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Wilson Voted Another Five Years as Top Adventist Leader

By AT News Team, July 3, 2015 with corrections on July 4: Pastor Ted N. C. Wilson was voted a second five-year term as president of the Adventist denomination. Just before breaking for lunch, an estimated 90 percent of some 1,900 delegates present in San Antonio voted in favor of a nominating committee recommendation to continue Wilson in the position.

First there was an unprecedented 37-minute discussion that showed he may not have strong support in some parts of the world. When the nominating committee report was first brought to the floor, Pastor Ray Hartwell, president of the Pennsylvania Conference, asked for it to be sent back so that he could discuss a concern with the committee.

According to the General Conference (GC) Rules of Order, if a delegate requests that a nomination be sent back to the committee for additional consideration, the chair is to direct the report back to the committee and the delegates who have questions are invited to meet first with the chairman and vice chairman of the committee before meeting privately with the committee as whole. Friday morning it was soon clear the chairman, Pastor Pardon Mwansa, a GC vice president, was uncertain about a procedure rarely used.

First, he invited Hartwell to come up to the platform and tell the chairman of the nominating committee what his question was about "so the chairman can determine if it is something the committee has already considered." After a delay, Pastor Homer Trecartin, president of the Middle East and North Africa Union Mission and committee chairman, had decided that there was no need for additional consideration.

Then Sadrail St Ulysse, another delegate from North America, asked that the report go back to the nominating committee so that he could discuss a concern with the committee. Again there was a delay and Trecartin decided this was unnecessary. Mwansa announced that he would ask the delegates to vote on whether to send the report back or move immediately to vote on the nomination.

Pastor Elizabeth Talbot, director of the Jesus 101 media ministry, then made a point of order, requesting that the vote be taken using the new electronic voting system so that each delegate’s vote would be private. Mwansa said that the electronic voting system could not be used because an earlier test had shown that it had technical problems and was not reliable. Talbot then asked for a secret ballot, but the delegates voted not to take a secret ballot.

Pastor Bob Boggess, president of the Mountain View Conference, asked that before there was a vote, time be taken to have prayer "because it is clear that we need prayer." But for one reason or another, Mwansa did not ask for prayer and pressed ahead, first with a vote to end deliberation and then with the vote on the nominee.

Predictably, the chairman announced that the majority had voted to elect Wilson for another term. Within minutes Wilson, together with his wife, Nancy, was introduced to sustained applause and his continued leadership established.

"It is with very quiet respect and humility that both of us stand before you, before God," Wilson said. "And we do accept this responsibility." Wilson reiterated his commitment to God and the Adventist faith, and briefly outlined three goals that he would pursue in his second term: (1) a greater emphasis on Christ and His righteousness, (2) encouraging the faithfulness of believers, and (3) the involvement of every church member in outreach.

Wilson is the son of a legendary figure in Adventist history, Pastor Neal C. Wilson, who served as president of the Columbia Union Conference, the North American Division and then the GC until 1990. The son grew up in Takoma
Park, Maryland, near the GC offices and began his career in the denomination as part of the staff of Metro Ministries in New York City. He earned a Ph.D. at New York University, served as a missionary in west Africa and in the former Soviet Union, and was CEO for a period of time at the now-defunct Review and Herald Publishing Association.

The parliamentary incident may seem minor, but it is significant. A conference president does not risk his career over nothing, and it must be remembered that Hartwell is the delegate who asked about a solution to the ongoing debate about including women pastors among the ordained clergy during the 2010 GC Session. This is the question that Wilson has said launched the entire study process leading up to the question that delegates are being asked to vote on at this session.

The incident does shed light on why it is more and more difficult for Adventists to find unity. Those who feel they have a strong majority are all too quick to ride roughshod over anyone who has questions or concerns about the direction things are going.

The incident raised crucial questions in the minds of a number of observers: Did he think about the damage done to the unity of the denomination? Why are leaders and delegates from Africa, Latin America and elsewhere so blind to the sensitivities of North American and European delegates about democratic due process, fairness and avoiding a stampede mentality? Would it really have hurt anything to take a few minutes for prayer before pressing rapidly ahead with the votes? Is it really necessary to ignore the wish for a secret ballot on important decisions?

