CHAPTER 4

Organisation of Adventists Churches

The Congregation

The basic unit of organisation among Seventh-day Adventists is the local congregation. Throughout Australia there are more than 400 congregations. Each congregation is seen as a whole church. Individual congregations are grouped collectively into Conferences (corresponding to States or parts of States), which are in turn grouped collectively into Union Conferences and subsequently Divisions of the world church, known as the General Conference. Denominational institutions are owned and operated by Conferences, Union Conferences or Division levels of organisation for the benefit of the local church congregation.

The congregation meets weekly on Saturdays, usually referred to as Sabbath, for an all-age Sabbath School and worship. Sabbath worship services are the central events in the life of the church. These worship services usually consist of singing of hymns or contemporary Christian music, the devotion of prayer, the reading of Scripture and a homily on a Scripture passage. The style of worship may vary between congregations, especially in urban areas. The local church pastor, or a worship committee, in consultation with the preacher (if not the pastor) is usually responsible for selecting the theme and content of the worship. The Lord's Supper or Communion is usually celebrated quarterly.



Berwick Adventist Community Fellowship, Victoria.
(Photo courtesy of G.Gale)

Most congregations provide a program for all age groups. These programs include: Sabbath School, an all-age program featuring a Bible study period and mission/evangelism promotion; youth activity programs - Adventurers (age 6-9), Pathfinders (age 10-15) a coeducational program similar to Scouts or Guides and youth camps and activities; and in some congregations over 60's clubs.Most congregations also offer a number of community-oriented programs. These programs include: Health & lifestyle programs (Quit Now, Vegetarian cooking, Wa-rite, Stress Management, etc), family seminars (marriage enrichment, parenting support etc), children's playgroups, holiday club activities and adult creative activities; and Bible discovery seminars.

The Minister or Pastor

Ministers are employed by the Conference and paid from the tithe pool collected from each church in the Conference. In the churches to which they are appointed, their role is to lead the congregation as a player/coach. They are to motivate and mobilise the church members in their Christian life

and witness. Ministers, as congregational leaders, are responsible to both the Church Business Meeting and, as employees, to the Conference Executive Committee.Ministers are ordained after an appropriate period of study and ministerial experience, Ordained ministers are called pastors and attach this title before their name. Avondale College, offering accredited Bachelor, Graduate Diploma and Masters degrees, is the training institution for ministers in Australia.Application for employment is made during the final year of study. The applicants describe their professional skills and interests, and express their preferences for employment. An interview process with the Union Conference Presidents follows. Upon graduation, local conferences offer the successful applicant a ministerial internship. During the two-year internship, the ministerial intern is mentored by an experienced pastor. On completion of the internship, the licensed minister gains further church experience. When the corporate church has validated the individual's call to ministry, the local Conference, in consultation with the Union Conference, arranges the ordination service. Ordination qualifies the minister to officiate at baptisms, funerals and the Communion Service and to receive denominational endorsement for registration as marriage celebrants.

Subsequent ministerial placements are coordinated by the local conference, acting as the employer. Local conferences usually consult with congregations and pastors regarding these ministerial appointments. Final arrangements are confirmed by the Conference Executive Committee. Although ministerial appointments are for an indefinite period of time, transfers between conferences can occur after a period of five years.

Leadership Roles of Laity

Church members hold important leadership positions in the local congregation. They are encouraged to accept responsibilities in all aspects of congregational life. Church officers are appointed by the church Business Meeting, either annually or biannually, on the recommendation of the congregational Nominating Committee. Specific guidelines are outlined in the Church Manual, a General Conference publication describing the operation of local churches.

Local elders, appointed to assist and advise the pastor, are the congregational leaders. These elders perform both relational and task functions. The relational functions include assisting the pastor with the spiritual

care of the people entrusted to them. The task functions include supporting and advising the various departments of the church.

