

JANUARY 2017

Welcome

New Year's greetings and welcome to the first edition of the new, monthly *General Conference Executive Committee Newsletter*. As a leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church you are receiving this newsletter to keep you updated on current issues the church faces, informed about significant trends within the church and briefed on some of the church's mission challenges. We will also include stories of the miracles of God's grace and His providential leadings in the church around the world. The Newsletter will provide informative, inspirational and educational articles especially for General Conference Executive Committee members.

With over 19 million members globally and nearly 25 million people attending Seventh-Day Adventist Churches worldwide from a variety of cultural backgrounds, speaking multiple languages and dialects, one of the church's greatest challenges is unity. In our lead article in this month's edition we discuss the biblical principles for New Testament unity. The article makes a careful distinction between the unity believers have in Christ, the teachings of scripture, our God-ordained mission and divinely inspired church organization and a superficial unity based on human ideas and secular reasoning. This month's edition also reports on what God is doing in Eastern Europe through Total Member Involvement and contains an amazing story of God's providential working in Jesus hometown Nazareth. You will not want to miss the monthly, "Did You Know Section" that shares quick facts about God's work around the world that you can use.

Our General Conference Presidential team encourages you to circulate this *Executive Committee Newsletter* throughout your territory. Feel free to e-mail it, post it on line or publish entire articles and excerpts in your denominational journals. It is our intent that this Newsletter will keep you informed of significant happenings within the church, keep you apprised of the challenges the church faces and to encourage us to stay focused on the mission of Christ until He comes.

—MARK FINLEY

EDITORIAL



A DIVINE MOVEMENT UNITED IN MISSION AND MESSAGE

BY MARK A. FINLEY, *Assistant to the President for Evangelism*

One of the things that really matters to God is the unity of His church. This is not some periphery matter. It's at the very heart of the gospel. Without unity the church is powerless to proclaim the gospel in its fullness to the world; worse yet, it becomes a contradiction to the true nature of the gospel.

Jesus revealed the importance of unity in His final intercessory prayer when He prayed, "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (John 17:23).*

One of the greatest evidences of the power of the gospel is the unity of the church. When people of different backgrounds, cultures, languages and dispositions are united by the Holy Spirit in

Christ, the world notices.

One of the most striking examples of a unified church is in the book of Acts. Although there were differences of background and culture, and, at times, heated debates, at its very core the New Testament church exhibited unity. This was not some vague, undefinable pluralistic "oneness" where each tolerated the others' personal views to accomplish some larger ethereal goal. It was a unity of faith rooted in the person, message, and mission of Christ.

Christ is the great unifier. The apostle Paul emphatically declares, "For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of partition between us..." (Eph. 2:14). The apostle goes on to say that in Christ, "the whole body is joined and knit together"



AT THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

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TRUTH

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(Eph. 4:16) and pleads with the church at Corinth that there “be no schism in the body”(1 Cor. 12:35). When hearts are one in Christ they cannot be too far apart.

Could it be that at times our disunity is the result of having drifted from the heart of Christ? Is it possible that our own personal opinions and ideas about a given subject cloud Christ's will and create dissension between us? Do you think pride ever obscures our vision? Might it also be that the reason the disciples were of “one accord” on the day of Pentecost is because they unashamedly surrendered their wills to the will of Christ and were willing to surrender anything that separated them from Him and one another? New Testament unity was based on a common commitment to Christ, His message and His mission.

It is often overlooked that when Jesus prayed for the unity of His church, He prayed that His Father would, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth” (John 17:17). The unity of the New Testament church was based on a common commitment to Jesus' revealed truth.

Believers accepted the truth about the authoritative revelation of Scripture, salvation by faith, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the second coming of Christ, the Sabbath, Christ's death, resurrection and priestly ministry, just to mention a few of our Lord's central teachings. They were brought together through His prophetic Word, bonded in truth and committed to the divine revelation of His will.

Luke describes this in Acts 2:41, “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand

souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”

Notice two significant expressions: 1) “those who gladly received His Word;” 2) “they continued steadfastly in the apos-

When people of different backgrounds, cultures, languages and dispositions are united by the Holy Spirit in Christ, the **world** notices.

tle's doctrine.” Both of these expressions imply an acceptance of and commitment to the unchanging, eternal truths of Scripture.

Commenting on Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17, Ellen White writes, “We cannot surrender the truth in order to accomplish this union; for the very means by which it is to be gained is sanctification through the truth. Human wisdom would change all this, thinking this basis of union too narrow. Men would effect a union through conformity to popular opinions, through a compromise with the world. But truth is God's basis for the unity of his people.”¹

Truth unites. There is something larger, greater, and grander than our personal opinions, or even our individual convictions. The truth of the Word revealed by the Spirit supersedes everything else.

