
Adventism in Transition: The Church of the South Emerges at New Orleans

by Roy Branson

At the 1985 General Conference session the sleeping giant of Third-World Adventism rubbed its eyes and stirred awake. It will never sleep again. At the next General Conference session, the original Adventist church of North America and Europe will become the church of the South. According to their presidents, the divisions of Inter-America, South America, Africa-Indian Ocean and Eastern Africa will enter the next General Conference session with more than one million members each, while North America's membership will remain well under one million. If its rate of growth over the last five years continues, the church of the South will grow to 61.8 percent of the denomination's membership.

Indigenous presidents now lead all but one of the world divisions. The new reality for conference and union presidents in North America is that they will no longer become presidents of unions or divisions outside of the North America, an acknowledged prerequisite for becoming president of the General Conference. From now on, the question asked about a prospective General Conference president will no longer be, "Has this North American had overseas experience?" but "Has this individual spent at least some time in North America?" The future role of American Adventist leaders at

the General Conference may well become similar to that of Italians in the Vatican—providing departments at headquarters with technical skills.

The General Conference session decided *who* would lead the church, but spent virtually no time discussing *what* those entrusted with leadership would do with the power given them. It is true that the president of the General Conference, after consulting with his vice presidents, did announce his own views on peace, racism, home and family and drugs. His statement on racism included declarations that were both specific and eloquent: "The Seventh-day Adventist Church deplores all forms of racism, including the political policy of apartheid with its enforced segregation and legalized discrimination. . . . Racism is really a heresy and in essence a form of idolatry."

However, the general sessions at New Orleans did not focus on what, beyond increasing its size, the goals of the Adventist Church would be during the next five or 10 years. Should nurturing the quality of Adventist spiritual life through stronger local congregations and educational institutions become the principal aim of the church? Or would a burgeoning Adventism devote a dramatically greater share of its resources to addressing such fundamental evils as hunger and disease in the Third—and the very

poorest Fourth—World? As Adventism becomes more powerful and influential, should the relationship to government and society become more central to the mission of Adventism? If so, should Adventism ever prophetically challenge societal injustice, even if doing so threatened its role as an agent for reconciliation?

Since church leaders at the General Conference session did not devote time to publicly discussing these questions regarding what priorities a growing Adventism should adopt, it is impossible to tell the difference it will make when leaders from the church of the South assume leadership from the incumbent North Americans. Nevertheless, even without a clear picture of what the outcome might mean for defining the mission of the church, the struggle began at this General Conference session between those determined to keep direction of the church firmly in the hands of a General Conference dominated by North Americans and those urging some dispersal of power and responsibility.

One way to understand these debates and the other activities of a General Conference session is to envision them taking place within concentric circles. The smallest, the nominating committee, carries out the unique work of a General Conference session: selecting the leaders of the General Conference and the divisions. From that core of activity, mandated by the constitution, the circles expand through important, but less formally required activities, to the outer circle of public worship and celebration.

First Circle: Nominating Committee

North American union presidents took the lead in urging the reelection of Neal Wilson. Although it was noted that Wilson was already 65 years old, the traditional retirement age for General Conference presidents, he was eas-

ily returned to office. The next action—hallowed by long tradition in the church—has always been crucial for not only the rest of the work of a General Conference session, but five years of activity in the General Conference and the world divisions. The president has always been invited to meet with all subsequent sessions of the nominating committee. As a result, the careers of the top leaders around the world have been subject to the veto of the newly elected or reelected General Conference president.

As expected, the returning secretary of the General Conference, G. Ralph Thompson, and two vice presidents, Enoch Oliveira and Kenneth Mittleider, were recommended by Wilson, voted by the nominating committee and announced to the full session, which elected them without debate.

Deadlock soon set in, however, between the General Conference president and the nominating committee. Surprisingly, it lasted for a couple of days. Members from Inter-America and Africa challenged the president for recommending Americans for treasurer, all associate treasurers, most associate secretaries and all but one of the vice presidents. Wilson did not recommend one African to become an officer of the General Conference. According to several participants, early in the proceedings Wilson said that if the nominating committee were to insist on taking to the floor names for General Conference officers that he could not accept, he had two options: (1) go directly to the floor of the General Conference session and express his opposition to the recommendation of the nominating committee; or (2) withdraw as president. Even in that dramatic moment one member of the committee was reported to have said that the nominating committee was not without its options: It, too, could go to the floor, report its inability to proceed under these circumstances and resign.

