

June 19, 2019
David Asscherick
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Chinderah, NSW

Dear NNSW Executive Committee,

It is with profound sadness and concern that I write to raise serious procedural and ethical concerns which have come to my attention regarding the current NNSW Nominating Committee (NC). I am roundly persuaded that the nature and number of these concerns have already undermined the legitimacy of the current NC. I take no pleasure in writing this, I would much rather be giving a Bible study or preparing a sermon, but my conscience and my concern for our beloved Conference compel me.

In March 2014, I moved my family from the United States to Kingscliff, Australia at the invitation of Pr Justin Lawman and the NNSW Executive Committee (EC). We have not regretted that decision for a moment. We have made this country and Conference our home. We are even in the process of applying for citizenship! The direction, passion, and personnel of the NNSW Conference have been a source of tremendous blessing and encouragement to me both professionally and personally. As someone who has traveled to Seventh-day Adventist churches, conferences, and communities all over the world, I feel qualified to say with confidence that this is a special Conference, one to be proud of. My hope and prayer, like yours, is that this will continue to be the case until the return of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

I trust that my letter will be received in the spirit it is sent: with love, humility, and yet concern.

To provide some context, I was blessed and honored to be a member of the 2015 NC. Too, I was a member of this year's Selection Committee (SC) which convened on April 21 at Yarrahappani, NSW. These committee experiences, and the many other committees I've served on and chaired the last twenty-plus years, have provided me with the background and context to raise my concerns.

A few words about confidentiality before I itemize my concerns. As a pastor I know well the importance of confidentiality. But there are, I believe, at least two types of confidentiality: morally-grounded and policy-based. An example of morally-grounded confidentiality would be a young man confiding in his pastor that he experiences same-sex attraction and then saying something like, "please, don't tell anyone this; you are one of very few people who know about this." In situations like this, the pastor is morally-bound to preserve absolute confidentiality.

Policy-based confidentiality is similar, but different in important regards. While the former is morally absolute, the latter is not. For example, take the policy-based confidentiality expected in meetings like the current NC: among other things, this confidentiality helps to prevent rampant agendas from bearing sway, which is valuable. It also helps to prevent harmful and counterproductive gossip. But when policy-based confidentiality comes into conflict with one's moral commitments to, say, fairness and justice, a moral tension is created. It is this moral tension which creates the "whistle-blower" phenomenon. In cases of significant moral tension, wisdom must be exercised and absolute confidentiality should not be expected. Policy-based confidentiality cannot be used to cover injustice, illegality, or incompetence, for example.

I should say that I have not pursued knowledge of the current NC particularly. As a member of the SC I felt reasonably good about the process and the NC we selected. As a member of the former NC, I did call several of the current NC members to advise them on a few things that I thought would be helpful to them, but this was before the first meeting. As the NC process got underway, I was happy to let the NC do its work, reasonably confident that a good and Kingdom-building outcome would eventuate.

Pr Tom Evans' departure letter, however, caused me to raise my eyebrows a little, even though I knew there were some potential roadblocks to his re-nomination. Then, following the second NC meeting, when I heard from Pr Paul Geelan that he too had not been re-nominated, I was admittedly nonplussed. So I began to make some reasonable inquiries about the proceedings. What I learned was deeply troubling.

A further note on this: the members I know of the current NC have been extremely tight-lipped about details and deliberations of NC. I have asked a few general questions of several of them and gotten essentially nowhere. The information that follows has come to me personally *from sources who are not members of the present NC*.

Here is what I've learned:

1. **"Your blood will be on your hands."** As hard as it is to believe, it is reported that these are the words which were spoken at the end of a dissuading speech by the chairperson, Pr Jorge Muñoz, in reference to the potential nomination of former NNSW President, Justin Lawman. Apparently, this speech and these words were spoken immediately before the vote was taken, casting a pall of negativity over the minds of the members of the NC toward Justin Lawman and his potential nomination.

Did the prophetic unction come suddenly upon the chairperson? To paraphrase 1 Samuel 10:11, "Is Jorge also among the prophets?" If not, then on what possible grounds could such language be justified? **Justin Lawman** is, after all, the same man who served this Conference well for many years as its president and was, just four years ago, *unanimously* nominated by the 2015 NC (I know, I was there) and then reelected by 97+% of the constituency at session (I know, I was there and I calculated the vote percentage at the time).