When the people of God are united in Christ to proclaim the prophetic Word of



God in the power of the Holy Spirit, the earth will be lightened with the glory of God. It is the Bible-based message of Christ our righteousness in light of the Three Angels' Messages of Revelation 14 that will unite His people in one final end-time proclamation of truth.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus emphasized the divine nature of the church. When Peter confessed that Jesus was the divine Son of God, our Savior replied, “...upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18, KJV).

The church is not some human, bureaucratic, manmade institution. It is a divine movement raised up by God. Christ organized the church Himself when He personally ordained the twelve disciples. The

TMI REPORT: EASTERN EUROPE

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's [Total Member Involvement](#) will see an unprecedented 113,000 TMI events held worldwide in 2017, starting in February at 4,300 sites in Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia.

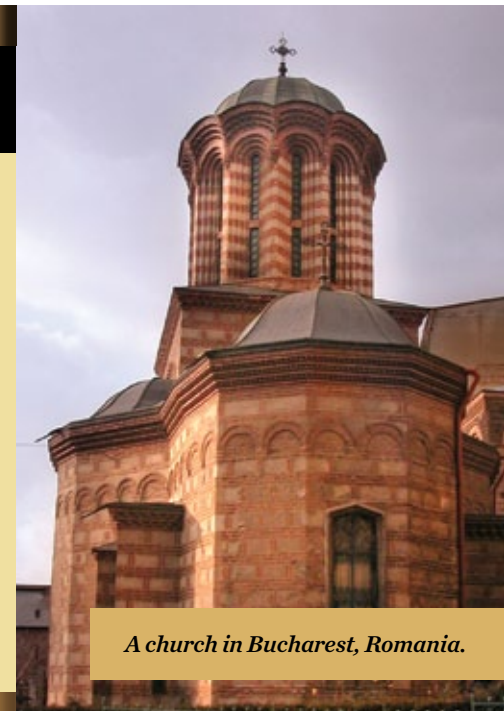
The evangelistic series represent the culmination of months of preparation by local church members, and their work will continue long after the meetings end. TMI is not just about preaching. It's every church member and every church entity – from Hope Channel and ADRA to the youth and Sabbath School departments at a local church – working together to share Jesus in the community.

The TMI program is calendar-driven. Dates are set for evangelistic meetings, and then church members get to work. This year's

plans seek to build on the TMI evangelistic initiative in Rwanda that resulted in 110,476 baptisms in 2016.

As in previous TMI evangelistic programs, in 2017 local church members will lead most meetings, but world church leaders and other church members will also participate.

—DUANE MCKEY
*Assistant to the President for
Total Member Involvement*



A church in Bucharest, Romania.

scriptural record states, “And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach” (Mark 3:13, 14, KJV).

Ellen White leaves no doubt about the significance of this act when she states, “It was at the ordination of the Twelve that the first step was taken in the organization of the church that after Christ’s departure was to carry on His work on the earth.”²

It is fascinating to observe that the first step in this organizational process was the ordination of the twelve disciples who then became the spiritual leaders of the early church. The ordination of the twelve was a crucial step in Christ’s plan for accomplishing heaven’s mission to the world.

In the book of Acts, church organization is paramount to the unity of the church. Without organization, the church’s message could easily have been hijacked by false teachers and its mission sidetracked. The Biblical message of truth based on the Word of God would have been distorted and the mission of Christ diluted.

Let’s briefly review a few examples of church organization and notice its function in nurturing the believer’s spiritual life, preserving the church’s message, and fostering its mission.

In Acts 1, a united group of 120 believers met in the upper room to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They were united in their love for Christ and were committed to His teachings. Their hearts beat with an overwhelming desire to share His love with everyone. They were in “one accord” seeking God for the outpouring of His Spirit and power to reach the world (Acts 1:8, 14, 15).

A potential problem arose at the end of the chapter. The position vacated by Judas needed to be filled. The early church considered two of their number as possibilities.

The fact that they chose two and were only going to select one indicates that there were differences of opinion. This could easily have divided the church, but they agreed on a process of discerning God’s will and they agreed to accept the outcome. They were willing to surrender their own convictions to the revealed will of Christ. Even in its embryonic stage the church was learning lessons of submission for the sake of unity and mission.

Acts 9 records the conversion of the apostle Paul. Immediately upon Saul’s conversion, the Holy Spirit led him to Ananias—a representative of God’s church. The Spirit didn’t at this juncture lead him into the wilderness, or send him immediately on an evangelistic mission. He was brought into contact with a representative of God’s church. One reason for this is to illustrate the importance of

church organization and authority.

