

How the General Conference Election Works

by Alvin L. Kwiram

This July in Vienna more than 1,700 delegates and 10,000 visitors will meet for the fifty-second session of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. To most, this will be a time of reaffirmation and pageantry. But it will also be the time when the church chooses its leaders. And in an organization where power, policies and programs flow outward from the leadership to the laity, it is important that the leaders be chosen with great care.

This article, therefore, examines the procedures by which the leaders of the church are chosen. First, I shall discuss the composition of the delegation, the selection of the nominating committee and the decision-making processes. (The constitution of the General Conference forms the basis for a general understanding of the procedures, and is reprinted for your convenience at the end of the article.¹) The second part of the article offers some criticisms of these election procedures.

The voting body of the General Conference in session is composed of regular delegates and delegates-at-large. The number of regular delegates allotted to each union is based in part on the membership: one delegate for each 2,500 members or fraction thereof. Each union is allowed one delegate for each local conference and mission plus one additional delegate which I shall call a "bonus" delegate. Therefore, with world membership somewhat above

2,500,000, there will be slightly over 1,000 regular delegates.²

As an example, the North Pacific Union Conference of North America, with a membership of close to 55,000, is entitled to at least 22 regular delegates based on membership, six regular delegates based on the number of conferences and missions and one "bonus" delegate for a total of 29 delegates. In fact, the total number of regular delegates from the North Pacific Union Conference to the 1975 General Conference will be 31—two more than the constitutional minimum. There will also be nine delegates-at-large from this union. The five delegates from the Washington Conference will be the conference president, an academy principal, two pastors and a lay member of the conference executive committee. This is a typical distribution of personnel except possibly for the presence of the lay person, and represents the will of the Union Conference Committee, which selects delegates, including those allotted to local conferences.

In addition to the thousand-plus regular delegates, there will be about 700 delegates-at-large. All 350 members of the General Conference Executive Committee are delegates-at-large by virtue of position. This number includes all division administrative officers and departmental secretaries as well as all union presidents. A complete list of the executive committee members can be found in the *Yearbook*. Finally, the Executive Committee (actually a small subset thereof) can appoint an additional 300 to 400 delegates-at-large. This open category provides for the appointment of representatives of institutions and departments not otherwise covered. It allows for response to the requests from unions for additional delegate allotments, and it provides a mechanism for rewarding certain individuals for their steadfast and long-standing

Alvin L. Kwiram was the first president of the Association of Adventist Forums. At present, he is chairman of the board of editors of SPECTRUM. His doctorate is from the California Institute of Technology and he is a teacher in the chemistry department at the University of Washington.

dedication to the church.

It is significant to note that of the total number of 1,700 delegates, all are appointed by those in office, and virtually all are employees of the organization. Very few laypersons and even fewer women are represented in the delegation.

The major official act of the delegates is the selection of the members of the Nominating Committee. This task is taken care of on the first evening of the session. The regular delegates from each division, together with the delegates-at-large connected with that division, caucus in order to select their representatives to the Nominating Committee. Usually each division president acts as the chairman of the division caucus which selects one Nominating Committee member for each 15,000 members in the division. (It is not uncommon in the larger divisions for each union delegation to caucus separately.) Figure 1 displays the relative membership of the divisions, and the corresponding (estimated) delegate count, shown in parentheses. There will be close to 170 members on the Nominating Committee.

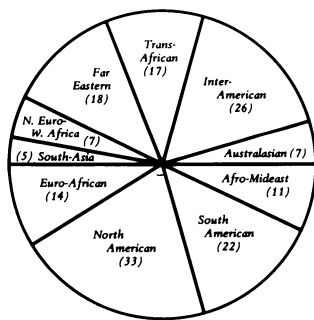


Figure 1. The relative membership of the ten divisions. The corresponding number of delegates who serve on the Nominating Committee is shown in parenthesis.

Only official delegates to the session may serve as members of the Nominating Committee. Delegates-at-large who must stand for reelection at the session may not be members of the Nominating Committee, even though they may participate in the actual voting on their own nominations and those of their colleagues. This includes all General Conference and division officers. The union conference officers represent a notable exception since they do not stand for reelection at the session. Indeed, the union conference presidents from North America invariably serve on the Nominating Committee. And because of the repeated occasions when

they serve together on various church assignments, they are the most influential and cohesive block on the committee.

