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# The Politics of Aging

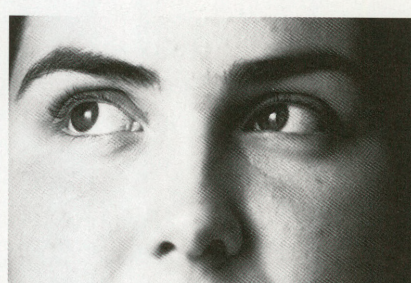
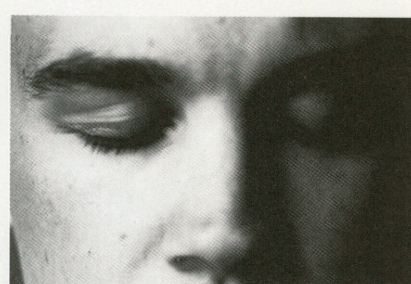
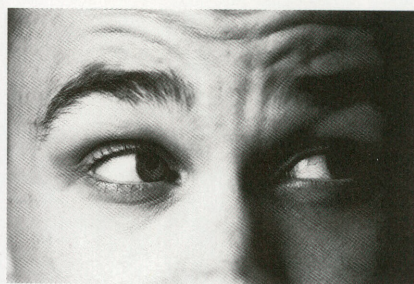
Has the Church Jeopardized Its Future by Marginalizing Its Youth?

by Ron Osborn

Extolling the importance of youth has become a regular feature at General Conference sessions. Similar to his predecessor in 1995, within hours of his election at the 2000 General Conference Session in Toronto, President Jan Paulsen, 65, issued a clarion call for greater inclusion of youth in the business of the Church. "We've been accustomed to experienced hands doing it all," said Paulsen in an interview with *Adventist Review* editor William Johnsson. "Today in many countries, 70 to 75 percent of our membership are less than thirty-five years of age. Clearly these people are not the leadership in waiting, they are the ones who must take a creative part in the life of the church today."<sup>1</sup>

Although these and a host of similar statements made by senior administrators in recent years suggest that the Church is earnestly pursuing a bold, youth-oriented course for the future, the evidence from Toronto tells a different tale.





Photos: Thomas Osborn

Without challenging the apparent goodwill of church officials, I would like to raise some potentially thorny questions concerning age and the political structure of the Church. In particular, I would like to ask church leaders: What does the proliferation of statements, sermons, and speeches about “armies of rightly trained youth” reveal in view of the fact that young Adventists (those under the age of thirty for the purposes of this article) have been effectively barred from having a representative voice within the Church?

## Theory versus Practice: The Rhetoric of Inclusion

To begin, it will be helpful to put the current situation in historical perspective. A survey of the official minutes from early General Conference sessions reveals that a significant concern among Seventh-day Adventist founders during the period 1863-88 was how to include younger members in the work of the fledgling movement. “[W]e regret the lack of a missionary spirit among our people,” a typical resolution from the time reads, “and [we resolve to] encourage proper men and women, *especially the young*, to consecrate themselves to the work of God; not simply as ministers and lecturers, but as helpers in the various departments of the cause” (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, present calls for increased youth involvement, as well as the underlying sentiment that new approaches must be adopted to retain young adults in

the Church, are as old as the General Conference itself. Youth, evidently, are a perennial problem.

However, there have been some significant demographic changes within the Church over the past 140 years that should be noted. In 1863, barely 14 percent of General Conference delegates were over the age of fifty.<sup>3</sup> In 2000, by contrast, almost half were. Correspondingly, in the first sixty years of General Conference meetings, seven out of ten of the Church’s presidents were under the age of fifty at the time of their election, whereas over the past sixty years only one out of nine have been.<sup>4</sup>

The disparity in age between early and present church leaders is even more apparent when one considers the composition of the 262-member Executive Committee in Toronto, the body that exercises the greatest political influence and authority in the Church. At this year’s session, 74 percent of the members were over the age of fifty, with only fifteen people under forty and just one under thirty.

To the extent, then, that the executive officers control the business of the Church, set the parameters of discussion on administrative and theological issues, and chart church policy, it would be fair to say that youth representation is so negligible as to be of zero consequence.

