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Organized for purpose

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has seen two major reorganizations. The first occurred from 1860–1863, about 16 years after the disappointment of 1844. In the early 1860s, the fledgling denomination had only 3,500 members scattered in 125 local churches, which were represented by 6 local conferences across a few of the eastern states of the United States. Representatives from these conferences gathered in Battle Creek, Michigan, and—despite considerable opposition—adopted a denominational name in 1860 and an organizational form in 1863.

The second major period of organizational reform took place in 1901–1903. These were difficult years for the denomination. Although the membership had grown to 75,000, the members were becoming increasingly scattered, and leaders realized that other organizational structures were now needed to deal with the growing church.

Subsequent to the reorganization of 1901–1903, many other structural adjustments have been made. In 1915, the General Conference was divided into a number of divisions that have specific responsibility for administering large areas of the globe (the South Pacific Division and North American Division, for example). Study continues to be given to the organizational and administrative needs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—a church that continues to grow and diversify but intends to maintain its unity and integrity as a global organization.

Church organization: 1860–1863

The form of organization adopted in 1863 consisted of three levels: local churches; state conferences, which comprised the local churches in a designated area; and a General Conference, which comprised all the state conferences. The General Conference was located in Battle Creek, Michigan. The officers were a General Conference president, secretary, and treasurer, and an executive committee of three. General Conference sessions were to be held annually.

An obvious question is, Why was it deemed necessary to organize the Adventist believers into a denomination in the first place? In fact, there was some concerted opposition to the whole idea. And how was the specific form of organizational structure decided? Interestingly, a precise theological answer cannot be found. The church fathers did not decide on an organizational form based on any particular biblical model. Though some general notions of stewardship of personnel and financial resources certainly did influence the discussion, what dictated the need for organization, and the subsequent shape it took, was a list of pragmatic necessities that, if left unattended, would stifle growth.

In 1907, A. G. Daniells, General Conference president at the time, reflected on some of the reasons for the organization in 1863. His list included (1) failure to keep proper church membership records, (2) lack of church officers, (3) "no way of determining who were accredited representatives of the people," (4) no regular support for the ministry, and (5) no legal provision for holding property.[1] Organization of the church meant that these and many other problems could be dealt with systematically.

Reorganization: 1901–1903

As the church continued to grow rapidly, the meager organization set in place in 1863 could not cope with the numeric, geographic, and institutional expansion of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. By the turn of the century, its 75,000 members were spread—not only across the United States—but in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, and increasingly in the mission fields. The organizational structures of 1863 could not cope with this expansion, nor with the increase in departments and institutions that oversaw the publishing, educational, health, and missionary interests of the church. Each of these became a separate entity in itself, outside of the existing organizational structure of the church, but calling on the services of already overextended administrators. The church was in danger of drowning in its own bureaucracy.

Fortunately, the church had some farsighted leaders who realized the danger and the need for change. At the forefront was Ellen G. White. At no time did she attempt to prescribe the exact form that organizational reform was to take; she left that to the delegates at the General Conference sessions. But she did raise her voice in a call for urgent and

innovative change. The day before the commencement of the session in 1901, she called the leaders together and in no uncertain terms told them that "God wants a change . . . right here . . . right now."[2] She was ably supported, particularly by A. G. Daniells, who was to become General Conference president at that session, and by her son, W. C. White.

The shape of church organization since 1903

At the 1901 and 1903 General Conference Sessions, the church adopted a representative organizational form that was shaped as follows:

1. The basic unit is the local church. The local church comprises a group of believers who have been organized as a church and function in their community as the "body of Christ."
2. Local churches in a designated area belong to "the sisterhood of churches" in a local conference, mission or field. For example, the North New South Wales Conference comprises Seventh-day Adventist churches in a designated area of northern New South Wales, Australia. The conference is administered by a president, secretary, treasurer, and executive committee elected by representatives from the local churches at a conference session, which may be held every three or five years.
3. Local conferences in a designated area belong to a union conference. Union conferences are also administered by a president, secretary, and treasurer. These officers are elected by representatives appointed for this function by the local conferences. Recently, an organizational structure designated as a "Union of Churches" has been approved by the General Conference as a structural option. This option omits the level of structure known as the conference, mission, or field. It is implemented only in specific predetermined circumstances.
4. Union conferences and Unions of Churches around the world belong to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, with headquarters just outside of Washington, D.C., United States. General Conference sessions are held every five years, at which time General Conference leadership is elected and major doctrinal and business matters are discussed by representatives from around the world.

As mentioned, subsequent to the 1903 General Conference Session, the General Conference allocated many of its administrative tasks to General Conference Division Headquarters, which are currently found in 13 strategic locations around the world. This has been done in order to facilitate the work of the church and prevent decision-making processes from becoming too centralized and cumbersome. Examples of divisions of the General Conference are the North American Division near Washington, D.C., United States; the East-Central Africa Division in Nairobi, Kenya; and the South Pacific Division in Sydney, Australia.

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Conclusion

The organizational structures and institutions of the church have served us adequately over the years. Recently, the General Conference has formally recognized that flexibility is an important principle of organization as the church moves into the twenty-first century. It is in the best interests of the church that a strong global organizational structure continues to facilitate its ministry and mission as the church takes seriously the commission of Christ, which challenges us to take the gospel to the world. Continually we need to assess what structures best serve the church and how these structures can continue to facilitate that mission. M

1. A. G. Daniells, "Organization—No. 3: A Brief Account of Its History in the Development of the Cause of the Third Angel's Message," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald,* February 14, 1907, 5.
2. "Talk of Mrs. E. G. White Before Representative Brethren in the College Library, April 1,1901, 2.30 P.M.," MS 43a, 1901, Ellen G. White Estate Branch Office, Andrews University, 1.

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