

A Scholar-President: The Election of Jan Paulsen

By Doug Morgan

The first week in March at General Conference headquarters ended in a Friday-evening glow of spiritual uplift and renewed hope. Like many other occurrences that week, the installation and dedication service for the newly elected General Conference president, broadcast worldwide by satellite, was unprecedented.

The new president, Jan Paulsen, speaking to an audience packed into the General Conference headquarters auditorium, established the tone for his leadership, not with a statement of programs, policies, or grandiose goals, but by modeling what it means to be a pastor-theologian. In simple yet forceful terms, he set forth the gospel about Jesus Christ proclaimed by the first Christians as the core of the distinctive Seventh-day Adventist message.

The week did not begin in such an aura of good feeling. "Tense moments," in the words of one member commenting during the midday break, characterized the morning session of the General Conference Executive Committee's historic meeting on Monday, March 1. That a tense mood prevailed on Monday is not surprising. Never before in the church's history had it coped with a General Conference president's resignation at midterm and under pressure.

But by evening, the tension and uncertainty had already given way to relief and optimism. In an election process lasting less than four hours, the committee had replaced an energetic, technologically savvy church president forced out because of ethically dubious financial dealings, with a calm, scholarly, consensus builder who pledged not to engage in "any business other than the Lord's spiritual business." On the fourth ballot, the 244 committee members in attendance elected the Norwegian-born Paulsen, 64. A General Conference vice president and former president of the Trans-European Division, he became the denomination's sixteenth world president.

The Monday morning session was dominated by the tumultuous exit of Robert Folkenberg. News of the settlement of James Moore's lawsuit fueled rumors that Folkenberg might wish to be reinstated. In a prepared statement at the beginning of the session, he expressed repentance for failure to disassociate himself from Moore sooner and regret for not having spent more of his personal time on "more productive and less controversial matters." Folkenberg insisted, however, that his resignation did not constitute "an admission of egregious misconduct or moral failure" but came out of a desire "to avoid further conflict and pain to my family and the church I love." In addition, Folkenberg complained of "feeling abandoned" because of the church's refusal to assume the twenty percent of his defense costs not covered by insurance. In view of Folkenberg's claim to innocence from gross misconduct, and lacking specific information supporting the allegations against him, some committee mem-

bers questioned the necessity for Folkenberg's resignation. Lay members and representatives from developing countries who felt Folkenberg's leadership had benefited the church in their areas were particularly outspoken. A union president from Africa was among those pleading for disclosure of the facts necessitating the resignation. Otherwise, said the African leader, he wouldn't know what to tell his people. After more than an hour of discussion, Folkenberg again took the floor and urged that his resignation be accepted while at the same time bristling over what he called the "grossly distorted process" that led to the resignation. Folkenberg declared that it was his nature to push for the full disclosure which would exonerate him but that he wanted to spare his family and the church further suffering. In a voice at times shaking with emotion, he stated that while no one could understand his excruciating pain dealing with Moore over the past two years, the pain had not hurt so much as what he had undergone in the past three months at the hands of his fellow church leaders. One might expect such trauma from an "unconverted individual," he commented, referring to Moore, but not from within the church.

Following Folkenberg's brief remarks, the committee quickly voted to accept his resignation and moved on the task of selecting a new president. Rather than forming a separate and smaller nominating committee, the Executive Committee, accepting the proposal of the interim administration formed after Folkenberg submitted his resignation on February 7, constituted itself as the nominating committee so that the new president would have a clear mandate from the entire committee. Calvin Rock, a General Conference vice-president, received an overwhelming majority of votes to chair the nominating process with runner-up Neils-Erik Andreasen, president of Andrews University, designated associate chair.

Fallout from Folkenberg's departure, however, lingered at the beginning of the afternoon session. One committee member called for a factual response to Folkenberg's complaints that would give a clear rationale for his removal. A General Conference official who served on the Ad Hoc Group that met from January 25 to 26 and recommended convening the Executive Committee, noted that Folkenberg had earlier described the process as fair and expressed shock that the former president now seemed to be "bumping against reality."



Photo: Adam Bujak/ANN

Jan Paulsen appears with his wife, Kari, following his election to vice presidency of the world church at the 1995 General Conference session in Utrecht.