Once the delegates have selected their representatives for the Nominating Committee, their major task is completed. They spend most of their remaining time at the session listening to and approving the various division and departmental reports. This process is interrupted intermittently to allow the delegates to approve the selections made by the Nominating Committee. The delegates rarely introduce new business from the floor. However, amendments to the constitution or the church manual sometimes elicit active discussion by the delegates. Of course, most policy questions of substantive character are considered at annual councils and studied in detail by appropriate committees before they are brought to the delegates in session for confirmation.

The newly elected Nominating Committee holds its first meeting the morning after the opening session. Acting under the temporary chairmanship of the General Conference president, the committee selects its own chairman who is usually a member of the North American delegation. After four to six nominations for the chairmanship have been made from the floor, the candidates are discussed by the committee and then voted on by secret ballot. Once the chairman is elected, the committee proceeds to elect a vice chairman, who is usually an overseas delegate.³ Although interpreters are made available for those who do not speak English, their participation in the business of the Nominating Committee is obviously more difficult.

The committee then begins its substantive task—the selection of the officers. The first office considered is the General Conference presidency. The chairman invites nominations, which are usually halted after five to ten names have been introduced. Each name is discussed by the members of the committee and then voted on by secret ballot; each member votes for one candidate. Usually, no one receives a clear majority on the first ballot. The chairman has considerable latitude at this stage. If two or three candidates are clearly the leading contenders for the position, he may choose to submit those

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How does lay participation in church polity in the Seventh-day Adventist church compare with that in other churches?

Now very well, apparently.

At least this is the conclusion of a study done recently at Loma Linda University, Riverside campus, by E. J. Irish.¹

On the local level, Irish finds no startling differences in the ratio of ministers to laymen among Seventh-day Adventists and three other Protestant churches: United Presbyterian, Southern Baptist and United Methodist.²

He notes that business is done in individual Seventh-day Adventist churches with a ratio of one minister to ten laymen. It is the same among Southern Baptists. Terms vary: Presbyterians call their local organization "sessions," which have no specific ratio; and the Methodists speak of "charge conferences," where the ratio is one to 15.

Procedures for choosing delegates to world assemblies such as the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists vary considerably.

Irish's study finds that among Methodists, Presbyterians and Southern Baptists, members of local churches have a voice in the selection of those who will represent them at the higher levels of church government.

Among Presbyterians, delegates to the top levels where polity takes shape—the General Assembly, held every year,—are chosen by presbyteries made up of an equal number of ministers and laymen from a dozen churches. In an annual conference, also with an equal number of ministers and laymen, Methodists choose delegates to their General Conference, held every four years. Among Southern Baptists, the local church is autonomous, and the local church chooses delegates to an annual General Convention,

What about Seventh-day Adventists?

Above the local congregation is the conference. Here, Irish finds some matters being decided by officers in a ratio of six ordained ministers to one layman. Above the conference is the union conference, with a ratio of ten to one. And it is this group—the union conference—that chooses delegates to the General Conference sessions every five years.

So much for procedures. Now, what about the ratio at this highest level, the General Conference session or its equivalent?

Irish has found that among United Presbyterians, Southern Baptists and United Methodists, the ratio of clergy to laymen is still one to one, straight across the board.

At the 1975 General Conference session in Vienna, however, it will be roughly 20 ministers to one layman.³

Irish has attempted to find also what ratios exist on key committees and boards. While the committees in the four churches are not parallel, he thinks some comparisons are valid.

The top five committees and boards of United Presbyterians maintain a one-to-one ratio, clergy and laymen. The two most important United Methodist committees have 54 members, 36 ministers to 18 laymen: that is, two to one. Five key committees or boards of Southern Baptists, with 202 members, all told, have 117 ministers and 85 laymen. In the 60-member executive committee, for example, the ratio is 34 to 26.

Again, what about Seventh-day Adventists?

By far the biggest committee of the General Conference organization is the executive, with a membership of 353. This includes 311 ordained ministers and 40 nonordained but denominationally employed and licensed persons. How many laymen? Two.

