
Who Will Be Elected General Conference President in 1990?

by Richard Hammill and Ronald Graybill

Dr. Richard Hammill, who retired in 1980 as a general vice-president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, has been a delegate to nine General Conference sessions. At the 1966 General Conference session he was secretary of the nominating committee and in 1975 was elected by the nominating committee as its vice-chairman.

Hammill's life in the church has not only been distinguished, but varied. Growing up in a Church of the Brethren congregation, he became a baptized Adventist at 19. After graduating from Walla Walla College with a bachelor's in theology, he pastored for four years in the Washington Conference. In 1941 he began his missionary service by pastoring in Danang, Vietnam. His district included Hanoi.

When war broke out in the Pacific he and his family were transferred to the Philippines, where he was appointed director of the home missionary department of a union conference. The Japanese conquest of the Philippines meant Hammill and his family—along with other missionary families such as the Blakes, Eldridges, Stumps, and Wittschiebes—were imprisoned in a Japanese concentration camp for four years (1941-1945).

After World War II, Hammill earned his master's in biblical languages at the SDA Theological Seminary, then served on the faculty of Southern Missionary College for nine years (1946-1955), the last three as academic dean. During that time he earned his doctorate in Oriental languages and literature from the University of Chicago. For eight years (1955-1963) Hammill was the associate director of the General Conference department of education, responsible for collegiate education.

Hammill left his enduring mark on denominational history as president of Andrews University, where he served longer than any president (1963-1976), going back to the founding of the school as Battle Creek College. During his 13 years as president, the master's of divinity degree was officially required of all beginning ministers in North America, the first doctorates at Andrews in education and religion were accredited, and the construction of not only the seminary but also a new university library and other buildings was completed. He was also instrumental in establishing the Geoscience Research Institute.

Hammill completed his denominational career as a general vice-president, chairing committees studying church doctrine and counseling executive committees of the world divisions. He is the author of *In Full Assurance*, published by Southern Publishing Association, and the commentary on the book of Judges in the *SDA Bible Commentary*.

Hammill was interviewed by Dr. Ronald Graybill, associate professor of history at Loma Linda University and an authority on SDA church history. In addition to earning a master's of divinity from the SDA Theological Seminary and a doctorate in American history from Johns Hopkins University, Graybill worked for 13 years, until 1984, at the Ellen G. White Estate in Washington, D.C. In addition to scores of articles, he has written *Mission to Black America: The True Story of Edson White and the Riverboat Morning Star*. It was Graybill who drafted and successfully moved, at the 1980 General Conference Session, the adoption of the crucial introductory paragraph to the 27 Fundamental Beliefs, which includes the words, "Revision of these statements may be expected at a General Conference session when the church is led by the Holy Spirit to a fuller understanding of Bible truth or finds better language in which to express the teachings of God's Holy Word."

—The Editors

What Kind of President?

Graybill: What kind of a leader do you feel the church will need in 1990?

Hammill: There are times when the church needs a good executive, and organizer; someone who will set up policies and help the church function more smoothly. But as I see it, we've had several people like this at the helm of our church. Our church has for some time shown what one poet called "the blessed rage for order." What we

need is a mover and shaker, a president who can arouse us from the ruts we are in.

It seems to me, that as we're nearing the year 2000, when the third millennium of the Christian church will begin, we should elect someone who is an innovator, a person with new ideas who could help the church get a new vision of itself and of its task and the way to accomplish that task. We need a person who can articulate a vision of Adventism not only in church papers but in major addresses to national audiences via radio and television as he travels throughout the world field.

Graybill: What does the international character of the church require of a General Conference president?

Hammill: You have put your finger on a very important point. We don't want a president who comes across to the rest of the world as a North American. Neither do we want a person who would project a colonial view. For a long time, the Adventists from the former colonial powers in Europe had to have mission fields that reported directly to them. At one point our African believers were administered from four different centers, only one of which was on the continent of Africa.

In the late 1970s, some Africans were resenting this a great deal and wrote letters to the General Conference insisting that they be given more responsibility for the direction of their own work or, at the very least, have the headquarters that administered the work in Africa on the African continent. And so the church addressed itself to this problem and established African divisions with their headquarters on the continent. That was a forward move in my thinking. Recent experience in overseas fields clearly demonstrates that when indigenous believers lead their own divisions the result is enthusiasm, vigor, and solid church growth.

