

INTRODUCTION TO THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND LOCAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

Biblical Pictures of the Church¹

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is, first of all, a spiritual community of persons who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Bible uses many symbols or pictures to describe the relationship between God and His people. These pictures, in both Old and New Testament, are often used as illustrations of the Church. They include the following:

1. Sheep with a shepherd (Isaiah 40:11, Zechariah 9:16, Luke 12:32, John 10:14-16, Acts 20:29)
2. Body of Christ (Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 1:22, 23, Colossians 1:24 and 2:19)
3. Vine and branches (John 15:5)
4. Household of faith (Ephesians 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15)
5. Family of God (Deuteronomy 14:2, Hosea 11:1, John 1:12, Romans 8:15, 2 Corinthians 6:18, Galatians 4:5-6)
6. Children of God (Matthew 5:9, Luke 20:36, Romans 8:16, 21 and 9:26, 1 John 3:1-10)
7. Building (Matthew 16:18, 1 Corinthians 3:10, Ephesians 2:21, 1 Peter 2:5)
8. Bride (Isaiah 62:5, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Revelation 19:7-9)

Part 1 Organizational Structure

The Components of Seventh-day Adventist Church Structure

The Bible symbols that we understand as references to the Church describe primarily a relationship that exists between God and His people. These biblical images of the Church might imply some form of organization but they do not provide details. In actual fact, Seventh-day Adventist Church organization has an interesting developmental history.

Our pioneers thought in terms of an “Advent Movement” rather than of a church organization. In fact, many of them vigorously opposed the idea of any organizational structure. But in the course of time several issues indicated the need for some type of organization. These issues included: the endorsement of ministers who traveled from place to place, the need to employ workers for various tasks, the need to have some arrangement for the holding of property and assets rather than to have these held in the name of individuals.

Understanding church organization is important because if a member understands the global calling of Christ to mission—going to the world with the gospel—then she/he needs to see that a world organization to facilitate mission is necessary.

¹ This insightful material was copied from *Organized for Mission—the Business of Being the Church: A Seventh-day Adventist Church member’s guide to understanding denominational structure, operation, and decision-making* by Ardis Stenbakken and Pastor Lowell Cooper

Some ideas of denominational organization were borrowed from other denominations. However, Seventh-day Adventist Church structure is unique in many ways. In fact, it is different from all other forms of church organization.

One of the amazing differences between the Seventh-day Adventist Church and other denominations is in how Adventist Church work and workers are funded. Monies are distributed to open Gospel work in new areas, infrastructure is maintained, and workers are paid by area guidelines. We all help each other.

In this seminar we will look at the four main elements of Seventh-day Adventist structure. These are: the Local Church, the local Conference or Mission, the Union Conference or Mission, and the General Conference with its divisions. One of the underlying principles in our structure is that “together we can do more.”

Structural Element #1—A Local Church

Let’s begin with the part of Seventh-day Adventist organization that all members know something about, the local church:

What is your definition of a local church? (Responses will include expressions such as: a group of believers; people who share the same understanding of the Bible; an organized body; etc.)

All of these answers are correct to some extent. Yet each one is incomplete. We are looking for a comprehensive definition that describes this basic building block of the Seventh-day Adventist organization. What we’ve said is good, but it is not quite enough to complete our understanding. For example, all of us (most of us) in this room today are believers, yet we cannot say that we are a local church. Something needs to be added to our definition.

Here is a good working definition of a Local Church.

A Local Church is a group of Seventh-day Adventist members who have been granted, by the constituency session of a local Conference or Mission, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist Church.

This is the most important definition we will look at in this seminar. It is our key to understanding virtually everything else in denominational structure. So, we will spend a moment or two of our time to examine the meaning of this statement.

The second question raised from our definition statement for a local church is this: How does a group of members become an official Seventh-day Adventist Church? Let’s look again at that definition:

A Local Church is a group of Seventh-day Adventist members who have been granted, by the constituency session of a local Conference or Mission, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist Church.

By this definition, a group of Seventh-day Adventist believers could not make themselves into an official Seventh-day Adventist Church. Incidentally, the terms “Seventh-day

Adventist” and “Adventist,” along with the denomination’s logo, are protected trademarks and may only be used in harmony with General Conference *Working Policy*. Lay and professional groups may not utilize trademarks owned by the General Conference Corporation without its express written approval.