Still, the most glaring illustration of the Church’s seeming indifference to the voices of its younger members was evidenced not in the Executive Committee, but in the delegation from the North American Division. Although it sent the fourth largest delegation to the session (179 members) the North



**Table 1**  
**Delegation by Age Group\***

Entity Name	Under 30	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Total
Africa-Indian Ocean Division	0	21	82	44	9	1	127
Eastern African Division	3	30	93	38	11	0	175
Euro-Africa Division	5	26	52	28	8	0	119
Euro-Asia Division	5	17	29	10	2	2	65
GC ADCOM/Institutions/Services	0	2	23	25	19	5	74
GC Dept. Associate Directors	0	2	4	10	9	2	27
GC Executive Committee	1	14	54	100	83	10	262
GC Office Appointed Staff	0	4	7	13	10	0	34
Inter-American Division	6	28	100	56	17	3	210
North American Division	0	7	44	93	33	2	179
Northern Asia-Pacific Division	1	8	12	24	12	5	62
South American Division	2	23	94	56	14	4	193
South Pacific Division	9	11	27	18	7	0	72
Southern Africa Union	0	3	7	5	4	0	19
Southern Asia Division	2	3	37	29	4	1	76
Southern Asia-Pacific Division	5	21	51	48	12	1	138
Trans-European Division	10	12	30	23	9	0	84
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>232</b>	<b>746</b>	<b>620</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>1946</b>

\*As of April 20, 2000. From "Delegation Composition Report," *Adventist Review*, June 30, 2000, 37.

"Today, in many countries, 70 to 75 percent of our membership are less than 35 years of age." —Jan Paulsen

**Table 2**  
**Delegation Composition Report\***

Entity Name	Lait	Pastor/Tchr. Nonadmin.	Admin.	Gen. Conf. Comm.	Total	Male	Female
Africa-Indian Ocean Division	46	43	68	0	157	134	23
Eastern African Division	46	61	69	0	175	151	24
Euro-Africa Division	31	27	61	0	119	108	11
Euro-Asia Division	18	14	33	0	65	58	7
GC ADCOM/Institutions/Services	16	19	39	0	74	56	18
GC Dept. Associate Directors	0	27	0	0	27	21	6
GC Executive Committee	0	0	0	262	262	236	26
GC Office Appointed Staff	0	34	0	0	34	27	7
Inter-American Division	58	58	94	0	210	168	42
North American Division	48	43	88	0	179	137	42
Northern Asia-Pacific Division	13	34	15	0	62	54	8
South American Division	37	64	92	0	193	176	17
South Pacific Division	20	28	24	0	72	56	16
Southern Africa Union	3	1	14	1	19	14	5
Southern Asia Division	19	24	33	0	76	65	11
Southern Asia-Pacific Division	43	42	53	0	138	115	23
Trans-European Division	28	29	27	0	84	69	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>548</b>	<b>710</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>1946</b>	<b>1645</b>	<b>301</b>

\*As of April 20, 2000. From "Delegation Composition Report," *Adventist Review*, June 30, 2000, 37.

**Table 3<sup>1</sup>**  
**Divisions Ranked by How Well They Represented Youth, Women, and Laity**

Delegations from best to worst on 3-36 point scale <sup>2</sup>	Average Age <sup>3</sup>	% Women	Ratio of Laypersons to Administrators
1. South Pacific (7)	45.4	28.5	1:1.2
2. Trans-European (9)	46.1	21.7	1:0.96
3. Inter-America (15)	47.7	25	1:1.6
4. South Asia-Pacific (16)	48.2	20	1:1.2
5. Africa-India Ocean (17)	47.8	20	1:1.5
6. Eastern Africa (18)	46.4	15.9	1:1.5
7. Euro-Asia (19)	43.9	12	1:1.8
8. North American (21)	53.8	30.7	1:1.8
9. North Asia-Pacific (22)	53.5	14.8	1:1.1
10. Euro-Africa (23)	45.7	10	1:2.0
11. Southern Asia (24)	49.3	16.9	1:1.7
12. South America (31)	48.6	9.6	1:2.5

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from "Delegation Composition Report," *Adventist Review*, June 30, 2000, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Based upon the rank numbers of each division in the categories of youth, gender representation, and lay representation added together, with the lowest score being "best" and the highest "worst."