Graybill: This raises the long-standing question of representation and division status for North America. What's your perspective on that issue?

Hammill: In 1967 or 1968, Elder Robert Pierson appointed a committee to look into the possibility of making the North American Division quite independent, somewhat like the other divisions. At that time, I favored it. I was a member of

that committee and voted for it. The idea, however, was voted down. It was felt that the North American Division is so necessary to the welfare of the work in the other divisions, because of its financial strength, that to move it farther apart from the General Conference would probably, in effect, weaken the work in the other divisions. For



Neal C. Wilson

Present Position
President
General Conference
of SDA's

Age 70 in 1990

Education
B.A. Pacific Union
College, 1942; two
years language study,
SDA Theological
Seminary, 1942-1944

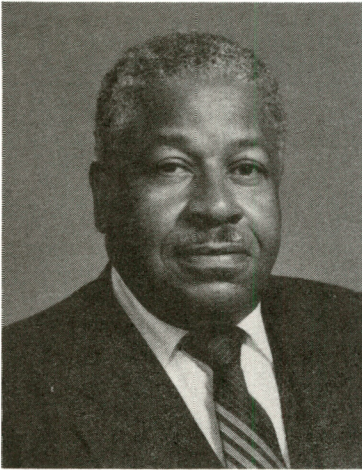
Birthplace Lodi, California
Positions

1 year (1942) Wyoming Mission Pastor/Evangelist
2 years (1942-1944) Two years language study at SDA
Theological Seminary
14 years (1944-1959) Egypt
1 year (1944-1945) Pastor/Evangelist
5 years (1945-1950) President, Egypt Mission
9 years (1950-1959) President, Nile Union
1 year (1959) Central Calif. Conf. Dir. of Rel. Liberty
6 years (1960-1966) Columbia Union
2 years (1960-1962) Dir. of Rel. Liberty
4 years (1962-1966) President
21 years (1966-1988) General Conference
12 years (1966-1978) Vice Pres. for North America
9 years (1979-1988) President

Honors

D. D. (Honorary) 1976 Andrews University

now, I don't think the North American Division should be made independent like the other divisions are. It should be kept closely tied to the General Conference, but I wouldn't be adverse to maybe providing for more membership by Americans on the General Conference Committee, let us say.



**Charles E.
Bradford**

Present Position
President
North American
Division of SDA's

Age 65 in 1990

Education
B.A. Oakwood
College, 1946

Birthplace Washington, D.C.

Positions

- 6 years (1946-1952) Southwest Region Conference
Pastor
- 5 years (1952-1957) Central States Conference
 - 1 year (1952-1953) Departmental Director
 - 4 years (1953-1957) Pastor
- 4 years (1957-1961) Northeastern Conference
 - 2 years (1957-1959) Departmental Director
 - 2 years (1959-1961) Pastor, City Tabernacle,
New York
- 18 years (1970-1988) General Conference
 - 9 years (1970-1979) Associate Secretary, North
American Division
 - 9 years (1979-1988) Vice President for North
American Division

Honors and Publications

- D. D. (Honorary) Andrews University, 1978
- Two volumes including, *Preaching to the Times*,
and *The God Between*.

Graybill: What about the notion, discussed by Elder Wilson informally with the General Conference officers and then raised again by him at the General Conference Colloquium this spring, of basing representation at General Conference sessions partly on financial support? That is, the number of delegates representing each division at General Conference sessions after 1990 would depend not only on the number of members in the division, but also on the amount of money the division contributes to the denomination's world budget.

Hammill: I believe it would be demeaning. I think that it would be much better to encourage our believers in the other parts of the world to raise

their financial contributions rather than to set up a new discriminatory policy based on finance.

Graybill: Do doctrinal issues in the church call for any particular qualities in a General Conference president?

Hammill: I think so. While our General Conference presidents have had a good grasp of Adventist theology, we've never really had a president of the General Conference who has had very much theological training. They, of course, perceived major issues, but not in the depth that I think would be desirable for the person who is the chief leader in the church. We are now coming to the place where some of our emerging leaders have had better theological training, and it might be a good time, now, to give some thought to electing a president with this background. We very much need a president with a biblically based view of the church and its message for the world.