The members of the Local Church vote on the business of the Local Church in accordance with the policies found in the *Church Manual*. (More information on the Church Manual is found on page 18.)

The answer to our question of how a group of members becomes an official Seventh-day Adventist Church is that another official entity of the Seventh-day Adventist organization gives official status to the group or members in question. This introduces us to the next two elements of denominational structure: a constituency session and a local Mission or Conference. To better understand that, we need to look first at the definition of a **local conference**.

Structural Element #2—A Local Conference

Remember that we said the local church definition was the most important definition because it serves as the key to understanding everything else in denominational structure. Use your knowledge about the definition of a local church and see if you can create a definition for a local Conference. With very little modification you will have it look like this:

A local Conference is a group of churches, within a specific geographic territory, which has been granted, by the constituency session of a Union Conference or Mission, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist local Conference.

Notice the changes that have been made:

- A Local Church is a group of members...
- A local Conference is a group of churches...
- The membership units in a Local Church are persons...
- The membership units in a local Conference are churches.

The concept is similar, only the definition of the group has changed.

No doubt you have noticed that we’ve also introduced a new clause in this definition, “within a specific geographic territory.” A local Conference has defined territorial boundaries. A Local Church may also have a rather defined territory—but its members do not necessarily have to live within that territory. Of course, it is preferred that Seventh-day Adventists hold membership in a Local Church near where they live. But it is not mandatory. The pattern for Conferences is different. Member churches **must** be located within the territory of the Conference of which they are a part.

To further enhance our understanding of our denominational structure, we need to know what a “constituency session” is. The term simply means a business meeting of the members of a group. Now let’s insert that explanation into our definition of a local Conference.

A local Conference is a group of churches, within a specific geographic territory, which has been granted, by the constituency session (a business meeting of the members) of a Union Conference or Mission, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist local Conference.

“Mission” or “Conference” Status

Before looking at other layers of organizational structure, we should become familiar with the meaning of two terms, “Mission” and “Conference.” These terms describe the status of two different groups of Seventh-day Adventist organizations. The status of these organizations is generally included in its name. For example: Haitian Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists, Central Amazon Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, or Singapore Mission of Seventh-day Adventists.

“Mission” status indicates that an organization receives direct support (financial and/or administrative) from a supervisory organization. For example, the Vietnam Mission receives direct financial and/or administrative support from the Southeast Asia Union Mission. The officers of an organization having Mission status are *appointed* by the supervisory organization.

“Conference” represents the highest status level of self-governance available to an organization. Accordingly, the officers of organizations having Conference status are *elected* by the constituency session of that organization. Officer position vacancies that occur between constituency sessions are filled by decisions of the Conference executive committee.

Structural Element #3—A Union Conference/Mission

We now reach the third basic element of denominational structure—a Union organization with either Conference or Mission status. We have already examined the organizational definition of a Local Church and a local Conference. Based on what we know about these entities it should be expected that the organizational definition of a Union is as follows:

A Union Conference/Mission is a group of local Conferences and/or local Missions, within a specific geographic territory, which has been granted, by the constituency session of the General Conference, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist Union Conference/Mission.

By way of review:

- Membership of a Local Church is comprised of persons.
- Membership of a local Conference/Mission is comprised of Local Churches.
- Membership of a Union Conference or Union Mission is comprised of local Conferences and/or local Missions.

Structural Element #4—The General Conference and its Divisions

The next step in organizational structure is the General Conference. A definition for the General Conference is slightly different from the definition format that we've used for the previous three elements of denominational structure.

The General Conference is the combined grouping of all Union Missions, Union Conferences and other directly attached fields² throughout the entire world. The General Conference has established divisions which are regional offices of the General Conference that have been assigned general supervisory responsibilities for a specific group of Unions or other church units within a geographic area.

We have now completed a structural survey of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with both its local identity in the Local Church to its global identity in the General Conference in session. The voice of the world Church is expressed through General Conference Sessions. These are business meetings of all the Unions and other directly attached fields. Between General Conference Sessions the voice of the world Church is expressed through the actions of the General Conference Executive Committee, a group of approximately 300 people from around the world who are elected by a General Conference Session to serve on the Executive Committee.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is often described as having four constituency-based units of organization. These are: the Local Church, the local Conference/Mission, the Union Conference/Mission, and the General Conference. A constituency-based unit is one that has a specific membership group and the group, or representatives of the group, meet periodically for a business meeting.

