

## From the Editor's Notebook

by Roy Branson

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### *Neal Wilson and A Bid for Continuity*

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In his keynote report the first evening of the General Conference session, Neal Wilson could have avoided the subject. Instead, he teased the delegates, pulling out an envelope from his jacket, saying he was sending a letter to the nominating committee. Long pause. Long . . . No, he said, it was not a letter of resignation. The carefully planned by-play made it publicly official. Wilson would be quite happy to be re-elected president of the General Conference. That night he confidently presided over the organization of the nominating committee.

The next day, at the end of the Friday morning business session, it was announced that the nominating committee would have a report at 2 p.m. After lunch the delegate seats were uncharacteristically full. No report. Nothing at 3 p.m. Could it be? Nothing at 4 p.m. It was after 5 p.m. before the blockbuster announcement was officially made, and a new president introduced (see pp. 10-15). Less than 24 hours after teasing the delegates with a letter to the nominating committee that was not a resignation, Neal Wilson's 12-year presidency was over. Why?

At least two reasons emerged: A broad reason, having to do with shifting moods in the style of leadership preferred in a General Conference president; and a more focused reason, having to

do with the immediate attitudes of the three American divisions toward Wilson.

The broad reason was an indefinable but palpable desire by delegates to be excited, to feel deeply. Wilson has not been supported by partisans of causes he has championed. He is no Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher. Apart from an unwavering concern for racial justice, which has particularly earned him the enduring loyalty of North American black leaders, Wilson has been less adored than respected. He is superb at analyzing oral and written communication. At his best, he can sit in the discussions of small committees or large assemblies and sense emotions the speakers themselves scarcely realize they are feeling. He breaks complicated controversies into manageable proportions. He patiently waits until antagonists are exhausted to the point of accepting compromise solutions. For 24 years he has been the unmatched mediator of the Adventist church. If he had worked outside the denomination he could have been the head of the United States National Labor Relations Board, and honored for settling America's most difficult disputes.

But Wilson has the mediator's invaluable skill for dissipating passion at a time when members increasingly want to be moved. Wilson's elections to high denominational office have not been ideological crusades, but the acknowledgements of his competence. They have had about them not the air of struggle, but of inevitability. When that quality of inevitability was lost on the first ballot in the 1990 nominating committee, there seemed to be no core of supporters passionately committed to keeping Wilson in the presidency.

A second, more focused and immediate, rea-

son for the nominating committee moving away from Wilson was the converging opposition—from very different starting points—of the three American divisions. Inter-America (1,177,964 members) and South America (941,527), the denomination's largest divisions, comprise more than one-third of the church's membership. Combined with North America (743,023) they approach one-half the denomination's membership and more than 80 percent of its financial support. Of course, the nominating committee reflected the membership strength of these three divisions.

Throughout the ministers' council (see pp. 8, 9), some of the unprecedented large numbers of pastors from outside the United States talked about the desires of the South American Division's commitment to making a change. South America had ideological reasons. It felt Wilson had manipulated the 1989 Annual Council into supporting what it considered an impossibly liberal approach to women in ministry—allowing divisions to individually authorize women ministers to perform baptisms and marriages.

North America opposed Wilson on non-ideological, administrative grounds. (A notable exception were the nominating committee members selected by the black caucus, who were genuinely saddened by the possibility of Wilson's departure.) The dominating presence of a veteran General Conference president, it was thought, would thwart the emergence of an independent North American Division more than any conceivable incoming president could. In addition, certain North American union presidents (all but one of whom served on the nominating committee) had clashed with Wilson when he became deeply involved in North American division crises, such as the Davenport scandal, the Harris Pine Mill bankruptcy, and the attempted consolidation of the two campuses of Loma Linda University.

Inter-America joined the successful coalition for less deep-seated, perhaps more opportunistic, reasons. Once they realized that the incumbent was not going to be re-elected as a matter of course, and that North America did not appear to have a clear picture of life after Wilson, Inter-

America quickly organized itself into the most effective bloc in the nominating committee. Twice its home-grown leaders were nominated for the presidency of the General Conference—first, George Brown, and then Robert Folkenberg.

## *The Dawning of the Age of Folkenberg*

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Organizers of General Conference sessions assume the re-election of the incumbent president. The session is spread over 10 days, but the election of the General Conference president—the absolutely essential task of the session—is expected to be dealt with immediately, certainly within the first 24 hours.

