



Re-arranging the World Church

Report from the church's Annual Council

STORIES FROM ADVENTIST NEWS NETWORK BY ELIZABETH LECHLEITNER AND ANSEL OLIVER

TOP LEADERSHIP of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted in October to make several changes in the oversight of the church's work in several regions of the world.

First, the Executive Committee of the General Conference voted to transfer administrative oversight of church operations in the Middle East from the church's Trans-European and Euro-Africa divisions to church headquarters.

The **newly formed Greater Middle East Union Mission** is home to 21 countries and more than 500 million people, and has 2,900 Adventists worshipping in 70 churches and companies.

Under the new organization, South Sudan becomes part of the church's East-Central Africa Division and the church's Southern-Asia Pacific Division will oversee the Pakistan Union. Culturally, Pakistan can better be served by the division that also serves Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, leaders said.

The church's Euro-Asia Division will absorb Afghanistan. The world church headquarters will directly



Church officials appointed Homer Trecartin to serve as president of the church's Greater Middle East Union Mission. The union was formed when Annual Council delegates voted to transfer administrative oversight of the church in the Middle East to world church headquarters.

oversee the Israel Field and the new Greater Middle East Union Mission. That union mission will also include the Trans-Mediterranean territories. South Cyprus will remain in the Trans-European Division.

Despite more than 100 years of outreach to the region, data indicates that the mission of the church is changing with challenges in the region, members of the church's Greater Middle East and Mediterranean Survey Commission said in an October 9 report to Annual Council delegates.

Attaching the "high priority" Middle East region directly to world

church headquarters will enable quicker implementation of projects, commission members said in the proposal. "It would make movement of personnel, funding and ideas easier across what used to be different division boundaries," they said. The realignment would also group countries together that have similar cultures.

Commission members also said the Middle East "should be the focus of the entire church," citing another advantage for moving regional leadership to oversight by world church headquarters.

In 2010, the church tasked the commission with studying Adventist work in the Middle East, with the intent that a territorial realignment



Annual Council delegates vote to approve transferring the church's Middle East administrative oversight to the denomination's world headquarters. Leaders said the move signals that the region is a world priority.



Bertil Wiklander, president of the Trans-European Division, addresses the chair with his support as well as some concerns about the proposal to adjust administrative structure in the Middle East, which includes his division. Behind him, Bruno Vertallier, president of the Euro-Africa Division, waits to speak. The proposal also affected his division. The proposal later passed.

might be necessary. A study of historical, demographic and statistical evidence seems to indicate that the church grows best when overseen by a unified and geographically contiguous body, commission members said.

The Middle East is part of a region called the 10/40 Window, where two-thirds of the world's population lives, only one percent of which is Christian.

"I want you to think of the incredible challenges in the Middle East," world church President Ted N. C. Wilson told delegates. "We want to give full credit to the workers already there," he added.

Bertil Wiklander, president of the Trans-European Division, said he and his team had some reservations about parts of the proposal but would fully support it if approved by the world body.

"We have personal ties to our people in this area, and we have spent much time in prayer with and

for them. We have thoroughly enjoyed working in our attached fields and have poured our best time, talents and resources into it," Wiklander said.

Euro-African Division President Bruno Vertallier said that in recent years, the region has redoubled its work in the Middle East and that the administrative shift would be considered difficult for some people.

"Our recommendation is to strongly emphasize the training of local people," Vertallier said. "We have some wonderful people working there right now, and we must add to them. The great challenge will be to train more people in local fields and give them the best tools possible to meet the needs of Adventists and community members."

Adventist Church President Ted N. C. Wilson said the move would signal that the region is a global priority for the denomination.

"The Middle East is a unique place," Wilson said. "We have to take this area of world field as a special burden. We're also grateful for what the Euro-Africa and Trans-Europe have done to foster and nurture Adventist mission in those areas of Middle East."

Homer Trecartin, undersecretary of the World Church, was chosen to serve as president of the newly formed Greater Middle East Union Mission.

