

## Why Our Unique Parliamentary Rules?

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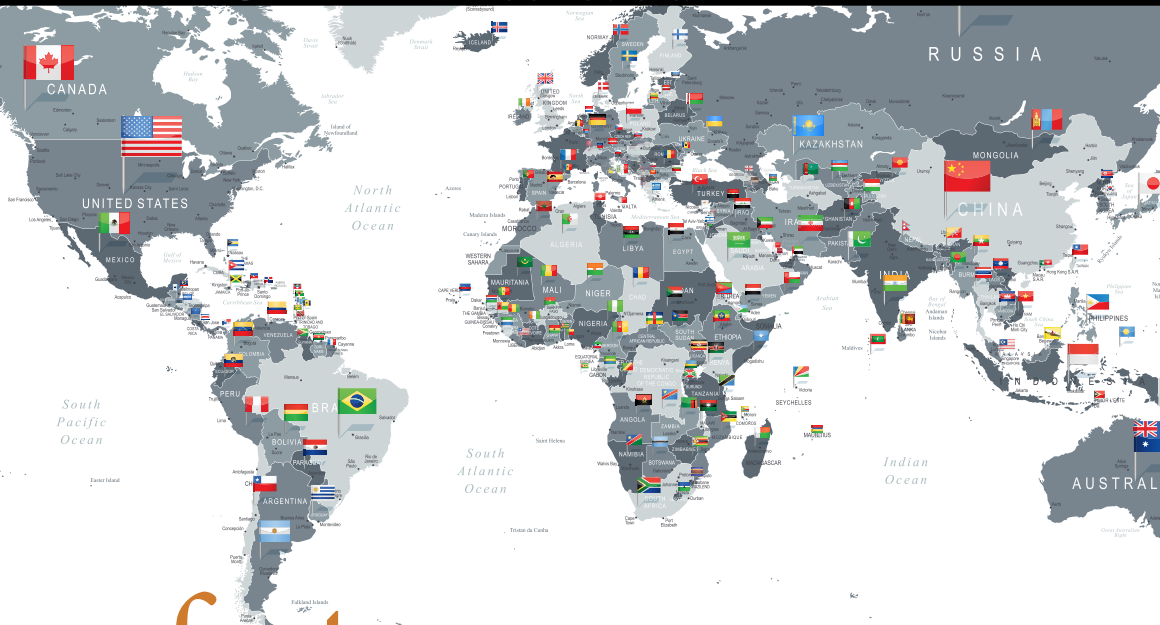


# Adventist Today

WINTER 2020 • VOL. 28 NO. 1



# THE 2020 GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSION



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## Our Quinquennial Papacy

By Loren Seibold

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM OF MY CHILDHOOD was obsessed with Roman Catholicism. I remember entire sermons preached about the Catholic Church, with Jesus entering the story only as an aside. To the prophetic horrors of Ellen White in *The Great Controversy* were added the fictions of Maria Monk: sex in nunneries, babies thrown in pits of lye, torture in basilica basements.

The Roman Catholic Church and the pope were important players in my childhood faith—more frightening than Jesus was comforting. I know that children have had to endure many things down through history, but making them suffer horror stories about how your Roman Catholic neighbors are going to report you to the police and torture you in their church basements is indefensible.

I have always maintained that our obsession with Roman Catholicism says far more about us than it does about the papacy, and that it can't but issue forth in an unhealthy faith. I vowed that as a pastor, I would never frighten people with such nonsense. And I haven't.

That doesn't mean I'm defending Roman Catholicism. It has all of the problems associated with every organized religion, and because of its hierarchical structure, extraordinary wealth, peculiar clergy, and unbending sense of itself as the only Christian church, often worse. Claiming a history going back to Jesus doesn't excuse abusive behavior in the centuries since.

### Our Alter Ego

If you shove aside the anti-Catholic nonsense, the foundational criticism of Rome is that it isn't biblical, flexible, evolving, or democratic. The pope has been seen as God's voice on Earth, a virtual spiritual dictator who could interpret the Bible as he wanted to, who didn't ask anyone for advice, and who ruled the church with an iron hand.

Since Vatican II that description may not be accurate, if it ever was. Still, I assume that most of us believe that a church shouldn't be run by one man, or even a team of them. That it should be based

on the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. That it should be especially moral and ethical. That groups of believers adapt to the times and learn new things as we go along that bring us ever closer to God's will. That the church is at its best when it is local and responsive to individuals' needs. And that because much of one's faith is personal, between you and God, there is room for substantial doctrinal differences among us.

That's why the endless quotes about the General Conference (GC) in Session being God's highest authority on Earth<sup>1</sup> bother me so much. What it amounts to is that we, too, have a papacy—one that meets every five years and empowers our leaders to carry on in an authoritarian manner in the time in between.

### An Inevitable Problem

People blame GC President Ted Wilson for this slide into authoritarianism, but he's a symptom, not a cause. Getting the kind of leader who could have saved us from authoritarianism would have been the surprise. What we got was precisely what we should have expected, extrapolating from our history.

Adventism started out with strong theological opinions but little sense of organizational dynamics. I believe that people unconsciously take on certain qualities of their enemies, and our enemy was Roman Catholicism. Lacking an intentional ecclesiology, we developed a system not unlike the one we opposed. And so we ended up being far more like the Catholics than we probably intended to be. Our terminology is different (conferences, unions, and divisions rather than dioceses, archdioceses, and episcopal conferences; presidents and secretaries rather than deacons, bishops, and cardinals; Sabbath rules and food restrictions rather than sacraments), but we are similarly hierarchical and identical in having a sense of ourselves as the only legitimate Christians.

The will to power is also similar. We see it every five years when the world church meets for the General Conference Session. There, it becomes the Vatican of the denomination and votes policies that

**We, too, have a papacy—one that meets every five years and empowers our leaders to carry on in an authoritarian manner in the time in between.**

the rest of the church must adhere to. Our leaders take the authority they've been given by the votes of the delegates and employ it for the next five years with the support of the pliable General Conference Executive Committee, which is composed mostly of church employees.

Since 2015 our General Conference president used the church's vote on women's ordination to make himself the Great Enforcer, becoming overbearing and demanding far beyond the remit of that vote, even creating a clumsy, top-down enforcement mechanism: the "compliance committees."

Yet I insist that our decline into authoritarianism didn't happen because any one person was especially perverse. It happened because as an organization we are sclerotic and bilious, no longer agile enough or healthy enough to adapt to a changing world. We are overloaded with things to protect, from our reputation to our employees to our theology to our real estate. We are terrified that the church

been pursued with such enthusiasm. Control is the last refuge of an unskilled leader.

## Democracy at the Session

It has long seemed to me that huge meetings of people who don't know one another, while lovely for fellowship and group identity, are fairly useless for making good decisions and workable strategies. The impossibility of such a large and diverse group working well together throws control to the leadership. The weakness of a large democracy is that it isn't necessarily democratic: the power belongs to those we rely upon to make the system work.

This wouldn't be a bad thing if you had an organizational culture that generated informed and progressive leadership and whose leaders were open-minded enough to identify what will make people feel successful and secure. But that's seldom the case with "legacy" leaders such as Wilson, who

**Even if an exciting new leader—one who could initiate the equivalent of an Adventist Vatican II—were out there, it would be almost impossible for that person to make it into the presidency.**

is going to fly asunder. We have little trust in one another—often for good reasons—and we doubt our ability to remain a viable organization in the face of pressures cultural, theological, and economic. We use too many resources at the top, in maintaining control, and not enough on the product, which is a local community. One of the biggest threats to the church is evidence of massive corruption in some regions, and there appears to be little will to correct it.

That is to say, we are aged and unwell and unlikely to improve on our own. Elder Wilson is a decent and spiritual man, but he hasn't been a good geriatrician for us. His diagnosis of insufficient theological unity was faulty, as was his treatment: a stronger hand in doctrine and policy, frequent scolding and fault-finding, and stifling of cultural differences. A wiser leader would have recognized such treatment as contraindicated for a church of such diversity, but Wilson missed all of that. He did what leaders at this stage of an organization's decline often do, which is to go on the defensive: protect, restrict, exclude, purify, and threaten rather than drawing the circle wider.

That's why the theme of the General Conference as God's highest authority on Earth has emerged so strongly and

get put in place because they and their families have spent their lives looking at the church from organizational offices.

Wilson wasn't trying to find common ground when for five years he prepared the church to defeat women's ordination. He'd already told us that he didn't approve of women's ordination. He telegraphed that to his friends in other fields, who prepared their delegates for how they should vote. The Theology of Ordination Study Committee wasn't a serious attempt at finding truth, but cynical misdirection, because in the end it was pointedly disempowered. And so when women's ordination went down to defeat, it shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone.

I say again that this happens not because these leaders are bad men, but because they're worried and afraid, and control is the primary tool in their toolbox. As much as they say they believe in a democratic church, they don't want that to actually work, because it seems likely to take us in directions they've already decided they don't want to go. Wilson decided early on that he didn't want to see women ordained, and he led the church to reject it. He could just as easily have led the church to accept it. In this case, democracy failed us.

## Be Careful What You Wish For

Many of my friends are hoping that Ted Wilson will no longer be the president of the General Conference after this summer. I'd be inclined to agree with them, except that those waiting in the wings to take up the job aren't necessarily better. The General Conference is incestuous in leadership development; it nurtures its own. And because the "God's highest authority on Earth" culture permeates this organization, those it nurtures also believe that our biggest problems require top-down enforcement.

There is an expectation that in Indianapolis, the church will at long last elect a General Conference president with some melanin in his skin, who hails from somewhere other than America or Europe. But other parts of the world church wouldn't necessarily provide a president who leads with a light touch. They might provide leaders who would double down on the agenda of demands and control.

Take for example the South American Division (SAD) president, Brazilian Erton Carlos Köhler, who has telegraphed his desire to take the top church job. He leads one of the most successful fields in the world church. Enough money comes to the GC from Brazil that a shift in exchange rates on the *real* (R\$) has made the GC treasurer's job difficult in some years. Köhler had never been a top executive in any conference or union before he was picked for his current position.

It would be unfair to Wilson to say that Köhler has followed the Wilson playbook. In fact, he's been even more strongly controlling, employing an old-fashioned "I demand it, and you do it" attitude toward his region. Judicatories in his territory say that he spends what he wants to, merely telling them to cough up the money. He has built up massive centralized institutions with hundreds of employees, such as the Adventist Institute of Technology, among whose rumored projects is a smart-phone app to monitor in real time the movements and activities of pastors.

Despite the division's large membership and solid infrastructure, only four of its 16 unions are actually union conferences. Most are union *missions*, in which the entire administration is chosen by the division board. Since Köhler has taken charge, three new union missions have been established, but it has been more than 30 years since the last union conference was organized in the SAD. This gives the president control of almost every aspect of

the work on that continent without having to answer to a constituency in most regions.

Köhler disapproves of women's ordination, though he cagily asserts that he only supports what the church wants. Ranieri Salles, Köhler's main competitor for the job and the leader many would have preferred, was hounded and criticized by Köhler until he relocated to Europe. A South American pastor I interviewed told me that pastors and educators in his division have been deeply disheartened. "The pastors are very excited about [the possibility of] Köhler's moving to the GC," he told me, "because that means he will be gone from here."

