

The 1978 Annual Council: A Report and Analysis

by Donald R. McAdams

None of the delegates could anticipate the most momentous action taken by the 1978 Annual Council — the election of a new General Conference president, ushering in a new era in the denomination's history. But before the delegates assembled for the opening meeting, Oct. 10, they had received from Clyde Franz, secretary of the General Conference, a letter, enclosing a preliminary agenda and calling particular attention to three items: a request from the regional conference presidents to establish two black unions in the North American Division, a request from health care administrators to take hospital supervisory personnel and union health care corporation officers off the General Conference wage scale and pay them according to community wage rates, and the introduction of major changes in the church retirement plan.

In his opening address to the delegates, General Conference President Robert H. Pierson abandoned the traditional sermon for a report on the state of the church. He projected that by the time of the General Conference Session membership would reach

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3,265,000. The goal, he stated, referring to the theme of the Annual Council, "Harvesttime," was 1,000 baptisms a day. The report reviewed the evangelistic activities of the church, department by department. Clearly, in Elder Pierson's view, each agency and institution of the church is evaluated by measuring its contribution to winning converts. "Evangelism," he said, "is still the watchword of the hour." "This is the time for worldwide advance." "Victory may yet be ours in our day."

The following morning, Wednesday, Oct. 11, the secretary and treasurer gave their official reports to the delegates. K. H. Emerson noted that as of Oct. 1, 1978, exchange rate adjustments had cost the church nearly \$5.5 million. That morning, an important action was taken to broaden representation at the 1980 General Conference Session. The delegates voted that at least ten percent of the regular delegates to the 1980 session must be women, youth and church members not denominationally employed, and at least one-third of the regular delegates from each union must be citizens of the country or countries of the union. (This makes it less likely that an American missionary will be chosen as a delegate to represent an overseas union.) Some new procedures were adopted for the General Conference Session Nominating Com-

mittee to insure that each division, including the North American Division, has access to the full nominating committee when nomination is made for workers assigned especially to that division.

Concomitant with the leadership's commitment to increased internationalization of the church was the evolution of the North American Division into a separate division organization. To bring this about, the General Conference Committee was asked to "thoroughly explore the advisability of restructuring the relationship between the North American Division and the General Conference, including the creation of a separate division organization, structured along the same lines as the present world divisions, . . ." This study is to be completed well before the 1980 General Conference Session.

By midafternoon on Wednesday, nearly everyone was talking about the upcoming debate on the proposal to form two black unions in the North American Division. (For two opposing views on this proposal, see SPECTRUM, Vol. 9, No. 3) It was rumored that reporters from the *Washington Star* and *Washington Post* would be in the gallery the next day, as well as scores of black pastors from all over the east coast.

The business meeting on Thurs., Oct. 12, began at 9 a.m. with the council sitting as the North American Division Committee on Administration (NADCA), and with Neal Wilson presiding. Following Elder Wilson's opening remarks, there was a frustrating 45 minutes of parliamentary confusion before a positive motion was placed before the council to create two black unions within the North American Division.

G. R. Earle, president of the Northeastern Conference, began the debate by summarizing the arguments in favor of black unions. They allow 1) greater cohesiveness for the black work, 2) easier transfer of black workers from one conference to another, 3) more effective evangelism in the inner cities, 4) provision of better educational opportunity for black young people, 5) increased visits to black churches by union departmental men, 6) greater upward career mobility for black

administrators, 7) black representation at meetings of union presidents on the basis of equality. Elder Earle also suggested that regional conference subsidies to union colleges and black representation on union college boards should remain unchanged.

Calvin Rock then took the floor and enthralled both black and white delegates with a masterful speech. "This is an animated debate," he said, "but no one is angry." To clarify the issue, Rock listed what black unions were not. They are not, he said a cop-out on brotherhood, a rebellion nor "the hasty efforts of ambitious men wanting union jobs." Rather, he said, they are recognition of the fact that we are culturally two different people. "We believe we can be culturally twain and spiritually one." The high point of Rock's presentation came when he referred to church leadership and specifically to Elder Pierson. He acknowledged that Wilson and Pierson were opposed to black unions, but then, in reference to the recent pronouncement by Spencer Kimball, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, who recently announced a revelation that improved the position of black men in the Mormon Church, he turned directly towards Elder Pierson and added with a touch of humor in his voice, "I could wish that the President of the General Conference would stand up like the Mormon head recently did and say, 'I have had a revelation.'" For the first time of the day, there was laughter and general applause.