No one can remember the last time this occurred with the nomination of a GC president. It is unfortunate, but likely a reality that the moral authority of Wilson as the top leader of the denomination has been damaged by this incident. It will make it more difficult for him to lead the gathering through the debate on ordination. And it further strains the relationships between the diverse community of Adventists around the globe.

Note: An earlier version of this report attributed to Pastor Pardon Mwansa some decisions which observers have told Adventist Today he did not make and included a few words that went beyond entirely objective reporting. This version has been corrected, based on those sources.
GC Session on Social Media

Adventist Today is taking full advantage of social media to deliver near-real time information to interested observers of the Seventh-day Adventist 2015 General Conference Session.

In addition to regular updates via this website, we have a number of reporters providing regular updates via our Facebook page and our Twitter feed.

If you are not a regular user of Twitter, you can follow our Twitter feed by clicking here where we are mirroring the Twitter feed on this website.
First Step in Election of Top Adventist Leaders: Nominating Committee Formed

By AT News Team, July 3, 2015: The top leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination only hold office for five years at a time, unlike some other Christian bodies where bishops are appointed for life or until a mandatory retirement age. The method for selecting new leaders and renewing the mandate for incumbents is primarily centered in a method from 18th-century New England town meeting democracy. It is called the nominating committee.

A relatively small committee meets in private to review each leader and discuss new candidates. This committee presents a report with a single candidate for each position and the entire delegation then votes on the report, yes or no.

Adventist history has developed its own traditions related to this methodology. Instead of voting against a suggestion from the nominating committee, the tradition is for someone to move that the report be returned to the committee for reconsideration. In fact this almost never happens, but it illustrates the taboo among Adventists against open conflict or competition about who gets a leadership role.

It is also rare that a top leader is not re-nominated unless he has announced his retirement. It has only happened three times since 1900. At the 1922 GC Session, Pastor A. G. Daniells was asked to step aside as GC president and become secretary (second-ranking officer). At the 1990 GC Session, Pastor Neal Wilson (father of the current GC president) was retired although he had not intended to. And it happened again at the last GC Session in 2010, to Dr. Jan Paulsen, the president at the time. In fact, there is some evidence that nominating committees may now have a sense that the president should retire at least by the time he is 70 years of age.

Committee Appointed Thursday

One of the first items of business at a GC Session is to appoint a nominating committee. This is done through caucuses. Each of the GC divisions caucuses separately and the delegates from the world headquarters itself also caucus. Each division picks ten percent of its delegates as members of the nominating committee and the headquarters group picks eight percent of its delegates as committee members.

Yesterday (July 2) a total of 252 individuals were appointed by the caucuses to serve on the 2015 nominating committee; 233 from the union conferences and 19 from the headquarters group. When the report was presented, it was announced that only 34 of these individuals were women; 13 percent, despite the fact that a strong majority of the denomination’s total membership is female.

The committee is dominated by middle-aged males; two-thirds of the members are in their 50s or 60s. Only two percent are under 30 years of age and only six percent under 40 years of age. Again, despite the fact that a much higher percentage of the membership is made up of adolescents and young adults. Spectrum, the leading journal of Adventist academics, has published infographics in recent days that claim to show the real demographics of the global Adventist family, and this has led to a log of commentary on why the nominating committee and the entire delegation at this GC Session do not really represent very accurately the people in the pews.

Committee Officers Elected Last Night

At about 9 pm Thursday, the nominating committee had its first meeting. It immediately elected a chairman, vice
chairman and two secretaries. Pastor Homer Trecartin, president of the Middle East and North Africa Union Mission, was elected chairman. He is a long-time missionary originally from the United States and served for a while on the staff of the Office of Global Mission at the denomination’s headquarters.

Dr. Richard Hart was elected vice chairman. He is president of Loma Linda University (LLU), the largest and most important of the denomination’s institutions. He is a physician, and LLU is both an educational and health care institution.