On three other key committees at the General Conference level, Irish finds no laymen at all. This is the case with the Sabbath school, communications, and stewardship and development committees.

Roberta J. Moore

NOTES

¹ Irish, who is instructor in Bible at Glendale Academy, did his research for a class he was taking towards his Master of Arts degree.

The choice of these groups had no particular significance, according to Irish.

³ Irish obtained the statistics he cites by counting names in the 1973-74 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, then checked his count and understanding of procedures in a lengthy interview with a conference president of wide experience.

United Presbyterians, Southern Baptists and United Methodists publish organizational policies which specify the ratios of ministers to laymen at various levels.

three names for the second ballot. When one candidate has a simple majority, voting ceases. This candidate's name is then brought to the floor of the general session for voice-vote approval by the delegates. The delegates do not have the option of choosing between two candidates, and it is unknown for the delegates to reject a candidate submitted by the Nominating Committee. Once the new president has been approved by the delegates, he joins the Nominating Committee and participates actively (without vote) in the subsequent deliberations.

Normally, the president's immediate associates, such as the secretary and treasurer, are selected next. Then the committee selects the five general vice presidents and the presidents of the various divisions. Although these individuals do not join the Nominating Committee, the newly elected division presidents caucus with their divisional representatives who are on the nominating committee, and thereby have considerable influence on the selection of officers for that division. The selection of departmental secretaries and divisional officers represents most of the remaining work of the Nominating Committee.

Now some reflection on all of this. It should be readily apparent, first of all, that a General Conference session is a convocation of denominational employees—the lay-person has virtually no impact on the selection of the church leadership. This makes it crucial that the selection procedures be as democratic and open as possible. Many observers have suggested that the Nominating Committee submit to the delegates two names for each position, particularly for the major positions. Opponents of this approach usually counter that this would make the election process too “political”—presentation of a dual slate might encourage candidates to engage in the kind of political maneuvering associated with secular politics. But even if some few might be tempted to do this, they would do so regardless of the methods of election. The present system, after all, cannot prevent the surreptitious lobbying of key members of the Nominating Committee. And since the delegates themselves are not given a choice between candidates, the present system *encourages* secret lobbying.

It is difficult to find a logical reason for not allowing the delegates to exercise their corporate judgment. In the most important decision that the church organization makes, our delegates are not permitted a choice but merely an echo.

Another questionable aspect of present election procedures is the method by which information regarding the candidates is transmitted. Anyone who has worked on church nominating committees knows that appropriate information not available to the general public is frequently introduced. Beyond this, however, members of the Nominating Committee (and for that matter, the delegates) should be given the curriculum

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vitae of each major candidate for office. After all, the committee members are appointing persons who will administer large organizational structures involving thousands of people and millions of dollars. The committee members should not be asked to decide on a candidate on the basis of fragmentary information communicated orally and pre-selected by the person who is nominating him. The candidate's training and experience, his specific qualifications and his areas and length of service should be made available. Unfortunately, decisions now are based less on information than on image and personality. In an age when the church was smaller and more intimate, the information I am talking about may have been common knowledge. But with as many as 170 members on the Nominating Committee, that cannot be the case today.

I will not mention the many other changes that have been contemplated by lay persons, ministers and administrators. Some will object to even these few suggestions, saying they are “political” in nature. But I do want to make one further comment. Traditionally, Adventists have shunned secular politics. Ironically, this stance matches the lack of broad participation by members in the democratic processes within the church structure itself. Even knowledgeable and concerned lay persons are often uninformed regarding either the foci of power or the procedures for influencing the decision-making

processes. The fact that church government is representative, rather than purely democratic, underlines the paramount importance of an informed and active laity. At present, lay participation in church government is essentially restricted to the local constituency meeting—only there are lay persons in the majority. The ministers are the dominant force at the union constituency meetings and, at the General Conference session, the administrators are clearly in the majority. Thus, if lay participation at local constituency meetings is perfunctory, this forfeits the laity's one guaranteed opportunity to act as a majority in affecting decision-making in the church.

