

ORGANIZING FOR MISSION: THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Seventh-day Adventist history represents the full spectrum on approaches to organization. The movement began aggressively anti-organizational, but today it is the most highly structured church in the history of Christianity. The editorial process of the published version of my 1998 annual council presentation entitled "Adventist Congregationalism: Wake-Up Call or Death Knell?" illustrates my point.¹ In my original manuscript I had written that no other church in the world had so many administrative levels to support. The editors, seeking to be helpful, added the words, "excepting the Roman Catholic." I objected to the change and penciled in "including the Roman Catholic." That branch has only two levels above the local church, whereas Adventism has four.

The topic of this chapter is how Adventism traveled from one extreme to the other. I will not be telling the story in detail, since that can be found in my *Organizing to Beat the Devil: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (2001) and in the published doctoral dissertations of Andrew Mustard and Barry Oliver.² Rather, I will present a basic outline of the denomination's organizational evolution with an emphasis on the practical and theological reasons for organization, the enabling authority undergirding initial developments and ongoing modifications, and the evaluations by Ellen White and others on structural developments within the denomination.

The chapter closes with an analysis of the meaning of Adventism's historical journey for the church in the twenty-first century.

I. *Moving Toward Organization in the 1850s*

No one in the late 1840s would have predicted that the incipient Sabbatarian Adventist movement would organize beyond the congregational level. After all, two of its three founders--James White and Joseph Bates--had their roots in the anti-organizational Christian Connexion, which had a congregational system held together by periodicals, periodic conferences of believers, and powerless associations of like-minded congregations. Connexionists saw church organization as an infringement of a person's Christian liberty. While it is true that the denomination's third founder--Ellen G. White--had belonged to the highly structured Methodist Episcopal Church, it is also true that that structured body had disfellowshipped her and her family in 1843 because they would not keep silent about their sincerely held belief in the nearness of Christ's advent.

Excommunication and the removal of Millerite pastors from their pulpits had been the experience of many Advent believers in 1843 and 1844. To them, following the lead of Charles Fitch, organized churches were symbolized in the Bible as Babylon--the oppressor of God's true people.

Picking up on that theme, George Storrs argued that individuals needed to abandon the denominations because "we have no right to let any men, or body of men, thus lord it over us. And to remain in such an organized body . . . is to remain in Babylon." To Storrs the history of organized religion (both Catholic and Protestant) was one of bigotry and persecution. He argued against visible, organized

churches and opted for God's great invisible church that "the Lord organizes" on the basis of the "bonds of love." In the face of the record of persecution caused by a belief in the soon coming of Jesus, Storrs concluded that "no church can be organized by man's invention but what it becomes Babylon *the moment it is organized!*"³

Storrs' argument and the Millerite's painful experience with organized denominations made it next to impossible for any of the six religious bodies that eventually developed in the post-Millerite period to organize before the late 1850s and early 1860s, and only one of those six would develop significant structures above the congregational level.

But what Adventists in the late 1840s believed that the world would even be around in 1860? To them time was short indeed, too short to need church organization. Organization was even more inconsequential for shut door Adventists, who firmly believed that they had no mission for the world, but only to other ex-Millerites. The Sabbatharians were among that group who saw both time and mission in extremely limited terms.

But they soon faced a major challenge in the stubborn fact that time would not come to an end. That frustrating reality *forced* them to begin to see things differently. In the late 1840s they very tentatively began to publish a periodical and to hold gathering meetings as they sought to convert other ex-Millerites to the third angel's message. But their efforts also gathered in some who had not been in the Millerite movement. That unexpected development *forced* the Sabbatharians to reevaluate and reject their shut door theology. By the early 1850s they had begun to see that their mission was broader than they had previously thought.

Meanwhile, as time continued, the Sabbatarians in various localities formed congregations. And the existence of those congregations *forced* them in the early 1850s to think and act on such problems as local church leadership, a basic belief system, and disciplinary action against those out of harmony with the principles of the movement. But issues at the congregational level weren't the only ones they had to face. There were also those of a more general nature, such as protecting the congregations from false pastors, certifying orthodox pastors, and transferring members in good standing from one congregation to another.

By the mid to late 1850s the Sabbatarian leaders were *forced* to face even more perplexing problems. Who, for example, was to pay their traveling preachers (there were no stationary pastors), who was to collect the money to pay them and on what basis, and who was to own church buildings and the printing press. James White as the leading minister was *forced* by circumstances to begin to think about church organization. At first he took many of the responsibilities for various aspects of the movement upon himself, but he was intelligent enough to see the pitfalls in that. Thus he took the initiative in the late 1850s to *force* others to see the problems and to come up with some solutions. His wife was with James in the journey toward organization in the face of three stubborn facts: (1) time that would not come to an end (2) a broadening concept of missiological responsibility, and (3) numerical growth.

James and Ellen White began to call in earnest for gospel order in late 1853 and early 1854. They, more than anyone else, recognized the needs of the developing movement.

At the center of the struggle were several theological issues of the utmost importance. One was the need to redefine Babylon. James began that redefinition in December 1853 when he wrote that "it is a lamentable fact that many of our Advent brethren who made a timely escape from the bondage of the different churches [Babylon] . . . have since been in a more perfect Babylon than ever before. Gospel order has been too much overlooked by them. . . . Many in their zeal to come out of Babylon, partook of a rash, disorderly spirit, and were soon found in a perfect Babel of confusion. . . . To suppose that the church of Christ is free from restraint and discipline, is the wildest fanaticism."⁴

That same month his wife wrote that "the Lord has shown that gospel order has been too much feared and neglected. . . . In these last days, while God is bringing His children into the unity of the faith, there is more real need of order than ever before."⁵

James White vigorously utilized the revised understanding of Babylon as he moved toward high gear in his drive for organization in 1859. In June he got the leading members to adopt Systematic Benevolence to pay ministers since "the shortness of time and the vast importance of the truth calls upon us in the most imperative manner to extend missionary labor."⁶

The next month he laid down the gauntlet in no uncertain terms. "We lack system," he cried on July 21. "Many of our brethren are in a scattered state. They observe the Sabbath, read with some interest the REVIEW: but beyond this they are doing but little or nothing for want of some method of united action among them." To meet the situation, he called for regular meetings in each state (yearly in

some and four or five times a year in others) to give guidance to the work of the Sabbatarians in that region.⁷

"We are aware," he wrote, "that these suggestions, will not meet the minds of all. Bro. Overcautious will be frightened, and will be ready to warn his brethren to be careful and not venture out too far; while Bro. Confusion will cry out, 'O, this looks just like Babylon! Following the fallen church!' Bro. Do-little will say, 'The cause is the Lord's, and we had better leave it in his hands, he will take care of it.' 'Amen,' says Love-this-world, Slothful, Selfish and Stingy, 'if God calls men to preach, let them go out and preach, he will take care of them, and those who believe their message; while Korah, Dathan and Abiram are ready to rebel against those who feel the weight of the cause [e.g., James White], and who watch for souls as those who must give account, and raise the cry, 'You take too much upon you.'"⁸

White let it be known in the most descriptive language that he was sick and tired of the cry of Babylon every time anyone mentioned organization. "Bro. Confusion," he penned, "makes a most egregious blunder in calling system, which is in harmony with the Bible and good sense, Babylon. As Babylon signifies confusion, our erring brother has the very word stamped upon his own forehead. And we venture to say there is not another people under heaven more worthy of the brand of Babylon than those professing the Advent faith who reject Bible order. Is it not high time that we as a people heartily embrace everything that is good and right in the churches [denominations]? Is it not blind folly to start back at the idea of system, found everywhere in the Bible, simply because it is observed in the fallen churches?"⁹

As one who had the "weight of the cause" upon him, James White felt impelled to take his stand for better organization among Sabbatarians. Castigating those who thought that "all that was necessary to run a train of cars was to use the brake well,"¹⁰ he firmly believed that in order to get the Advent movement moving it had to organize. That task he would pursue with full vigor between 1860 and 1863.

A second theological issue at the center of the struggle for organization in the 1850s and early 1860s was that of authority and hermeneutics. On what grounds could they organize? Did they need an explicit thus saith the Lord for the steps that needed to be taken? Those were crucial questions for a movement that aimed to be faithful to the Bible in everything that it did.

The question of authority and hermeneutic was not only important, but it was one that of necessity had to be settled before the denomination could move forward. At first the Sabbatarians were in harmony on the issue of the needed authority. In 1854, for example, Joseph Bates claimed that apostolic church order must be restored to the church before the Second Advent. When he said apostolic that is exactly what he meant. Bates made no room for any element of organization not found in the New Testament.¹¹ James White at this early period shared that opinion. Thus he could write in 1854 that "by gospel, or church order we mean that order in church association and discipline taught in the gospel of Jesus Christ by the writers of the New Testament."¹² A few months later he spoke of the "perfect system of order, set forth in the New Testament, by inspiration of God. . . . The Scriptures present a perfect system, which, if carried out, will save the Church from Imposters" and provide the ministers

with an adequate platform for carrying out the work of the church.¹³ J. B. Frisbie, the most active writer in the *Review* in the mid 1850s on church order, agreed with Bates and White that every aspect of church order needed to be explicitly spelled out in the Bible.¹⁴

By 1859, however, James White had moved beyond the biblical literalism of his earlier days when he believed that the Bible must explicitly spell out each aspect of church organization. That year he argued that "we should not be afraid of that system which is *not opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense.*"¹⁵ Thus he had come to a new hermeneutic. *He had moved from a principle of Bible interpretation that held that the only things Scripture allowed were those things it explicitly approved to a hermeneutic that approved of anything that did not contradict the Bible.* That shift was essential to the creative steps in church organization he would advocate in the 1860s.