Trecartin has previously served as secretary-treasurer of the former Middle East Union and planning director for the world church's Office of Adventist Mission, among other positions.

Trecartin replaces Kjell Aune, who served as president of the region

when it was overseen by the church's Trans-European Division. Tibor Szilvasi will continue in his capacity as union secretary for the region.

World church Secretary G. T. Ng said church leaders will review possible candidates for the union's treasurer and announce their nomination at a later date. Delegates voted current Associate Secretary Myron Iseminger to replace Trecartin as world church undersecretary.

In other changes, the Guam-Micronesia Mission, an administrative region comprising islands in the western Pacific Ocean, will now report to the denomination's North American Division.

The shift, approved by the denomination's Executive Committee moves oversight of the region



Southern Asia-Pacific Division President Alberto Gulfan addresses the chair of Annual Council regarding the shift of the Guam-Micronesia Mission to the North American Division, whose president, Dan Jackson, sits nearby.

from the church's Southern Asia-Pacific Division, which is based in the Philippines.

The mission region includes the United States territories of Guam, the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Northern Mariana Islands and Palau.

"Over the years there has been discussion whether it would fit better elsewhere," said world church Undersecretary Myron Iseminger. "Regulations are U.S.-oriented and many employees come from North America."

The region is home to roughly 4,500 Adventist Church members. The Adventist Church there also operates numerous elementary and secondary schools, which are staffed largely by student missionaries.

North American Division President Dan Jackson welcomed the move. "We are always happy to cooperate with the world church, and we will embrace the peoples and the ministry of the Guam-Micronesia Mission," he said.

Southern Asia-Pacific Division President Alberto Gulfan confirmed that his executive committee had made several requests to shift oversight of Guam-Micronesia.

"We loved serving Guam-Micronesia over the past years, but we have some challenges, and we are very happy and grateful to the leadership of the North American Division...for their willingness," Gulfan said. "I believe this is God's timing."

Southern Asia-Pacific acquired administrative oversight of the denomination's operations in Pakistan in the territorial realignment involving the countries in the Middle East.

Finally, church leadership voted to split the Northeast Brazil Union Mission

into two administrative bodies—the Northeast Brazil Union Mission and East Brazil Union Mission.

The move recognizes burgeoning membership and impeccable handling of finances in the region, church leaders said. It comes on the heels of a similar realignment of the church's administrative structure in Brazil last year.

The former Northeast Brazil Union Mission is home to almost 340,000 Adventists and a growing network of churches and church-run schools. Membership there has more than doubled since the union was established in 1996. As of July this year, the church in the region welcomed more than 20,000 new believers, or about 3,000 accessions per month.

"This region for us has a strong potential for growth," said South American Division President Erton Kohler. "The people there are very receptive. We believe that a new union there can give strong support to our church in the region and help fulfill the mission."

The newly formed Northeast and East Brazil union missions will each begin in 2013 with more than 100 percent of ideal working capital, said world church Undertreasurer Juan Prestol. Neither region is saddled with debt, he added, and both are in "exceptional" financial condition.

The Adventist Church in Brazil has undergone numerous administrative realignments since it was organized in the country in 1895. Church leadership regularly reorganize church administrative structure to

accommodate membership growth. Most recently, delegates at last year's General Conference Session voted to recognize the split of the former North Brazil Union Mission into two entities, creating the Northwest Brazil Union Mission.

"We praise the Lord for the dynamic growth in South America and especially in this region of Brazil," world church President Ted N. C. Wilson told Annual Council delegates.

Also, church leaders voted to rename the current East Brazil Union Conference. To avoid confusion with the newly formed East Brazil Union Mission, the region is now called the Southeast Brazil Union Conference. ■



A PowerPoint graphic shows the Southeast Brazil Union Conference. Church leaders renamed the union when they split another union in two, creating a similarly named church region. The new union demonstrates church growth and financial stability in Brazil, church leaders said.

