

A President with the Heart of a Youth Pastor

The Election of Don C. Schneider

by Doug Morgan

For most observers the outcome was no surprise. On July 3 in Toronto, Don C. Schneider, 57, was elected president of the North American Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Although expressions of support for and optimism about the new president were widespread, troubling questions emerged about the process by which he was elected: Did delegates have access to the information necessary to make wise choices in electing church leaders? Did a wealthy church member who has been exceptionally generous in financial support of the Church exert improper influence over the election? What was the role of the General Conference president in determining the outcome? How might such an election be conducted so that the various segments of the Church can trust that their voices have registered a fair and equitable influence? Is it healthy for a twenty-first-century church that the key decisions about leadership are made “behind closed doors,” with no public record of the proceedings?

The Person

Schneider embarks on his new responsibility with the strength of an exceptional breadth of experience as a church leader in the North American Division. He has served in an administrative post in five of the division's nine unions. After completing his B.A. at Union College and M.A. at Andrews University, Schneider spent a few years in pastoral ministry and moved rapidly into administration. He served as a youth director at both the conference and union conference levels and then, at the age of thirty-four, was elected president of the Wyoming Conference in 1977. Over the next fifteen years he successively led the New Jersey, Arkansas-Louisiana, Rocky Mountain, and Northern California Conferences as president. Since 1994, he has presided over the Lake Union Conference.

One union conference official has commented that Don Schneider brings to the NAD presidency “the heart of the youth pastor”—an image that perhaps best encapsulates the most prominent characteristics and commitments of Schneider's ministry. He “keeps it simple,” viewing all church



Photo: ANN/Richard Dower

issues through the lens of two basic spiritual themes: a personal relationship with Christ and winning others to Christ. He loves to tell stories and is renowned for a great sense of humor. He has a reputation for openness—a willingness to listen, admit mistakes and quickly apologize, and refer matters about which he knows little to others with expertise. He is viewed as an “encourager and supporter;” as a conference president he once organized and personally bore the expense of a full-blown second graduation service for an academy senior who had been barred from the regular ceremonies due to a minor infraction late in her final semester. He possesses “strong inspirational and motivational skills,” according to a union conference president who marveled at the skill Schneider recently displayed quickly winning over a group of upset people.

Although he possesses the advantages of a successful youth leader, Schneider may have to overcome perception of potential liabilities. Will his jocund manner and focus on simple themes be adequate to deal with the complexity of the issues the division faces? Such concerns, however, do not appear to register very prominently, because the new president is viewed in hopeful terms from a variety of sectors in the North American church.

The Process

It's a different story, however, when it comes to the election process. Here reports of undue influence exerted by a wealthy church member combine with longstanding concerns about the lack of information and mechanisms needed to nominate committee members and delegates so they can have meaningful input and make informed decisions.

Some delegates and observers in Toronto were outraged at reports that Garwin McNeilus, a contractor from Minnesota who has given large sums to support various world mission endeavors of the Church, had taken measures in the NAD caucus to block election of one of the three top vote getters for president. Moreover, in remarks to the NAD caucus of the nominating committee General Conference president Jan Paulsen reportedly had given voice to McNeilus's threats.

McNeilus's antipathy was directed toward Charles Sandefur, president of the Mid-America Union. In 1995, McNeilus had unsuccessfully lobbied against Sandefur's election as Mid-America president, employing lawyers to produce a two hundred-plus page document that criticized Sandefur's involvement in the

partnership between Adventist and Roman Catholic health care entities in the Denver area formed in 1995 while Sandefur was president of the Rocky Mountain Conference. McNeilus warned that if the nominating committee in Toronto designated Sandefur as NAD president, he would mount opposition to the nomination from the floor. Such opposition is almost unheard of and would have been enormously disruptive. The delegates meeting as a whole almost always confirm the names recommended for office by the nominating committee.