It has been reported to me that a **similar speech was made by Jorge** when Justin's name came up recently for consideration as president at the SNSW Conference NC. By any measure, this course of action and this choice of language constitutes **steering** of the most indefensible sort. If true, this is a serious breach of not only impartiality, but of professionalism. These words not only constitute steering, they are also inflammatory and unscrupulous. I am choosing my words carefully here; this is not hyperbole. **The suggestion that if the NC votes in a certain way their "blood will be on [their] hands" is purposely evocative and clearly coercive.** That the chairperson would feel comfortable saying such a thing would be entirely puzzling and utterly irresponsible.

It is my understanding that Pr Muñoz may have later written a letter of apology to the NC. If this is case, that is good news. But, of course, the damage was done and his desired outcome was achieved at that point. I hope you are as disturbed as I was to learn this report of this unfortunate situation.

2. **No professional appraisals for incumbents have been made available to the NC.** On the first day of the 2015 NC, each member of the committee was given a large packet containing, among other things, lengthy and comprehensive professional appraisals for each incumbent. These appraisals were absolutely invaluable to us and, in truth, formed the very basis of our decision making (in addition to prayer and robust discussion, of course). Each member kept the packet until our work was done many weeks later when we then turned them in. We were rightly encouraged by the chairperson, Pr Chester Stanley, to read up on the incumbents so we could speak intelligently and informedly to the various matters of professional competency which were at hand.

For my part, I can't even imagine attempting to conduct a NC without this essential evaluational tool. I have spoken to members of the 2011 NC and have learned that they too received the same packet, containing the full complement of professional appraisals. I have also learned that this is standard procedure in our church, even at the General Conference and Division levels. I am told that Pr Chester Stanley, the former AUC President, who also chaired the 2011 NNSW NC, made it his standard practice, in keeping with Division policy.

This practice represents a common sense approach. I mean, really, how many of the 20 or 21 people who make up our present NC have an actual, firsthand knowledge of the day-to-day work of Conference officers and departmental heads? Apart from the four or five pastors on the NC, I imagine none of them would have much awareness at all of such things. Even as a pastor myself, I know precious little about, say, the daily work, professionalism, and effectiveness of our CFO, Russell Halliday, or our Children's Ministries Director, Daron Pratt. Without the basic and essential information provided by the professional appraisals, the NC is largely flying blind. Or, more likely, regularly looking to the chairperson for suggestions, advice, and direction, which I imagine he is happy to give.

Already, Tom Evans and Paul Geelan have been removed *without professional appraisals of either having been made available to the NC*. This one fact alone, in my considered perspective, utterly invalidates the votes regarding the positions of president and general secretary. I couldn't believe my ears when I learned that professional appraisals had not been made available, on the first day, to each member. When I told some members of the present NC that they should have received such formal, professional appraisals they were shocked and one of them said, "well that would've been incredibly helpful; it could've made all the difference in the world."

3. **In direct violation of the North New South Wales Conference Constituency Meeting and Election Procedures, no "right of reply" has been extended to Prs Tom Evans or Paul Geelan.** Here is paragraph 8, section 8:

The chairperson shall extend to every person whose position is being reviewed, including executive committee members, the right of reply to the nominating committee in the event of questions arising relating to areas of specific concern.

This procedure is eminently reasonable. Please, notice several things. First, this is **not optional** for the chairperson as the verb "shall" in the phrase "The chairperson shall extend..." makes unmistakably clear. Second, "the right of reply" regarding "areas of specific concern" must be extended to "every person whose position *is being reviewed*." That is present tense; the procedural requirement described here cannot be carried out *after* a person has failed to be renominated. No, the language is clear: this "right of reply" must be extended *during the process*, not after the vote.

Neither Tom Evans nor Paul Geelan had this procedural requirement extended to them. And let's be real here: we all know it is quite unusual to dismiss a president who has come in mid-term. Strong reasons of "specific concern" would have to be marshaled to justify presenting such a decision and report to the NNSW Constituency.

I do not doubt that there were some concerns about Tom Evans' leadership. It is reported that something like 60 letters were written to the NC. Presumably, some of those letters raised concerns about Tom Evans' leadership and fitness for the role. Perhaps some NC members themselves had "areas of specific concern." This is not unusual, of course. In fact, it is to be expected. **But was Tom Evans given the opportunity to speak to his alleged shortcomings and missteps? Was Paul Geelan? No, they were not and this is wrong.** Note that carefully, please: *it is not only procedurally disallowed it is entirely unjust.* "The one who first states a case seems right, until the other comes and cross-examines" (Proverbs 18:17, NRSV).