FROM THE SPECTRUM BLOG:

Germany— A new mission field?

BY LOTHAR E. TRÄDER

In his first year in office the newly-elected president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church speaks at five major events in Germany.

IN SOME COUNTRIES, especially the United States, German Adventism is still perceived under the “Conradi Syndrome.” L. R. Conradi, a highly gifted evangelist, author, and administrator, had managed church growth rates to rival and at times outdo those of the Adventist homeland in America. This, however, didn’t cause his schism from the world church. It was rather his independent direction in theology and church organization, as

This scathing review has upset many in Germany because Pöhler’s book is an official publication of the church in Germany. So when Ekkehard Müller denounces German-speaking churches as being “deeply polarized,”² many feel that such generalized statements are of little help and accuracy.

In order to more accurately understand the current situation of the Adventist churches in Germany, a couple of preliminary remarks from church history are in place. In Europe, ever since the Reformation, the adherence to a church or denomination has always been tantamount to a battle cry. The two major Christian faiths—Roman Catholic and Lutheran—initially stood fiercely opposed against each other. Because the political powers played into the scheme, this led to much bloodshed. Add to this a phe-

life in Germany is the geographic diversity of different forms of religiosity. In one part in the west of Germany, the Rhineland Christian faith traditionally took the form of conventicles, small house churches gathered around one leader, joining in Bible study. This is where Adventism in Germany originated. The Lindermann Movement in Rhineland was the cradle of German Adventism.⁴ Also located in the west is pietism. The northern and eastern parts of Germany are predominantly Lutheran. Additionally, in the west and the south we have a strong representation of the Catholic Church.

For Adventist churches in Germany this means—and I write this as a church historian—that we are acquainted with a Lutheran type of Adventism, with the religiosity of con-

PAULSEN PHOTO: ANNI



well as his critical attitude toward Ellen G. White. This is the legacy with which we are still dealing in Germany. Additionally, reservations are palpable that remain largely nonverbal, but we distinctly sense them from time to time. Lately, however, reports and rumors seem to have spread in the U.S., painting a rather sinister picture of the church in Germany. This impression is amplified by publications like the Biblical Research Institute’s recent review of Rolf Pöhler’s book on the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs.¹

nomenon largely unknown to the American religious landscape: the difference between a church and a cult or sect. Up until recently (and quite commonly, still in public perception), we Adventists here in Germany were being labeled a sect or cult in public opinion, with all of the painful prejudices. Only in 2009 did we change our official name to “free church”³ (*Freikirche der STA*) instead of the traditional label “community” (*Gemeinschaft der STA*) that we were called hitherto.

Another particularity of religious

venticles, with pietistic Adventism, as well as with so-called crypto-Catholic Adventists. Additionally, however, one new element has been added to this: namely, to use the terms “Lutheran Adventism” or “pietistic Adventism” in a somewhat judgmental demeanor. Sometimes the terms “liberal” or “conservative” are used, sometimes the label “fundamentalist.” Representatives of all these can be found in almost any church, and for a long time they managed to coexist peacefully. That has changed lately.

Don't misunderstand me; the majority of the [Adventist] churches in Germany are theologically healthy and mission-oriented, harmoniously living their faith. And in the past it was of minor importance whether a church was more Lutheran or more pietistic in their tradition, whether the stress lay more on justification by faith or on personal piety, with sometimes a bent towards perfectionism and an emphasis on just works, hidden behind the term "sanctification." The differences were known, but the different groups respected each other—up until recently.

Today we observe that those Adventists more inclined towards pietism (that is more in the tradition of Calvin than that of Luther) have come to understand themselves as true Adventists. They insist on a more rigid, traditional form of Adventism, fighting against a more supposedly liberal brand of Adventism. While there is agreement in the basic doctrines of our faith tradition, there are distinct differences when it comes to the Adventist specifics. As long as Jan Paulsen was president of the world church, conservative forces in Germany remained rather silent. Even Ekkehard Müller's book review was only published in 2011, though Pöhler's book had been in print since 2008. The theological change begun in Atlanta in 2010 has fuelled the controversy in Germany.

