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# From Puerto Rico to Washington: Trajectory of a President

by Bonnie Dwyer

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In the glow of the honeymoon period that surrounds every new presidency come the questions of what the General Conference will be like under Robert S. Folkenberg, this 49-year-old bilingual man who stands 6'5" and is known for his skills as an airplane and helicopter pilot, an administrator, and a computer wizard. Who is this person that the General Conference Session in July pulled from the obscurity of a conference presidency and thrust into the church's highest position?

A look at his *curriculum vitae* shows a man who has touched all the rungs of the church's career ladder, starting with singing evangelism, through pastorates, and quickly on to increasingly important administrative responsibilities. He was a union conference president at age 34. The *vitae* does not include the fact that 10 years ago he was nominated for the presidency of the Inter-American Division, before he was 40, and came within one vote of winning. What it shows is that he spent five years as the assistant to the man who was elected instead. And it was because that man—George Brown—turned down the 1990 General Conference Nominating Committee's request that Folkenberg was selected.

Within the *curriculum vitae* are clues to the personality of the new president. His interest in evangelism is one. After his singing evangelism experience, he served as a conference evangelism secretary, and worked on developing lay-evangelistic methods. One person who recalls Fol-

kenberg's commitment to evangelism while in Central America is Benny Moore, who was then secretary of the Ken Cox crusade. At that time, the Inter-American Division had committed itself to holding a Ken Cox crusade in each of its unions. If any of the other unions hesitated to hold a Cox crusade, Folkenberg would add the crusade to his allotment. Moore, working as the advance man, set up three crusades with Folkenberg. In particular he remembers San Jose, Costa Rica. Finding a suitable location there proved to be impossible. Moore says he called Folkenberg and told him that there just was no place to hold the meetings. Folkenberg's response was, "We'll hold a crusade even if we have to build a building in which to have it." And that is just what they did. They rented a vacant hill in a good San Jose location, and a building was erected just in time for the meetings. On the first night, 6,000 people attended. The crusade produced 600 baptisms, and a new church was started which later spawned three more congregations. Eventually, the rented property was purchased and the crusade building became the church building. People who have known Folkenberg a long time predict we will hear a lot about evangelism.

Fund-raising also emerges from the *curriculum vitae* as one of his major strengths. He says he is a reluctant fund-raiser. Nevertheless, of the 18 significant experiences on his résumé for the years 1968-1985, more than half involve fund-raising, and several note Europe as a source for funds.

Folkenberg says that governments of countries such as West Germany were looking for local

projects into which they could put their foreign aid. These projects required matching funds from the communities. So, if an Adventist school needed a water system, Folkenberg would approach the independent agency administering the funds from Germany and ask for partial funding for a water system. He would then approach the boards of the Adventist institutions, getting their approval to also contribute money to the water system.

Folkenberg's creativity in solving problems impressed the people who worked with him while he was chairman of the board of Montemorelos University. Walter Douglas, who served as the Andrews University liaison to Montemorelos, recalls Folkenberg's thorough knowledge of what needed to go into the accreditation documents for the school. "He would bring his small computer to the committee sessions, draft the accreditation documents, and get our language down as we worked, so we could immediately evaluate it," Douglas says.

Inter-American Division Education Director Herbert Fletcher notes that Folkenberg made sure that a majority of the university's board members were at the campus during that time, so meetings could be held whenever necessary. The chairman of the board would not allow the process to slow down.

The *curriculum vitae* distributed by the Carolina Conference ends with his assumption of the presidency there. It has not been updated to include the most recent significant experiences. They include, in addition to conference president, many assignments from the General Conference: the Global Strategy committee, the Media Center Study Committee, the McBride Study of the effectiveness of the General Conference Headquarters' staff, the committee reviewing of ADRA, the Health Systems Committee, and visits to Russia with former General Conference President Neal Wilson.

Asked about significant experiences in Carolina, Folkenberg mentions the enlarging role of the laity in conference affairs. Just before his arrival in 1985, a legal crisis with the laity was brewing, and depositions were being taken. Folkenberg had six weeks to prepare for his first con-

stituency meeting. He called a lay advisory meeting and asked for a list of suggestions. One thing that needed to be done was to overhaul the conference executive committee. That was done and the laity were given majority status. Then the evangelism budget was put under the control of a lay committee.

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"My first reaction to power is to get rid of it, diversify it," Folkenberg says. "I want someone out there on the limb with me." Particularly the laity. "I crave the credibility that a group of laity gives," Folkenberg says. "I want outspoken, opinionated people, because I want them talking outside the committee as well as inside."

Lay members make up 60 percent of the Carolina executive committee. Almost 50 percent of the lay members are women. Five certified professional accountants and one attorney sit on the conference committee. This use of laity has caused a little resentment on the part of some ministers, admits Benny Moore, who is now treasurer of the conference. Others appreciate it.