Move on to Asia, where the Southern Asia Division (SUD) is mired in corruption allegations. Which of those leaders now in a high position, some of whom are associated with the Hope Center debacle and Spicer Adventist University's many embarrassments, would you elect as the executive of the whole church?

Africa, which has more Adventists than any other field in the world, is riven by nepotism and tribal fights. Would putting an African in charge make the church more unified, or would it bring these problems right into the offices at 12501 Old Columbia Pike?

Please understand that I'm not saying there aren't good and honest men in these regions. What I am saying is that those good and honest men are unlikely to be the ones queued up for the job. Even if an exciting new leader—one who could initiate the equivalent of an Adventist Vatican II—were out there, it would be almost impossible for that person to make it into the presidency. While it would be an exaggeration to say that the next GC president has already been selected, it wouldn't be far off to say that those now in power have some idea of who they want and believe that the next GC president will come from their short list. And given how carefully the nominating committee is chosen, they might be right.

All of which leads me to fear that Wilson may yet emerge a better candidate than some others. As the old apothegm goes, better the devil you know.

## Organizational Changes That Could Matter

In a previous editorial, I listed leadership priorities<sup>2</sup> I'd suggest to a potential General Conference president. But inasmuch as we're now going to be meeting as a policy-shaping organization, here are some *organizational* changes

that might improve the denomination. Not all of them are achievable at this meeting, but they're part of a tapestry of changes that I wish could be addressed.

**Return to "chair of the board."** Back in the youthful days of our denomination, the leader of the General Conference was the chairman of the General Conference Committee. Somewhere along the line that morphed into "president," with all of the corporate and political overtones that accompany that title. Wilson expanded it beyond the General Conference, labeling himself "President of the World Church of Seventh-day Adventists." It is no wonder the holder of this office sees himself in imperial terms, expecting to travel and be feted and celebrated wherever he goes, and expecting to be obeyed whenever he speaks.

I know the change might be mostly symbolic, but what if we went back to the previous title, signifying that each president is merely chair of the board in his or her territory? That might even open the way for talented laypeople, rather than career administrators, to take these positions.

**Run the church locally.** Every time I talk to top officials at a local conference, union conference, division, or the General Conference, what I hear about is how much they travel. Sometimes it seems as if they are active everywhere except where they work.

Ever tried to make an appointment with a union conference or division president? If they're honest, these individuals will tell you that they're in Loma Linda this week, Orlando the next, Hong Kong the next, and London the week after that. They're members of dozens of boards where they aren't really needed, and their subordinates—the ones who aren't traveling themselves—are left to do the work.

I know a conference president, a good speaker and a fine man, who appears to accept every speaking appointment anywhere he is invited, and often his wife goes along. On their Facebook page, you can find pictures of them taken around the world. This man has a good reputation as a speaker. But back at home, important things are neglected, including pastors he's never talked to. Districts left open for months. Problems going unsolved.

It's time to insist that our leaders stay home and lead.

**Slim down the General Conference.** I suspect that much of what the General Conference does could disappear tomorrow, and 90 percent of the world church would never notice. I believe we should trim the General

Conference to the function of coordinating and auditing institutions for the world's work, and we should curb its aspirations to be the originator of all good ministry ideas, with its leaders traveling the world as figureheads. Putting the General Conference on a diet might not be as hard as you think. The headquarters building is teeming with men who should have retired a decade ago and whose primary contribution is to institutional inertia.

**Rethink ministry resourcing.** The GC has loads of resource functions whose usefulness isn't tested. Do the programs recommended by mission planners actually build the church? Is the ministerial department necessary? Are all of the magazines, pamphlets, and books, which are published by the organization and then sent out free of charge, really read by anyone? Most importantly: has anyone done an analysis to find out?

Not long ago when I was a pastor, I received a large box of books from the stewardship departments of the GC and the North American Division (NAD). I tried to get my congregation to use them. But no one wanted them, no one would take them, and no one read them. They ultimately went into the dumpster. I talked to other pastors who had hauled theirs to the trash, too. Church members would be astonished at the quantity of printing-for-the-dumpster that goes on in the offices of the church.

Please understand that I'm not saying that the people in the GC offices are lazy. On the contrary, they got these jobs because they are smart, self-motivated people who stay very busy. The question isn't whether or not they're capable and energetic, but whether they're actually accomplishing anything.

We don't need people in offices generating materials and services no one has requested. In fact, I'd suggest that much of what the GC, divisions, and union conferences produce could be developed, sold, and distributed by parachurch ministries. Most of our best programs have come from outside, from practitioners rather than administrators.

As for the General Conference: enough of the Biblical Research Institute, which has functioned like the Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, looking down its nose at the church and blocking progressive thinking. Enough of the Geoscience Research Institute, which produces little that is ever seen by church members.

And why do we need a General Conference youth department or stewardship department—four stories

above where it matters? If leadership is needed in these areas, then let conferences keep their money and hire it.

**Up the auditing game.** I stopped by the General Conference Auditing Service (GCAS) last year and asked the people there about the corruption reports we hear from Africa and Asia. They made it clear that finding crimes and theft isn't their responsibility. Their job is to match up money, account books, checking accounts, and policies with actual activities by institutions.

One thing a centralized office can do better than anyone else is to monitor basic institutional integrity. So, whose job is it to end corruption in the ranks? It's time to make *that* the General Conference's main responsibility. We don't need the president and his wife flying around the world like celebrities, riding in limousines and receiving leis around their necks. Nor do we need the GC to be our orthodoxy monitor. What we desperately need is auditors who can assure givers that their money is being used honestly and that leaders are behaving responsibly.

**Put term limits in place.** I'll make a suggestion here, for what it's worth: elect the GC president for one term; give a division president two terms; allow a conference president three. Similarly limit other officers.

Require administrators to circulate back into parish ministry, not make a career of sitting in an office. (We have a GC president right now who was a pastor for about a year after college. Almost immediately, his surname put him straight into church leadership.) After church employees complete their elected term(s), they need to go back into on-the-ground ministry, to prove they can do what they've told others to do.

**Refine the selection process.** You are probably aware that when the General Conference nominating committee meets at the GC Session, it selects the president first, and then he comes in and selects the rest of his team personally. Thus, we ended up with some bad choices in 2010, such as an ADRA leader who quickly ran the organization aground, and a Southern Asian Division president chosen by Wilson who has let corruption flourish around him. Some of the more solid people in leadership were pushed out because Wilson didn't like them—or didn't find them orthodox enough.

Furthermore, I've been told repeatedly by those in the highest places of the church that wealthy donors have clustered around nominating committee members, offering significant donations for favored church projects

if their chosen candidates are nominated. That this has been attempted, even occasionally, is pretty good evidence that there's something wrong with the process.

## Don't Get Your Hopes Up

Sadly, I fear that a combination of inertia and self-interest will prevent any significant changes. For one thing, the church's committees and boards are made up largely of people working for the denomination. A friend from India sent me a list showing that the delegates to the 2020 GC Session from his region were mostly the wives and family members of administrators!

Laypersons are equally culpable. Studies have shown how much the church could expand local ministry with fewer administrative offices, but there's been an extraordinarily stubborn resistance to combining conferences, even when it means cutting back pastors and teachers. Instead, in many fields, unions and conferences proliferate.

I don't want to be a pessimist, but we may just need to accept that as a denomination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church can't change. It will get fatter and more inflexible until it collapses one day of its own weight. (My one hope is that the constant crises created by GC leadership might drive us to separate into more manageable entities, as appears to be happening with the United Methodists, but that's another discussion.)

If you're looking for anything substantial to happen in Indianapolis, something that will change the way the denomination works, I'd counsel you not to get your hopes up. Since the GC appears to think of *itself* as the church, it is accustomed to acting for its own survival rather than for the good of the church out here.

I firmly believe the church is at its best when it's *local* and *accountable*, and that's where you should invest your talents, your interest, and your resources. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> A collection of these quotes can be found on the Pacific Union's website at [session.adventistfaith.org/god-s-highest-authority](http://session.adventistfaith.org/god-s-highest-authority).

<sup>2</sup> Loren Seibold, "My Advice to the Next General Conference President," *Adventist Today*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Winter 2019), p. 3.

# ETHICAL GENERAL CONFERENCE LEADERSHIP

By Jim Walters

I PUT MYSELF THROUGH ACADEMY AND college by colporteur-ing, selling Adventist books door-to-door in the summers. I did it well, but I didn't enjoy it. Once, after going a couple of weeks without a sale, I took a lunch break in a local cemetery where I cried my eyes out, longing for home.

Looking back, I am bothered by the sales tactics I'd been taught. I shamed young mothers into deciding whether they wanted their families in the hopeful or frightened groups at the second coming, as graphically portrayed in the four-color, two-page, rocks-falling closing spread in the best-selling children's book series, *The Bible Story*. I was also taught to rush the \$98 check to the bank before the husband came home and stopped payment, a practice now considered illegal due to cancellation clauses.

I don't blame the conference office's colporteur assistants. They were honest in their desire to spread our "truth-filled" literature. They were reflecting a common mentality among Seventh-day Adventists: an unspoken sense that the goal of spreading Adventist truth allowed actions that others would see as ethically questionable.

## Ethical Exceptionalism

This sense of ethical exceptionalism runs deep in our church. We now know that Ellen White used others' writings extensively to boost her prolific literary output. The once-denied "borrowing" is now acknowledged, though we still don't admit that what our prophetess did was actually plagiarism.

Since studying theological ethics in graduate school, I realize how easy it is for us to justify a compelling end—saving a lost world, for example—by use of questionable means, even deception.

How else is one to understand how our earnest, blue-blooded, fervently believing world church president, Ted Wilson, has acted over his term of office? He has rigged important votes by key committees and coerced fellow leaders to get desired outcomes. He has openly manipulated due process in chairing committee meetings. He has blamed others for ignoring policy, while he does so himself. He has bent the truth in his statements, such as his denial that the General Conference (GC) ever voted to ordain female elders, when it clearly did.<sup>1</sup>

So as we approach the selection of our next GC president—be it Ted Wilson or another—what standard of ethics should delegates demand of a candidate?

Today's Adventist church leaders are educated. Wilson himself has a Ph.D. The GC has a well-staffed legal department, and we can produce strong defenses for our official actions. Some might even be able to argue the intricacies of law and ethical teleology vs. deontology, with the latter divided into rule- and act-oriented emphases.

But what about the most elemental things that we humans know about proper behavior? Let's talk about basics—what is commonly known to be right and wrong, good and bad, by all of us, regardless of our cultures. There are, it seems to me, universal principles understood by Adventists in Africa, Asia, South America, and at our home base in North America.

Several decades ago, Robert Fulghum wrote *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, a reflection on how to live and what to do. Fulghum shares not what he gained atop the graduate school mountain, but what he learned at the "sand pile at Sunday school."

I'll cite three Fulghum sand-pile takeaways and then add a couple of my own.

### 1. Share everything.

In our grade school primer, Jane learns early on that if she shares her little sand shovel with Dick, he will later share his toys with her.

Sharing works. The late Peter Drucker, father of modern management theory, voiced the sharing idea 50 years ago, and it still dominates textbooks on leadership. Drucker advised leaders to share power and to empower their employees.

Old-school management was top-down and saw the employee as a liability to be overcome. Modern management sees fellow leaders and all employees as assets who constitute a team. Every team member has dignity and is prized for problem-solving and innovative capabilities. Decentralized management is

key. The wise leader knows her limitations and values the diverse and unique abilities of the array of workers. Employees are valued collaborators who devise better ideas as they're empowered to achieve shared objectives.