A division is not considered to be a constituency-based unit of organization. It is an administrative office, established by the General Conference, to give supervision and assistance to the life of Union Conferences and Union Missions in a specific region of the world.

For summary, the four building blocks of Seventh-day Adventist organization are:

1. The Local Church consisting of individual members.
2. The local Conference/Mission consisting of a group of Local Churches.
3. The Union Conference/Mission consisting of a group of local Conferences/Missions.
4. The General Conference consisting of all the Union Conferences/Missions in the entire world, plus any fields directly attached to the General Conference.

These four units of denominational organization may establish affiliated entities, such as schools, clinics, hospitals, publishing houses, food industries, media centers, and radio and television stations. These entities are an integral part of the Church's mission and witness. Each one operates under the authority of its own organizational documents and in harmony with the Church's working policies.

² Attached fields are organizational units (such as local Conferences or Missions) which for various reasons are more effectively served by direct attachment to the General Conference rather than to a Union and/or division. The attachment of any particular field to the General Conference is considered a temporary rather than permanent arrangement.

Another picture that describes church organization is a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle represents Jesus Christ. The next circle represents the individual church member, who along with others, makes up a Local Church. Several Local Churches are joined together to form a Conference or Mission. A group of Conferences/Mission then belongs to a Union, which covers areas as large as countries or several provinces. Next come the Divisions, of which there are 13 in the Adventist church and they are the administrative arms of the Church's General Conference. Divisions cover portions of or entire continents and represent the world Church in particular regions. The General Conference ensures that the global church shares the same visions and beliefs.

Now then, we can begin to picture in our minds the vast array of organizations that call themselves part of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As of December 31, 2005 this Church included the following. (Note to presenter: these statistics can be updated by going to: http://www.adventist.org/world_church/facts_and_figures/index.html.en)

1. Church members	14,399,072
2. Local Churches	60,273
3. Local Conferences/Missions	559
4. Union Conferences/Missions	102
5. Countries where the Church is established	202
6. Schools (including colleges and universities)	6,966
7. Colleges and universities	106
8. Food factories and industries	30
9. Hospitals and sanitariums	167
10. Publishing houses	65
11. Media centers	10
12. Total tithes and offerings reported through the Church	\$1,492,720,001

We are now ready for the second part of the seminar on Seventh-day Adventist Church structure: operation, and decision-making.

Part 2 Operating Principles of the Church

The sheer size and diversity of denominational organizations makes the Church appear very complex. However, we have seen that this entire structure is established on four basic elements of organization. All the complexity can be explained with simple ideas.

The same is true for the operating principles of the Church. What may appear to be very intricate and mysterious is based on a few foundational concepts. We shall identify seven basic operational principles in the life of this Church.

Operating Principle #1—Seventh-day Adventist Organizations Have a Defined Membership

The doors of the Church are wide open for people to participate in worship and fellowship. One does not need to be a member of the Church in order to attend services at a Local

Church, or to enroll in a Seventh-day Adventist educational institution, or be treated in a medical facility. However, when it comes to the matter of a Seventh-day Adventist organization making official decisions, membership becomes extremely important.

Every denominational organization has its membership defined in some way. A Local Church has its own membership record books. The membership of a Conference, Union, institution, and the General Conference is described in the governance documents for the organization. These governance documents include constitutions and bylaws, charters, and General Conference *Working Policy*. (Later in this seminar we'll discuss governance documents in greater detail.)

In our discussion of membership, let's begin with the most basic question. How does a person become a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? (Answers will include expressions such as: by believing the doctrines, by being baptized, by profession of faith, and by transfer of membership.)

Actually, there is only one way by which a person becomes a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is not by baptism, profession of faith, or transfer of membership. The one and only way of becoming a member is by vote of the other members in a congregation. That vote has to have a reasonable basis. The legitimate reasons for voting a person into membership are: on the basis of baptism *or* on the basis of profession of faith *or* on the basis of transfer of membership from another official Seventh-day Adventist congregation.

Adventist churches provide a base for personal spiritual growth. Membership in a local Seventh-day Adventist church is important for several reasons. First, it engages the individual in the mission and witness of the whole Seventh-day Adventist Church. Second, membership in a Local Church entitles a person to vote in the business matters of that church. Guests or visitors are not entitled to vote in official decisions of the Local Church. Third, membership in a Local Church also entitles one to be elected to leadership positions in that Local Church. (Some leadership positions may have additional qualification requirements, but the first requirement is membership in the Local Church.)

