

# Present Tense Behind the General Conference Platform

By Chris Blake

I flash my purple platform pass, mailed to me months earlier, and stroll past uniformed security people down silent white corridors tall and wide enough to hold three elephants.

My destination is as exclusive as a George W. Bush town hall meeting. Gary Swanson, editor of *CQ* (formerly *Collegiate Quarterly*), meets and directs me to Entry B Service Corridor to Room 176. In the two decades I have known Gary, he always dresses neatly and speaks in terse, clipped sentences—a precise poet.

About a minute into the dome's innards, I pass a door with a sign: "Rams locker room." The Rams have been my football team since the 1960s, during the reign of Roman Gabriel and the Fearsome Foursome, when they played in the Los Angeles Coliseum. Of course, it would be inappropriate now while I'm unattended to enter this private dressing area. It's locked, anyway.

As with other contemporary General Conference Sessions, Saint Louis's Edward Jones Dome at America's Center provides an odd setting for the 2005 proceedings. Logos of scores of advertisers stare down on us. (How would Jesus chase out these marketers?) I think of my own church-sponsored moribund Valic option as I read, "Don't fumble your retire-



Petra Houmann, sophomore at Columbia Union College, hosted the Youth on Parade report.

ment—contact Edward Jones." Ringed around us in large block letters appear the names of legendary spiritual giants: Merlin Olsen, Dan Dierdorf, Eric Dickerson, Elroy "Crazylegs" Hirsch, Tom Mack, and David "Deacon" Jones. ("Will the Deacon please come forward and pick up the quarterback?")

Outside, Saint Louis bustles with bizarre bipolar energy as Fourth of July parade floats queue up alongside Sabbath worshipers. Through the long weekend, fervent, sober Adventists will mingle with tens of thousands of exuberant (and drunk) celebrants. My family enjoys playing "Pick out

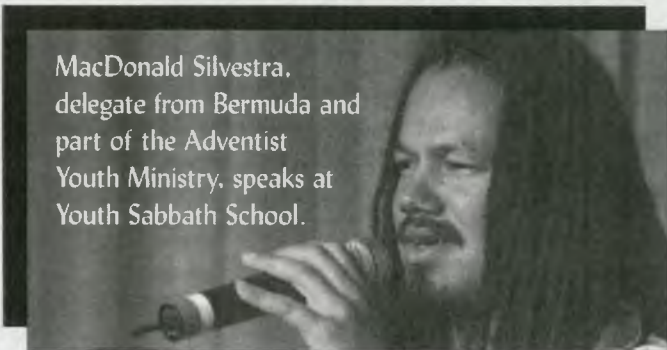
the Sevey” in downtown Saint Louis crowds. Generally it’s fairly easy pickings. (Still wearing their badges, dressed in suits, clutching plastic 3ABN bags, walking as fast as they can to avoid getting contaminated.)

I was asked to show up an hour before “0855 Platform Participants Enter and Seated,” and at this time not many people are backstage. Behind the ten-meter screen two rows of folding chairs simulate the seating arrangement out front. Every platform participant has his or her name written in black marker on a white paper that sits atop a designated chair facing literally acres of empty seats. An invariable context inside the dome is the sense of immense space.

It’s good to meet Jim Zackrison, the outgoing General Conference Sabbath School and Personal Ministries director, with whom I’ll be sharing the podium. Jim is about seventy, a genial, laid-back fellow. His non-anxious presence dissolves some of the tension just before he informs me that this is the first General Conference Session Sabbath School covered by the Hope Channel, so we need to be precise in our timed assignments—dead space doesn’t play well on TV. The musical prelude will begin at 8:30.

PHOTO BY MELITA POJIK

MacDonald Silvestra,  
delegate from Bermuda and  
part of the Adventist  
Youth Ministry, speaks at  
Youth Sabbath School.