Rock then called upon all eight black regional conference presidents to come forward. It was a dramatic moment. One by one they gave their reasons for favoring black unions. One president stated that, though he enjoyed his work greatly, he had been president of his conference since 1962 with no opportunity to transfer to another field. The black conference presidents made it abundantly clear that one of the central issues was power. L. R. Palmer, Jr., president of the Allegheny East Conference, stated it most forcibly when he said, "Black unions are not the multiplication of position, but the sharing of power."

It was not until midafternoon that Elder Wilson, still chairman of the council session,

rose to speak for the President's Executive Advisory Committee (PREXAD). He recounted again, this time in more detail, the history of the request for black unions. The first formal request in 1968 was renewed in 1971. Partially in response, the Annual Council of 1971 accepted 16 points to increase integration and improve opportunities for blacks within the existing church structure. As a part of this program, blacks were moved into union officer positions throughout the North American Division. In mid-1976, continued Elder Wilson, black leaders, seeing little implementation of the 16 points, renewed the request for black unions. PREXAD looked carefully at the proposal, setting up study groups and commissioning position papers, but responded negatively to the black conference presidents at the 1977 Annual Council.

Following this rejection, which was made public on the back page of the Oct. 27 *Review*, black leaders carried the issue to their own people. This activity led to a reconsideration of the question at the 1978 Spring Council and referral once again to PREXAD. Now, for the second time, said Elder Wilson, PREXAD recommended rejection

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of the request. He acknowledged that one research study reported that 52 percent of black Adventists favored black unions and 80 percent desired substantive changes, but he said that this was not the time to pull farther apart and spend the additional \$1.5 to \$2 million annually required to set up and support two black unions.

Elder Wilson then yielded the floor to Martin Kemmerer, under-treasurer of the

General Conference. Elder Kemmerer used a chart to show that 52 percent of the \$8,379,000 that came to the General Conference from black Adventists in 1977 was returned directly to the black work in North America. W. L. Murrill, assistant treasurer of the General Conference, added that regional conferences were not unfairly supporting the church retirement fund as some had charged. Concluding the comments on finances, Elder Wilson stated that, in his opinion, two black unions, if created, would have to carry the full financial responsibility for Oakwood College.

One of the high points of the day's oratory came when Elder Wilson yielded the floor to C. E. Bradford, associate secretary of the General Conference for North America. Elder Bradford was ostensibly speaking in support of the PREXAD position, but after indicting the union conference presidents for failing to take pastoral care of their regional conference presidents, he brought down the house with a quotation from the 1930 General Conference minutes that rejected Negro conferences with some of the same arguments that Elder Wilson had used earlier in the afternoon to show why regional unions were not in the best interests of the church.

The council adjourned at five-thirty and reconvened at six forty-five. In intelligent and spirited speeches, prominent black and white church leaders spoke both for and against the establishment of black unions. Those black delegates who opposed black unions expressed concern that this step would weaken the commitment to integration and fellowship between the races. The attitude of the whites who supported black unions was best summarized by Dr. Josephine Benton, associate pastor of the Sligo Church. “Perhaps,” she said, “we can show our brotherhood best by saying we trust you enough to allow you to judge for yourselves how best to carry on your work.” Spontaneous applause echoed through the church. Following Elder Pierson's summation of PREXAD's position and the offering of two prayers, the delegates cast secret ballots rejecting 190 to 53, the motion to estab-

lish two black unions in the North American Division.

