Annual Council delegates review suggested changes to 28 Fundamental Beliefs

Annual Council delegates today approved the next step in a five-year process to better articulate the church’s core beliefs, using clearer—and frequently more inclusive—language.

Adventist theologians led delegates through a reading of an edited draft of all 28 Fundamental Beliefs prepared by the church’s Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee. The group was appointed in 2011 to follow up on a decision during the 2010 General Conference Session to strengthen the church’s interpretation of origins.

It came as no surprise, then, that Fundamental Belief Number 6 received the most red ink. One proposed edit to the church’s belief on Creation replaces “In six days, the Lord made” with “In a recent, six-day creation, the Lord made.” Another suggested change specifies that creation took place within the span of “six literal days.”

The word “literal” closes what some Adventists have claimed is an interpretive loophole that hypothetically allows theistic evolution to explain the Genesis origins account.
The edited draft also replaces the document's citation of the first verse of Genesis, which states "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the Earth" with a passage from Exodus 20, which says God created “the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them...”

The change allows for differing understandings of whether the creation of the universe was coincident with the six-day creation of life on earth. Some creationist Adventist theologians believe Genesis 1:1 may refer to creation in a broader sense (see Job 38:7), whereas Exodus 20:11, the draft states, "seems to restrict the creative act to what took place during the six days of creation."

"The suggested version doesn’t bring anything new to the belief. It just states with a firmer voice, or a more clear voice, what we have always believed,” said Artur Stele, an Adventist world church vice president and co-chair of the Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee.

Overall, the draft proposes changes—most of which are minor and editorial in nature—to 18 of the church’s 28 Fundamental Beliefs.

Stele provided additional background on the new gender-neutral language that shows up consistently throughout the draft document. “Man and “mankind” now read “human” and “humanity.”

“We wanted to determine whether the suggestion was biblical or just reflecting the spirit of the day,” Stele said. After a close study of Hebrew usage in the Old Testament, “you cannot conclude words such as “man” only refer to the masculine gender.”

Even in the New Testament, Stele said, inclusivity is the clear biblical intent. The original Greek word “man” was always gender-neutral until the modern era. "It means human being,” he said.

The draft also underscores the church’s belief on Marriage and Family, suggesting that the phrase “a man and a woman” replace the current word “partners” to ensure that the church’s definition of marriage cannot apply to same-sex unions. The new version “removes any ambiguity,” the draft states, that could be “misused” by Adventists supporting gay, lesbian or transgender marriages. Changes to Fundamental Belief Number 23 also include removing the word “disciplinarian” when urging parents to emulate Christ’s relationship with humanity when raising their children.

The draft also does away with outdated English vocabulary and usage. “Which” frequently becomes “that” and “gracious” is now used to describe God, instead of “beneficent.” Another change replaces the archaic word “fruitage” with “fruit.”

Stele assured delegates that the Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee only included proposed changes that met several criteria. The only included suggestions that survived editorial scrutiny were ones that “deepen” the statement, refrain from “elaborations of ideas already present” or present key ideas currently missing. The committee also welcomed editorial suggestions meant to clarify or condense the beliefs. Members rejected any suggestions that they felt “primarily promoted a personal agenda,” he said.

Adventist world church General Vice President Ben Schoun, who chaired the presentation, reminded delegates that the draft is “not the final copy” and urged them not to spend the afternoon debating semantics. He then invited delegates to lead discussions in their respective church divisions and submit further edits to the Fundamental Beliefs by June 1, 2014.
The Fundamental Beliefs Review Committee will prepare a second draft of the document for the 2014 Annual Council, Schoun said. Ultimately, delegates will vote whether to add the second draft to the agenda of the 2015 General Conference Session, where a final vote would occur.

Creation movie central to church identity is key to 2014 evangelism

Hundreds of church officials settled into the plush burgundy theater-style seats. Conversations faded into silence. As the overhead lights dimmed, all eyes were fixed upon the huge movie screen, assembled for the occasion. Suddenly, the hushed room was pierced by the shriek of a howling wind projected through the surrounding speakers. Then an image of Moses appeared to the booming rhythms of symphonic sounds, until the prophet dissolved and the scene gave way to clouds rolling over a mountain range.