The preceding paragraphs provide the background for a phenomenon which to my knowledge is singular in the history of the advent movement: the newly elected president of the General Conference, in his first year in office, has visited Germany five times, in order to preach in five major con-

ventions. Obviously, he was alerted that Germany was in imminent danger, or that German Adventists were on the verge of schism, or at least heading towards disavowing Adventism. This situation necessitated the intervention of Ted Wilson; at least this is how I interpret his frequent visits to our country in his first twelve months. One or two visits would have been considered normal, but five trips? That prompts further questions.

So after his departure I asked myself which special message he had in store for German Adventists. However, after analyzing his talks, I realized that the subject matter has remained the same since his initial keynote address in Atlanta in July 2010. The president's massive commitment to stamp these topics into German Adventism leads me to conclude that there is an alleged deficiency perceived in our country, a misperception, in my opinion, certainly due to one-sided information.

The outcome of his addresses was predictable: the members in Germany were divided. Several reveled in the message that they had missed for too long. Elder Wilson's sermons were characterized by sincerity and a high sense of responsibility, but they tended to be couched in old phrases and clichés. I don't claim to judge the reactions of the individual listeners, but I found it disenchanting to hear formulae that smacked of being regressive, leaving me with the distinct impression that they were uttered to satisfy the needs of the fundamentalist section.

I have to add, however, that many left the meetings deeply discouraged. Due to lack of objective data I am not able to tell which group represented

the majority. Many had hoped to glean directions on how to deal with current world events. Some perhaps hoped to gain new insights into the interpretation of difficult Bible texts. Those with a passion for theology (and there are many of them in Germany) know about theological discussions with diverging views within the world church. Would Ted Wilson admit that an Adventist theology could be worded differently for the northern or the southern hemisphere? But all we got was the old, stereotypical phraseology. Obviously, there seems to be a confusion of the terms "reformation" and "restoration" because what is expected of us has little to do with genuine reformation and much to do with restoration. Every reformation bears in it the seed of something new, but restoration takes the old and revamps it.

So I ask myself if I am bigheaded in concluding that Ted Wilson never really addressed the issues relevant to us, but rather spoke to us from an altogether different tradition of faith and thinking. I may have misheard, but what appeared to be lacking was the theological bandwidth of the world church. The reflections we heard were one-dimensional, and in writing this I hear the voices of old stereotypes labeling us Germans as notorious critics and wiseacres. However, our official publishing press disproves this argument, as there is nothing to be found except praise and affirmation.⁵ But I want to give my honest assessment, and I don't think it would change even if the editors of *Spectrum* should be faced with furious letters from Germany.

How did I understand Ted Wilson's sermons? Allow me two comments

about them. First, I noticed a dangerous version of end-times theology. He never ceased to emphasize the imminence of the Second Advent. Taking as a starting point the somewhat peculiar and overemphasized notion of the latter rain (which never played a significant role in Palestine), we are called to pray for the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in order to speed up the final work resulting in the coming of Jesus Christ. Many will ask themselves whether Elder Wilson was never informed about the twofold ways to translate the term that Martin Luther rendered with “soon,” since another possibility is to translate it with “suddenly” or “unexpectedly” (KJV: “quickly”), which accords much better with our eschatology. What will happen if next year in all the pastors’ conventions around the globe, ministers are called to preach this message, but the longed-for cosmic event does not materialize? Wouldn’t that create something like a second Great Disappointment among Adventists?

