

# Replacing a General Conference Executive Officer: A Review of the Rules

*By Ted W. Benedict*

**T**he question: how does the General Conference replace an officer? A short answer: according to the rules. But the longer answer asks us first to find the rules, and then to follow them very carefully.

First, some background about those rules. In our national culture we assume that the actions of every person may be freely pursued within limitations specified by law, and that those laws are put in place by the people themselves, or by their selected, elected, or appointed representatives who then act as their agents.

Our laws provide that groups of persons may voluntarily agree to operate as if they were one person, through a legal action recognized by the state as the creation of a "corporation." Approval for this is represented by a document called a charter or articles of incorporation. There is a large body of statute and case law that governs how the corporation must conduct its affairs. This includes some rules regarding the relationships among its own members. Because the charter is very broad in its statement of objectives, structure, and procedures, each corporation then establishes other, more detailed sets of rules. Typically these include a constitution, a bylaws, a policy manual, standing rules, special rules, and a parliamentary authority. The law requires a parliamentary authority; if one is not specified, *Roberts Rules of Order* is assumed.

We individual Adventists have agreed to band together in various ways to form a number of such incorporations. The one we are concerned with here is the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. We are, in the legal sense, such a corporation. In addition to securing legal standing, we have followed the usual practice of supplementing those broader corporate rules with other regulations that we have drafted to deal specifically with our own peculiar ways of managing our affairs. The General Conference has a constitution, bylaws, working policy, church manual, and rules of order.<sup>1</sup> As we go down this list, each is subsidiary to those above it, is more detailed, is more specific, and may be modified more easily. Our rules about how we should elect, terminate, or replace an officer are scattered throughout these different documents. We need to look at them all in order to describe the process.

But behind these rules of ours is the basic assumption that, because these officers are elected by the members of the organization, they are removed, and their successors are elected, by the same authority that elected them. This means that these actions are performed either by the delegates to a regular General Conference session or, between regular sessions, by the members of the General Conference Executive Committee, because each of these groups was selected to represent the general membership of the church. Where particular rules are lacking (for example, how an investigation should be conducted), the organization has the inherent power to take any action or follow any procedure that is not in conflict with the law, its governmental charter, its own constitution, bylaws or other adopted rules. So, what do the rules say?

**Who are "officers?"** There are numerous officers of the General Conference. Three of them, a president, a secretary (a title which means far more than its ordinary usage), and a treasurer, are designated "executive officers," a sequence that may imply a ranking or order of succession.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of the president, meetings of the Executive Committee are chaired by a general vice president of the General Conference or the president of the North American Division (Note: none of these are "executive officers.")<sup>3</sup> In case a president needs to be replaced before serving out his term of office, the secretary serves as acting president until a new president is elected and assumes his responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

The "ranking officer" of the General Conference who may be present at the General Conference headquarters, may call a meeting of the Executive Committee at any time; he, or any member of the Executive Committee appointed by him, shall act as chair of the meeting.<sup>5</sup> It is not specified whether this must be an "executive officer" or what the ranking among officers is.

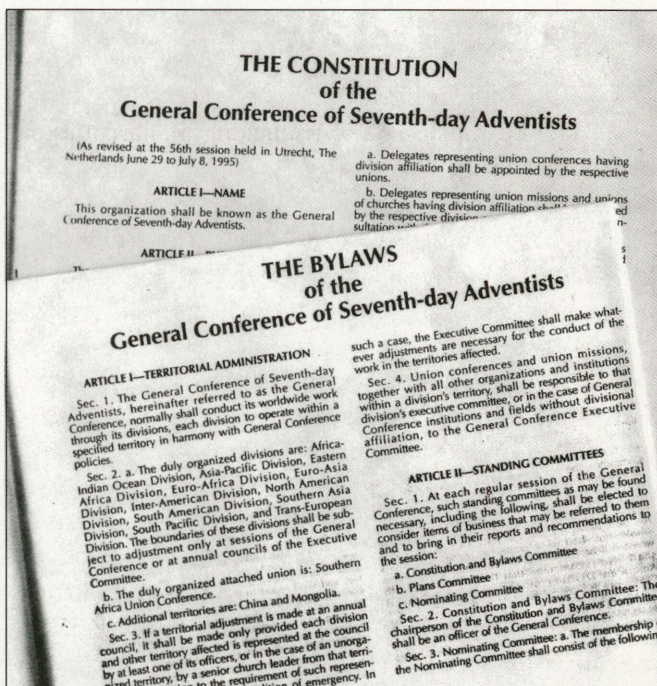
**When is a president elected?** Generally, a president is elected at a regular session of the General Conference, which usually occurs at five-year intervals (the next one is scheduled for 2000). If a vacancy in that office should occur between sessions, for any reason, a replacement is elected at a regular meeting of the Executive Committee convened as an Annual Council unless the vacancy occurs more than "three or more months before" such a meeting. In that case, a special meeting of the Executive Committee is called for that purpose.<sup>6</sup>

