



Who Runs? THE CHURCH

*Understanding the Unity,
Structure and Authority of the
Seventh-day Adventist Church*

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PART ONE: From Whence We Came

In 2012, after studying the ordination of women to the gospel ministry for several decades, two unions in North America began ordaining women to ministry. Some members and leaders of the church believed this was the kind of adaptation of ministry methods for which unions were created, while others believed the unions did not have the authority to take these actions. It seemed like a good time to review the story of how and why unions were created. Hence, this brief history.

Our goal is to understand the current structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was adopted in 1901. But to understand the current structure, we will look first at the previous structures, to see how they served the church, and why they ultimately failed. Finally, we will review the processes by which church authority has changed since 1901, gradually becoming more centralized.

With only hours remaining until his crucifixion, Jesus huddled in a private room with His disciples and prayed for what mattered most to Him: the unity of his disciples, and the unity of all who would later believe in Him.

“I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send me” (John 17:20-21, NASB).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church emerged from a similar setting: the extraordinary spiritual unity found among Christians expecting Jesus to return on Oct. 22, 1844. The history of Adventist church organization after that date can be divided into three periods, each defined by a different way of avoiding hierarchical organization to preserve deep spiritual unity. For the first two decades they preserved spiritual unity by, among other things, avoiding church structure entirely. Then, in 1863 they adopted a name and a constitution, and elected officers, but still avoided hierarchy because they believed religious authority would undermine unity. And, finally, in 1901, the church reorganized, but still did not adopt a normal organizational hierarchy.

Coming out of Babylon and into unity: 1844-1853

Ellen White wrote moving descriptions of the profound unity that existed among Adventists waiting for the return of Jesus in 1844:

“With diligent searching of heart and humble confessions, we came prayerfully up to the time of expectation. Every morning we felt that it was our first work to secure the evidence that our lives were right before God. We realized that if we were not advancing in holiness, we were sure to retrograde. Our interest for one another increased; we prayed much with and for one another. We assembled in the orchards and groves to commune with God and to offer up our petitions to Him, feeling more fully in His presence when surrounded by His natural works. The joys of salvation were more necessary to us than our food and drink. If clouds obscured our minds, we dared not rest or sleep till they were swept away by the consciousness of our acceptance with the Lord” (Ellen White, *Life Sketches*, p. 60).

“I remember when we were looking for the Saviour to come in 1844, how great was the anxiety of each to know that his own heart was right before God. When we met together, the question would be asked by one and another, ‘Brethren, have you seen anything in me that is not right? I know that we are often blind to our own faults, and if you have seen anything wrong in me, I want you to tell me.’ Sometimes errors would be pointed out, and we would all bow before God and seek forgiveness. If any variance or alienation existed, we felt that we could not separate until all were in harmony. Sometimes brethren who had difficulty would be seen going away together to some secret place to plead with God, and they would return with their hearts knit together in love. The sweet spirit of peace was in our assemblies, and the glory of God was around us. The faces of the believers shone with the light of heaven” (Ellen White, *Historical Sketches*, p. 213).

There is no evidence that Ellen White had that 1844 experience in mind when she declared nearly a half century later that “the secret of unity is found in the equality of believers in Christ” (*Review and Herald*, Dec. 22, 1891, par. 8), but that experience certainly linked unity and equality forever in her mind and in the Adventist experience.

The equality that undergirded their unity was undoubtedly much deeper than what we mean by political equality, or equal rights, today. To people who expected that in less than 24 hours Christ would return, their loved ones would be raised, their diseases would be healed, and all non-believers would be destroyed, the differences that Ellen White mentioned in 1891 (*ibid.*) — “color, race, position, wealth, birth, or attainments” — were truly of no significance. But religious organization and authority also meant

nothing. Religious leaders had rejected the Adventist interpretations of Scripture and had expelled the Millerites from local churches, so the joyful unity early Adventists experienced developed outside of, and in opposition to, organized religion, both Catholic and Protestant.

No special position was granted to priests, presidents, bishops, ministers, creeds, church policies or committees. All Adventists waited together as equals, caring only about their first glimpse of Jesus. Everyone was either ready or not; nothing else mattered. It is not difficult to understand, then, that they believed church organization, with its authorities, traditions and creeds, would almost certainly destroy their deep unity in Christ.

Nine years after the disappointment of 1844, but still 10 years before the Seventh-day Adventist Church organized, James White describes the “bonds of love” that existed among Adventist believers, but he now includes a few points of theological agreement:

“As a people we are brought together from divisions of the Advent body [the Millerites], and from the various denominations, holding different views on some subjects; yet, thank Heaven, the Sabbath is a mighty platform on which we can all stand united. And while we stand here, with the aid of no other creed than the Word of God, and bound together by the bonds of love — love for the truth, love for each other, and love for a perishing world — which is stronger than death, all party feelings are lost. We are united in these great subjects: Christ’s immediate, personal second Advent, and the observance of all the commandments of God, and the faith of his Son Jesus Christ, as necessary to a readiness for his Advent” (James White, *Review and Herald*, Aug. 11, 1853). Besides avoiding organization in order to maintain faith and unity, our earliest pioneers associated organizational authority with the papacy — which they understood to be the “Babylon” of the book of Revelation.



They avoided anything that reminded them of the structure of the Roman Catholic Church or the “fallen” Protestant churches: denominational names, religious authorities, elected or appointed church leaders, ministerial titles, ministerial clothing, official church policies, statements of belief, and ownership of property. Many believed that if they started down the road of organization, the church would end up with a special ministerial class, with popes and bishops, with creeds to measure orthodoxy and with trials to expel or discipline members who followed their conscience instead of church policies or doctrines. They firmly believed that adopting a church hierarchy would destroy the spiritual unity found in the equality of all believers in Christ.

As the years passed, some Adventists, including James White, took small steps toward organization, but others resisted even the tiniest hints of structure or authority. In 1901, Adventist pioneer John Loughborough described that early libertarian position:

“One of the principal claims made by those who warred against organization was that it abridged their *liberty*¹ and *independence*, and that if one stood clear before the Lord, that was all the organization needed, etc.” (*Review and Herald*, July 9, 1901, vol. 78, no. 26, p. 2).

Loughborough described several examples of the disorder that prevailed between 1844 and 1863. One involved traveling evangelists:

“Sometimes three ministers would be with one small company at a time, neither knowing that the others were to be there; and that in a place where there was no special need of even one minister” (*Review and Herald*, July 2, 1901, vol. 78, no. 27, p. 2).

At meetings, Loughborough said, any person had as much right to speak as any other person. Sometimes a person no one knew called meetings to order and dominated the discussion. Clearly, if they were to remain united and take Christ’s saving message to the world, they would have to organize to some extent.

Steps toward organization: 1853 to 1863

In 1901, the flagship Adventist journal, the *Review and Herald*, published a 10-part series, by Loughborough, reviewing the steps that led to the formal organization of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in 1863. During this time, when many Adventists were resisting any organization, Ellen White wrote frequently in support of order, cooperation and organization. According to Loughborough:

“Knowing that it was the Testimonies [of Ellen Harmon White] that had prompted us as a people to act, to establish order, these opponents soon turned their warfare against the instructions from that source, claiming that ‘when they got that gift out of the way, the message would go forth unrestrained’” (*Review and Herald*, June 11, 1901, p. 11).

Because organization was causing some to leave the already small band of Adventists, the church organized slowly and cautiously. Adventists never entirely abandoned their fear of religious authority, and that fear is the key to understanding the structures of the Adventist church, both the structure created in 1863 and the current structure, created in 1901.

¹ *All italics used throughout this paper are supplied by the author for emphasis.*

Loughborough's list of steps in organization:

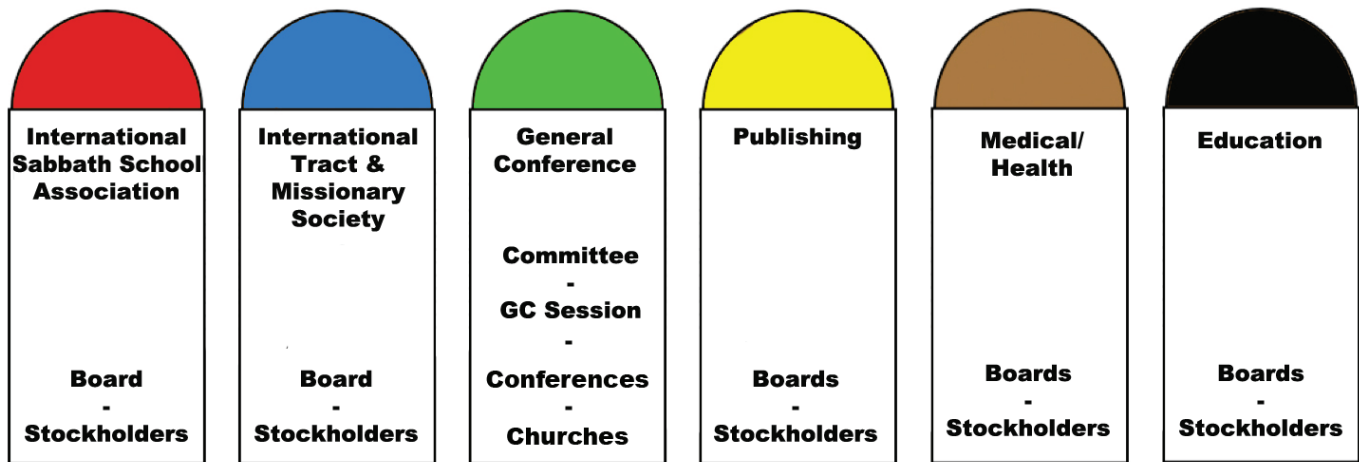
1. **Issuing Credentials for approved ministers (1853).** There was no official association or official body to issue credentials in 1853, so the value of each credential depended on local believers recognizing and respecting the ministers who signed the credential card.
2. **Tithing to Support Ministers (1858).** Since there was no organized church, this was mostly a personal plan of “systematic benevolence,” though some groups, such as the church in Battle Creek, made tithing the foundation of their mission work.
3. **Legal organization of the publishing ministry (1861).** James White had originally financed the press in Battle Creek by mowing lawns. But he believed a wider group — the church — should hold legal title to the growing business. But the church was not legally organized, so it could not hold property. After considerable debate, the press was incorporated as a stand-alone business, controlled by stockholders. This allowed the church itself to avoid organizing, thereby preventing the creation of any special class of elected leaders with religious authority. The press became the organizational model for nearly every Adventist ministry for the next 40 years. Colleges, sanitariums, presses, and even the International Sabbath School Association, the Foreign Mission Board and the International Tract Society, were legally autonomous, self-governing corporations. No church organization had any authority over them. If church leaders, including Ellen White, believed changes should be made at, say, the *Review and Herald* or the Battle Creek Sanitarium, they had to convince the majority of stockholders to vote their way. *This is one of the two organizational problems that led the church to crisis in the 1890s.*
4. **Local Adventist churches meet by state to make joint plans (1861).** These statewide meetings were open to the participation of anyone who showed up. There were no elected leaders and no official delegates. But they did pray and study together and they made limited plans for coordinated evangelism.
5. **Churches appoint delegates (1861).** Beginning in 1861 delegates were selected by local churches to participate in state meetings, though a church could send as many delegates as they chose. At the first “general” meeting for Adventists from anywhere in the world, the delegates from Michigan far outnumbered all other delegates, and most of the Michigan delegates were from Battle Creek.
6. **(a) Local conference officers elected and, (b) “general” meeting planned (1861).** At the Michigan state meeting, the Michigan Conference was organized with a chairman, a secretary and an executive committee of three people. At the same meeting, a committee voted to hold a “general” meeting of Adventist representatives from everywhere.

