

Where Did Adventist Organizational Structure Come From?

by Gary Land

The Seventh-day Adventist organizational structure is the outgrowth of more than a century of denominational experience. Developed first in response to a recognized, though also widely disputed, need for church order among the sabbatarian Adventists in the early 1860s, organization during the next half century evolved as the Adventist mission vision grew to worldwide proportions. The first quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the organizational structure's achievement of its modern form. Changes made since have not been major.

During the 15 years following the Great Disappointment of 1844, the sabbatarian Adventists expanded both numerically and geographically. Scattered in small groups from New England to northeastern Iowa, they were held together only by their common beliefs and the traveling and publishing of James White. Not surprisingly, difficulties arose that pointed toward the need for some kind of organization.

The Adventists discovered that they had no effective way to deal with such problems as dissident groups, the definition of proper ministers and economic support of the ministry. In addition, they needed a legal basis for owning church property and some central direction for evangelizing new geographical areas. As James White, among others, saw the problems, he called as early as 1853 "for order and strict discipline in the church."¹

Progress toward organization moved slowly

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because many Adventists held a strong antipathy toward church institutions of almost any kind. One believer, R. F. Cottrell, opposed organization on the ground that it "lies at the foundation of Babylon. I do not think the Lord would approve of it."² Like many others, he wanted to leave the problems to the Lord to solve. Probably, such antiorganizational bias resulted from the expulsion of the Millerites from the established churches and the general anti-institutionalism that pervaded reform groups during the pre-Civil War years.

In 1859 James White proposed that yearly meetings be held in each state; the next year he issued a call for a general conference. This conference, which met in Battle Creek, Mich., in the fall of 1860, took the first step toward general church organization by adopting the name Seventh-day Adventist. Several months later, in May 1861, the "Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association" organized. Progress had been made, but stiff opposition continued. Patience with those who opposed organization ran thin. Ellen White, for example, wrote that "unless the churches are so organized that they can carry out and enforce order, they have nothing to hope for the future."³

The Battle Creek conference of 1861 had taken another major step when it recommended that the churches in Michigan unite as a conference and appointed Joseph Bates as the state conference's chairman. Seventeen churches met together at Monterey, Mich., in October 1862 and entered into the conference. Immediately, they established a fixed remuneration for ministers and required that ministers report their activities and expenses to the conference. During the next few months, five more states followed suit in establishing their own conferences.

Delegates from all the state conferences except one, Vermont, met together in Battle Creek in May 1863. Believers in organization, the representatives took only three days to establish a constitution and elect officers. The resulting structure divided responsibility between the General and state conferences, giving the General Conference the general supervision of the ministry (transferring a minister from one state conference to another, for example) and the special supervision of all missionary labor. The state conferences held the power to appoint ministers to particular geographical areas and to grant ministerial licenses and credentials. The constitution also established the offices of president, secretary and treasurer, and an executive board of three, all serving one-year terms.

The organizational structure adopted in 1863 came from the leaders of the sabbatarian Adventists, not from the local churches. Significantly, the General Conference was composed of the local conferences and those conferences themselves had been organized in response to calls from James White, among others. That the local churches did not even hold the power to appoint their own ministers, a decision made probably because of a shortage of ministers, helped ensure that denominational leadership would never be strongly grounded in the local church. The new structure satisfied James White, for, a short time later, he wrote that "organization has saved the cause. Secession among us is dead."⁴

The primary object of organization on both the general and state levels had been to solve the legal problem of property holding, to define and support the ministry and to give general direction to the denomination. A workable basis for achieving such goals was now accomplished and the organizational structure developed in 1863 retained its basic form until 1901.

During the remainder of the century, however, the growth of the denomination's educational, publishing and medical institutions strained a structure that had not anticipated them. Between 1885 and 1901, for example, 12 publishing, 17 educational and 14 medical institutions came into existence. To make things more complicated, several of these establishments were missionary projects in such wide-

spread areas as England, Germany, India and Australia. Generally, they were operated on a stock basis with the stockholders electing the officials that would run the day-to-day affairs. The legal relationship and the line of authority to the denomination were unclear, a situation that resulted in considerable conflict and misunderstanding among denominational leaders and the various institutions.

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As a result of such problems, questions regarding denominational organization arose at nearly every General Conference session and several attempts were made to rectify matters. In 1887 the General Conference session created the post of corresponding secretary to help the General Conference president with his paper work. In addition, the session added three secretaries to supervise education, foreign missionary and home missionary activities.

Two years later, the General Conference session divided the United States into six geographical districts with a member of the General Conference Committee selected to superintend each district. Among other duties, this superintendent was to attend all the annual conferences in his district and advise the leaders of the local conferences and Adventist institutions.