At 8:26 a.m., Gary Swanson returns from inspecting the platform. At 8:27 a.m., Don Driver, the platform organizer, receives a call on his cell phone. Gary listens in on the conversation before exclaiming indignantly, “Can you believe it?” He explains to me that someone is complaining about a dome worker who was seen vacuuming the stage. “Tell them it’s a union thing,” Gary suggests to Don. “We can’t do anything about it.”

(*Evil unions!*) I privately wonder whether the complainer called his/her hotel to request no housekeeping service today. Moreover, as I look around at the tech people scrambling like Crazylegs himself to bring this production to life, I speculate as to why their work is considered kosher. Perhaps the exertion is viewed as too exotic, more “virtual”—certainly not as plebian or bibli-

cally based as pushing a vacuum cleaner.

I meet Casey Wolverton, the telegenic young adult host of Sabbath School University on the Hope Channel, who tells me I probably don’t remember that we met in 1990 when I spoke outside Newcastle, Australia. He’s right. In the course of conversation, Casey remarks that in his New South Wales Conference, only 25 percent of students are Adventist in Avondale Adventist School, Central Coast Adventist School, and Macquarie College, a K–12 school. (“Everything’s a college there,” he adds. To which I reply, “Here everything’s a university,” and instantly reflect that, as host of one, he’s probably aware of this.)

“It’s changed everything,” Casey says. “We’re more evangelistic. More tolerant, of course. We struggle to follow up all the Bible study interests. And Adventist kids are stronger in their convictions as a result.” Central Coast and Macquarie each maintain one-and-one-half full-time chaplains plus volunteers, including student missionaries. What an astounding departure from most Adventist academies in North America.

Onstage someone is hitting an immaculate high C. I hug my friend Carol Barron before she goes around front at 8:45 to belt out some hymns. I turn off my cell phone. Later, a friend will tell of sitting in a delegate’s seat and phoning another delegate who was standing at the microphone to make a comment. My friend crumpled in hysterics as he witnessed the delegate fumbling frantically to kill his phone.

Cliff Goldstein arrives, a bit breathless. He has a narrow face with chiseled cheekbones and gray-flecked black hair, and he talks and moves quickly and jerkily, giving a first impression of a ruffled politician with ADHD. Perhaps he’s nervous, though he admits to having felt more anxiety in Toronto five years ago.

I have always liked Cliff personally—he’s entertaining, candid, intelligent, and compassionate on an individual level. On that note he launches immediately into discussing a mutual friend who is struggling with the authenticity of the Sabbath and church politics in general. We share our assessments and concerns until he concludes by encouraging me to “give him a call. He’ll appreciate it.”

It strikes me strange that though they work there, Gary and Cliff both use the word *they* to refer to the General Conference. “They” are doing or not doing things because “they” don’t get it. Not surprisingly, this is the identical rhetorical tag people *outside* the General Conference use when speaking of the General Conference. Fans of sports teams will often say “*we* won” and “*they* lost.” Does

Sabbath morning  
General Conference  
Parade of Nations  
stage set.



Jan Paulsen use the word *they* to refer to the General Conference when he doesn't like what's happening?

A last-minute flurry of activity brings all platform participants together to pray for inspiration and effectiveness. Then, on cue and in proper order, we file out into the lights. From our seats on about the goal line I can scarcely discern the audience far, far away. The only faces I recognize are those of Bill and Noelene Johnsson, who are sitting and smiling at the twenty-five yard line, waiting for the kickoff. The sound seems muffled on stage, doubtless because the speakers are turned from us.

We remain standing to sing a rather unfamiliar hymn, but we have no hymnals, no music or words, and the dome's seven jumbo screens obviously would not display the words. (Evil celebration tactic!) The lyrics are printed in the General Conference program books, translated into Russian and Zulu and Yoruba and Portuguese and Finnish and Twi and Lingala and more languages.