<sup>3</sup> Based upon the number of delegates in each age category multiplied by the means of each grouping. (The mean of the 30-39 age group would be 35; the mean of the 40-49 group would be 45, etc.) Delegates under the age of 30 were counted as being 25 based on a random sample of 25 members of the group. Delegates over the age of 70 were counted as being 75.

"Under the Church's present constitution, there is nothing to suggest that youth will be adequately represented at future G.C. sessions."



American Division sent merely seven individuals (roughly 3 percent) under the age of forty, and not a single delegate under the age of thirty.

"If this is true, it was clearly a case of inexcusable oversight," said one incredulous young adult observer from North America when shown the facts. Other young Adventists were less charitable. "I'm really disappointed in the division," said Andy Nash, age twenty-nine, of Lincoln, Nebraska. "Young adults in North America have worked hard the past several years to revitalize the Church here. The fact is, young leaders like Shasta Burr, Allan Martin, and Adam Rose would not only be excellent delegates, but excellent administrators. They would bring vision and energy to a division that's low on both."

The world church as a whole, however, did little better than the North American Division. Out of the entire two thousand-member body, those under thirty—representing an estimated 70 percent of actual Adventist membership—comprised little more than 2 percent of the session's voting members, or forty-nine individuals. (See Table 1.<sup>5</sup>)

Statements about allowing "young people to reshape and restate" the Church; about vast number[s] of highly educated, beautiful young people" poised en masse to finish the gospel commission; and about youth "on the march for Christ and to Zion" (all speeches delivered during the session)<sup>6</sup> thus belie a glaring fact: that when it comes to matters of official policy and belief, youth at present have little if any voice in their church.

## Separate and Unequal:

### Where Young Adventists May Be Seen and Heard

Although young Adventists were not given a representative voice as delegates at the Toronto session, it would be inaccurate to conclude that they are not active within the Church, or that there have not been positive efforts over the past several years on behalf of the Church's younger members.

The recent Net '98 evangelistic campaign attempted to put a more contemporary face on traditional Adventist theology and outreach; meetings and conferences organized by young Adventists across North America, such as GenX in 1998 and Connexions, in 1999, have received recognition and

encouragement from some church leaders; and the establishment of various youth ministries and publications, such as *View Magazine*, have drawn attention to the positive contributions being made by young Adventists around the world.

In North America these contributions over the past year have included the services of more than 1,433 volunteers who fulfilled one-year commitments with ADRA International, Maranatha International, Task Force Missions, International Student Missions, Adventist Frontier Missions, Student Health Ministries, and a diversity of other service-oriented programs. An additional 24,975 Adventist youth served in various capacities as short-term YouthNet volunteers.<sup>7</sup>

In Toronto, too, there was evidence that young Adventists are seeking ways to remain engaged in the life and mission of the Church. On the first Sabbath of the week, a young adult worship service was arranged with seating for 1,300 persons. However, almost twice as many people arrived as could be seated. The following week the service was moved into a hall with seating for 5,000.

During the ten-day General Conference Session, while official delegates spent hours parsing words such as "abandon," approximately three hundred young adults met daily to distribute food to homeless persons and conduct street evangelistic efforts that incorporated music, drama, preaching, and the distribution of literature. The group, known as Impact Toronto, was highlighted during the afternoon program in the SkyDome on the second Sabbath of the session.

Clearly, then, young Adventists are visible in many areas of church life. They may in fact be some of the Church's most visible members, maintaining the "front-lines" of service and nonmedia evangelism through programs like Impact Toronto, Student Missions, and Adventist Volunteers. Fifty-five-year-olds, it goes without saying, do not generally suspend their careers and move to remote villages or depressed neighborhoods for the cause of mission; twenty-two-year-olds routinely do.