Fourth, a person who is a member of a Local Church may be selected, by that Local Church, to serve as a delegate to business meetings (constituency meetings) of the local Mission or Conference. It should be noted that the privileges of voting in Local Church decisions, holding office in the Local Church, or serving as a delegate to local Mission or local Conference business meetings are suspended for any period during which a member is under discipline (censure) by the Local Church.

Membership can only be held in one Local Church at a time. A person cannot be a member of two or more Local Churches. The rights of membership, voting, holding office, eligibility for selection as a delegate, etc. are exercised only in the Local Church where one has been granted membership.

Let's do a very quick review of what we've learned from the discussion of structure.

1. Membership of a Local Church is comprised of persons.
2. Membership of a local Conference is comprised of Local Churches.
3. Membership of a Union Conference is comprised of local Conferences and/or local Missions.

4. Membership of the General Conference consists of all the Union Conferences and Union Missions in the whole world, plus any field directly attached to the General Conference.

Other entities of the Church, such as *institutions*, also have a defined membership. We've said earlier that the four basic units of denominational organization may establish other entities, such as institutions. When an institution is established, its membership is defined by the organization that decided to establish the institution. For example: The membership of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) consists of persons who are members of the General Conference Executive Committee plus any ADRA Board members who may not be members of the General Conference Executive Committee.

Another dimension of this operating principle (a defined membership) in Seventh-day Adventist Church life is that every *board or committee* also has a defined membership. Just because a person is a member of a Local Church does not mean that this person can simply walk into any business meeting anywhere in the denomination and claim the right to speak and vote. Only those who have been officially designated (by the process of election or appointment) as members of a board or committee can vote in the decisions of that body. There are times when boards and committees agree to have invitees or guests attend their meetings. In many cases, invitees and guests are given the privilege of "voice but not vote." That means they can speak on the issues that are being discussed, but they cannot participate in the voting.

We said earlier that a person can have membership, as a Seventh-day Adventist, in only one Local Church at a time. Membership on boards and committees is somewhat different. Any one person may be a member of several boards or committees simultaneously.

The first principle of denominational operation is that every Seventh-day Adventist unit of organization has a specifically defined membership. One cannot begin to understand denominational decision-making without recognizing that this principle applies everywhere.

Operating Principle #2—Status as a Member is Conferred, not Self-Appointed

Membership in a church or on a board is not a decision a person makes for herself or himself. Yes, one can decline the appointment, but one cannot create the appointment. No person can make himself/herself a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Membership is a status that is received only by decision of an official congregation of Seventh-day Adventists.

Secondly, membership in a congregation is not a right or something that a person possesses. It is a status or privilege that is entrusted to an individual. It is retained by the individual only as long as it is entrusted by the congregation's decision. A congregation has the right to withdraw the privilege of membership if, in its judgment, the person in question is not living in accordance with the teachings and values of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. (Later in this seminar we will discuss the role of the *Church Manual* as a reference for Local Church procedures and decision-making.)

The principle of membership status being conferred applies not only to individuals—it applies also to organizations such as churches, Conferences, and Unions. Organizational status as a Local Church, local Conference/Mission, or Union Conference/Mission is not self-

generated, automatic, or perpetual. It is the result of a formal decision by an executive committee or a constituency session at higher levels of denominational organization. Organizational membership and status are entrusted to entities that meet certain qualifications such as faithfulness to Seventh-day Adventist doctrines, compliance with denominational practices and policies, demonstration of adequate leadership and financial capacity, and responsiveness to mission challenges and opportunities. Membership and status can be reviewed, revised, amended, or withdrawn by the level of organization that granted it.

Operating Principle #3—Leaders and Members Are Accountable to a Group

One of the most interesting features in any organization relates to how authority is exercised. Who has it and how is it used?

In some religious organizations, final authority resides in an individual. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, final authority resides in a group. While it is true that various leadership positions are given considerable authority, such authority must be exercised within the context of a leader being held accountable by a group. This feature is sometimes described as “authority ascends to a group.” It means that the highest degree of authority is held by a group of individuals rather than by a single individual.

The highest level of authority granted to each level of denominational organization resides in the constituency meeting—the delegates in business meeting. Various officers may be elected and vested with a degree of authority, but ultimately each officer is accountable to a group such as the executive committee. An executive committee is entrusted, through policies or constitution and bylaws, with authority to govern between constituency meetings. However, the executive committee is ultimately accountable to the constituency meeting of the organization concerned.