The two secretaries of the nominating committee are both academics. Dr. Leslie Pollard is president of Oakwood University, the historically African American school operated by Adventists in Huntsville, Alabama. Dr. Cheryl Doss is a professor of world mission in the theological seminary at Andrews University near South Bend, Indiana.

All of the officers of the nominating committee are Americans, although 38 percent of Adventists live in Africa, 32 percent in Latin America, 19 percent in Asia and only 7 percent in North America, according to the report Friday morning from Dr. G. T. Ng, executive secretary of the GC. The actual membership of the committee does reflect closely the geographic distribution of the denomination’s membership because of the caucus method of its selection.

The committee is already meeting and very likely will have its first report before the afternoon is over. It is generally believed that Pastor Ted Wilson, because he is not yet 65 years of age and has given every indication that he expects to continue in office, will be re-nominated for the denomination’s top leadership post, president of the GC.
Massive Diversity Is Reality of Life for Adventist Faith

By AT News Team, July 3, 2015: The Adventist faith may be the most diverse religion on the globe. It is not clear which religion would rival it on this score. This diversity produces a great many practical problems for the meeting underway in San Antonio.

In a test of the voting system at the GC Session, the delegates were asked, “Do you speak English?” They were asked to respond with a simple yes or no. Despite the fact that delegates have come from the most cultured cities and the most rural recesses of the globe, 80 percent of the census gave positive responses.

The number is surprising and it does not ask how fluently delegates speak or understand English. Nevertheless, it is a marvel in itself as to how such a diverse group could acquire a common language. What contributing factors come into play? Is it globalization? Is it the result of the English Language Schools used in missionary work? Or, could it possibly be the influence of the European and American Adventist churches? Does this number indicate a unified body of believers or does it reflect a loss of identity in some kind of denominational conformity?

Adventist Today has reported on the relative small percentage of young adults among the delegates. During discussion of the nominated committee yesterday, delegate Cecil Perry posed the concern that the session lacked consideration for senior citizens. For example, the 10- to 15-minute walk between the Conference Center and the Alamodome. And the assembly’s projected media display of all pertinent information that was in such miniscule print that even the far-sighted cannot read it from the vantage point of the press box.

A fact sheet distributed by the GC communication department stated that 22% of the delegates are age 60 and older. While Perry’s inquiry did not get an immediate answer, it is now on record to provide future accommodations for the aging and otherwise impaired.
ADRA calls Adventists to “Be the one to serve the One” at General Conference Session

From News Release, July 3, 2015: At the 2015 General Conference (GC) Session in San Antonio, TX, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) International is calling Adventists from all over the world to join the movement to bring about long-lasting and positive change to communities around the world. ADRA is the humanitarian arm of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

“Most social movements started with passionate people who were willing to stand up and give a voice to justice and reach out to make a difference,” said Jonathan Duffy, ADRA International President. “If we can start that movement as a church and bring other denominations and even faiths on board and we can find a common voice, then we can actually effect change.”

ADRA’s exhibit this year, “Be the one to serve the One,” located in Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center, calls Adventists to a life of Christ-like love through service, compassion, justice, and mercy.

The exhibit is based on Matthew 25:35-36, showing how Adventist Christians can serve Jesus by meeting the immediate needs of people living in poverty. The booth features stories from Syrian refugees, girls at risk of human trafficking in Thailand, Peruvian entrepreneurs, and remote communities receiving medical care in the Brazilian Amazon.

“The Gospel comes alive when we come face to face with those in need, and we act to serve them,” explained Duffy.

For the last 30 years, ADRA has been working hand in hand with communities to bring sustainable change and resources to eradicate poverty. In the last five years alone, ADRA has worked with more than 97 million people in areas such as food security, water, community health, education, and disaster relief.