Yet in a sense, the *visibility* of young Adventists in these areas, positive as it may be, merely serves to illustrate the point: namely, that youth do not have a real *voice* in the Church. "The Church doesn't like confrontation," said Mirna Karam, a twenty-nine-year-old observer from Lebanon who attended the session. "I don't feel they are exempting the youth altogether. But in sessions like this where they are discussing the *Church Manual* and things like divorce



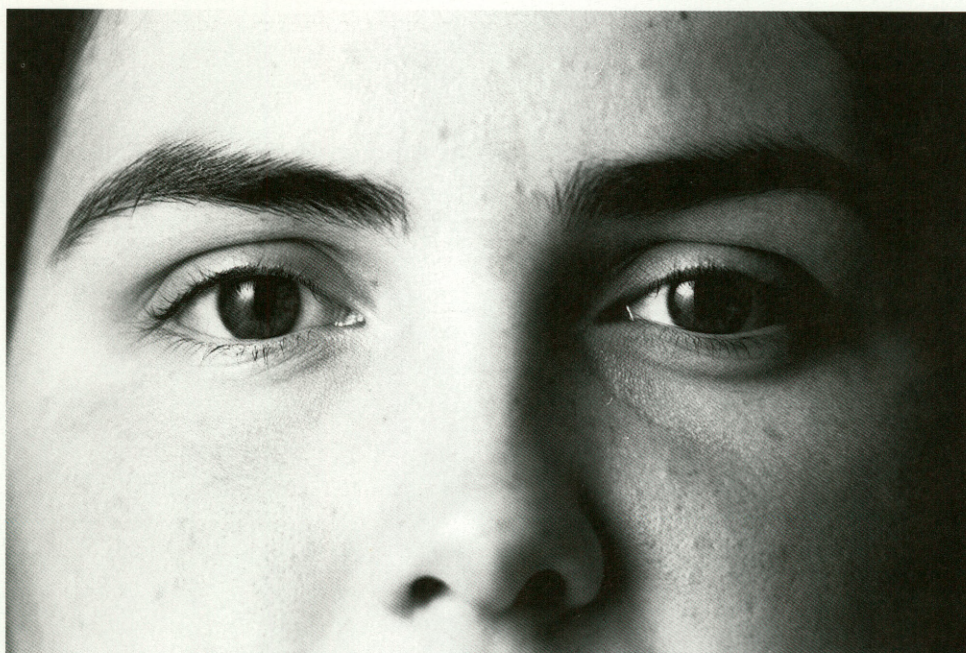


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youth to engage in acts of service and ministry without necessarily engaging in much critical thought or discussion. "[I'm] tired of just theory," said Mark Baines, a young adult from Australia who distributed bread in Toronto. "[T]his is practical, hands-on. It's good to 'get your hands dirty.'"<sup>9</sup>

But if a theory of Christianity divorced from Christ-like actions poses one danger to the Adventist community, an equally unhealthy church would include a flurry of

and remarriage and the age for baptism and all these different things that they want to change or fix, they think that the young people are here to learn but not to take part."

In her home conference, Karam reported, the Church has sponsored numerous programs and activities for youth, but none that would prepare them to assume positions of leadership. "They only touched on things like community service," she said, "things that are strictly for the youth."

It may thus be acceptable for youth to devote themselves to mission work in remote or exotic locations; it may be acceptable for youth to pass out sandwiches and clothing to homeless persons on street corners; it may be acceptable for youth to organize their own separate rallies, conferences, and spiritual retreats. It may even be acceptable for youth to perform the special music for Sabbath worship (provided the music does not involve percussive instruments or lead to any errant expressive movements).<sup>8</sup>

But beyond the conference constituency level, no provision has been made for the representation of younger Adventists in regard to matters of doctrine, theology, policy, or church administration. In other words, when it comes to discussing the things that "really count," the old adage holds true: children are to be seen but not heard—never mind the fact that young adults are not children.

It is true that many young Adventists, impatient with any form of political process or theological discussion, prefer this arrangement, which encourages

enthusiastic though unreflective and uncritical activity performed in Christ's name—activity divorced from substantive church dialogue or decision making.

Songs, skits, and sandwiches may be important and visible applications of the gospel. However, young Adventists who are concerned about the Church as a corporate and political body will not find satisfaction in these officially sanctioned, separate spheres of youth activity unless they also feel truly represented and engaged in the life of the Church as a whole.

This implies not only the presence of young delegates at future General Conference sessions, but also the inclusion of young Adventists in positions of genuine leadership and responsibility at conference, union, division, and General Conference levels.

## Rewarding versus Representing: Let Us Not Praise Famous Men

Unfortunately, under the Church's present constitution there is nothing to suggest that youth will be adequately represented at future General Conference sessions; for, although the constitution implicitly embraces the principle of representative government, there are no safeguards within the document to ensure that such representation actually occurs.