The setting of the presentation may have well resembled a movie theater, but in fact, it was the world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

And the 27-minute, professionally produced film that the General Conference Executive Committee premiered in the auditorium Tuesday, called “The Creation: The Earth is a Witness,” will be one of the denomination’s key evangelism efforts for 2014.

“This incredible project is going to be a blessing to every single church around the world that is able to show it,” President Ted N. C. Wilson told the gathering of 350 pastors and other Annual Council delegates who watched the movie, which shows a day-by-day account of the Earth’s beginnings, filmed and edited with the cinematic quality of a major motion picture.

Wilson added: “This, I believe, is going to be a magnificent tool to bring thousands of people to the foot of the cross.”

In addition to reaching non-believers, the four-years-in-the-making movie by Adventist filmmaker Henry Stober can also send a message to a few vocal critics inside the church who have questioned the Seventh-day Adventist fundamental belief in a literal, six-day creation.

The film was initially a project Stober was preparing for his local congregation in Nürnberg, Germany. He studied photography for a year in Canada, and then traveled to five continents because he wanted to present God’s love and unique creative power.

More than 70,000 people have viewed the film in nine countries.
“I never realized it was going to be worldwide,” Stober, 46, said after the General Conference premiere.

The movie was introduced by Williams Costa Jr., director of the denomination’s Communication department, which has championed the project.

Quoting from Genesis 1:1, Costa said, “We need to proclaim to the world this prophetic truth,” and later added, “I don’t know why many people of faith have difficulty believing that the world was created in six days.”

“Creation,” opens with music to a scene shot in Iceland, in which Moses shows his scroll to his son, Gershom, while teaching him about the creation. A narrator, meanwhile, reads from Hebrews 11, explaining the meaning of faith.

The next scenes focus on each creation day using powerful images of nature that play out while the male narrator reads from Genesis 1:1-2:3.

In day one, the movie shows darkness and a bubbling body of water, and displays lights in bright yellow and orange filtering into the clouds, which turn to an orange and brown tone, to show the creation of light. In day two, to the sound of water drops, the camera soars through and above white clouds, and captures lighting to illustrate the creation of sky.

The dramatic footage continues into day three, at Brazil’s enormous Iguazu Falls, and also includes close-ups of vivid green vegetation and colorful flowers sprouting into full blossom using time-lapse videography.

The fourth day portrays footage of stars, constellations and planets, showing the magnitude of the solar system. On day five, to the narrator announcing, “Let the water teem with living creatures,” the film captures underwater sea life, including a shark and brightly colored fish, and later sea lions and exotic birds. On the sixth day, the film shows an impressive collection of wild animals and insects and finally, an image of hands molding dirt to form a human body.

At the end of the film, Moses and his son are kneeling before an altar, while the narrator reads the command to keep the Sabbath day holy. Then the screen fills with shots of waterfalls, clouds and sunlight emerging over snow-capped mountains, followed by the logo, “Seventh-day Adventist Church.”

The movie is the highlight of a multi-faceted approach to teach creationism around the world. Other components of the educational initiative include the book, “Beyond Imagination,” Bible studies, tracts, a Sabbath School curriculum, Hope Channel programming, and dozens of articles in the Adventist Review, among other efforts.

Church officials believe the movie, available on DVD, will captivate viewers and compel them to learn more about the denomination’s strong ties to other Bible-based beliefs.

Vice President Ben Schoun made a direct appeal to the delegates, most of whom are officers of the 13 divisions and presidents of unions from every region of the globe.

“We encourage you, we invite you, we challenge you, to be a part of this. Make the creation project a meaningful one in your territory,” Schoun said.
Redesign of Adventist Church’s website unveiled

The Seventh-day Adventist Church unveiled a major redesign to its website Wednesday and urged regional leaders to make similar upgrades to ensure the denomination has a more consistent global online identity.

The content of the site has also shifted to address a new audience: The general public, as opposed to primarily church members.

