

PASTORAL PAPER: AG Reverter Clauses Revised November 4, 2007 (Part 1)

From Hot Springs to Hot Water:

The Journey from Local Autonomy to Denominational Ownership, and the Role of the Reverter Clause.

By

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In this study I will attempt to take stock of where the Assemblies of God stands at this point in her history relative to local church autonomy and the role of denominational leadership through intervention in and ownership of congregational properties. My motivation is the desire for simplicity and clarity. As one who served for five consecutive years on the Presbyter Board of the Michigan District, I witnessed the agony of pure-hearted leaders who wanted to do everything possible to resolve the struggles and relieve the burdens of local assemblies, while at the same time attempting to walk the tightrope of autonomy vs. denominational control. I also saw local churches that had little or nothing to do with the “fellowship” until they wanted financial relief or recognition, and still others who, due to their notable size and clout, simply disregard District and General Council leadership believing that they are “beyond” it all. This state of affairs has been repeated too many times across our great fellowship. In an earlier study entitled “When in Rome” I examined the spiritual dimension of “official vs. unofficial” status as reflected in compromises in the area of doctrine and ecclesiastical politics in connection with the modern ecumenical/global movement. This spiritual milestone took place at the 2005 General Council held in Denver, Colorado. Now we will delve into the dynamics of how this same duplicity is evidenced in the question of local autonomy and ownership of congregational properties.

According to denominational literature, the Assemblies of God exists as a “Voluntary Cooperative Fellowship”. Simply defined, this means that each local congregation affiliated with the national headquarters in Springfield, MO has the right of self government and voluntarily participates in various endeavors sponsored by the denomination (ex: foreign and home missions, men and women’s ministries, conventions, higher education, etc.). At the first General Council in Hot Springs, AR, there were just a handful of fiercely independent leaders that gathered to form a new fellowship that would provide a relational and administrative structure for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission set forth by our Lord Jesus Christ. The basic Constitutional guidelines that came out of that meeting stood until 1979 when they were altered through the insertion of new language describing requirements of affiliation that were to henceforth be placed upon local congregations wanting to function within the AG “family”.

The change in the nature of General Council debate as well as the incremental movement toward full denominationalism began to appear in the years following World War II. At that time the fellowship launched out into some aggressive building projects meant to enhance the national headquarters, Gospel Publishing House, as well as improvements to the campus of CBI (Central Bible Institute). Starting with those WWII era councils, one can trace the periodic appearances of language referring to “trust deeds”, “executive Presbyter empowerment”, as well as debates concerning the right of Districts to insert themselves into local church disputes (See minutes from 1945: pp.27-29, 1951: pp.8-19, 1953: p.18, and proposed amendments discussed in 1975). The record of minutes available for purchase on CD-ROM through the Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center are not completely clear on every point, that is why I have listed these particular councils that at least speak to the issues of construction, financing, and deeds.

I will cite other excerpts from the aforementioned General Council minutes that span the years of 1914-1999, along with the current set of recommended bylaws found on the General Council website (revised August 5, 2002). Please allow me to reiterate; if the Assemblies of God is a genuine voluntary cooperative fellowship with true local autonomy, self-government and property rights, well and good. But if it is a denomination where voluntary cooperation, once volunteered, becomes compulsory and not optional and where absolute ownership of church properties is held in the name of the national headquarters via reverter clauses; we must then dispense with all confusing double-references found either in sermons or written documents. The confusion found among so many pastors and congregations in America is evidence enough that we are at a crossroads of both definition and philosophy. The words of the Apostle James call out to remind us, “A double minded man (denomination) is unstable in all his ways (1:8).”

The 1914 Constitution and Bylaws adopted for our fledgling movement stated:

PREAMBLE AND RESOLUTION OF CONSTITUTION

WHEREAS, God, our Heavenly Father, sent His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, into the world, Who purchased and redeemed fallen man with His own precious blood, and called out of the world and saved a people, of whom He built and established His Church (Assembly of God. Matt. 16:18), upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Head and Chief Corner-stone (Eph. 2:20), and organized and baptized it with the Holy Spirit, with its government upon His shoulders (Isaiah 9:6-6), said: “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18); and

WHEREAS, he gave the Holy Inspired Scriptures, (both old and new covenants, Heb. 8:6-13) as the all-sufficient rule for faith and

practice (2 Tim. 3:16), as follows: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works,” we therefore shall not add to nor take from it (Rev. 22:18); and

WHEREAS, He commanded that there should be no schism (division, sectarianism) in His Body, the GENERAL ASSEMBLY (Church) of the first born, which are written in heaven, Heb. 12:23; and

WHEREAS, We recognize ourselves as members of said GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF GOD, (which is God’s organism), and do not believe in identifying ourselves as, or establishing ourselves into, as sect, that is a human organization that legislates or forms laws and articles of faith and has unscriptural jurisdiction over its members and creates unscriptural lines of fellowship and disfellowship and which separates itself from other members of the General Assembly (Church) of the first born, which is contrary to Christ’s prayer in St. John 17, and Paul’s teaching in Eph. 4:1-16, which we heartily endorse:

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, FIRST, That we recognize ourselves as a GENERAL COUNCIL of Pentecostal (Spirit Baptized) saints from local Churches of God in Christ, Assemblies of God, and various Apostolic Faith Missions and Churches, and full Gospel Pentecostal Missions and Assemblies of like faith in the United States of America, Canada and Foreign Lands, whose purpose is neither to legislate laws of government, nor usurp authority over said various Assemblies of God, nor deprive them of their Scriptural and local rights and privileges, but to recognize Scriptural method and order for worship, unity, fellowship, work and business for God, and to disapprove of all unscriptural methods, doctrines and conduct, and approve of all Scriptural truth and conduct, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace, until we all come into the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, and to walk accordingly, as recorded in Eph. 4:17-32.

THEREFORE, SECOND. That we recognize all the above said Assemblies of various name, and when speaking of them refer to them by the general Scriptural name “Assemblies of God;” and recommend that they all recognize themselves by the same name, that is, “Assembly of God” and adopt it as soon as practicable for the purpose of being more Scriptural and also legal in transacting business, owning property, and executing missionary work in home and foreign lands, and for general convenience, unity and fellowship.

