

Presidential Prospects

for the North American Division

by Doug Morgan



Photo: Pacific Union Conference

Thomas Mostert Jr.
President
Pacific Union Conference
since 1986

Education

Andrews University
M.A., 1964
Southern Missionary College
B.A., 1963

Denominational Service

Pastor

Arkansas/Louisiana Conference
Chesapeake Conference

Ministerial Secretary

Potomac Conference

President

Mountain View Conference
Hawaiian Mission
Southeastern California
Conference

The 2000 General Conference session will be a critical moment in the history of the North American Division. For only the second time in its brief existence as an entity distinct from the General Conference, the NAD will select a new president, replacing Al McClure, who, it is anticipated, will retire. With no heir apparent to the presidency, the division faces numerous challenges as it enters the new century, such as gender and racial issues, decentralizing forces, church growth and vitality, and diversity in theology and lifestyle. Moreover, the entire bundle of issues is laced with potential for conflict between the NAD and the world church, especially now that the NAD's structural distinctiveness is solidly in place.

It is widely assumed that the new president will come from the ranks of incumbent union conference presidents, with Tom Mostert of the Pacific Union, Charles Sandefur of the Mid-America Union, and Don Schneider of the Lake Union most frequently mentioned as the likeliest choices. However, sources stress that the election appears to be wide open, with modifications in the election process since 1990 contributing to the uncertainty.

Until the era of Charles E. Bradford's leadership (1979-90), administration of the North American Division blurred with that of the General Conference. In contrast to other world divisions, the NAD had no president, no budget, no offices, in short, no administrative structure. Whereas Bradford and his predecessors held the title of General Conference vice president for North America, other General Conference vice presidents held responsibility for aspects of the work in North America, and the decision-making body was a General Conference committee for North America. No separate departments (Youth, Sabbath School, Publishing, etc.) existed for North America.

Believing a true division—separate from the General Conference and attuned to the unique needs of the North American church and society—crucial to a vital future, Bradford and his associates set about the task of bringing such a division into being. Trenchant opposition from within the General Conference made the project a complex and arduous one. Though the 1985 General Conference session in New Orleans brought forward steps—the establishment of separate departments for the NAD and the official designation of Bradford as president of the division (not just General Conference vice president for North America)—obstruction from

within the General Conference bureaucracy persisted, particularly from some individuals in the treasury.

Personnel for the new separate departments were told by General Conference department directors that they couldn't take any equipment with them when they moved out of their GC offices, and some found their new working quarters to be folding tables in hallways. General Conference personnel continued to take a direct hand in American church matters in ways often at odds with the NAD leaders' agenda of adapting church policies and programs to the distinctive characteristics of the North American field. Contention continued, for example, over whether the NAD should be allowed to create a separate youth Sabbath School curriculum.

Bradford encouraged his colleagues to keep pressing forward despite the frustrating slowness of change. "Yard-by-yard it's hard, but inch-by-inch it's a cinch," he would say. The process did indeed inch forward. In 1990, the year of Bradford's retirement, policy language that kept the NAD in a unique category of greater dependence on the General Conference was removed. Finally, the NAD had a status parallel to that of the other world divisions. However, the NAD was still declared to have a "special relationship to the General Conference," even though there was little if any de facto substance remaining to the "special relationship."

Some impediments lingered. For example, separate financial accounts had been established for the NAD, but no working capital was provided. However, by 1995 this issue had been resolved and at the General Conference session that year even the "special relationship" phrase was dropped.

Al McClure, sources say, has led with a steady hand since his election in 1990. Though conservative in orientation, his commitment to the integrity of the process of church decision making has led him to support and implement voted decisions, even measures about which he initially had doubts.

While leading the NAD through finalization of its full divisional status in relation to the General Conference, however, McClure faced a new political challenge from another direction. The NAD's previous weak division status had allowed the union conference presidents in North America greater autonomy than in other parts of the world. Not surprisingly, then, they have not always shown enthusiastic support for strong, centralized division-level administration. When, for example, an NAD commission developed a plan to update the structure of church's literature ministry, replacing the Home Health and Education Services (HHES) with Family Enrichment Resources (FER), only three unions went along. McClure found that getting the nine union presidents to work together was just as difficult as getting the NAD to full division status. The union presidents' presumed disinclination to put strong, activist leadership in place over them may prove to be a factor in this election.