ADRA is encouraging GC Session participants to stop by the ADRA exhibit and learn more about how they can #ServetheOne and share what “Be the one to serve the One” means to them, communicated via social media.
Human Interest: Delegates Do a Lot of Walking Between Facilities in San Antonio

By Dennis Hokama, July 3, 2015: One of the annoying things about the San Antonio GC Session is the long walk between the Grand Hyatt where the North American Division delegates are staying, the Convention Center where the exhibits are and the Alamodome where the meetings are being held. Even when one stays in the Convention Center exhibit area, the distance between Hall C and Hall B, where various Adventist related ministries and enterprises display and promote their product and services, is surprisingly long. It seems like a good city block, which one would not expect, since they are both under the same roof.

But it is the distance between the Grand Hyatt and the Alamodome that is the killer. We were told by the Hyatt staff that the distance was a “15-minute walk.” After walking that distance round trip three times on Thursday, plus walking around the exhibit hall, looking for various organizations, I admit I was beat by the end of the day.

Early on Friday morning, I asked a helpful employee working at the Grand Hyatt front desk how far it actually was between the Hyatt and the Alamodome. At first, he merely repeated the company line that it was “a 15-minute walk.” But when I persisted in asking what the actual distance was, he went back to his computer and eventually came up with a figure of 8/10 of a mile, and seemed surprised.

Then he had some good news to share. Due to complaints from our group, he said, the hotel had just started a shuttle bus to the Convention Center and the Alamodome that would run from 7 am to 8:30 pm, every 15 minutes at the cost of $1.20 a trip. That is sure to be welcome news to Adventists who did not come to San Antonio with their running shoes even if they believe in healthy lifestyles!

Dennis Hokama is a veteran Adventist Today writer who is part of the seven-person team of journalists covering the GC Session for AT. His wife is a delegate from the denomination’s Pacific Union Conference.
Heading for Another Great Disappointment?

By Dennis Hokama, July 3, 2015: On Thursday evening, July 2, 2015, following the acceptance of the nominating committee, General Conference (GC) president Ted Wilson, delivered a tour de force campaign speech disguised as a “President’s Report” for the ages. In my humble opinion, it secured his renomination beyond all doubt, and virtually guaranteed the passage of the amendment to Fundamental Belief #6 (creation), as well as the failure of the attempt to allow the ordination of women.

Watching his presentation was almost like having an out-of-body experience. I was not concerned with trying to write down or record his every word because there would presumably be a transcript put out by The Review only hours later.[1] It was as if I had been transported 50 years back in time, listening to evangelists like Stanley Harris in a sawdust-on-the-ground evangelistic tent meeting at Auburn Academy (AA). When I graduated from AA in 1965, I was absolutely sure Jesus would return before I could ever hope to get married, have children, and probably even before I could graduate from college.

Wilson weaved in clips of beautiful footage from a trip to Israel and the surrounding territory throughout his speech. Footage included climbing what he claimed was Mt. Sinai, effectively associating himself with Moses and the Ten Commandments. Most dramatic, in my opinion, was a clip of him standing on the banks of the Jordan River that separates Jordan and Israel. He recounted Joshua’s dramatic crossing over Jordan into the promised land, drawing the obvious parallel to the present day where we are about to cross over into the metaphorical promised land, presumably under his (Joshua’s) leadership. The latter rain is about to fall.

Wilson went on to claim that the Geoscience Research Institute’s (GRI) scientists have vindicated the church’s historic teaching regarding creation week, and that “the Bible can be believed as it reads.” However, I was at the GC session at Atlanta in 2010, where in the midst of the landslide to push for a revision of Fundamental Belief #6, Dr. Ben Clausen, a GRI scientist, got up to say before the world church that there was no known scientific model that could defend the traditional Adventist stance on a short chronology. (I have his speech saved on my computer at home.) I have read many books on the subject since then, and to the best of my knowledge, Clausen’s verdict still stands today.

Wilson closed his report by reminding us that Jesus was coming again soon. Then the congregation was led in a rousing song service consisting of a medley of gospel songs whose theme was the second coming, such as “Lift Up the Trumpet,” etc.

