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## The Organisation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

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until the 1890s, however, did groups of local conferences begin to be organised into union conference. Soon thereafter, in 1901, the General Conference itself was extensively reorganised, but otherwise the basic patterns developed during the 1860s were preserved.

From our perspective in the twenty-first century, it is vital to remember the determination of early Seventh-day Adventists to pursue truth. Thus they wanted no creed but the Bible, and no organisation which would hinder their primary mission. Not until recently (1980) was a General Conference in world session prepared to vote its acceptance of a statement of faith. Even then an explanatory preamble was necessary: "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."<sup>478</sup>

## **The Organisation of the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

Barry D. Oliver

### **Introduction**

The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church has seen two major periods of organisational reform. The first occurred in the years 1860-1863, just over 16 years since the bitter disappointment of 1844. At that time the fledgling denomination had only 3500 members scattered in 125 local churches and 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 chose a denominational name in 1860 and adopted an organisational form in 1863.

The second major period of organisational reform took place in the years 1901-1903.

In many ways these were very difficult years for the denomination. Although the membership had grown considerably since the initial organisation of the denominational structure in 1863, there were still only 75,000 Church members. Yet these members were becoming increasingly scattered and it was realised that other organisational structures were needed which could more adequately deal with the administrative needs of the Church.

While this chapter will discuss in more detail these two periods of organisational reform, it should be kept in mind that there have been many other structural and administrative adjustments which have modified the manner in which the Church is organised and administered. For example, subsequent to the reorganisation of 1901-1903, the General Conference was divided into a number of divisions that have specific responsibility for administering large areas of the globe, eg. The South Pacific Division, The North American Division, etc. Study continues to be given to the organisational and administrative needs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—a Church which continues to grow and to diversify, but which very much intends to maintain its unity and integrity as a global organisation.

### **Church Organisation: 1860-1863**

The form of organisation adopted in 1863 was simple. There were three levels: local churches, state conferences comprising the local churches in a designated area, and a General Conference (with headquarters in Battle Creek, Michigan) which comprised all state conferences. The officers were a General Conference president, secretary, and treasurer, and an executive committee of three. It was decided that General Conference sessions were to be held annually.

An obvious question that should be asked and answered is the question of why it was necessary to organise the “adventist believers” into a denomination. Certainly there was some concerted opposition to the whole idea. Interestingly, a theological answer cannot be found for that question. It is clear that the founding fathers of the Church did not decide on a Church organisational form which was strongly theologically grounded or which was based on any particular biblical model. While some general notions of stewardship of personnel and financial resources certainly did influence the discussion, that is as far as it went theologically.<sup>479</sup>

What did dictate the need for organisation and the shape it should take was a list of pragmatic necessities that, if left unattended, would stifle the growth of the fledgling organisation. In 1907, A. G. Daniells, the General Conference President, listed some of the reasons for organisation 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.<sup>480</sup> Organisation of the Church meant that these and many other problems could be dealt with systematically.

### Reorganisation: 1901-1903

But the Church soon discovered that it had a problem. As the Church began to grow rapidly it realised that the meagre organisation that was set in place in 1863 could not cope

#### Discussion starters:

1. Was the form of Church organisation that we now have determined by our theology or our practice? What does that mean if we want to change the form of structure that we have?
2. How do we regard the role of Ellen White in determining the form of organisation that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has today?

with this numeric, geographic, and institutional growth. By the turn of the century the Church had 75,000 members spread, not only across the United States but in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, and increasingly in the “mission fields.” The organisational structures of 1863 did not foresee and therefore could not cope with this nor with the increase in departments and institutions which began to spring up in order to care for the publishing, educational, health, and missionary interests of the Church. Each of these became a separate entity in itself, outside the existing organisational structure of the Church, but calling on

the services of already over-extended administrators.

Fortunately, the Church had some far-sighted leaders who realised the danger and the need for change. At the forefront of these was none other than Ellen G. White herself. While at no time did she attempt to prescribe the exact form that organisational reform was to take—she left that to the delegates at the General Conference sessions—she called 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.”<sup>481</sup> She was ably supported, particularly by Arthur G Daniells who was to become General Conference President at that session, and by her son, W. C. White.

### The Shape of Church Organisation Today

The 1901 and 1903 General Conference sessions saw the Church adopt a representative organisational form which was shaped as follows:

- 1. The basic unit is the **local church**. The local church comprises a group of believers who have been “organised” 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**. 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.
- 4. Union conferences around the world belong to the **General Conference** of Seventh-day Adventists with headquarters just outside Washington DC, United States. General Conference sessions are held every five years at which time General Conference administrators are elected and major doctrinal and business matters are discussed by representatives from around the world.

As mentioned above, subsequent to the 1903 General Conference session, the General Conference allocated many of its administrative tasks to General Conference Division Headquarters which were established at certain strategic locations around the world. This was done in order to facilitate the work of the Church and prevent decision-making processes from becoming too remote and cumbersome. Examples are the North American Division in Washington, the Trans-European Division in London, and the South Pacific Division in Sydney.

### Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has been well administered over the years. Its organisational structures and institutions have served the Church adequately. It is in the best interests of the Church that a strong global organisational structure continues to facilitate the ministry and mission of the Church in the world as the Church takes seriously the commission of Christ which challenges it 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 our mission.

## The Seventh-day Adventist Church Today and Tomorrow

Barry D. Oliver

### The Church Today

**F**rom its humble beginnings one hundred and fifty years ago, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has become the most widespread Protestant denomination in the world. Its commitment to a global mission has ensured its viability and continuing rapid growth. Today, almost 90% of the membership of the Church is found in what-were-once-considered