NOTES:

One can see when examining this primitive statement of vision and intent that the founders of the Assemblies of God were seeking to create a simple structure that could facilitate cooperative fellowship and ministry, while at the same time preserving the concept of local sovereignty in church government and ownership.

The true strength of The Assemblies of God has been her voluntary fellowship, free of financial and political constraints, which made her such a powerful tool in the Lord’s hand over these many years. If volitional freedom is one of our accepted beliefs from the Word of God, then we see its universal application in every arena of life. Adam and Eve’s freedom to obey or disobey God was not an illusion, and neither was the responsibility borne by them for the results of their corresponding choice. In marriage, the proposing lover should not use external enticements of money or social status to sway the decision of the pursued one. Couples who do not possess a great deal of this world’s wealth joke occasionally about the wife having married her husband “for his money”. Ironically, in these days of prenuptial agreements, poverty still seems to be the greatest test of true love; as true autonomy is of fellowship.

When I carried the responsibility of leading a congregation that operated a Christian School, I came to a crisis that also served as an unexpected blessing and breakthrough. It was very evident to me that there was great discord amongst the staff. During contract negotiations with the teaching staff one summer I noticed the endless parade of employees telling how much they loved my vision, the church, and me. However, their behavior the rest of the year betrayed their true feelings. After much prayer and waiting on God for guidance I came to a decision; Release all school staff from compulsory attendance at my Assemblies of God Church! I called the staff in and made the announcement. After a pregnant pause, they quietly filed out of my office without much comment. However, I soon found out that I had made a statement equivalent to “Gentlemen, start your engines!” The next Sunday I witnessed the fruit of my decree when I saw a noticeable number of those who had just told me, only days before, how much they loved my church and me, now seeking greener pastures.

Was I angry? Yes, but not at the absent teachers. I was angry rather, with a system of compulsory attendance that had been placed on a group of people whose hearts were not in the church at all. Historically, many “midnight hour” hirings had taken place in the school where doctrinal as well as ethical compromises were made “for the good of the ministry”. The goal of keeping the machinery alive led to pragmatic compromises where “the end justified the means”, and I had to clean up the inevitable debris. However, every face that was in the congregation the Sunday after the “Exodus” was there because they truly wanted to be, and not because their livelihood depended upon it. ONLY THE PRESENCE OF TRUE FREEDOM PROVIDES THE ENVIRONMENT FOR HUMANS TO EXPRESS GENUINE LOVE AND LOYALTY. This is what I have perceived when I have seen ministers who are AG in name only, never being bound to the heart of our great fellowship through genuine grassroots friendship. To me, this is a common hypocrisy we see demonstrated at many District and General Councils, and is one of the most corrosive elements assaulting our future fruitfulness.

Dr. Margaret M. Poloma, in her sociological study entitled, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas*. (The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, TN. 1989), makes a powerful observation that bears repeating. “The relationship between the local church, with its congregational form, and the larger Presbyterian structure, dominated by pastors, is not without tension. The pastors appear to guard their autonomy jealously and have resisted attempts by ‘Headquarters’ to usurp more control. For example, when some executive presbyters sought the control of local church property for the denomination, a measure that would have de facto extended the General Presbytery’s control to congregational matters, the measure was promptly defeated. Although the national leadership defends its continued growth and corresponding need for additional finances and control with the rhetoric of serving and ser-

vanthood rather than any extension of authority and power, the autonomy of the local church and its congregational government is protected by its pastors. For the most part, local church members seem oblivious and basically disinterested in the national politics of the denomination. Since pastors are not only selected by their congregations but also dependent on these congregations for support, it is they who walk a tightrope between the two organizational forms (p.125).

This “organizational tension” is exactly what our historic progression demonstrates. Our movement has good leaders who want to do the very best they possibly can to preserve a viable network of local churches for the purpose of reaching the world with the good news of Jesus Christ. However, with the passage of time, all denominations have demonstrated the propensity to take on a life of their own, demanding more and more energy, resources, and manpower in order to maintain the machinery of ministry that eventually hinders the very mission it was created to facilitate.

In the Global University text for the “Assemblies of God: History, Missions, and Governance” course, we find some very interesting observations made by our own editors. Under the section heading “Pentecostals changed as the nation’s economy improved (p.52)”, we read:

“The nation’s economy improved in the years after World War II. Church members had more money and respectability. Churches moved out of their storefronts, tents, and old theater houses. They could now afford to build their own buildings. The new buildings had large auditoriums, Sunday school classrooms, and places for a choir and church offices. A few included a church kitchen in their plans (p.52) By the 1960s, the Assemblies of God had become a major American denomination. The (General) Council was respected. Third-generation believers were comfortable in American culture. The lifestyles of preachers and laypeople showed a decline in the strong belief that the coming of Christ was imminent (p.55).”

Isn’t it ironic that prosperity, increase, and respectability as a “major denomination” actually led to decline? With the increase in real estate holdings nationwide, accompanied by their corresponding increase in value, local autonomy in property ownership began to carry a much higher price tag. After all, who wants to put a reverter clause on an old army surplus tent or a run-down theater? Starting with the turbulent 1960s, we will attempt to trace some of the debate that transpired within our denomina... (oops), I mean fellowship.

1969: Dallas, Texas
Resolution 7

The Chairman of the resolutions Committee offered the following additional amendment to Article III, Section 6:

WHEREAS, Article III, Section 6, of the Bylaws contains provisions which are intended to authorize transactions pertaining to acquisition and disposal of properties, the securing of funds through mortgages and otherwise which provisions have throughout the years of the operation of The General Council of the Assemblies of God been regarded and found to be sufficient authorizations for such transactions, and

WHEREAS, A certain lending agency has recently expressed an opinion that said enabling authorizations as are attributed to the Executive Presbytery should be stated more specifically, and

WHEREAS, Recent court rulings involving nonprofit corporations have in some instances called for fuller provisions of authorization, be it

RESOLVED, That Article III, Section 6, paragraph “b” be amended to read:

They (the executive presbytery) shall have the right to buy, take, lease or otherwise acquire, own, hold in trust, use, sell, convey, mortgage, lease or otherwise dispose of real property, personal and mixed, tangible and intangible, or whatsoever kind, to borrow monies as deemed necessary and to issue bonds of whatsoever kind, trust deeds, mortgages, debentures, and notes and to enter into contracts all as may seem expedient and proper in the furtherance of the work of the said The General Council of the Assemblies of God.