Precisely because our denomination is composed of people of diverse and diverging cultures, for a General Conference president to appreciate differences and share the power will go far toward creating an authentic world church.

## **2. Play fair.**

Fair engagement is the right way to play the game of life together, because for thousands of years humans have learned that it's the only way that makes sense if we care about tomorrow.

Almost everybody plays the game where  $2+2=4$ . Then along comes Jack, and sometimes  $2+2=5$ . Jack is big and strong, and he gets away with saying what almost everyone knows is wrong. But what Jack may not realize is that his different way of counting allows a future autocrat to devise yet other rules, so  $2+2=10$ , or 100. Who knows? The game itself has been weakened, maybe destroyed, if the long-standing acceptance of  $2+2=4$  is disregarded by those who succeed Jack.

Since all institutions, including the institutionalized church, play games to advance their causes, for a General Conference president to model fair play is a powerful example to the church at large.

## **3. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.**

One of the most influential books I read as an adolescent was Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. One of his rules was this: if someone criticizes you, agree with them, and even enhance that criticism—and your critic will likely quit, as you've stolen their thunder.

I realize that this not-always-quite-honest counter-reaction may seem self-serving, but there's a basic moral

truth in Carnegie's advice: it is powerful to acknowledge one's own imperfections.

Fulghum insists on the power of saying, "I'm sorry I hurt you." True sorrow can come only from a person who accepts his or her thorough-going humanity—and such acceptance isn't natural for us Adventists, because at a deep level that's hard to identify and articulate, we sense that we're a bit special and not thoroughly human.

So for a potential General Conference president to be able to simply say "I'm sorry I hurt you" would be a big thing.

## **4. The Good News trumps good numbers.**

The gospel is the good news that God loves the world. Jesus Christ lived that love, and through him the world is redeemed—we as individuals, as well as the "whole creation" that has been groaning under sin (Rom. 8:22).

This redemption story is at the core of the Christian faith and the Adventist version of that faith. But too often numbers seem to dim the Good News, at best eclipsing it and at worst replacing it.

The problem with numbers is that they're all about us. Numbers make us feel proud of what we've accomplished. We Adventists have struggled with numbers from the beginning, when we preached that once we numbered 144,000, the Lord would return. Now that we have 20 million-plus, is the second coming any closer? (And that brings up a related but different set of numbers: 1844 to 2019—175 years of waiting for the Lord's "soon coming" back to Earth.)

The next General Conference president needs a gospel-oriented perspective: what God has done, is doing, and will do is the Good News! Numbers are often an anti-Christ serving pride, and as any Bible student knows, pride is the original sin.

## **5. People trump propositions.**

As a child growing up in an Adventist

institutional town, I developed a vivid sense of how persons related to true ideas. With my young pious eyes closed, I envisioned the Ten Commandments engraved across the heavens, and little Christians like myself created to exemplify those true propositions.

As I matured, however, Mark 2:27 became my favorite text, as it appropriately upended by legalistic past: "The Sabbath [the law itself] was made for man [people], and not man [people] for the Sabbath."

Being entrusted with true ideas is a weighty responsibility, and we Adventists have long been tempted to make them into a creed that then stifles the individual conscience. Having been banned from creedal churches, early Adventists accepted the Bible as their only creed.

Yet eventually statements of "fundamental beliefs" emerged, most notably in 1872, 1931, and 1980, each time with a clear understanding that the propositions were organizationally important but only descriptive of most Adventists, and surely not a creed.

Today, though, the 28 Fundamental Beliefs have achieved creedal status. The next GC president must appreciate the dynamic history of our denomination, where the spirit of personal conscience historically transcended creedal propositions.

I love my church a lot; it has nurtured me in a myriad of wonderful ways. But our Adventist ethical exceptionalism is a sin, and we must repent and change. It won't be easy, as this ethical exceptionalism runs deep. I still have tinges of it. It would help if we select a General Conference president who follows basic rules of right and wrong: the things we learned in kindergarten. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> See Adventist Today Online article posted June 13, 2018, at [atoday.org/has-a-general-conference-session-approved-female-church-elders/](http://atoday.org/has-a-general-conference-session-approved-female-church-elders/).

# Why Does the General Conference Have Its Own Rules of Parliamentary Procedure?

By Andre M. Wang

**In most aspects, the GC Rules of Order is functionally identical to Robert's Rules of Order. A casual observer would not recognize any difference in the way business is transacted in an Adventist setting.**

IN 1863, A MILITARY ENGINEER BY THE name of Henry Martyn Robert was elected to preside over a church business meeting in New Bedford, Massachusetts. During the course of the evening, the gathering grew unruly and chaotic. Having lost control of the meeting, Robert was so embarrassed that he vowed never to attend another meeting until he developed some basic rules of order.

Today, *Robert's Rules of Order* is the most familiar system of parliamentary procedure and is widely used by school boards, homeowners' associations, church boards, government committees, and state legislatures.

## Confusion Among Delegates

How the Seventh-day Adventist Church came to promulgate its own rules of order also came out of frustration over unruly and chaotic church meetings.

In 1985, at the General Conference (GC) Session in New Orleans, delegates openly vented their dissatisfaction to the GC leadership for its poor management of the proceedings. While *Robert's Rules of Order* was to be followed, some of the rules did not correspond with certain denominational decision-making practices. This created confusion among the delegates when the chair of the business session would depart from *Robert's Rules of Order* in deference to an established church procedure. As a result, the GC Executive Committee

appointed a subcommittee to study the issue and devise specific parliamentary rules of order for General Conference Sessions. The GC Executive Committee eventually ratified the subcommittee's recommendation and officially adopted its own rules in 1986, then published them as the General Conference *Rules of Order* in 2000.

To be clear, an organization adopting a set of customized rules to correspond with its unique governance culture is not unusual. All organizations develop their own unique character, whether it be through policy or a pattern of practice over many years.

## Three Key Differences

In most aspects, the General Conference *Rules of Order* is functionally identical to *Robert's Rules of Order*. A casual observer would not recognize any difference in the way business is transacted in an Adventist setting. The way a motion is made, brought to the floor (or assembly) for deliberation, and then brought to a vote is identical. Most importantly, it preserves the basic key principles of parliamentary procedure: that decisions are made by majority vote, and the rights of the minority to meaningfully participate are protected.

But what are the main differences between *Robert's Rules of Order* and the GC *Rules of Order*?

While *Robert's Rules of Order* states that the chair must remain impartial, the GC

*Rules of Order* elaborates that the chair shall “work for consensus and treat each side with fairness.”

The GC *Rules of Order* directs that all delegates (and presumably also the chair) shall “maintain Christian decorum” throughout the proceedings. Delegates are also free to participate in the proceedings speaking their own language. *Robert’s Rules of Order* does not make either of these provisions.

The biggest difference is the way the GC *Rules of Order* prescribes elections. Under *Robert’s Rules of Order*, elections are handled in the same manner as a regular motion: an individual is nominated by a delegate or recommended by a nominating committee, a second is made, there is discussion on the merits of the individual, and ultimately, a vote is taken.

Under the GC *Rules of Order*, all nominations for “elective office or executive committee membership” are made by a nominating committee, which must meet in private. No nominations are ever made from the floor. Further, only one individual per office can be nominated. This precludes the delegates from holding a true election between two candidates.

To express reservations about a nomination, a delegate may request that the entire nominating committee report (not the specific name of an individual) be referred back to the nominating committee for further consideration.

The GC *Rules of Order* advises, “It is the usual procedure for the chair to accept the referral . . .”; however, the chair is not obliged to do so. The delegate can then make a motion to refer the report back to the nominating committee, which is non-debatable and subject to simple majority vote by the assembly.

The GC *Rules of Order* further counsels that a “request or motion to refer should be based on information which the objector(s) may have and which could be helpful to the Nominating Committee.” This connotes that the information must be something new that was not previously considered by the nominating committee. While some delegates use this provision to relitigate issues they have with particular candidates, the chair has the authority to refuse “persistent referrals” back to the committee.

### **Responsibility of the Chair**

Many church members mistakenly think that if a particular issue is not specifically addressed by the GC *Rules of Order*, then *Robert’s Rules of Order* would govern. On the contrary, the GC *Rules of Order* defers authority to the chair, who “shall rule according to his best judgment.”

There is little functional difference between the General Conference *Rules of Order* and *Robert’s Rules of Order*. The business of the church marches on in an orderly manner, whether it is adopting official position statements of

the denomination or making editorial changes to the Church Manual. But the GC *Rules of Order* does two things. First, it reminds us that we are part of a church, and with that comes an expectation of “Christian decorum” and behavior. And secondly, the chair is directed to strive for consensus in decision-making and to treat all sides with fairness.

As a student at Pacific Union College, I served as the Student Association executive vice president, which by position chaired the Student Senate. It was the role of the chair to not only know the parliamentary rules of order, but to enforce them rigorously. That’s how I became a parliamentary procedure junkie, also known as a parliamentarian.

An important principle I learned is that the rules of order must be applied equally, without prejudice or bias. Whether in a General Conference Session or local church finance committee, parliamentary rules of order exist to ensure fairness in deliberation and decision-making. But like any device or machine, they work only when used properly. **AT**

# GENERAL CONFERENCE SESSIONS

## *Five Propositions for the Future*

BY LOWELL C. COOPER



I WAS SWEEPED ALONG IN THE CROWD OF PEOPLE EXITING FROM the final Sabbath worship service at the 2005 General Conference (GC) Session in St. Louis. Upon leaving the building, I paused to observe my global church family. A few feet to my right were two tall Nigerians dressed in impressive national costume. A session delegate from India, catching sight of these two men, desired to have a picture taken with them. He carried a camera made in Japan in the era before selfies, so he anxiously looked around to find someone to take the picture. He gestured to a bystander, a man from the Philippines, who readily agreed to snap a photo.

No conversation took place. Arrangements were all by gesture. The Indian stood with the two Nigerians while the Filipino took the photo, then handed the Japanese camera back to its owner. At this moment, the Indian man addressed the other three with these words: “One God! One Church!”

The group dispersed, and I remained for a moment or two reflecting on what I had just observed. People who had never met before experienced an instinctive bonding because they belonged to a worldwide church and worshipped the same God.

Although I was exhausted at the time, this fleeting moment brought a new wave of energy and joy. A General Conference Session was indeed more than just an occasion for conducting official church business. It was a celebration of a global family—a collective identity that transcended a host of other identities such as race, gender, nationality, language, age, political convictions, and culture. A spontaneous bonding on the platform of shared faith in the one God of the universe.

## The Upcoming GC Session

The 61<sup>st</sup> General Conference Session will be held in Indianapolis from June 25 to July 4, 2020. The official purpose of the meeting is to elect world leadership, to receive reports on mission advances during the past five years, and to discuss and decide on any proposed amendments to the Church's Statement of Fundamental Beliefs, the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual. It all seems very structured and mechanical. However, those who attend a session experience it as much more than that. Questions will abound on whether things could be done differently in order to maximize efficiency and effectiveness.

I offer here five propositions for consideration. No doubt some will be controversial and perhaps not even implementable; however, I believe it is good to challenge certain assumptions and traditions that have characterized General Conference Sessions over recent decades.