This is particularly true since the church is experiencing certain tensions. We have noted in the past 10 years that the orientation of some Adventists is to look back to where we came from and keep their eyes fastened on the past. They've become quite reactionary. They look on the church as a city of refuge or an embattled fortress that must be defended. At the same time, there are many Adventists who, realizing the changes that are taking place in the world, choose an orientation that is more toward the future. These members regard the Christian life as a pilgrimage and the church a movable tabernacle.

We are facing a new millennium. We're coming very close to 2000 A.D. and probably it would be a great advantage for the church, facing these questions of unity and possibly facing some doctrinal problems in the next decade, to have as its president one who has undergone real depth in the study of the Bible and is acquainted with the major doctrinal issues.

Graybill: You have mentioned the desirability of unity and at the same time stressed the diversity of views of the church. How can a General Conference president relate to these divergent tendencies?

Hammill: Too many church leaders believe unity means uniformity, whereas the Apostle Paul clearly states that the church, though one body,

has many members, each with specialized and necessary functions. Adventism needs a president who is not threatened by the rich diversity in our church, but looks upon it as a potential gold mine of talent, vision, and energy, which can contribute toward a great forward thrust for the Adventist church.

The Most Likely Possibilities

Graybill: Who are the possible candidates for the next president and what might their strengths and weaknesses be?

Hammill: Obviously, Elder **Neal Wilson** may be reelected. He has proven himself to be a very good executive. He is an articulate person who speaks well and can very forcefully set forth his views. He possesses remarkable skills in dealing with important religious and political leaders around the world. At the same time he is renowned for involving himself pastorally with the problems of individual workers and members around the world.

During his administration the church has made some forward moves. For instance, consider the way in which he has greatly strengthened Adventist World Radio with a major station in the Far East that reaches large parts of the world. This, to my mind, is a very notable achievement.

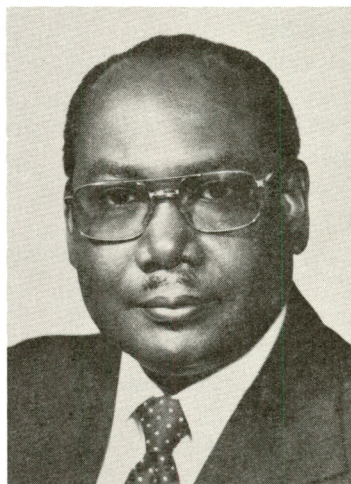
I think too of Harvest 90. I recognize that growth in numbers alone isn't all we need; still, organizing the church for an evangelistic thrust forward is an important accomplishment. In this he's done very well. And it may be that Elder Wilson could still give effective, innovative leadership. The church will have to decide whether at his age, and by 1990, having already given 12 years to leadership, it might be better to choose someone else.

Graybill: What other church leaders might be likely to receive consideration as possible General Conference presidents?

Hammill: We all recognize Elder **C. E. Bradford** is regarded as perhaps the best preacher in Adventist leadership circles. He would provide a strong spiritual mold to the presidency. Certainly, he has thrown his energies behind the

evangelistic thrust of the church. He's also developed the concept of the "Caring Church." He has given evidence of being a leader of broad vision and a person who can galvanize individuals into action. He is not afraid to take positions that may not be universally popular, such as his strong stand in favor of permitting qualified women to be ordained as ministers. He certainly does have qualities that would make an effective leader for the church. He's had a broad background as a pastor, conference president, associate secretary of the General Conference, and now as president of the North American Division.

When I was a General Conference vice-president, I saw up close what I had noted before: Elder Bradford is probably the most voracious reader in the General Conference; not only theology, but history, sociology—everything. Inevitably this



**G. Ralph
Thompson**

Present Position
Secretary
General Conference of
SDAs

Age 61 in 1990

Education
B.A. Atlantic Union
College, 1956
M.A. Andrews
University, 1958
B.D. Andrews Uni-
versity, 1962

Birthplace Connell Town, St. Lucy, Barbados

Positions

25 years (1950-1975) Caribbean
3 years (1950-1953) South Caribbean Conf.
Evangelist
11 years (1953-1964) Caribbean Union College
5 years (1959-1964) Teacher/College Church Pastor
2 years (1962-1964) Chairman, Dept. of Theology
6 years (1964-1970) East Caribbean Conf. President
5 years (1970-1975) Caribbean Union Conf. President
13 years (1975-1980) General Conference
5 years (1975-1980) General Vice President
8 years (1980-1988) Secretary

Honors

D. D. (Honorary) Andrews University, 1983

gives him breadth of outlook. At the same time, he would bring a new perspective, representing what has been a racial minority in the church.