A motion prevailed to adopt resolution 7 as presented. The motion to adopt all of the proposed revisions to Article III as amended was then voted upon and declared carried.

1971: Kansas City, MO
Resolution 10. Supervision of Churches

A motion prevailed that Resolution 10 become the next order of business.

Brother Smolchuck, chairman of the Resolutions Committee then presented the following resolution:

WHEREAS, The General Presbytery in its 1969 session heard a committee report on Supervision of Churches, and adopted a recommendation offered therein, that each District Council give serious consideration to adopting as a part of its district policy specific guidelines whereby the district officials may intervene in the government of a local assembly when discord causes major problems and threatens proper functioning and,

WHEREAS, the result of the discussion of this subject caused the General presbytery to call for the appointment of an additional committee to which was assigned the task of preparing a resolution for the amending of the Constitution and Bylaws relating to a District Council’s intervention in local assemblies, the committee being also instructed to define what is meant by sovereignty and disapproved as applied to this area of relationship, and

WHEREAS, The committee in considering its assignment took cognizance that in an organization encompassing 11,910 ordained ministers and 8,734 churches, in order to facilitate smoothness of operation and fellowship there must be guidelines for the governing of conduct and rules for effective operation and, further, that neither the church nor the minister can lay claim to sovereignty but must operate within these guidelines of operation and rules of conduct, and

WHEREAS, The word 'sovereignty' is found only once in the General Council Constitution and once in the Bylaws, and

WHEREAS, The context clearly shows this sovereignty to be limited to self-government in the calling of its pastor, election of its official board, the administering of discipline to its members, the right to own and hold title to its property and to determine standards for membership, and

WHEREAS, The local assembly is amenable to the General and District Councils in matters of doctrines, methods, and conduct, and

WHEREAS, Any broader interpretation of the term sovereignty would violate the Constitution and Bylaws and basic principles of the Assemblies of God, and place the assemblies in position of authority above the pastors in the organization, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That Article XII, paragraph 4, of the Constitution, entitled 'Local Assemblies,' be amended by placing a period after the word 'stated' in the third line and thereby deleting 'or interfere with its sovereignty,' so that the sentence will read, 'The fact that a local assembly is affiliated in the association of a District Council of the Assemblies of God shall in no wise destroy its rights as above stated,'
The balance of the paragraph shall remain as it is now stated; and, be it further

RESOLVED, That Article VI of the Bylaws shall be amended by adding the following as Section 4:
Church Supervision

a. The district officary may intervene in the government of a local church when discord causes major problems and threatens the proper functioning of the assembly.

b. The courtesy of entry shall be accorded district officers to services and business meetings of the church for the purposes of aiding, counseling, and guiding the congregation when it is the united judgments of the district officary that this is advisable and necessary.

c. As a last resort, the District Presbytery may disapprove a church when it becomes apparent in its judgment that the church is unwilling or unable to remedy problems of chronic strife, or unacceptable standards, or erroneous teachings, practices or doctrines. Upon becoming convinced that the situation cannot be remedied, the District Presbytery may advise the General Council Executive Presbytery to remove the church from its official list of affiliated churches; and, be it further

RESOLVED, That it is recommended that District Councils amend their Constitutions and Bylaws by adopting provisions similar to the foregoing.

It was moved and seconded that the resolution be adopted.

A motion to amend was seconded and carried to add a new paragraph "d" to read: "That such intervention shall not lift or suspend financial, mortgage, or legally contractual obligations of the local Assembly of God."

Following debate, a motion calling for the previous questions was seconded and carried.

The motion before the house to adopt Resolution 10 as amended was then vote upon and declared lost. (THIS WAS SIGNIFICANT IN DEFINING THE MINDSET OF OUR CHURCH LEADERS AS RECENT AS THE 1970s). One could see the gravitational pull of wanting to bring these additional measures in to "fix" trouble spots within the denomination (a good motive), but the underlying principles (and consequences) of true freedom were ultimately upheld.

1975: Denver, Colorado
Resolution 17

Manual on Ministers and Church Divisions.

It was moved and seconded that Resolution 17 be adopted. A motion prevailed to consider this resolution by sections indicated by Roman numerals I, II, and III.

It was moved, seconded, and carried to adopt section I.

It was moved, and seconded to adopt section II.

A motion was made and seconded to delete paragraph 1 of the section II, page 2, lines 21 through 24.

The chairman stated that the perimeters of the district dealing with the minister are stated in Article IX, page 145, or our constitution and bylaws.

The motion to amend by deletion was declared lost.

It was moved and seconded to amend section II of the resolution on page 3, paragraph 3, lines 3 through 5 by adding the following sentences: "A member of the dissenting group shall not be given ministerial recognition except under unusual circumstances and conditions."

It was moved and seconded to combine resolution 17 in the referral already made to the Executive Presbytery involving Resolution 16.

The attention of the assembly was called to the fact that the Executive Presbytery, through a duly appointed committee, has been giving study to this for a period of two years. It has been carefully studied and carefully debated in two sessions of the General Presbytery. While Resolution 17 refers to Resolution 16, it does stand separately as a whole.

The motion to refer was voted upon and declared lost.

The motion to amend section II, paragraph 3 on page 3 was declared carried.

It was moved, seconded, and carried to amend section II, paragraph 1, page 2, line 21 by inserting the word wrong in two places to read: "wrong conduct and wrong attitudes."

