

## Curriculum Guide for Presentations on: ***Church Organization and Mission***

**Goal:** 1) To understand basic principles in Seventh-day Adventist Church organization and how these are applied to operations.  
2) To understand how denominational structure relates to denominational mission.  
3) To adopt leadership practices that demonstrate respect for denominational organization and build church membership trust in the legitimacy and effectiveness of it

### **Points to cover:**

1. Basic concepts in Seventh-day Adventist Church organizational structure: (see also General Conference *Working Policy* D 05)
  - a. Structure is necessary to fulfill mission. The Bible contains principles of organization, not prescriptions for organization. New Testament principles for organization include:
    - i. Preservation of unity (John 15, 17 and Ephesians 4, etc.)
    - ii. Engagement in worldwide mission (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:7-8, Acts 10-11)
    - iii. Recognition of diversity and a process for the resolution of conflict (Acts 6, 15, Galatians 3:26-29, Philippians 2)
  - b. Representative and constituency-based system
  - c. Authority rooted in God and distributed to the whole people of God
  - d. Accountability and authority exercised through the committee system
  - e. Shared administration rather than a presidential system
  - f. The unity of entities based on mission, purpose, and beliefs that bind the believers together in a universal fellowship
  - g. Every entity part of the 'sisterhood', cannot act without reference to the whole (see Article III "Relationships" in Model Constitutions, General Conference *Working Policy* D 10, D 15, D 17, D 19, D 20, D 25)
  - h. SDA Church polity is neither congregational nor hierarchical, it is interdependent
  - i. Mission (see General Conference *Working Policy* A 05) informs structure; Seventh-day Adventists take the Gospel Commission as the basis for their understand of mission—the whole Church engaged in taking the whole gospel to the whole world. Therefore structure facilitates mission by creating various entities with specific geographic territory and assigning specific responsibility to each entity while embracing a sense of worldwide organization through:
    - i. distributed authority (see below under Operating Principles)
    - ii. globally-approved statements of belief
    - iii. globally-approved *Church Manual*
    - iv. a representative system for development of policy
    - v. a quinquennial global business meeting (General Conference Session)
  - j. Much of the Church's organization and activity is carried out through unincorporated organizational units. However, there is an increasing variety of incorporated entities established to facilitate specific aspects of denominational activity or to advance particular aspects of the Church's mission. (See General

- Conference *Working Policy* BA 25 Corporations, Institutions and Other Legal Entities...)
- k. SDA Church operations exhibit certain aspects of both centralization and decentralization. A balance must be maintained. The purpose of centralization is more for coordination than for control. The purpose of decentralization is more for responsiveness to mission in local situations than for independence.
2. Operating principles in Seventh-day Adventist organization: (how concepts of structure are implemented)
- a. **Defined membership:** Every unit of church organization (local church, local mission/conference, union, General Conference) has a defined membership. Membership can only be held in one place at a time. Membership carries with it the right to participate in the official business decisions of the organization where membership is held and to be given/entrusted with specific responsibility (such as holding office) within the organization.
  - b. **Conferred membership:** Membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not a right nor is it self-declared or self-generated. Membership is a status entrusted to an individual, or an organization, by those who are already members of the entity concerned. Membership is held in trust. Failure to uphold the terms and standards of membership may result in discipline or removal of membership. The body that has authority to approve membership also has authority to revoke membership.
  - c. **Ultimate authority in groups rather than in individuals:** Operational authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is entrusted to the committee system (executive committees or boards, in the case of institutions) and to periodic membership meetings (constituency sessions) of the organization. The highest administrative authority in the Church is always a group rather than an individual. Officers of the organization are accountable to a group (the executive committee/board or constituency session).
  - d. **Distributed authority at various levels of organization:** Seventh-day Adventist Church structure is expressed in several layers of organization (local church, local mission/conference, union, division, General Conference). Authority in the Church is distributed among the layers of organization. No single entity or layer of organization has full and final authority in every matter of administration. All layers of organization are dependent on other layers of organization using their authority with a view to the health and well being of the entire Church. For example: A local church, in business meeting, has final authority on whether an individual may/may not be granted membership in that local church. But the local church does not have the authority to define the fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nor can it revise denominational policies. (See curriculum guide for “Roles and Relationships in Seventh-day Adventist Denominational Structure” for further amplification of this operating principle.)
  - e. **Representative democracy:** The Church operates upon the principles of representative democracy in its successive layers of organization. All members in regular standing at a local church may participate in the decisions of a church business meeting. The business meeting of the local church elects a board and grants certain decision-making authority to the board. The local church

participates in a conference business meeting (constituency session) by selecting a quota of members to represent the church at the constituency session. This pattern of members in a given organization selecting representatives to serve at other levels of decision-making is followed throughout denominational structure. (Note that in corporations, institutions and other legal entities the representative system is also used but may be accomplished in a manner somewhat different from the ecclesiastical structures of the Church.)

- f. Shared mission/identity/practices: All units of denominational organization share in the same statement of Church mission (see General Conference *Working Policy* A 05). The global Church, by actions of General Conference sessions, has approved a *Church Manual* to serve as the policy manual for local churches. The General Conference Executive Committee, with members from around the world, approves the working policy framework for denominational entities. Denominational identity for organizations is accomplished through “trademarks” such as a denominational logo and legal protections regarding the use of the name “Seventh-day Adventist”. (See General Conference *Working Policy* BA 40 for Trademark Policy.)
  - g. Shared resources: The Church has established systems for the sharing of human and financial resources. “From everywhere to everywhere” expresses the intent of the Church to deploy human resources for the accomplishment of mission worldwide. “Together we can do more” captures the spirit of the Church’s tithes and offering system whereby opportunity is provided for every member to financially support the local church program as well as to participate in the global activity of the denomination.
3. Adopting leadership practices that strengthen denominational organization and life:
    - a. Leaders are expected to affirm the legitimacy of denominational organization and to demonstrate this legitimacy by engagement of their organizations in the mission of the Church
    - b. Leaders are obligated to act in ways that demonstrate the effectiveness and efficiency of denominational organization
    - c. It is the task of leadership to maintain and strengthen the roles and relationships of organizations in denominational structure. There is no room for an ideology of independence from the rest of the body.
    - d. Church organization is both strong and fragile: any leader, with determination can weaken the structure; any leader, with determination, can help to keep it strong and effective in mission.