Adventist.org contains most of the same information as before, but it’s now presented in a more modern, graphically oriented look, and it’s accessible in four languages – English, Spanish, Portuguese and French.

“What begins as a relationship with a website can lead to a relationship with a brand; the research tells us this,” Garrett Caldwell, the denomination’s associate Communication director for public relations, told executive committee members of the 2013 General Conference Annual Council in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States.

“And if people can get to the point where they can trust a brand,” Caldwell added, “then they will want to know the product, and the product of the Seventh-day Adventist church is every life that has been transformed by the message that we’ve been given and the God we serve. And I want people to find that transformation.”

The redesign is the most significant update since 2004, said John Beckett, director of the Adventist Church’s Office of Global Software and Internet.

One of the new features, he said, allows users to take advantage of responsive design technology, which means the website will automatically adjust itself to different screens sizes for optimal viewing, whether it’s being viewed on a smart phone or large computer monitor.

General Conference leaders are offering the new design to every denominational organization through the free tools and templates available at framework.adventist.org.

Planning for the redesign began more than a year ago in collaboration with Inter-European Division and its development team at the Stimme Der Hoffnung Media Center in Germany, whose Web experts had updated the division’s website and then offered to collaborate with the General Conference’s own upgrade.
Before updating the European sites, Klaus Popa of the media center said his team looked at the existing webpages of the division’s 11 unions and noticed how graphically different they appeared from one another.

“They might be good in their own rights, with respect to design, with respect to technical features, they might serve the needs of this respective conference or union,” Popa said, pointing to a collage of the websites he displayed on the projection screen of the General Conference auditorium. “But looking at these websites like these, just paralleling them, we realized that the way we represent ourselves to the world, to the visitors of our websites, it’s a patchwork approach, it’s a confusing approach.”

Some 100,000 people each month perform Web searches using the English-language phrase “Seventh-day Adventist,” Caldwell said, suggesting that catering the site to the public can serve as a vehicle for evangelism.

“This is a completely reimagined experience of how to express who we are as Seventh-day Adventists,” said Andrew King, the GC Communication department Web manager who helped design the site.

Users of the redesigned site will open the main page and find personal testimonies of Adventists, along with photos or videos of their stories. The same top portion also includes a section titled “Adventist Beliefs,” which includes a link to the church’s 28 Fundamental Beliefs in a PDF document for easy printing.

Users can still find features that were more prominent in the previous design, such as a directory of church institutions, in the Information tab.

The multi-language feature, church locator, and sitemap are also accessible from the tabs at the top of the page.

The redesign, which now has larger fonts and more white space, also includes three standing features: Spirituality, Vitality and Service.

Under Spirituality, one can learn about the Sabbath, download Bible study guides, read about prayer and find out more about prophecy. The Vitality section offers information on family life, health and education. The Service component displays details on missionaries, humanitarian work and religious liberty.

“Rather than communicating the structure of our church, we’re trying to communicate the impact that our ministries can have on your life,” Caldwell said. “We want people to know that Seventh-day Adventists are committed to making the world a better place.”

Landmark survey reveals in-depth beliefs, perceptions of Adventist members

The most extensive research ever conducted on the attitudes, beliefs, experiences and spiritual practices of Seventh-day Adventists reinforced some long-held assumptions about worshippers’
positive affirmation of the denomination, yet revealed an emerging trend toward secularization that is worrisome for some church leaders.

Among the most significant findings, based on tens of thousands of surveys from around the world:

- Sabbath School teachers were ranked higher than pastors and elders when church members were asked to state who was friendlier, warmer, more caring and had a positive effect on their spiritual lives.

- About three-fourths of Adventists strongly embrace the prophetic ministry of church co-founder Ellen G. White.

- Only about one in three families conduct daily worship.

- Almost half of college students and recent college graduates said they would accept practicing homosexuals as church members in good and regular standing.

- About 9 in 10 people who left the Adventist church were never contacted by their pastor after they stopped attending.

The findings, released this week to delegates at the 2013 General Conference Annual Council at church headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, were commissioned by the Office of Archives, Statistics and Research two and a half years ago.