The second observation from listening to Ted Wilson’s sermons is that during the five big conventions at which he spoke, there was a discernible shift in emphasis. Undoubtedly, his visits to the places of the Reformation had borne fruit. His first sermon in Mannheim was very much in the tradition of his keynote address in Atlanta.⁶ His last, in Friedensau, having visited Wartburg and Wittenberg, shows much more grace and theological depth. Deeply convinced in Mannheim that Christ’s return would be imminent, in Friedensau he dared to formulate that it is of little relevance whether Christ will return in five or fifty years.⁷ That was a new beat of the

drum. The thoughts he expressed in Friedensau showed that his visits to the places of the Reformation had deeply impressed him. The main thrust of his argument was still there, but with less pathos than in Atlanta.

So I conclude with delight that Ted Wilson is a learner like all of us, and perhaps he should come back to Germany more often to discuss issues with our fine theologians in Friedensau, and to get to know not only those churches with a pietistic slant, but also those in the heartland of the Reformation. ■

Lothar E. Träder is a retired pastor, teacher and former rector of Marienhöhe, an Adventist boarding school in Darmstadt. He holds a doctorate in church history.

References

1. Pöhler, Rolf. “Hoffnung die uns trägt,” 2008, *Advent Verlag*.
2. Müller, Ekkehardt. *BRI Newsletter* (April 2011): 11.
3. “Free church” is a term frequently used in countries with established state churches to denote independence and an adherence to a strict state/church separation. In German “free churches” this difference is often seen in the more derogative use of the word “church” (*Kirche*) as opposed to the more commonly used term “community” or “congregation” (*Gemeinde*).
4. The first Adventist churches in Germany (Solingen and Vohwinkel) recruited their members from an independent church which was founded and led by Johann Lindermann. Believers met on his compound and most likely they became sabbatarian somewhere in the 1860s. Attempts by J.N. Andrews and J. Erzbeger to integrate the whole group into the SDA-church failed because of Lindermann’s independence and doctrinal dif-

ferences.

5. For instance in the official German church paper *Adventisten Heute*, 8 (2011).

6. See my critical review of that homily (in German): www.kaleidoskop-freikirche.de.

7. Morning devotional, July 8, 2011, with university staff and employees.

<http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2011/09/19/germany-ausgezeichnet-adventures-revival-and-reformation>

Selected Comments

Zane Yi - Mon, 09/19/2011 - 06:27

Thank you for this thought-provoking report and analysis. This past year, I had a couple friends from Germany as house guests and they tried to explain the “liberal”/“conservative” divide in Adventism there. Your explanation of the regional/cultural differences that influence the kind of Adventism that is promulgated is very helpful. It makes me wonder how much this happens in other parts of the world, and how much of Adventism in its “original” form was a product of such factors.

On a side note, here, in the States, as far as I can tell, we do not have much experience/success dialoging with those from the Pietist or Lutheran traditions, so we have much to learn from Germany.

Graeme Sharrock | Mon, 09/19/2011 | 10:31

It is good to get an informed and reflective report on what is happening in Adventism outside of the USA.

I traveled to Germany in the last decade to present a paper at a conference and met with theologians such as Rolf Poelher, social scientists, and many students from all over Europe. I was impressed by the diligence of the Germans, the vitality of the Italians, the community-mindedness of the Spaniards, the friendliness of the English (the conference had few eastern Europeans). The fact that the GC president was European and

embracing of diversity was a fact of quiet pride that encouraged the students who wondered aloud about the possibilities of secular engagement by believers.

Although I am not, I was perceived as an American and had to explain that I did not work for the church, but taught at a private university in America. Most importantly, I experienced first hand how European Adventists had created a community among themselves where the differences in culture were more or less taken for granted. Historical experience has taught them how to maintain positive and diplomatic relations with others who may not share the same worldview. No one got bent out of shape, for instance, when a German speaker went on and on, long past the scheduled ending of a meeting, insisting that he had to read every word of his paper, or an Italian speaker handed out pocket knives to audience members as gifts.

European Adventism is as variegated as in the USA and Canada, with even larger differences of language, nationality and culture. I hope we hear more reports about what is happening there and how European voices are contributing to the wide spectrum of faith and practice today.