**For what reasons might it be necessary to elect a replacement for the president before completion of his regular term?** The reasons are those we might expect. The incumbent president could die, be incapacitated by ill health, or resign for personal reasons. The position to which he was elected could be eliminated, or he could be terminated "for cause."<sup>7</sup>

**What are the bases for termination "for cause?"** The bylaws provide, in a footnote, this explanation: "The phrase 'for cause,' when used in connection with removal from an elected or appointed position, shall include but not be limited to 1) incompetence; 2) persistent failure to cooperate with duly constituted authority in substantive matters and with relevant employment and denominational policies; and 3) actions which may be subject of discipline under the *Church Manual*."<sup>8</sup>

The General Conference *Working Policy* says that "Officers and administrators are expected to work in harmony with the General Conference Working Policy. Those who show inability or unwillingness to administer their work in harmony with policy should not be continued in executive leadership by their respective constituencies or governing boards/committees."<sup>9</sup>

The General Conference *Working Policy* further says that "The phrase 'for cause' when used in connection with removal from an elected or appointed position, shall include but not be limited to misdeeds, incompe-



tence, incompatibility or lack of team work by an elected/appointed person."<sup>10</sup>

The *Church Manual* expands the list to include the following:

1. Denial of faith in the fundamentals of the gospel and in the cardinal doctrines of the church or teaching doctrines contrary to the same.
2. Violation of the law of God, such as worship of idols, murder, stealing, profanity, gambling, Sabbathbreaking, and willful and habitual falsehood.
3. Violation of the seventh commandment of the law of God as it relates to the marriage institution, the Christian home, and biblical standards of moral conduct.
4. Such violations as fornication, promiscuity, incest, homosexual practice and other gross sexual perversions, and the remarriage of a divorced person, except of the 'innocent party' in a divorce for adultery or for gross sexual perversions.
5. Fraud or willful misrepresentation in business.
6. Disorderly conduct which brings reproach upon the cause.
7. Adhering to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or organization.
8. Persistent refusal to recognize properly constituted church authority or to submit to the order and discipline of the church.
9. The use, manufacture, or sale of alcoholic beverages.
10. The use, manufacture, or sale of tobacco in any of its forms for human consumption.
11. The misuse of, or trafficking in, narcotics or other drugs.<sup>11</sup>

### **How is an incumbent president terminated?**

While the documents furnish the causes for which such a decision may be made, none of them specifically describe the processes to be followed. However, there are processes indicated for electing an officer to fill the remaining term of an office which has become vacant, and it is a reasonable assumption that a parallel procedure would be appropriate. A common-sense process, which would not be in violation of any existing requirements and which would fulfill the ordinary responsibilities of the officers and committees, would involve notice to the General Conference Administrative Committee (which functions at headquarters on

a day-to-day basis) of a potential problem, followed by its investigation of the circumstances prompting concerns about the officer, and, if judged necessary, the presentation of the matter to the General Conference Executive Committee in regular or special session for deliberation and decision.

If the officer resigns, or is terminated, or when for any other reason the office becomes vacant between sessions of the General Conference, the provisions in the documents for election of a replacement by the Executive Committee are then followed.

**How is a replacement president elected?** A simple nomination and election are needed. The steps in that process, found in the General Conference *Working Policy*, clearly indicate that the line of succession among the executive officers follows from the president to the secretary and then to the treasurer. The details of the process for each of these officers differs somewhat; those for the president are follow:

1. The secretary of the General Conference shall serve as acting president of the General Conference until a new president is elected and assumes his responsibilities.
2. The secretary of the General Conference shall immediately notify the presidents of all divisions of the vacancy. The Executive Committee, after counsel with all the divisions, shall set the date and place for a special meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee.

b. All General Conference Executive Committee members shall be invited to attend.