In many respects, **Tom Mostert** would appear to be in the strongest position for the division presidency. President of the largest union conference, the Pacific Union, he also holds the longest tenure of service as a union president—fourteen years. He is regarded as bright, energetic, and innovative. He has reduced layers of bureaucratic duplication in the union and conference departments, supported "celebration churches" and experimental lay ministries, and implemented "Plus Line"—an 800 number at which callers may reach a well-informed, live operator for help or referral on all aspects of church life, such as ordering videos for youth ministry, finding a counselor, or getting the recipe for communion bread. Although his willingness to innovate has earned him the political advantages and liabilities of a progressive image, some advocates of women's ordination have been disappointed that he has not taken a firmer stand on this issue. An even more serious liability may be the alienation of African-American church leaders who feel that he mishandled the



Photo: Lake Union Conference

Don Schneider
President
Lake Union Conference
since 1994

Education
Andrews University
M.A., 1966
Union College
B.A., 1964

Denominational Service
Pastor
Arkansas-Louisiana Conference
Minnesota Conference

Departmental Secretary
Oklahoma Conference
Oregon Conference
Central Union

President
Wyoming Conference
New Jersey Conference
Arkansas-Louisiana Conference
Rocky Mountain Conference
Northern California Conference

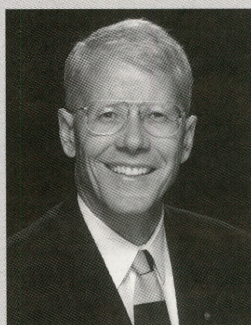


Photo: Southern Adventist University

Gordon Bietz
President
Southern Adventist University
since 1997

Education

Andrews University
 D. Min., 1976
 Loma Linda University (La Sierra)
 B.A., 1966

Denominational Service

Pastor

Southern Union Conference
 Northern California
 Conference

President

Georgia-Cumberland
 Conference



Photo: James Ferry Photography

Harold L. Lee
President
Columbia Union Conference
Since 1998

Education

McCormick Theological Seminary
 D.Min., 1995
 Harvard University School of Business
 Certificate in Educational and
 Financial Management, 1976
 Andrews University
 M.A. 1964
 Oakwood College
 B.A., 1963

Denominational Service

Pastor

Allegheny Conference
 Caribbean Union Conference
 Southwest Region Conference

Stewardship Director

Caribbean Union Conference
 General Conference
 North American Division
 Columbia Union Conference

V.P. for Development and P.R.

Oakwood College

proposal for a regional conference in the Pacific Union.

Three other union conference presidents are regarded as possibilities, though each carries negatives that may prove difficult to overcome. Most prominently mentioned among these is **Charles Sandefur**, president of the Mid-America Union. Viewed by many as an exceptionally talented and well-informed administrator, Sandefur served as president of the Hawaii and Rocky Mountain Conferences prior to his election as Mid-America president in 1995. He completed all the requirements except the dissertation to earn a doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary, but made a conscious choice to pastor and administer rather than pursue academics. However, his role in bringing about the partnership between Adventist and Roman Catholic health care administrative entities in the Denver area stirred considerable protest, and he may be perceived as too liberal to gain the breadth of support needed.

On the other hand, **Jere Patzer**, president of the North Pacific Union, has staked out an outspoken conservative profile. While viewed as a leader likely to "move up" in 2000, sources suggest that a General Conference post may be more probable for him. His handling of the controversy that involved theology faculty at Walla Walla College has not endeared him to the educational community at the NAD.

Harold Lee, the newest of the union conference presidents, like Sandefur, holds impressive academic credentials. He earned a doctor of ministry degree in denominational administration from the well-regarded McCormick Theological Seminary in 1995. He also holds a certificate in educational and financial management from the Harvard University School of Business. At the 1999 Annual Council, Lee presented a paper on church governance that was, at the encouragement of the General Conference leadership, intended to be provocative. The far-reaching reductions in the denomination's administrative structure and other reforms there proposed may bolster his appeal with some but may threaten others. Moreover, he has never served as a conference president and has only been Columbia Union president since 1998.