All in all, it was a masterful, updated presentation of the Adventist denomination’s faith narrative, the likes of which I have never before seen. I have no doubt that he has the world church enthralled. If only I were 18 again, and could take him at his word, I would have bought it hook, line, and sinker. In a church founded upon the Great Disappointment, it seems that we are headed back there again. But this General Conference, in my opinion, now belongs to Ted Wilson.
by Harry Banks, July 2, 2015:  The other day a staff person from the Finance Department came charging down to my office and sternly announced, “You’re changing lives!”

Teaching technology on a small 2,000 student, two-year college campus has given me an unusual opportunity as an older-generation person to engage directly with teens and young adults. I love “my kids.” The subject I teach requires that they take fall, spring, fall, spring classes with me for two years. The maximum class size is about 16. Bottom line: we get really well acquainted by the end of two years.

My students say things like, “We know Dr. Banks cares about us.” I’m not always sure just what they have in mind when they say that. I do care about them, though, and I’m glad that comes through.

Coming from a generation that only had computer technology available later in life, I’ve had to do a little hustle to gain competencies that earn their respect. It helps that I spent 17 years in a local government Information Technology department, but I still have to actively take on new technologies. A couple semesters ago I had an expert instructor teach a security class and I took the class with my students. I really had to work hard but it seemed to gain me some credibility with my students.

I try to encourage what I call “a proper level of insubordination.” That way I know what they are thinking. They feel free to express their opinion, free to tease me, to challenge me, and on some occasions, to correct me if I misstate a fact. That dynamic allows us to mutually engage in an educational endeavor.

I have come up with what I call “conspiracies of success.” For example, if the whole class does 80% or better on a chapter exam, I treat the class to pizza.

We work hard, have a ton of fun, and students frequently gain employment even before they graduate.

So who cares? . . . Why bother to tell you all that? . . .

Well, I have a certain sadness when I read some of the reports about engaging young adults in congregational life. How do they know we care? Are they free to test? To try? To innovate? Are we their friend? Can they trust us? Can they respect us (not because we demand it but because we have enough integrity to earn their respect)?

One of the things that has been jumping out at me over this past year is that so many of our articles are “about” young people and not “with” young people. How come we are not engaging in conversations with them? Where is our collaborative conversation? How do we make it safe for them to suggest, to dream, to initiate?

An image which I have found helpful in thinking about generations is the idea of each generation needing to build its own spiritual campfire. We may supply a spark or two… but in the end they have to find their own kindling, their own fuel to warm their life.

Some questions I wonder about which I pose because I think they may be useful areas of study as we move forward in engaging the future: Where do values come from? How is faith developed? Do we understand the physical and cognitive developmental stages our young people are going through? Do they know we care? (Oh, did I mention that before?) Do they know we trust God enough to trust them?

The other day I picked up a book titled A Religion of One’s Own. It made me wonder, do we know enough about a broad spiritual landscape to be able to provide a contextual map to young people who need to be building their own
I once heard Bernard Ramm, a well-known Southern Baptist theologian, make a self-deprecating reference to Southern Baptists. He said some of them were so narrow-minded that they could see through a keyhole with both eyes. (Of course, you had to be familiar with old-fashioned doors that had a hole for the key that went clear through the door so the key could be put in from both sides. The hole was about ¼" wide and about ¾" high.)

As part of my responsibilities in Information Technology I have supported GIS (Geographic Information Systems). These days we just go on line and fire up Google Maps and can get our bearings anywhere in the world. There is no narrow keyhole perspective in that global frame of reference. How do we hold ourselves accountable for developing a comprehensive spiritual map for our own reference and to facilitate others in their exploration of faith?

Which kind of brings me to asking, have we taken responsibility for building our own faith, so that we can actually encourage lively spiritual designs in the spiritual architecture of the future generation?

A well-known Adventist writer talks about “experimental” faith. How do we inspire the young people we have opportunity to engage with to experiment with their faith? How do we make it an adventure for them? With them?

Sometimes when I get a bit discouraged about the parts of the church I have no control over… I think about research someone quoted to me several years ago. I never tried to verify the source of the fact, but I seem to have collected some anecdotal evidence that it might be true.

One exemplary adult in a congregation can make all the difference in the world for a young person. So for me the challenge is… to be that person.