A member of the 2011 NC relayed to me that in their deliberations issues were raised with regard to a particular departmental leader. It looked like this departmental leader might not be renominated. There were questions and concerns about some of his decisions, interpersonal skills, and overall leadership. What did the chair (Chester Stanley) do in this case? He did the right thing, the procedurally-sound thing: he invited the departmental leader to the NC to answer the questions which had come up in the course of their robust discussion. The result? The NC was satisfied with the departmental leader's answers and he was renominated. Where there had been confusion and even accusation, now there was understanding and clarity. This is the exactly the kind of situation paragraph 8, section 8 is designed to address. Too, it is the exact kind of situation described in Proverbs 18:17.

In the 2015 NC we invited no incumbents in to address and answer us as did the 2011 NC. Why not? Simple: because we chose to renominate everyone. Had there been cause to seek better understanding, or to have questions addressed, we would have certainly done so. The present NC, however, in violation of clearly-written procedure, has extended no such pre-vote opportunity to either Tom Evans or Paul Geelan. This is completely unacceptable both procedurally and ethically.

It is my understanding the EC recently formally raised this very point of frustration (no opportunity to answer one's critics and/or detractors) with the NC chairperson regarding Tom Evans' failure to be renominated by the NC. I am happy to hear this, as it further confirms my confidence in our EC. Again, this is just common sense type stuff here. Should, for example, non-tabled, anonymous letters and accusations be allowed to stand as evidence against anyone, much less our elected leaders?

Can I please inquire as to what Jorge's reply to the EC's formal complaint was? This would be helpful to know.

4. **None of the reported 60-ish letters the NC has received have been tabled with the NC.** And yet these letters seem to be bearing significant sway in the meeting. How is this even remotely ethical? It is now widely known that a well-timed letter writing campaign was organized by certain discontented persons. It is reported that social media was used to encourage and coordinate this campaign. Fine, people should be able to have their say. No problem there. But several serious issues are at hand regarding these letters.

First, for a letter to have *any* sway at all in a formal meeting such as the NC, it needs to be formally tabled by the chairperson. It needs to be available to each member of the NC. The

content, reasoning, and spirit of the letter must be considered. So too must the author. As with Scripture itself, *context is everything*.

Is the chairperson aware that a letter writing campaign was organized? I have been told that he is aware of this. Are the letters positive, constructive, and praise-worthy? Are they written in a Christian spirit? Do they represent the NNSW Conference geographically, demographically, theologically, and methodologically? Surely we cannot allow our NCs to devolve into the lowest common denominator of which group, church, or faction can marshal the most letters before the deadline. And not all letters are created equal. Again, content, reasoning, spirit, and authorship must all be considered by the whole NC, not just the chairperson.

If the letters are not tabled with the NC, this affords the chairperson the opportunity to cherry-pick perspectives, anecdotes, sentiments, and sentences that suit his desired outcomes—and this is key—with absolutely no accountability, since he is the sole reader, interpreter, and dispenser of the letters. This is an entirely untenable situation; our collective faith is in the process and the NC, not in any one man. “In a multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 24:6, NKJV).

Putting items 3 and 4 together, it becomes necessary to note that if a critical or questioning letter has been written about an incumbent’s work, skill, character, personality, initiatives, fitness, etc. (that is, “areas of specific concern”), the incumbent must be extended “the right of reply” to the letter in front of the NC. Otherwise, anonymous, unfounded, or mean-spirited letters could be allowed to assassinate a person’s character or derail, or even destroy, their ministry!

If these 60-ish letters are to have *any* sway, then let them be tabled, read, analyzed, discussed, and answered. But un-tabled they must not be allowed to manufacture agenda-serving narratives like “this Conference needs healing” or “the time for change has come.” The truth is, these un-tabled letters seem to have *already* had significant sway and, very likely, affected votes, nominations, and outcomes.

5. **As has already been made clear, the chairperson is inappropriately steering the outcome of the meeting.** As someone who has chaired meetings for 20-plus years, let me begin by saying that chairing a meeting is not always easy. Though a Seventh-day Adventist, Pr Jorge Muñoz is not a member of the NNSW Conference. But every member of the NC, of course, is. The churches of the NNSW Conference are trusting the NC to nominate leaders that will accurately represent and responsibly lead us. We are thankful for and respectful of the ministerial work of Jorge Muñoz, but he comes to the NNSW NC as a visitor and a servant. As the chair, he should be striving for impartiality and seeking to ascertain what *our* needs and wants are in terms of direction and leadership. We don’t need him to pick our leaders and determine our direction, and we don’t want him to. That’s not how the Seventh-day Adventist Church functions constitutionally or administratively. It’s not biblical that one man, or a small group of people, should hold outsized influence or sway. We are a church which strives for the democratic ideal, informed by the biblical maxim of “the priesthood of all believers.”

