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FEATURE

**Who R U?
Seventh-day Adventist Identity in a Global Context**

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a global organization with a unique history that continually shapes and reshapes their identity and the operating procedures. This brief article lays out and explains the major features of Adventism and Church structure.

**In the Beginning:
Lack of Organizational Intent**

The forefathers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church did not initially intend to create another Christian denomination. Their focus was to teach what they saw as ‘present truth’—an interpretation of Bible prophecy that pointed to the Second Coming of Jesus in 1844. They were wrong in that interpretation. However, with further Bible study and prayer they reached a more comprehensive and accurate view of prophecy and embraced its proclamation.

Though many of their followers abandoned the movement following the 1844 non-event, commonly referred to as “The Great Disappointment,” there remained a group of believers who soon became seventh-day Sabbath-keepers. They had not intended to leave their former churches, but the interpretation of prophecy they taught, along with Sabbath-keeping, made them more and more unwelcome in their local churches. Many who did not leave of their own accord were disfellowshipped or were otherwise informed that they were no longer welcome.

The fledgling movement continued in the conviction that the final events of earth’s history were taking place, that the investigative judgment described in the Book of Daniel was underway in heaven, and that the world must know how to be prepared. Gradually, the realization dawned on the leaders that some form of organization and identity was necessary to enable the movement, as the carrier of truth, to grow and fulfill its mission.

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Realizing the Need for Structure

Over the course of some twenty years following the Great Disappointment of 1844, these believers crystallized their views about organization. At first, convictions differed considerably. As is typical of organizations, various initiatives began to take place, including those relating to the holding of meetings, publication of literature, formation of local worship groups and the itinerating of preachers. Despite the considerable differences in opinion, a formal organizational design came more clearly into focus between 1860 and 1864, and the General Conference was organized in 1863. Several guiding principles lie at the foundation of Seventh-day Adventist Church organization:

1. Structure is necessary to fulfill mission
2. Bible contains principles not prescriptions for structure
3. Structural design must be informed by mission
4. There is need for balance between centralization/decentralization
5. Unity must be preserved while diversity must be permitted

Both James White and Joseph Bates (1855) initially claimed that organizational design should be patterned after the “perfect system of order, set forth in the New Testament” (p. 164). However, by 1859 White argued that “we should *not be afraid of that system which is not opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense*” (p. 68). He moved away from a principle of Bible interpretation that the only things Scripture allows are those things it explicitly approves, to a hermeneutic that allowed anything that was reasonable and did not contradict the Bible. Ideas concerning organization and structure had shifted from biblical literalism to biblical principle and common sense in the light of the church’s needs and mission.

In Adventism, mission (evangelism) and church organization are not separate issues but are united, with organization providing the delivery system for effective mission. The main theological pillar undergirding Adventist church structure is eschatology. Mission is an outgrowth of eschatology, since Adventism believes that the three angels’ message must be preached to all the world before the end of time (Knight, 2006).

Hierarchical or Collaborative Design

The Seventh-day Adventist Church structure today is sometimes viewed as being very hierarchical. In fact, the Seventh-day Adventist form of church government has characteristics from several systems: it has congregational characteristics with an emphasis on local church authority; it includes aspects of the Presbyterian system which provides for government by elected

representatives and, in some points, it mirrors the Methodist structure, with conferences as organizational units which assign ministers to local churches.

To describe the Seventh-day Adventist Church in terms of hierarchy, however, is somewhat of a caricature. From an operational standpoint the various levels of Church structure fulfil collaborative and supervisory functions entrusted to them by their member units. While it is often necessary, for descriptive purposes, to speak of different levels of Church structure, such terms must be understood in the context of collaboration and cooperation. The purpose of centralization was more for coordination than for control, while the purpose of decentralization was more for responsiveness to local situations than for independence.

Structure must always remain responsive to the interrelationships of circumstances, needs, and core values. Preserving a structural design or insisting on a rigid worldwide application of organizational pattern has no merit in itself. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has demonstrated openness to change and development when success in mission demanded a shift in approach or procedure. This was the view advanced by M. C. Wilcox:

If we will get this thing deep 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. (as cited in Oliver, 1989, p. 302)

There have been times in its history when the Church was hesitant to be flexible and adaptable. For good reason the Church did not want to be seen as weakening the very structures that provided so much strength and security. However, at pivotal periods in its history, remarkable adaptability has been demonstrated by the Church and its leaders.

