

---

# World Ministers' Council— One in Five SDA Ministers Attend

by Lyell Heise

---

Speakers at the plenary sessions of the World Ministers' Council, meeting at the Hoosier Dome four days before the General Conference Session, had the opportunity to capture the imagination of the majority of North American pastors and one in five of all the 16,566 licensed and credentialed Adventist ministers active worldwide. That is the estimated breakdown of the some 5,000 registrants who shattered previous attendance records. (The same meetings for pastors before the 1985 General Conference Session drew 3,770 registrants.)

Sponsored by the General Conference Ministerial Association (currently headed by Floyd Bresee), this traditional feature of the General Conference experience is usually dominated by sermons and devotional presentations at plenary sessions. This year's plenary sessions were limited to only four sermons (one by a woman) and three panels. The heart of the council was the kaleidoscope of more than 40 seminars, for which continuing education credit was available.

The subject matter of the seminars seemed to have shifted from evangelism and theology toward nurturing the local congregation. Rex Edwards, director of continuing education for the Ministerial Association, said, "We felt we needed to listen to those at the grassroots." Sensing that

pastors' interests had moved away from the intense theological discussion of the early and middle 1980s, Edwards organized more concurrent seminars on topics of practical relevance to the local congregation, such as how to nurture long-term attachments to the church, finance the local congregation, organize small groups, and improve worship services. Seminars on evangelism were scheduled, and topics such as how to obtain decisions attracted some attention. But sessions on strategies for conducting traditional crusades, and even on how to run Revelation Seminars, did not achieve the high levels of interest they had in the past.

Registrants had the option of attending any four of forty seminars. My four seminars can at least provide a glimpse of the council. With almost 400 other people, I crowded into a small ballroom to hear William Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review*, speak on "Living as Adventists." Johnsson's presentation was a remarkable combination of theology, sociology, and psychology. He made it painfully clear that the Adventist lifestyle, to which he is fully committed, must be more consistent and more sensitively adapted to the new social and cultural challenges confronting the church, if it is to capture the imagination of the next generation of young Adventists. Rarely have I heard as effective a presentation on the needs and challenges facing Adventist youth and young adults.

"Church Alive," presented by Eoin Giller, pastor of the Desert Valley Church in Tucson, Arizona, drew favorable reviews from those of us who packed into his seminar room. The life cycle

---

Lyell Heise, who earned his B.A. from Avondale College and his M.Div. from Andrews University, brings a uniquely international perspective to this report. He has been senior pastor of the College Church, at La Sierra, California, for three years, following seven years as senior pastor of the Avondale College Church in Australia.

of church congregations, methods of both outreach and nurture, and strategies for renewing worship were all explored through discussion of case studies.

Willmore Eva, who recently moved from being ministerial director of the Columbia Union to serving as senior pastor of the Kettering, Ohio, Church, brought candor to his seminar, "Revitalizing Pastoral Morale." Eva's discussion of such sensitive topics as burnout and marital tension is part of a new realism that seems to be permeating current analysis of the personal life and job satisfaction of the Adventist pastor.

My fourth seminar was "Multichurch Pastors," led by David Currie, then ministerial director of the South Pacific Division. It emphasized the training of lay pastors. Their importance for third-world Adventism was shown by pastors from New Guinea participating in the seminar.

What was missing? Well, in addition to adequate child-care, a seminar on the ordination of women. Within days, the denomination was going to make important decisions on the topic. Yet the topic was greeted with a strange silence in both the plenary sessions and seminars of the ministers' council. It would have been most helpful to have had at least a theological analysis of the whole subject of ordination.

Also, in the sessions of the ministers' council, more could have been done to demonstrate the power of worship. Far more than any panel discussion, the energy that could have been generated by 5,000 Adventist ministers singing and praying together would have shown the crucial importance of worship. To be fair, a cavernous indoor sports stadium seating 70,000 people would have dissipated the most creative worship service, but there was an appropriately sized cathe-

dral just across the street. Precisely when it is becoming more multicultural and experiencing profound change, it is time for Adventism to take worship seriously.

---

**Eva's discussion of such sensitive topics as burnout and marital tension is part of a new realism about the personal life and job satisfaction of the Adventist pastor.**

---

What do I recommend for the ministers' council at the 1995 General Conference in the Netherlands? More emphasis on the needs of ministers in the world divisions. Some of my friends from developing countries lamented the almost overwhelming focus of this council on the North American Adventist church. Floyd Bresee says that the consultations that have already started the planning for the 1995 Council assume a more international range of topics and participants.