Along these lines, it is my understanding that the EC requested several times (three?) that Jorge might come and listen to their perspective on the state of the Conference and its leadership needs. Wisdom would avail itself of these invitations. But I am told that Jorge never came. This situation is bordering on absurd, frankly. Not only is the NC chairperson steering, saying terribly unwise, unethical, and unfortunate things (“Your blood will be on

your hands.”), failing to follow procedure, requiring a stifling and threatening level of confidentiality, but he also couldn't make time to meet with our EC to hear their input regarding the leadership, direction, and health of their Conference? I struggle to imagine an unbiased rationalization of the totality of these actions.

In closing, I want to make four final points and a formal request:

First, the NC is not to blame for the present situation. Most of them (all of them?) have never sat on a Conference NC before. To use an illustration, they are passengers along for a ride. The driver knows the roads well and he knows where *he* wants to go. As a member of this year's SC, I know the NC names and, as I said, I had confidence in the NC we chose. The above breaches of ethics and procedure are not the fault of the NC members whatsoever. I believe the NC has done their work in sincerity and to the best of their ability, given the compromised situation.

Second, even though they are not at fault, the present NC has been irreparably compromised and their minds and view points have necessarily been influenced by the things they've heard and their own votes up to this point. For this reason, I am convinced the process needs to be started over from the SC level. This would be problematic, I know, and perhaps even unprecedented. But as the five points above make clear, there is just no responsible way forward for the present NC.

Third, any of the above five points, even in isolation, would be reason enough to disband the NC and convene a new NC. The cumulative situation, however, is both deeply saddening and totally irredeemable.

Fourth, I don't want to impute motive to the chairperson. I've never met or spoken with him, so I have no personal angst or prejudice toward him. Though I have no personal quarrel with him, I am entirely dissatisfied with his professional execution of the present NC. I am not alone in this regard, there are others who are aware of my concerns, and of this letter. My own experience on the last NC was characterized by none of the egregious features I have outlined above.

As you can probably detect, I am deeply disappointed and, frankly, very upset about this situation. I hope you are too. I imagine that a great many other NNSW members would share my considerable incredulity and frustration. I am, therefore, writing to the EC to ask that one of two things be done:

1. That the EC requests that the whole NC process be started over. I'm not sure constitutionally whose call it is to disband a NC and start over, but if it is the EC's decision to make, I'm asking that in light of the issues I've raised above that you, please, do so. Or, if this is someone else's decision to make, could the EC, please, strongly request and advise them that they make this decision?

And/or

2. That EC puts "Procedural and ethical concerns which seriously undermine the legitimacy of the NC process and report" on the agenda for the General Session in September. This would be a strange juxtaposition, to be sure: a NC report as one agenda item and another item which questions the legitimacy of the very report just received. But what are our options if the chairperson presses forward even in view of the present concerns? Our people need to

know what is going on. As I've outlined here, there is considerable cause to question the legitimacy of the present NC.

Just yesterday I received an article from Julian Archer posted on the NSW Conference website titled *Conference 'Largest Improvement in the World'* describing the excellent Natural Church Development (NCD) scores and trajectory of our beloved Conference. What an encouraging read! Our churches are not perfect, of course, but they are passionate about the Adventist message and authentic service. My own church is prospering and growing numerically and spiritually. Praise God! The question dawns on me as I read this: is this really a time for a wholesale change of direction and personnel? When things in many respects are looking up so promisingly? It is my conviction that the general population of our Conference is pleased with the direction and trajectory we are on. I know I am.

I am not precious or passionate about the *outcome* of the NC report and General Session vote, as such, but I am absolutely committed to an ethical, defensible, and procedurally-sound *process*. Thank you for your time and consideration of my request. If the EC desires, I'd be happy to come in person and further explicate the points contained herein. Even at 3800 words, I've had to leave several important issues and situations out.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Asscherick", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

David Asscherick
Senior Pastor, Kingscliff Church

copies to:
Glenn Townend
Jorge Muñoz
Michael Worker