

Agenda for the General Conference Session

by Ronald Graybill

Even if women's ordination does not spark the "Battle of New Orleans" at the 1985 General Conference Session, the 54th World Congress of the Seventh-day Adventist Church will elect a new group of top leaders and decide many important issues of church order.

New Officers

Although Neal C. Wilson is certain to be re-elected president of the General Conference, there will still be a large number of changes in the top levels of the church's leadership. At least four, and possibly five, of the six vice presidents will retire. The General Conference treasurer, Lance Butler, is also expected to step down.

All these men are officers of the General Conference, and with the demise of the President's Executive Advisory (PREXAD), the officers have become, de facto, the most powerful decision-making group in the General Conference. With so many new faces in the inner circle, the appearance of the group will change. Whether these changes will extend beyond mere appearances is unclear. Given Wilson's long tenure, his phenomenal

grasp of detail in the church's operation, and his tendency to become involved in many of those details, changes at the vice-presidential level are not as important as they would be under a different style of presidency.

However, vice presidents each have assigned areas of responsibility that could be profoundly affected by the selections made. For instance, Loma Linda and Andrews Universities will be getting new board chairmen.

Furthermore, filling these posts in the General Conference will have a ripple effect all through the church. Union and division officers are likely candidates for vice-presidential posts, and their positions will be taken, in turn, by others. Those who fasted and prayed for the General Conference Session will need to keep praying for months to come that God will guide in the selection of wise and compassionate leaders.

Church Structure

In New Orleans, delegates will also codify Adventist Church order in much the same way the 1980 session codified church doctrine into the 27 Fundamental Beliefs. New constitutions for union and local conferences are a case in point. In the past, the church's working policy included "model" constitutions. Now those constitutions have been worked

Ronald Graybill, formerly of the White Estate staff, is communications director of the Columbia Union. His essay draws on material that has appeared in the *Columbia Union Visitor*, of which he is the editor.

over and, if all goes according to plan, will be declared mandatory. This measure is an attempt to curb constitutional innovations that have appeared in such places as the North Pacific Union. Church leaders fear that unless greater uniformity is assured in this area, a dangerous degree of fragmentation will occur.

The hazard of such a move is that if the new constitutions contain some unforeseen weaknesses, every union and local conference will be forced to live within them until the next General Conference session. Conversely, if unforeseen needs arise, no constitutional adaptations will be possible without approval of the world church. Ironically, the concept of mandatory constitutions seems to be at odds with the aim of the statement on the Role and Function of Church Organizations, which the session is also considering. The Role and Function plan espouses a church in which plans originate at the local level and are adopted at higher levels as they prove workable.

The statement on the Role and Function of Church Organizations is, of course, another codification of church organization,

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albeit a generally innovative one. Its most sweeping innovation is the creation of a Church Ministries Department to replace the Sabbath School, Youth, Personal Ministries, and Stewardship Departments. The action proposed to the session will accomplish this reorganization only at the General Conference/division level. Meanwhile, in union and local conferences across North America, experiments are under way with many different configurations of departments and personnel.

The real significance of actions on role and

function may lie in their codification of some long-unspoken ideals. For instance, the church is said to function on a committee, not a presidential system. This means that the three principal officers of a conference, union, or of the General Conference—president, secretary, and treasurer—each derives his authority directly from the executive committee. Thus the secretary and treasurer are responsible directly to the executive committee, not to the president. The report also makes clear that there are four, not five, levels of organization: local church, local conference, union conference, and General Conference. Divisions are not an additional layer of administration. Rather, they are integral parts of the General Conference in the various geographical areas of the world.

A rationale for the "special relationship" between the North American Division and the General Conference is also spelled out in the Role and Function document. The most compelling reason for the special relationship is the fact that the church members in North America are far more wealthy than those in most other parts of the world. The genius of Adventist organization has always been that more wealthy areas provide the financial resources to advance the work in less-prosperous territories.