The pastors do feel more comfortable with how personnel matters are handled in the conference since Folkenberg's arrival, according to Ben Maxson, Carolina church growth consultant. A process has been put into effect for hiring pastors that includes more input from the churches and allows pastors to choose opportunities which they would like to pursue instead of being moved without consultation. The conference personnel committee consists of five pastors, the conference secretary, and the church growth consultant.

Maxson says Folkenberg practices a consultative type of leadership, and discusses with pastors what they want to accomplish in workers' meeting and continuing education classes.

Folkenberg also believes authority should be

process-oriented. As an example, he says the Carolina constituency has given him unilateral authority to call or terminate any pastor. He says the reason he was given that power is because of the selection process that has worked well.

Gloria Hudson, one of the lay members of the Carolina executive committee, notes his use of area meetings to get information to conference members, and to address their concerns. "I've never seen him cut anyone off, and he is willing to keep a meeting open until all questions are answered."

To Ben Kochenower, a certified professional accountant and another member of the Carolina executive committee, Folkenberg is like Nebuchadnezzar.

"You remember Nebuchadnezzar went all over the world picking the sharpest, brightest people, brought them back, trained them, and put them to work. He was not threatened or intimidated. Folkenberg is like that. He can work with anybody. Sometimes that's hard on the people around him.

"He is very open to new ideas, and can take people questioning him or his decisions. He does not take that personally. He is the finest administrator I've met in the church or business world. I don't think we've ever seen a church administrator like him. I have tremendous respect for the guy," he concludes.

As proof that the laity responds to greater participation with increased support, Kochenower points to a 12 percent increase in tithes, the highest in the Southern Union.

That Folkenberg gets rave reviews from a CPA does not surprise Charles Sandefur, president of the Hawaii Mission, who has served with Folkenberg on the board of VersaCare, an Adventist Self-Supporting Institutions corporation, with hospitals in California and Florida. "Folkenberg has a strong entrepreneurial spirit," Sandefur says. "If he weren't a pastor, he would be an executive in a major corporation. He's innovative and a risk-taker. He thoroughly understands financial issues."

## PREPARATION FOR THE PRESIDENCY

### ROBERT S. FOLKENBERG

#### GENERAL INFORMATION:

Born in Puerto Rico - January 1, 1941

Parents, grandparents, great-grandparents have served as missionaries in the Inter-American and Euro-African Divisions.

Married Anita I. Emerson - July 29, 1962

Anita's parents and grandparents have served as missionaries in the Inter- and South American Divisions.

Children:

Robert S. Folkenberg, Jr. - August 12, 1964  
(pastor, Florida Conference)

Kathi Lynne Folkenberg - December 13, 1967  
(student, Southern College)

#### EDUCATION:

- Primary, Grades 1-4, Puerto Rico

- Primary, Grade 5, Havana, Cuba

1951-1954 - Primary, Grades 6-8, Yuba City, CA

1954-1956 - Secondary, Grades 9-10, Yuba City, CA

1956-1958 - Secondary, Grades 10-11, Milo Academy, OR

1958-1959 - Freshman, College, Atlantic Union College

1959-1960 - Sophomore, College, Newbold College, England

1960-1962 - Jr.-Sr. College, Andrews University

1962-1963 - M.A., NT Theology, Andrews University

#### RESPONSIBILITIES:

8/63-10/64 - Intern, Battle Creek Tabernacle

10/64-12/66 - Singing Evangelist, Columbia Union, with Roger Holley

12/66-3/68 - District Pastor, Colon, Panama Conference

4/68-12/69 - Panama Conference Evangelist; Stewardship Director

1/70-12/73 - Honduras Mission President

1/74-6/75 - Secretary, Central American Union

6/75-5/80 - President, Central American Union

5/80-1/85 - Asst. to Pres., Inter-American Division

2/85-7/90 - President, Carolina Conference

#### SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCES:

1. Airline Transport Rated Pilot with more than 2,000 hours experience.

2. 1968-1969 - Opened work in a new region where there were no members and organized a new church.

3. 1970-1973 -

a) Designed, supervised construction, staffed, fully paid for and initiated operations of an 80-bed, acute care hospital in Valley of the Angels, Honduras.

Sandefur said Folkenberg seemed to thoroughly enjoy his role on the VersaCare board, because there was a receptive atmosphere for his many ideas on things like corporate structure and salary scales. To put Folkenberg's strong managerial skills into historical perspective, Sandefur says, "If Robert H. Pierson was a pastor to the world church during his GC presidency, and Neal Wilson a secretary of state, Robert S. Folkenberg will be a manager."