7. **(a) General Conference organized and, (b) nominating committees established, and (c) delegates selected on basis of percentage of membership (1863).** The first general “conference” [meeting] was held in Battle Creek on May 20, 1863. The next day, a constitution was adopted for the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and on the same day a [model] constitution was adopted for recommendation to the state conferences. These constitutions provided for delegates to be chosen on a numerical basis for fair representation.

The GC constitution and the model constitutions provided that all church officers should be nominated by small, prayerful committees, then approved by the constituents, rather than casting lots or asking delegates to choose from multiple candidates for each office, as in a political contest.

While the General Conference did not control the ancillary organizations, they did control all state conferences in the world, which controlled the churches and ministers. This is the second problem that led to crisis in the 1890s.

Church Organization 1863 - 1901



Ministry silos: 1863 to 1901

From 1863 to 1901, the Seventh-day Adventist church worked as Loughborough described above: local churches answered to state conferences, and state conferences answered to the General Conference. It was a simple, vertical, hierarchy of authority. But a rapidly increasing number of Adventist organizations, including sanitariums, schools, publishing associations and evangelistic and missionary societies, operated as separate corporations.

For at least two decades, this organization worked well. But by the 1890s, the church was nearly torn apart by two areas of conflict:

1. **The General Conference had far *too little* (horizontal) authority — usually no authority at all — to make changes in the independent corporations and associations that controlled most of the ministry of the church, and**
2. **The General Conference had far *too much* (vertical) authority to control how ministry was conducted in local churches and conferences around the world.**

One Adventist history textbook describes the first problem:

“By 1885 the International Tract and Missionary Society, the Sabbath School Association, the Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, the Seventh-day Adventist Educational Society, the Health Reform Institute, and the American Health and Temperance Society all operated as quasi-independent organizations allied with, but not subject to, the General Conference” (*Light Bearers*, Richard W. Schwartz and Floyd Greenleaf, revised 2000, p. 253).

It was not just the GC that had no authority over important ministry organizations. A local sanitarium or school, whether in Battle Creek or Cape Town, that was responsible to its own stockholders, was beyond the control of any church organization, from the local church to the GC. Nor were they under the authority of any other educational or health organization, unless that organization owned the majority stock.

Gilbert Valentine, in his book, *The Prophet and the Presidents* (Nampa: Pacific Press, 2011), describes in several chapters what this meant to Ellen White, who had moved to Australia in 1892. From Australia she wrote a steady stream of letters to the GC presidents, in Battle Creek, Mich., urging that they make important changes, especially in publishing and medical ministry. But almost nothing changed. As the GC presidents explained to her, they didn't have the authority to make changes in those organizations because the organizations answered to their own boards and stockholders.

It was probably the publishing problems that caused Ellen White the most frustration. She believed the publishing leaders were wrong in reducing the royalties paid to authors (including her), they were wrong in not promoting the sale of the 1888 edition of *The Great Controversy* (they said *Bible Readings* was easier to sell, and more profitable), they were wrong in trying to keep the presses financially solvent by printing non-Adventist and secular publications, and, when the publishing leaders didn't make changes, she said the treasurers were not spiritual men and should be removed. Still, nothing significant changed.

The second major problem was that the work done by ministers, evangelists, Bible workers, and some health educators and colporteurs in every part of the world was controlled by, and subject to, the approval of the General Conference.

In 1881, shortly before his death, James White had defined the role of the General Conference — according to the 1863 model — in these words:

“The General Conference takes the general supervision of the work in all its branches, including the state conferences. The state conferences take supervision of all the branches of the work in the State, including the churches in that State” (*Review and Herald*, Jan 4, 1881).

Why was this a problem? Some have suggested the main problem was that the GC committee was too small or that the GC president was too assertive, or “kingly.” Ellen White was concerned with both issues, but if those were the main problems, they could have been fixed by enlarging the committee and electing a less domineering president — without the complete reorganization that Ellen White called for, and the delegates voted, in 1901.

Making the ministry of the church in all parts of the world subject to the approval of the General Conference was seen as a serious problem for the following reasons:

1. **Centralized authority prevented local leadership development.** Referring important or difficult decisions to people in another location, especially higher authorities in Battle Creek, prevented the development of experienced and tested leaders in the local conferences. This was a major issue with Ellen White. She believed that local people became strong leaders by praying and studying ministry issues together, agreeing on a plan, and acting together in faith. She recognized that they would make mistakes, but believed that humbly fixing those mistakes would strengthen both faith and leadership skills.

A. G. Daniels commented in 1903, after the reorganization:

“Many people can testify that the blessing of God has attended the efforts that have been made to distribute responsibility, and thus transfer the care, perplexity, and management that once centered in Battle Creek to all parts of the world, where they belong. *Scores of men are now getting the experience of burden-bearing that was previously confined to comparatively few*” (A. G. Daniels Address, March 30, 1903, *General Conference Bulletin*, p. 18).

While calling for reorganization at the 1901 GC session, Ellen White said:

“While on my journey to Battle Creek, as I have visited different places, I at Los Angeles, asked, Why do you not do this? Why do you not do that? And the response has been, ‘That is what we want to do, but we must first get the consent of the Board, the members of which are in Oakland.’ But, I asked, have you not men here with common sense. If you have not, then by all means transport them. You show great deficiency by having your board hundreds of miles away. That is not the wisdom of God. There are men right

where you are who have minds, who have judgment, *who need to exercise their brains, who need to be learning how to do things, how to take up aggressive work, how to annex new territory.* They are not to be dependent on a Conference at Battle Creek or a board at Oakland” (Ellen White, 1901 *General Conference Bulletin*, p. 69). She followed that anecdote with stories of similar conversations in other locations.

W. T. Knox, newly elected president of the also-new Pacific Union Conference, reflected Ellen White’s conviction when he told Pacific Union Conference members:

“A reorganization is necessitated that will not only enable those in the different sections of the great harvest-field to carry the responsibilities of the work for that particular field, but will also result in *the development of men to carry responsibilities, a lack of which has retarded the message more than anything else*” (*Pacific Union Recorder*, vol. 1, no. 1, Aug. 1, 1901, p. 3).

2. **Centralized authority ignored the leading of God through the Holy Spirit.** To Ellen White, and many others, such as E. J. Waggoner and A. T. Jones, the idea that local leaders could not meet, study, pray and trust in the Holy Spirit to guide them, was theologically wrong, a denial of the promise of the leading of the Spirit. Ellen White asked, “Have those in Battle Creek been given superior reason and wisdom that God will not give those in the churches and conferences?” (*Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, p. 325). And, “Has the Lord to go to Battle Creek, and tell men there what the men working in distant countries must do?” (EGW to A. O. Tait, Aug. 27, 1896. *Special Testimonies for Ministers and Workers*, no. 9, p. 32).
3. **Centralized authority prevented adaptation.** Centralized decision-making prevented local adaptation of ministry methods to address local needs and local cultures. Often the response of the GC leaders was inappropriate to the local conditions. Ellen White commented: “The place, the circumstances, the interest, the moral sentiment of the people, will have to decide in many cases the course of action to be pursued” (EGW Ltr. 53, 1894, MR 714). And, “Those who are right on the ground are to decide what shall be done” (*General Conference Bulletin*, April 5, 1901, pp. 69-70). At the beginning of the 1901 GC Session, she was clear that the work in America’s southern states, for example, required departure from standard methods:

“God desires the Southern field to have a conference of its own. The work there must be done on different lines from the work in any other field. The laborers there will have to work on peculiar lines, nevertheless the work will be done. The Southern field must be organized into a Conference. ... The workers in the South are not to depend upon the Conference at Battle Creek” (EGW, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 5, 1901, p. 69-70).

In 1902, while explaining why Unions were created and how they were to function, GC President A. G. Daniels said:

“Because a thing is done a certain way in one place, that is no reason why it should be done in the same way in another place, or even in the same place at another time” (A. G. Daniels, *European Conference Bulletin*, [ECB], 1902, p. 2).

4. **Centralized authority caused time delays.** With mail traveling by ships and trains, it often took months for the GC to receive and respond to a request for assistance or for approvals. At the beginning of the 1901 GC session, Ellen White said: “It is not necessary to send thousands of miles to Battle Creek for advice, and then have to wait weeks for an answer. Those who are right on the ground are to decide what shall be done” (*General Conference Bulletin*, April 5, 1901, pp. 69, 70).
5. **Centralized authority caused centralized fatigue.** Responsibility for deciding how everything should be done in all parts of the world was wearing out the world leaders. (For much more on this, see Bert Haloviak, *Ellen White and the Australasian Women*, and Gilbert Valentine, *The Prophet and the Presidents*.)

Centralized decision-making was a very personal problem to Ellen White as she sought to create an effective ministry in Australia. Meeting the needs of the people of Australia required changing the way ministry was done, and those changes required the permission and support of world leaders in Battle Creek. To Ellen White and some of the early Adventist pioneers with her, depending upon the decisions of others made their own prayers and planning irrelevant. And too often, the GC leaders seemed more interested in maintaining their own power base — “kingly power,” Ellen White called it — than following the leading of the Spirit of God. To Ellen White and many church leaders, the idea that God had to work through world leaders to guide local ministers was contrary to the New Testament teachings about the priesthood of all believers and the leading of the Holy Spirit. (See e.g. *Testimonies on Organization*, March 13, 1896. Quoted in Bert Haloviak’s *Approaches to Church Organization*, unpublished, p. 11, 1993.)

Departments and Unions: 1901 to Present

With encouragement from Ellen White, church leaders attempted to address the church’s two organizational problems at the 1889 and 1899 General Conference sessions, but both efforts led to anger and defensiveness, especially among the leaders of ancillary organizations. The discussions in 1889 got so ugly that the GC session delegates voted to delete the entire discussion from the minutes (Richard Schwarz, *Lightbearers*, p. 253). Many ministry directors believed that if changes were made, they would lose the power necessary to keep their organizations functioning. And some, such as John Harvey Kellogg, believed that if the GC took over their independent, stockholder-controlled ministry, the ministry would fail. Ellen White considered not attending the 1901 session because she wasn’t sure her aging

body and mind could handle the conflict that she and others expected. The editor of the 1901 *General Conference Bulletin* commented in his final summary:

“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. ... Whispers of disintegration were borne from ear to ear, and speculation as to the final result were rife” (*General Conference Bulletin*, April 25, 1901, p. 1).