Graybill: But Elder Bradford lacks overseas mission service. Isn't that a prerequisite to serving

ence. I'm sure he would consider those churches a mission field. I wouldn't consider this to be a major impediment to his becoming a president, in view of his particular background and experience.

Graybill: Who else might the church look to when the time comes to choose a new General Conference president in 1990?

Hammill: In the past we have elected to the presidency persons who have been the secretary of the General Conference. By 1990, Elder **G. Ralph Thompson** will have served for a decade as secretary of the General Conference. Prior to that time he served one term as a general vice-president, during which time he chaired several committees, including some revising the *Church Manual*. He is a native of Barbados and has served in the Caribbean as a conference and union president. Even while serving in the General Conference, he has for years prepared tapes for broadcasting on the radio back in the Caribbean countries. He would have an international viewpoint. I'm sure he would want to accelerate the move toward giving greater responsibility to indigenous churches. So, I think Elder Thompson will receive consideration.

Also, our church has often chosen its presidents from those who have been division presidents. A couple come to mind in this category. One of these is Elder **Walter Scragg**, currently serving as president of the South Pacific Division and before that as president of the Northern European Division. He has served as a president longer than any of the other division leaders, and is the only one to have been the president of two divisions. In both, Elder Scragg strongly supported the development of educational institutions, including ministerial training programs in West Africa, Newbold College in England, and Avondale College in Australia. As director of the General Conference Department of Communication, Scragg became well acquainted with how the church operates throughout the world. He is a ready speaker and writes well. In fact, he has written eight books, including commentaries on his two Sabbath school quarterlies in 1987, *The God Who Says Yes* and *The In-Between God*, as well as the devotional book for 1988, *Such Bright Hopes*. Scragg would be able to articulate his



Walter R. L.

Scragg

Present Position
President
South Pacific
Division of SDAs

Age 65 in 1990

Education

Ministerial course,
Avondale College,
1943-1945; B.A.
Univ. of Adelaide,
1947-1949

Birthplace Auckland, New Zealand

Positions

- 16 years (1947-1966) Australasia
 - 6 years (1949-1955) Victoria Conf., Pastor/
Evangelist
 - 9 years (1956-1965) Voice of Prophecy, Australasian
Division, Speaker/Program Dir.
 - 4 years (1961-1965) Australasian Division, Dir. of
Communications
 - 1 year (1965-1966) Longburn College, New Zealand
President
- 8 years (1967-1975) General Conference, Radio and
Television Dept. (Director, 1973-1975)
- 8 years (1975-1980) Northern European Division,
President
- 4 years (1984-1988) South Pacific Division,
President

Honors and Publications

- D. D. (Honorary) Andrews University, 1982
- Eight volumes including, *Such Bright Hopes*

as General Conference president?

Hammill: I can't think of a General Conference president in recent memory who hasn't served as a missionary. Elder Bradford has not served as an overseas missionary, but certainly the churches he pastored in his younger days, some of them in the ghettos of New York, would have provided him with culturally diverse experi-

vision for the church to Adventists in both public meetings and articles. More than any other possible president, he also would perform effectively in communicating on radio and television to the general public during international travels. He is a person of real stature who will receive serious consideration.

Graybill: How does his age compare with that of Elder Wilson?

Hammill: He's probably approaching the years of normal retirement but is younger than Elder Wilson. We all know that lately people have been serving longer than they used to. In this country there is a trend in this direction in laws relating to retirement. Elder Scragg would have the vigor to serve as president, but the church would probably have to recognize that it might be a one-term appointment.

Graybill: What about other division presidents?

Hammill: I think of Dr. **Jan Paulsen**, president of the Trans-European Division. He is a person who has had very careful and excellent training in mission theology. He holds a doctoral degree from Tübingen University in Germany. His roots are in Scandinavia, but he's served as a missionary in Africa and as a teacher of religion and head of the Bible department at Newbold College. He has had the experience, as an executive, expected of a General Conference president. He was president of Newbold College and secretary of the Northern European Division. He is now president of that division under its new name, the Trans-European Division.

