

Important Decisions Reached in Atlanta

By Clinton Wahlen

“This is not just an organization. This is not just another denomination. This is God’s Remnant Church.” So said the new General Conference president, Ted N. C. Wilson, on Friday, June 25, 2010 to those gathered at the 59th General Conference session in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A. Together with emphasizing the role of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy in decision-making and the church’s need of “revival and reformation,” Pastor Wilson set a spiritual direction for the session and for the work of the coming quinquennium. He will work closely with G. T. Ng, newly elected GC secretary, and Robert Lemon who was re-elected as GC treasurer. Other new appointments include Delbert Baker, Geoffrey G. Mbwana, Benjamin D. Schoun, and Artur Stele as GC General Vice Presidents, Jerry Page as Ministerial Secretary, and a number of new directors of departments: Williams Costa, Jr. (Communication), Lisa M. Beardsley (Education), Willie Oliver (Family Ministries) with wife Elaine as associate director, Thomas A. Kapusta (Trust Services), and Gilbert Cangy (Youth Ministries). The proposal to elect associate directors of GC departments at the Annual Council following a GC session was voted down and so these offices were also filled in Atlanta, though a special exception was voted by the session for the Ministerial Association associates for this quinquennium to be selected at the upcoming Annual Council.

Ordination of Deaconesses

In addition to changes in leadership, some significant items involving theological matters were considered. Dominating the business of the session was a major reorganization/revision of the *Church Manual*. In connection with this revision, a new provision for the ordination of deaconesses was discussed at length and passed:

. . . When these have been elected, the elders should be ordained, unless they have already been ordained as elders. A similar but shorter service should take place for ordination of deacons and deaconesses.¹

The change passed with more comprehensive language than the original proposal, which had provided for the ordination of deaconesses only in those regions that would have specifically allowed it.

Responding to the suggestion that the whole concept of ordination deserved more scrutiny, the question of what we mean by ordination was referred for further study during the coming quinquennium. This is an important step because ordination within the Adventist church (whether for elders, deacons, and now deaconesses) has always been worldwide rather than regional. Voting the modified proposal concerning deaconesses has preserved this understanding for the time being.

Another question that generated a little bit of discussion was the definition of marriage given in the *Church Manual*. In order to clarify the existing definition further, that “marriage, thus instituted by God, is a monogamous, heterosexual relationship,” it was voted that the phrase “between one male and one female” be added to the existing statement. This echoes language found in Gen 1:27, which is quoted by Jesus in Mark 10:6/Matt 19:4 (cf. Gen 2:24; Mark 10:7/Matt 19:5).

The Doctrine of Creation

The General Conference session also considered the topic of Creation, which has undergone increased scrutiny in recent years. Following the Faith and Science conferences of 2002-2004, which brought together a widespread international representation of Adventist scientists, theologians, and administrators to examine issues related to origins and the Flood, a report entitled “An Affirmation of Creation” was presented to the Executive Committee of the General Conference.² As a result of this report, a strongly-worded response was discussed and voted by the Annual Council in Silver Spring, Md., U.S.A. on October 13, 2004. (For details about these meetings, the report of the conferences, and this response, see the article by Gerhard Pfandl, “Creation Debate in the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” in this issue.)

This response was reaffirmed by the General Conference session on June 30, 2010. In addition to reaffirming “a literal, recent, six-day Creation” and a global Flood, it calls “on all boards and educators at Seventh-day Adventist institutions at all levels to continue upholding and advocating the church’s position on origins.” It also urges that students be “educated to understand and assess competing philosophies of origins that dominate scientific discussion in the contemporary world.”³ As part of the same discussion, the session voted to ask that study be given to clarifying Fundamental Belief #6 in accordance with the process it voted in 2005 for revising these statements.

Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, BRI director, summarized this process for the delegates assembled in Atlanta. Requests for revision of or addition to the Fundamental Beliefs, he said, “should reach the office of the president of the General Conference at least two years before the next General Conference session.” The GC president will then appoint an ad hoc committee to consider the request and, if necessary, prepare an initial draft of the revisions. The proposed revisions will be sent by the Administrative Committee of the General Conference to the Spring Meeting or Annual Council “for further discussions, contributions, and suggestions for changes or revisions.” After that, the document will be circulated among theologians and published in the *Adventist Review* and *Ministry* magazine to invite suggestions from the world church. The ad hoc committee will study these suggestions and incorporate those that are accepted into the document, which will be further discussed at the Annual Council preceding the General Conference session. “And from there it will be voted to take it to the General Conference session with any recommendation that the Annual Council might have.”⁴

All of these actions taken by the General Conference in Atlanta encourage the church individually and collectively to study and reflect on matters vital for our faith and practice. By drawing attention to them here, we hope to stimulate widespread study, discussion, and reflection on these topics at all levels in order to further theological unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and thereby enhance understanding of what we believe and why.

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¹*Adventist Review: General Conference Bulletin 6*, July 1, 2010, p. 3.

² The document is available online: <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat54.html>; accessed July 8, 2010.

³ The document is available online: <http://adventist.org/beliefs/statements/main-stat55.html>; accessed July 8, 2010.

⁴ *Adventist Review: General Conference Bulletin 7*, July 2, 2010, p. 29.