But we left our programs backstage, so we stand and stare at the thousands of singers. Cliff uses this opportunity to revisit our conversation about our friend. Throughout the first verse he speaks and gestures animatedly until Gary Swanson mutters from behind, "Hey, a little decorum!" I hope that Hope Channel wasn't focusing on us.

After the opening prayer, Jim introduces a video

that features my Something Else Sabbath School in Lincoln, Nebraska. Expressing their appreciation for the class are a few of my friends: Mark Robison, a colleague at Union College and a Ph.D candidate with an emphasis in Willa Cather studies; Marlyn Schwartz, a contractor and health club owner; and Al Chambers, a UPS driver who faithfully attended our class despite not being an Adventist.

They talk chiefly about prayer—the class encircling and placing our hands on Marlyn when he had cancer ("The peace I felt was indescribable"), and praying for Al's brother, who had achieved sixty days of sobriety ("That, to me, is a miracle"). Seeing Al projected on the screens in front of twenty thousand Adventists (with more arriving by the second) somehow gives me great glee. The video also lists ideas for improving fellowship from people in Sydney, Australia; Montemorelos, Mexico; Saint Thomas, Virgin Islands; Anchorage, Alaska; and Austin, Texas.

As we sit together watching the video, Casey is tapping in notes on his PDA, spurring Cliff to remark that



he usually preaches from his PDA but because he has only five minutes today to speak, he's scribbled his notes elsewhere. He holds up his right hand. On his palm are five lines in blue pen. (*A southpaw.* I resist the urge to use a "palm pilot" reference.) Sitting between them, I consider that I maybe should have brought a few notes myself.

Just prior to the end of the video I walk to the podium for my part in enhancing fellowship in Sabbath Schools. After relating an anecdote about Ruth, who continued attending our class purely because I knew her name after one visit, I ask everyone in the dome to engage in "neighbor nudging," to connect with a neighbor and to leave out no one (especially the security guards) for two minutes and forty-nine seconds. During that time they are to learn one another's names, where home is, and where they were at the age of twelve. We "agree" that the conversations stop when hands are held high. "Ready?" I ask rhetorically. "Go."

The dome hums like a hive. People pivot in their seats to converse or seek out someone sitting alone thirty rows over in another section. I talk with Jim, and after 2:49 or so I walk to the podium and raise my hand and the hive—amazingly—hushes.

"If we can do this with twenty thousand, you can do this in your Sabbath School. Let's make certain no one in any class is left out, that all realize they are valued every week."

Jim steps up with the second part of our presenta-

prayer, and summarizes how these two activities can be a part of every Sabbath School.

We are finished. I feel relief, exhilaration, and gratefulness. Getting twenty thousand people to cooperate is, after all, more than a perfunctory kick for the extra point.

Three petite women in colorful native dress from Korea, Japan, and Taiwan appear on stage in front of us. Instantly the floor swarms with flash and video cameras. I lean out around Taiwan, hoping for a mention in Asian photo albums ("Here are the three lovely ladies. I don't know who the smiling bearded guy is.").

Casey introduces the Sabbath School University video, which presents him as a moderator along with four bright, ethnically diverse Australian young adults offering responses to a question about the week's lesson. Although the production quality is good, I yearn for more dialectical drama. Perhaps they could take opposing sides of a question. ("Did Jesus come soon? What does 'soon' mean?") At least they would model how to engage tough questions and disagree agreeably, which would be an enormous step forward for many Sabbath Schools.

Cliff gets up to speak. "I've been an Adventist," he glances at his right palm, "for about twenty-five years." He goes on to describe how our salvation is sure only through the gracious sacrifice of Christ, how if we depend on any internal righteousness we are surely lost.

When he returns to his seat, I say, "Good job."

Cliff leans toward me. "I want to give them the *gospel*," he says. "I don't often get a chance to talk to this many people."

Next, the thirteen division presidents file in. They stand at attention while Jim introduces the quarter's lesson and the brief talks each president will provide.