The union conference president with the least negatives, and thus regarded by sources as the most electable, is **Don Schneider**, president of the Lake Union Conference. Schneider has worked in more conferences and unions than any of the other likely candidates, distinguishing himself most in the area of youth ministries. Though quietly supportive of women's ordination (all nine union presidents, in fact, are on record as favoring it), Schneider has generally avoided controversial areas. He is an affable leader who expresses himself in a simple, straightforward manner. At the same time, he is viewed as an effective administrator and generally gets high marks as chair of committees and business sessions. Moreover, the union presidents may prefer someone less defined by strong stands in hopes of minimizing top-down control from the division.

Though conventional wisdom points in the direction of a current union conference president, observers stress that the election is highly unpredictable. Particularly if the multiplicity of candidates among the union presidents leads to deadlock, delegates could look elsewhere.

The name most frequently mentioned as the leading alternative in that event is **Gordon Bietz**, president of Southern Adventist University. Bietz enjoys remarkably high regard across the Church's ideological spectrum. Pastor of the Collegedale church at SAU for many years, Bietz became widely appreciated throughout the division as an articulate and thoughtful voice in the pulpit. He is seen as a creative and progressive thinker and yet has not alienated the right wing of the Church. His stint as president of the Georgia-Cumberland Conference adds breadth to his administrative background.

It may also be that African-American church leaders will back a candidate not among the current union presidents. **Calvin Rock**, a vice president of the General Conference, former president of Oakwood College, and second in the vote that elected Jan Paulsen to the world church presidency last year, is one such possibility. According to a source in the regional conferences, the regional conference presidents express the voice of African-American Adventism on such matters. It is not clear at this point, however, whether they will support one of the perceived frontrunners mentioned above or promote an alternative.

Another possibility, though not a likely one, is that a candidate may emerge from the ranks of the current conference presidents. Here the strongest resume appears to be that of **Gordon Retzer**, president of the Florida Conference. Retzer has been a conference president in four different unions and has earned a strong reputation as an administrator and spiritual leader. He has also served as president of Adventist World Radio, a General Conference position.

Exactly what is the process for the election of a division president? Here, recent rule changes will likely increase the influence of the union conference presidents over the process, yet they could at the same time increase the element of unpredictability. On the first evening of the General Conference session, all of the approximately 2,000 delegates will caucus by division to elect their representatives to the nominating committee. Delegates from each union conference in turn will form a subcaucus to select the two or three nominating committee members from their union. The union president is almost always elected first. A new rule that requires 50 percent of the General Conference delegates to be individuals who are not church administrators will increase the likelihood that the remaining one or two slots from each union will be filled by pastors, educators, or lay people. The proportion of conference presidents selected will thus almost surely be reduced. The non-administrators placed on the nominating committee could bring independent perspectives, making for a more wide-open process, but on the other hand could be more likely to follow the leadership of the union presidents if they feel a lack of sufficient information to pose alternatives.

After the nominating committee has been voted in, it meets as a total group and elects the General Conference officers. Then, members break into divisional caucuses, which bring recommendations for the officers of their respective divisions back to the full nominating committee. Only rarely are the recommendations of a division caucus overridden by the nominating committee as a whole. Committee members are wary of interfering in the affairs of other divisions because that opens them to the danger of others interfering with them. The nominating committee's selections are then submitted to the entire session delegation and are routinely approved.

What will it matter to North American Adventists whom their next division president will be? Although Mostert and Sandefur would likely be more daring and innovative than Schneider, it seems certain that whomever is elected will pursue the goal of an NAD empowered to carry out its distinctive mission. The major story of the 2000 General Conference session and beyond may be the extent to which the same centrifugal dynamic shapes church life within the division.

This article is based on interviews with sources currently and/or formerly involved at the conference, union conference, and North American Division levels.

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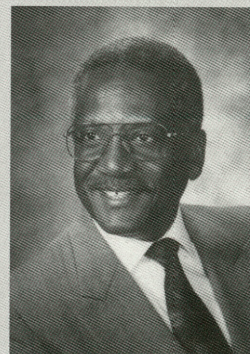


Photo: Adventist News Network

Calvin Rock
Vice-President
General Conference
since 1985

Education

Vanderbilt University
 Ph.D., 1984
 Vanderbilt University
 D. Min., 1979
 University of Michigan
 M.A., 1966
 Oakwood College
 B.A. 1954

Denominational Service
Pastor

South Atlantic Conference
 Lake Region Conference
 Northeastern Conference

Associate Secretary of
Ministerial Association

Southern Union Conference

President

Oakwood College