A question was raised concerning page 3, line 7, paragraph 4, of section II, as to whether we could legally regulate where a minister can reside.

The chairman said we could not abridge his civil rights, but we could say whether he could have credentials (and rightfully so. If a minister wants ag credentials, he or she should abide by the standards of the authorizing body! If he or she wants to preach other doctrine, then let them labor in another denomination that agrees with their position! emphasis mine).

A question was raised as to the meaning of the word "split", specifically regarding numbers of people. The chairman stated that the word "division" could be used as well as the word split

Several other questions were raised. It was noted that the term pastor and minister are herein used synonymously, and the term associate pastor would be under the same purview.

It was moved and seconded to amend the resolution by deleting from section II, paragraph 3, page 3, lines 3-5. The motion to delete was declared lost.

A motion calling for the previous question prevailed.

The motion to adopt section II as twice amended was declared carried.

It was moved and seconded to adopt section III.

It was moved and seconded to amend section III, page 3, at the beginning of line 21, by adding these words: "Be approved as a home missions church or."

The chair stated, "We do not have three levels of churches. We list district affiliated and General Council affiliated in the church directory. The chairman understands that any home missions church is a district affiliated church as soon as it hangs out a sign."

The motion was withdrawn following this explanation.

It was moved and seconded to amend section III by adding a paragraph "d" which shall read: "recognition should come only after a 1-year probationary period." This amendment was declared lost.

The motion to adopt section II was declared carried.

The chairman asked for a vote on the motion to adopt the resolution as twice amended. The motion was declared carried.

The resolution as amended, and adopted, follows:

"WHEREAS, it is essential that we articulate our policy and express what attitudes we should show when a church divides and a new church results; and

WHEREAS, The General Presbytery has approved the following guidelines to be used by district officials in dealing with church divisions; therefore, be it

RESOLVED, that the Manual on Ministers and Church Divisions be adopted by this 36th General Council now in session.

I. The District and the Church

1. Effort should be made to preserve Assemblies of God adherents and help them to become strong new Assemblies of God churches.
2. Whenever possible, Assemblies of God recognition should be granted any meritorious group desirous of Assemblies of God fellowship.
3. We should endeavor not to lose a church from the Assemblies of God, whether it is the existing church or a new one that may be formed by a dissident group. However, we should not condone wrong conduct, attitudes, actions, or false doctrines that lead to division.
4. In order to protect the rights of the membership, districts should provide suggested constitution and bylaws for local churches which should include provision for an appeal to the district for help when church trouble develops (THIS SECTION IS VERY IMPORTANT DUE TO ITS CALL FOR A "SUGGESTED CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS" this will resurface later. Emphasis mine).
5. District should exercise strong leadership, offering counsel to pastors, boards, and churches when there are indications of trouble.
6. The pastor and/or the official board should notify the district superintendent when a potential splinter group forms within the congregation, seeking his counsel and advice. Effort should be made to resolve the problem and prevent the split.
7. After efforts to maintain unity or to reunite the congregation have failed and when doctrine and district policy do not conflict, the district should offer assistance in establishing the new church. All procedures required for beginning any new Assemblies of God church shall be carefully followed.
8. District officers should approach each situation with an open mind and spirit, recognizing that local situations vary and all elements must be considered. Love and consideration should be shown to the existing church when the new group is seeking Assemblies of God recognition.
9. District guidelines should be established to provide consistency when dealing with churches and pastors involved in divisions. Care should be taken to provide flexibility in dealing with these complicated problems for the preservation of all concerned.
10. The district should seek to persuade the existing church to give its approval for district recognition of the new group. The existing church must not dictate what happens to the new group, but it should be considered and consulted. The existing church should be encouraged to release the fragmentation to the counsel and advice of the district officers and to cooperate with them, thus extending the kingdom of God. Also, let it be noted that the requirements for affiliation were as follows:

ARTICLE XI. LOCAL ASSEMBLIES

All true believers accepting the Assemblies of God tenets of faith and associating themselves in local bodies as assemblies, and accepting their full personal share of responsibility for the maintenance of scriptural order in the local body, shall have a standard for membership which may be determined either by the local assembly itself, or by agreement with the District Council.

Local assemblies shall be set in order and cooperate in the work of the district. They should support the district organization and may send delegates to the District and General Councils.

Each local assembly has the right of self-government under Jesus Christ, its living Head, and shall have the power to choose, or call its pastor, elect its official board, and transact all other business pertaining to its life as a local unit. It shall have the right to administer discipline to its members according to the Scriptures and its Bylaws. It shall have the right to acquire and hold title to property, either through trustees or in its corporate name as a self-governing unit.

The fact that a local assembly is affiliated in the association of a District Council or the General Council of the Assemblies of God shall in no wise destroy its rights as above stated or interfere with its sovereignty. The local assembly shall recognize that a District Council or The General Council of the Assemblies of God has the right to approve scriptural doctrine and conduct and to disapprove unscriptural doctrine and conduct and the authority to withdraw its certificate of membership if deemed necessary.

Once again, let me say that I agree with these statements in full! It is not just the District and General Council's right, but its holy charge from God to preserve scriptural integrity both in the pulpit and the pew. But what happens if the disapproved pastor and his loyal flock are not concerned about the loss of their affiliation? In the primitive days of absolute local autonomy, we would simply have to remove a push-pin from the District map where an Assembly once existed, demanding only that they remove their AG sign, and then turn the situation over to the providential judgment and/or mercy of God. ISN'T THAT ENOUGH?

(THE MINUTES CONTINUE) When in need of counsel or advice, the local assembly may appeal to the district officary for help. It may appeal from a decision by the district officary to the Executive Presbytery of The General Council of the Assemblies of God when there is a question whether or not the assembly has received proper help from the district. When exceptions are taken to the decisions of the Executive Presbytery, either by the local assembly or the district presbytery, appeal may be made to the General Presbytery.

Local Assemblies are expected to have an interest in the missionary enterprise, and to plan for regular contributions for its support.