Nevertheless, as the General Conference becomes more truly international in its concerns and work, it seems inevitable that the North American Division will become more like the other world divisions in its relationship to the General Conference. Already each General Conference department has named a North American representative who meets periodically in "North American staff" meetings headed by Charles E. Bradford, president of the North American Division. Even Bradford's title bespeaks growing North American independence. His post was formerly known as vice president for North America.

Another innovation in church order will be the proposed establishment of a church-wide computerized personnel information

system. The system will compile employment-related data on all church employees and make this information available to all levels of church organization needing such data.

Role of Women

The fact that the 1985 General Conference session will "take no definitive action at this time" regarding the ordination of women does not mean that this area of church order will be neglected. An "Affirmative Action" plan will be proposed to involve women in all the ministries of the church that do not require ordination. If the General Conference session moves in this direction, it would undermine the opponents of women's ordination, since most of their arguments are directed against women in leadership of any sort, not against ordination per se.

Following this same trend, the ordination service for deaconesses is also likely to be approved. This involves striking a statement from the *Church Manual* which declares that since there is no biblical precedent for ordaining deaconesses, Seventh-day Adventists do not practice it. In place of that statement, an Ellen White comment endorsing the practice will be used.

The recent round of deliberations on women's ordination was originally sparked by the obvious inequity that arose when women pastors with the same training, experience, productivity and sense of calling as men saw their male counterparts empowered by ministerial licenses to baptize those they had won to Christ while the women could not. North America is unique in allowing licensed ministers (who are not yet ordained) to baptize. Consequently, the Spring Meeting has recommended that the General Conference session refer this inequity to the North American Division for resolution.

Another Spring Meeting recommendation

calls for reform in ordination practices for the purpose of limiting ministerial ordination to those who perform "direct pastoral, evangelistic, ecclesiastical, and other clearly ministerial-type duties." Since this might leave out treasurers and other important workers, it is not impossible to imagine that such a reform could eventually sever the link between ordination and a preferential pay scale. Perhaps a nonordained pay scale will need to be worked out that will compensate for the tax advantage enjoyed by clergymen.

Family Life

Not all the General Conference actions will revolve around church order, however. This session will reflect the church's increasing concern for the quality of family life and standards of sexual morality. In one action, the delegates will recognize the General Conference Home and Family Service by including it in the *Church Manual*. In another, the position of local church family life director is proposed.

Following Spring Council the Officers approved a *Church Manual* revision to be submitted to the General Conference Session, which declares homosexuality and lesbianism to be "obvious perversions of God's original plan." The statement also implies that homosexuality is a completely reversible condition. It declares that those who are in Christ "receive full pardon and the right to choose anew the better way, the way to complete renewal." By the power of the Holy Spirit "all that sin has caused may be undone," the statement concludes.

Church Hymnal

The new church hymnal, slated for introduction at the General Conference Session, will provide a new medium for celebration and praise dur-

ing the deliberations. Dozens of Adventist musicians, scholars, composers, performers, pastors and administrators contributed to the new hymnal. Wayne Hooper, principal editor of the book, brought a knowledge of church music to his task which went far beyond the gospel songs he is often associated with because of his former membership in the King's Heralds quartet.

The book will have the effect of broadening the hymnody of the church to include many of the great hymns of other communions. Many original compositions and arrangements by Adventist musicians will also be featured. What will be significantly lacking in the new book will be high quality hymn-poems by Adventist authors. A hymn contest by the committee yielded only one or two usable poems.

Mission

Finally, the General Conference Session will listen to reports on the 1000 Days of Reaping. The program will prove to have been an overall success, but it will leave two areas of growing challenge unmet: the increasingly active millions of the Islamic world will still be largely untouched, while highly educated, technically advanced Western peoples will also show troubling resistance to the church's message. The church still sorely needs educated Adventists who, resisting the temptation to surrender the church to obscurantists, will claim it as their own and continue to present it to the world as a joyous, sensible way of life.