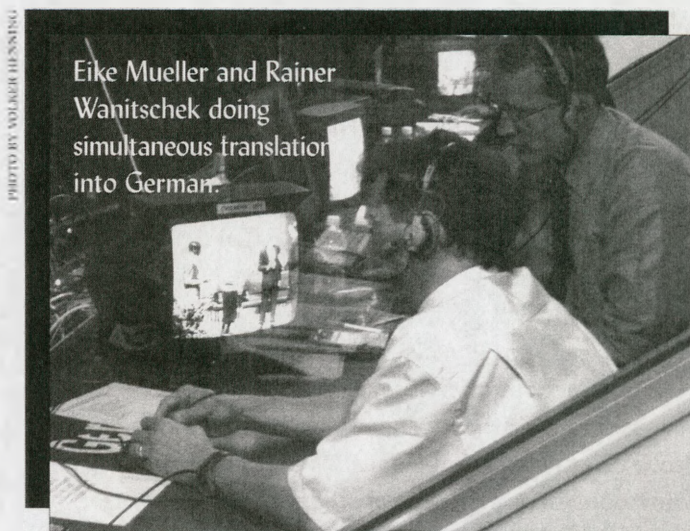
"That worked out well," I murmur to Cliff.

"Thirteen presidents and thirteen weeks in the quarter." He laughs. "Yeah."

Gary says in a stage whisper, "You can leave the platform if you want to." He tries to sound casual, but I think he wants a bit more decorum and a bit less us. I look around at the scene. *No way am I leaving. This is too good.* Dozens of photographers and videographers jockey for position in front of the stage. Flashes punctuate the air like a pulsing lightning storm.

"A media scrum," Casey observes.

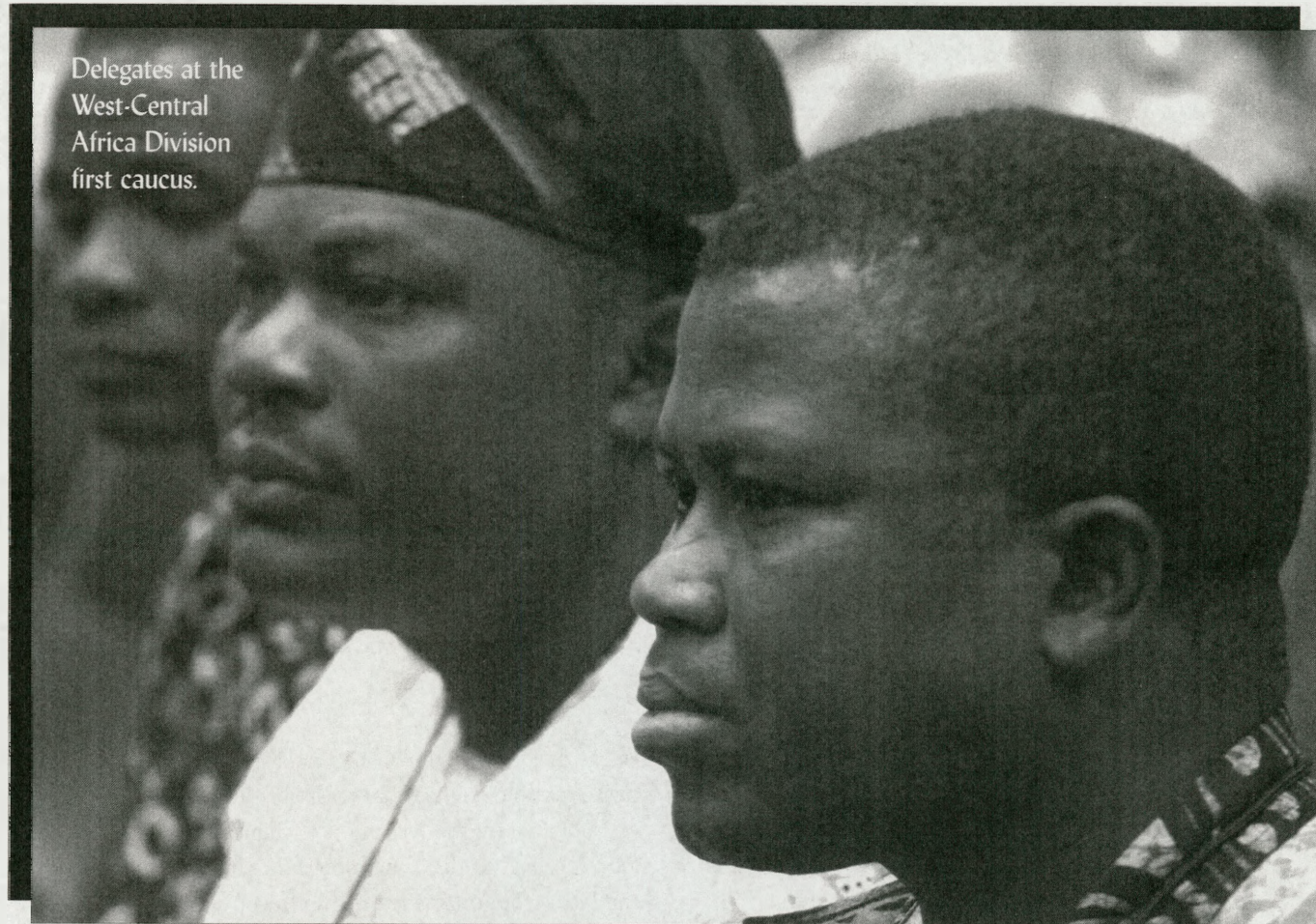
We can see only their thirteen backs silhouetted by the stage lights. Apart from the paucity of gender and age differences, their racial spectrum—so many heights and hues—our marvelous diversity from my God's hand and voice, moves me, and I feel my throat constrict. As