### 1. Reduce the time frame for a General Conference Session.

General Conference Sessions since 1863 have varied in length, from one day to 30 days, and in delegation size, from 14 in 1872 to 2,536 in 2015. The 10-day schedule for 2020 has been the dominant pattern since 1958. The GC Session begins on a Thursday and concludes on Sabbath, 10 days later. Discussions about reducing the session period to fewer days have always focused on preserving the tradition of closing the GC Session on a Sabbath so that the experience of all delegates and visitors culminates in a day of worship and focus on mission—as highlighted in the Mission Pageant on Sabbath evening.

The necessity of up to two travel days for delegates coming from distant lands has been a major reason for starting on Thursday, near the end of a week. Sabbath travel considerations have also removed Sunday as a possible start time for a session.

I believe that a GC Session could begin on a Monday afternoon and end on the following Sabbath evening. It is true that some delegates would need to arrive in advance of the Sabbath, but not all would find it necessary to do so. The financial savings in hotel and facility costs would be considerable.

Objection to a shortened time frame will come from those who feel that it is impossible to complete GC Session business in four working days. This may seem a more formidable challenge than it is in actuality. For the past several sessions, no official business has been conducted on Thursday afternoon.

### 2. Trim the delegation size.

This suggestion will meet with stiff resistance, for it seems

intuitive that a growing global membership will need increasing numbers of delegates to make decisions appropriate for the worldwide church. However, I am not convinced that larger groups make better decisions. Furthermore, actual attendance during many of the recent business sessions has been far below the official delegation size, which is well in excess of 2,000. Major agenda items attract a large percentage of delegates, but the reality is that many session decisions are already being made with a reduced number of participants.

I believe that delegate presence at business meetings should be mandatory and monitored, except for those in the nominating committee or other session committees that may be convened for special items.

Delegate quotas for 1995, when 2,321 attended, were adjusted downward for 2000, when 1,844 attended. Since that time the numbers have grown to an expected 2,600 delegates in 2020. A reduction in quotas accompanied by careful delegate selection criteria to ensure broad representation will not be a detriment to decision-making by a General Conference in session.

### 3. Pre-select and empower a nominating committee.

The General Conference Session Nominating Committee, approximately 250 members in 2020, is appointed on the first day of the session—usually late in the day. The nominating committee convenes later that same night and addresses organizational tasks such as the selection of a chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, and associate secretary. Then, in the course of a few days, the nominating committee is expected to recommend the election of personnel to about 100 leadership positions.

It is not surprising, then, that the nominating committee relies heavily on recommendations from the General Conference president—perhaps an unintended concession toward a presidential system that is denied elsewhere in denominational policy. The nominating committee divides into division-based groups for the consideration of division officers, but even here the participation of the president or his nominee is expected.

Many denominational entities have adopted bylaws that provide for appointing and empowering a nominating committee to function in advance of its constituency session. Although this provision entails some extra expense, I am not aware of any organization that has adopted this practice and then later changed its mind and returned to the pattern of appointing a nominating committee *after* a constituency session begins. The advantages of meeting beforehand have proven themselves.

Convening a General Conference Session Nominating Committee several weeks in advance would remove the incredible urgency and prevent hasty decision-making. It also would allow for more in-depth assessment of potential candidates for office and for the inevitable challenge of finding appropriate representation from all parts of a territory served by the entity. In the case of the General Conference, the need for global representation is just as important, or perhaps more so, than finding persons with the appropriate skill set. This task requires ample time.

While it may take a bit of out-of-the box thinking to figure out how to accomplish this for the General Conference, much could be learned from organizations that are already doing it. A nominating committee that meets in advance of a GC Session need not complete all of its work prior to the session. Even if it addressed only the officer team (president, secretary, treasurer), this would be a major step of progress. The time between nominating the officer team and starting the session

Manual, the text of that change would appear along with an explanatory statement as to its merits or demerits. This would give delegates an opportunity to better understand the proposed actions and their impact on the world church. Such a procedure, which has already been followed for some agenda items, could be enhanced considerably to reduce the need for deliberation time at the session.

#### **5. Set the GC Session compass toward leadership and away from management.**

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is one church, though its presence in the world is expressed through thousands of entities spanning the organizational spectrum from local churches to the General Conference. It is taken for granted that regardless of the amount of growth in church membership and structure, there will be only one General Conference. At the other end of the organizational spectrum, the potential number of local churches is virtually without limits.

Coordinating the whole requires careful and strategic

## **Less time and energy would be expended at a GC Session if the content of the Church Manual moved in the direction of descriptive principles rather than prescriptive practices.**

could give nominees an opportunity to more carefully consider the recommendations they would make for associate officers, department directors, etc. The current system of appointing/empowering a nominating committee at the beginning of a General Conference Session places an unfair and unreasonable burden on a new officer, such as a president, to come back to the nominating committee a few hours later with recommendations for a huge number of other elected leadership positions.

#### **4. Revise the agenda documentation.**

It is typical for the General Conference Executive Committee to review and make recommendations on proposed agenda materials for a GC Session. This work is usually completed by the final Annual Council of the Executive Committee for each quinquennium. In the remaining eight to nine months before a General Conference Session, agenda materials are prepared in their final format and sent several weeks in advance to all delegates for consideration.

I suggest that every such agenda proposal be accompanied by a concise statement of rationale. For example, if a change is proposed to the General Conference Bylaws or the Church

placement, in numbers and size, of globally defined intermediate structures (local missions/conferences, unions, and divisions) with specific roles that do not overlap. This realization invokes an exploration of the role and authority of the GC Session and of the General Conference office and administration. Inevitably a growing organization must address the concepts of centralization and decentralization.

Seventh-day Adventist historians have persuasively argued that steps toward centralization have been based on the benefits of collaboration (“Together we can do more”) rather than for control. On the other hand, developments in the direction of decentralization have proceeded out of the need to address mission in local or unique circumstances rather than to express independence. This awareness needs to pervade session decisions. Although the world church embraces the idea that the General Conference in session is its highest authority under God, such an embrace must also recognize that a key principle in denominational structure is the distribution of authority. No place in church structure has final authority in everything.

Different aspects of final authority are found throughout

church structure. For example, only the local congregation can authorize a person's entry into membership of the local church. In addition, engagement in mission occurs primarily at the local church level. Although programs and initiatives may be designed at the General Conference or its divisions and widely promoted, every individual church must still ensure that its activities effectively address mission opportunities and challenges in the local area.

Much time at the GC Session is spent in amending the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*. It is customary for Church Manual amendments to consume a day or more of a session agenda. "The content of each chapter is of worldwide value and is applicable to every church organization, congregation, and member. Recognizing the need for variations in some sections, additional explanatory material, presented as guidance and examples, appears as notes at the end of the Church Manual."<sup>1</sup>

The plain fact is that the 86,576 local churches, reported in 2017 denominational statistics, exhibit amazing diversity in membership size, education, resource capacity, cultural dynamics, and geographical or political context. To expect that the Church Manual will function as a regulatory document for every detail of local church life is simply unrealistic. In some areas of the world church the Church Manual is followed rigidly, and in other areas some of its provisions have been substituted. Less time and energy would be expended at a GC Session if the content of the Church Manual moved in the direction of descriptive principles rather than prescriptive practices.

### Term Limits for Leaders

Comments and questions surface frequently about the advisability of term limits for leadership roles, particularly in the office of General Conference president. Among the reasons is the realization that an incumbent generally has an advantage when it comes to leadership selection. However, introducing a policy of term limits implies that a future session nominating committee, or the GC Session itself, cannot be free to pursue what it believes is the leading of the Holy Spirit at that moment in time.

The long-standing practice of the world church has been to trust that nominating committees and constituency sessions both seek and receive divine guidance in their decision-making. Although term limits have been strongly advocated by some, I do not sense either a need or an inclination for the General Conference Bylaws to adopt provisions in that direction. The idea of Holy Spirit guidance at the moment of decision will prevail.

### Finding Global Leadership

Within the last 25-30 years, the Adventist Church has made significant progress in selecting national leaders for administrative roles in unions and divisions. Very few positions in unions and divisions are held by expatriates from outside of a division's territory. This is glowing evidence of the human resource capacity of the denomination around the globe.

When it comes to General Conference leadership positions, however, the challenge is to find leaders with international rather than just national experience. Leaders of the global church who have limited cross-cultural or international experience will encounter challenges in their understanding and working with the diversities present in denominational life.

The success achieved in finding national leaders for unions and divisions is countered by a smaller pool of leaders with significant international leadership experience. It will be increasingly demanding for a GC Session Nominating Committee to find qualified individuals. The mission of God addresses all of human existence and thus is cultural, cross-cultural, and transcultural. General Conference leaders need a global perspective developed by cross-cultural experience and appreciation of diversity.

### Celebrating the Global Family

The impact of a General Conference Session goes far beyond voting on global church operational decisions. Session attendance of 50,000 to 60,000 people on weekends indicates the importance of things other than routine business. It is an opportunity to experience and celebrate the global family of faith. Both visitors and delegates alike go away from a General Conference Session to share stories about the worldwide church. These stories are not just about official business decisions, but also the joy of meeting new people and building appreciation for the global nature of the church, its complexity, its worldwide mission, and its ethos of oneness despite all manner of differences. As one attendee in San Antonio (2015) said to me: "This is the first time I have had the opportunity to attend a General Conference Session. It amazes me that a convocation of this size actually works. I have a new appreciation for my Church."

Perhaps the most significant underlying message that comes from attendance at a General Conference Session is that the Adventist Church is organized for mission. God does not have a mission for the church so much as he has a church for his mission. May we be that world church. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 19th edition (2015), p. 16.

# ONE IN CHRIST: WHAT HAVE WE MISSED?

by Denis Fortin

IN THE AUTUMN QUARTER OF 2018, OUR *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* focused on oneness in Christ and unity in the church. I was the author of that guide, and the topic generated a lot of conversation from the start, with many wondering if it had been chosen by church leadership at a time when our church was going through so much conflict. I assured those who asked me about this possibility that in fact I had been asked to write this study guide back in 2012, and the manuscript was completed by April 2014. There was no conspiracy, but its timing was quite providential.

In 2017 and 2018, Adventists were bracing for the creation of General Conference “compliance committees” that would oversee teachers, church administrators, and church institutions in matters of orthodoxy and church policy. The proposal sparked heated conversations among church members and between administrators in various levels of our church organization.<sup>1</sup>

During the week of the General Council Executive Committee in 2018—the gathering in Battle Creek at which the compliance committees were voted—the study guide contained a quote from

Ellen White’s *Prophets and Kings*. Many, including myself, were amazed by how providentially appropriate the quote was for that very day. The lesson for Tuesday, October 9, included a commentary on King Rehoboam and how he showed a lack of wisdom by not listening to his more mature advisors in making an important decision for the future of the kingdom. His rashness led to the breaking apart of the nation. Ellen White wrote, “In this unwise and unfeeling attempt to exercise power, the king and his chosen counselors revealed the pride of position and authority.”<sup>21</sup>

To many attending the Annual Council that day, it seemed a perfect description of what some General Conference leaders were attempting to do in their push to enforce compliance.

