

World Church Takes Control

All union presidents, worldwide, now meet twice a year, joined by three laypersons from each division.

by John C. Brunt

THE GOVERNING BODY OF THE ADVENTIST Church—the General Conference Executive Committee—is dramatically more international since the Utrecht General Conference Session than before. Within months of the session, all union presidents from around the world gathered for the 1995 Annual Council of a General Conference Committee that is smaller than before—down to 260 from 360 members—and that excludes all associate departmental directors. From now on, the union presidents will also gather a second time each year for the spring meeting of the General Conference Committee. These changes may stimulate a more autonomous North American Division. The Utrecht meetings also created smaller, less-costly General Conference quinquennial general sessions (from a projected 3,000-plus delegates at the next session to

2,000) and auditors who are more independent. These are the most important changes in organization and structure voted at the 56th General Conference Session in Utrecht.

The delegates to the Utrecht General Conference Session did influence the basic structure and organization of the church. Discussion of the constitution and bylaws of the General Conference proved that in spite of a somewhat cumbersome and sometimes confusing process, delegates from the floor can make a distinct difference.

Most of the proposals that were brought to the delegates by the Constitution and Bylaws Committee were modified in important ways before they were passed by the session.

Basic Proposals

Members may find it interesting to follow the process by which these changes were made. The Constitution and Bylaws Committee, chaired by Calvin Rock, a vice president of the General Conference, and the

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secretary of the committee, Athal Tolhurst, undersecretary of the General Conference, brought proposal changes to the floor.* Some of the suggestions had come to the committee from a commission on world church organization that began meeting in 1992. One of the committee's most important proposals changed the structure of the General Conference Executive Committee in three important ways: reducing the committee from 362 to 240 members (at-large members from 80 to 30); excluding associate General Conference departmental secretaries and directors from membership; and financing the attendance of all union conference presidents to the fall and spring meetings.

Another proposed change concerned the election of officers. In the past, associate directors/secretaries of departments in the General Conference and world divisions have been elected at the General Conference Session. It was proposed that the associate directors in the General Conference be elected by the General Conference Committee at the annual meeting following the General Conference Session, and that division directors and secretaries be elected by division executive committees.

A third major proposed change concerned the General Conference Session itself. Currently, the number of delegates grows each quinquennium as the church grows. There were 2,650 delegates to the 56th session in Utrecht. It was proposed that a cap be set on delegates, either at the current 2,650 delegate level, or at a lower level of 2,000.

The President's Involvement

On the first Friday afternoon of the Session, President Robert Folkenberg introduced the concept of changing the size and membership of the General Conference Committee and changing the manner in which

departmental personnel are elected. Hours after being re-elected, the president stressed two issues: fairness and accountability.

According to Folkenberg, the existing structure was not fair because many members of the General Conference Committee do not attend (or are even urged not to attend) its important fall and spring meetings. Many union presidents from the world field simply don't have the finances to attend. As a result, about 70 percent of the attendees at these crucial annual meetings come from the North American Division. According to Folkenberg, the North American members of the commission on church organization argued that fairness demanded a greater representation from the world field.

The second issue Folkenberg raised was that of accountability. He said the General Conference Committee used to meet every Thursday, but consisted almost entirely of departmental staff within the General Conference. Sometimes this gave the officers of the General Conference, who presented the material to the committee, the idea that they were on trial. In reality, Folkenberg argued, the departmental staff should be accountable to representatives of the world church. But when the majority of the General Conference Executive Committee is made up of General Conference employees, there is no accountability.

Therefore, he proposed that associate directors and associate secretaries of the departments of the General Conference not be members of the General Conference Committee, and that they no longer be elected at the session. Since departments have downsized, he argued, there is a need to choose carefully associates who will complement the directors.

Folkenberg acknowledged that some viewed the proposals as attempts to consolidate more power in the General Conference, but added that he could not see how the proposals would have that effect. More accountability did not mean more centralized authority, for

accountability would be to the world church and the individuals and organizations within it.

Delegates Speak Up

When discussion from the floor began, some delegates described aspects of the proposals as dangerous, if not sinister. Delegates had a choice of microphones when they stood to speak. One was marked *for* and the other *against*, with chairs recognizing speakers from one mike and then the other. Interestingly, many delegates who raised objections went to the *for* microphone, said something good about the proposal, added a *but* or *however*, then voiced their objections. Several times the chair had to remind delegates that opponents of a proposal should really go to the *against* microphone. One delegate against a proposal admitted that he knew he would be recognized sooner by going to the *for* microphone.