General Conference secretary G. Ralph Thompson pointed out that the division presidents had received the information from the Ad Hoc Group and would be free to disseminate it if they chose. A consensus emerged that the executive committee should not go into a "trial mode," evaluating the facts calling Folkenberg's leadership into question, which would then require giving Folkenberg time to respond. He had already had a "trial," his resignation was final, and it was time to move on. Folkenberg facilitated closure on a painful and embarrassing episode in the church's history by returning the next morning to apologize for his impromptu remarks on Monday.

It was around 3 P.M. Monday afternoon that the nominating process finally began. Even then, the bulk of time was spent in prayer, reflection on pertinent state-

ments by Ellen White that Rock had prepared, and discussion of the qualities desirable in a General Conference president. The spiritual atmosphere created by this procedure made a deep impression on many committee members.

It was not until about 5 P.M. that names began to be placed in nomination. The voting proceeded very rapidly, aided by electronic voting devices that gave instant tallies. In less than an hour and a half, a new president had been elected.

Four of the original fifteen nominees immediately withdrew from consideration. Rock, the first to be nominated, turned the chair over to Andreasen. The only nominee to make a statement before leaving the room was Paulsen. He suggested that it might be better to consider someone who had been more remote from the Folkenberg matter since some might conclude that Paulsen had acted for selfish reasons.

Former General Conference president Neal C. Wilson, whose son, Ted N.C. Wilson was among the nominees, suggested that in view of the fact that 85-90 percent of the world church body is non-Caucasian, the committee should give serious consideration to the two non-Caucasian nominees (Rock and Thompson). In response to a request for resumes of the candidates, committee secretary Athal Tollhurst provided brief biographical sketches on most of the nominees from the General Conference files. Verbal information from the secretary and the floor was provided about the candidates for whom no written information was immediately available.

Four candidates emerged as front-runners after the first ballot: Paulsen, 29 percent; Rock 26 percent; Wilson, 16 percent; and Thompson, 11 percent. The second ballot narrowed the field to three: Paulsen, 38 percent; Rock, 31 percent; Wilson, 26 percent. No candidate won a majority on the third ballot, but Wilson, who dropped to 22 percent, was eliminated, with Paulsen receiving 45 percent and Rock 33 percent. In the final ballot, Rock narrowed the gap between himself and Paulsen by apparently gaining about two-thirds of the votes that had gone to Wilson. However, Paulsen, the top vote-getter in each ballot, won by the relatively slim margin of 53 percent to 47 percent. Then, at Rock's request, the General Conference Executive Committee made the election of Paulsen unanimous. Participants also seemed unanimous in describing the election process as fair and open. Despite the large size of the committee, the floor was open to all who wished to speak and make nominations. The process was "not guided by a locomotive from the front," said Bjarne

Christiansen, assistant to the president of the North American Division. Selma Chajj, a psychologist from Takoma Park, Maryland, concurred that the process was open and appropriate.

Chajj noted that the lay members spoke more than in previous Executive Committee meetings and placed several names in nomination. While the process might be viewed as somewhat hasty and superficial, lacking in detailed and deliberate evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each nominee, Chajj believes the committee was informed well enough to make a wise choice. She pointed out that the committee has worked together over a four-and-a-half-year period, meeting at least twice a year, affording an opportunity for the members not employed by the denomination to become knowledgeable about the nominees.

Some General Conference insiders expressed surprise that a European would win the presidency, given Europe's small and diminishing proportion of the world church membership. One factor may be that representation on the executive committee favors the developed, wealthier regions of the globe, despite changes made at the 1995 General Conference session in Utrecht. For example, the Trans-European Division, Paulsen's base, has 92,100 members and fifteen representatives on the Executive Committee. The Eastern Africa Division has over fifteen times as many members (1,655,091 members) but only sixteen committee members.