That revised hermeneutic, however, put White in opposition to those, such as Frisbie and R. F. Cottrell, who continued to maintain a literalistic approach to the Bible that demanded that it explicitly spell something out before the church could accept it. To answer that mentality, White noted that nowhere in the Bible did it say that Christians should have a weekly paper, a steam printing press, build places of worship, or publish books. He went on to argue that the "living church of God" needed to move forward with prayer and common sense.¹⁶

The issue of authority and hermeneutic surfaced again when Cottrell resisted legal incorporation of church property since it wasn't taught in the Bible. He argued that Adventists ought to trust in the Lord for any losses they might suffer.¹⁷ White countered that

"the Devil is not dead" and knows how to shut down our publishing houses.¹⁸

White went on to claim that he regarded "it dangerous to leave with the Lord what he has left with us, and thus sit down upon the stool of do little, or nothing. Now it is perfectly right to leave the sun, moon and stars with the Lord; also the earth with its revolutions, the ebbing and flowing of the tides. . . . But if God in his everlasting word calls on us to act the part of faithful stewards of his goods, we had better attend to these matters in a legal manner--the only way we can handle real estate in this world."¹⁹

A month later White again raised the hermeneutical argument that he had used against the biblical literalists in 1859. Acknowledging that he could find no plain text of scripture for holding property legally, he pointed out that the church did many things for which it could find no Bible text. He then moved on to Jesus's command to "'let your light so shine before men,'" noting that Jesus did "not give all the particulars how this shall be done." At that point he wrote that "we believe it safe to be governed by the following RULE. All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain scripture declarations, should be employed."²⁰ With that declaration White placed himself fully on the platform of a pragmatic, common sense approach to all issues not definitely settled in the Bible.

Ellen White appears to have agreed with her husband on both the topic of church organization and his hermeneutic. She penned that Cottrell had taken a "wrong stand" and that "his articles were perfectly calculated to have a scattering influence, to lead minds to wrong conclusions." Then she put her influence behind that of her

husband's in calling for church order so as "to place the matters of the church in a more secure position, where Satan cannot come in and take advantage."²¹

Disagreement over hermeneutics arose again in October 1860 in the final stages of the battle to incorporate for the legal holding of property. James White, as usual, argued that "every Christian duty is not given in the Scriptures." Still combating the proof-texters, White twice called on the opposition to produce "one text of scripture to show that" legal incorporation "is wrong." Not being able to find such a passage or to match his logic, the objectors surrendered and the motion to incorporate carried.²²

With that action the way was opened for formal church organization in 1861. But that organization could never have taken place if White had not won the authority/hermeneutics battle and shifted the ground from biblical literalism to biblical principle and common sense in the light of the needs of the church and its mission.

II. *Church Organization in 1861/1863*

The growing Sabbatarian movement with its developing sense of mission generated many organizational needs. Looking back from the perspective of 1892, Ellen White wrote: "As our numbers increased, it was evident that without some form of organization, there would be great confusion, and the work would not be carried forward successfully. To provide for the support of the ministry, for carrying the work in new fields, for protecting both the churches and the ministry from unworthy members, for holding church property, for the publication of the truth through the press, and for many other objects, organization was indispensable."²³

The common denominator of each of the reasons she listed is mission. The plain fact is that the one object that propelled James and Ellen White toward formal church organization was that Seventh-day Adventists could not effectively carry out their mission of spreading the message of the third angel without satisfactory organization.

It should be noted that neither of the Whites had an exact organizational plan in mind when they began agitating for church order in 1853. In fact, Andrew Mustard points out, "at no time did Ellen G. White express herself before 1863 on the precise form of organization to be adopted."²⁴ She was not even included among the nine persons appointed to draw up the proposal for church organization in 1861. It was her husband who was the person behind the development of the structural shape that was adopted in 1861 and 1863. But even James did not start out with a clear vision. Only as he faced the developing needs of the movement did he gain insight regarding appropriate structures.

The first step in the initial organization of Seventh-day Adventism took place in October 1861 with the establishment of the Michigan Conference. Its structure was simple, consisting of a conference president, a conference clerk, and a conference committee of three. The next year saw conferences established in Southern Iowa, Northern Iowa, Vermont, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and New York. But not all states chose to organize. For example, New England (with the exception of Vermont) did not adopt a conference organization until 1870. Maine delayed until 1867.

While the formation of state conferences was helpful, they did not solve all of the administrative problems. Who, for example, was to coordinate their work or the assignment of ministers to different

fields? J. H. Waggoner raised that issue to consciousness in a forceful manner in June 1862. "I do not believe," he wrote, "that we shall ever fully realize the benefits of organization till this matter" of a general conference "is acted upon." With that object in view, Waggoner recommended that believers hold a general conference yearly session at the same time as the annual meetings of the publishing association. He concluded his article by recommending that "every conference of Seventh-day Adventists send a delegate or delegates to the General Conference; and that a General Conference Committee be appointed, with whom the State conferences may correspond, and *through* whom they shall present their requests for laborers."²⁵

Several readers of the *Review* responded to Waggoner's proposition with hearty affirmations in the summer of 1862. Without a general conference that shall represent the whole body of believers, J. N. Andrews argued, "we shall be thrown into confusion every time that concert of action is especially necessary. The work of organization, wherever it has been entered into in a proper manner, has borne good fruit; and hence I desire to see it *completed* in such a manner as shall secure its full benefit, not only to each church, but to the whole body of brethren and to the cause of truth, so dear to all."²⁶ James White, as we might expect, favored such a move, since he was still concerned with protecting his fellow believers from "self-called, tobacco-eating, gift-hating, preachers."²⁷

B. F. Snook shared Andrews' conviction on the need for a fuller organization. In order "to complete the organization," he penned, "we need a general conference, in which the ministers or delegates of all the State conferences can meet and confer together on such matters as

pertain to the good of the cause." He noted that the only way to head off the sectional feelings developing in the young church and to bring unity into the movement was through the formation of a general conference. "The times and the cause demand our immediate action on this subject."²⁸

James White, in his usual role, set the stage for the formation of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He announced the formative meeting in April 1863, billing it as "*the most important meeting ever held by the Seventh-day Adventists.*" As he saw it, *the proposed General Conference must be "the great regulator" of the state conferences if they were to secure "united, systematic action in the entire body" of believers.* The duty of the General Conference would be "to mark out the general course to be pursued by State Conferences." And if, White noted, "it be the pleasure of State Conferences to carry out the decisions of General Conference, unity thus far will be secured." Thus, "if General Conference is not higher in authority than State Conferences, we see but little use for it." His primary argument in his April article for the need of a broader system of organization centered around the distribution of preachers. While Michigan and Vermont had a surplus, every other area was "almost destitute" of ministerial service. If, White asserted, the preachers wanted systematic benevolence for their support, the church had a right to "systematic labor." In short, the believers needed a General Conference to coordinate the work of the church across the geographic range of its endeavors.²⁹

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists organized at a meeting called for that purpose in Battle Creek from May 20 to May 23, 1863. The enabling action read: "For the purpose of securing unity

and efficiency in labor, and promoting the general interests of the cause of present truth, and of perfecting the organization of the Seventh-day Adventists, we, the delegates from the several State Conferences, hereby proceed to organize a General Conference, and adopt the following constitution for the government thereof.”³⁰

Between 1850 and 1863 the Sabbatarian movement had been transformed from disorganized groups of individuals into a unified church body. James White was the person behind the development and final shape of the Seventh-day Adventist form of organization. While his wife supported his efforts and the general principles of organization, she at no time suggested the form that organization should take.

James’s concepts of church organization progressively developed during the several years he fought to establish an adequate structure for Adventism. On one level, he altered his hermeneutical understanding. Whereas in the early 1850s he argued that the Bible should explicitly spell out any structures adopted by the church, by the late 1850s he had broadened his argument to the place that things were permissible if not forbidden by the Bible and agreed with common sense. That approach not only formed the hermeneutical basis for the organizational structures he eventually recommended, but it also came to inform the Seventh-day Adventist Church on a broad array of issues as it became a worldwide church encountering a multitude of situations in a variety of contexts. To stick with the narrower understanding would have largely crippled the church as it moved across time and cultures.

A second area in which James White’s understanding broadened was at the level of structure itself. Certainly when he started

advocating organization he did not have the three-tiered structure in mind that he advocated in 1863. Even the very concept of a conference transformed itself in his mind between the mid 1850s and 1861. More specifically, the name "conference" had moved from being a gathering of believers who wished to confer with one another to a permanent operating organization of a group of churches, somewhat equivalent to an Episcopal diocese or a Methodist conference. White ended up establishing a type of church government that he had never even dreamed of in his early years of agitating the subject.