The day before the 1901 session opened, a large group of leaders persuaded Ellen White to meet with them in the Battle Creek College library, because they were eager for her advice on restructuring the church. Ellen White assured them she had no special instructions on how the church should be organized, but then spoke for an hour and a half on the need to completely rebuild church structure, to eliminate “kingly power” — in the GC, the state conferences and the ancillary organizations — and to restore unity.

During the next few days, a special 75-member committee crafted, and the delegates approved, a plan to fix the two overwhelming problems with two revolutionary structures: *unions* and *departments*. They also voted two less revolutionary changes:

1. **They enlarged the GC executive committee, to include broader representation.**
2. **They abolished the office of GC president, replacing the president with a chair of the GC executive committee.** The chair was to be appointed by the committee and could be replaced by them at any time.

But neither of these contributed much to what leaders were then calling a revolution in church structure. The size of the committee had been changed before 1901 and would be changed several times in later years. That did not constitute a reorganization. Furthermore, when the authority of the GC was distributed to unions and local conferences, those organizations also included large committees, so that decisions at every level of the church were made by large councils of believers, rather than by individuals.

And the experiment with no president was brief; the presidency was restored in 1903.

But the other two changes turned the church structure upside down. Autonomous *unions* automatically transferred authority from the General Conference to local leaders, and *departments* transferred authority over such ministries as Sabbath school, health, temperance, religious liberty, publishing, mission appointments and education from independent stockholders to church leaders, including members, at all levels.

It is futile to search the actions voted in 1901 looking for lists of exactly which decisions were transferred from the GC to the unions, or which decisions were transferred from independent associations and societies to the GC and other church organizations. After the struggles with the stockholder-controlled organizations, delegates understood that what mattered most was structure, not detailed policies.

Policies can be changed from year to year, or ignored by GC presidents of strong personality. But when an organization (such as a union or conference) answers to its own constituency, no one but its own constituency can determine its decisions.

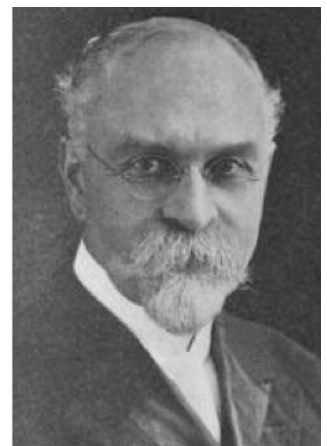
The following statements from people who were present at the 1901 session illustrate their understanding of what the creation of unions meant:

- “When we first met in Conference, it was thought that the General Conference should extend over the whole world. But this is not in God’s order” (Ellen White, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 5, 1901, p. 68).
- “In reference to our [General] Conference, it is repeated o’er and o’er and o’er again that it is the voice of God, and therefore everything must be referred to the [General] Conference, and have the [General] Conference’s voice in regard to permission or restriction, or what shall be and what shall not be done in the various fields.... [But] the work carried on all over our field demands an entirely different course of action” (Transcript of Ellen White’s comments in Battle Creek College Library, April 1, 1901, pp. 1-3).
- “It has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences” (Ellen White, Manuscript 26, April 3, 1903).
- “I am perfectly satisfied that we have done right to break our territory up and organize independent, self-supporting union conferences as we have done. Already new life is coming in. ...



“When the present plan is fully developed, we shall have in the general body a large representative board, studying the interests of all the fields, but really managing none. It will be an impartial, advisory, fostering board, and I claim that that is all the General Conference ought to be” (A. G. Daniels, GC president and chairman of the reorganization committee, to Allen Moon, July 25, 1901. *General Conference Archives Reference Group* 11, bk. 24, pp. 138-139).

- “They [leaders in Africa, South America and the West Indies] have been sending their problems to Battle Creek long enough. They must cease to look to Jerusalem for everything, and must



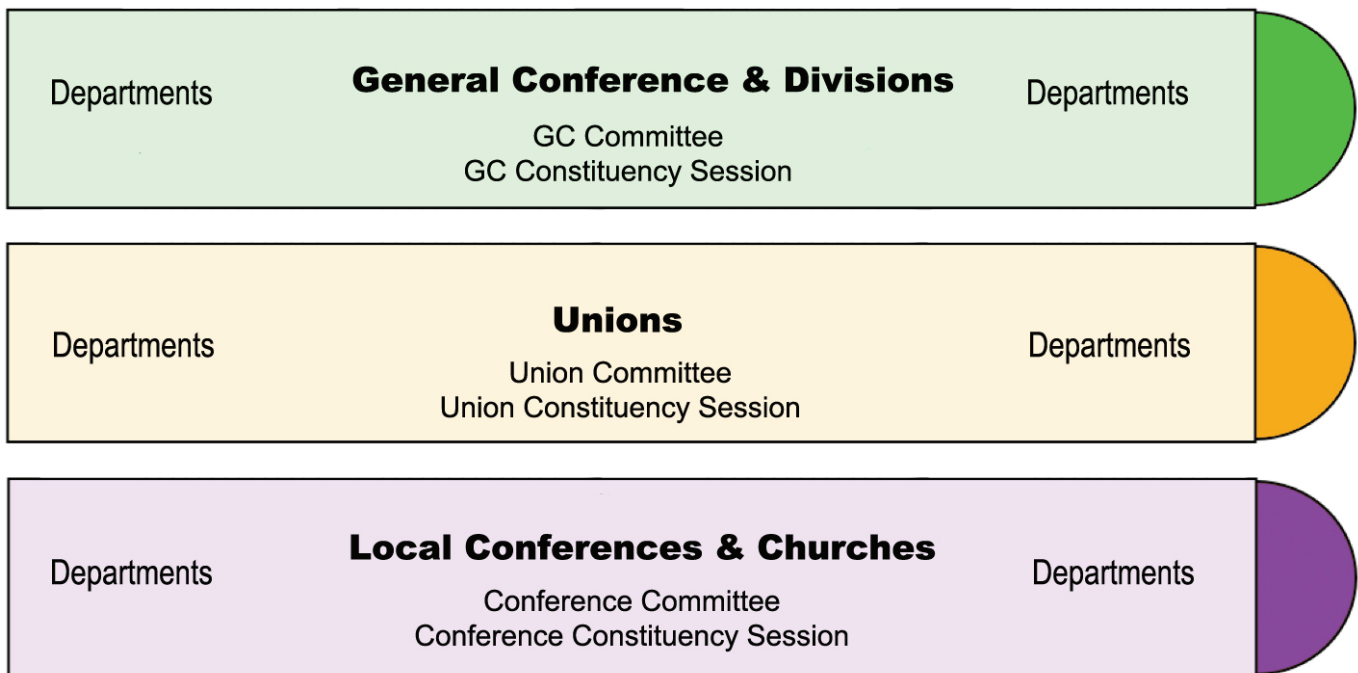
get light for themselves, and as far as possible support and manage their own work. Of course the General Conference, through its various departments, must always *foster* the work in all parts of the world, but it cannot be the brains, and conscience, and mouthpiece for our brethren in these different countries” (A. G. Daniels to E. R. Palmer, Aug. 28, 1901. *General Conference Archives Reference Group* 11, bk. 24, pp. 305-308).

- “Recently the General Conference in the United States has been divided into Union Conferences, and *all matters pertaining to the work in these union conferences should be dealt with by the Union Conference Committee*. The General Conference [world work] has grown so large that it is impossible for the committee to give attention to the many details and perplexities arising in different parts of the world. For this reason we have thought it best to organize large Union Conferences in all parts of the world, so that they would have large committees, and full authority and power to deal with all matters within their boundaries” (A. G. Daniels to George LaMunyon, Oct. 7, 1901, *General Conference Archives Reference Group* 11, bk. 25, p. 41).
- “This [the creation of self-governing unions], it will be plainly seen, will distribute the responsibilities of the General Conference, placing them more fully and definitely on those who are upon the ground where the work is to be done and the issues to be met ... *A thousand details will be transferred from the General Conference Committee to those whom the Lord has called to his work* and whom he has placed in the field where the details are to be worked out” (A. G. Daniels, GC president, *General Conference Bulletin*, Third Quarter, 1901, pp. 513-514).
- “The plan of organization is precisely the same from the local church up to the General Conference. In every case it provides that the work of God shall be placed in the hands of those to whom it belongs. *It distributes responsibilities so that the details of the work in all parts of the world are to be dealt with by men who are on the ground where these details are to be worked out*. In short, the plan recognizes one message, one body of people, and one general organization” (A. G. Daniels, The Chairman’s Address, *General Conference Bulletin*, March 31, 1903, p. 18).
- “And as I understand it, the instruction was to decentralize responsibilities and details and place them in the hands of a larger number of men. Now in our work of reorganization this is just what we have endeavored to do. Instead of having the details of General Conference organization centering at Battle Creek, we have been trying all the year to push them out, back to the

Union and local Conferences, where they belong, and to put departmental work in the hands of committees specially appointed for that purpose. And so the General Conference has practically become an advisory mission board” (A. G. Daniels, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 10, 1903, p. 160).

- “In order to meet the present conditions, and also to relieve the officers of the General Conference, the United States has been organized into six union conferences, of which the Pacific Union is one. *All questions of general interest in this field, the exchange of laborers, mission work within our own borders, etc., will be questions for the Pacific Union Conference to handle instead of referring them to [the General Conference at] Battle Creek*” (W. T. Knox, newly elected president of the Pacific Union Conference, *Pacific Union Recorder*, vol. 1, no. 1, Aug. 1, 1901, p. 3).

Church Organization 1901 - Present



Unions

Some have suggested in recent years that the unions were created in order to help administer the work of the General Conference around the world. No one in 1901 understood it that way. The unions were created, as Daniels said above, with “large committees, and full authority and power to deal with all matters within their boundaries” (A. G. Daniels to George LaMunyon, Oct. 7, 1901, *General Conference Archives Reference Group* 11, bk. 25, p. 41).

In the words of Ellen White, quoted above:

“It has been a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences”
(Manuscript 26, April 3, 1903).