## What Is Unity?

Since the beginning of our church organization in the early 1860s, we have framed our understanding of church unity in relatively simple ways. In everyday Adventist culture, unity is often perceived as getting along, as not fighting with each other. Unity is not rocking the boat. The cognate of this idea is that we tend to believe unity is manifested when we follow our leaders and remain faithful to our church organization and its policies and decisions. Such a view of unity, which is often agreed to unconsciously, is based on a hierarchical church structure.

Although this is all fine and good, it is lacking depth and needs a more solid biblical foundation. So, what is church unity really about?

## What “Church” Really Means

The New Testament reveals a number of nuances of the word “church.” We often mean a building in which a congregation meets every week, but that is hardly the biblical meaning of the word.

In the New Testament, the word “church” (in biblical Greek, *ekklesia*, the called-out ones) means the congregation, community, or assembly of those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Most often it refers to the believers in Jesus in a specific geographical area: the church in Judea or in Galatia; the congregation in Antioch, Thessalonica, or Corinth.

More broadly, church can also mean the entire group of people who believe in Jesus: the universal church.

Often for us, however, the meaning of church is restricted to our denominational name: the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And when we restrict the meaning of the word to our denomination, we also restrict what Jesus and Paul tell us about unity in the church.

## Local to Universal

Most of the lessons in that 2018 study guide discussed unity in the context of the local congregation. This involves brotherly love and reconciliation (Philemon; Matt. 18:15-17), conflict resolution (Acts 6:1-6), and unity in worship (Acts 2:42-47). Here we find lessons to help congregations find unity *within a local context*. More and more of our congregations are ethnically diverse, and our diversity of cultural heritage affects how we live our common faith. When conflicts arise, we need to be reminded of the unity we already have in Christ, a unity that should transcend all earthly limitations.

Other lessons looked at unity in the context of the church as an organized community of believers. Although the concept of a denominational entity is not found in the New Testament, when the church is larger than a local congregation, then unity must also be practiced at this level. A study of biblical images of unity (people, body, temple, etc.), as well as conflicts in the New Testament church (Acts 15:1-22) and unity in faith, provide needed insights.

Some of the lessons defined unity as a process for the entire *worldwide* community of believers. We find this idea in Jesus' prayer in John 17, Paul's key to unity in Christ throughout his letter to the Ephesians, unity in worship in the early church (Acts 2:42-47), and the final restoration of unity (Rev. 21:1-5). This understanding of unity transcends our cultural heritage and denominational boundaries. In Jesus, Paul says, we form one big family: the family of God and the body of Christ, irrespective of our denominational names.

That unity is a spiritual reality already given to all believers in Jesus is something many Christians don't understand. All who claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior are already experiencing a spiritual oneness in Christ, however imperfectly it may be lived in reality. It is a spiritual gift that should never be questioned. Whatever our internal struggles regarding women's ordination or the place of compliance to our own rules, we are one in Christ.

So unity goes beyond our own boundaries. Whatever our denominational names, whether Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, Pentecostal, or Seventh-day Adventist, our common relationship to Christ surpasses all human limitations in Christ.

## Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief #14: Unity in the Body of Christ

"The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship

with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children."

Please understand: this is not at all to downplay the crucial truths we believe and the identity markers that shape our end-time mission. But the fact that our unity is in Christ must frame our understanding of other Christian believers, and it must guide our speech about them. The most convincing proof of the beauty of the gospel is love and tolerance expressed toward all those who believe in Jesus.

I often weep over our evangelistic efforts and how they sow seeds of division through what is said about other Christians. Biblically, it is tragic to use eschatology to divide us from others, for in fact the ultimate description of unity among God's people is when John, in Revelation 19, sees a large banquet table and all of the redeemed sitting together to partake of this heavenly meal. It is in the realization of this blessed hope at last that all boundaries between people will have been removed.

### Jesus' Final Wish

Unity was so important to Jesus that in his last prayer, recorded in John 17, he prayed for unity among his own disciples and among those who would later believe in him. That was his last wish, his final desire. If unity was so ardently on Jesus' mind at that crucial moment of his life, should it

also be part of our consciousness? Should Jesus' last burden shape the way we fulfill our mission? Should it guide the way we relate to each other in times of conflict? Should it shape the way our church leaders exercise their ministry? Should it guide what we pray about?

When I teach a segment on church unity in my seminary courses, I ask students to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' prayer for unity among those who would believe in him, and I ask them whether this prayer is a wish, a suggestion, a desire, or perhaps even a command.

As we approach our next General Conference Session, it is essential that we reflect on Jesus' prayer for unity among those who believe in him. It might also be good to remind ourselves that we have a fundamental belief on church unity, and we should seek to live up to it. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Given the huge amount of opposition he received, the General Conference president later abandoned pursuit of the "compliance committees" and instead asked the GC Executive Committee, during Annual Council 2019, to reprimand union conference leaders for what he felt were infractions against the 2015 General Conference Session vote opposing the ordination of women.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (1917), p. 90.



# ETHICAL BLIND SPOTS & SINKHOLES

BY RAJ ATTIKEN

General Conference Sessions are primarily intended to inspire us about our worldwide work and message and to provide a forum for making decisions that concern the church's global operations. Yet as we approach the 2020 General Conference Session, there is something that merits special attention and action. It has to do with periodic reports from members and church leaders alleging incidents of nepotism, abuse, embezzlement, fake academic degrees, violence, and the like in the world church or its institutions.

## Taking Responsibility

Within the Adventist Church, we have significant disagreements about many things. But there is more about which we agree. For example, we agree to make the church a safe place for all, free of abuse. We agree to ensure that the funds we give are not misappropriated or misused. We agree that moral and ethical conduct will characterize our lives and service. We agree, I hope, to banish misogyny and discrimination from our relationships. We agree to protect each other from the trauma of sexual violence. We agree to hold accountable people who hurt others.

The path to progress in addressing these matters requires that we be vigilant, prompt, and decisive in creating environments of high ethical and moral conduct, and also in addressing abuses when we learn about them. We expect that allegations will be investigated and appropriate actions will be taken by those with oversight and leadership responsibilities. We should be enraged when it is evident that no such response has occurred.

A General Conference Session is one forum for conversations and actions about such matters.

## Expediency and Ethics

Certain features of our collective life as a denomination make the task of effectively addressing moral and ethical issues difficult. We are a global church, but our experience of the church is local and particular. We hear the voice of God and the universal truths of the Bible in our own language, sensibility, and culture. Consequently, some behaviors that are seen as egregious in some parts of the world are seen as an acceptable way of life—or of survival—in other regions.

Take, for instance, the practice of bribery. Major media attention was given recently in the United States to the alleged actions by actors Felicity Huffman, Lori Loughlin, and others of paying bribes to get their children into elite universities—actions that Americans deem unethical and unlawful.

Paradoxically, bribery of this sort is hardly noticed in some parts of the world. It may be seen as the smartest, most expedient way to get things done. You get your goods cleared at customs by giving the customs officer a subtle “incentive.” Paying off a school or political figure gets your child admitted to an elite elementary school. A few currency notes placed in the right person's hands can significantly speed up the processing of a document at a government office. In such contexts, the end is seen as justifying the means; expediency trumps ethics.



The blurring of lines between expediency and ethics permits individuals to act in ways that may be seen, in other locales, as a disavowal of biblical values. How cultural and regional particularities influence human behaviors makes for some interesting exploration for ethicists among us. A good first step in addressing these situations would be to seek to understand the people and contexts where such behaviors are practiced that, in our view, marginalize moral considerations.

### There's More to Truth

Besides regional or cultural nuances in how actions are perceived, there are some inherent vulnerabilities within the Adventist Church. One of these, surprisingly, is how we understand “truth.”

The church has, since its inception, seen itself as an advocate for, and defender of, biblical truth. We have anchored our identity on our claim to be the final custodians of “present truth.” Our understanding of truth is the church’s major agenda.

Yet this sense of truth is a double-edged sword. On one edge, it keeps us seeking for more clarity and wholeness. It unites us as a global community. It serves as a guardrail against error. It has the potential to shape a positive picture of God and the universe.

On the other edge, this particular way of understanding truth may promote a limited and sometimes distorted perspective of truth.

Our forebears who dared to envision an Adventism that appealed to “every nation, kindred, tongue and people” could not have anticipated all of the moral challenges that future generations would face. They could not have foreseen ethical issues such as mass refugee migration, diversity and exclusion, gender identity, the weaponization of identity, environmental damage, global economics, or artificial intelligence.

Understandably, they gave shape and substance to an Adventism that spoke to their time and place. There is something

to be said, therefore, for stepping back and asking why we came to see ourselves and the world the way we do. We absorb moral ideas best the same way we learn languages: unconsciously. When moral and ethical ideals are not a significant part of our story and identity, they do not become part of the ethos of the Adventist lived theology. We give great attention to some concepts of truth while neglecting others.

Take the Sabbath, for example. Our pioneers’ concerns in advocating for the Sabbath were largely eschatological: Jesus was coming soon. They left out its ethical dimensions of inclusivity, justice, mercy, and freedom. That could explain, partially at least, why today we do not more explicitly portray the God we worship as the God who “exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth” (Jer. 9:24, NIV). It might explain why we do not proclaim more resolutely and practice more devoutly the truth that we are here to make a difference, to mend the fractures of the world, to make it a place of justice and compassion where the lonely are not alone, where the poor are not without help, and where the cry of the vulnerable is heeded.

That’s where we are today. The compulsion to live by the truth provokes hypocrisy on the one hand and denial and inaction to deal with failures on the other.

### The Case for Hypocrisy

We don’t like to admit it, but hypocrisy is a common and deeply embedded trait among us. If the standard to which we aspire is easily achievable, most of us can meet it without pretense. But when the bar is set high, and we know we have not reached it, hypocrisy is an essential survival mechanism. It is a handy practice in order to be accepted and respected in the church community.

We feel prodded to present ourselves as living by the truth, when we really aren't. Others, most likely, aren't either. Hypocrisy becomes the tacit norm for community life. It is a necessary evil. It makes us look good within the church.

But hypocrisy also inhibits transparency and authenticity. It stifles disclosure. It fosters shallow relationships. In some quirky way, the higher the standards of belief and conduct, the greater the level of hypocrisy in the communal life of the church! In such an environment, we dare not point out the speck in someone else's eye when we have a log in our own (Matt. 7:3, NRSV).

### The Image Problem

Along with hypocrisy, the ethos of truth also spawns a concern for the church's public image that incapacitates us from calling out abuse, admitting problems, seeking constructive intervention, and taking corrective actions. We hear stories in a church or school from victims of sexual abuse, who claim that more administrative

*Write now to General Conference leaders and demand that they discuss ways to enforce moral and ethical accountability across the world field.*

effort was directed at limiting publicity about the situation than in assisting the victims or dealing with the perpetrator. We hear of instances of administrative blunders being explained away as spiritual issues.

Take the recent conflicts within the church in the Republic of Burundi. While many Burundian Adventists saw it as a clear administrative and managerial gaffe, the General Conference leadership framed it as an attack on religious liberty.<sup>1</sup> This reflects how our collective DNA is programmed to deny or screen out those things that might undermine our lofty claims about ourselves.

So the commitment to truth, although a wonderful thing, also sets us up with some liabilities.

### Authority and Accountability

Authority, and the accountability for its use or misuse, is a strangely complicated and confusing phenomenon in the Adventist world church. It is not always clear who has authority to do what and how accountability is to be exercised in specific situations.