Ellen White puts it this way, “Thus Jesus gave sanction to the authority of His organized church and placed Saul in connection with His appointed agencies on earth.”³

In Acts 15, the New Testament church faced a critical juncture. A conflict arose over how Gentile believers who had accepted Christ should relate to Jewish customs, especially circumcision. Paul and Barnabas had “no small dissension and dispute” with these Jewish leaders (vs. 2, KJV). They mutually agreed to refer the matter to the Jerusalem Council. The Jerusalem Council had the authority to make a decision that not everyone was pleased with but the majority of the church accepted.

Unity came as individuals surrendered to the authority of the larger body. My point here is not the decision that was made, but *the process* by which it was made. A complex issue was brought from the local church to a larger administrative body. Both the leadership and membership agreed to accept the decision of the Jerusalem Council. People had convictions on both sides of the question, but most were willing to accept the decision of a representative body of leaders for the sake of God’s mission.

Think of what could have happened if the rest of the book of Acts was spent discussing the varying sides of the debate. Imagine the tragic impact on the growth of the church that an endless debate would have had. Wisely, the New Testament church accepted the decision of the larger body—the general Council of the church, and passionately moved on with mission.

The New Testament church was unified in its commitment to Christ, to His present truth and prophetic message, His mission to the world, and His divinely established church organization. We are on a very slippery slope if personal opinions or preferences are placed over and against the authority of Christ’s organized church. Ellen White states it clearly:

“Oh, how Satan would rejoice if he could succeed in his efforts to get in among this people and disorganize the work at a time when thorough organization is essential and will be the greatest power to keep out spurious uprisings and to refute claims not endorsed by the word of God! We want to hold the lines evenly, that there shall be no breaking down of the system of organization and order that has been built up by wise, careful labor.”⁴

Church organization and its subsequent policies based on Biblical principles play an indispensable role in unifying Christ’s church. Rather than being arbitrary decrees by authoritarian leaders, the church’s policies are mutual agreements based on



DID YOU KNOW?

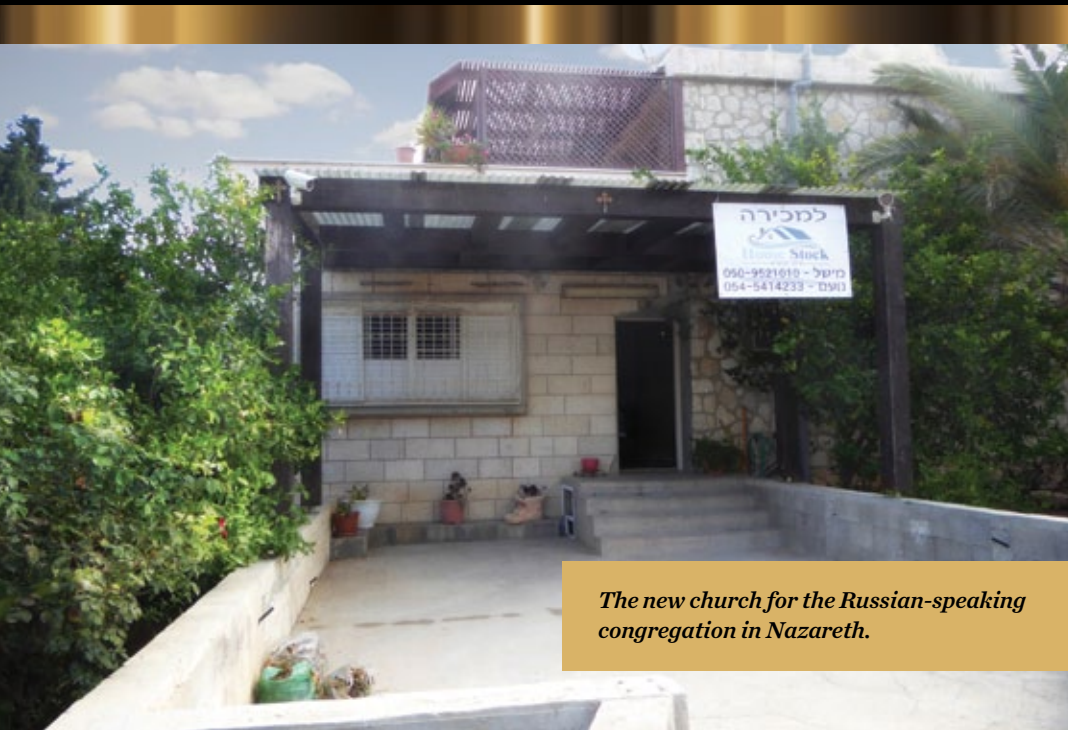
- The [Romanian Union](#) with its 1,104 churches and 241 companies is planning to launch nearly **2,000 evangelistic meetings** in February.
- Pastors and lay people in the little country of Bulgaria with only 7,207 members will conduct **100 evangelistic meetings** in 2017.
- The [South American Division](#) members have distributed more than **22 million copies** of the Missionary Book of the Year, [Health and Wellness: Secrets That Will Change Your Life](#).
- **110,476 people** were baptized as the result of the Total Member Involvement initiative in Rwanda.
- There are 20 to 25 individuals with **Arab backgrounds** that are actively studying the Bible with our Adventist pastor in Nazareth.
- As the result of an Adventist run mega-clinic, [Your Best Pathway to Health](#), 8,538 people in Los Angeles, California, received health-care services worth **\$38.4 million**, absolutely free.
- The “World Changers Bible” outreach has led to **thousands of baptisms** in the [South Pacific Division](#).
- God is moving powerfully in the [Adventist Church](#) and hundreds of thousands of Adventist pastors and lay people are using their God-given gifts to witness for their Lord.



