

Perceptions on the administrative structures of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in South Africa

ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of research done among the rank and file of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa. In particular, it concerns the results of surveys sent to pastors and structured interviews conducted with church boards. With these surveys and structured interviews, the opinions of pastors and church boards were obtained as to how they perceive the administrative structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa has two levels of administrative structures above the local church. It is the local Conference and then the Union Conference. These two are the basic administrative units that are found in most countries. The Division and General Conference follows on to the Union Conference. However, these two structures do not form part of the structures in South Africa. The General Conference is the highest authority within the administrative structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its headquarters in the United States of America. The Division is an administrative unit of the General Conference. It oversees the work of the Church within groups of countries.

The local Conference and Union Conference oversee the work of the Church within a particular country or countries. Conferences oversee groups of churches within a particular geographical area and Union Conferences oversee the work of the Church over various Conferences within a particular geographical area.

This study gives particular attention to the Conference level of administration and in a secondary way the Union.

1.1 The question under review

From observations made over several years, it has become clear that disillusionment and alienation of the rank and file from the administrative structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa has become an ever present phenomenon. The question which this article² addresses is: What are the key factors in the administrative set up of the Seventh-day

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2 The article focuses on the result of the empirical research only. The dissertation (Plaatjes 2007) deals with the history of the SDA in general but describes in more detail of the growth and development of the SDA in SA. It gives a detailed description of the administrative structures and its functioning. This is juxtaposed by a chapter on the theological debate on the relationship between the church as organism and the church as institution. The final chapter is a theological evaluation of the descriptive part of the dissertation

Adventist Church in South Africa, that have contributed to the disillusionment and alienation of the rank and file from the administrative structures of the church?

The hypothesis that under girds the stated problem is as follows: The way in which the Seventh-day Church Adventist in South Africa is administered, with particular reference to: administrative authority, leadership, power, transition, and organisational structures have caused the disillusionment and alienation of the rank and file from the administrative structures of the church.

In order to find answers to the stated problem and support for the hypothesis, the following methodology was followed.

2. METHODOLOGY

Answers to the stated problem had to be found from among the pastors and members of the church, since they are the ones experiencing disillusionment and alienation. They would therefore, form the target population. However, it would be time consuming and costly to visit each pastor and each church member.

To overcome this problem, it was decided to survey the pastors in each conference, and to use structured interviews on ten percent of church boards in each conference. The church boards would be used as a sample of the population of church members in each conference.

Permission was granted by Conference Presidents to survey the pastors and to interview church boards in their conferences.

Presidents also randomly drew the samples of church boards to be interviewed.

2.1 Pilot studies

Pilot studies were conducted with both the surveys to pastors and structured interviews with church boards. This was necessary to test the instruments. With minor changes in wording the research was commenced.

2.1.1 Pastoral surveys

Pastoral surveys were used to solicit the opinions of pastors to determine how they experience the administration of the local Conference as well as the Union administration.³

The pastoral surveys consisted of five guiding concepts of administration. They were: administrative authority, leadership, power, transition (change), and organisational structures. The surveys consisted of a two-ended scale. On either end of the scale of 1 – 7 were guiding statements, concerning each of the five concepts of administration. Each concept was dealt with twice, giving a total of ten scales, consolidated into five illustrations. On the left hand side of the scale were negative statements and on the right hand side positive statements. Respondents were asked to indicate their experience by marking it on the scale of 1 – 7. Marking toward 1 on the scale would indicate a negative experience; marking toward 7 would indicate a positive experience.

The surveys were colour-coded to differentiate between various conferences and difference racial group responses, within each conference. Surveys were sent to 146 pastors in all of the four conferences in the South African Union Conference. Self-addressed envelopes accompanied each survey in which the results could be returned. Completed surveys were received from 74 pastors giving a 51 percent response rate of return.

with the empirical research results.

3 The Conference and Union administrations administer the church organisation in South Africa.

2.1.2 Structured interviews

Structured interviews were conducted with church boards, to ascertain how churches experience conference administrations, and how they view the conference and union administration in relation to their church. A sample of church boards equal to ten percent of all churches, in each conference, were interviewed. Because of time and cost constraints, interviews were focused on churches in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban and Johannesburg. Initially, 58 church boards were to be interviewed. However, this number was reduced to 41 church boards. The Trans Orange Conference administration,⁴ withdrew their consent for the interviews to be conducted. The reason given was that churches were uncomfortable with the interviews to be conducted.