In the formative story of Adventism, authority progressively

moved from the young individual leaders of the movement to loosely connected groups, next to the few "state conferences," and then to the General Conference. A few decades later, union conferences were introduced into the denomination's structural design. In this organizational paradigm, each "level" of the hierarchy was assigned specific and limited authority.

As with most hierarchies, the perception developed over time that power and authority flowed *down* from one level to the other, with the local congregation at the bottom of the hierarchy. The notion also evolved that ultimate authority rests with the General Conference and that all other levels of the church are to be accountable to it. The way the organization now operates reinforces this perception: the 2019 Annual Council warnings to union conferences and their leaders was a conspicuous portrayal of how the General Conference sees the flow of authority and accountability.

Confusion about the lines of authority allows some authoritarian leaders to abuse power, while it inhibits others from exercising the authority rightfully available to them. Adding to the complexity is that, in many entities, the power to act is vested in constituencies and committees, not in administrators. Certain actions can be taken only when authorized. This requires that a number of persons—sometimes hundreds, in the case of a constituency session—be adequately apprised of a situation in order to make an informed decision.

### Auditing Compliance

The auditing services available to church entities can help identify fraud or malpractice in financial operations. Frequently, however, these audits have been shown to be of limited and inadequate scope and detail. Many church administrators can tell stories of how the denomination's annual auditing processes left serious financial issues undetected. Churches and church entities would be well served to be attentive to what is and what is not addressed in denominational audits and to utilize additional resources as necessary.

A different kind of issue came up at 2019's General Conference Executive Committee meeting (Annual Council) when it was reported that the current level of resources allocated to the General Conference Auditing Services (GCAS) allowed for only a limited number of organizations to be audited annually. Even more alarming was the disclosure that some entities have consistently failed to submit financial statements that could be audited or, even worse, provided no financial statements at all. It was implied that administrators did not address these situations for fear of jeopardizing their own positions.

It should be obvious to even the casual observer that the obsessive focus of appointed “compliance committees” on women’s ordination was grossly misdirected while these major moral and ethical failures went unchecked in various aspects of the church’s life.

## A Way Forward

It is reassuring that the Adventist Church has begun to take steps to address some of these moral and ethical concerns. The *enditnow* global initiative to advocate for eliminating violence against women, men, and children is both timely and helpful. The NAD-required screenings for volunteers and employees is another beneficial process. We should welcome more such initiatives in the church.

There is no simple way to solve all ethical or moral misconduct in the denomination. Problematic events often occur in particular contexts, involving people of complex intentions and motives, in settings unfamiliar to us. When we hear of such problems, we tend to suppose that someone else in the organization will deal with them. So often these acts are surrounded by the nervous silence of those who know they might wreck their careers if they say anything.

In general, when moral or ethical failures exist, they are best dealt with by those who are closest to the incident. Regrettably, this does not always happen. When individuals in authority are unlikely to act, that awareness emboldens some to act unethically. Worse yet, when those in authority are themselves the perpetrators, the cycle of corruption and abuse becomes difficult to break. Stories abound of complaints to the General Conference being referred back to be dealt with by the very persons who were the malefactors in the first place.

Awareness among Adventist members at large about the ethical and moral gaps in our collective life as a denomination is an essential starting point. Responsible journalism, media reports, and social media can play an important role. Demands for transparency and accountability through media can influence positive change. The #ChurchToo movement, for example, has been effective in raising awareness about abuse in Christian congregations.

## What Can Happen at the GC Session

The upcoming General Conference Session should be seen as a venue where this matter could receive attention. Despite how overwhelming such a gathering can be, and despite the complicated parliamentary procedures that guide the proceedings, delegates can make efforts here to catalyze positive change.

Delegates (and non-delegates) can communicate their

concerns and desires directly to leaders who set the agenda and design the meeting sessions. To put it simply: write now to General Conference leaders and demand that they discuss ways to enforce moral and ethical accountability across the world field.

Delegates can make this a topic of conversation in formal and informal settings among themselves. Delegates can then speak substantively to the issues from the floor and can call for change.

Two kinds of conversations are necessary. One is about creating environments and systems that make it difficult for such ethical misconduct to take place. The other is about accountability among those in the church structure who have the authority to act but don’t.

Delegates on the nominating committee should ask questions about proposed nominees for leadership positions. What is the candidate’s track record of ethical and moral conduct in their past roles and responsibilities? Is the person currently leading an organization that has been shown to have multiple moral and ethical setbacks? How has the person handled reports of misconduct by employees in his or her organization? Is the candidate’s leadership more procedural and managerial, with moral and ethical dimensions receiving minimal attention? Do organizational systems that report to this individual generally reward production and expansion—bodies, bucks, and buildings—more than ethics and morality?

Delegates might also propose the creation of forums for social accountability, giving concerned members access to church employees and laypersons to present issues and press for accountability. Delegates can insist that “silent whistleblower” provisions be widely established, through which individuals can anonymously alert leaders of abuse and corruption. Delegates can call for the denomination to explore additional ways to prevent, detect, and address abuse and corruption wherever they exist in the church.

There is much that the combined voices of many delegates can add to the collective conversation about ethics and morality. These voices need to be heard at the General Conference Session, and also at executive committee meetings and constituency sessions in divisions, unions, conferences, missions, and institutions. Believers cannot stand aside when people are hurt and the church is exploited. Believers cannot, by their silence, become complicit to such misconduct. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> See Adventist Today Online reports posted May 24 and October 29, 2019, at [atoday.org/head-of-adventist-church-in-burundi-arrested/](http://atoday.org/head-of-adventist-church-in-burundi-arrested/) and [atoday.org/what-is-happening-in-the-church-in-burundi/](http://atoday.org/what-is-happening-in-the-church-in-burundi/)

# THE GC AND ME

By Zack Payne

“THE LAKE UNION CONFERENCE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE VOTED you to be a Wisconsin delegate to the General Conference Session [Indianapolis, 2020]. Are you willing to serve in this capacity?”

I read the text from my conference president a couple of times. It was 7:26 a.m. on a chilly Wisconsin morning in our home just south of Milwaukee. I had been awakened by the sound of my son jumping out of his bed and thumping down the hallway toward our room. Then I checked my morning messages.

I blinked hard, put on my glasses, and read the brief text again. How should I reply?

## It's Not All Fun and Games

As a pastor in my 30s, this would be the first General Conference (GC) Session where I'd be participating as a delegate. Having never served in this way before, it got me wondering: would it be worth it?

The last time I went to a GC Session, I was a student at the Andrews University Theological Seminary. I was working with The Haystack, and we were attempting to break the world record for the largest potluck. Although we didn't quite break the record, we came close, and the whole experience was a blast. It was a fun summer break from classwork to participate in a community-building project with friends.

In comparison with my previous GC Session experience, sitting through hours of meetings sounded terribly boring, bordering on tragedy. I suppose that everyone grows up at some point, though. Since the last session, I've gone from college student to full-time employee, from father of one to father of three, from renter to homeowner, from youth pastor to serving a district of four churches. This would be another step in the process of Adventist “adulthood.”

I don't mean to imply that the voting would make me any more important than if I were not voting. In some ways, as I think about sitting on the stadium floor—as opposed to serving and mingling and uniting outside—it seems a step *away* from what God wants for me. But I suppose there is room for both in life and in ministry: being “one of the kids” and having a blast with a bunch of young adults, *as well as* sitting in meetings with esteemed colleagues and voting on the issues.

There was a time when I figured I'd never be a senior pastor, get ordained, or spend my time sitting in hours of meetings—but here I am. And, honestly, I don't feel like any more of an “adult” now than I did five years ago.

## Breaking Through the Jade

For all my Millennial jadedness, I still have a sense of awe when it comes to these immense, worldwide business sessions. I think back to important GC Sessions of the past: 1888 in Minneapolis, where Christ's role in our salvation was debated; 1990 in Indianapolis, where the ordination of local women elders was given the go-ahead; 2015 in San Antonio, where divisions were denied the right to decide the ordination of women pastors.

I don't know exactly what will be on the agenda, but if studying Adventist history has taught me anything, it's that delegates will inevitably vote on something important. From Adventist education to women's ordination to how we view Ellen White's writings, lots of hot topics are being discussed. I could potentially take part in groundbreaking debates and a historical vote—perhaps even one of those moments to be analyzed by historians and theologians for centuries to come. By accepting, it's even possible I'd be remembered as the delegate who voted this way or that way on an important matter, and I'd win or lose friends based on the personal stance I took. That may be dramatic and overanalytical, but who knows what might happen?

## What's the Point?

At the same time, this question runs through my mind: what's the point of all this anyway? The General Conference and its sessions

might have historical and denominational significance, but the results aren't always encouraging.

The General Conference in Session, as described by Ellen White, is "the highest authority that God has upon the earth."<sup>1</sup> However, she also wrote to Elder O. A. Olsen that God was not in his decision to send her to Australia following the 1888 Minneapolis session,<sup>2</sup> and she referred to that GC Session as one in which "the opinion of men was looked to as the voice of God."<sup>3</sup>

Conference's own Theology of Ordination Study Committee, don't violate scriptural principles.

### Adding My Voice

The biggest thing that saying "yes" to this invitation represents to me is the opportunity to sit at the table and weigh in on important global Adventist conversations. It's unlikely the topic of women's ordination will be on the 2020 agenda, and who knows if I'll get to

## The biggest thing that saying "yes" to this invitation represents to me is the opportunity to sit at the table and weigh in on important global Adventist conversations.

So, clearly, her views on this subject were not fixed, and although the General Conference is a respected entity and the General Conference Session a high gathering, there is room for human error and an absence of sanctified judgment.

As much as I'd like to say that I would be expressly partaking in the decisions of the Lord by voting in the General Conference Session, I'm not convinced that this is always the case. As a result of the 2015 session in San Antonio, I know many who were incredibly discouraged. Although the world church had allowed the ordination of women elders back in 1990, for some reason the ordination of women pastors became an immense stumbling block. I've personally seen young adults become cynical and colleagues leave the ministry over this particular decision. I've even been part of helping to bring back church leaders who left Adventism in the wake of the disastrous 2015 vote.

Ellen White saw "the opinion of men" governing the 1888 meeting. I look back on the San Antonio GC Session with the same impression. I've seen too many young church voices silenced because of this matter and watched Adventists change careers from pastor to nurse or realtor or something else—all, it seems to me, due to worldly politicking.

The current General Conference administration seems to have one main objective: to make sure no women pastors are ever ordained, by going to war with those who see things differently than they do. From compliance documents to public reprimands to hints about dissolving entire unions, I've watched as a denomination that is so vocal about freedom of religion has sought to stamp out the freedom to practice Adventist Christianity in regionally appropriate ways that, per the General

participate when it resurfaces. But having watched too many of my friends leave the church over that saga, I want to take my seat at the table when I'm given the chance and add my voice wherever I can.

I myself have gone through the stages of discouragement and jadedness. I've thought about leaving the ministry. I want to be proud of my world church, and in many ways I am, but what this glaring issue represents still remains. So, I feel that I owe it to the Lord, who called me to say "yes" and to officially join the denominational conversation. I owe it to colleagues whose optimism has been crushed by a world headquarters that uses policy, and not scripture, to shut down opposition. I owe it to my younger self, who spent years in formal theological education, and further years working toward a senior pastorate and an ordination.