It should be noted that before 1901, the GC had divided North America into six districts. The unions that were created in 1901 mostly covered the same geography as the districts. But the districts did not prevent the GC from “exercising dictation” over the local conferences and churches, because the General Conference appointed the district leaders, and the districts did not have separate constituencies. As a result, the districts were not autonomous. They were very much like today’s divisions, which function as administrative units of the General Conference. The unions, on the other hand, were created to act as firewalls between the GC and the conferences, making “dictation” impossible because:

1. **Each union had its own constitution and bylaws and was to be governed by its own constituency.**
2. **The officers of each union were to be elected by their own union constituency, and, therefore, could not be controlled, replaced or disciplined by the GC.**

So the unions now had the same autonomy that most publishing houses, sanitariums, and colleges had before 1901 — with one important difference: the unions would be controlled not by those who had invested money, but, through delegates, by every church member in their territory. World leaders could offer counsel regarding the decisions made by the unions, but they were denied the ability to determine or override union decisions.

To put it as bluntly as possible, after 1901, the General Conference could vote whatever it wanted unions and conferences to do, or not do, but the unions and conferences were autonomous and could do what they believed would best advance the work of God in their fields. The GC executive committee, or the General Conference in business session, could vote to fire a union president or conference president, or vote to merge a union or conference with another one, but their vote would change nothing: the union or conference would still exist and the member delegates could elect whoever they wanted as president.

This structure was not a call for disunity, by any means. But the independence of the unions would, according to Ellen White, prevent the General Conference from “dictating” to the unions, and would open union leaders to greater spiritual growth and leadership development as they counseled together and relied upon God for wisdom.

That is the church structure the delegates created in 1901, and that is the church structure in place in the early 21st century.

We should note here that autonomous unions really transferred power from the General Conference to local conferences, which Ellen White called “all the separate conferences.” Now, for example, local conference leaders in Australia, instead of writing to the General Conference for approvals, could meet with each other at a union executive committee or business session — *in Australia* — and vote their own plans and policies. But the unions had no more power to dictate to the local conferences than the GC had, because the local conferences, too, had their own constituencies and voted their own officers.

While the 1901 *General Conference Bulletin* says that a thousand details that had previously been decided at the GC level would now be decided at the union level, those details, or decisions, are not listed. It was very much like selling a car. The seller does not make a list of the places the new owner can drive the car; the new owner will decide that. The delegates at the 1901 session well understood that they were transferring ownership. They were not creating new policies, which could be changed later; they were changing the structure of the church, making it impossible for the General Conference to make decisions that the delegates believed would be better made at the union conferences, local conferences, and local churches. Or, stated positively, making it possible for the unions, conferences and churches to follow the leading of the Spirit in their territory and to develop strong leaders.

Of course, the church could have restructured itself again after 1901, and the church could adopt a new structure at the next GC session. The church could, for example, abolish the union level of church structure or reduce unions’ power. But that could not happen without the constituency of each union and conference affected voting to adopt the changes.

As noted above, in 1901, W. T. Knox, the Pacific Union’s first president, wrote to his constituents in the western United States, western Canada and Alaska:

“All questions of general interest in this field ... will be questions for the Pacific Union Conference to handle instead of referring them to Battle Creek”
(*Pacific Union Recorder*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 3).

At the end of the 1901 GC session, President A. G. Daniels described how each union would be responsible for directing its own ministry while maintaining a cooperative relationship with other unions and the GC:

“Before the Conference closed, arrangements had been made for organizing the six General Conference Districts into *Union Conferences*, each organization to be complete in itself, having an Executive Committee, with

a President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Auditor, and *each to take the entire oversight in its territory*. The Union Conference Committee will unite with each of the States in looking after their interests; work up, receive, and administer funds; advise with states in exchanging laborers; and practically *carry forward the work in its territory as though no other conference existed, except that it will cooperate with all other Union Conferences and with the General Conference* (*General Conference Bulletin*, Third Quarter, 1901, p. 513).

In the 21st century, figuring out how to take the “entire oversight” for the work in its territory, “as though no other conference existed,” while “cooperating with every other Union Conference and the General Conference,” remains a challenge for every union, local conference and the GC.

The reorganization of 1901 put Ellen White’s statement from 1891 into action: “The secret of unity is found in the equality of believers in Christ” (*Review and Herald*, Dec. 22, 1891, par. 8). The representative church structure adopted in 1901 meant that church leaders and members from all parts of the world and all levels of organization could counsel together *as equals*, united in humility to complete the mission of the church.

During the weeks after the 1901 reorganization, A. G. Daniels was heartened by reports of “new life” and a new sense of unity, but he was concerned that as they extended autonomy to mission fields, some might think all order and structure had been abandoned:

“Professor Prescott tells me that harmony and good cheer have prevailed everywhere this summer [1901]. Already they are being drawn closer together [in Europe], and *new life is manifesting itself*. Now I want to see this work carried forward in Africa, South America, and the West Indies. They must cease to look to Jerusalem for everything, and must get light for themselves, and as far as possible manage and support their own work.

“*This is the doctrine I am preaching all the time. I am trying to put it in a way that will not lead to disunion, and an independence that will destroy all appreciation of counseling with brethren*” (A. G. Daniels to E. R. Palmer, Aug. 28, 1901. *General Conference Archives Reference Group* 11, bk. 24, pp. 305-308).

From her comments at the end of the 1901 session, it is clear that Ellen White believed the creation of autonomous unions and conferences was a wonderful change, a change that would bring harmony and healing:

- “Who do you suppose has been among us since this Conference began? Who has kept away the objectionable features that generally appear in such a

meeting? Who has walked up and down the aisles of this Tabernacle? The God of heaven and His angels. *And they did not come here to tear you in pieces, but to give you right and peaceable minds....*

“I was never more astonished in my life than at the turn things have taken at this meeting. This is not our work. God has brought it about. Instruction regarding this was presented to me, but until the sum was worked out at this meeting I could not comprehend this instruction. God’s angels have been walking up and down in this congregation. *I want every one of you to remember this, and I want you to remember also that God has said that He will heal the wounds of His people*” (*General Conference Bulletin*, April 25, 1901, pp. 463, 464).

- “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” (*Review and Herald*, “Bring an Offering to the Lord,” Nov. 26, 1901, p. 1 [761]).

Departments

But Ellen White’s enthusiastic affirmation of the new organization of the church did not refer only to the creation of unions. While unions transferred responsibility and decision-making authority from the GC to local leaders, it was departments that brought the independent corporations and associations into the church structure at every level.

Initially some thought that all stockholder-owned associations and corporations should become departments of the General Conference, but this idea was quickly squashed by Ellen White, who said that every institution should be controlled by the part of the church it most closely affected. Education provides a good example. Education departments were created at local conferences, union conferences and the GC, but elementary schools were operated by local congregations, academies were operated by conferences, and colleges and universities were operated by unions. Something similar happened with other areas of ministry. The General Conference ended up owning and operating a few institutions that served the whole world, including, eventually, a theological seminary, a medical school, two publishing houses and what is now the *Adventist Review* magazine.

Of course, voting in 1901 (and 1903) that the church would assume ownership of all the independent ministries was easier than making it a reality. If the GC didn’t have the power to change what a press printed or promoted, they certainly didn’t have the power to dissolve the publishing house’s board and bring it under the control of the church. Each board had to vote to disband itself and to become a part of

the church structure. In many cases, the individual stockholders had to either donate their stock to the church or sell it to the church at full price or at a discounted price. The GC president spent most of the two years after 1901 traveling from one independent organization to another, convincing the boards to vote themselves out of existence or simply advising them how to transfer ownership to the church.

That effort was almost entirely successful; one famous exception being Battle Creek Sanitarium. John Harvey Kellogg was able to maintain the support of the majority of stockholders and, in 1905, walked away from the church, taking the sanitarium with him.

As a result of these two changes in church structure — the creation of autonomous unions and the departmentalization of previously independent organizations — a local conference or union in any part of the world could now decide, for example, to spend less on medical work and more on education, or the opposite, and they had the power to make it happen.

PART TWO: Does It Work?

If we think of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a top-down corporation, where world leaders make plans that are promoted by the unions and conferences and carried out by the members in the churches, then it doesn't work very well. When the General Conference initiates a program to be carried out by church members in all parts of the world, the plan will be followed by those divisions, unions, conferences, churches and members who choose to do so, and not by anyone else. All church administrators, at least in developed parts of the world, know that.

In 1932, Adventist pioneer Hampton Cottrell (1852-1940), who apparently didn't know that, wrote the following highly idealized version of the Seventh-day Adventist organizational system in action. Some of today's church leaders might wish for such a system, while others might try to avoid it, but all will smile at this description:

“It may be truthfully said to be the most masterly and effective religious organization in Christendom. In evidence of this statement, the figurative electric button may be touched by the chief executive of the denominational organization at its headquarters, and the great wheel in the divine system is set in motion, and the personnel of the denomination in the entire world is at once in action, each one at his particular post of duty. Such a system could be created and made operational only by the divine hand” (*Review and Herald*, March 24, 1932).

Every Adventist administrator soon learns that the church does not work like that. But if we think of the actual church structure as a way of coordinating the gifts and energies of the members in the local churches, then the church's structure has proven very successful. And that was the purpose of the 1901 reorganization; giving the power to the people.

Over the decades since 1901, the implications of the new structure have been standardized and described in policies.

1. **Local churches have the final authority to decide how donations to local congregations (but not tithe) will be spent, to plan local evangelism, and to decide who will be members of that congregation.** No other church body, including the local conference, the union conference or the General Conference has the authority to override local decisions in those areas. (The local conference can, however, replace the pastor and take possession of the church building and property, demonstrating that the delegates in 1901 did not abolish church authority, they just moved it.)

But the members, including the pastors, in local churches are also the source of most ministry initiatives that are eventually adopted by the world church. Pathfinder clubs are a good example. When the first two clubs were started by lay members in Southeastern California about 1930, church leaders at conference, union and General Conference levels cautioned that these clubs should not be encouraged because they would divert the energy of local churches from evangelism. GC leaders warned local conference youth leader, Laurence Skinner, not to start or encourage any new clubs, and the original clubs disappeared by the early 1930s.

But in 1946, local conference leaders in Southeastern, Central and Southern California, realizing that the clubs were a powerful evangelism tool, established goals of starting a club in every church as quickly as possible. Two years later the Pacific Union, seeing the value in the rapidly multiplying clubs, adopted Pathfinders as a major part of youth ministry, and two years after that, in 1950, the General Conference adopted Pathfinders as a world program. Today there are said to be more than one million Pathfinders in thousands of clubs around the world. Similar stories could be told about almost every area of the church's ministry, from Ingathering to radio, television and Internet evangelism, all of which started in local churches before being adopted by the world church.

2. **Local conferences have the final authority to budget expenditures from tithe, to form and disband local churches and schools, to hire, fire and supervise pastors and teachers, and to own and control property related to those local institutions.** Conference officers are elected by the conference constituency, that is, by members of local churches. Local conference officers cannot be replaced by union or GC actions, not even by the GC executive committee or by delegates at a world session. A local conference is autonomous, controlled by its own constituency — the local churches that make up the conference membership. From this we see that authority is shared. The church depends upon voluntary cooperation: the conferences have significant authority over the churches, but the churches together have complete authority over the local conference.
3. **Union conferences own and operate colleges and universities and grant approvals where conferences desire continuity, cooperation or uniformity, such as the approval of candidates for ordination.** And unions coordinate joint conference plans, such as workshops, Bible conferences and camporees. Union officers cannot be replaced by the GC, and union votes cannot be overridden by GC votes. The unions are autonomous, controlled by their constituencies — the local conferences that make up the union membership. So there is a clear chain of command in the Adventist church, but it flows from the local church members upward.

