A Watershed for Seventh-day Adventism

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Over 2,500 delegates from 184 countries participated in the quinquennial General Conference Session of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Indianapolis, July 5-14, 1990. The session was marked by impassioned debates and dramatic, unexpected election results. By its close it was clear that Adventism had reached a turning point and that others lay ahead.

Origins and Beliefs

When the prediction of Baptist lay-preacher, William Miller, that Christ would return on October 22, 1844 proved false, his movement, which had drawn upwards of 50,000 followers in the American northeast, shattered. One fragment, guided by a young visionary, Ellen White, reinterpreted the prophecy: the pre-advent judgment had begun in heaven on that day. However, the appearance of the Bridegroom would not be long delayed. Meanwhile, it was their special task to warn the world to prepare for that event. This involved calling Christians to a strict observance of the commandments, especially the neglected Saturday Sabbath. The name they chose when they formally organized in 1863, Seventh-day Adventists, thus highlighted their most significant peculiar doctrines. Ellen White also urged the waiting saints to keep their minds clear and their bodies healthy by abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea, and flesh foods, for they had a great deal to do for the Lord.

Expansion and Centralization

The call to observe the Sabbath was especially difficult in the nineteenth century, when a six-day working week was almost universal. Nevertheless, the commitment of Adventists to tell their neighbors and to support evangelists and missionaries with a strict system of tithing resulted in numerical growth and geographical expansion, first in the U.S. and then abroad. Wherever they went they tried, as part of their outreach, to establish schools and "sanitariums", which eventually developed into extensive networks of educational and medical institutions.

Unlike the mainstream Protestant denominations, Adventist missionary work did not culminate in the spinning off of independent national churches, but instead helped build a highly centralized system whose headquarters, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, relocated last year to Silver Spring, Maryland, just outside Washington D.C. The president of the General Conference, in recent court testimony, stated that the Adventist church was second only to the Roman Catholic church in the hierarchical nature of its structure. This structure is arranged in geographically-based administrative layers, with churches being grouped in conferences, conferences in unions (which comprise several

states or a smaller nation), and the unions in the eleven divisions of the General Conference. These administrative units, together with the educational, medical, publishing and food processing institutions whose boards they control, employ more than 111,000 persons.

Because tithes are not retained at the congregational level, but are passed up the structure, the hierarchy has had considerable flexibility to redistribute funds from the wealthier parts of the world church to the newer and poorer segments, and thus to orchestrate expansion. Its control over finances and its voice in the choice of leaders at lower levels also enables it to exercise considerable control over the operation of the - church as a whole. This is so in spite of a representative feature, where delegates from the constituent bodies choose the committees which select the officers and department heads at each level. Constituency meetings, especially those at the higher levels of the organizational pyramid, have proved unlikely to act independently because the delegates have not been elected but have either been chosen because they hold certain positions or been appointed by those holding such positions--that is, the vast majority of delegates at constituency meetings above the conference level have been church employees.

The result of such influence by an American-based hierarchy has been a highly Americanized church. The vast majority of General Conference personnel have been Americans, the flow of funds, personnel, and theology has been outwards from America, and even the hymnals have almost everywhere been dominated by translations of American hymns.

This pattern has continued in spite of the fact that in recent decades the proportion of the world membership residing in America has fallen sharply as accessions there have been eclipsed by rapid growth in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia. North Americans had dominated numerically for the first half-century, making up 91.0% of the membership in 1890, and had formed a majority (51.7%) as recently as 1920; but by the end of 1979 they had declined to 17.7% of the total, and in 1989 to only 12.0%. Demographically, the members in North America and the rest of the developed world are aging, while the membership in the developing countries is much younger. These changes in the numerical balance, together with the increasing replacement of missionaries by nationals in leadership positions at the lower levels of church structure, inevitably raised the issue of when and to what extent the distribution of leadership and other staff at headquarters would be modified to reflect world membership. At the General Conference Session in1985 an African graduate student studying in America pointedly asked when the Adventist church would follow the papal lead in appointing African "cardinals". Many wondered then whether such stirrings would develop into a chorus at the 1990 session.