With only a barely perceptible commitment to the full implications of "the priesthood of the laity," we have slipped inexorably into a state of inaction, or "passivism." This is hard to change, and should greatly concern church leaders. The work of the church cannot be finished by the leadership; laity active in church government as well as in church ministry is essential for the completion of the task. Therefore, a major responsibility of church leaders at this time must be to discover the means to stimulate the laity to more active participation. This cannot be achieved merely by imposing programs from above; it will require careful examination of the talents and inclinations of the members of the church, and the creation of an atmosphere in which they will feel both the responsibility and the authority to act. Hopefully, this brief overview of one aspect of how the church works will help bring about fuller lay participation not only in proclaiming the gospel but also in shaping the vehicle which can make the transmission of the gospel more effective.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Taken from the *Seventh-Day Adventist Yearbook*, J. O. Gibson, Editor, Review and Herald Publishing Association, Washington, D.C., 1975.

2. The numbers throughout this discussion are based on the membership as of June 30, 1974 (see reference 1), and therefore will not be identical to the final delegate counts which will be based on December 31, 1974 figures.

3. The chairman may choose to consider certain procedural matters at this stage. At one previous session, the committee voted to exclude those over 65 from consideration for office. This action was later criticized since that prerogative did not lie within the power of the Nominating Committee. Nevertheless, that procedural rule was in fact operational for the duration of that committee's actions.

THE CONSTITUTION of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Article I—Name

This organization shall be known as General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Article II—Object

The object of this Conference is to teach all nations the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the commandments of God.

Article III—Membership

Sec. 1. The membership of this Conference shall consist of:

(a) Such union conferences and union missions either in organized division sections or without divisional affiliation as have been or shall be properly organized and accepted by vote of the General Conference in session.

(b) Such local conferences and properly organized local missions not included in any division, union conference or union mission or such local conferences or local missions directly attached to divisions as have been or shall be properly organized and accepted by vote of the General Conference in session.

Sec. 2. The voters of this Conference shall be designated as follows:

(a) Delegates at large.

(b) Regular delegates.

Sec. 3. Delegates at large shall be:

(a) All members of the General Conference Executive Committee.

(b) Such representatives of missions of the General Conference and of general institutions and departments of work, and such general laborers and field secretaries as shall receive delegate's credentials from the Executive Committee of the General Conference, such credentials to be ratified by the General Conference in session. The number of these delegates thus seated shall not exceed 25 per cent of the total number of delegates in attendance otherwise provided for.

Sec. 4. Regular delegates shall be appointed in the following manner:

(a) Delegates representing union conferences shall be appointed by the respective unions.

(b) Delegates representing union missions, and local conferences and missions attached to the division but not to any union, shall be appointed by the division committee in consultation with the organization concerned.

(c) Delegates representing union missions, local conferences, and local missions without division affiliation shall be appointed by the General Conference Committee in consultation with the organization concerned.

Sec. 5. Regular delegates shall be appointed and accredited on the following basis:

(a) Each union conference and each union mission shall be entitled to one delegate in addition to its president, without regard to number, an additional delegate for each local conference and each regularly organized mission in its territory without regard to number, and an additional delegate for each 2,500, or major fraction thereof, of the membership of the union conference of mission.

(b) Each local conference or local mission directly attached to divisions or to the General Conference, as have been or shall be properly organized and accepted

by vote of the General Conference in session, shall be entitled to one delegate without regard to number, and an additional delegate for each 2,500, or major fraction thereof, of the membership of the local conference or mission.

(c) Calculation for delegate allotments shall be based upon the membership as of December 31, of the year preceding the session.

Sec. 6. Credentials to sessions shall be issued by the General Conference to those appointed as provided for in harmony with the provisions of this article.

Article IV—Officers and Their Duties

Sec. 1. The officers of this Conference shall be a President, Vice-Presidents, a Secretary, Associate Secretaries, a Treasurer, an Undertreasurer, and Assistant Treasurers, who shall be elected by the Conference.

Sec. 2. President: The President shall preside at the sessions of the Conference, act as chairman of the Executive Committee, and labor in the general interests of the Conference, as the Executive Committee may advise.

Sec. 3. Vice-Presidents: Each Vice-President shall at the time of his election be assigned to serve as a general administrative assistant to the President or to preside over a division field.

Sec. 4. Secretary and Associate Secretaries: It shall be the duty of the Secretary and the Associate Secretaries to keep the minutes of the proceedings of the General Conference sessions and of the General Conference Committee meetings, to maintain correspondence with the fields, and to perform such other duties as usually pertain to such office.