Let’s look at how authority functions in a Local Church. This will illustrate a pattern that is seen throughout Seventh-day Adventist Church structure.

The authority structures of the Local Church, ranked in scope of authority, beginning with the highest are:

1. The Church Business Meeting, an official meeting of the Church members.
2. The Church Board is elected by the church membership at the time of the regular election of church officers. The suggested officers are listed in the *Church Manual*
3. Various committees, whose members have been appointed by the Church Business Meeting or the Church Board or whose membership is defined in the *Church Manual*. Examples would be: the Sabbath School Council, the Church Building Committee, and the Church Finance Committee.
4. Church pastor. (It must be noted that, in some areas of authority and responsibility, the Church pastor reports to the Conference Executive Committee through the office of the Conference president. But in decision-making on everyday matters within the Local Church, the Church pastor is also accountable to the Church Board and Business Meeting.)

5. Church elders elected to serve in the current term (usually one or two years per term).
6. Other leaders elected to serve in the current term.
7. Individual members of the Local Church.

Another element of the authority principle in denominational life is that no group or individual has more authority than the group that appointed it. For example, the Church Board does not have more authority than the Church Business Meeting. The Seventh-day Adventist *Church Manual* outlines in considerable detail the authority, responsibility and relationships that pertain to the operations of a Local Church.

Authority and responsibility issues in denominational structure, beyond the Local Church, are quite similar to those of a Local Church although some different terms may be used. The most typical pattern, again ranked in scope of authority, is:

1. The Constituency Session, a formal business meeting of all the members. This compares to the Church Business Meeting of the Local Church.
2. The Executive Committee of the local Conference, Union Conference, division, or General Conference. In denominational institutions, the authority group appointed by the Constituency is generally called the Board of Trustees or the Board of Directors.
3. The Administrative Committee, if one has been appointed.
4. The elected officers. In Conferences, this is usually the President, Secretary, and Treasurer. The President is considered the first officer and reports to the Executive Committee in consultation with the secretary and treasurer.
5. Persons elected as associate treasurers or associate secretaries.
6. Other elected personnel.
7. Appointed staff.

The variety of denominational organizations makes it difficult to identify one universal pattern. The sequence above serves as a general outline. However, most organizations have a large roster of committees that have been appointed by various bodies. When committees are appointed, or new employee positions established, it is the general practice to vote, at the same time, the terms of reference for the committee, or the job description for the new employee. These documents then define the role, authority, and relationships that pertain to the particular appointment. Once again, the rule applies that any individual or group cannot have more authority than the body that appointed it.

This operating principle regarding authority—that leaders and members are accountable to a group—is complemented by another principle regarding authority in the Church.

Operating Principle #4—Different Types of Final Authority Are Distributed Throughout Denominational Structure

Final authority on all questions is not concentrated in one place in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Instead, it is distributed throughout denominational structure. This is one of the unique things about this Church. Each part of the organization needs the other parts. No part is an island unto itself. Each part can only function and prosper when all other parts are also functioning correctly.

Earlier in this seminar, we identified the four basic pieces, or groups, of denominational structure. Now we shall consider how each of these organizational components has final authority and responsibility for some aspect of denominational life. The table below illustrates this.

Type of Organization	Examples of Responsibility and Final Authority
1. The Local Church	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decisions on membership (accepting, disciplining, removing). 2. Election of Local Church leadership. 3. Election of the Local Church board. 4. Election of delegates to Conference constituency meetings. 5. Local Church programs. 6. Spiritual growth, evangelism and witnessing programs in its territory.
2. The Local Conference	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The employment of ministers. 2. The employment of staff in the Conference office. 3. Evangelism and witnessing programs in its territory. 4. The organization and admission of new Local Churches. 5. Establishment and operation of Conference institutions. Examples: hospitals and boarding academies. 6. Policies (within the scope of Union and GC <i>Working Policy</i>)
3. The Union Conference	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The ordination of ministers. 2. The employment of staff in the Union office. 3. Establishment of new Missions or Conferences. 4. Establishment and operation of Union institutions. Example: colleges 5. Policies (within the scope of GC <i>Working Policy</i>)
4. The General Conference and its Divisions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Definition of fundamental beliefs (General Conference Session) 2. The Seventh-day Adventist <i>Church Manual</i> (General Conference Session) 3. Election of General Conference officers (General Conference Session) 4. Denominational policies (General Conference Executive Committee) 5. Establish and operate General Conference and Division institutions. Examples: Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Andrews University, Loma Linda University, Oakwood College, Griggs University, ADRA, AWR, <i>Adventist Review</i>, Review and Herald Publishing Association and Pacific Press Publishing Association. 6. Oversee global operations and development.