The research was based on five separate projects. It consisted of 41,000 interviews or questionnaires around the world; involved 4,260 pastors; nearly 26,000 church members; 1,200 college students and recent graduates; and 900 former Adventists. Research teams from Adventist universities on several contents were involved in the unprecedented effort.

"In terms of both the breadth and depth," said David Trim, director of the church’s research office, "this is the best snapshot we’ve ever had of the worldwide church."

Before presenting the findings to hundreds of church administrators, Trim warned the audience to not be quick to judge. “Data is what it is,” Trim said. "What it means, is something else."

The findings debunked longheld assumptions about the denomination’s gender makeup: The church is 57 percent female, and 43 percent male – quite a ways off from the belief that 65 percent of worshipers were female and 35 percent were male.

The findings also showed a church that is young – 54 percent of the members worldwide are between the ages of 16 and 40 – which has two disadvantages, according to Trim. For one, young members may be called too quickly into denominational administrative leadership positions without the proper experience. In addition, older leaders may need training to learn how to understand and work effectively with the younger generation.

Only 10 percent of church members globally are older than 60, and the largest proportion of aging congregants are in North America, Europe and Japan. In contrast, Trim said, “Our church in Latin America and Africa in particular is an extremely youthful church.”
The findings contained several bright spots, Trim said, including a statistic that shows that 53 percent of respondents stated that the Sabbath School adult Bible study guide helped “very much” to develop their religious life.

The study guide, perhaps not surprisingly, is least popular with worshipers is in North America, parts of Europe, and in and around Australia. “As someone who is both from Australia and Europe, and married to an American,” Trim said jokingly, “I will accept the blame for all those things. We are very cynical people in America, Australia and Europe.”

Another “success story,” Trim said, was that 92 percent of Adventists have an overwhelming conviction that the Seventh-day Sabbath is the true Sabbath, and only 3 percent disagree (that particular survey’s margin of error was 3 percent, which could perhaps mean zero disagreement).

The findings also pointed to several areas deemed problematic, such as people leaving the church unnoticed, and the seeping influence of secular values, Trim said.

Interestingly, the vast majority of inactive and former members are not rejecting the message and mission of the church.

“They are moving with the strong dynamics of contemporary society away from established forms of religious activity,” Trim said. “The fabric of most Adventist local churches is not sufficient to stem this tide.” He then told the delegates, “Brothers and sisters, I think this is a real challenge to us.”

While only 9 percent of Adventists were contacted by their pastor after they stopped attending church, a larger number of former members said they had been visited by elders or other church members. However, the findings show that 4 out of 10 Adventists slipped out of the church without ever being contacted by anyone.

The fact that members lapse unnoticed is a “tragedy,” Trim said.

From 2000 to 2012, more than 13.6 million people joined the church, mostly through baptism. But during the same time, 5.9 million Adventists were lost (and that doesn’t include those who died). That’s a loss rate of nearly 43.4 per 100 new converts. “That is too high,” Trim said.

Approximately 90 percent of respondents strongly agreed that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is God’s true last-day church with a message to prepare the world for the Second Coming of Christ. When asked if they expect the world to end within the next 20 years, just 22 percent of respondents strongly agreed, and 45 percent strongly disagreed, Trim said. “It’s not that people don’t believe that Jesus is coming, but there does seem to be some kind of skepticism about him coming soon.”

The research concluded that secularization is no longer limited to America, Europe and Australia. “It’s a globalized society,” Trim said. “People are watching the same television programs, reading the same apps and websites on their phones and computers, and secularization is a problem.”

Following the presentation, Vice President Benjamin Schoun acknowledged that challenges indeed lie ahead.
“We have much to learn and we probably need to incorporate these results into our strategic planning,” he stated, “because it is a very sobering picture in some cases, even though we have our strengths as well.”

Ministry of deacons, deaconesses now under care of Ministerial Association

Attention dwindled in the auditorium of Seventh-day Adventist world church headquarters on the final day of Annual Council, as some delegates bid farewell to colleagues and others considered the logistics of wedging hefty agenda binders and a week’s worth of handouts into already bulging carry-ons.