The interview instrument like the survey instrument to pastors was structured around the five concepts of administration of the church. Statements about each concept were made twice, giving a total of ten statements. Statements were made in the form of opposites on each of the five concepts. The respondents were given the opportunity to respond to ten options, according to their experience of the administrative ethos of their Conference administration.

2.1.3 Method of interviews

At each interview, each member of the church board was given a copy of the questionnaire. The researcher then read the relevant statements to which the members had to respond by consensus. They had to indicate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statements read. The researcher then recorded their consensus by circling the appropriate answer.

At the end of the interview, the questionnaire was checked and signed by the elder and the clerk of the church.

3. STUDY RESULTS – STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The results of the study were obtained from the data extracted from the structured interviews with church boards and from the surveys sent to pastors. The processing of the data was done by independent researchers⁵.

This section presents the results of the structured interviews. It presents the accumulated results of the responses to the interviews conducted in each conference. Illustrations 1-5 contain the combined results. The results cover the five concepts involving Conference administrations: Administrative authority, leadership, power, transition and organisational structures.

3.1 Administrative authority: Concentrated or dispersed

The two statements concerning administrative authority, concerns how authority is used, and how people experience the use of authority in the various conferences⁶. In particular it concerns whether authority is concentrated in a few people or whether it is dispersed. In other words, do those entrusted with authority rigidly concentrate authority among themselves, by

4 The facsimile containing the withdrawal was received on Friday 7 May 2004, at 12:21pm. It was received two hours before the research's flight departure for Johannesburg. The merger spoken of in the facsimile is the merger between the Transvaal Conference (previously an all white conference, now White, Coloured, Indian and Black. The Coloureds, Indians and Blacks combined is still in the minority in the Conference) and the Trans Orange Conference which is totally Black. There has been a long stand-off between these two conferences on the matter of merging. The matter is shadowed by the merger that has as yet not taken place, so everything is seen through those lenses.

5 The data were processed by the Unit for Religious and Development Research in the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology in the University of Stellenbosch.

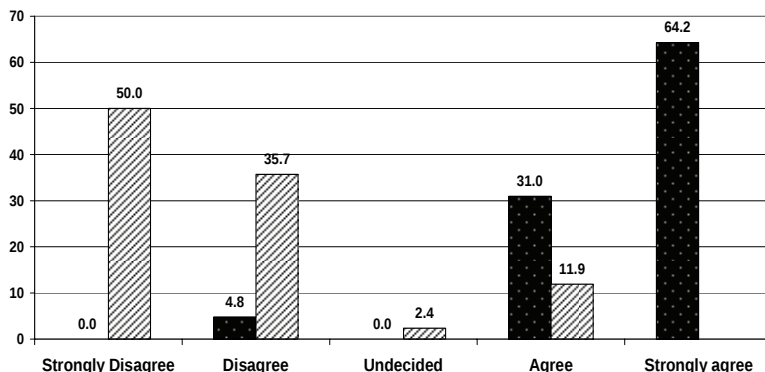
6 The two statements were the questions of the structured interview.

tenaciously holding on to it for purposes of control? Or on the other hand, do those vested with authority recognize that people by means of their God given gifts and several abilities can make a contribution by solicitation of their input? Where people do not have input, the tendency is to become passive and they may then develop a critical spirit. There is also a tendency that may develop among the administration, that unless they maintain full exclusive authority they may lose control. The result is that authority is concentrated in a few who act on behalf of the majority.

Illustration 1

■ Administrative authority is concentrated in a few, who act on behalf of the majority.

▨ Administrative Authority is dispersed; the Conference solicits input and assistance from congregations.



The responses shown in Illustration 1 above, show clearly that people at the bottom of the hierarchy of the church experience the exercise of authority by the administration of conferences in a negative way. People expect the administrators and their Executive Committees to consult them before taking decisions that concern them. People are not against the exercise of authority, but how it is done. People want to be part of the process and decisions that affect them.

How authority is exercised has a direct bearing on leadership. It has to do with how leaders lead and their attitude to leadership.