4. **Divisions* do not have separate constituencies or bylaws, and their officers are elected at GC session by the General Conference constituency, so they are administrative units of the General Conference.** Theoretically, they have no final authority on anything. In practice, they provide a venue for unions to plan together, to develop materials and administer cooperative programs and policies, such as pay scales and evangelism initiatives. At times, divisions derive considerable power from the unions in their territories — which do have autonomous authority. (*The South Pacific Division was originally organized in 1894 as a union and still functions much like a union, with its own constituency and bylaws.)
5. **The General Conference administers the worldwide budget, which is critical to the growth of the church around the world, especially in mission areas — areas of the world church funded to some extent by tithe and donations from other parts of the world.** The world budget does not include income and expenses at local churches, local conferences or unions. In practice, the GC also leads in the development of worldwide policies, such as those in the *GC Working Policy* and the *Church Manual*. But, because of the structure of the church, as adopted in 1901, the GC cannot require that any union or conference follow those policies. Whether a union or conference follows GC policy depends upon the votes of the union or conference constituency. *But, in practice, unions and conferences follow almost all GC policies almost all the time, because that is what the leaders and members in their constituencies want them to do.* That is not surprising, since the unions and conferences largely create the policies and programs of the GC. We are all Seventh-day Adventists, with common major beliefs and objectives, following the leading of the same Holy Spirit.

As W. T. Knox explained the reorganization to the Pacific Union Conference members in 1901:

“The work of the General Conference and its committee has, therefore, been materially modified. It still continues the center and principal factor in this great work of God in the earth. Under its direction the large portion of the unorganized field still remains” (*Pacific Union Recorder*, vol. 1 no. 1, Aug. 1, 1901, p. 3).

PART THREE: Drifting Back

A large part of the authority that was distributed to the Unions in 1901 seems to have drifted back to the General Conference. Why? How?

After delegates “materially modified” the work of the General Conference and its committee, creating autonomous unions to take responsibility for “all questions of general interest” in their part of God’s vineyard, GC President A. G. Daniels reported in 1903 that life was much quieter at world headquarters:

“As the work is now shaping, the province of the General Conference Committee is of an advisory character to a large extent — not altogether, by any means — and it is of a missionary character or phase. The organization of the Union Conferences has taken the administrative work from any central place and located it in the Union Conferences, and placed the responsibilities upon the shoulders of those located in those different Unions.

*“One who has not been in our office can scarcely realize what a complete change has been wrought at the headquarters of the General Conference. The details of the work of every character have been swept away, and the secretary has had very little to do along those lines. Of course, there has been some statistical work and some detail work with reference to transportation and collection of reports and work of that character, that must always be done. But the administration in the United States has all been taken away and is now placed in the hands of scores of men who have been appointed to that work in the East, and the North, and the South, and in the Central and Western States” (A. G. Daniels, *General Conference Bulletin*, April 7, 1903, pp. 100-101).*

But over the years, that tranquility at GC headquarters, based on the assumption that the union conference and local conference leaders and constituents would follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and make the best decisions for completing their missions in their areas, has been replaced — at least at times — by varying levels of concern that unless the General Conference intervenes, the work of God will go astray in the unions.

Following are three principal factors that have caused many Adventists, including many pastors, to assume that the Adventist church is hierarchical. There are other factors that we will not examine here, such as the power attached to money as it flows from world headquarters down to some unions and conferences, especially in mission fields; the intimidating language and size of the 900-page *GC Working Policy* book, and the pageantry of the worldwide General Conference sessions.

Ellen White's "Highest Authority" Statements

Current *General Conference Working Policy* includes this statement:

“All organizations and institutions throughout the world will recognize the authority of the General Conference in session as the highest authority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church under God” (*General Conference Working Policy*, B 10 20 2).

To most people, this probably looks like a simple statement that the church is hierarchical, with the General Conference as the highest organizational authority, and the divisions, unions, conferences, churches and members each accountable to the next level up. This, as we have seen, is contrary to the actual structure of the church, which makes everyone responsible to the next level down.

But when Adventists read this statement, we tend to hear more than a GC policy statement. We hear the voice of Ellen White saying that the General Conference in session is the voice of God. We see that confusion when leaders or members refer to the above policy statement but quote (or paraphrase) what Ellen White said in 1875, instead of quoting the actual words of the current *Working Policy*.

To many Seventh-day Adventists, Ellen White's statement to the effect that every man's private independence and judgment must be surrendered to the judgment of the General Conference in session, because the GC in session is the voice of God, settles the issue: when the GC speaks, all other church organizations and individuals obey. So let's look at several statements Ellen White made during her life.

In 1875 [when the 1863 organization was working well], Ellen White said:

“I have been shown that no man's judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the judgment of *the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth*, is exercised, *private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but surrendered*” (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. III, p. 492 {PC 422}, 1875).

Before we look at later statements, let's take a look at the context of this statement. The first thing we notice (see text below) is that Ellen White was addressing a Brother A. And she is discussing a specific incident that had occurred two years earlier. From the context of the statement, we see that the General Conference had been in some urgent and immediate need for a leader in Battle Creek, perhaps because they had transferred an important leader from Battle Creek to a new position elsewhere. They apparently needed a replacement immediately, so they issued a call to Brother A to go to Battle Creek as soon as possible to handle the situation. But Brother A felt that if God needed him somewhere, God would communicate that to him directly. He thought it important to let the GC leaders know that he didn't jump just because they called. So he continued working where he was for several weeks or months — while the work of God was “much hindered.” So Ellen White tells him that God normally speaks through His

church, through believers gathered in the name of Jesus. She tells Brother A that he had ignored God's call to him, a call that had come through the General Conference in session.

We should also remember that in 1875, 26 years before the authority of the GC was divided and distributed to the unions, every Seventh-day Adventist minister in the world worked directly or indirectly for the General Conference. The GC alone had the final responsibility for deciding where almost every minister in the world would work. That changed dramatically in 1901. Here is the 1875 statement in its original context:

“Brother A, your experience in reference to leadership two years ago was for your own benefit and was highly essential to you. You had very marked, decided views in regard to individual independence and right to private judgment. These views you carry to extremes. You reason that you must have light and evidence for yourself in reference to your duty.

“I have been shown that no man's judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered. Your error was in persistently maintaining your private judgment of your duty against the voice of the highest authority the Lord has upon the earth. After you had taken your own time, and after the work had been much hindered by your delay, you came to Battle Creek in answer to the repeated and urgent calls of the General Conference. You firmly maintained that you had done right in following your own convictions of duty. You considered it a virtue in you to persistently maintain your position of independence. You did not seem to have a true sense of the power that God has given to His church in the voice of the General Conference. You thought that in responding to the call made to you by the General Conference you were submitting to the judgment and mind of one man. You accordingly manifested an independence, a set, willful spirit, which was all wrong” (3T 492, 1875).

In the 1890s [when the 1863 structure was failing, but before the 1901 reorganization]:

- *“The voice of the General Conference has been represented as an authority to be heeded as the voice of the Holy Spirit. But when the members of the General Conference Committee become entangled in business affairs and financial perplexities, the sacred, elevated character of their work is in a great degree lost” (Manuscript 33, 1895, {14MR 278}).*

- “As for the voice of the General Conference, *there is no voice from God through that body that is reliable*” ({17MR 178} 1895).
- “*The voice from Battle Creek, which has been regarded as authority in counseling how the work should be done, is no longer the voice of God*” ({17MR 185} 1896).
- “*It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God*” ({17MR 216} 1898).

In 1901 [at GC session, when urging that the church be completely restructured]:

- “That these men (leaders) 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*” (*General Conference Bulletin*, April 3, 1901, p. 25).
- “The Lord declares that His church is not to be governed by human rules or precedents. Men are not capable of ruling the church. God is our Ruler. I am oppressed with the thought of the objectionable human management seen in our work. God says, Hands off. Rule yourselves before you attempt to rule others. Strange things have been done, things that God abhors. *For men to claim that the voice of their councils in their past management is the voice of God seems to me to be almost blasphemy*” (Manuscript 35, 1901, {17MR 250.1}).

1909 (eight years after the creation of autonomous unions):

- “At times, when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God’s work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field should not *be respected*. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, *shall have authority*. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work” (9T 260.2).

There are several factors to consider when interpreting these statements:

First, it is clear that sometimes Ellen White considered the decisions of the General Conference to represent God's leading and sometimes she did not.

Second, some suggest that in the 1909 statement Ellen White says that if we think of the GC as large numbers of delegates in session, rather than as one man or a few officers, the GC is still "God's highest authority on earth." But in the 1909 statement, she does not use the strong terms she used earlier. Instead, her strongest counsel in 1909 is that the decisions of the GC in session should "be respected" and "shall have authority." It is likely she would have said the same thing about union and local conference committees.

Third, Ellen White did not compare the authority of a union conference constituency in session, or a local conference constituency in session, with the authority of the GC constituency in session. Ellen White enthusiastically supported the 1901 reorganization that divided the authority of the GC and distributed that authority to many large and prayerful union committees around the world. It was while speaking about the need to distribute the authority of the GC to "the people on the ground" that she said, as noted above:

"In reference to our [General] Conference, it is repeated o'er and o'er and o'er again that it is the voice of God, and therefore everything must be referred to the [General] Conference, [but] there needs to be the laying of a foundation that is different..." (Transcript of Ellen White's comments in Battle Creek College Library, April 1, 1901, pp. 1-3).

It is apparent that whether she did or didn't believe the GC in session was God's highest authority on earth, she did not believe it was necessary for that group to be the final word on how ministry was done around the world. She made it clear that God can give wisdom to union and local committees as well as He can give wisdom to the GC committee or GC delegates in session.

Fourth, in all the statements about the authority of the General Conference, Ellen White was offering counsel on how an *individual* should respond to the direction of an appropriate, representative group of believers. She is usually telling a stubbornly independent person to trust the leading of a faithful, prayerful committee or group of believers.

From 1873 to 1877, the "highest authority" statements were a subject of contention at GC sessions. See Appendix B for the GC statement that ended the controversy — for a while.

Model Constitutions and Bylaws

Imagine that you have been elected General Conference president. You notice that liberalism, or perhaps legalism, is sweeping across the denomination, at least in some places, and you feel God calling you to do something to stop it. But what can you do? Union and local conference leaders don't seem to be concerned, and because of the reorganization of 1901, the GC can't tell them what to do.