The driving force behind the change in White's hermeneutics and concepts of church structure was an integrated complex of interrelated realities. One of the most important was a growing biblically based understanding of the mission of the church. By 1861 some denominational leaders had concluded that they had a world to warn, and in 1863 the *Review* reported that within a few days of its establishment the General Conference executive committee was considering the sending of a missionary overseas.³¹ A broader vision of the mission of the church had led to a more extensive recognition of the necessity of developing an adequate organization to support that mission. In short, White and others gradually came to realize that no significant mission outreach could exist without a rational and effective organizational structure.

A second reality that helped James White and his fellow believers broaden their concepts of church structure was the need to maintain doctrinal unity. In 1864 White contrasted the good fruits of Seventh-day Adventist organization with the "miserably confused condition of those who reject organization."³² G. I. Butler developed that line of thought a bit further in 1873 when he wrote that "we are a thoroughly

organized people, and our organization is not based upon mere appearances, but upon a solid foundation. Having struggled against all kinds of influences, within and without, and being now a unit, speaking the same thing from ocean to ocean, it is not a very easy thing to shake us to pieces."³³ The doctrinal unity issue, of course, was closely tied to mission. Because they were unified in their doctrinal message, they were willing to support missions in various parts of the United States and eventually the rest of the world. Thus structure not only helped the Adventists maintain unity of doctrine but also to take that belief system into new areas.

In the end it was the mission of the church that demanded an adequate church structure, one that would meet the various needs of a rapidly expanding church. As James White repeatedly noted, "it was not ambition to build up a denomination that suggested organization, but the sheer necessities of the case."³⁴

The immediate stimulus behind the development of church organization by early Adventism was the pragmatic necessities facing its leaders on every hand. They developed a system that worked for them as they sought to accomplish the mission of preaching the message of the three angels of Revelation 14 that God had entrusted to them. The mark of an adequate system for White in 1871 was that "the machinery works well."³⁵ On the other hand, even though pragmatic efficiency may have provided the immediate stimulus for organization, James White and his colleagues sought to base their organizational structures on a foundation that was in harmony with the Bible's teaching on the principles that should undergird the nature and mission of the church. Thus, although the early Adventist leaders stopped short of developing a mature ecclesiology or doctrine of the

church, the very sense of mission that had moved White and his colleagues toward organization was a byproduct of their Scriptural understanding of the church and its end-time role of warning the world before the Second Advent. As a result, they sought to develop an organizational structure that was in harmony with Bible principles. Those principles were evident throughout their discussion of the topic in the 1860s.

III. *Organizational Developments between 1863 and 1901*

Most people seemed to be pleased with the two-level-above-the-local-congregation structure of 1863. But they soon discovered that it had its own inbuilt problems. The earliest problem to show up was that with a small executive committee (never more than 8 members before 1897 when it was changed to 13) that seldom met, the major decisions fell on the General Conference president. It didn't help matters that James White and George I. Butler were personally tilted to dominate anyway. Thus a perpetual problem with the 1863 structure was that it lent itself to what Ellen White would refer to as "kingly power." The problem was particularly troublesome because it was believed that the General Conference was "the highest earthly authority with our people."³⁶ Ellen White repeatedly rebuked the General Conference presidents for assuming too much authority in what had become a centralized denomination. At times in the 1890s she even indicated that God no longer spoke through the General Conference. What she meant in her statements was that God no longer spoke through a man or small group of men who had assumed the authority of the General Conference. On the other hand, she was quite certain that "God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all

parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority."³⁷

At any rate, the problem of too much centralized power repeatedly created difficulties. That showed up very clearly in events related to the 1888 General Conference session, which Butler sought to manipulate from his position as president.

The post-1888 years would see two main approaches develop as various elements in the church sought to arrive at better forms of organization. *The first avenue to reform was developed by the denomination's leading theologians in the 1890s--A. T. Jones, E. J. Waggoner, and W. W. Prescott.* Theirs was a theological ecclesiology that basically held that there was no need for a president since Christ was the head of the church and would direct every born again individual. As Waggoner put it, "Perfect unity means absolute independence. . . . This question of organization is a very simple thing. All there is to it is for each individual to give himself over to the Lord, and then the Lord will do with him just as he wants to. . . . 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost.' The Holy Ghost is the organizer." "If we get at it right," Prescott claimed, "there will be no officials here." "'All ye are brethren,'" is the biblical ideal.³⁸

To Prescott, Jones, Waggoner, and their colleagues such a scheme was not anarchy but true biblical organization. They would push their ideas with great vigor at the 1897, 1899, 1901, and 1903 sessions. Their greatest success came in 1897. Fueled by an 1896 quotation from Ellen White that "it is not wise to choose *one man* as president of the General Conference,"³⁹ the reform element urged either no president (their preference) or multiple presidents. In 1897 they pushed through a resolution for three General Conference presidents--one each

in North America, Europe, and Australia. In practice, things didn't work out to the desire of the reformers. But their ideas were firm, and they would make their own contribution in 1901.

As noted above, the ecclesiology of Jones, Waggoner, and Prescott was highly theological. Their ecclesiology flowed out of their Christology.

The other avenue to reform in the 1890s would develop in the denomination's mission fields and would focus on pragmatic necessity rather than theology. It is not that theology was absent. Rather it was not central. The theological foundation of this approach to reform was eschatology. Since the three angels' messages needed to be preached to all the world before the Second Advent, this second avenue to reform focused on the mission of the denomination as it related to its eschatological goal.

The first element of the reform began in the newly established South African Conference in 1892 under the leadership of A. T. Robinson. His major problem was a shortage of personnel. There was no way that he could staff all of the legally independent auxiliary organizations that had developed in Battle Creek. Where, for example, was he to find leadership for the Publishing Association, the General Tract and Missionary Society, the Educational Society, the General Sabbath School Association, the Health and Temperance Association, the General Conference Association, the Religious Liberty Association, and the Foreign Mission Board?

Robinson's solution was born of necessity. He would not create independent organizations, but would develop departments under the conference system. Both O. A. Olsen, General Conference president, and W. C. White felt anxiety over the suggestion, Olsen fearing that

the plan contained "elements of danger in too much centralization."⁴⁰ The General Conference leadership eventually told Robinson not to develop departments. But it was too late. Due to the large amount of time it took to communicate, Robinson had already instituted the program and found that it worked.

The time lag in communication is also related to the second great organizational reform developed in the 1890s. A. G. Daniells spoke to the issue from the perspective of 1913. Before the adoption of the union conference, he noted, every decision that transcended the decision-making responsibility of a local conference had to be referred to headquarters in Battle Creek. The problem was that at its best the mail took four weeks each direction and often arrived to find the members of the General Conference executive committee away from their offices. "I remember," Daniells noted, "that we have waited three or four months before we could get any reply to our questions." And even then it might be a five or six line inquiry saying that the General Conference officers really didn't understand the issue and needed further information. And so it went until "after six or nine months, perhaps, we would get the matter settled." By that point in his argument, his hearers had no trouble understanding his meaning when he claimed that "we found continually that our work was hindered."⁴¹

The post-1888 years witnessed more than one attempt to decentralize the authority of the General Conference. The first began in November 1888. In that month the executive committee voted to divide the territory of North America into four districts--South, East, West, and Midwest. Each district would have the services of a specially appointed member of the General Conference executive

committee. W. C. White had proposed this division of responsibility among the various committee members so that the different sections of North America could each have its own counselor.⁴²

Furthermore, White had no doubts about the source of his idea for developing the district concept. "Mother has told me," he reported to Olsen, "that it has been shown her that it would be more pleasing to God and for the advancement of the cause, if men should be chosen to take charge of the work in various divisions of the country, each one acting freely in his field, not referring all questions to one man, because the field is too large for one man to carry all the burdens. Then she says these men should meet together frequently for consultation and the formation of plans, all meet[ing] as equals, each expressing freely his views and listening with respect to the views of others. And it really seems that we must adopt some such plan as this for our work is certainly too broad for any one or two men to understand and manage, in all its detail."⁴³

The district system was the first step toward solving an issue that would occupy much of W. C. White's creativity up through 1901. Responding to his mother's concerns, he would do everything in his power in the 1890s to decentralize the authority vested in the leadership of the General Conference.

In 1889 the number of districts increased from four to six, all still in North America. In 1893 the district system would expand to include Australasia as district number seven and Europe as district number eight.

We must not confuse such districts with what soon came to be known as union conferences. The districts were in actuality divisions of the General Conference and had no local or regional constituency

that they were responsible to. By way of contrast, union conferences would have officers and an executive committee elected by a regional constituency. The districts also lacked sufficient executive authority to make regional decisions without input from Battle Creek.