Operating Principle #5—Representative Democracy and Democratic Processes in Decision-Making

Let’s review the operating principles cited thus far.

1. Seventh-day Adventist organizations have a defined membership
2. Status as a member is conferred, not self-appointed
3. Leaders and members are accountable to a group
4. Different types of final authority are distributed throughout denominational structure

Principle #5 primarily addresses the question of how decisions are made. But the operation of this principle is best understood when one has at least working knowledge of denominational structure and the other operating principles already mentioned.

Principle #5 affirms that the Seventh-day Adventist Church uses *principles of democracy*—a system of decision-making that provides for discussion and engagement by the members or their representatives. At its most basic level, the term “democracy” means that decisions are made by the people (in this case, the members of an organization). But in a large organization with many members it is virtually impossible to involve all members in every decision. Therefore, like many other large organizations, the Seventh-day Adventist Church uses the principles of democracy. This is accomplished by creating groups that represent a larger membership.

Here are several illustrations of representative groups that have specific decision-making authority. (Note the table under Operating Principle #4 that outlines the types of decisions made by various groups representing denominational organization.)

1. The Local Church Board is a representative group of the Local Church members. The members of the Board are elected by the Church membership in a business meeting.
2. Most of the persons who attend a local Conference constituency session are delegates, elected by their Local Churches.
3. Executive committees at the local Conference, Union Conference, or General Conference, are representative groups elected by the constituency session of the respective organization.
4. Board members for an institution are elected at a constituency session of the institution.

A second element of the representative democracy processes of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is that persons elected as leaders or representatives (e.g. members of an executive committee) serve for a *limited term*. In the Local Church, the term of office is usually one or two years. The term of service for officers of a local Conference and members of an executive committee might be as long as five years. (The actual length of the term is defined in the constitution and bylaws for the Conference organization.) Persons who have served may be re-elected to serve a new term. The point here is that the will of the members is periodically expressed in the election of leaders and representatives.

There is a third dimension to the principle of democratic process in the Church. It is commonly known as *parliamentary procedures*. This refers to the formal processes for making decisions in a group. Without these most large meetings would be chaos. It would be a good idea to learn parliamentary procedures. You can obtain a copy of the Church's *Rules of Order* from your Conference or Union Secretariat.

We will identify five elements of parliamentary procedure or rules of order. General Conference Executive Committee meetings and General Conference sessions proceed under a specific set of rules. However, it is not always necessary to have a specific set of rules for meetings where only a few persons are involved—provided that everyone is comfortable that there is fair opportunity for all to participate in the discussion and decision-making. The general rules of order in meetings are described below.

Proper notice of meeting: The members of a group, including members of representative groups, have a right to receive advance notice of a meeting. They are not necessarily obligated to attend but they have a right of knowing that a meeting will be held. Notice should be given with sufficient time for members to make arrangements to attend the meeting. Many of the decision-making groups in the Church follow a regular annual calendar of meetings that is published in advance. Often the bylaws of a Conference will give specific details about when and where the notice of constituency meetings is provided.

With respect to General Conference Sessions, the General Conference Constitution states that “the General Conference shall hold quinquennial³ Sessions at such time and place as the Executive Committee shall designate and announce by a notice published in the *Adventist Review* in three consecutive issues at least four months before the date for the opening of the Session.”

Quorum: This Latin term means the minimum number of officers and members of a constituted body who must be present for the valid transaction of business. As a general rule, the quorum for boards and executive committees is “more than 50% of the members.” In large organizations the quorum requirement may be a smaller number. A group does not determine its own quorum. That decision is made by the organization that elected the smaller group. For example: the Church Business Meeting determines the quorum for the Church Board meeting. In similar manner, the Conference Constituency Session determines the quorum for the Conference Executive Committee.

Discussion and voting on specific proposals one at a time: The orderly processing of business items in a group meeting is handled by dealing with one item at a time. The agenda of items should be prepared in such a way that items that are related to each other are dealt with in a sequential manner. The members of the group are given an opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of a specific proposal before a vote is called.