Despite these confrontations, the nominating committee handed to the floor

the names recommended by the president for treasurer, associate treasurers, and all vice presidents. However, the members of the nominating committee proceeded to show their independence. They insisted on directors of departments in the General Conference that were not the president's first choice. Two division presidencies were open, but delegates on the nominating committee from those divisions recommended to the full nominating committee names other than those Wilson recommended as his first choice. Even the delegates from North America did not go along with all of Wilson's recommendations for General Conference officers or elected departmental officials assigned to North America.

In short, the president finally prevailed in his choice of his closest associates. But the nominating committee demonstrated independence in their nominations of other General Conference staff, and even more in their choice of officers and staff for the divisions.

Second Circle: Caucuses and Committees

Other committees and caucuses were almost as crucial as the nominating committee to the required work of the General Conference session—deciding who will exercise authority, power and influence within the denomination. Some of these groups were mandated by the constitution and bylaws of the General Conference; others were not constitutionally mandated but enjoyed official status; still others emerged spontaneously and were little known, yet had a significant impact.

Division Caucuses. Perhaps never before have the division caucuses—members of the nominating committee from the various divisions—been so independent. Despite all the documents adopted on the floor of the General Conference saying that the divisions are merely the General Conference in different parts of the world, in fact these division

caucuses selected their own officers and had their recommendations routinely approved by the nominating committee. Basically, the General Conference president met with them only to discuss their choice of a division president, and even then the two division caucuses that had to pick new presidents did not follow the General Conference president's first choices.

The president did try to become more involved in the North American caucus of nominating committee members, but the caucus sent on to the full nominating committee the name of at least one person the General Conference president had advised to withdraw and refused to reelect an officer the president had urged to stand for reelection. As with the other division caucuses, their recommendations were routinely voted by the full nominating committee. (Interestingly, the reports of the nominating committee for associate secretaries of General Conference departments assigned to North America often came to the full floor before the nominating committee announced their recommendations for director of the department. The North American caucus selections for departmental associates were thereby not subject to veto by the subsequently elected General Conference departmental director.)

Black Caucus. Other less formal—but nevertheless, powerful—caucuses emerged, such as a black caucus, comprised of delegates from black North American conferences. These delegates carefully analyzed the proposals of the General Conference officers for changing the formulas governing the number of delegates representing each part of the world at the next General Conference session. They believed the recommendation of an overall cap on the total number of delegates, combined with a constant percentage of delegates selected by the General Conference, would give the General Conference a disproportionately large voice. Just as important, the proposals would reduce the representation and power of those parts of the world with rapidly

increasing memberships, such as the North American black conferences and the exploding church of the South.

The black caucus made certain that when the item came up for discussion on the floor their members were ready to speak. When the proposed new formulas for selecting General Conference delegates came to the floor, seven North American black delegates—including several conference presidents—were standing at microphones, waiting to speak. After a couple of forceful speeches from those presidents, the proposal of the General Conference officers was referred back to the constitution and bylaws committee, a constitutionally instituted committee used to resolve disputes erupting in debates on the floor. There, members of the black caucus continued the debate. Finally, a member from the powerful steering committee suggested that the formula remain the same. The committee adopted his suggestion, which was subsequently endorsed by the full General Conference session.

Steering Committee. The steering committee for the General Conference session does not appear in the constitution or bylaws of the church, but if gathered every morning to review the previous day's activities, confer on unforeseen developments in committees, the floor and the media, and plan adjustments in that day's agenda. Chaired by Wilson, its membership included the incumbent president of the General Conference and all general vice presidents, treasurers and secretaries—those who have come to be referred to as the officers.

Interestingly, none of the division presidents—to say nothing of their officers—were invited to meet with the steering committee. This was true despite repeated assertions that the divisions are merely geographically dispersed parts of the General Conference and their presidents are really General Conference vice presidents assigned to work and live outside of the Washington, D.C., headquarters.