The changing program of the ministers' council may point to the need for a more fundamental change—altering the purpose of the General Conference Ministerial Association. With the emergence of a stronger, more autonomous North American Division, perhaps the General Conference Ministerial Association would do well to become a resource body for the entire church, after the model of the United Nations' international agencies. Then the North American Division ministerial leadership could focus on issues of particular interest to the church in the North American culture.

---

# The Making of a General Conference President, 1990

by Ronald Graybill

---

**T**hursday, July 5, in his keynote address to all the delegates in the Hoosier Dome, General Conference President Neal Wilson gave the audience a moment of suspense when he pulled from his pocket a letter he had written to the nominating committee. After a dramatic pause, he assured the delegates that it was not a letter of resignation. His motto, he said, was the biblical passage that admonished those who had set their hand to the plow not to turn back.

The last time an incumbent willing to continue had not been re-elected was in 1922. A. G. Daniells had been president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists for 21 years, longer than any other General Conference president before or since. Daniells dearly wanted to continue, but it was not to be. W. A. Spicer was chosen to replace him.

For 68 years, no General Conference president who wanted to continue had been denied that right. It was no small surprise, then, that 24 hours after Wilson's speech, Robert Stanley Folkenberg, 49, was chosen to replace Wilson as General Conference president.

Late Thursday night, July 5, after Wilson's address, the 224 newly selected members of the nominating committee gathered to begin their work. Wilson was on hand to lead the committee as it selected a chair.

Wilson noted that when he first became a member of a General Conference Session nominating committee, in 1954, the committee had only 62 members, including 24 from North America and

eight from Inter-America. Then he observed that the North American delegation had remained nearly static, with 26 members, while the Inter-American contingent had grown to 38. Most observers assumed the trend favored Wilson, whose support was thought to lie in the divisions outside North America.

The first order of business was selecting a permanent chair for the nominating committee. Seven names went up, and Wilson quickly outlined the service records of each, including Robert Folkenberg, president of the Carolina Conference. There followed a short discussion of the qualifications necessary for a nominating committee chair. Some contended that all that was needed was a good facilitator, but most members seemed to favor choosing someone who was both a good facilitator and who had had mission experience. Not only did Folkenberg have mission experience, but he also spoke Spanish, the language of the two largest world divisions.

When the committee first reached for their electronic voting buttons to register their preferences, many of the delegates from the Inter-American Division had not yet made their way to the committee room. Still, the top vote-getter was the man with mission service in Inter-America, Folkenberg, who received 48 votes. Richard Leshner, who chaired the previous nominating committee, garnered 45, and Tom Mostert, president of the Pacific Union Conference, got 24.

After the first ballot, Wilson commented further on the three top candidates, seeming to some delegates to linger longest on Folkenberg's qualifications. On the second ballot, Folkenberg got 65

votes, Lecher 54, and Mostert 32. A final ballot gave Folkenberg 102 to Lescher's 53. Already it was clear that Latin America was asserting itself.

Benjamin Reaves, president of Oakwood College, was chosen as secretary.

After the nominating committee adjourned, Folkenberg and Wilson talked long into the night. Among other things, the elder statesman offered advice on how to conduct a nominating committee.

Folkenberg had been on good terms with Wilson for years, ever since Wilson served as Columbia Union president in the 1960s. In those days, Folkenberg was a young, unordained singing evangelist hired by the Columbia Union to work with Roger Holly. He was on a fast track even then. Although most ministerial interns were expected to wait five years for ordination, Folkenberg was ordained in December of 1966, after only three years of internship, because he was needed for mission service in Panama.

In recent years Folkenberg and Wilson have drawn even closer. Folkenberg played an important role in bringing about the McBride Report, later used by the nominating committee to target low-ranking GC functions for cutbacks. The savings will go into Global Strategy, the church's evangelistic plan for the 1990s. Folkenberg was also involved in the development of Global Strategy.

In his farewell speech to all the delegates on Friday night, Wilson mentioned several occasions in recent years when Folkenberg had consulted him to ask whether he should accept calls that were being offered. Wilson told him No, that he was needed for wider service in the church. Nevertheless, on the eve of the General Conference session, Folkenberg did not anticipate any change in his employment.

In Indianapolis on Friday morning, after a devotional by Folkenberg, the delegates took up the task of choosing a General Conference president. Folkenberg suggested that they put names on the board and select among them, or vote first on whether a change was desirable. A local conference president from the North American Division moved that the group vote on the latter

option, but after some discussion, withdrew the motion.