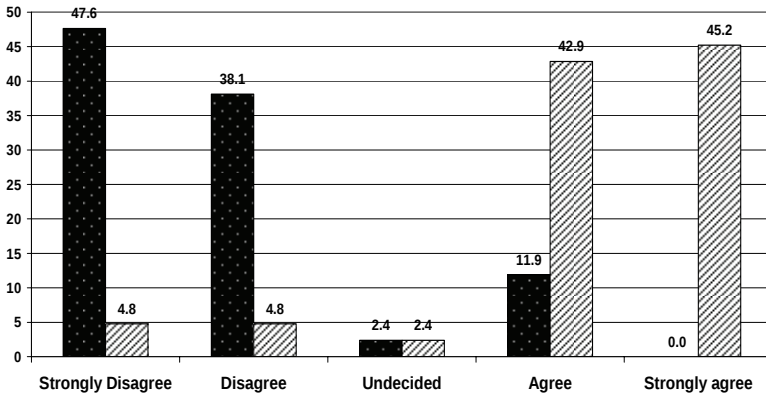
3.2 Leadership: People oriented or structure oriented

Leadership concerns how leaders of Conferences and their Executive Committees engage people at grassroots level of the church. The question in particular is: How do leaders see the people they lead? Do they serve people and thereby lead from the point of service or do they first consider their position within the structures from which they lead, and give those structures and its function their highest priority. Maxwell (1993:80) puts it another way when referring to leaders practicing good people skills, 'leaders must relate to their people from the soul, not merely by protocol.'

Illustration 2

■ The leadership is people orientated; the wishes and feelings of members come first

▨ The leadership is structure orientated; the organization and its functions take first preference



From Illustration 2 above, it shows that people experience leadership as first giving consideration to the organisation and its functions, above the wishes and feelings of members. Many felt that in this way leaders secure their positions in the organisation. Leaders are more concerned with policies and seeing to it that policies are strictly carried out. Most policies are structure oriented rather than people oriented, especially when it involves money. These policies are always formulated in the top echelons of the organisation. Normally, members and employees are expected to passively accept these policies, especially financial policies. These policies are normally to their disadvantage because large amounts of money are spent to maintain structures.

This state of affairs shows how much power the administrations hold and this is wielded "top-down." This leads to the discussion of the concept of power.

3.3 Power: Vested in top positions or shared with "grassroots"

The concept of power has to do with how power is used or wielded in the organisation. Is power used to empower people or to disempower them? Does power at the top benefit those at the bottom? Power centres around two concepts, whether it is used in a way to dominate people and manipulate them or is it used as stated by Greenleaf (1977:41-42) 'to create opportunity and alternatives that individuals may choose and build autonomy.' Furthermore, Greenleaf (1977:42) states if individuals 'are coerced into a predetermined path. Even if it is "good" for them, if they experience nothing else, ultimately their autonomy will be diminished.' Greenleaf (1977:42) is of the opinion that, 'Some coercive power is overt and brutal. Some is covert and subtly manipulative. The former is open and acknowledged the latter is insidious and hard to detect.' The dilemma we face says Greenleaf (1977:42) 'is that all leadership is, to some extent manipulative. Those who follow must be strong.' He adds that 'coercive power ... only strengthens resistance ... if successful, its controlling effects last only as long as the force is strong.'

However, by contrast Greenleaf (1977:42) says:

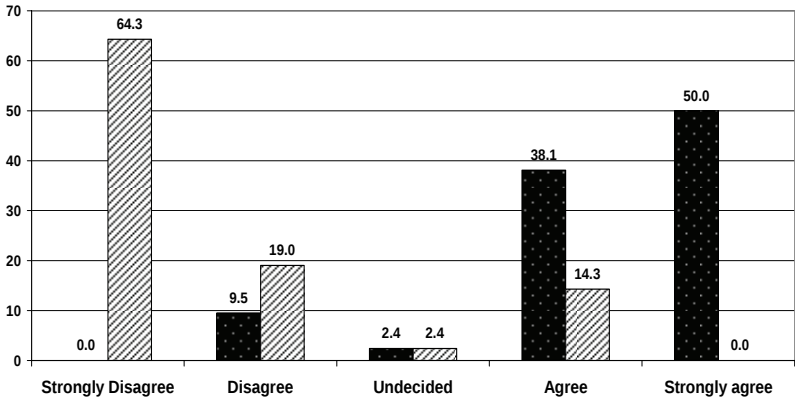
'Servants, by definition, are fully human. Servant-leaders are functionally superior because they

are closer to the ground – they hear things, see things, and know things and their intuitive insight are exceptional. Because of this they are dependable and trusted, they know the meaning of that line from Shakespeare’s sonnet: ‘they that have power to hurt and will do none...’