TURNING THE CORNER

1979: Baltimore, Maryland

Report of Committee To Study Churches—Sovereignty, Relationships, and Classification

An item of unfinished business from the 1977 General Council concerning Churches—Sovereignty, Relationships, and Classification has been referred to a further study committee. Lowell Ashbrook, chairman, read the report of the committee. It was noted that the committee met on two occasions. It was moved, seconded, and carried to receive the report with thanks to the committee for their faithful labors....

Cont....

It was moved and seconded that the report be adopted, and the floor was opened for discussion.

A question was raised concerning the lack of mention of churches which are mothered, and clarification was requested as to who would have jurisdiction over such a church. It was felt that such a church would be an outreach of the mother church and under its jurisdiction until the time it became established and came under district supervision.

A question was raised concerning lines 12-14, page 2, which would seem to permit a church to establish its own standards for membership, notwithstanding the position of the district or General Council. It was felt that there should be some uniformity in standards for membership in Assemblies of God churches. It was moved and seconded to amend lines 12-14, page 2, to read: “adopt a standard of membership determined by the local assembly in agreement with the district council.” It was noted that this was the present constitutional provision and not in need of a change.

The motion to amend was voted on by a show of hands and was declared lost.

It was moved and seconded that lines 4-15, page 9, be amended to read: “In the event the termination of affiliation with The General Council of the Assemblies of God is under consideration by an affiliated assembly, the pastor and/or the board shall invite the district officer to participate in a specially called business meeting for the express purpose of giving the district officer the opportunity to present the case for continued General Council affiliation. Final disposition of the matter may then proceed in accordance with the constitution and bylaws of the local church (emphasis mine).”

Much discussion followed. A point of order was raised questioning the necessity of a two-thirds vote in amending the report. It was the chairman’s opinion that this was true, whether it would affect the constitution.

The motion to amend lines 4-15, page 9, was carried.

Churches—Sovereignty (continued)

The chairman stated that the report of the committee to study Churches—Sovereignty, Relationships, and Classification, with its proposed amendments to the constitution and bylaws, was before the body for a vote. He read the two amendments which had been adopted. By a show of hands, the chair ruled that the proposed report as twice amended carried by at least 89 percent, which would meet the requirements of a two-thirds vote for the constitutional amendments contained therein.

The report as amended and adopted follows:

The committee to study Churches—Sovereignty, Relationships, and Classification was comprised of four laymen, five pastors, and two district officials (general presbyters, one of whom is also a pastor). The committee was appointed by the Executive Presbytery, in response to the request of the 37th General Council, and was instructed to continue the work begun by the previous committee on the subject of Churches—Sovereignty, Relationships, and Classification.

The committee understood its assignment to deal specifically with the matter of local church sovereignty and the meaning of General Council affiliation.

Basic to the committee’s considerations was the awareness of God’s evident blessing upon our Fellowship since its inception. The committee believes that, to a considerable degree, the historical concept of local church sovereignty has contributed positively to the growth and development of the Fellowship.

Therefore, the report of the committee reflects what it understands to be the historical view of the Fellowship on local church sovereignty and relationships and has sought only to clarify and strengthen that position.

The committee submits the following report:

Constitution Article XI. Local Assemblies
Section 1. General Council Affiliated Assemblies

A General Council affiliated assembly is one which has applied for and has received a Certificate of Affiliation from The General Council of the Assemblies of God.

a. Requirements for affiliation. Churches desiring to be affiliated with The General Council of the Assemblies of God shall meet the following requirements. They shall:

1. Accept the tenets of faith of the Assemblies of God;

2. Adopt a standard of membership which may be determined either by the local assembly itself or by agreement with the district council;
3. Have a minimum active voting membership of 20 persons who shall accept their full share of responsibility for the maintenance of scriptural order in the local body;
4. Adopt a constitution and bylaws compatible with those recommended by the district council;
5. Have an adequate number of spiritually qualified members to fill the offices of the church called for in its constitution and bylaws; and
6. Make provision for a pastor who is a credentialed minister in good standing with the General Council and /or a district council.

b. Relationship to and support of the General council and district councils. A General Council affiliated assembly should cooperate in the work and support of the programs of the General Council and district councils, and may send delegates to the General Council and district councils.

c. Right of self-government (sovereign rights): Each General Council affiliated assembly has the right of self-government under Jesus Christ, its living Head, and shall have the power to choose or call its pastor, elect its official board, and transact all other business pertaining to its life as a local unit. It shall have the right to administer discipline to its members according to the Scriptures and its bylaws. It shall have the right to acquire and hold title to property, either through trustees or in its corporate name as a self-governing unit. The fact that it is affiliated with The General Council of the Assemblies of God shall not interfere with its sovereignty.

At this point I want to skip ahead to proposed Bylaw revisions to:

Article VI. Assemblies
Section 1. Procedure for Affiliation, paragraph b.

b. The meeting in which an assembly shall be set in order shall be presided over by an officer of the district who shall assist the assembly in adoption of a constitution and bylaws acceptable to the district (WE SHALL SOON SEE HOW SIGNIFICANT THIS IS WHEN COMPARING THE DISTRICT RECOMMENDED CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS WITH THE PREVIOUS PARAGRAPH “c” UNDER Article XI of the Constitution~ EMPHASIS MINE.).

It should also be noted that under the same Article VI, in section 4, paragraph “d” entitled: Relationships Between Churches, District Councils and the General Council; Preservation of affiliation states:

d. In the event the termination of affiliation with The General Council of the Assemblies of God is under consideration by an affiliated assembly, the pastor and/or the board shall invite the district officary to participate in a specially called business meeting for the express purpose of giving the district officary the opportunity to present the case for continued General Council affiliation. Final disposition of the matter may then proceed in accordance with the constitution and bylaws of the local church.

NOTE: Article XI, Section 1, paragraph “c”, as well as Bylaws Article VI, Section 1, paragraph “d”, both reinforce the absolute sovereignty of the local assembly in all its matters both business and spiritual. However, Article XI, Section 1, paragraph “a”, subparagraph 4, and Bylaw Article VI, Section 1, paragraph “b” state that the affiliating Assembly adopt a “constitution and bylaws acceptable to the district”. THIS IS WHERE THE AMBIGUOUS LANGUAGE BECOMES A PROBLEM TO THE MINDS OF PASTORS AND LOCAL CONGREGATIONS ALIKE.