Congregations also appoint church members as delegates to the Conference session, held triennially. Constitutionally, church members have a significant representation on the Executive Committees at all levels of the corporate church. Most advisory committees also include church member representatives.

Committees

The highest level of authority in a local church is the church Business Meeting. Such meetings occur quarterly where congregational decisions are made, the activities of the church reviewed, plans for future directions voted and recommendations from the Church Board enacted. The Pastor, or delegated elder, is the chairman of the Business Meeting.

The Church Board, although ultimately responsible to the Church Business Meeting, has executive authority to act in most matters of church life. Most of the positions on the Church Board are ex-officio, as defined by the Church Manual. The pastor is usually chairman of the Church Board meeting. The Board usually meets monthly to manage and coordinate the facilities, activities and resources of the congregation.

The other congregational ministry areas also have coordinating committees, which report to the Church Board. These Committees include the Elders Committee, Sabbath School Council, Personal Ministries/Evangelism Council, Youth Council and Pathfinder Executive. Congregations also appoint other ad hoc committees as necessary. Most of these committees have executive authority to act within the defined parameters of their responsibilities. Congregational members chair these committees and consequently are usually ex-officio on the Church Board. The pastor is ex-officio on all these Committees.

Other Levels of Church Organisation: Conference, Union Conference, Division/ General Conference

The local Conference provides administrative support and ministry resources for the local church. The administration consists of a President, who is a spiritual leader and also a Secretary/Treasurer who manages the financial affairs. The ministry resources are provided by Department Directors who are specialists in their given ministry area. The Executive Committee, with the President as chair, is responsible for the operation of the Conference, including the ministerial staffing employment and appointments.

Amongst a wide variety of corporate events, most Conferences convene an Annual Convention which lasts from five to nine days. These conventions, with origins in the North American camp meeting of the last century, provide opportunities for spiritual growth by providing guest speakers, workshops and Christian fellowship.

The church operates a representative type of government. Each church entity has the right to appoint delegates to constituency sessions; the number varies depending on the size of the entity according to the constitution. Thus the local church appoints delegates for the conference session, the Conference for the Union session and the Unions for the Division/General Conference session. Conference sessions are convened every three years while the Union Conference and General Conference/Division sessions are convened every five years. The General Conference in session has the highest authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Denominational institutions are owned and operated by Conferences, Union Conferences or Division levels of organisation for the benefit of the local church congregation. Such institutions offer services in a broad range of activities including educational, medical, health, media/publishing, retirement villages, development and relief and youth/recreational areas. Key Australian institutions include:

Avondale College, Cooranbong NSW - a tertiary institution established in 1897 and currently, with a Faculty of Art, Design and Technology, Arts, Business, Education, Mathematics and Computing, Science and Theology and two schools; Aviation and Nursing. These are accredited to grant certificates, diplomas, Bachelor degrees, graduate diplomas and Masters degrees.

Sydney Adventist Hospital, Wahroonga NSW - a general community hospital, established in 1903, with specialist cardiology, oncology and maternity units.

Sanitarium Health Food Company, Berkley Vale NSW with multiple branches - manufacturing health foods including breakfast cereals and vegetarian meat substitutes, established in 1898.

Adventist Media Centre, Wahroonga, NSW - a media production unit for Christian material in radio, television, tape and video formats.

Signs Publishing Company, Warburton, Vic - a printing and publishing house established in 1886, for the distribution of Christian books, periodicals and literature through both the Adventist Book Centres and agents of the Home Health Education Service.

Adventist Development and Relief Agency - Australia (ADRA) - a non-government organisation supervising donor development and relief projects in third world countries - sponsors of the annual ADRA Adventist Appeal.

The Church in Australia and New Zealand also sponsors the work of the Adventist church in the South Pacific Islands. The Church in these areas is organised along similar lines to the church in Australia. Differences arise because they are currently not self-supporting. Missions, which can demonstrate self-support, are being encouraged to achieve Conference status. However, the expatriate staffing and financial support come predominantly from Australia and New Zealand.