But, as Undersecretary Myron Iseminger reminded them, there was still unfinished business.

One item, introduced by Jonas Arrais, associate secretary for Elders and Ministerial Training, asked delegates to officially place deacons and deaconesses under the care of the Adventist world church’s Ministerial Association.

Arrais explained that there are fewer than 30,000 pastors to oversee the Adventist world church’s 140,000 congregations. The church’s 250,000 elders are often recognized—rightfully so—as surrogate pastors, he said, but the work of the church’s 700,000 deacons and deaconesses often goes unacknowledged and unsupported.

“When Jesus came to earth, he came to serve. The ministry of Jesus as a servant is the model for the ministry of deacons and deaconesses,” Arrais said. “They have a deep spirit of service. We need to recognize, we need to value, the work of these volunteers.”

Delegates approved the request unanimously.

Afterward, Andrews University President Niels-Erik Andreasen introduced a new Bible commentary to be published by the university’s press in 2015. The commentary is a companion to the previously released Andrews Study Bible, Andreasen said. It was edited by former Biblical Research Institute Director Angel Manual Rodriguez and written by an international, diverse team of Adventist Bible scholars.

The one-volume commentary offers an alternative to the seven-volume Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary set, which costs more than $400. Andreasen said the new commentary will deepen readers’ understanding of biblical themes, going section-by-section rather than verse-by-verse. Verses, he explained, were not added to the Bible until later, making thematic study of the Scriptures essential.
Delegates each received a printed sample of selected portions of the commentary. The project is funded by Adventist world church headquarters and Andrews University.

Several agenda items in, Adventist world church President Ted N. C. Wilson took to the microphone to draw attention to the “distinction” between church and institutional structure. Some church entities, he said, are now using the title “Vice President for Finance” instead of the traditional “treasurer.” Similarly, he said, some church administrators now favor “Vice President for Administration” over “secretary.”

“This is not as it should be. Please use the correct nomenclature,” Wilson said, pausing after each word for emphasis. “When you use the other nomenclature, you are setting up a presidential system. Within the church, we report to the Executive Committee, not the president. We work in consultation.”

Shortly after noon today, Pardon Mwansa, a Seventh-day Adventist world church vice president chairing the business session, asked delegates to approve several reorganization requests from local church administrative units.

The Indian Ocean Union Mission and Botswana Union Mission will each become union conferences, a move that recognizes self-sufficiency in leadership and finances.

“It hasn’t been easy to gain union conference status in some parts of the world,” Mwansa said. “This is a huge accomplishment. Congratulations and blessings.”

Delegates also approved the reorganization of the Kenya Union Mission into two union conferences—the East Kenya Union Conference and West Kenya Union Conference. Similarly, the Tanzania Union Mission will split into the North Tanzania Union Conference and the South Tanzania Union Mission.

Delegates also voted to grant union mission status to the North East Congo Attached Territory. All reorganizations will go into effect by December 31, allowing the newly created administrative units to send delegates to the 2015 General Conference Session.

Undersecretary Iseminger offered a few final words today, asking delegates to leave their bulky agendas behind to be recycled, unless, he jokingly added, they needed “reading material” on the flight home. Annual Council delegates were offered a paperless agenda for the first time this year, but many opted for the traditional binder.

At the 2014 Spring Meeting, delegates will receive electronic copies of the agenda by default, Iseminger said.

Earlier this week, Annual Council delegates also voted to receive a statement from the recent International Urban Mission Conference, in which the church pledged to make significant efforts to reach large cities, particularly those without a Seventh-day Adventist presence. The statement calls for a “twice-yearly reporting and assessment system that informs the church about urban mission objectives, activities and progress.”

Delegates this week also celebrated the success of The Great Controversy Project, an initiative to distribute copies of the book “The Great Controversy” authored by Adventist Church co-founder Ellen G. White. More than 142 million copies have been distributed since the initiative launched in 2011.
Many people have joined the Adventist Church through the initiative, including Marcelo Pereira dos Santos, and his family, from Brazil. “We understand that this is only the beginning of a new life,” said dos Santos, who addressed delegates from the stage. “I hope my life and testimony will be useful to many brothers and sisters who have not yet realized the infinite love of God.”