The specter of such disruption was apparently a factor that prompted General Conference president Jan Paulsen to take an unusual measure to influence the NAD caucus's choice for president. On Sunday afternoon Paulsen had been present at a special meeting in which each of the 175 members of the NAD delegation was invited to express their views to the seventeen-member NAD caucus of the nominating committee about the qualities desired in a division president. There, Paulsen had allayed concerns aroused by a rumor that, with regard to the selection of the NAD president, he would invoke a clause in the General Conference bylaws that required the GC president's approval of candidates for vice president of the General Conference (division presidents are also GC vice presidents).

When he met with the NAD nominating committee caucus, though, Paulsen did make clear his preference for Schneider. That, in itself, reflected standard procedure. It was unusual, however, that Paulsen took the additional step of specifically cautioning the caucus about the potential drawbacks of nominating the other two top vote getters in the first rounds of balloting. Tom Mostert of the Pacific Union Conference, he pointed out, had alienated African-American leaders over the issue of separate conferences, whereas Sandefur would arouse opposition from the floor because of his involvement with the Porter-Centura health care partnership in Denver.

Although the outcome would have almost surely been the same even if the General Conference president had not spoken to specific problems associated with Mostert and Sandefur, his action raises serious concerns. Was he the conduit through which a church member used the influence of his wealth to destroy the viable candidacy of a highly qualified church leader? It may be, as some have suggested, that Paulsen's motivation was to inform rather than to pressure—to appraise the caucus of the realities of the situation in an open and thorough manner. At best,

however, the appearances lend themselves to suspicion.

And appearances are what remain because, under the present system, the proceedings of the nominating bodies are not made public and are therefore not a matter for comment by church officials. Although "leaks" from reliable sources give glimpses into the process, a shroud of secrecy obscures much.

The process also left some disgruntlement among African-American leaders, who had favored Sandefur. Several regional conference presidents felt that the selection was determined in advance and that their influence had been closed out. That the outcome of an election would be predetermined—"cut and dried"—is not in itself perceived as unusual. However, coming at a time when other issues—such as the controversy over the denominational retirement plan—are straining race relations in the North American Church, it may, according to one source, "put the brakes on efforts to work together."

Black church leaders and Schneider nonetheless seem eager to work together amicably on the complex set of issues they face. Norman Miles, who, as Lake Region Conference president, has worked closely with Schneider over the past few years, reportedly was key in building confidence among fellow black leaders in depicting Schneider as a fair and trustworthy leader. For his part, Schneider, when, as the newly elected NAD president, was issued a routine invitation to come for the last day of the three-day regional conference ministries meeting in August, requested to be present for the entire three days.

Beyond the particulars of this election, some nominating committee members voiced general con-

cerns about the process. One conference president, although favorably impressed that Paulsen, in contrast to some other top leaders in the past, "laid it straight out" and "didn't try to hide anything," insisted on the need for procedural improvements. Nominating committee members, he pointed out, had no résumés or substantive information about the names presented to them. "Persons were selected on the basis of feeling" and vague recommendations, he observed. Moreover, he expressed amazement at Paulsen's ability to name his slate of candidates and have them all voted in, with only one exception. "When I tried to do this at my conference constituency meeting," the conference president commented, "a GC representative told me I wasn't allowed to, that this was 'rubber stamping!'"

According to Columbia Union Conference vice president Monte Sahlin, Don Schneider has played a key role in establishing current NAD priorities for evangelism, church planting, lay and youth involvement, outreach in the large cities, efforts to reclaim missing and former members, and the provision of excellent resources for local churches. As president, he is likely to sustain initiatives along these lines, and most church members could likely rally behind one or more of these general goals. Perhaps the challenge will be to empower the diverse segments of the NAD to pursue them in their own ways while maintaining unity at some core level, both within the division and with the world church. A process of decision making and electing church leaders that is more open, informed, and authentically representative might be one key to meet the challenge.

A Conversation with Don Schneider

When *Spectrum* editor Bonnie Dwyer and I met with Don Schneider in Toronto after his election, he responded to our questions, not with theoretical statements of policies or goals, but with stories—in the best fashion of a youth leader. The newly elected NAD president graciously granted *Spectrum* time for an interview on Thursday, July 6, amidst a very hectic schedule. Originally, our interview was scheduled between interviews with *Christianity Today* and CBS radio. However, when the *Christianity Today* interview ran late, Bonnie and I opted to wait until after the CBS interview rather than take a shortened time slot between the two. The decision paid off—Schneider ended up giving us almost an hour rather than the originally agreed upon fifteen minutes.