4. A nominating committee, with appropriate representation from each division, shall be appointed by the General Conference Executive Committee, in a manner to be decided, regardless of whether the election takes place at an Annual Council or at a special meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee. Any member of the General Conference Executive Committee shall be eligible to serve on this nominating committee."<sup>12</sup>

**What are the parliamentary requirements for special meetings?** After due notice, a meeting of the Executive Committee will require fifteen members as a quorum to elect an officer, or forty to terminate one;<sup>13</sup> the vote will be a majority to elect, and two thirds to terminate.<sup>14</sup> As already noted, the nomination process is left to the Executive Committee to decide.

Comments? There are only a few. The process appears to respect the representative democratic ideal quite well, though the scattering of details across so many sections of several documents requires a very complicated analysis. There are no requirements for the procedures used or the proofs required to demonstrate "cause," and so fairness during a time of emotional stress could suffer. There is among Adventists a tradition of willingness to allow injury to a person in order to safeguard the reputation of our institutions, which I have called "the Caiaphus principle."<sup>15</sup> We should be willing to confront that error in our governing documents.

- 1995); and *General Conference Rules of Order* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1989).
2. Constitution, art. 8, sec. 1.
  3. Bylaws, art. 3, sec. 2.
  4. *Working Policy*, policy B, procedure 14, 5:1.
  5. Bylaws, art. 13, sec. 6.
  6. *Working Policy*, policy B, procedure 14, 5:3a.
  7. Bylaws, art. 13, sec. 1a; Constitution, art. 9, sec. 3; art. 13, sec. 6.
  8. Bylaws, art. 13, sec 1a.
  9. *Working Policy*, policy B, procedure 2:15.
  10. *Ibid.*, policy B, procedure 20, 22.
  11. The list occurs under the heading "Reasons for Which Members shall be Disciplined." *Church Manual*, 168-69.
  12. *Working Policy*, policy B, procedure 14, 5.
  13. Bylaws, art. 13, secs. 3 and 4.
  14. *Ibid.*, art. 13, sec. 1d.
  15. For example, see "Reasons for Which Members Shall be Disciplined," in the *Church Manual*, 168-69, and quoted above.

## Notes and References

1. Copies of the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws can be found in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook 1997* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1997). For the other documents, see the *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1997-1998 Edition* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1997); *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald,

**Ted Benedict is an alumnus and former professor of communication at Pacific Union College, and an emeritus professor of communication studies at San Jose State University. He has served on the boards of trustees at the Adventist Media Center and La Sierra University and has been a student of parliamentary procedure throughout his career.**  
103720.1025@compuserve.com

### WORTH HEARING, WORTH TALKING ABOUT.

Audio cassette samplings of recent presentations at the San Diego Adventist Forum Chapter:

- **Dr. Raymond Cottrell**  
*Exegetical Anomalies in the Traditional Interpretation of Daniel 8:14*
- **Dr. Ron Lawson**  
*The Fragmenting of the Adventist Apocalyptic*
- **Dr. Arthur Patrick**  
*Revisioning the Role of E. G. White for SDAs Beyond 2000*
- **Dr. Richard Rice**  
*New Directions in SDA Theology*
- **Dr. Bernard Taylor**  
*The Christian Fascination with the Legal Model of Salvation*
- **Dr. Desmond Ford**  
*My Vision for the Church*
- **Dr. Frank Knittel**  
*Adventism in the New Millennium: What Must It Do to Survive?*

Send completed form, check (\$8.50/presentation postpaid), your address and telephone no. to the address below:

**San Diego Adventist Forum**  
P.O. Box 3148  
La Mesa, CA 91944-3148  
Tel: (619) 561-2360

For a complete listing (without charge) of San Diego Adventist Forum tapes, send a SASE to the above address.

Mention this *Spectrum* ad with your order and save 10%.

### Thinking Theologically:

*What is it?  
Who should do it?  
Why is it important?  
How should it be done?*

### Third Annual San Diego Adventist Forum Retreat

May 14-16, 1999

**Dr. Fritz Guy**, well-known SDA theologian and Professor of Theological Studies, La Sierra University, will lead the discussions.

**Doug Mace**, Associate Pastor, Loma Linda University Church, will direct the Saturday night entertainment.

Call as soon as possible to register for your two-night stay at Pine Springs Ranch, in the flowering mountains of Southern California.

For further registration information, costs, and lodge location amenities contact:  
**San Diego Adventist Forum**  
P.O. Box 3148  
La Mesa, CA 91944-3148  
Tel: (619) 561-2360

Mention this *Spectrum* ad and save 10%.