It may also be that the prayerful committee members were able to transcend the categories of race and region and look to the most qualified individuals. That, at least, is how the participants seemed to characterize it. Israel Leito, president of the division with the largest membership—the Inter-American Division (1,703,467 members)—emphasized the spiritual dynamics of the election. "Everything was done so as to be the Spirit's work rather than by any human invention," he reported, adding that "we felt the presence of the Lord." Leito, who had withdrawn his own name from consideration, also stated that from the time it became known that Folkenberg would have to resign "it was clear in my mind that Dr. Paulsen was the one the church needed to bring healing, certainty, and direction." A committee member from Zambia admitted that "we worried and wondered how we would resolve the issue," but added that "I have never seen the church pray like we prayed in this house. 'All things work together for good. . .'" Even a veteran General Conference official who by his own admission inclines toward skepticism in such matters suggested that Paulsen's surprising victory indicates

The Election of Jan Paulsen

Nominees (in order of nomination)

Calvin Rock
G. Ralph Thompson
Jan Paulsen
Ted N.C. Wilson
Bertil Wiklander*
Mario Veloso
Robert Kloosterhuis
Ralph Watts
Jere Patzer
Ben Maxson
Lowell Cooper
Israel Leito*
Delbert Baker*
Gerry Karst
Neils-Erik Andreassen*

*withdrew from consideration

First Ballot

Paulsen	29%
Rock	26%
Wilson	16%
Thompson	11%
Patzer	5%
Karst	3%
Cooper	3%
Others	less than 3%

Second Ballot

Paulsen	38%
Rock	31%
Wilson	26%
Thompson	5%

Third Ballot

Paulsen	45%
Rock	33%
Wilson	22%

Fourth Ballot

Paulsen	53%
Rock	47%

that "there may be something to this business about the Holy Spirit leading the church after all."

The top three candidates each offered impressive credentials, and whichever had won, the denomination would have had its first president with an earned doctorate. Wilson, 48, regarded as a favorite of the church's conservative wing, holds a doctorate in religious education from New York University. Prior to taking his current position at the helm of the Review and Herald Publishing Association, Wilson held various administrative posts in the Africa-Indian Ocean Division and was president of the Euro-Asia Division. Rock, 69, has been president of Oakwood College and holds a Ph.D. in Christian ethics from Vanderbilt University. A powerful public speaker who once pastored the large Ephesus Church in Harlem, Rock has earned a reputation as an extremely effective chair of General Conference sessions. Perhaps the only major element missing from his résumé is overseas service, though he has traveled and evangelized extensively in Africa.

What, then, of Jan Paulsen? Who is he and what might the church expect from his leadership? Paulsen is the second Norwegian to serve as world president, but the first who has lived and worked most of his life outside the United States. (Ole Olsen, president from 1888 to 1897, was born in Norway but lived in the United States since childhood. The only other non-American General Conference president was Australian C.H. Watson, whose tenure lasted from 1930 to 1936). In more than forty years of denominational service, Paulsen has been a pastor, a college professor and president, and an administrator at the division and General Conference levels.

When people talk about Jan Paulsen, one word that comes up most frequently is "balance." While prognostication is always risky, his record and the perspectives of associates suggest that Paulsen will be likely to balance the following:

Gravity and Warmth

Those who have worked with Paulsen speak of a seriousness that evokes respect, even awe, and can be somewhat intimidating. Yet as time goes on they find in him a warmth and sense of humor that make him an enjoyable and comfortable companion.

General Conference communication director Ray Dabrowski, who studied under Paulsen at Newbold College and worked with him for several years in the Trans-European Division office, recalls a remarkable trip Paulsen made to Poland soon after the declaration

of martial law in response to the Solidarity uprising of December 1981. The Polish people were cut off from the rest of the world, unable to call outside the country, coping with increasingly empty shelves and tanks on the street. It was difficult to get into the country, but Paulsen showed up unannounced one day at the Polish Union headquarters in Warsaw. "I came to find out how you are and to let you know the church cares about you," Paulsen said to the stunned but grateful Polish Adventists. According to Dabrowski, Paulsen was the first churchman of any denomination to enter Poland after the declaration of martial law. "We feared for our lives," says Dabrowski. "Paulsen's visit revealed a warm and open heart."¹

The conclusion of his introductory sermon given at the General Conference headquarters on March 5 reflects Paulsen's desire that warmth be a defining characteristic of the Seventh-day Adventist church: "I appeal to you to do your best to make this church of ours a warm and attractive community where also sinners can feel at home; a place where individuals who come with many battle scars and who have not done particularly well, or who don't see themselves as successful, can feel accepted and loved."

