
A Raucus Caucus: North America Chooses a President

by David VanDenburgh

For many North American delegates, the election of a new North American Division president was the important presidential election. Most North American delegates assumed Neal Wilson would be re-elected president of the General Conference. Therefore, the crucial question was: Who could be elected president of the North American Division to replace the retiring Charles Bradford; who could give the division genuine autonomy in creatively solving its many problems?

The constitutional changes slated for approval at the General Conference Session would create a North American Division with more of the self-determination enjoyed by the other world division. That was a privilege always denied North America because of its “unique” relationship with the General Conference. Many understood that unique relationship to be the doubtful privilege of funding 82 percent of the General Conference budget, while losing more and more influence at the General Conference level, and losing strength in its own North American base. Loss of members, slow Anglo evangelism, loss of confidence in leadership, diminished tithe growth, increasing agitation by the right wing, polarization over women in church leadership roles, and disenchantment with church-related institutions had combined to make the future of the church in North America look somewhat grim.

While it would be difficult to equal the spiri-

tual leadership and breadth of vision provided by Bradford, it was hoped that a president could be found to continue providing creative, progressive, insightful leadership—leadership that would courageously stand up for the needs of North America, even where those needs might conflict with the demands of the rest of the world field.

Popular wisdom identified the leading candidates as: Alfred McClure, president of the Southern Union (and reputed to be Neal Wilson’s choice); Ron Wisbey, president of the Columbia Union; and Tom Mostert, president of the Pacific Union. Other contenders included Phil Follet, president of the Atlantic Union; and Calvin Rock, a general vice-president of the General Conference.

Each of the candidates had drawbacks for some of the delegates. McClure’s candidacy was seriously opposed because of his perceived failure to do anything to stop what looked like a witch hunt a few years ago at Southern College, resulting in the dismissal of a number of religion faculty. McClure had the reputation among some delegates as a cautious, conservative “company man.” They wondered aloud if North America didn’t need a more visionary and progressive leadership, if it was to move against its problems and send a clear signal, especially to its yuppie members, that the church is responsive to the needs of the people.

For some delegates, Wisbey was too openly and persistently supportive of ordination of women. That was certain to raise anxieties in a world field already convinced that North America was becoming less interested about overseas concerns.

David VanDenburgh is the senior pastor of the Campus Hill Church in Loma Linda, California, and a doctoral candidate at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Some delegates would not support Mostert because he had not declared himself sufficiently supportive of the cause of women in church leadership. Also, Mostert had publicly favored revising the percentage of tithes sent from local conferences to the General Conference. Both Wisbey and Mostert were known as progressive and creative union presidents; translate that “scary.”

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Many delegates wondered if the eloquent Rock would leave his post as general vice-president. Some worried that if he accepted he might prove to have a somewhat heavy-handed administrative style. In some ways, Phil Follet looked like a good compromise candidate because he was not known to have the liabilities of the top contenders. Other names were not seriously discussed, but with no clear-cut heir to Bradford, anything could happen.

Friday morning the 460 delegates from the North American Division met to organize. Before the delegation broke up into unions to choose North American representatives to the nominating committee, a delegate asked the chairman, Charles Bradford, a question: “Would it be possible for the North American delegates to meet again during the Session, as a single delegation?” Amazingly, this had never been done at General Conference sessions. The North American delegation always met together just once—to select their representatives to the nominating committee. Continuing that pattern would mean that the 460 delegates, traveling at considerable expense from all over North America, would provide no guidance to their 26 representatives on the nominating committee.

Bradford was asked if the North American delegates could meet in two days, specifically Sunday morning. Bradford wanted no official action taken, certainly nothing recorded in the minutes. Since the General Conference Officers had already denied a request from the Columbia Union for such a meeting, Bradford said that he would not chair a session of the entire delegation. However, he hinted broadly that he was not opposed to it happening, and that it might take place some other way. “Your union presidents will be in touch with you,” he said.

The traditional work of the North American delegation proceeded—picking delegates to serve on the nominating committee. First-time delegates were startled to learn that at General Conference Sessions, North America has, in effect, 10, not nine unions. When the delegates broke up into union caucuses, the black delegates gathered separately into what was called the black caucus. Just like the geographically defined union caucuses, this racially defined group chose its own delegates to the nominating committee. The number of black delegates in the North American delegation, and in the nominating committee, corresponded to the percentage of black members in North America. As a result, out of 26 delegates representing North America on the nominating committee, the black caucus chose six, as many as the largest union in the division, the Pacific Union.

Obviously, if they voted together, the black caucus could be pivotal in electing a division president. Reports indicated the black caucus would support Rock, former president of Oakwood College, for president. If that proved unsuccessful they would prefer McClure, with whom several black caucus members had worked in the Southern Union. Wisbey might find support, but Mostert would receive none. It was further reported that the black caucus did not want the North American delegation as a whole to inform the delegates on the nominating committee of their preference for division president. The black caucus believed they could be more effective within the caucus of 26 nominating committee members.