The General Conference Session of 1990

While the primary purpose of a General Conference Session is to conduct business, it is also a celebration of Adventism and its progress, a fair where church publishers, departments, educational and medical institutions, and unofficial "self-supporting ministries" show their wares and garner support, an old-fashioned revival meeting, and a "family gathering" where church employees, in particular, meet former school-mates and colleagues. Church officials, delegates and their families, support staff, and laity crowd the corridors in numbers that encourage local restaurants to create vegetarian menus and advertise that Sabbath meals may be paid for in advance: the attendance at the Hoosier Dome in Indianapolis on the final Sabbath this year was estimated at over 40,000. Since each of the units finance the travel and accommodation costs of its delegation, no one knows the total cost of a session to the denomination, but this year it was estimated as "certainly in eight digits."

Because of the air of celebration about the proceedings, with upbeat multimedia reports of progress from each of the world divisions and a final mission pageant featuring delegates in national costume, there is always a strong tendency to focus on encouraging news rather than to address worrying issues. There was a great deal of joy in Indianapolis concerning the success of the "Harvest '90" outreach program, which had aimed at adding two million members to the church during the 1985-1990 quinquennium but had, in fact, achieved over 2.5 million baptisms, bringing the official world membership to 6.4 million: the average annual net growth rate during the quinquennium had climbed to 6.9% from a low of 4.8% twenty-five years earlier. However, there was no attempt to wrestle with the weaknesses of the program. It had, in effect, created a competition between divisions which ultimately placed pastors, especially those in developing countries, under great pressure to win converts. The result was that they often baptized people who barely understood what they were doing and failed to nurture them afterwards because program objectives forced them to shift their attention to new baptismal prospects. The program also resulted in an apostasy rate that was much higher than admitted, since pastors and administrators under pressure to perform well were naturally loath to report failures, and consequently grossly inflated growth statistics. Similarly, the two separate racially segregated unions in South Africa each gave its own report which stressed its progress without informing the delegates of the existence of apartheid in the church or attempting to address in any way the issues raised by this situation.

The main business of a General Conference Session is to elect the officers and departmental heads at both the General Conference and division levels and to make changes in the constitution of the church and in the Church Manual. Delegates caucus separately, by division, on the opening day of the session to elect their quota of members

to the Nominating Committee, which sits throughout the session. This committee, which collectively comprises less than one-tenth of the delegates and where the presidents of the 85 unions form the largest category, nominates one person for each position. Its choices are then normally ratified without question on the session floor. The other delegates debate and vote on the other issues on the session agenda.

Election Surprises

The drama of the 1990 session began with the election of the president of the General Conference. This was the first time since 1922 that an incumbent willing to run for another term was not re-elected. The world membership had doubled during Neal C. Wilson's twelve years in office, but his authoritarian management style had alienated several constituencies, he was identified with several demoralizing theological and financial crises that had marred his record, his age, 70, was against him in spite of his astounding vigor, and there was a widespread sense of deep crisis and need for new directions in spite of the acknowledged progress under his leadership. Perhaps most of all, the growth of the church in developing countries, which Wilson had fostered so determinedly, had created an internationalization of the profile of the denomination that now needed to be matched in leadership.

The actual choice to replace Wilson was very surprising, and the process proved to be nerve-wracking. The representatives of the two largest divisions, which are both Latin-dominated, emerged as the strongest bloc on the nominating committee. The presidents of the unions of North America, who had traditionally been politically dominant on this committee, found themselves virtually powerless. The committee first nominated George Brown, a West Indian who was president of the Inter-American Division [IAD], which - consists of the Latin countries from Mexico to Venezuela plus all of the Caribbean countries. He was the first black and the first member from the Third World ever to be nominated as world president. However, after considering the nomination for three hours, he declined the post.