In Indianapolis, since it understandably took half a day to decide not to re-elect the incumbent, the nominating committee assumed that a new president needed to be chosen in half a working day. They chose the opening of the Sabbath as the absolutely final deadline. (One wonders if some North American union presidents had other reasons for not wanting the voting to extend from Friday to Saturday night or Sunday morning. More than other members of the nominating committee, they had seen up close how often Wilson could find a way to turn around a straw ballot, cast against his position one day, to an official vote favoring his position the next day.)

Since the expectation that a willing incumbent will be re-elected is so deeply ingrained, the Adventist church has no constitutionally mandated transition period, when the outgoing president continues to chair business meetings of the General Conference sessions. There is no period when the new president can reflect on his recommendations for his closest associates and gather his thoughts for the challenges he wishes to lay before the church in his sermon the last Sabbath of the session.

The fact is the 1990 General Conference session had less the feel of a constitutionally mandated shift of power than a *coup d'état*. Folkenberg, from the moment he was voted in Friday

afternoon, was accompanied by a bodyguard with a walkie-talkie, arranging his shuttles between the nominating committee and public presentations at the platform. Immediately, the new president had to approve the elimination of many General Conference posts and the retirement or release of well-known leaders who had not expected to be leaving the scene.

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The lack of a transition period meant the preceding leader almost disappeared from sight. After introducing Folkenberg Sabbath morning, Wilson left the platform during the Sabbath morning worship service. Later in the week, Wilson did surface to make speeches from the pulpit for his (and the 1989 Annual Council's) compromise position on the role of women in ministry. In particular, the vote allowing women ministers to perform marriages might not have passed without Wilson's intervention.

But Wilson's future role in the church was never fully clarified at the General Conference session. In introductions of his successor, Wilson portrayed himself as Folkenberg's long-time mentor, and the new president said that he wished to use Wilson's ambassadorial skills. However, in this century, it has been customary for outgoing General Conference presidents—unless obvious health problems prevented it—to be elected to the position of General Field Secretary, and their knowledge utilized by assigning them the chairmanship of an institutional board. After voting him out as president, the 1922 General Conference even made A. G. Daniells (who had just completed 21 years as president) the highly visible leader of the General Conference Ministerial Association. Neal Wilson, vigorous and in excellent health, received from the 1990 nominating

committee no invitation for any post.

Every new administration at least partially defines itself in response to the perceived deficiencies of its predecessor. R. H. Pierson, widely praised as a spiritual leader, was thought by many to be less than decisive as a chief executive officer. Twelve years ago Wilson set out to show consistent, determined leadership. By the end of his term he was criticized for overcentralizing authority into his own hands. Inevitably, Folkenberg, as chairman of the nominating committee, heard repeated criticisms of Wilson. Folkenberg will make certain he emphasizes delegation of responsibility (see pp. 16-20).

Folkenberg began to delegate at the General Conference session itself. Willingness to use writers to help prepare speeches was a concrete example. A remark at the session that received wide circulation in the mass media was Folkenberg's denunciation, Sunday morning, of American tobacco companies for targeting their burgeoning international sales to third-world women and children: "It's time to speak out and speak up, for the alternative is death, destruction, and a guilty conscience" (see pp. 41-43). That arresting, cadenced phrase was Folkenberg's own, although, for other parts of his presentation, he was secure enough to draw on comments drafted for him.

He demonstrated even more confidence by quickly deciding, after his election, to ask others to start preparing his sermon for the final Sabbath morning worship service—surely the most important public act of his entire ministry. He told ministers who are his peers, but previously never so involved in General Conference matters, the themes he wished emphasized in the sermon. Folkenberg later revised their work, incorporating wording and illustrations from his own experience.

The result was a sermon emphasizing unity, but "this unity is not uniformity," and an Adventism that is confident that its 27 fundamental beliefs "are strong enough to stand the scrutiny of Christian thought"; an Adventism, therefore, determined that its "unique identity and doctrine must not be a barrier to the people, but a bridge to them."