Members of a board or executive committee have fiduciary duties. This means that the person has the responsibility to act in the interest, not of self, but of another. The word *trustee* is often used to describe this. The fiduciary duties of board and executive committee members might be summarized as follows:

³ Every five years

1. The duty of care. A board or executive committee member should be competent to participate in decision-making for the organization. The legal threshold for the duty of care is that one must take at least the same level of care as “an ordinary prudent person in similar circumstances.” The duty of care means that a person should be informed about the organization’s purpose and practices. When relying on other persons to provide information or counsel, the board or executive committee should take care to ensure that such persons are reliable and trustworthy.

The employment of personnel and the election of leaders are two areas in which the duty of care is particularly important. Even in a Local Church setting it is necessary to perform sufficient background checks on individuals elected or appointed to leadership positions. A Local Church can be held liable for failing to exercise appropriate diligence in the selection of leaders.

2. *The duty of loyalty*: This means that a person’s position in an organization will not be used either for personal advantage or for the advantage of another person or entity. Election or appointment as a leader and/or trustee for an organization comes with the assumption that the individual will demonstrate a loyalty and faithfulness to the organization. For additional assurance in this regard, most organizations require officers and trustees to sign a declaration on conflicts of interest. A leader or trustee is expected to display undivided allegiance when making decisions for the organization.

The duty of loyalty is also breached when members make use of organizational property for personal purposes or when failing to maintain confidentiality of privileged information.

3. *The duty of obedience*: This means that a leader or trustee must keep the organization faithful to its purposes. In addition, it refers to the obligation for organizations to operate within the laws of the state. The duty of obedience also denotes an internal responsibility for an organization to keep its word, to honor its commitments

Decisions determined by the majority in a vote: Group members are not always of one opinion in making a decision. There may be strong differences of opinion and the voting can be quite divided between those who favor and those who oppose a specific proposal. It is a principle of democratic process that, when a vote is taken, the will of the majority of those who have voted becomes the decision of the entire group.

Let’s look at a practical example of how this works in real life. A church board has a membership of 21 with a quorum of 12. When a Board meeting is held there are 13 persons present. After lengthy discussion of an agenda item, the chair calls for the vote. The result of the voting is that six voted in favor, four voted against the proposal and three did not vote. In such a circumstance, what is the decision of the group?

Note that six is not a majority of 13. However, it is a majority of those who voted (ten in all). Those who chose not to vote do not affect the outcome of the vote—unless, of course, everyone chose not to vote. Membership on a board or executive committee is a very significant responsibility since every vote counts.

Another aspect to note with regards to voting is that the will of the majority is the decision *of the group*. It is important for effective group processes that those who voted with the minority recognize the voting process as a mechanism to determine the group's decision. If a member of the minority does not demonstrate good faith in the group and accept the group decision, he/she will have a detrimental effect on good group processes.

Accurate records maintained: The last of the five parliamentary procedures that we will deal with here is the matter of record keeping. The decisions of a group need to be recorded and maintained in a permanent file. The *minutes* represent the official record of the meeting and are therefore valid as legal documents. Considerable care should be taken in how decisions are recorded. In fact, it is a common practice for a board or executive committee to record approval, at a subsequent meeting, of the way the minutes have been written. In this manner the members have shown due diligence to ensure that the written record of the meeting is faithful to the decisions that were made.

In summarizing democratic processes and parliamentary procedures, we can say that decisions are based on group processes that allow for member participation. Each individual member of a Local Church has the right of voice and vote (unless under discipline) in the business decisions of the Local Church. At other constituency levels participation is accomplished through the selection of representatives. For example, representatives chosen by each Local Church become delegates, authorized participants, in a local Conference constituency meeting. When the necessary quorum is present for a constituency/executive committee meeting, the opinion of the majority participating in a vote is regarded as the decision of the group unless bylaws or rules of order require approval by more than a simple majority. Official decisions must be correctly recorded and maintained for future reference.