W. C. White seems to have had something like a union conference in mind in December 1892, when he wrote to Olsen from Australia proposing "the organization of some ecclesiastical body to stand midway between state and colonial conferences and the G. Conf." He suggested the holding of what he called an "Australasian General Conference" every two years to coordinate Adventist activities in that section of the world. He thought the same thing would be helpful for Europe.⁴⁴

Olsen, however, was not willing to go as far as W. C. White desired in decentralization. He told the General Conference executive committee that "he thought nothing should be planned so as to interfere with the general supervision and work legitimately belonging to the General Conference, as that is the highest organized authority under God on the earth." Thus in place of the constituent based organization that White had requested, Olsen recommended the extension of the district format to Europe and Australia. The 1893 General Conference session voted his recommendation into reality.⁴⁵

As we might expect, White was less than excited about Australasia becoming a district. "We are disappointed," he wrote to Olsen in May 1893, "in our search for the record" of the 1893 General Conference session "of any action regarding the Dist. Federation of Conferences, or any plans for a European, or Australasian Union." Still, White gracefully accepted the reality of the compromise of the district system in which the General Conference superintendent would have

increased responsibility. Two months later he, as the appointed general superintendent, invited Olsen to come to Australia to organize the new district conference.⁴⁶

While White may have asked Olsen to establish the new district number seven, it appears that he and Arthur G. Daniells had broader ideas in mind that would only come to light after the General Conference president arrived in their territory. Those plans would come to light in early 1894 after W. C. White, Daniells, and perhaps Ellen White had had an opportunity to work the pliable Olsen over a bit. What Olsen especially needed to understand was the difficulties they faced in their isolated field of labor.

Once Olsen arrived it wasn't all that difficult to convince him of the need to decentralize authority so that most decision-making could take place regionally without reference to the authorities in Battle Creek who really didn't understand the situation anyway. As a result, with Olsen's approval, a committee developed a union conference constitution that was approved on January 19, 1894. White and Daniells were elected president and secretary, respectively.

Years later Daniells recalled that not everyone was happy with the union conference idea. "Some of our brethren," he reported, "thought then that the work was going to be wrecked, that we were going to tear the organization all to pieces, and get up secession out there in the South Sea islands." But in actuality, he observed, the result was quite the opposite. The new organizational approach greatly facilitated the mission of the church in the South Pacific while the new Australasian Union Conference remained a loyal and integral part of the General Conference system.⁴⁷

Thus by 1894 a new entity had been "invented" in Australia to decentralize the authority of the General Conference leadership and facilitate the denomination's work in the South Pacific. The Australasian Union Conference consisted of the various local conferences and missions in its territory and served as an intermediary unit between the General Conference and the local conferences. Unlike the rather ineffective districts, it had its own constitution and constituency and had executive powers to act on issues in its region.

The Australasian Union Conference and each of its constituent local conferences and missions adopted the departmental system after A. T. Robinson arrived from South Africa in 1898. By then Daniells had become the union conference president. After serving in the position he would bring both the union conference and the departmental concept to the 1901 General Conference session.

The departmental structure and the union conference system would be the most important elements in the 1901/1903 reorganization. But, it should be noted, neither initiative came from the General Conference. The denominational leaders appear to have been satisfied with the 1861/1863 system. It was the needs of the field that drove the reform agenda.

Not only did the General Conference leadership not take the lead, it actually feared change. Toward the end of 1892, for example, Olsen informed A. T. Robinson that "nothing would be more disastrous to the work now than if we should allow ourselves to be led into a controversy and a long discussion on the form of organization."⁴⁸

It appears that the General Conference president tried to use Ellen White's writings to help him maintain the status quo position.

In January 1893 at the General Conference session he read a letter from her penned on December 19 in which she wrote, "Let none of our brethren be so deceived as to attempt to tear [organization] down, for you will thus bring in a condition of things that you do not dream of. In the name of the Lord, I declare to you that it is to stand, strengthened, established, and *settled*."⁴⁹ It appears from Olsen's resistance to W. C. White's pleas for an effective union conference with executive powers that the General Conference president was holding to the word "settled" in his approach to church organization.

But that was not Ellen White's position. In the same letter that Olsen quoted from she also noted that "in some parts of the work it is true, the machinery has been made too complicated. . . . An effort should be made to simplify the work, so as to avoid all needless labor and perplexity."⁵⁰

Ellen White had several quite specific concerns with the 1861/1863 structure. For one thing, decision making was too centralized. She repeatedly advocated localized decision making, writing in 1896 that "the men at Battle Creek are no more inspired to give unerring advice than are the men in other places, to whom the Lord has entrusted the work in their locality."⁵¹ Related to that problem were the concentration of too many responsibilities on one person or a small group of people and the dominance of the General Conference over the state conferences. Also problematic were the authoritarian attitudes of many leaders in both the General Conference and in the auxiliary organizations.⁵²

Beyond the problems that clustered around leadership and over-centralization, Ellen White was also concerned with unity and the pulling together of the various lines of the denomination's work.

Shortly before the reorganization in 1901 she had written that "it has been presented to me that every department of the work is to be united in one great whole. The work of God is to prepare a people to stand before the Son of Man at His coming, and this work should be a unit. The work that is to fit a people to stand firm in the last great day must not be a divided work."⁵³

That last point may seem like a contradiction since Ellen White seemed to be calling for a centralization of the various aspects of the church's work at the very time she was also urging a decentralization of authority. That seeming paradox is resolved when we see the actual situation in the various parts of the work in the 1890s. Not only did the General Conference expect every conference to look to Battle Creek for direct leadership, but J. H. Kellogg sought to control every Adventist medical institution in the world from his base in the Battle Creek Sanitarium. The same can be said of the educational, publishing, and other of the auxiliary organizations. Kingly power was not merely a General Conference problem. Since most of the associations were headquartered in Battle Creek and had interlocking directorates, a very few individuals administered nearly the entire work of the denomination in all of its various aspects. Thus the "decentralized" associations were quite centralized in their leading personnel. A few men were making, or seeking to make, decisions for what had become a world church.

Meanwhile, the various associations lacked coordination with each other. Each was a legally incorporated, independent body that had its own officers and executive board. Even though all were a part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and each reported to the General Conference, the General Conference did not directly administer them.

Due to their independent status, coordination between them and the General Conference was a perennial problem throughout the 1890s. Take, for example, the sending of foreign missionaries. The Medical Missionary and Benevolent Association, the Foreign Mission Board, and the General Conference proper each dispatched missionaries, but without always conferring with each other. Thus the association system was in one sense decentralized.

As a result, Ellen White called for both the centralization of the various aspects of the work at the very time she urged decentralization of administrative authority. She understood the difference between coordination and control as she called for a unified church structure.

IV. *Reorganization in 1901/1903*

Seventh-day Adventism in 1901 bore little resemblance to the denomination that had formed 40 years earlier. At the time of the establishment of the General Conference the denomination had about 3,500 members divided into 8 conferences and 125 congregations served by about 30 ministers. Its field of labor consisted of that part of the northern United States running from the Atlantic Coast to Iowa. Thus the body of believers was adequately organized for its size and mission. Due to its new organization it was in a position at that point to extend its mission in several directions.

By the turn of the century the denomination had not only spanned the North American continent but had penetrated every section of the planet with its mission program. Not only had the denomination grown in membership and in the number of conferences and missions, but it had also developed an extensive institutional system to buttress its

mission to the world. Whereas in 1860 only one denominational institution (the Battle Creek publishing house) existed, by 1900 dozens of Adventist health care institutions and publishing houses and more than 200 schools had joined the Adventist orbit.

In short, the church of 1900 was hardly recognizable from the little body of believers that had organized their General Conference in 1863. Yet they still had the same administrative structure. But by that time it was inadequate for its complex task.

The 1901/1903 reorganization of the denomination was not the product of theoretical musing. To the contrary, it evolved out of practical needs facing the church in the context of its biblical understanding of its message and mission.

In spite of its outward show of vitality, the denomination was facing disaster. It ended 1900 with only \$32.93 in its treasury, and even that was borrowed money. In addition, its institutions were indebted some \$1,250,000--a stupendous amount at that time. The church couldn't even keep up with its interest payments.

Just as serious was the fact that the church's financial problems had begun to affect its mission outreach. In 1899 the president of the Foreign Mission Board reported that "during the last two years we have opened up no new work in any part of the world. It has been an impossibility."⁵⁴ To put it bluntly, if the church was to follow through with its expanding understanding of mission it would need to spend its money more wisely and maintain better control over its finances.

A second problem facing Adventism at the turn of the century was also related to mission. The 1863 structures were no longer adequate for governing a worldwide church. In short, the missionary success of

the church had begun to demand revisions in the church's administrative structure.

Thus as in the 1850s and 1860s the financial and administrative problems related to the church's understanding of its biblical mission demanded creative thought and urgency of action as Adventism moved toward its 1901 General Conference session. With those facts in mind, it should come as no surprise to find that the architects of change at that session (W. C. White, E. G. White, and A. G. Daniells) had all had extensive overseas experience.

The tone for the 1901 General Conference session was set for it on April 1, the day before the conference officially began. On that date A. G. Daniells chaired a meeting of denominational leaders in the Battle Creek College library. He told those assembled that some of them had met the evening before but that they wanted to open up the discussion to additional people and also to allow "Sister White . . . to be present and place before us any light that she might have for us."

Ellen White, however, did not want to take charge of the meeting. "I thought," she told Daniells, "I would let you lead out, and then if I had anything to say, I would say it." He replied that he and his colleagues didn't want to discuss the issue of reorganization further until they had heard from her.