A lay delegate from North America suggested that the group list the qualities they would like to see in a president. Various delegates said they wanted a candidate who could work well with people, had the sound judgment necessary to steer through divisive issues, knew how to delegate responsibility, was a leader rather than a dictator, could develop a leadership team around the world, and could foster unity of thought. He would need to be a spiritual man, a skilled administrator with overseas experience and cultural (i.e. racial) sensitivity. The list did not match exactly with Wilson's qualifications, at least as seen by North America, but it did not signal the change that was about to take place.

---

**Russian delegates were especially strong in their support of Wilson. North American delegates, who generally opposed Wilson's re-election, were all but sure their views would not carry the day.**

---

The floor was then opened for nominations. The committee members had received a sheaf of papers containing brief biographical information and service records for all the incumbents in the offices they might be asked to fill. This enabled them to quickly calculate the ages of the 12 nominees, given here in order of their nomination: Neal Wilson, 70; George Brown, 66; Jan Paulsen, 55; G. Ralph Thompson, 61; Robert Kloosterhuis, 57; Cyril Miller, 62; Calvin Rock, 60; Ken Mittleider, 61; Walter Scragg, 64; Ottis Edwards, 61; Joao Wolff, 60; and Bekele Heye, 53.

The next hour and a half was taken up by speeches in praise of the leadership of Wilson. Speaker after speaker, mostly from Europe, Africa, and Russia, spoke of Wilson's strong spiritual leadership and his work as the church's ambassador to heads of state. Russian delegates were

especially strong in support of Wilson. Those Latin Americans who spoke seemed divided between Brown and Wilson. Still, North American delegates, who generally opposed Wilson's re-election, were all but sure their views would not carry the day.

For some delegates, the impact of the many speeches in Wilson's favor was weakened by a simple technological factor: the only microphone in the room was on the chairman's table. The delegates had to strain to make themselves heard in the huge meeting room.

---

**Wilson's re-election would mean that for nearly 30 years North America was under the strong influence of one man. Twenty-four years was long enough.**

---

Microphones were brought in for the delegates, and turned on at a crucial juncture—just as a union president from North America stood to make the first strong speech against Wilson's continuing in office. Yes, said the delegate, Wilson had been a great statesman, a polished administrator, and a fine leader. Some felt he had been one of the best General Conference presidents of all time. He was a personable man, the delegate continued, with a good recall for the names of people, and a comprehensive grasp of the issues.

But the speaker appealed to the other divisions to understand North America's situation. Wilson had been president of the North American Division for 12 years. He had been president of the General Conference for nearly 12 years. His re-election would mean that for nearly 30 years North America was under the strong influence of one man. Twenty-four years was long enough.

The influence of that first clear call for change may have been further enhanced by the fact that it was followed immediately by a break in the proceedings, during which the delegates were asked to nominate choices for vice-chairman and an

associate secretary for the committee. The delegates were divided into four groups in order to speed the process. Since Folkenberg, the chair, and Reaves, the secretary, were from North America, that division did not participate. When the whole committee reconvened, the delegates chose Desmond Hills, president of the Trans-Australian Union, as vice-chairman; and Derek C. Beardsell, president of the Pakistan Union, as associate secretary.

Was that break in the action fateful? No one will ever know what might have happened had the committee rushed to a vote on the president before the break. The break gave the delegates a chance to mingle more freely with one another and to share their thoughts.

Soon after the nominating committee reconvened, a local conference president from the North American Division took the microphone. He spoke of the diversity of his constituents and the lack of diversity in the General Conference. It was the wish of his field, he said, that there be a change. The youth felt disenfranchised and believed the church's leadership was aged and "stereotyped." It was time, he said, to give the church a fresh breeze of optimism. Wilson was needed as a goodwill ambassador for the church, not as General Conference president.

Other speakers lined up at the microphones. Calls for change came more frequently. Latin Americans joined in, pointing out the merits of George Brown, Inter-America's president, and Cyril Miller, president of the Southwestern Union. Later it was said that the Latin Americans, from Inter- and South America, had agreed that they would not take the lead in opposing Wilson, but if some other division's delegates broke the ice, they would plunge in.

The women's ordination issue was never mentioned, although some believed that the way Wilson had handled the issue of women in ministry may have rankled some Latin Americans, making them more willing to seek a change.