Folkenberg stressed at the outset that he was not outlining an agenda for the next five years (“something we will have to work out together as a church”), but the 50,000 Adventists hearing their new, young president reacted as though they were hearing a state-of-the union address. They interrupted him 21 times with applause. Some wept. Folkenberg had been confident enough to place in the hands of a new generation of church leaders the responsibility of helping him articulate a vision for the Adventist church. The result was easily the session’s most inspiring moment.

### *The Road From Indianapolis*

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While the election of a young, white, North American as president might superficially suggest a continuation of traditional American dominance of the Adventist church, North American church leaders know better. The General Conference presidency will be occupied by the new president for the next 10, maybe even 15 years. General Conference positions will be increasingly occupied by non-Americans representing the majority of the church’s members. Overseas division presidencies are no longer available, and only one person at a time can be president of the North American Division (see pp. 21-24). A generation of North American union and conference presidents are awakening to the fact that for the rest of their professional lives they will remain mid-level leaders of North American fields. However, their response may not be resentment, but a sense of release.

One afternoon, on the floor of the session, a North American leader said that he was already realizing that his contribution to Adventism would not be the result of holding the very highest executive offices in the church, but the exploring of creative new ideas right where he is. Another, even younger leader agreed. Their place in denominational history would not be secured by climbing the administrative ladder, but by successfully modeling daring innovations for the church in their own fields. The result could be

significant for the North American church: An Adventism that risks experiments in thought and action; that charts new ways to challenge, even lead, its surrounding culture.

The consequences of the General Conference Session’s actions regarding the role of women in the Adventist ministry are not as clear. Certainly the debates on women included the most painful moments of the session for North America. Even veterans of such debates were downcast at hearing the breadth and intensity of opposition, from outside North America, to ordination of women (see pp. 31-36). Hour after hour, delegates were subjected to forthright declarations of discrimination, such as one denominational leader from a third-world country declaring, “Women are mothers of pastors; they are not pastors themselves.”

Perhaps, psychologically, the nadir for North American supporters of women’s ordination came Wednesday morning, when delegates from around the world easily summoned a two-thirds majority to close off debate. Forty-five people, many of them North American supporters of women’s ordination, had lined up to speak. Some had stayed up a good part of the previous night preparing for their three-minute opportunity to share their convictions with church leaders from around the globe. After the vote to end debate, all the North Americans could do was troop back to their delegation. They knew that eventually they were going to be outvoted. They hadn’t counted on also being told to sit down and shut up.

When the vote against women’s ordination was announced, even North Americans who had always known this was how it would come out looked shaken. It was more disturbing than they had anticipated to witness their church’s official repudiation of what they considered to be simple fairness in the treatment of women.

Behind me a quiet, intense debate broke out between a lay delegate from the Pacific Union—a young professional—and his wife.

She: “Well, that’s it. This church has just officially said women are unequal. What’s the point of continuing to try?”

He: “But we’ve got to work from within.”

She: “Really? I’m not treated this way any-

where else. Why should I cooperate—identify with—an organization that makes women victims of official discrimination? A church, no less!”

He: Glum silence.

When the discussion moved from ordination to the issue of authorizing women ministers to perform marriages, and by implication baptisms, the chair of the session was C.B. Rock, a general

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**— C. B. Rock**

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vice-president, and past president of Oakwood College in the United States. Rock was clearly committed to letting delegates have their say. “We have tithe-paying, red-blooded, faithful, Sabbathkeeping vegetarians lined up here to say whatever . . . they wish to say, and we want to give them that opportunity.” The next day, as opponents of women pastors performing marriages tried to repeat the cut-off of debate they had achieved on ordination of women, Rock declared, “It is the duty of the chair, not only to see that debate flows expeditiously, but that fairness is exercised, and in the opinion of the chair, any motion to close down debate at this point is not in the best interests of the group.” Further into Thursday morning, Rock refused, point blank, to recognize a Latin American delegate’s motion to stop debate. “The chair will not recognize you, sir. Maybe a little later.” He then explained. “I hope you understand, ladies and gentlemen, that a motion is not on the floor when it is simply moved and seconded. It has to have a third, and that third is from the chair. The chair does not ‘third’ you.” Because of what may come to be known as Rock’s rules of order, most of the 45 speakers who had not been able to talk the day before, were able to speak.

Two bilingual delegates of Latin American

origin, now working as ministers in California and representing the Pacific Union, figured out a way to talk directly to delegates from Latin America. They requested and received translations into English, and gave their impassioned pleas on behalf of women pastors in flawless Spanish.