North American Caucus. What amounted to a North American caucus met only

once—the last Friday of the General Conference session—but may prove to be the most portentous caucus of all. With North American Division President Charles Bradford in attendance, North American Division delegates met to discuss what had taken place at the 1985 session. Walter Blehm, president of the Pacific Union (by far the largest in the division), presided. He set the agenda and tone for the meeting by passionately asserting that what had transpired at the session made it imperative that North America become a genuine, full-fledged division well before the next General Conference session. Other executives in the division emphatically agreed with him that steps should be taken immediately to create a North American Division.

Third Circle: General Sessions

If the groups in the first two circles of activity at a General Conference session were like the official committees and informal caucuses of the United States Congress, the general sessions corresponded to meetings of the full House and Senate. No recommendations from committees were officially approved until voted by the general sessions. It is to this body that Ellen White refers in her often-cited statement that the General Conference is the highest authority that God has on earth.

This was the first General Conference to have every minute of the general sessions televised on huge, 20-foot screens. Because of the television's lighting requirements, deliberations took place in semi-darkness. Early on, voting by the traditional show of hands had to be abandoned in favor of standing votes. The pervasive darkness affected participation in other ways.

Delegates found it more difficult than usual to survey the attitudes of fellow delegates. Those delegates contemplating making a speech were faced with the prospect of being bathed in near-blinding light, hearing their voices booming back to them

in a delayed echo caused by the vastness of the Superdome, and being startled by bigger-than-life images of themselves projected on huge screens. Delegates who raised a question about a measure recommended by the officers could look forward to responses from the general vice president and associate secretary of the General Conference standing at the podium presenting the item, another general vice president chairing the session and an associate secre-

tary sitting next to him at a long table on the platform. Often the General Conference president, sitting at the edge of the long table, would also answer a speaker. Further comments on delegates' remarks were sometimes provided by other delegates appointed by the General Conference, seated close to the front, where they could easily be recognized by the chair. Under this circumstance, a point from the floor could only be sustained if several successive speakers made

G.C. Alumnus Gives Historical Perspective

by F. E. J. Harder

New Orleans marked the high point of the nine General Conference sessions I have attended in quality of leadership, participation by delegates and facility of organization.

Upbeat Reports

There was an obvious determination by the officers to project a high tone of optimism in their reviews of the past quinquennium. Except for the treasurer's report, existing problems were, for the most part, referred to in generalities or glossed over and ignored.

Membership. In 1950—my first session as a delegate—the world membership stood at 750,000, about 30 percent of which was in North America. Now the world membership has reached nearly 4.5 million, 15 percent of which is in the North American Division. The world church exceeded its goal for the Thousand Days of Reaping by 12 percent, while the North American Division fell short by more than 40 percent. If these rates of growth continue for the next 15 years, church membership will approach 11 million, with less than 10 percent in North America.

Finance. Because of fluctuating currency exchange rates, annual comparison reporting of a multicurrency operation in terms of U.S. dollars cannot give a true picture of values in terms of local purchasing power. When the dollar strengthens, as it has during recent years, tithes and offerings from non-dollar countries appear to decrease, and when the dollar weakens, they appear to increase. And when 80 per-

cent of the church's income is in dollars, missions appropriations convert into substantially more local real value when the dollar is strong than when it is weak. As the treasurer warned, comparisons between years of strong and weak dollars do not accurately represent the patterns of world giving.

The decrease in tithes and offerings from North American members raises legitimate concern for recipients of General Conference funds. However, this does not indicate a lessening support for the church from American members. They are simply responding to the escalating urgency of calls for greater support of local church, conference and institutional needs. It seems likely that this trend will continue as the membership in North America becomes an ever-smaller percentage of the total and as internationalization of the General Conference leadership proceeds. An increasing portion of the church's mission effort must be borne by other divisions as their fiscal maturation catches up with their growth.

I was impressed again, as during my nine years at General Conference headquarters, with the high quality of General Conference financial leadership. Few funds are more carefully guarded and more skillfully managed than those of the General Conference.

Division Reports. The evening reports from the various divisions are always anticipated as the climax of each day. At this session these reports were given on film with minimal participation by division officers and delegates. They were informative and tended to keep within the allotted time but lacked much of the personal enthusiasm and excitement of the "live" presentations given in previous sessions. I especially felt that the North American report was something less than it might have been. To give an articulate, dynamic pulpit master such as Charles Bradford a prepared script, subject him to the regimentation of a media director and congeal him on film is unfair!

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