It is likely that no president ever planned to change the model constitutions and bylaws in order to cleverly take power from the unions. Perhaps the changes that we observe in the bylaws are more the *result* than the *cause* of the GC assuming more authority over the unions. Intentional or not, here are the changes that have occurred:

- **1863** — When the church first created a General Conference constitution in 1863, they also created a model constitution for the newly emerging state conferences. The model said nothing about the state conferences being in harmony with GC policy or practice, but it did say:

“This Constitution may be amended at any regular meeting of the Conference by a two-third’s vote of the members present, provided such amendment shall not conflict with the constitution of the General Conference” (Article VIII. Section 1).¹
- **1901** — Constitutions and bylaws were created and voted at GC session for the first unions. Those constitutions established each union as a self-governing organization. They contained no requirement that the unions adopt or follow GC policies, procedures, programs, initiatives, etc.
- **1975** — The GC’s model constitution and bylaws for unions still included nothing about the purpose of the Union or its relationship to the General Conference. This means that for at least 75 years the unions functioned as created: autonomous. But the model did have a section (II) entitled Object, which is similar to the later Purpose articles:

“The object of this [Union] Conference is to teach the everlasting gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and the commandments of God throughout the local conferences and mission fields established within its territory and to promote the interests of the world mission program of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”

¹ Article V, Section 1 of that 1863 model constitution said: “It shall be the duty of the [state] Conference to determine who are the approved ministers within the bounds thereof, [and] to grant suitable credentials to the same at each regular meeting.” Bert Haloviak notes that: “the creation of the NAD as a separate structural level of authority [in 1913] pushed the authorization for ordination from the [local] conference level to the union level. When the NAD was abolished in 1918, however, ordination authority remained at the union level” (Haloviak, *Approaches to Church Reorganization*, p. 3, footnote vi, unpublished).

- **1985** — Added Purpose section to the Constitution and created a separate document for the Bylaws. The Bylaws for the first time included a Relationship article. This statement was created by the GC for the unions to insert into union bylaws:

“The Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is a part of the North American Division which in turn is a part of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, a world church organization. *All purposes and procedures of this conference shall be in harmony with the working policies and procedures* of the North American Division and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This conference shall use its influence, guidance and resources to assist local conferences within its territory to pursue the mission of the church within the *doctrinal guidelines* adopted and approved by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in its quinquennial sessions.”

- **1995** — Kept the same statement but in the final sentence added the words “programs and initiatives:”

“The Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is a part of the North American Division which in turn is a part of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, a world church organization. *All purposes and procedures* of this conference shall be in harmony with the working policies and procedures of the North American Division and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. This conference shall use its influence, guidance and resources to assist local conferences within its territory to pursue the mission of the church within the *doctrinal guidelines, programs and initiatives* adopted and approved by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in its quinquennial sessions.”

- **2000** — Union Bylaws: Added “Policies” to the first sentence. So, 99 years after Ellen White said it was “a necessity to organize union conferences, that the General Conference shall not exercise dictation over all the separate conferences” (Manuscript 26, April 3, 1903), the GC *requires* that all unions adopt model constitutions that say the unions will follow all GC policies and procedures. The model also deleted the final sentence regarding “assisting” the local conferences to be in harmony with GC doctrines, programs and initiatives, and added a new sentence about additional ways the unions would comply with NAD and GC policies:

“The Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is a part of the North American Division which in turn is a part of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, a world church organization. All *policies, purposes and procedures* of this Union shall be in harmony with the working policies

and procedures of the North American Division and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”

“This Union shall pursue the purposes of the Church in harmony with the *doctrines, programs, and initiatives* adopted and approved by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Constituency Session.”

- **2015?** — The final two sentences above allow for some loopholes. Those loopholes could be closed by combining the two sentences into one sentence, like this:

“All policies, purposes, procedures, doctrines, programs, and initiatives of this Union shall be in harmony with the doctrines, programs, working policies, procedures, and initiatives adopted and approved by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.”

The 2006 GC/NAD *Working Policy* includes this introduction to the Model Constitution for unions:

D 10 05 Union Conference Constitution and Bylaws — This model constitution shall be followed by all union conferences. Those sections of the model bylaws that appear in bold print are essential to the unity of the Church worldwide, and shall be included in the bylaws as adopted by each union conference. Other sections of the model bylaws may be modified as set out in Bylaw Article XII, provided they continue to be in full harmony with the provisions of this model. Amendments to the Model Union Conference Constitution and Bylaws *shall* be made by action of the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists at any Annual Council of that Committee.

(All the requirements that union policy and practices, etc., be in harmony with GC policies and practices, etc., are in bold print, indicating that they cannot be altered by unions and conferences.)

Finally, according to the *Model Constitution for Unions* in the 2006 GC/NAD *Working Policy*, the unions can make changes to their own constitutions and bylaws, with these limitations:

Article VIII — Amendments

This constitution *shall not* be amended except to conform to the model union conference constitution when it is amended by action of the General Conference Executive Committee at an Annual Council. This union conference *shall* amend its constitution from time to time at regularly called constituency meetings, any such changes to conform to the model union conference constitution. The union conference executive committee may recommend to the General Conference through the _____ Division of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, amendments to the model constitution.

The Model Constitutions for the local conferences include the same requirements.

It is important to note that *few, if any, unions or conferences in the North American Division follow these GC policy requirements in every detail*. Some unions ignore the model constitutions almost entirely; others follow most of the provisions in GC policy, but make important modifications to fit local needs. Why? Because, as readers of this paper know, the unions and conferences are autonomous. They answer to their own constituents. They were created that way because church pioneers, including Ellen White, believed faith and leadership skills grow best, and the mission of the church is best accomplished, when constituents are free to study their own mission challenges, counsel with others, pray, make decisions and step out together in faith. Union and conference constitutions and bylaws were and are created and amended by their own constituents.

Leadership Initiatives

The changes in the bylaws provide an interesting paper trail of the church's drift back toward authority centralized at the GC. But leaders don't read bylaws very often, and many members probably don't know that unions and conferences have bylaws.

Most members do notice, however, when the General Conference leaders initiate worldwide actions, when they say something like: "We will take charge of this. We will form a committee, which will make a decision, then the GC executive committee, or the GC delegates in session, will vote it — and all the unions and conferences will comply with the GC vote." After that happens many times, members and leaders alike begin to assume that that is the way the church is supposed to work: the GC speaks (politely) and everyone else obeys (cheerfully).

Already in 1903, E. A. Sutherland, then president of Battle Creek College and soon to found Madison Sanitarium, saw centralized authority creeping back into the church. In his view, centralized authority grows because it enables leaders to get things done easier and faster:

"It seems to me the thing we are to fear more than anything else in this [organization question] is the danger of centralization, and consolidating. It is a fact that during the last two years, in spite of everything, there has been a tendency to centralize. We have seen this in a number of ways, and I believe it comes in this way. When we see a great work to be done, it is perfectly natural for us to want to do this work in the quickest way, and the best way possible, and if you throw that great work in the hands of a few men, they will be likely to draw in everything that can be so that they can handle the work quickly and carry it on to the very best advantage" (*General Conference Bulletin*, April 9, 1903, p. 104).

The following sentences from Bert Haloviak's 1993 paper, *Approaches to Church Reorganization*, suggest how and why the church changed to this more hierarchical attitude without officially reorganizing:

“Crisis situations, real and imagined, tended to enhance the role of the General Conference president since that time [1901-1903].”

“Despite minimal official constitutional/structural modifications between 1901 and 1990, Arthur Daniells [sic], the president elected in 1901, would note telling differences in the operation of the SDA church in 1990.”

“[GC President Robert H.] Pierson and W. J. Hackett had looked at the recent Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod experience and concluded it was better to confront liberalism earlier than later. Both believed the ‘conservatives’ consistently ‘lost’ over a delayed confrontation. It was this perspective that caused Pierson to amass an unusual amount of authority at the presidential level” (*Approaches to Church Organization*, Commission on World Church Organization, March 23-29, 1993, Office of Archives and Statistics, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, February 1993).

In the 1990s, then GC President Robert Folkenberg illustrated this process. Like earlier presidents, he was concerned that some teachers, especially at the college level, were teaching things that he and others believed were a danger to the church — and he wanted to do what he could to ensure that Adventist teachers would present Adventist beliefs.

As structured in 1901, if there is a problem at a college, it is the responsibility of the union that owns and operates that college to fix it. But the GC president felt some responsibility to help. Eventually, he proposed an international board that would evaluate the performance of individual colleges and universities. The GC Annual Council approved the plan, and it is currently in the *GC Working Policy*, under the title, “Total Commitment to God.”

Of course, if you have read this far in this paper, you know that the GC cannot require any union or union institution to use the Total Commitment program. Only the Unions can make the decision to use, adapt or not use materials developed by the GC.

But every time the GC creates a committee, institute, program or policy, especially one that the unions around the world appreciate, adopt, and use, the image of the GC as the top of the chain of command — the final authority — is strengthened. Over the last century, this has happened often, especially in the last quarter of the 20th century. As a result, many members and pastors have come to assume that the GC is the last word on what the unions and their institutions can and cannot do. The following initiatives, and others, have contributed to the impression that the GC makes decisions for the unions.

- **1923** — Bert Haloviak comments: “Church administrators [in the 1920s] feared ‘innovations’ entering Adventism. An overriding concern was the development of the local pastorate. This was occurring in larger city churches. Administrators feared the church would lose its evangelistic thrust by a stationary pastorate ‘hovering’ over local churches” (*Approaches to Church Reorganization*, p. 4). The GC 1923 Autumn Council recommended that all departmental leaders, including home missionary and missionary volunteer secretaries be ‘selected [from those] who have had successful experience in evangelistic work, preferably ordained ministers’ (Ibid.). This eliminated many women who had specialized in departmental ministry.
- **1931** — Tenure of Office plan limited GC officers to 12 consecutive years in office, union officers to eight years, and local conference officers to six years.
- **1932** — Autumn council recommended that SDA organizations adjust employees to prevent both husband and wife being “remuneratively” employed. If, under special cases, both were employed, the wife should receive “greatly reduced” wages.
- **1957** — Committee on the Teaching of Geology and Paleontology (GRI)
- **1972** — Adventist Media Center created in California to take control of previously independent radio and television ministries.
- **1973** — Symposium on the Role of Women in the Church (Mohaven)
- **1975** — Biblical Research Institute created
- **1980** — Statement of Fundamental Beliefs adopted at GC Session
- **1980** — Glacier View inquiry (GC) into theology of Pacific Union College teacher
- **1984** — GC Commission on the Role of Women in the Church
- **1985** — GC Women’s Ministries Advisory Committee
- **1990** — GC discussion and vote on first request of NAD to ordain women
- **1990** — Adventist Accrediting Association established
- **1995** — GC discussion and vote on second request of NAD to ordain women
- **1996** — Total Commitment to God adopted (accountability document)
- **2002** — International Faith & Science Conferences 2002-2004
- **2003** — Hope Channel and studios created at GC HQ
- **2011** — GC Committee on the Theology of Ordination created to determine whom unions can approve for ordination.