For what? I could do ministry without all of that. Sometimes I even wish that I'd chosen a different path. But I still maintain that God called me as a pastor to this denomination. So I've followed that calling. I've played the game. I've gone through the red tape.

And now I have an invitation to sit at the table. How should I reply?

At 7:27 a.m., I answered: "I humbly accept this nomination." **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3 (1875), p. 492.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White to O. A. Olsen, Letter 127, from "Sunnyside," Cooranbong, Australia (Dec. 1, 1896), as published in *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, Chapter 187.

<sup>3</sup> White, Manuscript 37 (1890), paragraph 33.



## On the General Conference, the Fruit of the Spirit, and Escaping to Scotland to Pray

By Alden Thompson

OUR FAMILY HAS VISITED ONLY THREE General Conference (GC) Sessions: San Francisco in 1954, Cleveland in 1958, and San Francisco in 1962. Through the haze of years, one vivid anecdote remains. It's from a hotel in San Francisco, where, in classic Adventist pack-lunch style, we were eating with our young pastor, Roland Hegstad (who went on to serve a distinguished 35-year tenure as editor of *Liberty* magazine). When one of my aunts offered him a peanut butter and tomato sandwich, Hegstad hitched up his suspenders and exclaimed in horror, "Can someone take care of that woman before she kills me?"

That's it: my credentials as a hands-on participant/observer at a GC Session.

My adult perspective is now clearer, and the point of this piece is that attending a GC Session is too dangerous for me. It would be much safer were I to go to Scotland and pray.

### Credentials

While I have absolutely no hands-on GC Session experience, my study of the Old Testament has led me to ponder the potential application of prophetic words to our day. And I have been intrigued by the contrast between God's heavy hand in the Old Testament—"Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.... Whether animal or human being, they shall not live" (Exod. 19:12-13, NRSV)—and the gentle ways of God Incarnate in the New: "Let the children come to me," said Jesus. "And he took them up in his arms ... and blessed them" (Mark 10:14, 16, NRSV).

After my studies at the University of Edinburgh, I knew that if I were to teach my students what I had learned, I would need to become more familiar with my Adventist heritage. So, I decided to read through the nine volumes of *Testimonies for the Church*. As a devout youngster of a good Adventist home, I had grown up with a decent knowledge of the Ellen White corpus, especially the Conflict of the Ages series and her books on the life of Christ. But every time I tried the *Testimonies*, I never got far. When I began to read them in 1978, I soon discovered why. The smoke curls up from those early volumes with quotes like this: "As soon as any have a desire to imitate the fashions of the world, that they do not immediately subdue, just so soon God ceases to acknowledge them as His children."<sup>1</sup>

But now I had a model that enabled me to stomach such stiff medicine without losing my faith. In short, the trajectory from Old Testament to New Testament moves from an emphasis on God's power, with fear as the primary motivator, to an emphasis on God's goodness, with joy as the primary motivator. It's a movement from external to internal motivation, with Ellen White's experience running parallel to that of Scripture.

I read through all nine volumes in six months, taking copious notes and becoming increasingly excited by the unfolding view of Ellen White's growth. I finished the last lines of volume 9 on the very first day of spring quarter, 1979, the first time I taught History of Adventism. It was a large class of some 80 students,

and the enthusiastic response across the spectrum is still what gives me hope for the church. The liberals on the left simply wanted to be honest with the text; the devout conservatives on the right, many from self-supporting or homeschooling backgrounds, simply wanted to see that God was at work. I had no difficulty affirming both. And so began a 40-year career of teaching Adventist history.

That's why I have something I want to say to those who attend the GC Session.

### Diagnosis

This medical term implies illness. I will cite two books and two examples to confirm the status of the patient.

Those who were at the San Antonio GC Session in 2015 would have sensed the illness firsthand. Modern media let the whole world see it. In 2017, two trusted Adventist spokespersons told their painful stories of the San Antonio illness in books published by Oak and Acorn. William Johnsson, editor of the *Adventist Review* from 1982 to 2006, wrote *Where Are We Headed? Adventism After San Antonio*. George Knight, retired professor of church history at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University and author or editor of nearly 100 books, wrote *Adventist Authority Wars, Ordination, and the Roman Catholic Temptation*. The assessments by Johnsson and Knight are sobering, but not without hope.

The first of my two examples comes in the form of a George Knight quote that describes the "booing and heckling of Jan

Paulsen when he raised issues related to ordination with no immediate, significant public rebuke by the denomination's highest authorities."

My second example comes from the opening session of the nominating committee as it was organizing and selecting a chair. Historically, at every constituency level in the church, a sitting president joins the nominating committee only after being elected. He then works with the committee to select the rest of the officers. But in 2015, GC President Ted Wilson joined the committee from the start and helped them select a chair.

Nobody challenged him. In an authoritarian system, if you want to keep your job, you keep quiet. And everyone did, including the parliamentarian.

In this connection, Ellen White sets a lofty ideal for dealing with a superior: "The younger worker must not become so wrapped up in the ideas and opinions of the one in whose charge he is placed, that he will forfeit his individuality. He must not lose his identity in the one who is instructing him, so that he dare not exercise his own judgment, but does what he is told, irrespective of his own understanding of what is right and wrong. It is his privilege to learn for himself of the great Teacher. If the one with whom he is working pursues a course which is not in harmony with a 'Thus saith the Lord,' let him not go to some outside party, but let him go to his superior in office, and lay the matter before him, freely expressing his mind. Thus the learner may be a blessing to the

teacher. He must faithfully discharge his duty. God will not hold him guiltless if he connives at a wrong course of action, however great may be the influence or responsibility of the one taking the wrong course."<sup>2</sup>

Enough diagnosis. If you're brave, read the rest of the story in Knight and Johnsson.

### **Treatment and Cure: Old Testament**

One doesn't typically seek the cure for an authoritarian illness in the Old Testament. Indeed, the Old Testament frequently illustrates the worst sins of authoritarianism. But it can help us understand those who have been immersed in authoritarian cultures their whole lives, which could help point us toward a potential cure for the San Antonio illness.

In 2016, prolific author and historian Philip Jenkins gave several lectures on the Walla Walla University campus. "In Africa," he noted, "the Old Testament walks right off the page into the lives of the Africans. It makes perfectly good sense to them." In short, what troubles us about the Old Testament is not a dominant concern for them.

So, without being inappropriately condescending, how do we nudge authoritarians toward the egalitarian model described and lived out by Jesus? Very carefully! We can start by pondering a student-teacher relationship. Initially the teacher clearly stands a notch above the students. But in an ideal world, the voracious learners among the students

will eventually overtake and surpass the teacher, though the transition is fraught with tensions. If former students become full-fledged equals, for example, when and how do they begin to call former teachers by their first name? Some never can; others use first names from day one, at least in our American culture. But in authoritarian cultures, the rules are different. Words such as negotiation, counsel, and mutual respect rarely show up.

The Old Testament prophets do give us some important insights, however, calling the people and their leaders to follow justice and righteousness—and all the more when the people cloak their evil with the trappings of religion. Jeremiah, for example, vividly calls Israel to account: "If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, ... then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever.... Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'—only to go on doing all these abominations?" (Jer. 7:5, 7, 9-10, NRSV).

I must admit that I have to fight off recurring waves of cynicism when I read well-intentioned slogans in church papers: "Hundred Days of Prayer for General Conference Session" and "The Church I Want to Belong to Is Faithful to Scripture." Oh, that we could hear the

anguished voice of Amos: “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21, 23-24, NRSV).

### **Treatment and Cure: New Testament**

So now let's focus more explicitly on the New Testament and Jesus' ideal. Not only does Matthew's Gospel summarize Jesus' message in terms of our treatment of others (Matt. 7:12), it also includes his

While focusing on the New Testament, we must also look more closely at Paul's exposition of the “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5, in particular his contrast between “works of the flesh” and “fruit of the Spirit.” I grew up assuming that “flesh” referred primarily to sexual sins, but a closer look has opened my eyes.

In Paul's view, the works of the flesh, including all 15 he mentioned, are “obvious.” They fall into four categories: (1) sexual sins: fornication, impurity, and licentiousness; (2) religious sins: idolatry and sorcery; (3) interpersonal sins: enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels,

“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23, NRSV)?

### **Treatment and Cure:**

#### **Ellen White and Adventist History**

Pondering the fruit of the Spirit has brought me back to the one GC Session when Adventists got it right: 1901. If you don't have time to read Knight and Johnsson, go online and read the minutes of the General Conference Session meetings for April 2, 1901. Ellen White's address at the opening session is powerful stuff. Here are four excerpts that have burned their way into my soul:

- Commenting on church leaders “who have not learned to submit themselves to the control and discipline of God,” she said: “That these men should stand in a sacred place, to be as the voice of God to the people, as we once believed the General Conference to be,—that is past. What we want now is a reorganization. We want to begin at the foundation, and to build upon a different principle.”<sup>3</sup>

- She also had words for the publishing house leaders, declaring that she “would rather lay a child of mine in his grave than have him go there to see these principles [of heaven] mangled and perverted.”<sup>4</sup>

- She was concerned about the spirit of the meetings, saying: “Let every one of you go home, not to chat, chat, chat, but to pray. Go home and pray. Talk with God. Go home and plead with God to mold and fashion you after the divine similitude.”<sup>5</sup>

- Her last words to the delegates—spoken publicly to all the church leaders at the General Conference and published in the *Review* for all to read—can

**In my lifetime, it has not been safe for me to attend a GC Session. It just hurts too much to see the principles of heaven “mangled and perverted” there.**

response to the request of James and John to be highest in the kingdom. I've blended the NIV and NRSV translations to maximize the power of Jesus' words: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28, NRSV/NIV). If only we could recite those words at the next GC Session! Maybe someone could put them to music so that we could sing them.

dissensions, factions, and envy; and (4) lifestyle sins: drunkenness and carousing. Furthermore, Paul gives a sobering reminder of the consequences for those who “do” these works of the flesh: “I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21, NRSV).

What might God say about the sins of San Antonio's 2015 session, especially the interpersonal ones: “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy”? And what might God say of the 2020 GC Session, if all those who speak would repeat to themselves, before speaking, those traits that are included in the fruit of the Spirit:

remind us of what we need at the 2020 GC Session: “I want to have a home with the blessed, and I want you to have a home there. I want to work in harmony with you, and I want that every one who has an impetuous temper, that will flare up and lead him to act like a frantic man—I want him, as he begins to speak in this way, to remember Christ, and sit right down and hold his peace. Say not a word.”<sup>6</sup>

“God help us to restrain our tongues,” she urged. “The voice is a precious talent.... It is not lent to you that you may swear; but every one, who gives way to an unholy temper might just as well swear. God help us to submit to Jesus Christ, and to have his power right here and now.”<sup>7</sup>

When she sat down, GC President George A. Irwin stepped to the pulpit and said: “These are certainly very plain words.” Indeed!

The session closed with a season of prayer and, for the next few days, the presence of the Spirit was felt by all. The awestruck editor of *The General Conference Bulletin* put it this way, clearly indicating that the most significant change at the conference had been the change in spirit:

“To sketch the inner history of the Conference just closed, would require the skilled pen of heavenly inspiration. Even that which has been apparent to beholders, has challenged their admiration to the verge of incredulity. From rumors that thickly flew across the horizon of every part of the field, a few weeks ago, hardly a delegate appeared at this session who did not anticipate worry, and even disaster more or less serious. Various theories were afloat, which most,

if not all, had previously canvassed, and decided their merits or demerits. Whispers of disintegration were borne from ear to ear, and speculations as to the final result were rife....