Though it may be true that a majority of the black delegates present supported the motion, and a majority of the white delegates present opposed it, the council was not split on racial lines. Among black delegates, departmental workers appeared to be the likeliest opponents of black unions. White conference presidents seemed most likely to support the proposal. The strong opposition of Elder Pierson and Elder Wilson was decisive. Most delegates were strongly inclined to follow the counsel of the top administrative officers of the church. The high level of the debate made it abundantly clear that no disagreement could stand in the way of the common commitment of black and white speakers to the work and unity of the church, an important fact, since the request for black unions will probably come before the council again.

Recognizing the need for greater interaction between blacks and whites, the council did accept, on Monday afternoon, Oct. 16, a report from the Commission on Strengthening the Black Work in North America. The Office of Regional Affairs in the General Conference will be replaced by an Office of Ethnic Relations. The office will initiate programs bringing about greater interaction between blacks and whites at church and conference levels and improving employment opportunities for minorities. Since the Executive Committee of the office will be chaired by the vice president of the General Conference for the North American Division and include the top General Conference administrators in the fields of health services, education, publishing and the Ministerial Association, the office has the potential for exercising considerable power within Adventist institutional life. The director of the office will hold the title of Associate Secretary of the General Conference. In addition to these structural changes in the General Conference, the council voted to place in the *Church Manual* a positive declaration on ethnic relations and include in the baptismal vow a statement defining the church as a multiracial, multiethnic fellowship.

The second major agenda item that Elder Franz had brought to the attention of the delegates in his Sept. 21 letter, the hospital wage scale, was introduced by Elder Wilson to the council, sitting as NADCA, on Sunday morning, Oct. 15. The problem, he said, was that the church had established new hospitals or expanded existing ones without adequate denominational personnel to staff them. In order to attract non-Adventist health care professionals, hospitals began paying community rates of pay. Of course, Adventist employees, performing equal work, expected equal pay. Consequently, Adventist hospitals abandoned the denominational wage scale and paid community rates. Only hospital administrators and other top supervisory personnel remained on the lower denominational wage scale. For some time now, said Elder Wilson, some of these administrators have been receiving additional compensation by such methods as personal use of a hospital-owned car, drastically reduced rents for hospital-owned housing, or low interest home loans. Recognizing that they were acting out of policy, the union health care corporations that own and operate most Adventist hospitals were now recommending to NADCA that hospital administrators and supervisory personnel receive salaries comparable to those paid to equivalent employees in non-Adventist hospitals. The implication, never made explicit, was that hospital administrators would no longer work for the denomination unless they received higher wages.

Our options, concluded Elder Wilson, were to: 1) close or sell the hospitals, 2) transfer the hospitals to nonchurch owned and controlled corporations, 3) establish corporations at arm's length from the church, but still including church leadership on the corporation boards, 4) try to return the hospitals to a strict denominational wage scale, which, said Elder Wilson, was "desirable but totally impossible," 5) maintain the status quo, which, said Elder Wilson, was not honorable because these policies were not presently being followed, 6) the only practical option, in his opinion: establish a separate wage scale.

The proposal now placed in the hands of

the delegates called for the administrator's salary to be computed by multiplying the arithmetical mean for all nurses' wages in a given hospital by 195 percent. This, for example, would give the administrator of the White Memorial Hospital an annual salary of \$30,420 in addition to regular educational, medical and retirement benefits received by most other denominational employees. If this method did not bring the hospital administrator's wage into line with community rates, the hospital board would be allowed to move its administrator to a maximum of 90 percent of the salary paid to the highest-paid administrator in the Adventist system of hospitals. Strict controls would be established to make sure that no additional compensation was paid by methods currently in use. With this policy, concluded Elder Wilson, "we have reached an honorable agreement." It was clear that negotiations had been going on between two almost equal powers and that the church was losing its ability to make policy for Adventist hospitals.