The matter of coercive and manipulative power in contrast to servant- leadership is a matter of deep concern in the administrative leadership of the SDA Church in South Africa. Especially as power is vested in the top position of the hierarchy.

Illustration 3

- Power in the organization is vested in those in the top positions of the Conference
- ▨ Power is shared with those at "grassroots" level of the church



The results as shown in Illustration 3 above, shows that members experience power in the organisation as being vested with those at the top of the hierarchy. Those at the bottom of the hierarchy must “be strong”. In this way people who are disempowered will never reach their full potential to autonomy and will always remain dependant on those with power.

It is clear that members do not experience the empowerment of power sharing. In fact they experience themselves being at the receiving end of power wielding. People respond in resistance language, such as “we don’t care if the office knows how we have voted.” The office being the leadership in the Conference office.

The respondents clearly show that power in the organisation as they experience it, is the privilege of a few, while the majority goes powerless. Powerless people are uncommitted people. People want to be part of the “whole” – the church organisation. However, they are denied this by strict rigid control of power. This is mainly done through a proliferation of policies that maintain the status quo.

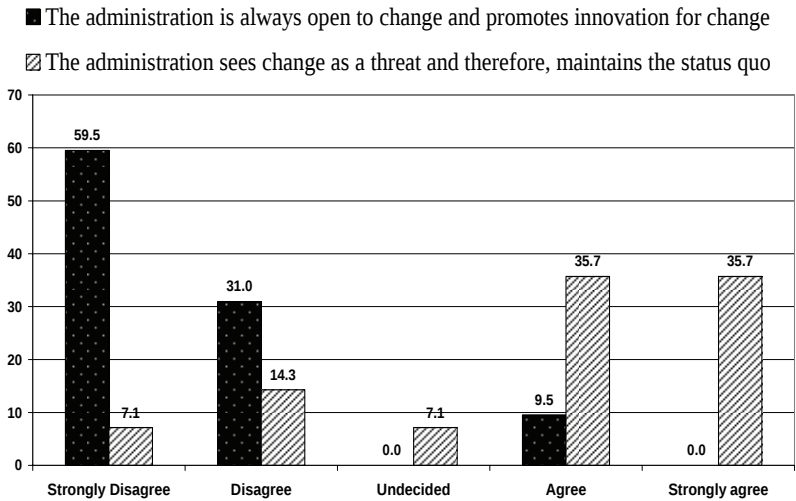
To a large extent most churches and its people have moved out of a dependent/ child stage. They are no longer dependent on the leadership for decisions affecting their lives. They want to express their opinions without fear of contradiction or victimisation. People have become mature and are able to handle power with understanding. In fact most have moved to an accommodation stage in their church life as in their career lives. Therefore, they want to make a contribution that matters and not only to contribute their money. Many did express their opinion that their worth lies in their financial contributions to the church, and not in their humanity.

When power is vested in those in top positions of the Conference it has negative implications for change. Change only comes about by recommendations from those in the top positions. Power becomes something very difficult to let go of, therefore, change does not take place easily. This phenomenon is indeed a problem for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa.

3.4 Transition

Transition has to do with change and the outcome that change produces. Transition also has to do with letting go of the old situation. Transition is especially difficult if it means letting go of a position which guarantees power and control. In particular it has to do with whether administrations are open to change, especially where transition means a change in status, letting go of familiar, comfortable situations based on their power and control.

Illustration 4



In illustration 4, above, an overwhelming majority of respondents experience the administration as not being open to change, and does not take the lead in the promotion of change. In particular people want to see change in an administration which is far removed from them. They want openness, and transparency. They want an administration that is approachable and not hedged in by numerous policies which are unknown to them. Most policies are seen as protecting the organisation, but do nothing for the members in the church. The local church has no say in the formulation of policies affecting them. This needs to change.