The nominating committee then turned to the man whom they had earlier elected to chair their deliberations, Robert S. Folkenberg. He is a son of missionary parents who spent most of his life and career in Spanish-speaking parts of the IAD, but had served as president of a conference in the American South for the past five years. At age 49, he was the youngest person elected to the post since 1901, and was also the first person to be elevated to that post directly from that of conference president since the church had been restructured and divisions created in 1901. An American who is bilingual, known, and trusted in Latin America was an ideal choice for a period of transition from American dominance to greater international representation. Folkenberg was identified with change, for he had published a call for structural change in *Ministry* a year earlier--an article that

had at that time been dubbed "political suicide" by insiders used to the caution of Adventist administrators. Yet he also represented continuity, for he had been close to Wilson, who had probably been behind his election as nominating committee chair, and had played a prominent part in some of Wilson's recent initiatives. Moreover, as committee chair, he had initially maneuvered to have Wilson re-elected until he found this route impossible. Nevertheless, he had not been on anyone's list of possible candidates for president before the session began.

Given the new balance of power on the Nominating Committee, the overall result of the elections was to make the General Conference noticeably more international in personnel. An African was elected as a Vice-president for the first time, thus achieving the "cardinal" status denied in 1985, while white Americans among the Vice-presidents were reduced to two out of five, an all-time low. Two of the departments, education and church ministries, were headed by Latins--another major change.

Ordination of Women Pastors

The question of whether to allow the ordination of women as ministers was the major issue facing the business sessions. This was the culmination of almost two decades of study and debate in which the General Conference leadership had played an uncharacteristically indecisive role. The general issue of women in ministry had first been raised, mainly but not solely in North America, in the early seventies, with questions concerning whether women could be ordained either as ministers or as elders within congregations. Some congregations began to ordain women as elders even though the issue had not been addressed officially. The General Conference responded in 1974 by arranging a conference of theologians to explore these matters. When these found no biblical objections to ordaining women, the way was prepared for the bureaucratic changes to be made to allow the ordination of women as elders. Today 1,100 women elders have been appointed in North American congregations and the practice has spread to other divisions, especially in Europe and Australasia. However, although the North American division, led at that time by future General Conference President Neal Wilson, established special seminary fellowships to encourage women to enter the ministry, progress towards their ordination as ministers proved to be much slower.

The new atmosphere resulted in increased numbers of women seminarians, many of whom outshone the men in their classes. However, these women found that after graduation and the usual two or three years pre-ordination service as a "licensed minister" their male classmates were being ordained but they were not--because the issue of ordination of women had not been officially settled. As continuing licensed ministers, their roles were normally limited to being associate pastors of churches, hospital chaplains, or religion teachers, and their functions were also restricted. Meanwhile, conservatives had

mobilized opposition to women's ordination, with the wives of older and retired ministers playing an especially prominent part.

The General Conference was eventually forced to return to the issue because of increasing debate, especially once the Potomac Conference, in which it was situated, allowed its women pastors to baptize--a function that had previously been regarded as a prerogative of ordained ministers. However, rather than taking a stand on the issue and then endeavoring to persuade the church to proceed accordingly, Wilson vacillated, frozen by a fear of pluralism and disunity. Declaring that the whole international church must act uniformly, he called the first of three commissions of administrators and theologians, with representatives from each of the world divisions, to consider the issue in 1984. Since the categories represented were so male-dominated, it took special quotas to lift the proportion of women commission members to 25%. Meanwhile, Wilson himself adopted a neutral stance. The lack of leadership allowed cultural prejudices to surface. While there was consensus that there was no explicit scriptural directive concerning the ordination of women, the representatives from Latin America and Africa and others who were conservative on this issue interpreted this as prohibiting a change of policy, while representatives, and especially theologians, from North America, Europe and Australasia were inclined to interpret this as allowing innovation. When all three commissions (in 1984, 1988, and 1989) proved inconclusive, the administrators of the General Conference and divisions, meeting in their Annual Council in the Fall of 1989, opted to recommend that the General Conference Session vote against ordaining women on the grounds that it was - opposed by a majority of the divisions and that to proceed risked "disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church."