“Take it altogether, this has been one of the most peculiar, yet the very best, General Conference ever convened by Seventh-day Adventists. There has been no particular outward demonstration of joy, but a quiet, deep-seated calm has apparently attended everyone, producing an expression of the sweetest peace. All differences of sentiment, which had been the cause of more or less alienation, were buried under the gentle droppings of the Holy Spirit, accompanying the words of instruction from the servants of the Lord. From the first of the business meetings, not one unkind word was spoken on the floor, not a single rebutting argument was used. But all seemed to vie with one another in maintaining the rules of courtesy and Christian deportment.”<sup>8</sup>

Ellen White was also awed by the result. Right up front she had told the delegates: “I did not want to come to Battle Creek. I was afraid the burdens I would have to bear would cost my life.”<sup>9</sup> Afterward, she was ecstatic: “During the General Conference the Lord wrought mightily for His people. Every time I think of that meeting, a sweet solemnity comes over me, and sends a glow of gratitude to my soul. We have seen the stately steppings of the Lord our Redeemer. We praise His holy name; for He has brought deliverance to His people.”<sup>10</sup>

George Knight has drawn a strong comparison between the 1888 GC and San Antonio. The parallels are numerous and painful. In 1888 the delegates argued

over whether the tenth horn in Daniel 7 represented the Huns or the Alemanni, even using those names to label each other! And they argued over the question of whether law in Galatians 3 was moral or ceremonial. After one particularly contentious meeting, Ellen White fled to her room and penned these poignant words: “And for the first time I began to think it might be we did not hold correct views after all upon the law in Galatians, for the truth required no such spirit to sustain it. ... I returned to my room questioning what was the best course for me to pursue. Many hours that night were spent in prayer in regard to the law in Galatians. This was a mere mote. Whichever way was in accordance with a ‘Thus saith the Lord,’ my soul would say, Amen, and amen. But the spirit that was controlling our brethren was so unlike the spirit of Jesus, so contrary to the spirit that should be exercised toward each other, it filled my soul with anguish.”<sup>11</sup>

Adventists got it right in 1901. But in my lifetime, it has not been safe for me to attend a GC Session. It just hurts too much to see the principles of heaven “mangled and perverted” there.

I may not go to Scotland to pray. But I will pray. **AT**

<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1856), p. 136.

<sup>2</sup> White, *Gospel Workers* (1915), pp. 102-103.

<sup>3</sup> White, *The General Conference Bulletin* (April 3, 1901), p. 25, paragraph 25.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, paragraph 24.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 26, paragraph 37.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27, paragraph 42.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, paragraph 43.

<sup>8</sup> *The General Conference Bulletin* (April 25, 1901), pp. 457-458, paragraphs 1, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *The General Conference Bulletin*, April 12, 1901, p. 204, paragraph 24.

<sup>10</sup> *The Review and Herald* (Nov. 26, 1901), p. 761.

<sup>11</sup> White, Manuscript 24 (1888), paragraphs 53 and 60, published in *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (1987), pp. 221, 223.

## We Need a Different General Conference President

By Edward Reifsnnyder

IF YOU THINK IT IS INAPPROPRIATE TO express the following opinions, let me ask you this: how does a lay person like me influence the selection of the General Conference (GC) president? I can't talk with General Conference Nominating Committee members: the committee isn't appointed until just before the session. I can't talk to GC Session delegates: who are they, and how would I contact them?

Further, the bylaws are sufficiently loose that the appointment of any division's delegates can easily be manipulated. The process of selecting a GC president is so haphazard, so non-transparent, and so subject to manipulation that we need a different method—but that is a subject for another day.

So this is the best—perhaps the only—way I know to communicate my views.

### An Executive Search

I am by profession an executive search consultant. I manage searches for senior-level executives and leaders, including CEOs, presidents, and members of boards of directors. One of the first tasks in a search is to determine what the client organization needs from its next leader, with considerable granularity. We begin the search by asking pointed questions of many key stakeholders:

- What kind of experience is desired?
- What skills, competencies, and abilities are needed?
- What education and other professional recognitions are desired?
- What personal characteristics and personality are desirable?
- What interpersonal abilities are required?
- What team-building skills are needed?

- What leadership/managerial style is desired?
- What specific accomplishments are expected early in the new leader's tenure?
- What strategic vision would be on target?

### What We Need Now

Here is what I would say if someone were to ask me, "What kind of leader do you think we need as the next president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists?"

We need a statesman-like peacemaker, someone who will make it his top priority to bring about healing after nearly a decade of conflict and division. We need someone who understands that in different parts of the globe, constituents have legitimate differences in perspectives and that a middle ground must be found. We need someone who will compromise on non-core issues, with corresponding adaptation of policy. The leader must recognize that he can't coerce constituents.

We need a leader who recognizes that the church structure was intentionally designed to *not* be an authoritarian organization and that its president has limited power and authority. The leader must be content to work through influence and character and the limitations of the role. This leader shouldn't aggregate power and authority to either the General Conference or himself.

We need a leader who is transparent. Everyone should know his agenda, intent, and motives. This transparency should extend beyond the echo chambers of church committees to the member in the pew.

We need a leader who is not openly ambitious. It is okay for someone to express an interest in church leadership,

but that interest is unseemly when it moves into maneuvering. There is a saying that the first qualification of a bishop is that he not want to be a bishop. A little of that would be good.

We need a leader who is not a manipulator of events and people, in pursuit of his own objectives. Success for the leader's agenda should come with honest behavior and good communication.

This may sound odd, but we need a good politician—in the best sense of the word. We need a leader who can sense where things are and bring people together toward desirable objectives.

We need a leader who will respect organizational boundaries, who will not attempt to control events and decisions where he/she has no jurisdiction or authority.

We need a leader who isn't playing win-lose games. On this point, we need a leader who will seek through diplomacy to avoid deeply split votes whenever possible.

We need a leader who recognizes that a church is a volunteer organization and that constituents are the truly important people who comprise and finance the church. The leader must recognize that constituents cannot be coerced by organizational policy or maneuvering.

We need a leader with good judgment, who will recognize when to push and when to prudently pull back.

We need a leader who understands that a spiritual organization, like any organization, must progress and will evolve. Times and forms and circumstances, markets and values, will change, and the church must adapt to be effective. The church is a movement, not a monument.

We need a leader who will focus intently on the primacy of Scripture.

We need a leader who has a vision for a future Seventh-day Adventist Church that is willing to move on to new forms, business models, and methods.

### The Need for a New Leader

Pointedly, Ted Wilson has helped us to see what we *don't* need in a leader. I believe that in order to obtain the above characteristics in the next General Conference president, we will need to elect a different president.

Please do not read this as a personal attack on Wilson. We just have a severe mismatch between what the church needs now and what Wilson offers. Wilson hasn't shown the ability to be a statesman and diplomat. He is an ideologue with a divisive agenda that he does not divulge. He is someone who seeks not win-win solutions, but personal victory over his opponents.

Wilson's 10 years in office have been divisive years. He took the initial sparks of controversy and disagreement and fanned them into flame. He seems to be unhappy that the protections built into our structure as far back as 1901 and 1903 have worked to block his pursuit of power and control. He has not been a reconciler, a statesman, a healer. Just the opposite.

It is too risky to hope that things would be different in a third term. And any signs of conciliatory initiatives by Wilson at this time must be viewed with a jaundiced eye, given that this is the silly season leading up to an election.

It is my opinion that we have seen enough. We need a breath of fresh air. Now. **AT**

## Contributors



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## NEWS BRIEFS

### Dan Jackson's Shoes Appear Too Big to Fill

COLUMBIA, Md. — A group of Loma Linda podiatrists confirmed that the shoes of retiring North American Division (NAD) President Dan Jackson are several sizes too big for most potential successors. Jackson announced that sometime this summer he will complete his decade of service in this position.

The division president was asked to allow candidates for his job to try out his shoes during the recent NAD Year-End Meetings. Candidate after candidate was found wanting, even after wearing the thickest socks on the market.

Scheduled programming at the division's headquarters was repeatedly interrupted as delegates tried to walk around the NAD auditorium, only to have Jackson's shoes slip off. Meeting organizers announced that nobody could go home until someone with the right shoe size was discovered. As they made the announcement, ushers passed out sleeping bags and pillows.

### Gutsy Theologian Flies Down Slippery Slope

TELLURIDE, Colo. — Alarm bells rang all over Adventist academia this morning as a prominent denominational theologian was spotted flying down a slippery slope in Telluride. A flock of commentators immediately lit up social media, declaring that the grace-preaching New Testament professor had no idea he was on a black-diamond run as he hurtled down the near-vertical decline.

Theological opponents of the professor pounced, certain the only thing that could explain the precipitous descent was an overdose of gossip juice, consumed on an empty theological stomach. Nothing else, claimed critics, could account for any deviation from the bunny slopes of committee-approved biblical insight.

### Panicked GC Officials Flood Area 7-Elevens

SILVER SPRING, Md. — 7-Eleven stores in the Silver Spring area have run out of application forms after being flooded by employment requests from GC officials worried about their re-election prospects.

With GC Session 2020 just around the corner, some of the convenience store applicants have offered to jump ship to 7-Eleven before this summer, as the chain offers significantly more job security than the cavernous denominational headquarters.

"We are running into a logistical nightmare, because



all of our recent job applicants are requesting Friday nights and Saturdays off,” said a local store manager. “Many candidates are also asking about whether they have to sign any compliance documents ahead of their hire dates.”

### Single, Eligible SDA Men an Endangered Species

NEW YORK, N.Y. — The United Nations has added single, eligible Adventist males to the list of critically endangered species worldwide. The action was taken after representatives from the International Preservation Agency (IPA) noted that

eligible single women in Adventist churches outnumbered their male counterparts by a factor of 7:1.

Adventist men join species such as the Amur leopard and the hawksbill sea turtle on the IPA short list. Officials warned against confusing Adventist men with Cross River gorillas, which also feature on the list.

“Attractive Adventist males are already spoken for in the average Adventist congregation,” said a report from the IPA. “The available remnant of Adventist men are either lacking gainful employment or front teeth.”

### Shark Tank Rejects Idea of a Boarding Academy

CULVER CITY, Calif. — The investors on business reality TVshow *Shark Tank* have roundly rejected the pitch made by a group of ordained Adventist pastors who described the concept of an Adventist boarding academy.

Billionaire investor Mark Cuban pointed out that the pastors’ strategy of charging an arm and a leg for a less-than-robust academic environment was likely to backfire, even if the school did have amazing vespers programming.

FUBU founder Daymond John told the pastors that their idea of making up for any and all financial losses by importing English language learners from China was a short-term strategy at best, as it did not increase student enrollment from constituent families.

Inventor Lori Greiner dismissed the boarding academy idea as “so last century” after the pastors explained that the school would be located in the middle of nowhere. She unapologetically dashed their hopes of attracting students from suburban Adventist families living hundreds of miles away, explaining that few parents today “want to send their kids to the wilderness” for an education.

BarelyAdventist (barelyadventist.com) is a satire and humor blog on Adventist culture and issues. It is written by committed Adventists who have no interest in tearing down the church but don’t mind laughing at our idiosyncrasies.





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