In the meantime, several separate organizations had arisen in an effort to coordinate the denomination's outreach. In addition to the Publishing Association established in 1861, the denomination created the SDA Educational Society (responsible for Battle Creek College), the General Conference Association (to hold the property of the various church organizations), and the SDA Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association (to oversee health and welfare institutions).

Responding to a proposal by President O. E. Olsen in 1893, the General Conference session moved to change the district divisions into "conferences intermediate between the General

Conference and the State conferences.”⁵ Two overseas districts were also created, one composed of Australia, the other of Europe. Envisioned to coordinate the Adventist Associations and to hold title to Adventist properties within their territories, the American district conferences concentrated on evangelism and never became real administrative units. Abroad, particularly in Australia, the districts developed into more effective organizations.

For more than a decade, Ellen White had been admonishing the General Conference to divide responsibilities among the top leadership rather than center it on the president. Up to 1897, the president also served as president of the Foreign Mission Board, the General Conference Association, the International Tract Society and the SDA Publishing Association. In that year, a number of changes came about. George A. Irwin became president of the General Conference but other men took the leadership positions in the associations (except for the mission board, which was discontinued). The Conference also divided church administration into three geographical areas: the United States and Canada, Europe and Australasia.

The difficulties continued, however. One administrator lamented, “The facts are, that no one can ever know the sad condition that things are in here on this side.”⁶ Complaints arose of mismanagement of mission funds; assertions were made that the organizational structure was impeding forward progress. Although much soul searching resulted from these criticisms, the leaders took no major steps at the 1899 General Conference session. But a strong movement toward reorganization developed during the next two years, led largely by A. G. Daniells and W. C. White, who were currently leading the denomination in Australia, one of the few districts that had become effective administrative units. Further impetus for reorganization came from Ellen G. White who called for a General Conference Committee that represented all aspects of Adventist work.

As the 1901 General Conference session met, the movement for reorganization became dominant. Amid sermons decrying overcentralization, a large committee studied for a week the general problem of organization and then presented a number of suggestions to the conference. As a result, the conference decided to lodge leader-

ship in an enlarged General Conference Committee of 25 members, which would choose a chairman. The office of president was discontinued. The conference further recommended that the districts be developed into strong union conferences.

When the new General Conference Committee met a short time later, it chose A. G. Daniells as its chairman. Within a year, he was signing his letters and reports in the *Review and Herald* with the title president. Some dispute arose concerning this action but in 1903 the General Conference session officially reestablished the office of president and named Daniells to the post. The conference also resolved that all Adventist institutions should be owned by one of the conferences, state, union, or General and changed the constitution to provide for departments to give general guidance to the various aspects of Adventist endeavor and to take the place of the several associations that were by now discontinued.

On paper, at least, the organizational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination by 1903 placed the General Conference president, who worked with a General Conference Committee, in the primary administrative role. Playing an advisory, rather than administrative, role were the yet-to-be-established departments. The second level of administration existed at the union conference level which was to cover large geographical areas and had yet to be made effective. The third administrative level was the state conferences, and at the bottom lay the local churches. In theory each level was to take care of the problems that did not need referral to a more general body. Thereby authority spread among all administrators, thus relieving the General Conference president of the need for intimate knowledge of the daily activities in all areas of the denomination. Such a change was regarded as necessary because it was impossible for one individual, or even a few, to carry the administrative burden and because the geographical growth of the church made communication and travel difficult.

Although the General Conference sessions created the structure, it took effective leadership to make that structure viable. In choosing A. G. Daniells, the denomination chose a man who

had considerable administrative experience. While serving in Australia, he had become president of the first union conference established by Seventh-day Adventists and on the basis of his experience there he had been instrumental in the push for reorganization of the denomination. Daniells' close association

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with W. C. White and Ellen White also helped establish him as a strong leader. During the 21 years that he served as president of the denomination, Daniells brought it into its modern form through effective, if sometimes forceful, leadership.

During the twentieth century's first decade, Daniells led in establishing eight departments to help coordinate areas of activity in which the denomination was already engaged. The avowed purpose of each of the departments was the advancement of the gospel, although three—the Medical Missionary, Foreign and Negro Departments—developed in part because of internal denominational conflicts. The Medical Missionary Department attempted to make certain that the denomination's medical work would never again come under the control of someone independent of the church, as it nearly had under John Harvey Kellogg. The foreign and Negro Departments were responses to the demands of ethnic groups in the United States for leadership roles within the denomination as well as vehicles for reaching immigrants and blacks with the Adventist message. The other departments established during this time—Sabbath School, Publishing, Education, Religious Liberty and Young People's—prompted little controversy and, for the most part, simply took over the roles played by the previous Associations.