(Continued on page 4...)

NAZARETH UPDATE

During Annual Council 2016 we met Wisam and Adri Ali, the pastoral couple working among the Arab population in Nazareth. In this brief report, we are updated on their work in that ancient city.



The new church for the Russian-speaking congregation in Nazareth.

(Continued from page 3 ...)

trust. They outline how the church functions. They are developed by a broad base of representative leadership.

The church's policies aren't infallible. They can change and sometimes do, but they represent the best judgment of a representative group of leaders at a given period of time. They are agreements guided by the Holy Spirit to determine the best way forward for the church. They aren't to be equated with salvation or timeless biblical truths, but they are one of the cohesive elements that holds the church together.

For example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has 28 Fundamental Beliefs. Why not 25 or 30? Who determines there are only 28? What if each local field determined the fundamental beliefs they thought were appropriate to their culture and territory and left the others out? The issue here is not the Biblical truth of the fundamental beliefs but the determination of what a fundamental belief is and how many to include. This is a decision of responsible church leadership mutually agreed upon by the General Conference in Session.

There will be some issues where honest people see things differently. In these instances, the gospel invites us to treat one another with respect and dignity. But the gospel also demands that we place a high

priority on the unity of the church and respect the decisions of the corporate body.

Without church organization we would quickly have a congregational system of theological pluralism, weakened mission, and organizational chaos. Ellen White echoes this critical thought. "God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority."⁵

The unity of the church is a clear, unequivocal, Biblical doctrine. To disregard or minimize the corporate decisions of representatives of the world church creates disunity and pains the heart of God. To downplay church organization or authority is to leave the church in disarray and fundamentally erode its mission.

May we be filled with the Spirit of Christ, proclaiming the message of Christ, fulfilling the mission of Christ and upholding the church of Christ. Then and only then will the church arise to fulfill its destiny and reveal the glory of God to a waiting world and a watching universe.

1. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (1892), p. 391.

2. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

4. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, pp. 257, 258.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

The old community center in Nazareth has for some years been used by our Russian-speaking congregation (20 worshippers) for Sabbath services. Since all members have a Jewish background it has not been possible for them to have any outreach programs in the Arab town center. It has therefore been a dream to have a place for this congregation in Upper Nazareth which is a predominantly Jewish area as this would enable them to witness and work for neighbors of their own kind.

When world church leaders visited Nazareth early in 2016 the dream became a vision which is now quickly becoming reality. We have signed a contract for a practical and fully renovated building in Upper Nazareth which can seat up to fifty people, ideally located and equipped for our Russian-speaking congregation since this is where most live. On January 20 we will receive the key and will move from downtown.

On February 1 the renovation of the old center will begin. A total renovation of this place is necessary to make it fit for our strong work begun by Wisam and Adri Ali, our pastoral couple who are working for the Arab population in Nazareth. The renovation process is scheduled to take three months. Cooking classes, language courses, health seminars, Bible studies and more have already proved a great success, and the renovated center will enable us to reach out to more people and be of even better service for the Lord and for the Arab community.

Dedication ceremonies are scheduled for May 20 and we want to express our sincere, heartfelt gratitude to various divisions, private donors and the GC — all who have had a part in turning the vision into reality. We pray that the Lord will continue to direct and bless all efforts in Nazareth so that Kingdom growth will take place and the Advent hope will bear fruit for eternity in the city where Jesus spent most of His earthly life!

— ROGER ROBERTSEN
President, [Israel Field](#)