Mrs. White countered by saying, "I would prefer not to speak today, . . . not because I have not anything to say, because I have." Following that statement she presented for about one and one half hours one of the most influential talks of her ministry. In no uncertain terms she called for "new blood" and an "entire new organization" that broadened the governing base of the denomination.

Opposing the centralization of power in a few individuals, she left no doubt that "kingly, ruling power" and any administrator who had a "little throne" would have to go. She called for "a renovation without any delay. To have this Conference pass on and close up as the Conferences have done, with the same manipulating, with the very same tone and the same order--God forbid! God forbid, brethren."⁵⁵

The opening meeting of the General Conference session saw Ellen White take the floor and request reorganization in no uncertain terms, even though "just how it is to be accomplished [she could] not say." From her perspective, it was her duty to urge reform but the responsibility of the delegates to develop its form. G. A. Irwin, the president, recognized the strength of her plea but didn't move beyond generalities on the topic of reform. At that point, Daniells took charge and moved that the "usual rules and precedents for arranging and transacting the business of the Conference be suspended" and that they appoint a general committee to develop recommendations related to reorganization of the denomination and other topics of concern. His motion carried.⁵⁶

Daniells would be appointed to chair the reorganization committee. And he and W. C. White were the leading voices in the reorganization, even though the Jones and Waggoner coalition sought to take the process their direction. In the end both organizational orientations made an impact.

When Daniells spoke of reorganizing the church, he meant restructuring its administration for more successful mission outreach. He made his point clear on the second morning of the 1901 session when he told the delegates that unless something definite was done "it will take a millennium to give this message to the world."⁵⁷

The 1901 General Conference resulted in some of the most significant changes in the history of the denomination. The most important organizationally were five in number: (1) the creation of union conferences and union missions that had supervision of local conferences and missions and thereby dispersed the administrative authority of the General Conference officers; (2) most of the auxiliary organizations would be discontinued and instead became departments of the General Conference, the union conferences, the local conferences, and the individual churches; (3) the General Conference executive committee would increase to 25 members in a further move to disperse power and authority; (4) ownership and management of institutions that had been under the jurisdiction of the General Conference and the auxiliary organizations would be transferred to the union conferences; (5) the General Conference would have no president. Rather, the executive committee of the General Conference would choose a chairman who would generally serve for a short term, with the committee having the power to remove him at any time if it desired a change.

Two structural problems remained after the 1901 meeting. The first was that the powerful medical branch had not been brought into the departmental system. The second was the issue of presidency. Between 1901 and 1903 a power struggle developed between Daniells versus Kellogg, Jones, and Waggoner over those two issues. The 1903 session witnessed the medical work departmentalized and the presidency restored. The losers in the struggle (Kellogg, Jones, and Waggoner) soon exited the denomination. Prescott, meanwhile, had switched sides and had become the denomination's first vice president.

V. *Evaluation of the 1901/1903 Restructuring*

It should be noted that the 1901/1903 organization was not a new structure. It was rather a restructuring that stuck to the general outline of the 1861/1863 plan, but modified it to meet the needs of a changing church. The major changes involved both centralization and decentralization based upon the underlying principles of unity and diversity urged by Ellen White.

Modification, however, was not the ideal that some of the delegates brought with them in 1901/1903. The Jones/Waggoner faction had sought total revolution. In the end their bid for revolutionizing the structures of the church lost out for several reasons. Not the least was that their model was theologically inadequate in the sense that it focused on the individual church member and left no room for a practical approach to unified action. While Jones, Waggoner, and others argued for an extreme individualism that needed no human coordination, they overlooked the fact that in both testaments the Bible upheld structural elements that indicated frameworks and boundaries for unified action. Perhaps Moses and Paul are the best illustrations of that fact. Theoretically, it sounded fine to say that every person would work in harmony with every other person if they were converted, but the biblical picture reflects both less perfectionism and a more complex view of sin than did Adventism's would-be revolutionaries. The truth is that even converted individuals are not fully sanctified. The biblical picture is much more realistic about human nature and the need for structure than the proposal set forth by Jones, Waggoner, and their colleagues.

It was to that unbalanced individualistic idealism that Daniells responded when he said he believed that "we must look at conditions.

We face conditions, and not theories. . . . When we get to heaven we [won't] be doing a great many things that we are doing here. We will have very different conditions and we will be in an ideal state, and we can live ideally then; but while we are here in this world, and are facing conditions, we have to meet those conditions in the best way possible to carry on the work God has given us."⁵⁸ In short, Jones and his friends advocated a theory inadequate both theologically and sociologically.

Their hermeneutics were also faulty. They took, for example, several of their citations from Ellen White out of their literary context and made them say something she did not have in mind. One blatant illustration is Jones and Waggoner's repeated assertion that "it is not wise to choose one man as president of the General Conference."⁵⁹ As noted above, she never meant that there should be more than one or none, as the Jones/Waggoner party repeatedly advocated, but that "the work of the General Conference should never have rested on one man."⁶⁰ Ellen White had no problem with the title "president." In fact, she regularly used it to refer to the leader of the General Conference. In the long run the inadequate theology, sociology, and hermeneutics of the revolutionary party worked against Jones, Waggoner, and company. Some of their claims were just too extreme and one-sided for the bulk of the delegates at the 1901 and 1903 General Conference sessions.

The approach taken by the Daniells/Prescott faction was much more down to earth and practical. In that sense it was quite in harmony with James White's approach in the early 1860s when he set forth the hermeneutic that structures that did not conflict with the Bible or common sense were appropriate. Daniells' proposals also followed

White in their missiological orientation. The General Conference president's approach was to reorganize with an eye to functionality. The need of the church as he saw it was to create administrative structures that would complete the work of carrying the Adventist message to the ends of the earth in as short a time as possible so that Christ might come. Thus he, as had James White before him, took a pragmatic rather than a theoretical approach to the problem of reorganizing the denomination. Efficiency in promoting and coordinating Adventism's mission became the central point for Daniells and his colleagues.

Evaluations of the 1901/1903 restructuring were generally positive by those leaders who remained in the denomination. Daniells, the new General Conference president who had pushed through the departmental and union conference ideas, was overjoyed with the new organization once the problems of the presidency and the medical department were settled.

Ellen White's initial evaluation was also positive. "During the General Conference," she wrote in November 1901, "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 stepplings of the Lord our Redeemer. We praise His holy name; for He has brought deliverance to His people."⁶¹

Ellen White also had good things to say about the new structure specifically. The day after the above statement was published she wrote that "the division of the General Conference into District Union Conferences was God's arrangement. In the work of the Lord for these last days there are to be no Jerusalem centers, no kingly power."⁶²

Her happiness with the new arrangement, however, would soon turn to despair. At the beginning of 1903 she wrote that "the result of the last General Conference has been the greatest, the most terrible sorrow of my life. No change was made. The *spirit* that should have been brought into the whole work as the result of that meeting, was not brought in because men did not receive the testimonies of the Spirit of God. As they went to their several fields of labor, they did not walk in the light that the Lord had flashed upon their pathway, but carried into their work the *wrong principles* that had been prevailing in the work at Battle Creek."⁶³

Although some of her disappointment had to do with the medical work, her continuing repeated counsel to Daniells and other administrators regarding "kingly power" indicates that union conferences hadn't solved the basic problem. As Barry Oliver points out, "when Ellen White said that 'no change was made,' she was referring to the spiritual renewal and focus on the mission of the church that she had hoped would accompany structural reorganization."⁶⁴ To her the establishment of union conferences had not solved the most basic organizational problems.

The problem between Daniells and the Kellogg/Jones faction undoubtedly interfered with the 1901 reorganization's potential for success. A case in point is that the polemical atmosphere skewed the proper balance between unity and diversity and rigidity and adaptability so necessary in a worldwide church. Oliver points out that whereas in 1901 and 1902 Daniells had been open to diversity and adaptability, the heated struggle with Kellogg and Jones had forced him toward the rigidity and unity end of the spectrum. He may have desired diversity, but he could hardly permit the forms promoted by

Jones and others. Thus Daniells, in an attempt to overcome extremes in the area of diversity struggled to maintain unity.⁶⁵ The end was a centralization of authority that might not have developed in more amicable times. As a result, by 1903 we find Ellen White rebuking Daniells regarding his use of authority in much the same way she had spoken to the General Conference presidents before the 1901 session--a conference that had supposedly resolved the "kingly power" syndrome once and for all.

Ellen White, who played a more crucial role in 1901/1903 than she did in 1861/1863, agonized in the struggle over reorganization. She seemed to be one of the few able to keep a balanced perspective. For her it was not the unity of Daniells or the diversity of Jones that the church should aim at, but the *unity in diversity* ideal that she would so clearly set before the 1909 General Conference session as she sought to balance the need for individualism with the proper authority of the General Conference in session.⁶⁶ In like manner, during the 1901/1903 conflict she presented positions in relation to church organization that overlapped those of both camps. As a result, she not only emphasized pragmatic organization for mission but also such biblical topics as the headship of Christ and the need for the new birth as foundations of structural renewal.

Even though Ellen White used elements of the arguments from both camps in the struggle over reorganization, circumstances compelled her to side with Daniells against the extremes of the Jones/Waggoner orientation. The end result of their approach she saw as disorganization. As a result, she supported the reorganizational results of the 1901/1903 sessions even though she had to caution

Daniells from time to time regarding his tendency towards centralizing authority in his own position.