In practice, delegates are tapped to attend sessions either as a reward for years of service, because they have money and therefore influence, or in



recognition of professional standing within the institutional hierarchy. There is only token representation of ordinary lay members who comprise the majority of the Church's population—unless, that is, one accepts the kind of Orwellian doublethink exemplified by a middle-aged male delegate at the 1995 session in Utrecht: "I represent devout young people, particularly young women of my division," he declared, introducing a stump speech against women's ordination.<sup>10</sup>

Yet even if Adventists fully embraced the notion of vicarious representation through a priesthood of senior male elites, the session in Toronto failed by the minimal standard of representation required: the standard of the Church's own constitution.

Beyond giving only 2 percent of delegate positions to persons under age thirty, and only 15 percent to women, a majority of the divisions violated the Church's working policy by failing to send the proper quota of lay members to the session—a fact that has direct bearing on the youth question because young Adventists are overwhelmingly laypersons.

According to article four, section eight of the church constitution: "In the selection of regular delegates and delegates-at-large, organizations shall choose Seventh-day Adventists in regular standing, at least 50 percent of whom shall be laypersons, pastors, teachers, and nonadministrative employees, of both genders, and representing a range of age groups and nationalities." Further, the article declares, "*The majority of the above 50 percent shall be laypersons*" (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup>

Eastern Africa Division, Northern Asia-Pacific Division, South America Division, South Pacific Division, Southern Asia Division, and Trans-European Division sent more pastors and teachers than laity. Therefore, they failed to comply with the final clause of this policy. As a result, there were 468 pastors, teachers, and nonadministrative personnel sent from the various divisions to the session, but only 409 laypersons—considerably less than half of the combined total stipulated under the constitution. (See Table 2.<sup>12</sup> The figures 468 and 409 do not include the four different GC delegations.)

For students of correct parliamentary procedure,

this leads to an intriguing (though admittedly facetious) question: Should the 2000 General Conference Session be declared null and void?

To a large extent, the problem of representation could be easily remedied. A conscious effort on the part of administrators to include young adults, as well as women and laypersons in general, would go a long way toward making future General Conference sessions diverse in more than the number of flags on the podium.

Two divisions should be commended for having already taken significant steps in this direc-

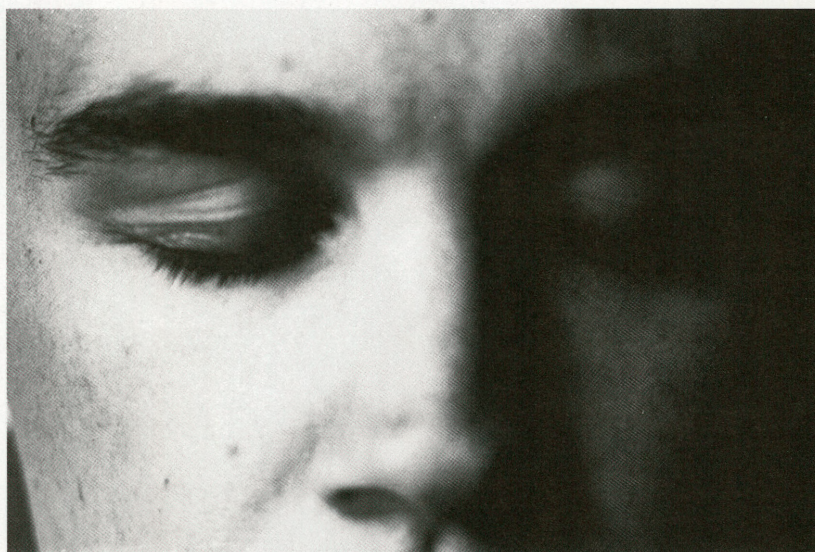


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tion. South Pacific Division and Trans-European Division, with a combined total of 156 delegates, sent more representatives to Toronto under thirty than the Church's six largest divisions (Inter-America, South America, North America, Eastern Africa, Africa-India Ocean, and South-Asia Pacific) combined. They also had extremely low layperson to administrator ratios, and two of the highest percentages of female delegates (28.5 percent for the South Pacific Division and 21.7 percent for the Trans-European Division).