During the debate that followed, it became very apparent that the great majority of the delegates were opposed to the recommendation. Even those who supported the recommendation frequently acknowledged that they did so with great reluctance. Some speeches against the motion pointed out the inconsistency of paying some classes of church workers at community rates, even if they were generating income from non-Adventist sources, when other classes of church workers, such as industry managers at colleges and universities, also generated income from non-Adventist sources and yet remained on the denominational wage scale. Dr. Charles Hirsch, executive secretary of the Kindergarten through Grade Twelve Board of Education, pointed out that at Loma Linda University the president of the university would now make less than the hospital administrator and his associates, as well as the deans of all the health-related schools. Several speakers referred to the explicit counsel given by Ellen White in the 1890s opposing higher wages for Adventist physicians and publishing house managers who, at that time, generated the majority of

hospital and publishing house incomes from non-Adventist sources. D. A. Delafield, associate secretary of the White Estate, strongly and movingly urged the delegates to follow the counsels of Ellen White and have faith that the Lord would provide a solution to this problem.

When the time came to vote, the chairman asked for a show of hands instead of taking a secret ballot. With a large majority abstaining, the proposal carried. It seemed obvious that most delegates opposed the motion, but the position of church leaders was unequivocal. Following the unwritten rule that commits union presidents, who have gone over important agenda items in advance, to support proposals that meet strong opposition, several union presidents joined the chair in support of the motion. Reluctant to oppose church leaders and unwilling to accept the consequences of saying no to the health care administrators, the majority of the delegates silently watched the proposal become church policy.

The action on the hospital wage scale continued a trend pointed out by Tom Dybdahl in his analysis of the 1976 Annual Council (SPECTRUM, Vol. 8, No. 2). Commenting on the actions of that year regarding divorce and remarriage, the functions of the licensed minister and the use of tithe, Dybdahl identified as a trend the "accommodation of the policies and standards of the church to existing practices or current situations." The action of the 1978 Council on the hospital wage scale demonstrated again the church's willingness to solve administrative problems with pragmatic solutions, even if these modify significantly historically held positions that, in the minds of many, are based on the writings of Ellen White. Church leaders interpreted and applied the writings of Ellen White in administrative areas more freely than they allow scholars to interpret and apply them in scientific, historical or theological areas.

Of course, the most dramatic moment of the 1978 Annual Council occurred at 9 a.m. on Monday, Oct. 16. Following the morning worship, Elder Pierson, with his wife at his

side, announced that “in harmony with medical counsel, we plan to leave Washington for a few weeks’ rest and then retire Jan. 3, 1979.” The decision, said Elder Pierson, was made after much prayer and agonizing the previous Sabbath morning just before leaving home for Sabbath School. Most of the delegates had not yet heard the news and were genuinely surprised, even shocked. Everyone knew that Elder Pierson would retire in 1980, and many church workers knew of his health problems, but few realized that he was subject to transient ischemic attacks (TIA) that brought numbness to his left side. Only immediate relief from his heavy responsibilities could reduce the high risk of stroke.

This is not the time to evaluate the man, R. H. Pierson, or his administration. This needs to be done carefully and perceptively. Perhaps a church historian will accept this challenge and give us an analytical biography or at least an article in *SPECTRUM* or *Adventist Heritage* in the near future. The man deserves the full treatment of scholars, for he is undoubtedly the most prominent Adventist of our day and the one who has had the greatest influence on this generation of Adventists.

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The twin commitments of the Pierson years were reemphasized in Elder Pierson’s final appeal: preservation of traditional Adventism and the evangelization of the world. Many of the delegates considered him their personal friend. He has always had the ability to remember people as individuals and show a personal interest in them and their families.

However, in significant respects, Elder Pierson’s analysis of the North American Adventist Church of 1978 is inaccurate. In his final appeal, Elder Pierson used as his text a long quotation taken from Elder and Mrs. Ralph Neall, based on the original paradigm of church evolution by Ernst Troeltsch. “A sect,” said Elder Pierson,

is often begun by a charismatic leader with tremendous drive and commitment. . . it arises as a protest against worldliness and formalism in a church. . . . The group has strict standards and controls on behavior. . . . And then it passes on to the second generation. . . . Children born into the movement do not have to make personal decisions to join it. . . . Preachers arise more by selection and by apprenticeship to older workers than by direct inner compulsion. In the third generation, organization develops and institutions are established. The need is seen for schools to pass on the faith of the fathers. Colleges are established. . . . Youth question why they are different from others, and intermarry with those not of their faith. In the fourth generation there is much machinery; the number of administrators increases while the number of workers at the grassroots level becomes proportionately less. Great church councils are held to define doctrine. More schools, universities and seminaries are established. These go to the world for accreditation and tend to become secularized. There is a reexamination of positions and modernizing of methods. Attention is given to contemporary culture, with an interest in the arts: music, architecture, literature. The movement seeks to become “relevant” to contemporary society by becoming involved with popular causes. Services become formal. The group enjoys complete acceptance by the world. The sect has become a church!