The final product of the 1901 and 1903 sessions was a church organization based on the pragmatic necessity of the denomination's mission rather than on an unchangeable structure that could never be modified as the condition of the church and the world it served changed. The same could be said for the 1861/1863 organization. When changed circumstances made it wise to modify its structures the way was open. *In Seventh-day Adventism the form of church government is not set in some sort of doctrinaire cement but is open to change and development when the needs of the successful mission of the church demand a shift in approach or procedure.* A living church cannot be one encompassed in the rigor mortis of an inflexible structure incapable of responding to altered circumstances.

M. C. Wilcox saw that truth clearly during the 1903 session. Speaking of the proposed constitution on April 9, he told his fellow delegates: "If we will get this thing deep down in our souls . . . we will not bind ourselves about with red tape and feel that everything must go in just the same way. *There are different fields sometimes that demand different organizations,* and I hope that when that field comes, and when that time comes, and that place comes, *that God will have men that will be willing to break the red tape, if necessary, and form the organization in harmony with the field, and according to the demands of the occasion.*"⁶⁷

That counsel still remains needed in the twenty-first century in an organization frequently tempted to fall into the pit of rigidity. It is not only sound advice, but it is in full harmony with the biblical principles, counsels from Ellen White, and the missiological

motivation that have undergirded Adventism's historic approach to church organization.

VI. *The Development of Divisions*

The most significant change to the structure of the church since 1903 has been the creation of divisions of the General Conference in 1918. The impetus for the creation of divisions originated in Europe. From nearly the beginning of Adventist activity in Europe the various nations had desired a general European organization. By 1882 the national segments had banded together in what became known as the European Council of Seventh-day Adventist Missions. Then in 1893 the European field became district number eight of the General Conference. The 1897 session of the General Conference, in the excitement that no "one man" should be president of the church, moved to create "three grand divisions," each with its own General Conference president. As it turned out, however, the European and Australasian fields came to be thought of more as unions, thus leaving the American General Conference president as the effective leader of the entire General Conference throughout the world.

The next development took place on July 23, 1901, when European Adventist leaders formed the European General Conference. "All believed," wrote Guy Dail, "the time had fully come" for such a move. "They appreciated more than ever the urgent demands for such an organization."⁶⁸ The forceful L. R. Conradi headed the new European General Conference committee, which would "take upon itself the same class of work as was done by the General Conference Committee in America."⁶⁹ It is highly significant that A. G. Daniells, the leader of what had become the other General Conference, was not even on the

European General Conference executive committee. In actual fact, as L. H. Christian later pointed out, the "denomination had really two General Conferences, each with its own constitution and constituency."⁷⁰

The potential problems of that development for the denomination had undoubtedly registered on the minds of Daniells and Prescott, but up through 1906 they were preoccupied in the struggle with Kellogg and Jones and their own survival. By 1907, however, Daniells and Prescott were ready to move on the issue. That year the annual meeting of the General Conference executive committee convened in Gland, Switzerland. The European leaders expected their organization to have charge of the session since the meeting was in their field, but Daniells exerted his authority and the meeting functioned as a committee of the worldwide General Conference. After a rather stormy discussion of the principles undergirding a united world work for the church, the executive committee (including the European leaders) voted "that the organization known as the European General Conference, organized by advice of the General Conference in 1901, be discontinued." In place of that structure, a vice president of the worldwide General Conference was elected "to take the general supervision of its work in the European division of the field." Beyond the vice president, the European administrative structure was to have a secretary, who would also serve on the General Conference committee, and a sub-treasurer appointed by the General Conference committee.⁷¹

Such a demotion, as we might expect, did not leave the European segment of the denomination in the best of spirits. L. H. Christian reports that "when we came to Europe in 1920, we heard more about the Gland Council of 1907 than of any other."⁷² Not the least among the

dissatisfied was Conradi, the ex-president of the European General Conference and the new vice president for Europe. In late 1911 he raised the battle flag in a letter to the treasurer of the General Conference that left no one in doubt regarding his future intentions. He believed that the various sections of the world should be divided into "self-supporting divisions," each with "constitutional rights." Such a move, he argued, would complete the Adventist organization. He concluded by suggesting that the treasurer "consider the question," since "it will come up at the next General Conference for sure."⁷³

That letter put the General Conference president into high gear. The very day Conradi's letter arrived, Daniells wrote to W. C. White, noting that the proposal sounded like the revival of the European General Conference. "The moment that step is taken," he penned, "the world-wide unity which we now have, will be broken." He noted that the situation needed careful study and that they had only two options: "make the very best arrangement possible for such a division" or "be prepared to defend the plan we now have."⁷⁴

W. C. White, who had by this time become the middle-man between his 83-year-old mother and the leaders of the church, showed Daniells' letter to her. She read it with "great deliberation" and "spoke quite fully" on the topic of more independence for the great sectors of the worldwide church. Willie paraphrased her as saying that as "long as our work can be managed with wisdom and the spirit of harmony be maintained, it is better that it should be united. Division and sub-division which may appear to be desirable, will open the way for men who are leaders to stamp their individuality upon the work." As long as humble leaders labored together harmoniously, "let us not seek to separate into independent parts at the earliest opportunity, but let

us seek to maintain the existing unity of the work just as long as possible."

Willie went on to say that this topic had been much upon her mind for a few days. What she really feared was the "danger that a few men of leading minds would endeavor to put their impress and the stamp of their individuality upon the whole work throughout the world." In such a case it might be a "necessity to make divisions." She apparently had in mind organizational units that would have a large degree of independence from the General Conference. She still feared the kind of kingly power that she had argued against in 1901. Her message, we should note, contained a subtle hint to Daniells on the topic. She closed her remarks by claiming that under the present spiritual/evangelical approach that Daniells was pursuing, it was "better to maintain world-wide unity."⁷⁵

A month later Daniells replied, thanking Mrs. White for her encouraging remarks. He also reported that he had recently attended meetings in Great Britain and had talked the matter over with Conradi and some of his associates. Those discussions left him no doubts regarding their intentions.⁷⁶

April 28, 1912, saw the European leadership vote unanimously to ask the annual council of the General Conference to "consider the advisability of so amending the Constitution of the General Conference at its session in 1913 as to provide for the perfection of the divisional organizations."⁷⁷

The annual council took up that request on September 25. The European leaders were not content with a vice president of the General Conference as their leader. They wanted both a division president and a European constituency that would select their officers. As they saw

it, the division president would also be a vice president of the General Conference. They went on to say that soon other continental divisions of the church would need the same sort of arrangement. Needless to say, except for the terminology, their recommendation greatly resembled the reinstatement of the European General Conference that the general leaders had managed to squelch in 1907. In spite of that threatening specter, however, the annual council of the executive committee voted to pass on the recommendation to the 1913 General Conference session. A committee of four, headed by Conradi, but also containing the secretary and treasurer of the General Conference, was formed to draw up a plan of organization for the proposed division conference.⁷⁸

The 1913 session, after an extensive discussion, voted the European Division Conference into existence with its own constitution and constituency. Prior to the vote Daniells expressed the opinion that taking such a step was not in "any way striking against the organization of this denomination. . . . The division conference sustains the same organic relationship [to the worldwide church], defined by constitution, as the union conference."⁷⁹ Within that positive framework, the session also saw the formation of division conferences in the North American, South American, and Asiatic fields.

The new European organization, however, had almost no opportunity to develop. In a few months World War I began and the European Division Conference ceased to function. As a result, it was in North America rather than in Europe that Daniells began to see flaws in the division conference structure. The division president was a strong leader who tended to dominate things. As T. E. Bowen put it, "the North American Division Conference president sort of carried the whole

thing [i.e., the responsibilities inside the division] around under his hat, and the Union men seemed to feel that they were restricted somewhat and not much latitude was given [them] in administrative affairs." He went on to remark that it was exactly the centralization of power problem they had sought to avoid in 1901.⁸⁰

But a problem of greater magnitude surpassed it. The North American Division Conference, with its own officers and treasury, had taken over the complete administration of the work of the church in North America, the denomination's home base, and controlled the funds and to a large extent the personnel upon which the General Conference depended to extend its mission program. In short, the General Conference no longer had any territory to administer. Nor did it have any control over the source of funds or people to respond to mission calls. Daniells described the situation succinctly when he wrote: "I consider it a very serious situation to have a strong, self-directing, practically independent organization thrown in between the General Conference and its resources. In the important matter of securing workers and funds, and in placing returned workers it subordinates the General Conference to the Division Conference. It transfers the control of the base of supplies from the General Conference to the Division."⁸¹