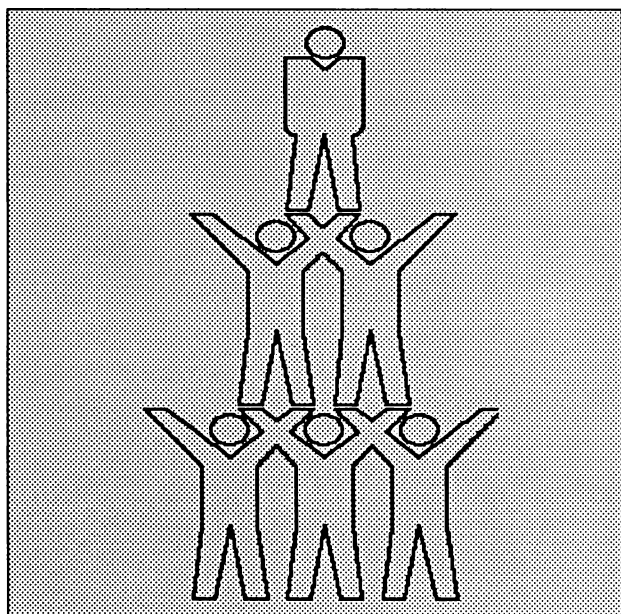
On the opening Thursday night of the session, delegates voted to prohibit moving amendments from the floor, and on Friday began referring items back to the Constitution and Bylaws Committee for further consideration. As a result, almost every item brought to

the floor was referred back to the committee. Calvin Rock, the committee chair, saved the frustration at the cumbersome and confusing process from boiling over by inviting delegates to come to the committee and express their concerns—seven hours on Sunday and two hours on Monday. Many delegates expressed their appreciation for Rock's chairmanship and for the responsiveness of the committee to many of the concerns. By the following Wednesday morning, Al McClure, president of the North American Division, while chairing one of the sessions on the main floor, commented that the Constitution and Bylaws Committee had already met more than 20 hours and heard from 75 delegates. As items were brought back to the floor, it was clear that the committee had made modifications based on the concerns expressed by delegates.

One factor that confused delegates was the linkage of so many items. Votes on any part of some proposals assumed other parts that might not yet have been voted. Fortunately, toward the end of the week, some chairs eased the confusion by breaking down some of the votes into conceptual units.

Delegates expressed a wide range of concerns. The very first person to rise after Folkenberg's initial speech was Neal Wilson, former president of the General Conference. He affirmed the basic proposal, but objected to what he called the negative reasons for it given by Folkenberg. He referred specifically to Folkenberg's statement that department directors had sometimes dominated the General Conference Committee. Wilson said no such thing had ever happened, and that the proposal should be voted because of the positive reasons stated, as long as the negative reasons were eliminated. Later, Folkenberg apologized, and affirmed that the positive reasons were sufficient to argue for passage.

Others worried that the proposed changes in composition of the General Conference Ex-



ecutive Committee gave it too much power. The General Conference Executive Committee would choose not only the 30 at-large delegates, but also division representatives as well. Susan Sickler, a North American delegate from Ohio and a lay member of the General Conference Executive Committee, pointed out that since divisions are a part of the General Conference, even those lay delegates elected by their division committees were really appointed by the General Conference. Some discussion followed about the difference between divisions and the General Conference. Sickler finally asked, "When is a division the General Conference, and when isn't it?" Calvin Rock, the chair of the Constitution and Bylaws Committee, responded with one word: "Amen."

As discussion continued over the next week, some expressed fear that departments would be weakened by the new structure. Rudi Henning, for example, argued that having only 12 departmental representatives on a committee of 240 hardly seemed like balance, and that associate directors travel the world field and need to know what is going on. Delegates also expressed concern about the number of lay representatives, only two from each division, as well as the lack of front-line denominational workers (pastors and educators) on the executive committee.

Auditors expressed fear that being appointed, rather than being elected by the world church, would decrease their autonomy and ability to present objective reports without danger of reprisals. Max Mitchell objected that auditors would no longer be able to stand up and tell administrators the truth for fear of risking their jobs, and Tom Miller proclaimed that the General Conference Auditing Services would be emasculated, especially since some administrators tend to follow the lead of the Roman emperors in killing messengers of bad news.

Concerns came from other directions, too numerous to include here. It did not appear that the discussion about organizational issues

was divided along any geographical lines, as was clearly the case in the discussion of some other issues, such as the ordination of women.

In general, more speeches were given against the proposals than in favor. By Wednesday morning, six days after discussion of organization and structure began, almost everything presented had been referred back to the committee. Many wondered if anything would ever actually be voted. Surprisingly, however, a lot happened during the last three days.