Please allow me to probe deeper. When reading the newly adopted Constitution Article XI and Bylaws Article VI, one sees the conflict between affiliation with the General and District Councils and local sovereignty. How you may ask? When one examines the fact that an assembly desiring to affiliate adopts the set of documents approved by the District, the local church finds that they have now signed onto the “Reverter Clause”. But within the balance of the General Council documents, local church sovereignty is still held forward as the status quo. To clearly understand this Constitutional “catch 22”; let us look to current District and General Council recommended documents.

In the Michigan District Constitution Article VII entitled Relationships, Section 2. Local Churches, we find:

Local churches that are members of the Assemblies of God, Michigan District shall recognize and be subject to the District Council as set forth in the General Council Constitution (Article XI).

However, when one turns to the 2005 version of the Constitution recorded in the minutes of the 51st Session of the General Council held in Denver, Colorado, Article XI. LOCAL ASSEMBLIES, we find in paragraph a. Requirements for affiliation, subparagraph 4 (adopted in 1979):

4. Adopt Articles of Incorporation, a constitution or bylaws compatible with models recommended by the district council, or district approved governance models that provide for adequate accountability, amenability, and safeguards so that a pastor and /or governing body cannot directly or indirectly exert dictatorial control over a church;

Later in ARTICLE XI, paragraph c we read:

c. Right of self-government (sovereign rights). Each General Council affiliated assembly has the right of self-government under Jesus Christ, its living Head, and shall have the power to choose or call its pastor, elect its official board, and transact all other business pertaining to its life as a local unit. It shall have the right to administer discipline to its members according to the Scriptures and its constitution or bylaws. It shall have the right to acquire and hold title to property, either through trustees or in its corporate name as a self-governing unit.

The fact it is affiliated with the General Council of the Assemblies of God shall in no way destroy its rights as above stated or interfere with its sovereignty. The governance model adopted by the local assembly shall conform to the guidelines of Constitution, Article XI, Section 1, paragraph a, subparagraph (4).

General Council Bylaw ARTICLE VI, section 4, paragraph d. states:

d. Preservation of affiliation. In the event the termination of affiliation with The General Council of the Assemblies of God is under consideration by an affiliated assembly, the pastor or board shall invite the district officers to participate in a specially called business meeting for the express purpose of giving the district officers the opportunity to present the case for continued General Council affiliation. Final disposition of the matter may then proceed in accordance with the constitution and bylaws of the local church.

BUT WHAT IF THE CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS OF THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY ARE THE ONES RECOMMENDED BY THE DISTRICT (PER CONSTITUTION ARTICLE XI AND BYLAW ARTICLE VI OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL)? LET'S READ FURTHER TO SEE EXACTLY WHAT THE RECOMMENDED SET OF CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS HAS TO SAY.

On the official web site of the Assemblies of God General Council www.ag.org, a prospective pastor and/or church seeking affiliation can read in the "RECOMMENDED CONSTITUTION AND BYLAWS FOR THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY" what is going to be expected of them.

Bylaw ARTICLE XII. PROPERTY, Section 4 (revised August 5, 2002). Disaffiliation states:

"Title to all real property now owned or hereafter acquired by the assembly shall be held in trust as a place of divine worship in full cooperative fellowship and affiliation with The General Council of the Assemblies of God. In the event that the assembly shall be divided over doctrinal or any other issues, or shall vote to disaffiliate from the Assemblies of God, all property of the assembly shall remain with those members, whatever their number, desiring continued affiliation with the Assemblies of God and adhering to its Statement of Fundamental Truths. The determination of which group of members desires continued affiliation with the Assemblies of God and adheres to its Statement of Fundamental truths shall be arbitrated by the District Presbytery of the _____ District Council of the Assemblies of God, and its decision shall be final and binding. If all of the members of the assembly shall vote to disaffiliate from the Assemblies of God for doctrinal or any other reasons, then all of the property of such assembly shall revert to said District Council and shall be used by the District as an Assemblies of God church if possible, and if not possible, the District may sell the property and apply the proceeds in any manner consistent with its stated purposes."

So, the General Council Constitution states that local assemblies are sovereign in all matters of business and discipleship, and also states that affiliation does nothing to set that sovereignty aside. The congregations are also told that in the case of conflict that leads to a move to disaffiliate, that all matters will be settled according to the local set of Constitution and Bylaws. What many do not know is that in order to affiliate in the first place, the local assembly must adopt the District recommended version which signs all ownership of property by right of reverter to the denomination. Quite the "catch 22"! There is actual public record of one such case taking place within our denomination that demonstrates the confusion surrounding the "tension" that exists between local congregational autonomy within a voluntary cooperative system, and centralized ownership of properties by denominational headquarters. Read the story reported in "The Clarion Ledger" (Jackson, Mississippi) that tells of what happened to a small Assemblies of God congregation in that District.

November 1, 2003
Church cries foul
By Charlotte Graham
cgraham@clarionledger.com

Photos by Vickie D. King/The Clarion-Ledger Sheila Morgan, wife of Pastor Bill Morgan leads the Abundant Life Worship Center congregation in song Sunday morning at the church in Sandersville.

Joy fills the sanctuary of the Abundant Life Worship Center in Sandersville as the Rev. Robert W. "Bill" Morgan and his wife, Shelia, lead the congregation in praise and worship.

Smiles are seen on faces, hands are lifted in praise and shouts of "Hallelujah" ring out across the building, draped with majestic banners.

No one would ever guess this pastor and members are facing what they call one of the worse times in the church's history. The 60-member congregation, once affiliated with the Mississippi District Council Assemblies of God Inc. is being sued by the District. And if the District prevails, the congregation will lose its place of worship, parsonage, mission house and two of the six acres owned by the church.