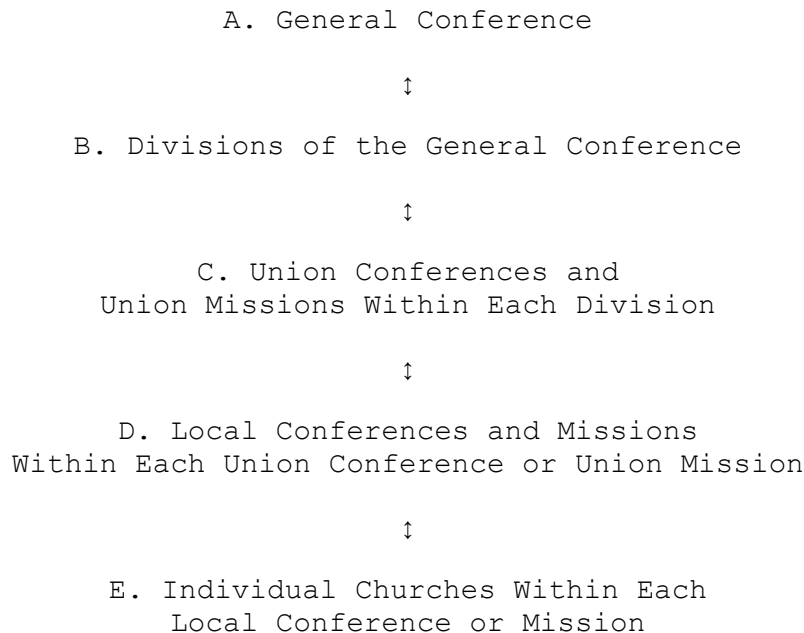
That situation, along with the fact that the division conference structure theoretically opened the possibility for a strong personality to lead a large sector of the church out of the denomination, led the 1918 General Conference session to abolish the division conferences. The action stipulated that the divisions would no longer be independent conferences with their own constituencies, but rather divisions or extensions of the General Conference in a

given territory. Within that model the General Conference constituency would appoint the leadership in each division and the president of each division would be a vice president of the General Conference. Further, the treasury of each division would be a sub-treasury of the General Conference, and mission funds would revert back to the General Conference for world distribution.⁸² Through this new format the denomination sought to protect its unity as a global movement and at the same time better facilitate its mission to all the world.

The 1918 session set up a different plan for North America than it did for the rest of the world divisions of the General Conference. The delegates concluded that there was no need to make a division in the territory containing the General Conference. As a result, the General Conference staff would also serve as the officers for North America and the General Conference Treasury as the treasury for North America. There was one exception to that rule. A vice president of the General Conference would be assigned to the North American field to look after the interests of the church's program in the home base of the General Conference. The lack of a North American Division on a par with the other divisions of the church would remain until the 1980s when changed conditions in the church led to the creation of a genuine division.

The dividing of the General Conference into divisions completed the structure of Adventism as we know it today. In its essence, the denomination had five levels of administration (2 for the General Conference--general and divisional) but with only four levels having constituencies and separate legal standing (the division, being part

of the General Conference itself, had no independent constituency). By 1918 the administrative structure of the church could be diagrammed in the following way:



VII. *Ellen White and Future Reorganization*

From an historical perspective, should Adventism even think reorganizational thoughts in the twenty-first century? After all, didn't Ellen White plainly state that "it has cost us much study . . . to erect this structure. It has been built up by his [God's] direction. . . . Let none of our brethren be so deceived as to attempt to tear it down. . . . In the name of the Lord, I declare to you that it is to stand, strengthened, established, and settled." Yes she did, but she had made those remarks in 1892, nine years *before* the current reorganization.⁸³ Obviously what had been settled and established had been the *principle* of organization rather than its exact form.

Another quotation from Ellen White has the advantage of being written several years after the 1901 reorganization. In 1905 she wrote that "we cannot now enter into any new organization."⁸⁴ It appears in *Selected Messages* with "No New Organization" as a supplied heading.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, that heading distorts the author's original meaning. The statement in its context (cut off in mid-paragraph in the published version) was a warning to those who were tempted to join up with the schism being fomented by J. H. Kellogg and A. T. Jones at that very time. A contextual reading of this and other Ellen White statements indicates that she was not saying that the 1901/1903 structure was unchangeable.

Well, some may be thinking, what about Ellen White's quite explicit approval of union conferences. The exact statement reads that "the division of the General Conference into District Union Conferences was God's arrangement. In the work of the Lord for these last days there are to be no Jerusalem centers, no kingly power."⁸⁶ The statement's context indicates that her main concern was the decentralization of authority. As Oliver notes, "the reference to 'District Union Conferences' was incidental."⁸⁷ Beyond that, she uplifts both districts (the way things were divided in the 1890s) and unions (the way things were divided after 1901). "The essential point was that a division of responsibility had been made and that division was God's arrangement."⁸⁸ In fact, *properly empowered world divisions on the 1918 model could fulfill in every way Ellen White's approval of unions.*

VIII. *Some Lessons from Adventist History*

In moving toward closure I will simply list some of the lessons from history as we think about church structure.

1. Seventh-day Adventist church structure is not based explicitly on either biblical structures or structures set forth by Ellen White.
2. Ellen White provided principles of church organization rather than models.
3. She was flexible in her approach and stood for reorganizing the structures where change would be beneficial.
4. Adventist church structure is based on common sense and Christian principle.
5. Adventism's structures in 1861/1863 and 1901/1903 were based on the pragmatic needs of mission rather than on a formal ecclesiology. Therefore they are flexible and open to change when the needs of mission suggest new approaches.
6. The main theological pillar undergirding Adventist church structure is eschatology. Mission is an outgrowth of eschatology since Adventism believes that the message of the three angels must be preached to all the world before the end of time.
7. In Adventism, mission (evangelism) and church organization are not separate issues but are united, with organization providing the delivery system for effective mission.
8. The main question to ask about the functionality of organization is not whether it is working, but whether it is making mission possible with maximum efficiency.
9. Continuity with the past was a major principle undergirding the 1901/1903 reorganization. As in that reorganization, the most

- helpful approach today would most likely not be total rejection of the old, but a combining of the best of the old with the most helpful of the new as the church, on the basis of biblical principles, modifies the essential core of its present organization for maximum missiological efficiency.
10. Powerful forces in the church resisted the 1861/1863 and 1901/1903 reforms.
 11. Both major organizational turning points in Adventist history cost a great deal of energy. But both brought benefits that far outweighed the time and trouble.
 12. In Adventist history organization took place at the great turning points in its mission outreach. Organization and reorganization each set the stage for new missiological dynamics on a level unimaginable at the beginning of the prior stage. Organizational change made possible the next explosive thrust of the denomination.
 13. Without the freedom to innovate with new structural models Adventism would never have arrived at its present structure. When freedom to structurally innovate is not a viable option, Adventism will have lost an important dynamic that helped make it what it is today.
 14. Unity and diversity were two basic principles undergirding the 1901/1903 reorganization. The church has done quite well in the area of unity but has not capitalized on the possibilities of diversity as it operates in vastly different cultures in various parts of the world. Barry Oliver notes that the imaginative use of the denomination's diversity is its greatest failure. In short, things may not need to be done the same way everywhere.

15. Financial crisis brought about both the 1861/1863 and 1901/1903 organizational initiatives. Those financial crises had a negative impact on the denomination's mission outreach.
16. Adventism needs an affordable organizational structure. If the present four-tiered administrative structure has been difficult to support in developed countries, it has been almost impossible to finance in developing nations. In 1995, for example, 56 percent of the worldwide Adventist membership lived in union missions rather than union conferences. The distinction between unions and missions centers on whether they are self-sustaining financial units. Thus most Adventists belong to administrative units that are unable to pay their own bills. As Borge Schantz notes, "too many fields, even where the Adventist message was planted more than a century ago, are still dependent. This borders on scandal."⁸⁹ Such a situation not only puts dependent fields in an unenviable position, but it creates a strain on those sectors of the denomination that must make up for the financial shortfall by utilizing funds that should be dedicated to entering new fields. One of Schantz's suggestions to remedy that situation is that "Western-type administrative superstructures should be partially dismantled or indigenized."⁹⁰
17. It might be important to note that the 1901/1903 reorganization took place in an era when big business was restructuring for more effectiveness. It might also be important to recognize that in the final 25 years of the twentieth century many big businesses were forced financially to restructure by cutting out large percentages of proliferating middle management. Many, such as

IBM, could no longer function effectively or even continue to exist with so much overhead.

18. All bureaucracies tend to become top-heavy. That is just as true of IBM as it is of Adventism. But when it comes to reform IBM had one major advantage--middle management did not sit on its governing boards. Downsizing was therefore not an impossibility. It will be much more difficult for Adventism unless people are willing to put heavenly mission before possible loss of earthly status.
19. Organization is a good thing, but too much of even such a good thing will by definition stifle the flow of money and personnel into mission and evangelism.
20. The history of Adventist church organization has been rhythmic, with the first part of the rhythm being a felt need, the second a restructuring, and the third a testing and refining of the new structural pattern. Historically the denomination has gone through two full cycles and has entered what appears to be a third. The first cycle witnessed agitation for change in the 1850s, church organization between 1860 and 1863, and refinements between 1863 and 1900. The second cycle began with calls for change in the late 1880s, reorganization between 1901 and 1903, and refinements between 1903 and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The 1980s saw the beginning of sustained agitation in what appears to be the start of a third cycle. The real question underlying the so-called "third cycle" is whether the denomination is still flexible enough to change, or whether the onset of structural rigor mortis will win out. *Church*

leaders may choose to ignore the agitation, but, given the amount of dissatisfaction in the churches, it will not go away.