Ole-Edvin Utaker | Tue, 09/20/2011 | 09:46

Ted Wilson and his wife visited Norway last weekend and had meetings in Oslo. I went to hear what he had to say, and it seems to me that it is mostly the same sermon he preaches everywhere these days - strong emphasis on SDA identity as the remnant church, different from the rest of Christianity, defined according to him by two key signs: the sabbath and the spirit of prophecy as manifested in EGW. He had a strong emphasis in eschatology and the world to come. He didn't mention once the present role of the church in the local or the global civil society today, except for preaching the unique SDA message. He claimed that "we know exactly what happened in 1844" and emphasised the preaching of God's judgemental understood as the investigative judgement, the latter rain..... He sermon was "other-worldly"

I spoke to a lot of people afterwards, also SDA pastors, young people, and middle-aged. Except for one, all said that they did not support his version of Adventism. My little "research" is of course not representative of the 600-700 who attended the meetings, but I believe it mirrors some of the disappointment with the present world leader, also from denominational workers. What surprised me was that many were quite open and direct in their criticism of him. Some expressed they were afraid that TW would destroy much of what has been built up in Scandinavia the last 20 years and that his approach is like moving 30- 50 years back in time. It has no appeal to Europeans in late modernity, except for conservatives and fundamentalist.

Christian Wannemacher | Wed, 09/21/2011 | 8:35

Let me explain who the author is, especially for the American readers. Lothar E. Traeder (retired pastor, teacher and school principal of Marienhoehe in Darmstadt) educated the generation of German pastors (including church leaders) who are active now and intensely took issue with Ted Wilson's initiative on fundamental #6 in Atlanta. As founder of AWA (an Adventist Scientific Study group that is built after the image of Adventist Forums although not quite the same) he is a respected retiree in certain circles of the church but not without exception because as a cheeky Berliner he likes to polarize.

Now a young generation of Adventists, not educated by Dr. Traeder, begins to redefine the shape of Adventism in Germany ("Youth in mission") boldly. As a response to the present condition of the society and church at large they are much more traditional, less academic and some of them are not only pretty much open to pietist but maybe also to fundamentalist brands of Adventism. Ted Wilson was well received during their last session. The leadership outside the mainly pietist Baden-Wuerttemberg does not always like the strong voice of this highly visible and mission-oriented mega-event organized by the Baden-Wuerttemberg conference.

To my mind Traeder is a church politician like Ted Wilson. As partisan and spokesman he is in part to rate responsible for the present situation in Germany as well. Lately he is more defending his accomplishments instead of being a renovator as he used to be in the past. His last national initiative ("Quo vadis, Adventist Church") was thwarted by Ted Wilson's global initiative "Revival and Reformation." In Germany there are quite some people who disagree with Traeder's emphasis on congregationalism and his analysis of (church) history steering away from the focus on events in the US to mark the Adventist prophetic position.

Sonja K | Wed, 09/21/2011 | 14:51

Thank you so much for your insightful comments on the situation of the Adventist church in Germany and of our world church as such. Being an "Exile German" since 10 years back I have watched the recent development in the German Adventist faith community with growing concern. As you so clearly pointed out there has always been a (rather healthy) diversity in many questions, but in all diversity there was a willingness to accept each other in a spirit of faith community. This has changed very conceivably. My childhood church which has been a loving and accepting congregation as long as I can remember has become a place with a rather "militant spirit" - where you either fit or don't fit. Where you don't have a chance to be granted eternal life if you eat meat or drink coffee. And where the absence of church growth is the fault of some church members who live sinful lives and therefore make it impossible for the congregation to be blessed by the Holy Spirit. Just thinking about this radical change makes my heart shiver.

Right now I work as a pastoral intern in another European country and when asked whether I could imagine working as a pastor in Germany - I have to say "no" (especially since working options for female pastors aren't really great in Germany, but the above mentioned reasons weigh heavily as well.)

Thank you for sharing your thoughts! ■