In particular, people want to see a change in the way in which they are governed from a “top down” way of doing things to a participatory way of doing things.

For this kind of change to take place, organisational restructuring would need to come into play.

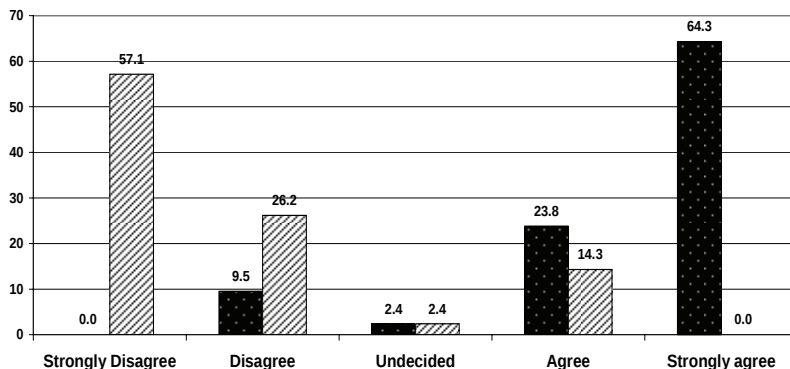
3.5 Organisational structures

Organisational structure concerns how the administration of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

is structured. In particular, it has to do with how the hierarchy functions. What is the relationship between the top of the hierarchy and its bottom? Does it operate on a “top down” relationship, or does it operate on a participatory relationship, in which laity becomes involved.

Illustration 5

- The organizational structures operate on a top down relationship. The bottom of the organization is expected to carry out what is passed down to them
- ▨ The organizational structure operates on a participatory basis; the leadership at the top sees those at "grassroots" as part of the administrative process



These statements like the others evoked strong reaction and comments. The majority of the respondents experienced their Conference administrations in a “top down” relationship.

A large majority of respondents do not see the organisational structures as operating on a participatory basis. They do not see themselves as part of the administrative process.

Among the most repeated points of dissatisfaction, concerns church structure and people’s relationship to it. Firstly, if people are responsible for the financial support of the organisational structures, then it must be structures they can afford. It must be structures that allow sufficient funds to be left at local church level so that the mission of the church could be carried forward. Funds are always being sought for evangelistic purposes at local church level. Secondly, if people are responsible for the financial support of these structures, then they need to have a say in the set-up of those structures.

In summary, the accumulative results of the structured interviews clearly show that an overwhelming majority of church members experience the conference administrations in a negative way.

The responses to the statements shown in illustrations 1 – 5 show the key factors that are causing the disillusionment and alienation among the rank and file in the church.

4. PASTORAL SURVEYS

Surveys were sent to 146 pastors in the five conferences of the Southern Africa Union Conference.⁷ Responses to the surveys were received from 74 pastors, giving a return rate of 50.6%. The response return percentage of each conference is as follows:

⁷ A conference is a self-supporting autonomous administrative unit designed to oversee Seventh-day Adventist Churches under its jurisdiction, within a specific geographical area. A Union Conference forms the basic constituent unit of the Seventh-day Adventist World Church. (Beach and Beach 1985:57).

Illustration 6 - Response percentage of pastors

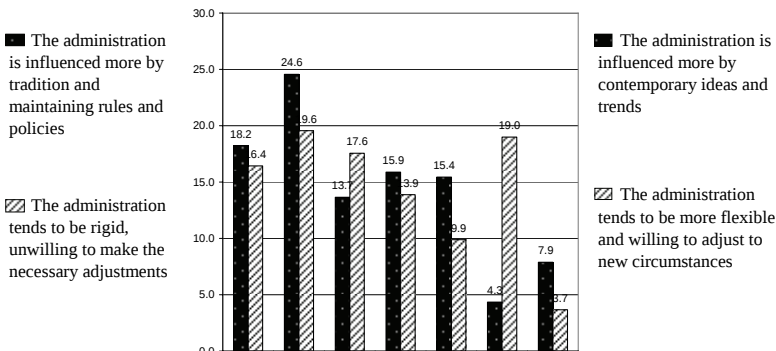
Conference	Response Percentage
Southern Hope	54.1
Trans-Orange	28.6
Kwazulu Natal	51.9
Transvaal	60.6
Cape	71.4

The statements put to the pastors covered the same areas of concern, as those in the structured interviews. They are: Administrative authority, leadership, power, transition and organisational structures.