Finally, around noon, it was time for the first ballot. Assuming all members of the nominating committee were voting (usually a few members were absent), a candidate needed 113 votes to be

nominated president. The delegates knelt in prayer, then rose to vote. Wilson garnered 76 votes; Brown got 75. Thirty-one delegates favored Jan Paulsen, and 18 voted for Cyril Miller. No one else got even half a dozen votes, and three did not even receive the vote of the persons who had nominated them.

When Brown's total, just one vote short of Wilson's, flashed on the screen, the nominating committee was electrified. The delegates decided to vote on the top four names. Of 209 voting, 88 now voted for Brown, 84 for Wilson, 27 for Paulsen, and 10 for Miller. A third ballot offered a choice between Wilson and Brown. Of the 211 voting, 130 favored Brown; 81 stuck with Wilson. Brown had picked up Paulsen's 27, Miller's 10, three of Wilson's and three who had been absent or abstained on the previous ballot. What had been unthinkable a few hours before had now come to pass.

Folkenberg and Reaves, the committee secretary, left to break the news to Wilson. According to Folkenberg's later report to the committee, when told of the desire for change, Wilson only asked if this desire was widespread on the committee. He knew North America opposed him, but what about the rest of the world? Folkenberg showed him the numbers and made it plain that the sentiment for change was widespread. "Then I must accept it," Wilson said.

Although the meeting with Wilson was doubtless very difficult for Folkenberg, some observers close to the scene believe it was fortunate, even providential, that it was Folkenberg who carried out the task. Had someone else been elected as nominating committee chairperson, someone on less cordial terms with Wilson, Wilson might have resisted. A floor fight might have been possible. It was much easier to hear and accept the news from a close friend.

While Folkenberg and Reaves talked with Wilson in Wilson's Hoosier Dome box suite, a messenger was sent to find George Brown. Unbeknownst to the messenger, Brown was being interviewed by the *Adventist Review*. It took 40 minutes to find him. Meanwhile, because of fears that the news would leak out before Brown had

been contacted, nominating committee members were not allowed to leave the committee room. The efforts to maintain secrecy did little good, for on the fringes of the main floor little knots of delegates were already whispering Brown's name.

Once the messenger found Brown and extracted him from his interviewers, Brown made his way to Wilson's box to meet with Folkenberg and Reaves. Wilson stepped out to give the three men privacy.

---

**It was about 3 p.m. when an unsmiling Folkenberg returned to the chairman's table. Shaking his head slowly he said, "A nightmare of nightmares has occurred. Elder Brown has decided not to accept."**

---

Brown was stunned by the news that the nominating committee wanted him for General Conference president. Both Reaves and Folkenberg used all their powers to persuade him to accept. Brown begged for time to ponder the invitation. The nominating committee took their lunch in the dining section of their committee room, then waited until nearly three o'clock for Brown's reply. After much prayer and soul-searching, and after consulting his family and several close advisors, including former Inter-American Division president B. L. Archbold, and Walter Douglas, professor of mission and church history at the SDA Theological Seminary, Brown felt no conviction that he should accept the call. He believed the changes needed at headquarters could not be made in one five-year term. At age 66, he did not believe he could see the task through to completion.

After Brown made his way to the committee room, Ron Wisbey, president of the Columbia Union, and Phil Follett, president of the Atlantic Union, made one final attempt to persuade Brown to accept. They wanted to assure him of North American support. Still Brown felt no conviction.

Consequently and regretfully, he told Folkenberg, he must decline the invitation.

It was about 3 p.m. when an unsmiling Folkenberg returned to the chairman's table. Shaking his head slowly he said, "A nightmare of nightmares has occurred. Elder Brown has decided not to accept."

---

**The nominating committee asked that the business meeting be extended. The delegates sang, "When All My Labors and Trials Are O'er" and "In a Little While We're Going Home."**

---

Now it was the nominating committee's turn to be shocked. What should they do? Turn back to Wilson? The question was put to a vote, and delegates raised their hands to indicate clearly that they did not want to reconsider Wilson's name. That bridge had been crossed; there was no turning back. They would start with a fresh list of names.

The new list went up on the board. It included many of the names from the morning, although Kloosterhuis and Wolff were absent. It also included four new names: Ralph Watts, Leo Ranzolin, Fred Thomas, and Robert Folkenberg.

Folkenberg was nominated by C. E. Dudley, president of the South Central Conference in the Southern Union. As Dudley had watched names go up on the board, some of them seemed to him to be virtually unknown to most of the delegates. Perhaps they were "favorite sons," he thought. Then why not nominate Robert Folkenberg, one of his fellow conference presidents in the Southern Union and a man whom everyone had now seen in action? The nomination was not something to which he had given any thought prior to the time the committee began to place names in nomination.