—additional reporting by Mark A. Kellner

Annual Council has a lighter side...in what passes for humor at the GC

Halfway through his Secretariat report on Sunday, Executive Secretary G. T. Ng felt attentions wane throughout the Seventh-day Adventist Church world headquarters auditorium. The light was dim as he showed his 30th slide featuring statistics, graphs and charts. He stopped and said, “Everyone turn to your neighbor and tell them they look marvelous.”

Delegates laughed, and for a moment the room burst with chatter. Even some of the intense personalities lightened for an instant to call out to a colleague. “Dale, marvelous!” someone shouted out across an aisle to Pacific Press Publishing Association President Dale Galusha. A day later, Ng, told glazed-over delegates to tell their neighbor they “smell great.”

Ng, a native of Singapore and former seminary dean, is often the in-house chief comedian during Executive Committee meetings, effectively using humor at the beginning of a presentation to make points on matters business or spiritual. But his humor often serves a more basic purpose: keeping jet-lagged delegates awake.

“You can see the energy level change. People come back to life again,” Undersecretary Myron Iseminger told ANN.

Each second weekend of October brings 350 Adventist leaders from around the world to headquarters for seven straight days of sitting through Annual Council. While many meetings feature worship services and updates on evangelism projects, delegates are often subjected to hours of financial PowerPoint slides, statistical reports and long readings of policy. Most world division officers have been living in nearby hotels for nearly a month to participate in pre-meetings and institutional boards. For many, the chance for a chuckle is a welcome respite.

Some attendees use humor to diffuse an otherwise awkward situation or gently rib a longtime friend.

In announcing the comprehensive health ministry outreach focus on Monday, Mark Finley, the assistant to the president, accidentally introduced Health Ministries director Dr. Peter Landless as
“Dr. Handysides” before quickly correcting himself (Landless became director this month following Dr. Allan Handysides’ retirement).

Landless didn’t miss a beat while taking the microphone from Finley. “Thanks so much, Elder Vandeman,” he said, referring to the late George Vandeman, who founded the Adventist television ministry It Is Written (Finley followed Vandeman as the ministry’s speaker/director in 1991). The room exploded with laughter that sustained and drew some hoots and applause.

“Frankly, I was flattered,” Landless later said. “Allan [Handysides] and I have worked so much together for a long time.”

Though he has long since retired, a union president from Central Africa still had several delegates remembering his wisecracks invoking African proverbs. Delegate Gerry Karst, a retired vice president, remembered the delegate getting restless with how long a policy item was taking compared to how it might have been handled in his own culture. He went to the microphone and said, “Mr. Chairman, you don’t need a long fire to fry a long snake.”

“That one brought the house down,” recalled Vice President Mike Ryan.

Ng, the secretary, usually opens his reports with a drawn-out joke, often told with a serious and intense face. “As soon as he stands up I start chuckling,” said Education Director Lisa Beardsley-Hardy.

Ng’s opening tale this year featured a donkey trained to understand biblical commands. “Amen” would cause the donkey to stop, while “hallelujah” would command the donkey to walk. One day a rider forgot the commands as the donkey walked toward the edge of a cliff. In scrambling desperation, the rider prayed for safety and ended his prayer with “Amen,” which brought the donkey to a standstill inches from the cliff. The rider was so excited his life had been spared that he shouted, “Hallelujah!”

Ng’s audience went bananas.

“That one was my favorite,” said East-Central Africa Division President Blasious Ruguri, “because it shows we sometimes make comments and remarks before we think clearly.”

On Wednesday, the final day of Annual Council, Undersecretary Iseminger played off the joke when introducing a smattering of suggested editorial changes to several policies. “I don’t want to gallop through all these final policy items, but why don’t you say “halleluiah” when you want me to go on and “amen” when you want to stop for discussion. Is that fair?”

“Hear, hear,” a delegate called out.

—additional reporting by Elizabeth Lechleitner