The statements were presented in pairs, concerning each area of concern. It was placed on a scale of 1-7. The left hand side of the scale carried negative statements, and the right hand side positive statements. The respondents were asked to circle their responses on the scale of 1 – 7. Marking toward the left hand side of the scale would mean a negative experience. Marking towards the right hand side on the scale would mean a positive experience of the administration, in the specific area of concern. The section that follows deals with the accumulative results of the Pastoral Surveys.

4.1 Administrative authority

Illustration 7 - Pastoral Survey
Conference Level of Administration - Administrative Authority



The pairs of statements shown in the above illustration yielded the following results:

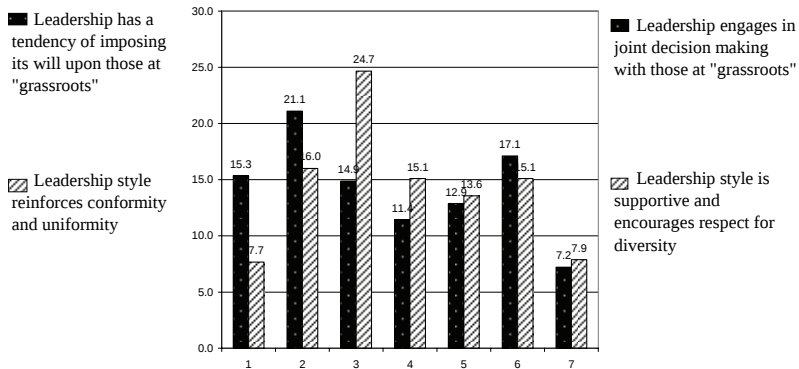
The first pair of statements shows that 56.5% of pastors answered to the left of centre on the scale, indicating that they experience administrative authority as being influenced more by tradition and the maintenance of rules and policies. To the right of centre 27.6% of pastors, experienced the administrative authority as being influence more by contemporary ideas and trends.

The second pair of statements dealing with administrative authority shows that 53.6% of pastors indicated that they experience administrative authority as tending toward rigidity, unwilling to make the necessary adjustments, while 32.6% of pastors experienced administrative authority to be flexible and willing to adjust to new circumstances.

The average percentage of both pairs of statements shows that 55% of pastors experienced administrative authority negatively and 30% experienced it positively.

4.2 Leadership

Illustration 8 - Pastoral Surveys
Conference Level of Administration - Leadership



The first set of statements concerning leadership in the administration of the conference concerning leadership’s tendency of imposing its will upon those at “grassroots” over the willingness to engage in joint decision making with those at “grassroots”.

It shows that 51.3% of pastors experience leadership as tending to impose its will upon those at “grassroots” level of the church and 37.2% of pastors feels that leadership engages in joint decision making with those at “grassroots”.

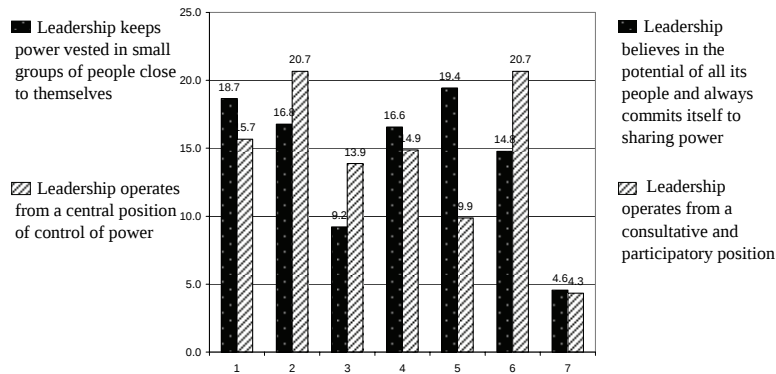
The second set of statements has to do with leadership style, whether it reinforces conformity and uniformity over being supportive and encourages respect for diversity.

It shows that 48.4% of pastors experienced the leadership style as reinforcing conformity and uniformity, while 36.6% saw leadership as being supportive and encourages respect for diversity.

