



Women Delegates, Geography, and the 14th Division | BY BONNIE DWYER

For the Seventh-day Adventist Church's quinquennial session in July 2015, when more than a hundred General Conference officials are elected, a voting body of 2,566 delegates is created to handle the election and other church business.

In a recent story about how the delegates are picked, Adventist News Network reported that 83 percent of the delegates are male and 17 percent female.

"A question that is certain to be asked when reading statistics on gender representation is why is the percentage of female delegates so small when it is perceived that women are in the majority as pertains to Church membership?" the article says.¹

Then it answers its own question: "While efforts are continually made to ensure that the entire delegation shall be comprised [sic] of both genders, currently the positions from which these delegates are named and that generate the majority of delegates for the Session are held by males. This will change over time as more women are elected to leadership positions and Conference or Union executive committee membership."

Yes, this will change over time—if women are allowed to be ordained and thus can be eligible for positions that require an ordained individual to be chosen for the offices such as Conference and Union presidents. Examination of the delegate numbers, and the three ways delegate quotas are established, demonstrates why this is so important.

Delegates with administrative positions are the majority of the delegates. According to the Constitution of the General Conference, delegates are drawn from

- employees of organizational units such as Unions and Conferences
- Division membership based on each Division's ratio to total world membership
- the General Conference itself and its institutions.

Division officers and Union presidents are delegates by

constitutional requirement. Invariably, other Union officers and Conference presidents, a group of about 800 more people, generally make the list of delegates too. So, without ordination, women essentially do not qualify for hundreds of delegate positions.

There is a formula for the inclusion of pastors and the laity that is supposed to be half of the delegate slots left after the administrative delegates are selected. Technically, though, only 400 delegates are allocated based on church membership. The other delegates—more than 2,000—are apportioned according to structural administrative units.

Another way to look at the spread of delegates is geographically (see chart to the right). This, too, shows great disparity in the representation according to membership.

The number of delegates per member is not the same for every Division. The SID has one delegate for every 15,836 members, while the TED has one delegate per every 767 members. The South Pacific Division has more delegates but less members than Northern Asia Pacific Division. Having more Unions, Conferences, and institutions affects the number of delegates in a Division. Also, notice that the unit with the third largest number of delegates is the General Conference itself. It functions like a 14th Division in spite of the fact that it has no membership base other than the approximately 4,000 members who live in the fields that were recently attached to it in the Middle East and Israel.

Who is included in that General Conference delegation? Members of the General Conference Executive Committee, associate department directors, representatives of GC institutions, 20 GC staff members, plus a list of about 70 former leaders and selected individuals traditionally nominated by the president and approved by the Administrative Committee.

If we were to compare the Adventist system to the US Congress, where the section of governance with the greatest numbers is in the House because representatives are apportioned based on population, we see that the Adventist

Delegates by Division, their membership, and the ratio of members per delegate²

Number of Delegates	Division		Membership	Ratio: Delegates to Membership
213	ECD	East Central Africa Division	2,856,708	1:13,412
112	ESD	Euro-Asia Division	116,013	1:1,036
118	EUD	Inter-European Division	178,199	1:1,510
392	IAD	Inter-American Division	3,686,255	1:9,404
241	NAD	North American Division	1,184,395	1:4,915
81	NSD	Northern Asia-Pacific Division	679,907	1:8,393
272	SAD	South American Division	2,263,194	1:8,320
200	SID	Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division	3,167,259	1:15,836
95	SPD	South Pacific Division	420,936	1:4,431
161	SSD	Southern Asia-Pacific Division	1,222,546	1:7,593
143	SUD	Southern Asia Division	1,520,326	1:10,631
110	TED	Trans-European Division	84,428	1:767
168	WAD	West Central Africa Division	769,609	1:4,581
10	MENA	GC Attached Territories MENA & Israel Field	3,946	1:395
250	GC	General Conference	0	

system is reversed. The largest number of delegates is based on church structural units rather than membership.

There is nothing inherently wrong with preference being given to administrators, since they are the people responsible for running the church organization. But some might argue that a system based more equally on membership would be more fair.

What is also problematic is barring women, who are half of the church membership, from holding hundreds of top administrative offices, such as Conference and Union presidencies. There are approximately 750 of these positions in the church, and they all require ordination. Almost all of those people become delegates to the General Conference, effectively locking women out of those delegate slots.

In the recent discussion of women's ordination, the tie of administrative offices to ordained positions has not been a major factor in the conversation. It was not discussed in the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC), for instance. The ascension of one woman to the presidency of

the Southeastern California Conference helped nudge the women's ordination conversation along, but that was all.

Whatever the outcome of the vote on women's ordination, these issues of delegate disparity in representation of membership—geographically and by gender—need to be faced and fixed. ■

Bonnie Dwyer is editor of *Spectrum* magazine.

References

1. "GC Session 101: Discovering the Delegates," Adventist News Network news release, May 28, 2015, <http://news.adventist.org/all-news/news/go/2015-05-28/gc-session-101-discovering-the-delegates/>.
2. Membership numbers published in the official delegate brochure of the 2015 Session, http://2015.gcsession.org/fileadmin/gcsession.adventist.org/files/galleries/GCS2015_DelegatesBro_WEB_041315.pdf.