Openness and Decisiveness

Paulsen is described as one who truly listens with an open mind to differing points of view. He has earned a reputation for skill in reconciling antagonistic parties. He was the point man in lengthy negotiations that resolved a split in the Hungarian Adventist church in 1989. More recently, says Dabrowski, Paulsen has taken a similar role in Macedonia.

Ulrich Frikart, president of the Euro-Africa Division, maintains Paulsen has shown two major components of a Christian leader: "humility and spirituality." And those characteristics, Frikart believes, create a more open atmosphere. "The church desperately needed a change at the highest level," according to Frikart. Already there has been "a tremendous change in atmosphere at church headquarters. People have the courage to speak for themselves."

Indeed, Paulsen's own brief remarks to the members of the Executive Committee and the staff of the world church headquarters the day following his election set the tone of open-

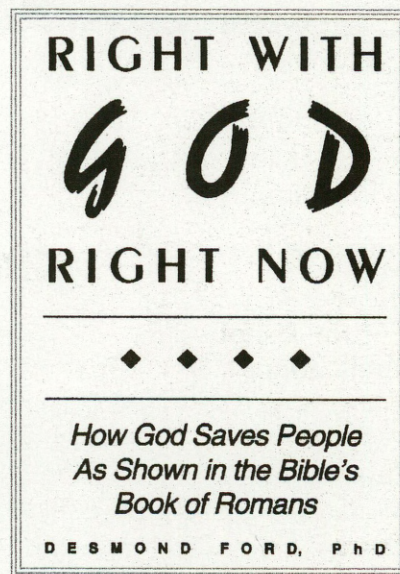
ness: "Our talents differ, we have different temperaments, and we don't always agree on everything. I want you to know, I think that's just fine. We don't have to agree on everything. And I want you to know, my colleagues, that you can talk to me and feel safe, and it's okay to disagree with me."

Adventists may find Paulsen somewhat more candid than past church administrators. In his report on behalf of the Trans-European Division to the 1995 General Conference session, Paulsen spoke frankly of a major evangelistic effort in Sweden that yielded only fourteen baptisms, illustrating the difficulty of traditional "soul-winning" in some parts of the division. He also reported in a straightforward manner the "gigantic blow" that came when the Nutana health food company in Denmark and its sister companies in Norway and Finland collapsed under financial pressures. This loss, in turn, forced the sale of the largest health-care institution in the division—the prestigious Skodsborg Badesanatorium, near Copenhagen.²

However genuinely open Paulsen may be,

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Jan Paulsen

Education

D. Th., Töbingen University, Germany, 1972
B.D., Andrews University, Michigan, 1962
M.A., SDA Theological Seminary, Washington, DC, 1958
B.A., Emmanuel Missionary College
(later Andrews University), 1957
Junior College (Ministerial Training), Vejlebjergskolen,
Denmark, 1952-54

Professional Experience

Vice President, General Conference, 1995-1999
President, Trans-European Division, 1983-95
Secretary, Trans-European Division, 1980-83
President, Newbold College, England, 1976-80
Chair, Religion Department, Newbold College, 1968-76
President, Adventist Seminary of West Africa, Nigeria,
1967-68
Head, Religion Department, Adventist Seminary of
West Africa, 1964-67
Bible Teacher, Bekwai Teachers Training College,
Ghana, 1962-64
Service Ministerial Director, West Norway Conference,
1959-61
Ministerial Intern, Norway, 1954-55
Ordained Minister, 1963

Publications

Author of two books and a number of articles

Personal

Born: Narvik, Norway, 1935
Married: Kari Trykkerud, 1955
Children: Laila, 1961
Jan-Rune, 1963
Rein Andre, 1970

(Source: *Adventist News Network*)

observers are unanimous and emphatic in describing a principled decisiveness. "At the end of the day," said Andrea Luxton, principle of Newbold College, "he's not in anybody's pocket. He's his own person." A church official who has worked closely with Paulsen believes that Paulsen will be less inclined than the previous administration to let the agenda be set by various special interests, such as "right wing groups and major donors."

Diversity and Oneness

This may be the most tricky balance of all, and Paulsen cites it as perhaps the major challenge facing the church. At a press conference the day after his election, Paulsen described the ethnic and cultural diversity of the church as "a huge blessing and gift but also an enormous challenge—how do you hold such a large international community together as one?"