The average percentage of both pairs of statements shows that 49.9% experienced leadership negatively, while 36.9% experienced leadership positively concerning the aspects of leadership as stated.

4.3 Power

Illustration 9 - Pastoral Survey
Conference Level of Administration - Power



The first pair of statements looks at power from the point of comparison whether leadership keeps power vested in small group of people close to itself or whether it shares power with those it leads.

The results show that 44.7% of pastors experienced power as vested in small groups of people that are close to the leadership, while 36.9% experienced leadership as committing itself to sharing power with those they lead.

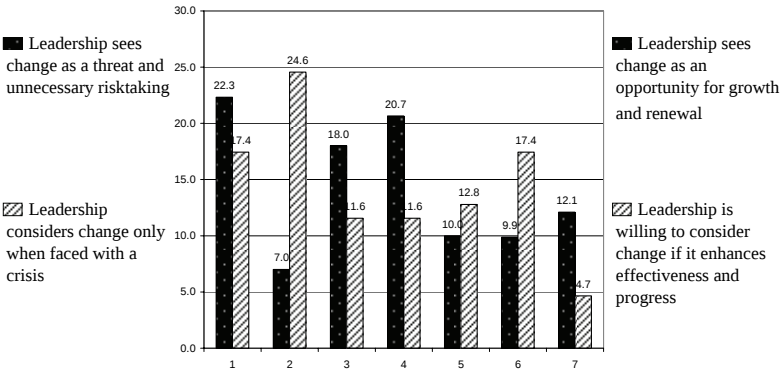
The second set of statements concerning power looks at whether leadership operates from a consultative and participatory position.

The results show that 50.3% of pastors felt that leadership operates from a central position of control of power. On the other hand 34.9% of pastors felt leadership operates from a consultative and participatory position.

The average result of both sets of statements show that 47.5% of pastors experience the use of power negatively, while 36.9% experiences it positively.

4.4 Transition

Illustration 10 - Pastoral Survey
Conference Level of Administration - Transition



The first set of statements shown in the above illustration concerns how leadership sees change. Whether it sees change as unnecessary risk taking or as an opportunity for growth and renewal.

The results show that 47.3% of pastors feel that leadership sees change as a threat and unnecessary risk taking. On the other hand 32.0% of pastors feel that leadership sees change as an opportunity for growth and renewal.

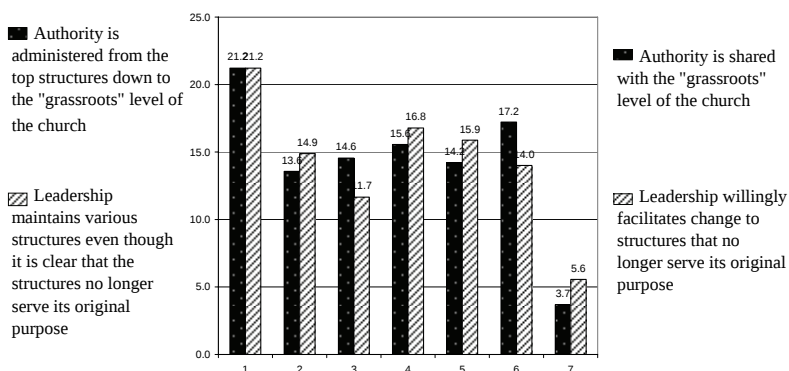
The second set of statements concerning change has to do with when leadership will consider change: when faced with a crises or when it enhances effectiveness and progress.

The results show that 53.6% of pastors felt that leadership considers change only when faced with a crises, while 34.9% felt that leadership is willing to consider change if it enhanced effectiveness and progress.

The average percentage of the two sets of statements on change show that 50.5% of pastors experienced leadership and change negatively while 33.5% experience it positively.

4.5 Organisational structures

Illustration 11 - Pastoral Survey
Conference Level of Administration - Organizational Structures



The first set of statements shown in the above illustration has to do with the organisational structures. It looks at authority in the organisational structures, whether it is administered from the top down to "grassroots" of the church or whether it is shared with the "grassroots".

The results show that 49.4% of pastors experienced authority in the structures of the SDA Church as functioning from top to bottom, while 35.0% felt that the authoritative structures of the church shares authority with those at "grassroots" level of the church.