Operating Principle #6—Local and Global Identity

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has both a local and global identity. The Local Church is indeed a genuine expression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but its identity cannot be fully defined or viewed in isolation from its relationships with other Local Churches and other levels of denominational organization. The local and global elements of Seventh-day Adventist identity are expressed in documents such as the *Church Manual* and General Conference *Working Policy* that reflect aspects of self-governance and interrelationship. The *Church Manual* and the General Conference *Working Policy* present the collective voice of Seventh-day Adventists regarding beliefs, denominational structure, relationships, and operational procedures.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a worldwide community of believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and who are united in mission, purpose, and belief. The Church defines its internal governance as representative in form with executive responsibility and authority assigned to a variety of entities and institutions and their respective constituencies, boards, and officers through constitutions or articles of incorporation, bylaws, and operating policies and guidelines.

Leadership and decision-making in the Church is not simply a matter of following the right process. The operating procedures of the Church are intended as aids to good decision-making and the preservation of an atmosphere of trust and confidence. From the standpoint

of the Church’s mission and purpose in society, good decision-making will always require a dependence on God’s presence and guidance. The spiritual qualities of those who make decisions in Church life are extremely important.

Part 3 Who Makes Decisions and How

We come then to the third part of this seminar. We have talked about organizational structure and operating principles for the Church. This last part deals with who makes decisions and how. Perhaps by now this question has been answered. For in order to understand decision-making in the Seventh-day Adventist Church one must know something about structure and operating principles. From that vantage ground, the answer to the question of who makes decisions—and how—is determined by sorting through the information we’ve already learned.

For instance, we know that decisions are made by groups of individuals. We also know that there are many different decision-making groups (i.e. at the Local Church, the local Conference, the Union, the Division, an institution, or the General Conference). Each decision-making entity has a degree of final authority while at the same time remaining dependent on other groups for authoritative decisions of another kind.

Let’s apply what we have learned. Look at the following table. After considering the decision type, fill in the column “Final Decision-Making Group” based on your understanding of denominational structure and operating principles.

Decision type	Final Decision-Making Group
Election and ordination of deacons.	Local Church business meeting
Ordination of ministers	Union Conference executive committee
Organizing a new Local Church	Local Conference executive committee
Voting a new Local Church as a member of the local Conference	Local Conference constituency session
Amendments to the <i>Church Manual</i> ⁴	General Conference in Session

⁴ “If revisions in the *Church Manual* are considered necessary by any of the constituent levels, such revisions should be submitted to the next constituent level for wider counsel and study. If approved, the suggested revisions are then submitted to the next constituent level for further evaluation. Any proposed revisions shall then be sent to the General Conference Church Manual Committee. This committee will consider all recommended amendments or revisions and, if approved, prepare them for presentation at an Annual Council and/or General Conference Session.

“If revisions to the Notes at the end of some chapters of the *Church Manual* are considered necessary by any of the constituent levels, such revisions should be submitted to the next constituent level for consideration. If approved, the suggested revisions should continue on through the next constituent levels for further evaluation until they are received the Church Manual Committee. The Church Manual Committee will process the request and, if approved, the revisions will be acted upon by the General Conference Executive Committee at the final Annual Council of the quinquennium to coordinate them with the changes of the main content that the General Conference Executive Committee will recommend to the next General Conference Session. However, the General Conference Executive Committee may address changes to the Notes at any Annual Council.

“A new edition of the *Church Manual* is published after every General Conference Session. It is recommended that leaders at all levels of the Church should always work with the most recent edition of the *Church Manual*.”
—from the introduction to the 2005 *Church Manual*.

Remuneration scale for Church employees	Division Executive Committee
Amendments to the Union Conference constitution	Union Conference constituency session
The color of the carpet in the Local Church	Local Church business meeting
Adding new members to the Local Church	Local Church business meeting
Renovation of a Sabbath School classroom	Local Church board (unless the project is a major renovation, in which case the Local Church business meeting should decide)
Selection of delegates to the local Conference constituency meeting	Local Church business meeting (for the quota of delegates assigned to that church)
Selection of delegates to a General Conference Session	The General Conference Constitution provides for quotas of delegates to be chosen by Union Conference, division executive committees, or the General Conference Executive Committee.
Making the Local Church available for weddings	Local Church board
Conducting an evangelism event in the community	Local Church business meeting (perhaps in consultation with other churches in the area, or with the local Conference)
Paying the travel cost for the Local Church treasurer to attend a training seminar	Local Church board (unless the seminar sponsor is providing the costs)
Appointment and employment of an Associate Treasurer at the Conference	Local Conference executive committee
Policy on the use of tithe	General Conference executive committee
Election of a division president	General Conference in session (by the General Conference executive committee between sessions)