The issue of women's ordination may at present provide the most pressing test to unity in the church. Not surprisingly, it is a subject that Paulsen approaches with caution. At his first press conference, he pointed out that the solution must be sought through consultation within the church's representative system of government. However, to women, as well as to youth who comprise over half the church, he declared, "You are not spectators in the church, the church belongs to you—you are the church." In addition, he called for a "strong, creative presence by both youth and women" in the initiatives of the church. Moreover, he seemed to open the door to different ways of coping with the issue in various parts of the world. "The question of sameness," he remarked, "can we do things the same way everywhere?—that remains an important question to look at."

Spirituality and Scholarship

The theological faculty of the University of Töbingen in Germany, where Paulsen earned a doctorate in theology in 1972, ranks in the highest tier among European universities. Paulsen's dissertation on the development of Methodism in West Africa illustrates how historic Christianity settled into a primal religion

culture. With graduate training of such caliber and a large portion of his career spent as a college teacher and president, Paulsen is attuned to needs and interests of the church's academic community as no other General Conference president before. He has described his years in academia as "wonderful years" and declared himself "open to ongoing, continuing dialog between this headquarters and the academic community."

It is significant, however, that Paulsen has used his scholarly training primarily in a pastoral fashion—in service of spirituality. His book, *When the Spirit Descends* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald, 1977) is an excellent example. Grounded in first-rate scholarship, it is a clear and accessible study of the Holy Spirit that is relevant to the spiritual life of the church. Similarly, Paulsen, at the March 2 press conference, reminded the church's academic and medical institutions that they are "participants in the mission of the church" and "need to be clear about their own identity and role in discharging that sacred function."

Evangelism and Social Involvement

Paulsen's fervor for evangelism and missions is clear. In his introductory sermon on March 5, he urged the church to remain "Christ focused and mission focused." He warned against becoming an inward-looking community. Instead, he declared: "Our focus is outward. We exist in the interest of those who are not part of us. It was God's love for those who were 'aliens and strangers' that motivated him in giving his Son. And that also expresses the life of the church."

In a paper given at the European Institute of World Missions in 1988, Paulsen displayed a strong conviction that social action was an integral part of the church's mission. While the primary goal of mission must be "personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour and trusting in him to secure the future," one's "relationship to the Lord is expressed by one's willingness and ability to 'dispense justice to the lowly and poor.'"³

Paulsen characterized actions of compassionate service in the social arena as "partners to evangelism." But, he has added, such actions "are justified not as 'bait on the hook,' but by the needs which are there, and by the injunction that 'love must not be a matter of words or talk; it must be genuine and show itself in action.'"⁴ In regard to societal evils such as apartheid in South Africa, he has declared, "the church must let its basic view and evaluation of the situation be clearly and

publicly known. The system is a foul way of denying human beings their basic, God-given rights. That the church must be able to say. . . . By this the church gives its lead and signal, and when then the members use the provisions and structures available to achieve the changes needed, they will not be engaged in something which is of a different order from the legitimate concerns of the church and its mission."⁵

The Gospel and Distinctive Adventist Doctrines

In his introductory sermon, entitled "The Urgency of the Gospel," Paulsen pointed to the gospel as proclaimed by the first believers—the message about the person, death, resurrection, ascension and high-priestly ministry, and second coming of Jesus Christ. We must continue to the preach "the Sabbath, the state of the dead, the millennium, healthful living, eschatology, the mark of the beast, and the sanctity of marriage," declared the new president. "However," he said, "there is a real sense in which the original gospel was and is the heart of the matter, and the rest is commentary." He urged that this gospel continue "to be the heart of your and my faith and the focus of our spiritual journey." The central points of the Seventh-day Adventist faith—such as the second coming and Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary—he pointed out, are "part of the core gospel and not peripheral to it."

The drama of the Paulsen era may well be whether these balances are negotiated in such a way as to underwrite stagnation or to prod the church forward as it enters the next millennium.

Notes and References

1. For Paulsen's report of his visit to Poland, see the *Adventist Review*, Apr. 1, 1982.
2. "The Flame Still Burns," *ibid.*, July 2, 1995.
3. Jer. 22:16 (NEB).
4. 1 John 3:18 (NEB).
5. For a brief discussion of Paulsen and social issues, see Zdravko Plantak, *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics* (New York: St. Martins, 1998), 25-26, 56.

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