The second set of statements deals with outdated structures. Its concern is whether structures that no longer serve its original purpose, is maintained or changed.

The results show that 47.8% of pastors felt that the administration maintains structures that no longer served its original purpose, while 35.5% felt that the administration was willing to facilitate change of structures that no longer serve their original purpose.

An average of 48.6% of pastors experience organisational structures in a negative light regarding outdated structures while 35.0% saw it in a positive light.

The accumulative results of the responses of pastors to the various statements concerning the conference administration, shows that most pastors experience the Conference administration in a negative light. However, on an individual basis there are Conference administrations that have shown up better than others.

5. UNION ADMINISTRATION

The pastoral survey also included the Union level of administration. The same aspects of administration tested on the Conference level of administration were applied to Union level of administration.

The higher the administrative structures rise above the local church the less representation the local church has on its committees and boards. The Union is one such structure. The experience of pastors with the Union was tested, since they work for the organisation.

The following are the results.

Administrative Authority

The administration is influenced more by tradition and maintaining rules and policies.

68.9% agreed.

The administration tends to be rigid, unwilling to make the necessary adjustments.

58.1% agreed.

The administration is influenced more by contemporary ideas and trends.

18.9% agreed.

The administration tends to be more flexible and willing to adjust to new circumstances.

21.6% agreed.

Leadership

Leadership has a tendency of imposing its will upon those at "grassroots".

74.3% agreed.

Leadership style reinforces conformity and uniformity.

51.3% agreed.

Leadership engages in joint decision making with those at "grassroots".

18.9% agreed.

Leadership style is supportive and encourages respect for diversity.

24.4% agreed.

Power

Leadership keeps power vested in small groups of people close to themselves.

67.6% agreed.

Leadership operates from a central position of control of power.

64.9% agreed.

Leadership believes in the potential of all its people and always commits itself to sharing power.

21.6% agreed.

Leadership operates from a consultative and participatory position.

22.9% agreed.

Transition

Leadership sees change as a threat and unnecessary risk taking.

48.7% agreed.

Leadership considers change only when faced with a crisis.

60.8% agreed.

Leadership sees change as an opportunity for growth and renewal.

28.3% agreed.

Leadership is willing to consider change if it enhances effectiveness and progress.

24.3% agreed.

Organisational Structures

Authority is administered from the top structures down to the "grassroots" level of the church.
68.9% agreed.

Leadership maintains various structures even though it is clear that the structures no longer serve its original purpose: 66.3% agreed.

Authority is shared with the "grassroots" level of the church

14.6% agreed.

Leadership willingly facilitates change to structures that no longer serve its original purpose.

17.5% agreed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The danger that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa faces is the exacerbation of the wedge of alienation displayed in dissatisfaction and disillusionment between the local church community and the wider institutional church. The exacerbation will worsen if the church organisation neglects to address the questions of power and structure which has had a negative outworking on the administrative authority, leadership and transition in the hierarchy of the church.

The way in which the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa is administered, with particular reference to: administrative authority, leadership, power, transition and organisational structures have contributed to the disillusionment and alienation of the rank and file from the administrative structures of the Church.

The formulated hypothesis in which it is conjectured that something is the matter is stated as follows: "The way (ethos) in which the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa is administered is the cause of the disillusionment and alienation of the rank and file from the administrative structures of the church."

The conjectures of the hypothesis are strongly supported by the results of the structured interviews and pastoral surveys. The key factors identified as contributing to the alienation are in the areas of administrative authority, leadership, power, transition and organisational structures. These five areas were tested in the structured interviews and pastoral surveys. The results of both instruments supported the hypothesis identifying these five areas in particular as being the key factors for the alienation that exists between the administrative structures and the rank and file in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa.

Finally, it must be stated that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in South Africa, with its hierarchical administration structure, functions along strong institutional lines and methods. However, the local church in its life and activities functions organically along the lines of an organism, alive through the authority of God's Spirit and in faith seeking a living relationship with God.

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KEY WORDS

Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA)

Administrative authority

Leadership

Power

Transition

Organisational structures

TREFWOORDE

Sewende-daagse Adventiste Kerk

Administratiewe gesag

Leierskap

Mag

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