

from our secretary



A 'strong constitution' is required

by Pastor John SurrIDGE, BUC Executive Secretary

When I first heard that my name was being considered to serve the church as Executive Secretary of the British Union Conference, I started to do a bit of research. What kind of skills would I need? What kind of help would I get? How much actual work would be involved?

Among the numerous pieces of advice that I received was one which particularly stuck in my mind and which may be the most important among my new responsibilities: 'You'll need a strong constitution!'

Now my initial understanding was that the person was referring to the long office hours, tedious committees and extensive travel involved. 'A strong constitution' is something you need when faced with an onerous task, a plate of unpalatable food, or a particularly malodorous cleaning job. So, yes, I could see that the requirement made sense.

However, I later realised that the advice carried a much more important meaning. My very first assignment as Executive Secretary, on the second day of this year's BUC Session at Newbold College, was to chair the business session dealing with 'the constitution'. This kind of 'constitution' is a totally different kettle of fish. It is the set of principles which define

who we are and how we operate as a church.

Until recently I hadn't given it much thought. I'm a fourth-generation Seventh-day Adventist and I love and care deeply for my church. The church has always been there for me and I assumed that it always would be. But the church does not exist by chance. The fact that we are here, still together despite our diversity, and growing faster than most churches in the world, is at least partly due to the painstaking work of those who, over the last hundred years or so, have carefully crafted our constitution.

We are not Seventh-day Adventists just because we believe in the Sabbath and the second coming of Jesus. We are not Seventh-day Adventists because we watch a particular Adventist television channel. We are Seventh-day Adventists because all of us, from the humblest administrative office to the largest megachurch, adhere to the principles which define us in the *Church Manual*, the General Conference's *Working Policy*, and, as we work this out in our local fields, our own constitution documents.

Is this really important? Well, yes, I'm afraid it is. There are forces within our own church which are, right now, trying to divide

us. 'We don't need the church structure,' they say. 'We don't need a set of documents to tell us what to do!'

These damaging forces have been with us right from the start, and they led to the production of the first *Church Manual* in 1932. As far back as 1875 Ellen White wrote this: 'The church of Christ is in constant peril. Satan is seeking to destroy the people of God, and one man's mind, one man's judgement, is not sufficient to be trusted. Christ would have His followers brought together in church capacity, observing order, having rules and discipline, and all subject one to another, esteeming others better than themselves.' *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 445.

As a church we actually do have a strong constitution. At the BUC Session we voted to strengthen ours still further by bringing it more closely into harmony with the world church. But we need to be vigilant. On your local church boards, and on the various other committees which keep the church operating, listen out for the negative and divisive voices. When you hear them, challenge them! It won't be easy. You may need to be assertive. In fact you may need 'a strong constitution' to defend who we are and what we have as a church.

Constitutional reform at BUC Session

How many Christians does it take to change a light bulb? It's one of those perennial jokes. For Charismatics, apparently, it's only one – as their hands are already in the air. For the Baptists, it's at least 15: one to change the light bulb, and the rest to approve the change and arrange the food for the potluck lunch. The list can go on – just google it.

For Seventh-day Adventists at the British Union Session on Friday, 1 July 2016, it took 241: this being the number of delegates who sat through more than four hours of constitutional minutiae in order to bring the present constitution in line with the General Conference's present model and the UK Charity Commission requirements.

Most changes were fairly academic, though time-consuming, as a two-thirds majority is needed for any change. With electronic voting, that takes roughly 90 seconds per item.

The longest section of discussion related to Article 9, and involved a suggestion to move back to an earlier model for the timing and functioning of the Nominating Committee for Union Sessions. In the current system the Recommendations Committee and the Nominating Committee meet some weeks prior to Session. Some felt that this was unwieldy and potentially unfair, and that holding these meetings during Session was preferable. Alternatively, some of those who sat on this year's Nominating Committee preferred the system as it gave much more time for the consideration of names and didn't compete with the main meetings and reports in the Session.

There was genuine passion and concern expressed by both those who wanted to go back to the old system, and those who wanted to work to modify and improve the current system.

With the need for a two-thirds majority for change the choice for change was defeated: 61% for, 38% against. The BUC will continue with the present system while seeking ways to improve it.

Full details of the recommended changes can be found in the supplementary handbook available online at the bottom of the following web page:

adventist.org.uk/news/2016/buc/constitutional-reform.

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