Are some of these actions legitimate functions of the GC, and others not? Perhaps a guideline like the following would help to decide: if the GC creates committees, actions, policies, institutions, etc., because the unions ask the GC to find worldwide answers for issues affecting unions, then the resulting GC committees, institutions and actions probably fit within the structure created in 1901. But if the GC initiates committees, institutions and actions to “exercise dictation over all the separate conferences,” then the GC would be acting contrary to the authority assigned to the GC in the 1901 reorganization.

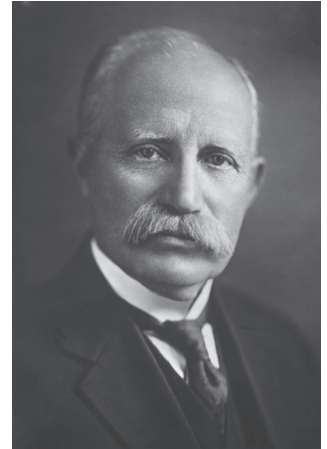
But whether the initiatives of the GC have been appropriate or not is not the point of this study. The more well-accepted a GC initiative is, the more it contributes to members believing the Seventh-day Adventist Church is hierarchical.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps it will be useful to conclude with the final words of Pacific Union Conference President W. T. Knox, as he explained the dramatic changes in church structure made in 1901.

“It is hoped that, by this *division* of responsibilities, our mission fields will be much more rapidly and economically developed, the funds more understandingly, and therefore more judiciously, expended, and the forces placed to better advantage.

“We can take up this work with courage, knowing that it is founded upon the principles of God’s government. If the reorganization begins where it should, with the individual, we may look for success. If all realize that the work is theirs, under God, and that through them individually He designs to bring to a successful issue the great conflict of the ages, and that we are indeed ‘priests of the most high,’ then we may look for great things from our God, and His rich blessings will attend the institutions and conferences with which we are connected” (W. T. Knox, *Pacific Union Recorder*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 3).



APPENDIX A

1901 in Everyday Life

I did not realize the unique, non-hierarchical structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church until I first worked in a local conference office. As a child, I was subject to the authority of my parents. As a student, I was subject to the authority of my teachers. When I worked at summer camp, I could be fired if the camp director felt I was not doing what he needed me to do. At college, I could be fired at any time from my job in the kitchen. When I entered the pastoral ministry, I seemed to answer to just about everyone, including the local church board, the district pastor and the conference president.

But when I started working in the Oregon Conference youth department in 1969, I discovered that I had reached a break in the traditional organizational flow chart. At that time, there was a conflict between the way we were doing youth ministry in Oregon and the way the GC youth ministry leaders (and the *Church Manual*) said it should be done. The *Church Manual* (voted by the GC in session) called for two entirely separate youth organizations in every local church: a Youth Sabbath School organization and a Missionary Volunteer [youth] organization, with separate officers, separate meetings, separate activities.

But that was not working in any local church in Oregon, or, from what we heard, anywhere else in the NAD. Most churches were fortunate to have one effective youth leader. Having leaders for two organizations was almost unknown. What was working (producing changed lives and baptisms) in many churches was a Spirit-filled, unified, local church youth program. That one youth program included Sabbath school, evangelism, fellowship and recreation among its activities.

General Conference youth and Sabbath school leaders insisted we stop encouraging this departure from GC policy, and they sent notices to every conference in North America pleading that they not do what Oregon was doing until the unified program was tested and approved by the GC. Being autonomous and caring about their youth, many conferences ignored the plea from world headquarters. My conference president, Walter Blehm (later president of the Pacific Union Conference), explained to me that I worked for the local conference, not for the union or the GC. He also explained that he answered to the Oregon constituency, not to the union president or the GC president. That was new to me. No one at any higher level of church structure had any authority over anyone in the Oregon Conference. We answered to our constituency.

He also explained that new policies follow successful new methods of ministry. The Lord was obviously blessing what our local youth leaders were doing. If it worked elsewhere, Blehm said, it would become GC policy. If we neglected to follow the leading of the Spirit, blessings would be lost and policy would remain static. Of course, this did not mean I was free to ignore church authority. I answered to the authorities established in 1901: my conference officers, the conference committee and the conference constituency.

Within the next three or four years, the GC changed youth ministry policy to encompass what was happening in Oregon and elsewhere. They didn't exactly adopt what we were doing as official policy, instead adding a third youth organization in the local church, the Adventist Youth in Action council. The AYA council was to serve as a place where MV leaders and youth Sabbath school leaders could meet to coordinate their programs. I never heard of a church that set up all three organizations, but the new policy was broad enough to cover those who had separate programs and those with one unified program.

But, there was a second part to Blehm's lesson: As conference youth director, I, too, had no authority over anyone in any local church. I could inspire them, challenge them, influence them, organize them, cooperate with them, or offend them, but I could not order them to do anything. Local youth leaders answer to their local church boards and to the church membership.

Here my conference president was a little different. While the GC president and union president couldn't order him to do anything, he could and did have considerable authority over the pastors. The conference paid their salaries, so the conference could transfer them to a different church, discipline them, promote them or fire them. But even then, the conference president knew that he could not order the pastors to impose conference plans on the local church without the approval of the local church board. And he knew that if he didn't treat local church leaders with respect they could vote him out of office at the next constituency session.

Conference youth directors could also direct, discipline or fire people they employed, such as summer camp staff. The work of God is orderly, as our pioneers decided in 1863, and everyone answers to others. Effective ministry happens when we work together.

Since the early 1970s I have really had no success explaining the church's structure to people who do not work for the church, or who have never worked above the local church level. The most common response I hear from people is that whatever the history or structure of the church might be, "everyone knows" that people at higher levels of an organization have authority over those at lower levels.

So, year after year, the church goes on functioning without a hierarchical structure, and year after year the vast majority of members seem to believe it is hierarchical. This is most evident when members complain that higher levels of church administration are not stepping in to fix something the members think should be different at lower levels.

But it is not at all surprising that members, including some pastors and a few popular Adventist web bloggers, do not understand Adventist church structure. I know of no other organization on earth that has the non-hierarchical division of authority that our pioneers built into the Adventist church in 1901.

APPENDIX B

The “Highest Authority” Vote at the 1877 General Conference Session

In 1877, the GC in session voted a carefully crafted statement defining the “highest authority” in the church. The story behind that vote began four years earlier, at the 1873 GC session when delegates voted to endorse a presentation, “Address on Leadership,” by General Conference President G. I. Butler. In his paper (also published in the *Review and Herald*, Nov. 18, 1873, pp. 180-181), Butler argued that:

“There is not a single important movement spoken of in scripture but that some person was chosen in it, to lead out.

“While we are ... willing to freely admit that ‘Christ is head of the church,’ we must also conclude that some men are placed higher in authority in the church than others.”

“[I]f there are those who still think that no man is ever authorized to exert any authority in the Christian church, and that all stand upon a level, let them carefully consider the following scriptures: ‘Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.’ ... This authority is not contrary to the leadership of Christ, but by his direct appointment.”

Butler goes on to argue that since the second coming of Christ is the most important event in history, God must have an authoritative leader in the Seventh-day Adventist church to whom all others should submit. He makes it clear that this leader is not a prophet, but an administrator, a person called to be an apostle. It must have been difficult for delegates to imagine this person could be anyone other than the General Conference president himself.

The action of the 1873 GC in session endorsing Butler’s “Address on Leadership” was more than a little offensive to many leaders. In fact, one of Adventism’s most influential pioneers, Brother W. H. Littlejohn, left the church, or at least the ministry, because of the statement.

In 1875, the same year that Ellen White made her famous statement that “the General Conference ... is the highest authority that God has upon the earth,” a committee was appointed, with Uriah Smith as chair, to revise the “Address on Leadership,” because the 1873 statement had, according to critics such as Littlejohn, claimed divine authority for human leaders and human councils.

At the 1877 GC session, Uriah Smith reported that the committee had not found time to revise the whole tract, but he presented two resolutions that he felt would correct the biggest problems.

Resolution One, rescinded “all that portion of the Address on Leadership passed in 1873 which teaches that the leadership of the body is confined to any one man.”

Resolution Two, declared, instead, that the highest authority, “under God,” among Adventists, is:

1. **found in the will of the body of that people — not in individual leaders — and that even a decision of the body of believers is authoritative only ...**
2. **when it is expressed in the decisions of the General Conference,**
3. **when that body is acting within its proper jurisdiction,**
4. **when the decision is not in conflict with the word of God, and**
5. **when it is not in conflict with the rights of individual conscience.**

This official statement of authority was voted unanimously by the General Conference delegates in session in 1877. Here is the way it was written:

Resolved, That the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference when acting within its proper jurisdiction; and that such decisions should be submitted to by all without exception, unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience” (*Review and Herald*, Oct. 4, 1877, p. 106).

Bro. Littlejohn declared from the floor in 1877 that this declaration was enough to bring him back to work for the church. The delegates welcomed him back with a “rising vote,” as opposed, apparently, to a voice vote or a show of hands. (In later publications, Littlejohn is referred to as the blind pastor of the Battle Creek church.)

This declaration that when the five conditions are met, the decisions of the GC “should be submitted to by all without exception” was voted in 1877, when the 1863 church organization was still working well. We should also remember that the topic under consideration was the right of the individual believer in relation to a council of believers. As seen above, even this toned-down declaration of the authority of the General Conference in session was later abandoned, then modified, by Ellen White. And it became largely irrelevant after most of the authority of the General Conference was “distributed” to unions and local conferences in the 1901 reorganization.

For the full story see the *Review and Herald*, Oct. 4, 1877.

APPENDIX C

The 1926 GC Session – “I wish in this denomination we could forget....”

In 1926, W. A. Spicer, who replaced A. G. Daniels as GC president in 1922, became the first president to express frustration with the GC’s limited authority after the creation of unions in 1901. Four years after taking office, he stood before the delegates at the GC’s world business session to explain something the GC was about to do that he believed would “disturb” some delegates — those, apparently, who feared the GC might try to exercise authority over the unions. He asked the delegates to not criticize the GC officers privately about this action, but to speak openly if they were not comfortable with the GC’s actions.

What they were about to do would not “disturb” many Adventists in the 21st century: GC officers were going to advise four union nominating committees who were about to choose new presidents — after previous presidents had accepted invitations to join the GC staff.

