

Curriculum Guide for Presentations on:

Roles and Relationships in Denominational Structure

Goal: 1) To understand Seventh-day Adventist Church denominational structure and the relationships that apply to effective operations among organizations.
2) To understand the role of governance documents in denominational structure.
3) To elicit leadership respect for and commitment to denominational structure and procedures.

Points to cover:

1. **Local and global identity:** The Seventh-day Adventist Church has adopted a structural design that is both local and global. At one end of the organizational spectrum is the local church; at the other end is the global church or General Conference. Moving from the local church towards the General Conference there is a succession of organizational structures; each one having a larger territorial supervision than the previous one until the entire world geography is embraced in church structure.
2. **Church polity:** Seventh-day Adventist Church structure is neither congregational nor hierarchical. It is interdependent. No unit of organization has full authority for its identity and operations. No unit is self-existent or fully independent. Authority is distributed throughout organizational structure in such a way that each entity is to some degree dependent on other units of organization.
3. **“Mission” or “Conference” classification:** Organizational levels between the local church and the General Conference are granted either ‘mission’ or ‘conference’ status. Mission status indicates that the entity is more reliant on the next larger level of organization for leadership selection decisions and resources. Conference status represents the highest level of self-governance possible. This level of self-governance should not be confused with independence. A conference organization is authorized to select its own leadership. Conference status also generally indicates that the organization is a net contributor to the financial resources of the church outside its specific territory.
4. **Authority of groups:** Authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is representative and membership-based. The highest authority resides in a group rather than in an individual. Every leader is accountable to a group.
5. **Constituency or membership meetings:** Seventh-day Adventist organizations have periodic constituency or membership meetings. The membership meeting represents the highest authority within that level of organization. Delegates to a membership meeting vote on major matters for the entity such as the election of leaders and members of the executive committee. (Organizations with mission status do not elect their own officers.)

6. **Executive Committees:** Between regular constituency meetings the affairs of the organization are managed by an executive committee whose members are elected at a constituency meeting. The executive committee is authorized to act on behalf of the constituency and in harmony with governance documents.
7. **Pattern for organizational structure:** The Seventh-day Adventist Church has adopted a worldwide pattern for structure. There may be some minor variation with respect to unit terminology. Each unit of organization has a defined membership and a specific territory of operations. (In cities with multiple local churches the territorial boundaries may be somewhat blurred.) The pattern is summarized as follows:
 - a. **Local Church:** The smallest unit of official Seventh-day Adventist structure. The local church is a group of Seventh-day Adventist members that has been granted authority, by a local mission/conference constituency session, to function as an official Seventh-day Adventist Church located in a specific territory.
 - b. **Local Mission/Conference:** The next larger unit of organization is the local mission or conference—a group or cluster of local churches that has been granted authority, by a union mission/conference constituency session, to function as an official Seventh-day Adventist mission/conference with supervisory responsibility for a defined territory.
 - c. **Union Mission/Conference:** The next larger unit of organization—a group of local missions/conferences that has been granted authority, by a General Conference constituency session, to function as a union mission/conference with supervisory responsibility for a defined territory.
 - i. **Union of Churches Mission/Conference:** In certain geopolitical circumstances the General Conference has established entities described as a Union of Churches with mission or conference status. This type of organization is a variation from the standard pattern. In such cases, the Union of Churches performs the combined role of the Local Mission/Conference and the Union Mission/Conference.
 - d. **General Conference:** The General Conference is the largest unit of Seventh-day Adventist Church structure. All unions or unions of churches in the world are members of the General Conference. In addition, any local mission or conference that may be attached directly to the General Conference will be a member of the General Conference organization.
 - e. **Divisions of the General Conference:** For purposes of efficient supervision, the General Conference has established division offices in various parts of the world. These are identified as “divisions of the General Conference” and thus do not represent an additional constituency-based unit of organization. In 2015 there are 13 division offices around the world
 - f. **Institutions:** The Seventh-day Adventist Church operates numerous institutions (schools/college/universities, healthcare institutions, media and publishing companies, social service agencies, etc.). These are special-purpose organizations established by the various organization levels (as described in a. through e. above) to serve the needs of the entity and territory involved. Institutions are not considered as new or separate levels of denominational structure.
8. **Governance documents:** Every Seventh-day Adventist organization recognizes the authority of certain documents in denominational life. These are:

- a. **The Statement of Fundamental Beliefs:** Approved (and amended if necessary) by a General Conference constituency session
 - b. **General Conference Working Policy:** Approved (and amended if necessary) by the General Conference executive committee. The *General Conference Working Policy* provides the operational policy framework for all denominational organization units apart from the local church.
 - c. **Church Manual:** The *Church Manual*, approved (and amended if necessary) by the General Conference constituency session) addresses the operations of the local church and its relationship to the local mission/conference.
 - d. **Constitution and Bylaws:** These documents, based on models approved by the General Conference executive committee, govern the operation of entities with conference status. Organizations with mission status will have an Operating Policy approved by the supervising unit for the mission.
9. **Role and Purpose of Policy:** The General Conference executive committee establishes the policy framework for organizations other than the local church. As such, *General Conference Working Policy* represents global leadership decisions regarding how entities function and work together. It is important to note that policy is dynamic; it can be changed as needs arise. The purpose of policy is to protect the organization from:
- a. Autocratic and erratic leadership
 - b. Merely reactive decision-making by officers and executive committees
 - c. Widely differing patterns of action
10. **Distribution of Authority Within Church Structure:** Each level of denominational structure has a realm of authority that affects the functioning of other levels of structure. Authority and responsibility in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not centralized in a hierarchical structure. Instead, authority and responsibility are distributed so that all parts of the Church structure become inter-dependent. No part of the Church can exist on its own, nor can any part act as if it exists only for itself.

The distribution of authority and responsibility in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is illustrated by the following examples of how and where final decision-making roles are exercised: (The listing is not exhaustive not intended to be definitive.)

Structural unit	Example of final authority and responsibility
Local church	Decisions on membership (admission/discipline/dismissal) Selection of local church officers and boards Furtherance of mission within its territory
Local mission	Employment of pastors Establishment and operation of elementary schools Selection of staff and members of executive committee Counsel/guide churches/employees within its territory
Local conference	Employment of pastors Establishment and operation of elementary schools

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selection of local conference officers, staff and members of executive committee Revision/amendment of constitution and bylaws Counsel/guide churches/employees within its territory
Union mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ordination of ministers Establishment and operation of institutions (education, healthcare, publishing, etc.) Selection of union mission staff and members of executive committee Appointment of officers for local missions
Union conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ordination of ministers Establishment and operation of institutions (education, healthcare, publishing, etc.) Selection of union officers, staff and members of executive committee Revision/amendment of constitution and bylaws Appointment of officers for local missions
General Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formulation of denominational beliefs Creation/revision/amendment of <i>Church Manual</i> Revision/amendment of constitution and bylaws
General Conference Executive Committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment and configuration of division boundaries Approval to form new unions Establishment and operation of General Conference institutions Establishment/revision of <i>Working Policy</i>
Divisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment and operation of institutions Responsibility for a delegated range of policies Acting/speaking on behalf of the General Conference Adoption of employee licenses and credentials General supervision of work in division territory Authority to set up corporations

11. Settlement of Differences, Grievances and Appeals: When differences arise in organizations on matters not already addressed in the Constitution and Bylaws, in General Conference Working Policy, or in General Conference Executive Committee acts at an Annual Council, opportunity is given to appeal to the next higher organization not directly involved in the matter. The decision of the organization to which the matter is appealed is considered final unless that organization itself chooses to refer the matter to a higher level.