Folkenberg himself says management by objective is not a classroom theory or a concept for him—it is a way of life. "If we can raise the perception of the world church that there is a job to do, the job will become more important than the differences that distract."

The differences in North America may present Folkenberg with his biggest challenges as General Conference president. Walter Douglas, who attended the seminary with Folkenberg, says North America with its institutional problems in the universities and the health-care system, and its

theological diversity, will definitely not make Folkenberg's task an easy one. Getting the church in North America to focus on evangelism and mission at a time when it is consumed with its own problems will take some doing. To some, global strategy sounds like faceless maneuvers on the other side of the world—nothing that will affect the member in the pew. Folkenberg will need to help church members personalize the mission.

In his inaugural sermon, Folkenberg talked of the church's need to build bridges, making a plea for unity in diversity. Perhaps the group that will need the first bridge built to it is the women who feel defeated after the General Conference officially rejected the ordination of women ministers. Folkenberg's passionate inaugural sermon on bridge building acknowledged the action that was taken to allow women to perform marriages, but some women felt that the new president pointedly left out women when he talked of the need to build bridges to people of all races and backgrounds.

As they say in the process of tracing the

b) Increased boarding academy enrollment, built two new dorms, secured West German financing, and built a vocational training complex.

c) Increased baptismal rate from 300 to 1,100 per year.

d) Secured funding to organize 52 new congregations.

#### 4. 1974-1980

a) Funded and built an addition to the union office, 10 houses, and two apartments for office staff.

b) In the aftermath of the Guatemala earthquake, supervised relief activities including food and clothing distribution systems, assisting in the rebuilding of hundreds of homes, secured international financing for a large warehouse built for disaster relief materials storage.

c) Secured European funding to build a new men's dormitory at our college in Costa Rica as well as many other similar projects.

d) Funded and built an AM, FM, and SW radio station and programming production facility in Guatemala City.

e) Developed lay-evangelistic methods that contributed to the annual church growth from 3,500 to 11,000 per year.

f) Established the first orphanage in the Inter-American Division and arranged for its continuing operation through International Child Care.

#### 5. 1980-1985

a) Served the IAD by submitting funding proposals to many European governments for various projects throughout the division.

b) Assisted in beginning a second orphanage in the Dominican Republic, also operated by I.C.C.

c) Supervised the installation of a large computer system at the I.A.D. office and managed the data processing department.

d) Secured funding for and contributed to the building of radio stations as follows: AM/FM in the Dominican Republic, AM/SW in Costa Rica, AM/FM in Haiti, FM in Guadeloupe, FM in Martinique. Installed a computerized program production facility in the IAD office.

e) Developed a funding process to underwrite an evangelism "matching" program that established 150 new congregations during the last two years.

f) Served as chairman of Montemorelos University Board during a 600 percent devaluation of the currency and 100+ percent annual inflation rate. During this time the medical program was significantly modified, the institutional administrative structure restudied, the medical center completed, and operating finances stabilized.

#### 6. 1985-1990 - President of Carolina Conference of SDAs.

thoughts of a nominee for the U.S. Supreme Court, there is no paper trail for Folkenberg on women's ordination. It is not a topic of debate in Inter-America or the Carolina Conference. Even some of his best friends do not know his feelings on the matter. The women who serve on his executive committee claim that his manner is not chauvinistic, and point out that he has appointed women to be directors of three different conference departments.

Folkenberg says he does not want women to feel disenfranchised, and predicts that we will see more and more women in ministry. He says the level at which women function will be determined by each division, with conferences setting their own rate and pace. Folkenberg points to the vote that gave permission to women to perform marriages and says from a functional standpoint, there is no inhibition on women pastors. "Let's use all those functions," he says. "Let's make it a function-based situation and not a title-based topic." Folkenberg adds that we will lose members if we don't use women, and points to French Guinea, where, he says, the majority of evangelism is done by women, and suggests that half the soul-winning in Inter-

America is also done by women. He says he wants to remove obstacles to women functioning in the church.

However, what Moore considers Folkenberg's most characteristic trait is his spirituality. Moore, who worked with Folkenberg in Inter-America and is the Carolina Conference treasurer, is one of his closest friends. The two camp together; Moore even writes computer programs for Folkenberg to help keep his library and reading references organized. Moore says that in the past year or so Folkenberg has read the entire *Testimonies to the Church* and the New Testament.

Talking about the job that lies ahead of him, Folkenberg becomes thoughtful. He knows that the honeymoon period will be short, that the church is full of differences of opinion, even on core values. But for him, "If there is no trust, there is no mission, no Holy Spirit."

Turning personal, the activist manager becomes reflective. "You know with some jobs, when they are described to you, you feel instinctively, I can do that job. Others, you know you can't. With this one, I know I can't. If there is going to be unity, the Lord will have to do it."