tion—intercessory prayer. He states, "Now turn to the person you just met and ask what's one thing you could pray for that person. This is how we achieve depth of fellowship quickly in Sabbath School. Let's pray for each other now."

Jim and I pray together. All around, people are praying for one another. It's working. After a suitable time Jim approaches the podium, ends with a corporate

Delegates at the West-Central Africa Division first caucus.



I do at each General Conference Session, I've caught a fresh vision of the world Church.

Casey tells me about tuning in to a Saint Louis "Christian radio" station this morning and hearing an interview with Walter Rea. The interviewer was extremely hostile toward Adventists, selecting passages from *Counsels on Diet and Foods* before concluding, "This, ladies and gentlemen, is a false prophet!"

I ask, "How did Walter Rea sound?"

"Old," he says.

One of the division presidents is at the podium speaking smoothly and confidently. From behind, however, we can see his right leg vibrating like a fresh-plucked lute. I think, *That is courage.*

Gary confers briefly with Jim at the side of the podium, after which Gary sits behind me.

"Chris, they're running short," he says in my ear. "Would you be willing to go up to talk for a couple minutes?"

My mind races as a surge of energy consumes me.

"Sure," I say. Gary sits back. The world recedes.

*What will I say to probably 25,000 people for two minutes?*

I determine to talk about Sabbath School as a time for training people every week to be disciples of Jesus—to live out prayer, money, time, study, and social ministries. This is the familiar theme of our local Sabbath School. Gary is talking to me again.

"We won't need you," he says.

After Jim sums up, all five of us—Jim, Gary, Cliff, Casey, and I—leave the platform. A primed full orchestra sits to our right and the Oakwood College Aeolians stand on risers to our left. A moving line of people, including some women, streams by us to take our spots and start the worship service.

Once behind the screen, Jim exults, "We made it with thirty seconds to spare!"

"Well," I said, "That was fun."

Past tense.

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