Then, in his own words, Elder Pierson passionately pleaded: “Brethren and sisters, this must never happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This will not happen to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is not just another church — it is God’s church!”

No careful observer of contemporary

American Adventism can doubt that much of this has already happened. Even the agenda of this Annual Council with so much attention given to administrative structure, the wage scale and the retirement plan is evidence that the sect has become a church. The challenge to Adventism is not to resist the evolution from sect to church; such a change has already happened. The challenge is to retain the spark, commitment and message that gave the sect its original power, while accepting the institutional, structural and cultural changes that are the inevitable concomitant of growth in the real world. While it is appropriate, indeed obligatory, to oppose heresy, loss of commitment and abandonment of moral standards, it is futile to oppose change and attempt to exist outside the reality of contemporary culture.

The only question remaining after the delegates absorbed the shock of Elder Pierson's resignation was whether a successor would be elected immediately or later in the year when more overseas delegates could be present. Everyone knew that Elder Neal Wilson would succeed Elder Pierson, but was it worth an additional \$100,000 in travel expenses to bring in more overseas representatives and follow the 1975 Annual Council action that provided for the election of a General Conference president between General Conference sessions? Would the overseas church feel left out of this important decision if the Annual Council went ahead and elected Elder Pierson's successor? PREXAD determined that it was more important to save the money, especially since some overseas workers would not be able to obtain visas at any time in the near future, and go ahead with as much advice as possible from overseas delegates present. Accordingly, the council amended the 1975 action so that they could proceed to elect a president. The council also accepted PREXAD's recommendation that PREXAD and the division presidents serve as an ad hoc committee to nominate a special nominating committee to nominate a new General Conference president.

According to the amendment establishing the procedure for electing a president at the time of an Annual Council, specific provision was made that "persons elected at a General Conference Session to the offices they hold will be eligible to serve on this nominating committee." This significant statement made it possible for division and General Conference officers, who are usually excluded from participation on the nominating committee, to dominate it. No one was surprised when the ad hoc committee brought in its report Tuesday morning following the morning worship. The 66 members of the special nominating committee included the overseas division presidents and secretaries, and a few other overseas workers who happened to be attending the Annual Council, the General Conference secretary, treasurer, vice presidents and a select group of other General Conference administrators and departmental representatives, the union conference presidents, the presidents of Loma Linda University, Andrews University, Oakwood College and the General Conference Radio-TV Center at Thousand Oaks. This nominating committee, unlike nominating committees at General Conference sessions, was the church's power elite.

The nominating committee began its work immediately. It was later learned that

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on the first ballot 61 of the 64 votes cast were for Elder Wilson. At three o'clock, the special nominating committee chairman, Cree Sandefur, president of the Pacific Union, and secretary, Calvin Rock, president of Oakwood College, brought the report to the floor. Neal Wilson was placed in official nomination before the body and was unani-

mously and enthusiastically elected president of the General Conference. No one seemed to doubt that Elder Wilson would have been elected regardless of the composition of the nominating committee and with or without extensive representation from the overseas divisions. He is almost universally acknowledged to be the best qualified man for the job.

The 1978 council did not, in the end, make any decision that will change significantly the life of the church. The request for black

unions in the North American Division was rejected and the changes in the hospital wage scale will affect very few church workers and have no impact on any church activity. The resignation of Elder Pierson and the election of Elder Wilson, though unexpected at this time, only accelerated a change which would undoubtedly have taken place in Dallas in 1980. Still, the 1978 Annual Council will always be unique as the first one to elect a president of the General Conference.