"In the early 1980s, the congregation here at Abundant Life bought two acres of land to start a church building," explained the Rev. Morgan. The church purchased an additional four acres in recent years.

"The local church made a \$20,000 loan from the District for the building program," added Morgan. "Although the loan (made April 5, 1983) was for 10 years, it was paid in full on July 19, 1985."

The congregation believed it had cleared its debt and had all rights to the property. However, in February 2000, members discovered that when the District recorded the deed at the courthouse, a clause had been inserted stating that if this church ever came out of the Assemblies of God denomination, the church and land would revert to the Mississippi District Assemblies of God. The pastor and members of Abundant Life are crying foul. They contend that since the District has not paid a single bill with regards to the church, it has no rightful claim to the property.

District Superintendent Walter L. Davis said the problem is the pastor and most of the members weren't there when the loan agreement was made. That's why they aren't familiar with the terms of the loan.

He added that the Mississippi District is simply requesting a declaratory statement from the church. "Because of the way the deed is written, since the church chose to sever its relationship with the Assemblies of God, we believe the Mississippi District to be the rightful owner of the property.

"Whenever property is deeded to the church, the District places a reverter clause in the deed to protect its investment," he said. "We've tried to work with the church and get them to recognize that the property belongs to the District, but they don't want to work with us to resolve this matter."

Church trustee Janet Lewis said the best thing the District can do for the congregation is leave it alone.

"I don't think God wants the church to be torn down like this," she said. "We shouldn't be found in such a battle.

"Personally, I don't think the District has any grounds for the suit. But if it's God's will for them to have the property, they will get it. He'll then give us something bigger and better."

Church secretary Cybil Cohen hopes the congregation keeps the property because of the many sacrifices made by the members and pastor.

"They (the District) didn't care about the church as long as it had a membership of 10 or 15 people," she said. "Now that the Morgans have built the congregation to 60 to 65 people, they all of a sudden have an interest in us."

There's a bigger issue. The Rev. Morgan, who came to the church five and a half years ago at the request of the congregation, is not an ordained Assemblies of God minister.

"Both my wife and I were previously married," explained Morgan. "For that reason, I cannot be ordained by the Assemblies of God." The District wants a licensed and ordained minister to lead the congregation. However, the members want to keep the Morgans whom they say have faithfully served the church for five years.

The congregation's desire to keep the Morgans prompted a vote to pull out of the denomination in February 2002. The congregation contends that's when the problems began.

"They knew he wasn't licensed with the Assemblies of God when he first came, but they (the Mississippi District Council) still allowed him to come in and preach," said Cohen. "They didn't ask the congregation anything when they made the decision to remove Brother Morgan.

"We took a stand. We sent a letter stating that we want Brother Bill and don't want anybody else. They didn't listen and so we pulled out." Davis refused to address the pastorate issue, only responding to the legal case.

"If they would work with us, we wouldn't even be at this point," Davis said.

Even if the District is legally right, 72-year-old David Milam believes it's morally wrong.

"Sure, they backed the loan for us, but that has been paid back for 20 years," he said. "They should let it go at that, but if the court says they have the right to the property, then I don't know anything we can do about it."

Cohen dreads the thought of it all. "They would just be putting us out on the streets, homeless, no place to go," she said.

Milam has a brighter view: "I'm still upbeat, really I am. The building is not the church, but of course, it's still a mighty good place to worship."

This unfortunate story was eventually resolved with the local congregation retaining its local sovereign and autonomous ownership of their property. No rational American would begrudge a financing body the right of securing its assets over the life of a loan. I've looked at a couple of car titles in my time that had a bank's name (or my Dad's) right next to mine. The only difference is that after the car loan was expired I received a new "cleared title", showing that I was truly the sovereign and autonomous owner of my car. In the case of this small Assembly however, they discovered approximately twenty years later that their property had been signed over for all time. If the church had been an ungrateful, wretched lot, attempting to "skip out" on their loan and go independent, then the District could have (and rightfully should have) pursued them in legal courts to recover its lost assets and in the words of the Mississippi District leaders, "protect its investment". BUT THAT WAS NOT THE CASE! The Mississippi District of the Assemblies of God did not simply make a low-interest construction loan to one of their congregations, but in actuality bought the entire church lock, stock, and barrel, for \$20,000! If the original appraised value of the property was (for discussion's sake) \$100,000, and the new addition raised the church's assets to \$150,000, then the District authorities were very shrewd indeed! They obtained a return of over 700% on their original "investment", simply by laying claim to the entire property via the reverter clause. One would think logically, that simply being paid back the \$20,000 with interest would have been sufficient.

In contrast to the recommended bylaws of the General Council and those adopted in Mississippi, the Michigan District of the Assemblies of God presents a set that still leaves the issue of absolute sovereignty to the local congregation. What follows is the text of the recommended bylaws that a local church receives when they are considering affiliation with the Michigan District of the Assemblies of God.

ARTICLE IX. PROPERTY

Section 1. Incorporation and Prerogatives

The church shall be incorporated under the laws of the State of Michigan. Its property shall be held in its corporate name.

The Official Board, on behalf of the church, shall be authorized to purchase or acquire by gift, bequest or otherwise, either directly or as trustee, and to own, hold in trust, use, sell, convey, mortgage, lease, or otherwise dispose of any real, personal, intellectual, tangible and intangible, or property of whatever kind, as may be necessary for the furtherance of its purposes, and to exercise all other powers conferred upon it by its charter or by the applicable nonprofit corporation law of this State; all in accordance with its Bylaws as the same may be hereafter amended.

No real, personal, intellectual, tangible and intangible, or other property of whatever kind, of the church in excess of a fair market value of \$10,000, shall be taken, or sold, leased, mortgaged or otherwise alienated, without the same shall have been authorized by a majority of at least two-thirds (2/3) of the ballots cast by members who are in attendance at an annual or special business meeting which has been called for the consideration of the proposal. The Pastor and secretary of the church shall certify in such conveyance, lease, or mortgage, that the same has been duly authorized and recommended by a vote of the church. Such certificate shall be held to be conclusive evidence thereof.