With such a recommendation, the advocates of women's ordination decided that their only hope was to persuade the session to allow any division that opted for it to proceed unilaterally. An emotional debate changed few minds. Delegates from the Third World were unmoved by North American pleas for understanding that this had become for them a moral issue, and that a decision against ordination could further alienate their younger members. Neither were they willing to grant one division permission to do something that others need not adopt: indeed, some North American delegates detected an air of "Americans dominated us for a long time, but now it is our turn." Many delegates resented the fact that while their speeches were limited to two minutes, Wilson was allowed to speak in favor of the motion for half an hour. After this last word the motion not to ordain women was endorsed by a lopsided vote of 1,173 to 377.

Many of those most intimately involved in the issue had been excluded from the vote by the system, for only 230 of the 2,644 delegates (8.7%) were women. Some of them had plead with Folkenberg to use his unexpected election as an excuse to table the issue

for another five years during which time they hoped he would try to prepare the way for change, but he chose to remain aloof from the debate. Such an action would have alienated his Latin supporters.

Ironically, the session then joined in the process of removing most of the functional distinctions between ordained and licensed ministers. The conferences had agreed to put a hold on women baptizing when the first women's commission was called in 1984. However, the constituencies of two conferences became so impatient with the failure to reach agreement by 1988 that they voted to permit women pastors to conduct both baptisms and marriages. Wilson decided to accept this as a *fait accompli,* and rammed it - through the 1989 Annual Council against intense Latin opposition, with the added stipulation that this decision was final and therefore did not have to be taken to the General Conference Session. However, the change concerning marriages required an amendment to the Church Manual, which did need session approval. After a long and heavy debate, which concluded with lengthy speeches from Wilson and the head of the General Conference Ministerial Association, this time pleading for an exception to meet the
needs of North America, the change was voted 776 to 494. This vote showed clearly that the delegates were voting in blocs: almost no delegates from the Latin American or African divisions voted for the motion.

With these changes the only functions that a licensed woman pastor cannot perform are the formal organization of churches and the ordination of others. The bottom line has been clarified: power. Most of the leadership, committee, and delegate posts are restricted to ordained persons, and thus to males. Those eligible to exercise power within - Adventism are still restricted to a very limited category.

AIDS

Perhaps the most notable omission from the session's agenda was any discussion of AIDS. Adventists have been slow to become involved with the victims of this disease, for they have associated it with unworthy people. Their hospitals have not attempted to be at the forefront in treating it, and indeed some in Africa have been cavalier in their use of untested blood for
transfusions; American members who have contracted the disease have often been shunned; and
church leaders in Africa have assumed that this is not an issue affecting Adventists. The General Conference did form an AIDS Committee, which included major experts among its lay members. However, the latter have become increasingly frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the committee. Being aware of the AIDS statistics in Africa, of the rapid - growth of the church there, and of studies that suggest that the promiscuity of African

Christians is not markedly less than that of non-Christians, they concluded that AIDS must be impacting the church there severely and that it is imperative that Adventists give it priority. Consequently, they agitated to have the issue placed on the agenda of the session. Their failure in this respect has completed their disillusionment with the AIDS Committee--they regard the time they have spent there as largely wasted.

Looming Issues

If one reads between the lines of the General Conference Session election results, decisions, and reports, there are clear signs of serious issues ahead which the new administration must face.

As the numerical balance within the world church has shifted dramatically in the last two decades, there has been mounting discussion of who should control decision-making, those with the members or those with the money. This was brought into the open in the report of the General Conference secretary, while the treasurer underlined the issue when he reported that "tithe from the North American Division comprises nearly 97 percent of all tithe received by the General Conference." The concentration of recent growth among the poor (including the growth in North America, where it has occurred mostly among recent immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia) has accentuated a drop in per capita giving, which declined by 3.9% between 1984 and 1989 without adjustment for inflation. The other main component of this statistic has been a tendency among Americans to switch their giving from "tithe", which all flows out of the local congregation, to "offerings", which can be directed to local or "self-supporting" projects, as they have become increasingly disillusioned with central management. A major question, then, is how North Americans will respond financially to the new politics, which has increased the power of those with large numbers of members at the expense of those who have been bankrolling the system.

