Seventh-day Adventist world church delegates have approved revisions to the wording of the church’s 28 Fundamental Beliefs. The voted actions took place during the Monday and Tuesday business sessions on the floor of the Alamadome in San Antonio, Texas, during
As a preface to the discussions, Pastor Ted N.C. Wilson, world church president, urged delegates to have confidence in the suggested revisions. The proposed statements, he said, were being brought to the floor only after rigorous and thoughtful consideration. World church leaders gave their tentative endorsement of the revised statements at the October 2014 Annual Council.

A small writing committee chaired by Artur Stele, director of the church’s Biblical Research Institute (BRI), was tasked with drafting the revisions following the 2010 General Conference session. Bill Knott, Adventist Review editor, Gerhard Pfandl, BRI associate director, and Angel Rodriguez, retired BRI director, completed the team.

Most of the revisions were minor semantic efforts to clarify the original wording or add textual support for the statements of belief. For example, the suggested revision for Fundamental Belief #1 on The Holy Scriptures changed the descriptive phrase for the Scriptures from “authoritative revealer of doctrines” to “definitive revealer of doctrines.” Those concerned that the authority of Scripture was therefore being diminished in the statement found reassurance in another revision earlier in the paragraph which described the Holy Scriptures as “the final, authoritative, and infallible revelation” of God’s will.

Often the nuances of just one word were enough of a catalyst for active discussion among the delegates. Fundamental Belief #4 on The Son originally stated that Jesus became truly man. Angel Rodriguez of the writing committee explained their rationale for a change: Scripture describes Jesus as becoming flesh, or in other words, human. He came to earth, not just to identify with the male gender, but with all mankind — the human race. While delegates actively challenged this proposed change, they eventually approved the revision that used human instead of man.

Stele reminded delegates that all revisions by the writing committee were an effort to most accurately describe each belief within the English language. Yet attention was also given to words more easily translated into other languages. An example was highlighted in the Fundamental Belief #20 on The Sabbath. The writers suggested describing the Creator as gracious instead of beneficent. Such changes for clarity and to accommodate the nuances of other languages were efficiently explained and quickly approved.

It would indeed have been a laborious process if each of the 28 Fundamental Belief statement revisions had inspired long lines of delegates at the microphones. But, in fact, most were approved without much deliberation. But four of the statements and the suggested revisions therein garnered significant discussion in Monday’s session: #1 The Holy Scriptures; #6 Creation; #8 The Great Controversy; and #24 Christ’s Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary. These statements were sent back to the writing committee with instructions to consider additional revisions for further discussion on Tuesday.

When delegates reconvened for the Tuesday morning session, Bill Knott addressed an undercurrent of concerns about cultural influences. He assured delegates that the committee had worked hard to avoid political or cultural biases. They sought only to clarify positions in a way that Adventist members around the world could fully embrace.

Ahead of this year’s session, the proposed statement on Creation had garnered active
discourse. Some members expressed concern about language in the revision that seemed to further restrict views on the age of the earth and length of the creation week. As delegates pondered this statement on Tuesday morning, Rodriguez stepped to the podium and affirmed that the statement on Creation was purposefully drafted to exclude any potential allowances for long-term evolutionary chronology.

Certainly the Creation statement became more specific with regard to time periods. Departing from more literal biblical language, the revision changed the description from “In six days …“ to “In a recent six-day creation …” It also added a phrase characterizing the Sabbath as a memorial of God’s “creative work, performed and completed during six literal days that together with the Sabbath constituted the same unit of time that we call a week today.”

Yet, in summary, the revisions brought back by the committee on Tuesday were minimal. They recommended the change of one word in Fundamental Belief #24 on Christ’s Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary. The phrase “His intercessory ministry, which was symbolized by the work of the high priest …” was altered by replacing the word symbolized with typified. In the Fundamental Belief #8 on The Great Controversy the committee changed the term worldwide flood to global flood.

It may be surprising that such seemingly minor alterations engendered such vigorous discussion. But it was also quickly obvious to even the casual observer that the delegates took guardianship of the church’s core beliefs seriously. They have devoted extensive time to keep these 28 Fundamental Beliefs consistent with the church’s traditional biblical interpretation. In doing so, it seems the majority of delegates concurred with an earlier statement by Stele.

“Looking at all the changes,” he said, “I must say there are none that bring anything new to our beliefs. This is what we have always believed. The commission only sought to express this better and help to avoid possible misinterpretations.”

The 28 statements are an ongoing effort by the world church to succinctly describe the theological parameters of Adventist belief. The world church adopted 27 Fundamentals at its business session in 1980. The current Fundamental Belief #11 on Growing in Christ was added in 2005, bringing the present total to 28.

--- Steve Vistaunet is the Assistant to the President for Communication in the North Pacific Union Conference
--- Photo: Rohann Wellington