The next few years saw the creation of the Home Missionary Department and a Press Bureau, later to become known as the Public

Relations Department, but Daniells ran into problems when he pushed for a ministerial association. For decades, General Conference presidents had been concerned with the state of the Adventist ministry, believing that a lack of education was resulting in poor theology. Daniells was likewise concerned and in 1905 announced that improvement of the ministry must be a major goal of the church. Although a few small steps toward this goal had been taken in the meantime, in 1918 Daniells vigorously urged the General Conference session to establish a Ministerial Department. Because of fear that the department might have executive power over individual ministers, the conference sent the recommendation back for further study. Four years later, it established a Ministerial Commission, soon changed to Ministerial Association, with sharply defined duties: to collect facts on ministerial workers and their problems, to serve as a medium for exchange of ideas and methods and to encourage youth to train for the ministry.

This action in 1922 brought to a close, for the time being, General Conference efforts to carry out the 1903 recommendation to establish departments that would give counsel and direction to the various lines of the denomination's work. Under Daniells' leadership, the church had created its modern bureaucratic structure, for only two more departments—the Radio and Television Department and the Temperance Department—were added in ensuing years.

The General Conference, however, moved beyond the recommendations of 1901 and 1903. Although Daniells continued complaining that the Unions had not become effective administrative units, in 1913 he supported the creation of a new unit, the Division, to lie between the Union and the General Conference. The Division, he said, was a natural outgrowth of the local conference-Union Conference arrangement.

The concept of the Division had been first suggested by Adventist leaders in Europe in 1912 as a solution to the problem of coordinating the European work. A special committee considered the proposal for a European Division in January 1913, and recommended it to the

General Conference session meeting in the spring of that year. At the conference, Daniells asserted that the new administrative structure was needed to provide a "binding, uniting, authoritative organization" to enable the Europeans to work together in meeting crises.⁷ Although several delegates objected to the possibility of establishing a larger bureaucracy, the proposal passed. In fact, the North American leaders found the concept of the Division so attractive that they were able a few days later to push through action establishing a North American Division, despite A. G. Daniells' opposition.

Establishment of the Divisions was now well underway. Although the 1918 General Conference session, upon recommendation of the General Conference officers, discontinued the North American Division, it accepted the Asiatic and South American Divisions that had been organized during the five-year interim. By the end of the next decade, all territory outside of North America had been organized into Divisions. The coordinated worldwide work that Daniells had envisioned when he became General Conference president had become a reality. In the meantime, the 1922 General Conference session had created a new constitution and bylaws that gave the Divisions the final authority in their territories, as long as their actions were in harmony with the plans and policy of the General Conference. It was hoped thereby that the Divisions could act with considerable independence, without having to rely upon Washington.

With the creation of the Divisions, the modern church structure had reached completion. Although, as the denomination grew, the boundaries of Conference, Unions and Divisions changed and new units came into being, the changes took place within the framework established by 1930. The organizational structure of 1975 is essentially that of 1930.

Theoretically, the changes made in organizational structure beginning in 1901 were to decentralize the affairs of the denomination. For the most part, the Unions were to be the means of this decentralization, but they never became really independent administrative agencies. The Divisions achieved this independence to a greater degree, helped along by the 1922

constitution and bylaws. Except for a five-year period, however, they existed only outside North America. Within North America, the denomination became more centralized. The medical, educational and publishing institutions were now all directly owned by the church, at the local, Union or General Conference level. The secretaries of the Departments who coordinated the various lines of endeavor within the church were now part of the General Conference Executive Board. The individuals chosen for these positions were now chosen at General Conference sessions and in almost all cases were ministers, a not insignificant change from nineteenth century practice. Furthermore, individuals might hold more than one position simultaneously, being both president of the Review and Herald Publishing Association and an officer of the General Conference, for example. Such interlocking directorates clearly helped centralize activities at the General Conference level.

Although the centralized structure that emerged in the early twentieth century was not exactly what the leaders had in mind when they began seeking organizational change, it did prove effective in promoting denominational growth. By the mid-1920s, Adventism had clearly become a missionary church, for more Adventists lived outside North America than within. But although the denomination and the world it was attempting to reach changed at a rapid pace during the next half century, the organizational structure remained basically the same. Whether it is still adequate in 1975 is a question that deserves serious examination.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ *Review and Herald*, December 13, 1853, p. 180.

² *Review and Herald*, March 22, 1860, p. 140.

³ *Review and Herald*, August 27, 1861, p. 101.

⁴ *Review and Herald*, June 2, 1863, p. 4.

⁵ C. C. Crisler, *Organization: Its Character, Purpose, Place, and Development in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*. Washington, Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1938, p. 139.

⁶ I. H. Evans to E. G. White, March 17, 1898, Ellen G. White Estate. Incoming Files. Quoted in Richard W. Schwarz, "Conflict and Expansion," unpublished typescript.

⁷ *Review and Herald*, June 5, 1913, pp. 6-7.

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