Many of the more active North American women found the General Conference Session a wrenching experience. Some of these have since decided to reduce their involvement in the church, while others have chosen to resign their membership, saying that just as they would not belong to a club that discriminates racially, neither can they continue in a church that discriminates against women. Many more of these women, and indeed many men, state that they are deeply concerned over how their daughters will - respond to the ordination decision. There is abundant evidence that large numbers of younger Adventists in North America feel alienated from their church, not seeing its relevance to their lives. The refusal of the church to take a stand on what is to them a central, moral issue, is likely to increase their alienation. The ordination of women is one

such issue for many younger members, especially females. Many of them have followed it closely; they have observed the trauma of these years of uncertainty and disappointment to the women pastors, seeing many of them sag under the pressures and resign from the ministry, turn to hospital chaplaincy or, in one case, commit suicide. The flow of women to the seminary is therefore likely to decline. Women are the foot-soldiers of the Adventist church: they make up two-thirds of the membership, they are much more likely than men to be spiritual and committed--and they have in the past been much less likely to lapse into cynicism. The ordination issue has touched many of them closely. To what extent will their long-term trust and commitment to the church be undermined by the decisions of this session?

A major leadership theme at this session was the need to protect and foster unity. The secretary warned that "we cannot afford to fragment international churches. This miracle of a united worldwide Seventh-day Adventist family will have to be maintained at all cost." The ordination of women was rejected on the grounds that it might risk disunity. Resolutions were introduced that sought to encourage uniformity in behavior. One was passed reaffirming the delegates' acceptance of the "counsel from God" given through Ellen White and committing them to "live by the principles contained in it." But when another resolution attempted to detail guidelines for Sabbath observance, some complained that it was an attempt to establish an Adventist "Mishnah". Its teeth were removed by an amendment that, rather than voting to accept the statement, merely acknowledged its receipt. It seems likely that the decision concerning the ordination of women will also be undermined--from below. Two conferences in North America, anticipating a negative decision in Indianapolis, voted before the session to schedule constituency meetings for the Fall which would then consider proceeding with the ordination of their women pastors. Since the presidents of these conferences publicly dubbed this a "moral issue", it will probably be difficult for them now to reverse positions, in spite of a warning from the head of the General Conference Ministerial Association during the debates that any unilateral action would be tantamount to rebellion.

The agenda which emphasized a rigid reading of "unity" was set by the outgoing administration and supported directly by the address with which Wilson opened the Session. But in his sermon on the final day of the session, Folkenberg replaced Wilson's equation of unity and uniformity with "unity in diversity" and "unity is not uniformity." Moreover, Folkenberg has taken a stand for reducing the staff of the General Conference because of the shortage of funds and widespread demands that more tithe be retained at lower levels, and is already implementing this policy vigorously. The General Conference is consequently likely to become more specialized and the lower levels relatively more powerful.

"Global Strategy", a new program of evangelism, was introduced at this session. Its innovative emphasis could change Adventism considerably. In their efforts to spread the "everlasting gospel" of Revelation 14:7, which they identify as their message, Adventists have focused on only one segment of the verse, "to every nation." They have frequently expressed pride that they have congregations in 184 of the 215 countries and areas officially recognized by the United Nations, and observed that this means that the Gospel Commission is nearing fulfillment, which is a key indication that the Lord will soon return. However, they have now concluded that they have neglected the rest of the verse: "to every...tribe, language, and people." Their analysis divided the population of the world into some 5,000 ethnolinguistic or demographic groupings of one million people each. It found that they had at least one church in 3,200 of these but no presence in the other 1,800. "Global Strategy" aims at targeting the latter groups so that they can all be reached by the year 2000--a huge task. One result of the past concern for numerical goals was to focus funds on areas where growth was easiest--which were often those where Adventist work was already well established. Because Global Strategy will divert funds to unentered, more difficult, situations, it may have the result of slowing the growth-rate. It is likely that this program will also redirect Adventists from their previous practice, where they often concentrated primarily on winning converts from other churches, to attempting to evangelize many groups which have had very little contact with Christianity. One of the first initiatives in preparation for this program was to establish an Institute of Islamic Studies so that Adventists might improve their understanding of Muslims and be better prepared to capitalize on the commonalities between their faiths.