However, Dudley was not the first or only one to think of Folkenberg as a candidate. Even as

Dudley spoke, at least one other person waited at a microphone to make the same suggestion. After the committee had adjourned the night before, at least one other North American delegate had suggested Folkenberg's name to several friends. He got little response at first, but later, one of his friends, a retired General Conference official, warmed to the idea. The next morning he met Folkenberg in the hall outside the committee room. "Bob," he said, "before this day is over you will be nominated for General Conference president, and if it is offered, you must not refuse it." The idea seemed remote to Folkenberg, but he did remark that someone else had said the same thing to him that morning.

Since his name was under consideration for General Conference president, Folkenberg surrendered the leadership of the committee to vice-chairman Desmond Hills, and stepped out into an anteroom between the committee room and the hallway.

By this time it was 4:15 and anxious calls from the floor of the main session begged for a report before the meeting closed and the Sabbath hours began. The nominating committee asked that the business meeting be extended. The delegates sang, "When All My Labors and Trials Are O'er" and "In a Little While We're Going Home."

Time was short, so only the new names were discussed. A. C. McClure, president of the Southern Union and thus Folkenberg's superior, gave a biographical sketch, noting, among other things, the nominee's sound Adventist beliefs and his skills as a financial manager and a fund-raiser. A delegate from North America slipped from his seat for a whispered conference with the Mexican Union delegates. Would Mexico favor Folkenberg? he asked. Yes, they would be very pleased. With that news, North American committee members began to look more positively on the Carolina Conference president, even though some of them knew relatively little about his stand on the issues. For instance, nothing was said about his views on women in ministry.

Even in his well-received sermon the following Sabbath it was not entirely clear where Folkenberg stood on that issue. By that time the session had decided not to ordain women, but it had voted

to “affirm a significant, wide-ranging, and continuing ministry for women.” In his sermon, however, Folkenberg spoke of only of women’s “contributions,” not of their “ministry.”

As Folkenberg waited nervously in the ante-room on Friday afternoon, a delegate emerged from the nominating committee room on his way to another room. “Be prepared,” he said, or words to that effect. Folkenberg’s knees began to weaken. A few minutes later another delegate left the room and, passing Folkenberg, made a similar comment. With difficulty, the Carolina Conference president made his way to a chair and sat down.

When the delegates were ready to vote, Folkenberg was called back into the room. Although he was eligible to vote, having surrendered the chair, he chose not to do so, and remained in the back of the room. From there he saw the numbers flash up on the board.

On the first ballot he garnered 62 votes, just six ahead of Paulsen, who got 56. Cyril Miller got 28. No one else got more than a dozen. On the second ballot, Folkenberg got 111 votes, Paulsen 69, and Miller 35. By capturing most of the votes previously cast for lesser candidates, Folkenberg was nominated. Although his majority of the total votes cast was very slim, it was widely believed that had a final ballot been taken between Folkenberg and Paulsen, most of Miller’s votes would have gone to Folkenberg, since Miller was also viewed favorably by the Inter-American Division.

As Folkenberg walked to the front of the room, the delegates stood and applauded. If Brown had been shocked, Folkenberg was dumbfounded, almost literally speechless. He asked for time to

speak with his wife. Forty-five minutes later he returned to another standing ovation and said, humbly, to the committee members, “I hope you folks know what you are doing.”

It had all happened so quickly, so smoothly, and so unexpectedly, that many nominating committee members were convinced the Holy Spirit had been active in the process. Certainly it could not have been of human devising, they reasoned. Others were less certain, wondering if they should have waited over the weekend to learn more about the candidate.

At the 1990 General Conference Session, nomination was tantamount to election. (The delegates on the floor of the session returned only one name to the committee all week.) Folkenberg’s election was further assured by the fact that Wilson took the podium in advance of the floor vote and urged the delegates to give the nominee their “strong, prayerful, undivided support.” As for himself and his wife, Elinor, Wilson said, they had no regrets and would sleep peacefully, believing that God had indicated “his leading” and that the process was something that “we must continue to respect.”

There is something else that every Seventh-day Adventist must now learn to respect: the international character of the church and the influence of the church’s largest division, Inter-America. Ten years ago, at the 1980 General Conference Session, the Inter-American Division delegates on the nominating committee struggled to settle on a new division president. In the end, George Brown was chosen by one vote over the promising 39-year-old president of the Central American Union Mission: Robert S. Folkenberg.