He brings not only a wealth of administrative experience, but his fine background and training in the Bible would make him an outstanding candidate in terms of being able to handle doctrinal issues that might arise within the church. In fact, he might foster theological renewal. His book, *When the Spirit Descends*, from the Review and Herald Publishing Association, is both pastoral and grounded in solid academic research. Of all the administrators, I think perhaps he is exceptional in combining high-level executive experience with theological training. He is also the youngest of the likely General Conference presidents.



Jan Paulsen

Present Position

President
Trans-European
Division of SDAs

Age 55 in 1990

Education

B.A. Andrews University, 1957; M.A. SDA Theological Seminary; Th.D. University of Tübingen, West Germany, 1962

Birthplace Narvik, Norway

Positions

4 years (1954-1955, 1959-1961) Norway, Pastor

6 years (1962-1968) West Africa

2 years (1962-1964) Bekwai Teacher Training College, Ghana, Bible teacher

4 years (1964-1968) Adventist Seminary of West Africa, Nigeria

3 years (1964-1967) Head of Religion Dept.

1 year (1967-1968) President of seminary

20 years (1968-1988) Trans-European Division

12 years (1968-1976) Newbold College, England

8 years (1968-1976) Chairman of Rel. Dept.

4 years (1976-1980) President

3 years (1980-1983) Secretary, Trans-European Div.

5 years (1983-1988) President, Trans-European Div.

Publications

Two volumes including, *When the Spirit Descends*.

Less Likely, But Qualified

Graybill: Are there other individuals who are unlikely to be chosen as General Conference President, but if by some unforeseen sequence of events, they were elected, would serve with distinction?

Hammill: Yes, there are some very promising and able leaders who aren't as well known in the church. I think, for instance, of Dr. **Calvin Rock** who is now one of the general vice-presidents of the General Conference. He has a wealth of experience as a pastor, part of the time in the large Ephesus Church in Harlem, New York. For many

years he gave outstanding leadership as president of Oakwood College, during which time he traveled extensively in the African divisions. He is a well-educated person with a doctorate in Christian Ethics from Vanderbilt University, a powerful preacher and a successful evangelist—a recent series of meetings in Kenya where he was the principal speaker resulted more than 1,000 baptisms. He could represent the views of much more than just black American Adventists.

It may be that as we come to a new stage in the development of the church, we ought to look to someone outside the regular ranks of administrators.

Other names come to my mind. One of these, Elder **Alf Birch**, has served the church as a president of local conferences and as secretary, or second in command, of the Southern Africa Division. When that division was reorganized out of existence, he was elected president of the South African Union, attached directly to the General Conference. He carried out graduate study in theology, in the United States, and is currently serving in Australia as director of the church-ministries department of the South Pacific Division. He's a very charismatic leader. Wherever he has served, people have enjoyed very much serving under him. His concept of the church, of the equality of all members, and of the right of self-determination for churches in all areas of the world field is a quality greatly to be desired in the president of the General Conference. There is no doubt his administration would be innovative, spiritual, and effective.

It may be that as we come to a new stage in the development of the church, we ought to look to someone outside the regular ranks of administrators. Dr. **Russell Staples**, formerly a missionary in Africa, is the chairman of the Mission Department at Andrews University. Before coming to the United States he was principal of Solusi College. He is one of the best-read theologians in the church. Dr. Staples has a very strong vision of the

role national leaders should play, and what this might do to revitalize the work in some places where our church is somewhat moribund. Here's a person who, as chief leader of the denomination, could help us to clarify and articulate the vision of what the mission of the church is; move us on to a new and more active concept of mission than we've thought of so far. He is a person who could bring leadership to the General Conference.

If we decide that this is the time to break out of the usual patterns of doing things and look outside the usual administrative echelons, we should remember that perhaps the most important person of all in the development of the church is the pastor of the local congregation. That is why many denominations choose their chief officer from among their pastors. It might be a very good idea to elect a senior pastor of wide experience as the next president of the General Conference.