IX. *Some Final Thoughts*

It appears to many Adventists that reorganization should be an important part of the denomination's agenda. If the changes between 1863 and 1901 were great, the changes since 1903 have been massive. Not only has the denomination expanded from a largely European body of 78,000 members to a truly worldwide membership of approximately 15,000,000, but modes of transportation and communication have transformed the very nature of doing business. Adventism has yet to adjust to those momentous changes.

Should it? That is the question of questions. But who is there to answer it? Ellen White was the spark plug that got things finally moving in 1901. She and her husband had done the same thing in 1861. Yet she has been dead for nearly a century. And since her death Adventism has struggled in a quandary with issues that she did not specifically speak to. But time moves on and Adventism in 2006 exists in a world unimagined in 1901. It faces new challenges and possibilities.

Such times can be met by facing backward or forward. Anyone who has studied Ellen White's life and ministry can hardly imagine her among that group who her husband categorized as thinking that all that was "necessary to run a train of cars was to use the break well."⁹¹ To the contrary, she was always at the forefront of those pushing the borders of doing things better and more efficiently. That was part of her prophetic voice. We may not have a living prophet amongst us today, but we dare not lose the prophetic spirit that continually put

Ellen White at the forefront of Adventist mission and advancement toward structural efficiency.

Notes

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²George R. Knight, *Organizing to Beat the Devil: The Development of Adventist Church Structure* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2001 (published as *Organizing for Mission and Growth* in 2006); Andrew G. Mustard, *James White and SDA Organization: Historical Development, 1844-1881* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1988); Barry David Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure: Past, Present, and Future* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1989).

³George Storrs, "Come out of Her My People," *Midnight Cry*, Feb. 15, 1844, 238.

⁴[James White], "Gospel Order," *Review and Herald*, Dec. 6, 1853, 173.

⁵Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1945, 97, 99, 101.

⁶James White, "Conference Address," *Review and Herald*, June 9, 1859, 20-23.

⁷James White, "Yearly Meetings," *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1859, 68.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Joseph Bates, "Church Order," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 29, 1854, 22, 23.

¹²[James White], "Gospel Order," *Review and Herald*, Mar. 28, 1854, 76.

¹³[James White], "Church Order," *Review and Herald*, Jan. 23, 1855, 164.

¹⁴J. B. Frisbie, "Church Order," *Review and Herald*, Dec. 26, 1854, 147.

¹⁵J. White, "Yearly Meetings," July 21, 1859, 68, italics supplied.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷R. F. Cottrell, "Making Us a Name," *Review and Herald*, Mar. 22, 1860, 140, 141.

¹⁸James White, "Making Us a Name," *Review and Herald*, Mar. 29, 1860, 152.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰James White, "Making Us a Name," *Review and Herald*, Apr. 26, 1860, 180-182.

²¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), I:211.

²²"Business Proceedings of B. C. Conference," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 16, 1860, 169-171.

²³ Ellen G. White to Brethren of the General Conference, Dec. 19, 1892, in 1893 *General Conference Bulletin*, 22.

²⁴ Mustard, *James White*, 129.

²⁵ J. H. Waggoner, "General Conference," *Review and Herald*, June 24, 1862, 29.

²⁶ J. N. Andrews, "General Conference," *Review and Herald*, July 15, 1862, 52, italics supplied.

²⁷ [James White], "Organization," *Review and Herald*, Sept. 30, 1862, 140.

²⁸ B. F. Snook, "General Conference," *Review and Herald*, July 29, 1862, 72.

²⁹ [James White], "General Conference," *Review and Herald*, Apr. 28, 1863, 172, italics supplied.

³⁰ John Byington, "Report of General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists," *Review and Herald*, May 26, 1863, 204-206.

³¹ J. H. Waggoner et al, "Conference Address: Organization," *Review and Herald*, June 11, 1861, 21, 22; James White, "The Light of the World," *Review and Herald*, Apr. 21, 1863, 164, 165; "God's Free Men" *Review and Herald*, June 2, 1863, 8.

³² James White, "Organization," *Review and Herald*, Apr. 19, 1864, 164.

³³ G. I. Butler, "Stability a Characteristic of Our Work," *Review and Herald*, Apr. 15, 1873, 140.

³⁴ James White, *Life Incidents* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Assn., 1868), 299.

³⁵ [James White], "Mutual Obligation," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 17, 1871, 140.

³⁶ James White, "Organization," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 5, 1873, 60.

³⁷ Knight, *Organizing*, 68-75; E. White, *Testimonies*, 9:261.

³⁸ "General Conference Proceedings," 1899 *General Conference Bulletin*, 86, 91.

³⁹ Ellen G. White to Conference Presidents, Aug. 1896, italics supplied.

⁴⁰ O. A. Olsen to A. T. Robinson, Oct. 25, 1892.

⁴¹ "Conference Proceedings," 1913 *General Conference Bulletin*, 108.

⁴² W. C. White to O. A. Olsen, Nov. 27, 1888.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ W. C. White to O. A. Olsen, Dec. 21, 1892.

⁴⁵ General Conference Committee Minutes, Jan. 25, 1893.

⁴⁶ W. C. White to O. A. Olsen, May 8, 1893; July 9, 1893.

⁴⁷ "Conference Proceedings," 1913 *General Conference Bulletin*, 108.

⁴⁸ O. A. Olsen to A. T. Robinson, Oct. 25, 1892.

⁴⁹ "Council Meeting," 1893 *General Conference Bulletin*, 24, italics supplied.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Ellen G. White to Bro. and Sis. Prescott, Sept. 1, 1896.

⁵² See Oliver, *S. D. A. Organizational*, 125.

⁵³ Ellen G. White, "Medical Missionary Work and the Gospel Ministry," MS 62, Nov. 13, 1900.

⁵⁴ "General Conference Proceedings," 1899 *General Conference Bulletin*, 73.

⁵⁵ "Talk of Mrs. E. G. White, before representative brethren, in the College Library" April 1, MS 43-A 1901.

⁵⁶ "General Conference Proceedings," 1901 *General Conference Bulletin*, 23-27, 33.

⁵⁷ A. G. Daniells, "The Field," 1901 *General Conference Bulletin*, 48.

⁵⁸ Stenographic minutes of 1903 General Conference session, Apr. 9, 1903, 70-72, cited in Oliver, *SDA Organizational*, 296.

⁵⁹ Ellen G. White to Conference Presidents, Aug. 1896.

⁶⁰ Ellen G. White, "Words of Counsel Regarding the Management of the Work of God," June 19, MS 91, 1899.

⁶¹ Ellen G. White, "Bring an Offering to the Lord," *Review and Herald*, Nov. 26, 1901, 761.

⁶² Ellen G. White, "Unheeded Warnings II," Nov. 27, MS 156B, 1901.

⁶³ Ellen G. White to Judge Jessie Arthur, Jan. 14, 1903, italics supplied.

⁶⁴ Oliver, *SDA Organizational*, 201-204.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 296-322.

⁶⁶ E. White, *Testimonies*, 9:257-261.

⁶⁷ Stenographic minutes of the 1903 General Conference session, Apr. 9, 1903, 20, 20a, cited in Oliver, *SDA Organizational*, 302, italics supplied.

⁶⁸ Guy Dail, "The European General Conference," *Review and Herald*, Sept. 3, 1901, 576.

⁶⁹ "Doings of European General Conference," 1901 *General Conference Bulletin*, 517.

⁷⁰ Lewis Harrison Christian, *Pioneers and Builders of the Advent Cause in Europe* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1937), 95.

⁷¹ General Conference Committee minutes, May 16, 1907.

⁷² Christian, *Pioneers*, 97.

⁷³ L. R. Conradi to W. T. Knox, Nov. 5, 1911.

⁷⁴ A. G. Daniells to W. C. White, Nov. 24, 1911.

⁷⁵ W. C. White to A. G. Daniells, Dec. 4, 1911.

⁷⁶ A. G. Daniells to W. C. White, Jan. 4, 1912.

⁷⁷ European Division of the General Conference minutes, Apr. 28, 1912.

⁷⁸ General Conference Committee minutes, Sept. 25, 1912.

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⁸⁰ T. E. Bowen to W. B. White, Nov. 7, 1917.

⁸¹ A. G. Daniells to W. A. Spicer, Oct. 9, 1917, cited in Bert Haloviak, "Approaches to Church Reorganization," unpub. MS, Feb. 1993.

⁸² 1918 *General Conference Bulletin*, 39, 40.

⁸³ "Council Meeting," 1893 *General Conference Bulletin*, 24.

⁸⁴ Ellen G. White, "Be Steadfast Unto the End," cir. Dec. 24, MS 129, 1905.

⁸⁵ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1958), Book 2, 389, 390.

⁸⁶ Ellen G. White, "Unheeded Warnings II," Nov. 27, MS 156-B, 1901.

⁸⁷ Oliver, *SDA Organizational*, 213.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Borge Schantz, "Seventh-day Adventist Missionary Finance: Is Reform Needed?" In Jon L. Dybdahl, ed. *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1999), 99, 103.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁹¹ J. White, "Yearly Meetings," *Review and Herald*, July 21, 1859, 68.