His responses illustrate the qualities we had heard about from others: warmth, openness, simplicity, a gospel- and evangelism-centered spirituality, and the communication skills of a great story teller. When Schneider's associate, Celeste Ryan, discreetly pointed out that our interview had lasted over forty-five minutes, I could scarcely believe so much time had passed.

I concluded that the best way to convey briefly the key points of the conversation would be to tell the story of how Schneider responded to questions on the following themes.

On his thoughts and feelings upon being elected Schneider gave a frank and detailed description of the process in the seventeen-member NAD caucus:

While setting the scene for what happened when he found out about his nomination, Schneider told us that there were three names in the final round of voting: himself, Tom Mostert of the Pacific Union, who came in second, and Chuck Sandefur of the Mid-America Union, who came in third. At that point, committee members used voting machines, and Schneider commented that when he saw on the screen that he had a majority, he “lost it:” overcome with emotion, he wept and prayed.

The new president seemed deeply gratified that Mostert and Sandefur were the first to speak after the nomination and express their support. “Can you imagine how much that meant?” he asked.

On the developments in North American Adventism between now and 2005 that he would most like to see noted at the next General Conference Session:

Citing a study published in *Trustee* magazine that highlighted “knowing Jesus” as a factor in making hospital executives successful, Schneider drew a parallel between his personal spiritual goals and his desires for the Church in North America. Schneider wants most to see “members who, number one, know Jesus; and second, who will tell someone else about it.” He sees these basic spiritual commitments as the most important factors for the NAD to be able to report great growth in 2005.

On the greatest problems and challenges that face the Church:

Schneider recalled engaging a telemarketer in a conversation about her life situation and spiritual needs, and finally praying with her over the phone, rather than simply viewing her as an annoyance to be dismissed as quickly as possible. He sees that kind of concern for the spiritual needs of others as the antidote to “ritualism”—the first problem that came to his mind. Here the NAD president again expressed his foremost priority: “a church full of people who present Jesus.”

On women’s ordination:

“We need everybody,” Schneider declared. He referred to his daughter’s recent commission as a teacher in the Adventist school system and stated that he “wouldn’t want to do anything to discourage her” (and by implication young women like her). On the other hand, he expressed hope that we will “keep the

focus on doing the work, not on titles.”

On the North American Division’s relationship to the world church:

Schneider was open about tensions. He referred to the unusual questioning of his name that took place in the General Conference nominating committee. Typically, he pointed out, names referred to the whole nominating committee by divisional caucuses sail through unquestioned. But when his name came up, a delegate from another division demanded to be able to interrogate him about the NAD’s loyalty to the policies of the world church (according to another nominating committee member the specific issue was loyalty to the world policy against women’s ordination). Having left the room because his name was up for voting, Schneider started to go back to respond but then was told to wait. Other NAD nominating committee members gave assurances that Schneider believes in church policy, while another pointed out that the NAD had not questioned names presented by the other divisions. The committee then voted for Schneider, but he expressed sadness that “the loyalty of the NAD was suspect.”

The NAD president then held up a Canadian five dollar bill and outlined the basic conflict between the influence of North American dollars and that of the ever-increasing dominance in membership and representation of other, rapidly growing divisions of the world church. Schneider pointed out that, due to the diminishing proportion of NAD delegates—along with new quotas for lay and nonadministrative church employee delegates as well as ethnic and gender representation—it took special requests and maneuvers for all NAD conference presidents to be delegates at the Toronto session. Previously, NAD conference presidents could have assumed they would have seats as delegates. “Conference presidents whose conferences provide large amounts of dollars are not happy about the prospect of being left out of the General Conference delegation,” Schneider observed. Furthermore, though this time all nine NAD union presidents were among the seventeen NAD members of the nominating committee in Toronto, “this may be the last time they all make it.”

“We face a real tension here,” he concluded. “I don’t have easy answers.”

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