Section 2. Defection

In the event defection shall occur from the Tenets of Faith of this church as the same are stated in the Statement of Fundamental Truths in the Constitution of The General Council, any portion of the membership subscribing to and practicing the aforesaid Tenets of Faith and retaining membership with _____ (name of this church) shall retain possession of, and title to, all properties of said church with full rights thereto as provided in its Bylaws.

The determination of which group of members desires continued affiliation with the Assemblies of God and adheres to its Statement of Fundamental Truths shall be determined by the Presbyter Board of the Assemblies of God, Michigan District, and its decision shall be final and binding. (this, of course, would only be a problem if a local group challenged the fellowship in finer points where “the fellowship” would be the one accused of changing the historic position contained in the 16 fundamental truths [the ordination of homosexuals, worship of mary, etc]).

Section 3. Disaffiliation

This church may disaffiliate from the Assemblies of God by a 100% vote of all active members of the church present at a special business meeting called for that purpose [see Article 7, Section 3 and Section 5], provided that the District Superintendent, or Superintendent’s designee, shall be present and actively participate in such meeting.

We now see that the transformation is complete. We have gone from the small group of pioneers who carefully guarded their local sovereignty, to a “major American denomination” who holds de facto ownership of local church properties via the “reverter clause”. The real issue at hand is one of double-mindedness and legal confusion. While on a recent trip to Arizona, I found myself on the Arizona District’s web site looking for a local Assembly in which to worship. As I perused the church listings in our area, I found the “Recommended By-laws” listing and clicked on it. Arizona is putting forth the version set forth by the General Council’s web site which calls for reversion of property EVEN WITH A 100% VOTE OF LOCAL MEMBERS! So you see, one must be very astute as to the legal parameters of each District in which one resides.

The Assemblies of God movement strenuously shrinks back from the use of the word “denomination”. That protest rings hollow when we hold up the banner of local church autonomy with one hand while placing reverter clauses in the back of local church bylaws with the other. What actually exists in today’s American Assemblies of God denomination is the local right of management, but not ownership. Congregations can call their pastor, build a building, paint it, landscape it, conduct outreaches to hopefully fill it, take out mortgages to sacrificially pay for it, but at the end of the day it all belongs to headquarters. I would like to offer one other meditation regarding the wonderful world of real estate ownership and church politics. I personally know men who, due to the overwhelming size of their congregations and the prestige that comes with them, have no reverter clauses in their local, autonomous, and sovereign constitution and bylaws. One administrator of such a church said to me over the telephone, “Do you think we’re going to put (millions) of dollars worth of “sweat equity” in the name of the District?” The answer to his rhetorical question was (and is) a resounding “NO”!

Before you think me one-sided on this issue, please allow me to share an item that appeared in the December 12, 2006 edition of the South Bend Tribune newspaper. It reported that there was a local United Methodist Church (Lane Boulevard UMC) that is embroiled in controversy with its denominational leadership over its local ownership of its church and real estate when it decided to remove “Methodist” from its name. The article states,

On Nov. 27, Kalamazoo County Circuit Judge J. Richardson Johnson issued a preliminary injunction giving the Western Michigan Conference of the United Methodist Church access to the early 20th-century building. The 120-member Lane Boulevard congregation now holds Sunday services at the Hungarian Church of Kalamazoo. “I know that it is hard for them,” said the Rev. Sawdie Abiade, the Kalamazoo-area district superintendent for the denomination (and a personal friend of mine-JLW). But, he added, “the property legally belongs to the United Methodist Church.” Founded as an independent congregation, Lane Boulevard Church later joined the Evangelical United Brethren Church. In 1968, that denomination merged with the United Methodist Church. Lane Boulevard members narrowly voted to participate in the merger.

Do you see? That local congregation voted to be assumed into a “hierarchical church organization, and the plaintiff local church under its jurisdiction and control,” Methodist lawyer Thomas Shearer wrote in a legal brief for the case (ibid). The United Methodist Church is, and always has been considered a full-blown denomination that holds the rights over all of its local congregational properties. As I’ve already cited, one would have to be completely mad to think he could go in and “sneak” the property out of that denominational structure. THEREFORE I SUPPORT THE UNITED METHODISTS AGAINST THIS LOCAL BODY WHO SHOULD KNOW BETTER AFTER VOTING, OF THEIR OWN FREE WILL, TO JOIN THE UMC BACK IN 1968. However, when comparing that situation with the conditions within the Assemblies of God, we see that our governmental authorities avoid such denominational terminology like the plague, yet behind closed doors consider all local AOG properties as theirs by right of historic association, while liberally using the words autonomous, sovereign, etc.

EPILOGUE: BRINGING IT HOME

I have done extensive research into the historic and legal condition of the church that I myself lead, and have found that it was incorporated in 1946 (before the quantum leap taken at the 1979 General Council) with its local autonomy spelled out within its articles, and without a “reverter” on its deed. It is a truly autonomous assembly that is voluntarily cooperating with our great fellowship. But why do some churches have reverter clauses while others don’t? You can reconcile that issue for yourself; I know I’m trying to. As in my previous paper, “When in Rome”, where I questioned “unofficial” AG doctrinal compromise and unholy alliances in the name of global ecumenism; we see in the case of denominational right of reversion vs. local church autonomy the same lack of clear and definitive leadership from denominational officials. One illusion feeds off of the other, making each stronger with every passing year.

By the way, in case you’re wondering, I do not have a secret desire to own my own corporation, and I look forward to someday being buried with my AG fellowship card in my pocket (if the Lord tarries). I just want our leaders to come out in the light of a District and/or General Council in session and state for the record that local Assemblies are actually sovereign within a truly voluntary cooperative fellowship, OR that all properties are held in trust in the corporate name of the denominational headquarters in Springfield, MO. Let’s put it on the table, debate, vote, and then move ahead in the true spirit of cooperative fellowship! This would, I believe, please both the hearts of our AG founding fathers and our Heavenly Father as well! The greatest days as a fellowship are yet ahead BY HIS SPIRIT!