The Final Result

In concept, most of the proposals were accepted, but delegates modified most of them by raising objections on the floor and to the Constitution and Bylaws Committee. For example, the General Conference Executive Committee was reduced, not to the original 240 membership that was proposed, but to 260 members. The modified, final version had three, rather than two, lay members from each division. The way these lay members are chosen was also modified. Instead of simply being elected by the division executive committee, now the division executive committee will choose lay members from nominees given by the unions within that division. This puts the election of lay leaders closer to the grass roots. In addition, the final configuration includes one front-line worker from each division, plus one for each additional half-million members beyond the first half-million. All of these changes were suggested by delegates who successfully referred items to the committee and there explained their objections.

On the matter of how to elect for association directors and secretaries of General Conference departments, the proposal was modified so that associate directors would still be elected by the general session through the nominating committee process, but assistant directors will be appointed. The delegates adopted the

proposal that these individuals no longer serve on the General Conference Committee. The delegates also approved the proposal that division departmental secretaries and directors be elected by the division executive committee, rather than at the General Conference Session.

The Constitution and Bylaws Committee gave special consideration to the concerns expressed about the autonomy of auditors. It brought a major proposal to the floor the last day of the session that was adopted: The director and associate directors of the General Conference Auditing Service will be elected, while associate directors who serve in the divisions will be appointed.

A more sweeping part of the proposal voted by the session requested the General Conference Executive Committee, over the next quinquennium, to give attention to the establishment of an auditing service board of 15 members. Two-thirds of the board would be nondenominationally employed Seventh-day Adventist members in professions that are relevant to the auditing service. The chair would be a lay member elected by the board. This board would recommend to the General Conference Session Nominating Committee the names of individuals for director and associate directors of the General Conference auditing service. In another change from the initial proposal, the committee removed the words "with the concurrence of" from a statement that originally said that the auditor would present his or her report "after consultation and with the concurrence of division administrations."

Finally, the delegates approved a cap of

2,000 delegates to future General Conference sessions. They voted a configuration of delegates that calls for 50 percent of the overall delegation to be comprised of lay members, pastors, teachers, and front-line workers, with the majority of that 50 percent to be lay members. Six hundred forty delegates will be delegates at large. These will include General Conference Executive Committee members, General Conference associate departmental/service directors, 34 General Conference appointed staff, and additional division and General Conference delegates.

Fifty percent of the delegates to the next General Conference Session will be comprised of lay members, pastors, teachers, and front-line workers, with the majority of that 50 percent to be lay members.

The remaining 1,360 will be regular delegates chosen in two categories. The first will be based on organization, with 22 delegates per division, one per union, one per local conference/mission, and one per division institution. The second category will be based on membership. Divisions will receive addi-

tional delegates according to their membership as determined at the close of the second year prior to the session.

Work on the constitution and bylaws is obviously never complete, and action taken toward the end of the session acknowledged that. Some delegates raised concerns about items in the constitution and bylaws that were not being modified at this General Conference session. For example, Susan Sickler raised a concern that according to the constitution, any member of the General Conference Executive Committee can also be a member of the North American Division Executive Committee, and since a quorum is only five members, it would be possible for five members who are not even from North America, but are members of the General Conference Executive Committee, to

call a North American Division Executive Committee and transact business. The chair ruled that it was too late for items that had not been discussed in the Constitution and Bylaws Committee to come to the floor at this General Conference Session. A motion was made to refer this, as well as some other items, to the Constitution and Bylaws Committee for consideration over the next five years, and discussion at the next session. Thus, the process of revision will continue.

Long-term Effect

First of all, it will be interesting to see how these changes affect the North American Division in the future. Will a more international General Conference Committee stimulate more separation between the General Conference and the North American Division?

Secondly, many delegates who had con-

cerns about the centralization of power with the original proposals felt better with the proposals as they were modified by this process. For example, Delbert Baker, a delegate from Loma Linda University, affirmed the Constitution and Bylaws Committee and commented, "I believe this document is much more reflective of the wishes of the people."

There can be little doubt the delegates moved the church in the direction of greater representation of lay members and "front line" workers, and of increased checks and balances in areas such as auditing. Delegates pushed the original proposals even further in the direction of the fairness and accountability advocated by Robert Folkenberg.

* In addition to personal observations and notes, I am indebted to the "proceedings" and "actions" sections of the 10 General Conference Bulletins published by the *Adventist Review*, June 29, 1995, through July 13, 1995.