In 1901-1903, for example, the principle of adaptability was almost too obvious to need stating. The very fact that the church was willing to enter into a process of radical reorganization is sufficient to indicate that priority was given to adaptability in organizational structures. In 1902, following the structural changes that were made in 1901, General Conference President, A. G. Daniells stated that

We see many things differently from what we did ten years ago, and I expect that we shall see still more. As new light comes, we ought to advance with it, and not hold rigidly to old forms and old methods. Because a thing is done a certain way in one place is not reason why it should be

done in the same way in another place, or even in the same place at the same time. (as cited in Haloviak, 1984, p. 46)

Daniells' successor, W. A. Spicer, was probably the most vocal advocate of the importance of allowing adaptability in the form that organization took in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was Spicer, an experienced missionary, who was responsible as much as anyone else for the success of the missionary enterprise of the church in the early years of the twentieth century. With his wide exposure to different cultures and situations, he repeatedly said: "*The details of organization may vary according to conditions and work, but ever as God has called his church together there has appeared in it the spiritual gift of order and of government, the spirit that rules in heaven*" (Spicer, 1909, p. 5, emphasis supplied.)

Current Structural Design

Since 1903, the Seventh-day Adventist Church structural design has followed a fairly standard pattern. In 2008, some elements of flexibility were adopted that recognize options in staffing arrangements, in officer configurations, and in organizational building blocks. The standard and alternative structural designs are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Seventh-day Adventist Structural Design

Standard Design	Alternative Design
1. Local church	1. Local church
2. Local conference/mission	2. Union of churches (conference/mission)
3. Union conference/mission	3. Division
4. Division	4. General Conference
5. General Conference	

Interrelated Structural Definitions

Structural definitions reveal much concerning the operation of Seventh-day Adventist Church’s units of organization. The series of organizational units and the accompanying definition create something of a ladder-type relationship. One can go up or down the ladder of organization and realize the inter-relatedness of all parts. The organizational units and their definitions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Adventist Structural Definitions

Organization	Definition
Local church	A “family” of Adventist members who have been granted, by the constituency session of a local mission/conference, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist Church.
Local mission/conference	A family of churches, in a specific geographic area, which has been granted, by a division executive committee action, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist local mission/conference.
Union mission/conference	A family of local missions/conferences, in a specific geographic area, which has been granted, by a General Conference session, official status as a Seventh-day Adventist union mission/union conference.
General Conference	The worldwide “family” of union missions/union conferences and other directly attached fields.
Division	A regional office of the General Conference which has been assigned general supervisory responsibilities for a specific group of unions or other church units within a geographic area.

Operating Principles in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Six operational principles summarize the interrelationships of Seventh-day Adventist Church units (see Table 3). These are as follows:

Table 3
Operating Principles

Principle	Details
Defined membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person can only be a member of one church at a time • Must be a member in order to hold office or to participate in the business meetings of the local church • Boards and committees also have defined memberships
Conferred status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership in a church is always a privilege that is granted by a group (e.g. one cannot baptize oneself); organizational status is never self-proclaimed, self-derived nor automatically perpetual; it is conferred by others • Membership is not a right • Membership can be withdrawn by the same group that granted it
Authority ascends to a group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final authority is always in a group not in one individual • Every elected/appointed leader is accountable to a group • No group or committee has greater authority than the group that appointed it
Authority is distributed throughout the organizational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different types of authority reside in different parts of the organization (i.e., membership, ministerial ordination, doctrine) • Distribution of authority helps to unite the church—no one part is complete in itself
Representative democracy process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a direct democracy every member can vote on each decision—particularly in the choice of leaders • Representative democracy involves the selection of representatives who vote in the decision-making process
Shared identity—concurrent elements of local and global identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A local SDA church is an official church but it is not the whole church • The world church is more than merely the sum of local churches

Maintaining a Global Identity

Seventh-day Adventists are committed to a global brand. The combination of theological convictions and operating practices reinforce that desire. These are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
Adventist Identity Trademarks

Task	Details
Theological convictions	<p>The Church is called to a global task</p> <p>The Church is called to demonstrate unity and community</p>
Operating practices	<p>There is both a local and a global sense of identity</p> <p>The official name is registered and its use protected</p> <p>The Church has a global logo</p> <p>Shared development of doctrinal beliefs</p> <p>Shared development of a Church Manual that defines/describes local congregational operations</p> <p>Shared practices (similar policies based on General Conference <i>Working Policy</i>)</p> <p>Shared resources committed to mission (“Together we can do more” is a motivating principle)</p> <p>Global ecclesiastical functions (ministers, church officers)</p> <p>Global publications (Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, <i>Adventist World</i>, Hope Channel)</p> <p>Global business meeting (General Conference Session)</p>

Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church structure combines elements of several systems used by religious organizations. The selection of structural design elements was not accidental, but was guided by theological convictions and practical necessities. In the course of its more than 160-year history, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has created a global organization, with an official presence in 206 countries. It has also developed a global identity based on its call to a Biblical and specific end-of-time role in world history, which continues to animate its commitment to maintain global unity, global branding, and global identity.

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