South America Division, by contrast, sent a whopping 2.5 administrators for every lay member, and a mere 9.6 percent female delegates. Although boasting one of the youngest divisions in the world, South American Division delegates were also on average two years older than their South Pacific Division and Trans-European Division counterparts. (See Table 3.)

Such dramatic differences between delegates from the South Pacific Division and the Trans-



European Division on the one hand and the South American Division delegation on the other, suggests that representation happens—or fails to happen—largely as a result of the choices made by church leaders. When division and union officials are sensitive to the need for youth, female, and lay voices, they are capable of sending a diverse delegation. When, for cultural or political reasons, they are indifferent on the matter, it should come as no surprise that the delegations they serve up are studies in blandness.

## Risks and Opportunities: Why the Church Cannot Afford to Disenfranchise Its Youth

In some areas of church life there is a great deal of attention given to matters of representation. Unfortunately, this attention revolves almost solely around issues of national, racial, and ethnic difference. The categories of age and gender—which cut across distinctions of race, culture, and class—meanwhile receive little more than token concessions by church leaders of all ethnic and racial backgrounds.

This is both cause for alarm and reason for hope. It is cause for alarm because disenfranchised young Adventists will become increasingly cynical and apathetic toward their church. A lack of representation within the institutional framework may thus be the catalyst for many youth leaving Adventism altogether. In this sense, the need for political representation of young Adventists contains an urgency that goes beyond any purely political calculation.

However, there are seeds of possibility in the present situation. I do not share in the romanticized view of youth frequently expressed by church leaders and sometimes by youth themselves: we are not the salvation of the Church, and the wisdom and experience of older Adventists remains critical to the Church's health and mission. Still, I believe that many young Adventists possess gifts of energy and openness that would greatly help the Church as it strives to attain genuine community—community that overcomes barriers of race, class, and gender, as well as age.

The Church is thus faced with one choice. It can either continue to marginalize its younger members and by so doing jeopardize its future. Or it can take

can take the risky, even agonizing, steps necessary to ensure that the rhetoric of inclusion is at last grounded in reality.

## Notes and References

1. "A Conversation With Jan Paulsen," *Adventist Review*, July 2, 2000, 4.
2. Minutes of the General Conference Session, Feb. 7, 1871, res. 9, Online Archives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church <[www.archives.gc.adventist.org/AST/archives](http://www.archives.gc.adventist.org/AST/archives)>.
3. The names of six of the twenty delegates from the 1863 session do not appear in the obituaries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The percentage used here is therefore based on the ages of the other fourteen delegates as a representative sample. See Minutes of the General Conference Session, 1863; and Obituary Index of the Archives of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.
4. James White and George Butler both served multiple nonconsecutive terms. The seven out of ten figure for the 1863-1922 period thus counts each of these terms as separate presidencies.
5. Although the delegation lists underwent slight changes during the course of the session, the basic demographic makeup of the various delegations is accurately reflected in the table "Delegation By Age Group," *Adventist Review*, June 30, 2000, 36.
6. See Larry Pitcher, quoted in "Windows on Mission," *Adventist Review*, July 3, 2000, 4; G. Ralph Thompson, "Knowing the Time," *ibid.*, 2; and L. D. Raelly, "Beyond Conventional Means," *Adventist Review*, July 5, 2000, 12.
7. Volunteers Action Report, Year-End Totals for 1999 Edition, Adventist Youth Service Network of the North America Division, 4.
8. See Samuele Bacchiocchi, ed., *The Christian and Rock Music* (Berrien Springs: Biblical Perspective Books, 1999). <[www.biblicalperspectives.com](http://www.biblicalperspectives.com)>.
9. "IT 2000 Helps 6,000 Receive Their Daily Bread," *Adventist Review*, July 5, 2000, 4.
10. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, Minutes of the General Conference Session, July 5, 1995, 2:00 p.m. Business Session, On-line Archives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
11. *Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, 1999-2000 ed. (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1999), 4.
12. See comment in note five, above, and "Delegation Composition Report," *Adventist Review*, June 30, 2000, 37.

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**Ron Osborn is a master's degree student in liberal arts at St. Johns Graduate Institute, Annapolis, Maryland. He graduated in 1999 from Atlantic Union College with degrees in English and history. [Ronaldosborn138@cs.com](mailto:Ronaldosborn138@cs.com)**