Sec. 5. Treasurer, Undertreasurer, and Assistant Treasurers: It shall be the duty of the Treasurer to receive all funds of the General Conference, and disburse them in harmony with the actions of the Executive Committee of the General Conference, and to render such financial statements at regular intervals as may be desired by the Conference or by the Executive Committee. The Undertreasurer and Assistant Treasurers shall assist the Treasurer in his work.

Article V—Election

Sec. 1. The following shall be elected at each regular session of the Conference:

(a) A President, Vice-Presidents, a Secretary, Associate Secretaries, Division Secretaries, a Treasurer, an Undertreasurer, Assistant Treasurers, Division Treasurers, General Field Secretaries, Division Field Secretaries, a Secretary and Associate Secretaries of the Ministerial Association, an Auditor and Associate Auditors, Division Auditors, a Statistical Secretary, a World Foods Service Secretary, a Director of Trust Services, a Secretary and Associate Secretaries of the Bureau of Public Relations, a Secretary and Associate Secretaries of each duly organized General Conference department: namely, Education, Health, Lay Activities, North American Regional, Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, Publishing, Radio and Television, Sabbath School, Stewardship and Development, Temperance, Young People's Missionary Volunteer; Division Departmental Secretaries (including the Health Food Departmental Secretary of the Australasian Division), Division Secretaries of the Bureau of Public Relations, and Division Ministerial Association Secretaries.

(b) Other persons, not to exceed 35 in number, to serve as members of the Executive Committee.

Article VI—Executive Committee

Sec. 1. The Executive Committee shall consist of:

(a) Those elected as provided by Article V.

(b) Presidents of union conferences, presidents of union missions, ex-presidents of the General Conference holding credentials from the Conference, the presidents of the two universities, the editor of the *Review and Herald*, the general manager of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, the general manager of the Pacific Press Publishing Association, the general manager of the Southern Publishing Association, the president of the Home Study Institute, the executive secretary of the Association of Privately Owned Seventh-day Adventist Services and Industries, and the manager of the General Conference Insurance Service.

Article VII—Term of Office

All officers of the Conference and those members of the Executive Committee provided for by Article VI, Sec. 1 (a), shall hold office from the time of election until the next ensuing regular session or until their successors are elected and appear to enter upon their duties.

Article VIII—Incorporations and Agents

Sec. 1. Such incorporations may be authorized by the General Conference in session, or by the General Conference Executive Committee, as the development of the work may require.

Sec. 2. At each regular session of this Conference, the delegates shall elect such trustees and corporate bodies connected with this organization as may be provided in the statutory laws governing each.

Sec. 3. The Conference shall employ such committees, secretaries, treasurers, auditors, agents, ministers, missionaries, and other persons, and make such distribution of its laborers, as may be necessary effectively to execute its work.

Sec. 4. The Conference shall grant credentials or licenses to ministers and missionaries except in division fields, in union and local conferences, and in organized union missions.

Article IX—Sessions

Sec. 1. This Conference shall hold quadrennial sessions at such time and place as the Executive Committee shall designate and announce by a notice published in the *Review and Herald* in three consecutive issues at least four months before the date for the opening of the session. In case special world conditions seem to make it imperative to postpone the calling of the session, the Executive Committee in regular or special Council shall have authority to make such postponement not to exceed two years, giving notice to all constituent organizations.

Sec. 2. The Executive Committee may call special sessions of the General Conference at such time and place as it deems proper, by a like notice as of regular sessions, and the transactions of such special sessions shall have the same force as those of the regular sessions.

Sec. 3. The election of officers, and the voting on all matters of business shall be a viva-voce vote or as designated by the chairman, unless otherwise demanded by a majority of the delegates present.

Article X—Bylaws

The voters of this Conference may enact Bylaws and amend or repeal them at any session thereof, and such Bylaws may embrace any provision not inconsistent with the Constitution.

Article XI—Amendments

This Constitution or its Bylaws may be amended by a two-thirds vote of the voters present and voting at any session: provided that, if it is proposed to amend the Constitution at a special session, notice of such purpose shall be given in the call for such special session.