Maybe we ought to look for someone like Dr. **Louis Venden** who served as a missionary for several years in Japan. He has a doctorate in pastoral theology from a first-rate university, Princeton, has taught many years at the SDA Theological Seminary, and now serves as senior pastor of one of the largest—if not *the* largest—Adventist congregations in the world, the Loma Linda University Campus Church. He is familiar with the challenges and opportunities of large Adventist institutions. With the power and influence of the General Conference presidency, Pastor Venden could revitalize the pastoral ministry, one of the denomination's, greatest needs. This suggestion of considering a practicing pastor as General Conference president should not be dismissed as impractical. It deserves careful, prayerful consideration.

How Presidents Are Elected

Graybill: The politics of choosing a General Conference president would virtually rule out the possibility of some of these less-prominent individuals, wouldn't it?

Hammill: Probably. Yet there are plenty of people who are beginning to think that individuals who have come up stage-by-stage, through the

echelons of administration in the church, probably have been placed within a mold that would be very hard for them to break out of.

Graybill: So that if we wanted someone with a new vision, we ought to look outside that conditioning process? Is that what you're saying?

Hammill: That's what I'm saying. There is a tendency among leaders to develop what some have called "group think." You're trying to be helpful, you want to be cooperative, you sit in committees and see programs, and you sort of develop a "going along" orientation that tends to curb real creativity. It may be that now is the time to look outside the administrative echelons to find an academic or a pastor who could be placed in the top leadership role in the church; a visionary leader who would help us break out of the pattern we are in and really make a surge forward.

Graybill: Let's look at the actual process of selecting a president. Doesn't the fact that the incumbent travels around the world, meeting people, pastors, and leaders, give him a tremendous advantage over any other possible candidate?

Hammill: Yes, I think undoubtedly it does. He's the most well-known individual in the whole church and is quite uniformly respected. Our past history has shown that with very few exceptions when a General Conference president wanted to go on he usually was reelected. There have been a few cases where this was not so. For instance, A. G. Daniells, after he had served for 21 years, still wanted to be reelected. The nominating committee was divided so that they were not ready to report by the time the session was ready to end and the session had to be extended for several days. It took a great deal of persuasion to get Elder Daniells to withdraw.

Graybill: Have the dynamics of the nominating committee changed over the last few General Conference sessions?

Hammill: It's changed markedly. Probably more in the last few sessions than it has in the past 50-70 years. As the church has grown larger, there is naturally a larger representation from overseas. And during the last two sessions, the overseas delegates have asserted themselves as they never did before. I've been on the nominating commit-

tee a number of times. The first time was in 1966 when I was secretary of the committee. At that time the overseas delegates didn't say much. The North American delegates spoke most often; they assumed the leadership role. It was taken for granted that a union president from North America would be the chairman of the committee—nobody ever questioned that.

In the 1975 session in Vienna, when I was vice-chairman of the nominating committee, the overseas delegates on the nominating committee became more vocal. They would disagree with the delegates from North America. They even con-

If one could really have a very outstanding person from the Third World who was articulate, bright, and aggressive, I think the church would accept him.

tested whether the chairman of the committee should be a North American union president.

In 1980 I was not a member of the nominating committee, but I was told that the overseas delegates were the most active they had ever been. They are better educated now; they're more self-assured; they're more aware of how the process works. Then finally, in 1985, the nominating committee elected Dr. Leshner, president of Andrews University, to chair their committee. The North American Division union presidents' hold on that post was broken. I think it's a real asset to the church to have these leaders from around the world developing the way they are.

Graybill: What would be the reaction of North America if an African or a South American was elected president of the General Conference?

Hammill: That's hard to say. We did have one General Conference president who was an Australian—C. H. Watson. He was well received. And at one time the president of the North American Division was an Australian.

Graybill: But these were still white, English-speaking leaders.

Hammill: Yes, and the work in Australia is very much like it is in North America. If one could

really have a very outstanding person from the Third World who was articulate, bright, and aggressive, I think the church would accept him. Such a person would have some built-in disadvantages in knowing how to deal with the problems in North America, problems connected to finances and large institutions, for instance.

Graybill: Don't you suppose that third-world pastors feel just as uneasy about the capabilities of North American-born-and-bred administrators to handle their problems as we would if they were in charge of our work?

Hammill: That's a good point. That's exactly the way they now feel.