They, and many other North American delegates, were surprised and delighted when the vote on Thursday went in favor of women pastors being able to perform marriages. Some thought that the final tally was affected by the fact that 272 fewer delegates voted on Thursday than on Wednesday. Quite a few delegates from sizable divisions—such as Eastern Africa and Africa-Indian Ocean—effectively abstained by skipping the Thursday business session.

In many respects, the most important question about the two days of debates and votes concerning women in ministry was their effect on seven North American leaders—four conference presidents (Ohio, Potomac, Southeastern, and Southern New England), and presidents of the three unions (Columbia, Pacific, and Atlantic) containing those conferences. In those fields, women pastors with the required educational training and experience are now—or will very shortly be—ready for ordination.

Some of the fields had taken actions before the General Conference session. The Southeastern California Conference scheduled a constituency meeting for October to discuss whether or not to ordain women as pastors. The Columbia Union approved the Ohio Conference’s proceeding any time it wished to ordain the qualified and experienced woman pastor on its payroll.

Since both the union and conference committees must approve individuals for ordination, and are highly influenced by their presidents, what the seven North American presidents attending the General Conference session now advise is crucial. Several of these leaders spoke forthrightly at the session (see pp. 31-36). In their climactic speeches on Thursday, both Neal Wilson and Floyd Bresee, director of the General Conference Ministerial Association, responded, aiming remarks directly at these leaders of some of the largest and most financially generous of

North America's fields. Wilson assured delegates from around the world that "It is my belief that our leaders in North America will abide by the decision that was made yesterday." In return, the world should allow North America—or any other division—to authorize women to perform marriages and baptisms. Bresee put the compromise more baldly. "I plead with my North American friends, 'accept no ministerial ordination at this time for the sake of the needs and problems of the world.' But, on the other hand, I ask the world church to give also, and allow a little more significant function of ministry where it is so desperately needed in North America."

It is at this point that the self-understanding of North American leadership emerging from the 1990 General Conference session intersects with what happens now concerning the session's most discussed issue. Do any of the seven North American conference and union presidents consider the ordination of women so morally crucial, that if their constituents are convicted that they should proceed, they would regard the unity of the world church as secondary in importance? Would any of these leaders be willing to lead their conference, their union, into being the first in denominational history to ordain qualified and experienced women to the pastoral ministry?

Perhaps one or two of these leaders had the same experience as a North American female delegate active in denominational committees at several levels. She came to Indianapolis a moderate, ready to wait for the entire church to move together. The 1990 General Conference session radicalized her. "After hearing all those speeches from around the world against the ordination of women, no one with half a brain can believe any longer that the world church can eventually be persuaded. If any change is going to take place, it will have to be at the grass roots."

On this issue, North American delegates repeatedly used words never before heard from the lips of North American delegates to a General Conference session: "plead," "beg," "please al-

low." North American delegates made it very clear in numerous speeches that they are conscious of how North Americans have previously offended and even mistreated members in other parts of the world. North America is also acutely conscious of its minority status within the world church. But many North American delegates do not relish returning to another session begging for permission to act in their own division with simple fairness and respect toward fellow members, including women.

By the end of the 1990 General Conference session in Indianapolis, several forces could be glimpsed pointing in the same direction. A new president was elected, who is deeply committed to delegation of responsibility, reduction of the General Conference headquarters staff, and dispersal of power. Denominational leaders began realizing, even more than before, that changing professional prospects suggest the importance of pouring one's energies, creativity, and moral capital into immediate and local responsibilities. Not all, but many, North American members became even more dedicated to the moral necessity that women be treated equally within the church, whatever other parts of the international church do.

In all these ways the 1990 General Conference Session accelerated the most significant institutional development presently taking place in the Adventist church: A movement from the center to the periphery; an increasing dispersal of responsibility, initiative, and financial resources from the General Conference headquarters in Washington to the divisions, including North America. Following a year like 1989, that brought so many momentous changes to the world, it is not surprising that in Indianapolis change overtook continuity in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Given our denomination's historic focus on a soon-coming Second Advent, perhaps it is appropriate that at the 1990 General Conference session, Adventism decided to rush into its future, its anxieties overcome by hope.