Before the Friday morning organization meet-

ing was over, just as Bradford had hinted, word was passed (except, inadvertently, in the Southern Union caucus) that Sunday morning there would be a meeting of the entire North American delegation. And indeed, North American delegates to a General Conference Session met at 7 a.m. Sunday morning, July 8, in a large ballroom, to do something besides elect members of the nominating committee. It marked a milestone in Adventist denominational history. Unfortunately, gathering together was the high point of the meeting. It was not a smashing success.

First of all, not only did no General Conference officer preside, but neither did a union president. Instead, the union presidents asked Joan Tonge, a lay woman from the Pacific Union, to be the chair. She was put in the awkward position of introducing herself and explaining her selection as the chair.

Second, and more importantly, the union presidents had agreed among themselves that no votes taken by the North American delegation as a whole would be announced either to the delegation or to the 26-member nominating committee caucus, which included all but one of the union presidents. As far as advocates for holding the Sunday morning meeting were concerned, not announcing and discussing the results of the del-

egates' balloting for president (writing down two names on each slip of paper), robbed the meeting of its reason for being.

Thirdly, some delegates were so opposed to anything perceived as threatening to the importance of the caucus of 26 delegates on the nominating committee, that they appeared to come ready to disrupt the delegation meeting. During the morning Tonge was called a dictator, and the chair warned a conference president that if he didn't sit down and be quiet he might be removed from the room. Before adjourning the meeting, Tonge apologized, and asked the conference president to offer the closing prayer. By then, everyone seemed relieved to leave the selection of the division president to the nominating committee caucus.

The caucus of 26 met Sunday evening. All of the potential presidents were members of the caucus, including the chair, Calvin Rock. He quickly removed his name from consideration. Folkenberg met with the 26 delegates, but the newly elected president did not appear to tip his hand toward any candidate, and left early. During the discussion prior to balloting, including the articulation of some characteristics desired in a president, some members of the North American nominating committee caucus perceived a differ-

PREPARATION FOR THE PRESIDENCY

ALFRED C. McCLURE

GENERAL INFORMATION:

Born in St. Petersburg, FL - Aug. 24, 1931

Parents are Elder and Mrs. A. V. McClure,
now retired and living in California

Married Mary Frances Taylor — Aug. 30, 1953

Children:

Sally McClure Lundine — June 16, 1955

(Married, two children, Brooke and Jordan; lives in Casper, WY)

Al McClure, Jr. — January 14, 1957, Collegedale, TN

Scott McClure — December 25, 1965; law student, Duke Univ.

EDUCATION:

1949-1951 - Union College

1951-1954 - BA Theology, Southern Missionary College

DENOMINATIONAL SERVICE:

1954-1956 — Evangelism, Florida Conference

1956-1963 — Pastoring, Florida Conference

1963-1967 — Pastoring, St. Louis, MO, Missouri Conf.

1967-1972 — Director, Stewardship and Communication,
Georgia-Cumberland Conf.

1972-1973 — Director, Ministerial and Stewardship,
Georgia-Cumberland Conf.

1973-1977 — President and Director, Education, Sabbath School, and
Religious Liberty, Wyoming Conf.

1977-1978 — President, Kansas Conf.

1978-1980 — President, Kentucky-Tennessee Conf.

5/5/80 - 7/9/90 — President, Southern Union Conf.

ence between progressives and conservatives. One of the caucus members later contrasted the conservative Adventism of the Midwest (Lake and Mid-American unions) and South (Southern and Southwestern unions), to the progressives on the two coasts—Atlantic (Atlantic and Columbia unions), and Pacific (Pacific and North Pacific unions). In this analysis, Canada remained unclassified. Crucially, the black caucus seemed to lean to the conservatives.

Before balloting, the caucus reaffirmed that Joan Tonge, who still had in her pocket the more than 400 ballots cast by the entire delegation that morning, should not report the tally of the delegation's vote to the caucus of 26. The caucus did not even want her to tell them which names appeared most often. For the caucus, it was as if the vote of the entire delegation, just hours before, had never happened.

When the balloting began, everyone knew that it would take a minimum of 14 votes to elect a president. Two ballots were necessary to reach that point. On the first ballot, McClure received 11 votes, Tom Mostert had eight, Cyril Miller, president of the Southwestern Union, four, and the remaining three votes went to Wisbey. On the

second ballot McClure gained the minimum of 14 votes he needed, and Mostert received 10. Two delegates abstained.

Although the caucus was evenly divided, even those who did not vote for him think that if the North American delegation votes had been counted, McClure, of all the obvious possibilities, would still have been the first choice. No one will ever know for sure. Of course, taking the election out of the hands of the nominating committee caucus, where almost one-third of the members are union presidents and potential presidents, and giving it to the full delegation, might have led to the emergence of new, unexpected names.

Unlike the election of the General Conference president, North America produced no surprises—no union conference secretary, local conference president, or pastor of a large church vaulting several levels to the division presidency. The one historic development was the convening of the North American delegates as a single delegation. Although the Sunday morning meeting left something to be desired, it was an important step towards a more representative and democratic process at General Conference Sessions.