“I speak about this in order that the questioning about what is going to be done should not disturb anybody,” Spicer says. He suggests several reasons that the delegates should not be afraid the GC officers would try to assume authority over the unions:

1. **First, the whole world church may be affected by what these unions do — especially the Pacific Union, which provides one-fourth of the GC budget.** “It is not merely a desire to have something to do with somebody else’s work,” he says. “But the brethren feel that the manning of our strong unions is more than a local matter; that it is a matter that should have the counsel of all the appropriate counselors that God has provided.”
2. **Second, — and Spicer repeats this several times — at a meeting that lasted until midnight the night before, the union leaders themselves requested GC counsel.** “Those brethren said, ‘Brethren, we want you of the General Conference to counsel us.’ ... In the fear of God, the union men say the officers should sit down in a meeting like this with each union committee that has to give up a man, and counsel freely as to filling the gaps.”
3. **Third, Spicer says GC leaders are well aware that they cannot tell the unions what they must do.** “We as General Conference officers do not want to be dominating the unions. We cannot do that. We cannot have any central power that is arbitrary.”
4. **Fourth, Spicer says that the Union leaders told the GC leaders that while the union leaders were responsible for decisions in their unions, they did not feel the GC should fail to offer a worldwide perspective.** “On the other hand, in the fear of God the union brethren who were together told us that we could not adopt any policy of drift,” Spicer says.

5. **Finally, the GC promised to follow a middle approach, suggested by the union leaders: “The union men said ... ‘Strike a medium between a ruling domination and the policy of drifting, and let us make it a policy of mutual, earnest, prayerful, and very, very serious counsel between officers and union committees, with the General Conference Committee itself the court of appeal.’ ... I believe there is safety in that. With brethren desiring counsel, we officers wanting to give counsel, but wishing to stop short of being arbitrary; I believe we should get together, and together plan to man this work and push on, hurting no man.”**

Spicer concludes with these words:

“For our part as officers, I want our relation to unions to be such that in our councils we can talk it over freely between us all, as to whether in any particular we as officers are too assertive, whether at some point dominating, or whether we are letting things drift, and failing to give the general counsel that is needed to help every local interest in best relation to the whole.”

“I wish in this denomination we could forget every mistake we have all made in the past, and when God lays the burden upon any one of us, that we might face the future together like brethren.”

In this same speech, Spicer says things that sound dramatically different from statements made by his predecessor, A. G. Daniels:

“As official, as president, I must declare the counsels of the [GC] Committee, and God being my helper, I must not swerve from the counsels of that Committee, which represents the General Conference, *which the spirit of prophecy says is the highest authority of God on the earth*. I yield to its counsels myself.

“When in the fear of God, with all the counsel that can be secured, the General Conference Committee gives counsel, that is the command of God to me, and we as officials must be true as steel to it.

“But, brethren, we do not want any body of men binding themselves together to agree together to follow one-another. It would mean stagnation to our souls. That is why I felt a real anxiety to bring in some union presidents [as GC vice-presidents]; let other men take their unions; try to develop more men, and get more of a circulation of blood through the body of our organization.”

It is interesting to see that in 1926, in an effort to justify the GC’s participation in Union decisions, the GC president is asserting a position on the divine authority of the General Conference that had been denied by the GC in session in 1877, and abandoned by Ellen White and the church in 1901.

For the full text of Spicer’s comments to GC delegates in 1926, see “Fundamental Principles in Choosing Men for Responsible Positions” (*Review and Herald*, vol. 103, no. 29, June 9, 1926, pp. 26-28).

APPENDIX D

Protecting the Boundaries: Dissolution

In 1863 and 1901 church leaders adopted ecclesiastical structures designed to enable faithful, committed church members, leaders and organizations to work together to achieve the goals of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The following four policy statements are in an appendix in this paper because these parts of *GC Working Policy* are not about building unity and fulfilling mission; they are about what to do when a part of the church is no longer committed to the church's mission or teachings. The 2005-2006 *Working Policy* states that because unions and conferences were created by vote of the GC, they can be disbanded by the GC, and therefore must — while they are allowed to exist — strictly comply with all policies and procedures of the GC, with no exceptions.

By themselves, the first three statements sound like they are contrary to the 1901 restructuring, which distributed GC authority to the unions. And perhaps the authors did intend them to be understood as ways to, in Ellen White's words, "*exercise dictation over all the separate conferences.*" If so, they should be revised; such a slavish devotion to uniformity and GC policy is not supported by Scripture, is not in accord with the statements of Ellen White, does not reflect the understanding of Adventist pioneers — and is not seen in contemporary church practices around the world.

But the first three statements do make sense if understood in conjunction with the fourth. This is not about how to force a union or conference to pursue current GC outreach projects or policies; it is about what to do when a union, conference or church no longer supports the mission or teachings of the church. It is sometimes referred to as "the nuclear option:" blow it up.

Current policy statements:

B 05 Organizational and Operational Principles of Seventh-day Adventist Church Structure — 2. Organizational status is granted to a constituency as a trust. *Organizational status* as a local church, local conference/mission, or union conference/mission *is not self-generated, automatic, or perpetual.* It is the result of a formal decision by an executive committee or a constituency session at higher levels of denominational organization. *Organizational membership and status are entrusted to entities that meet certain qualifications such as faithfulness to Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, compliance with denominational practices and policies, demonstration of adequate leadership and financial capacity, and responsiveness to mission challenges and opportunities. Membership and status can be reviewed.*

B 10 20 General Conference and its Divisions — 3. Highest Organization. The General Conference is the highest organization in the administration of the worldwide work of the Church, and is authorized by its Constitution to create *subordinate organizations* to promote specific interests in various sections of the world; it is therefore understood that all *subordinate organizations and institutions throughout the world will recognize the General Conference in session as the highest authority under God.*

B 15 10 Adherence to Policy Required — 1. The *General Conference Working Policy* shall be strictly adhered to by all organizations in every part of the world field. The work in every organization shall be administered in full harmony with the policies of the General Conference and of the divisions respectively. *No departure from these policies shall be made* without prior approval from the General Conference Executive Committee, except as stated below.

B 95 05 Discontinuation of Conferences, Missions, Fields, Unions, and Unions of Churches by Dissolution and/or Expulsion — If a situation arises where it is determined by the higher organization that the *majority of members* of a conference, a mission, a field, a union, or a union of churches *are in apostasy*, or that the organization refuses to operate in harmony with denominational policies and constitutional requirements, *and is in rebellion*, the higher organization has a responsibility to act for the protection of its loyal members, and the good name of the Church. Every effort should be made to avert the need for *dissolution* by counseling with the leadership and members, seeking to bring healing and reconciliation, and to preserve the organization as a witness for God and His saving truth. If conciliatory efforts fail and *discontinuation* appears to be the only solution, the higher organization shall have authority to act as set out under B 90 10, B 90 15, and B 90 2.

The world church probably needs these threatening statements in its *Working Policy* book, and on rare occasions a conference does have to act to save a local church facility from being “stolen” by people who are essentially not Seventh-day Adventists. But it is not fear of being cast out that causes believers to love the Lord and to love His church. As James White said:

“While we stand here, with the aid of no other creed than the Word of God, and bound together by the bonds of love — love for the truth, love for each other, and love for a perishing world — which is stronger than death, all party feelings are lost. We are united in these great subjects: Christ’s immediate, personal second Advent, and the observance of all the commandments of God, and the faith of his Son Jesus Christ, as necessary to a readiness for his Advent” (James White, *Review and Herald*. Aug. 11, 1853).

According to procedures outlined in the *Working Policy*, if the majority of members in a problem organization are loyal Seventh-day Adventists but the leaders are not, the higher organization can call a constituency meeting of the rebellious organization, and delegates can elect new leaders. If both the leaders and the members are rebellious, the higher organization can expel the organization, then create a new one.

APPENDIX E

Unity in Diversity

Throughout her ministry, Ellen White urged unity, mutual support and openness to council. But she did not see that as a reason for uniformity. The following statements illustrate how she reconciled unity and diversity during the years of church reorganization:

“The work of publication was presented to me by the figure which Christ used — the vine. In the different branches of this great work, as in the branches of the vine, there is to be unity in diversity. This is God’s plan, the principle which runs through the entire universe. In God’s wise arrangement there is diversity, and yet He has so related each part to others, that all work in harmony to carry out His great plan in extending the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ whom He hath sent. However there may appear to be dissimilarity, the work is one great whole, and bears the stamp of infinite wisdom.

“God and Christ are one, Christ and His disciples are one, we in Christ, and Christ in God. The Lord designs that His work shall move forward in perfect harmony without friction. Jesus said: ‘I am the vine, ye are the branches.’ The branches are many and diverse, yet all are united in the parent stock, and every branch, although separate, draws its sustenance from the vine stock. Jesus Christ is in God, the great masterpiece of infinite wisdom and power and sufficiency, from whom all diversity springs. Each branch bears its burden of fruit, and altogether make a harmonious whole, a complete, beautiful unity. This is harmony according to God’s order” (EGW, Ltr. 71. 1894. 1895 *General Conference Bulletin*, pp. 373).

“Labor in harmony with one another, even though you are not alike. Do you not know that of the leaves on a tree there are no two exactly alike? From this God would teach us that among His servants there is to be unity in diversity.

...

“To every man is given his work. But though our work is different, we need the help of one another. No one is to gather around him a party of men who will think as he thinks, and say, Amen, to everything that he says. God uses different minds. What one mind lacks will be made up by what another mind has” (EGW, “Lessons From the Sending Out of the Spies,” *General Conference Bulletin*, March 30, 1903, pp. 10-11).

When the Seventh-day Adventist Church was organized in 1863, members and leaders saw the organizational structure as so near perfect that it must have been inspired by God. But by the 1890s the church was nearly torn apart by conflict over who had the final authority to decide how the church's rapidly growing ministry was to be done.

Many, including Ellen White, believed the problem was that the General Conference had too much authority over local conferences and congregations, and that the church – from General Conference to local congregations – had too little authority over schools, publishing houses, hospitals, mission appointments, etc. In 1901, in response to a plea from Ellen White for complete change, the church structure was turned upside down through the creation of departments (health, education, Sabbath school, publishing, etc.) and the establishment of autonomous union conferences. It is that 1901 structure that determines who has authority in the church in the early 21st century.

At the end of that 1901 General Conference session Ellen White said, "God's angels have been walking up and down in this congregation. I want everyone of you to remember this, and I want you to remember also that God has said that He will heal the wounds of His people."

In *Who Runs the Church?* Gerry Chudleigh outlines the authority assigned to each level of the church today – General Conference, divisions, unions, local conferences and congregations. Chudleigh looks at the original structure to see why it failed, then details how the problem was fixed and harmony restored. Finally, he reviews the processes by which church authority has gradually become more centralized since 1901.

Among several interesting side trips, Chudleigh examines the context of Ellen White's 1875 statement that the General Conference is God's highest earthly authority, reviews her frustration with people quoting that statement "o'er and o'er and o'er again" to prevent change, and outlines her changing attitude toward centralized authority.

About the Author

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Advent Source

