



# Seventh-day Adventist Church Structure —many parts, one movement!

New Treasurer's Training Seminar  
North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists  
Linthicum, MD, June 26-30, 2022  
Presenter: Lowell C Cooper

# SDA Ecclesiastical Infrastructure—2020

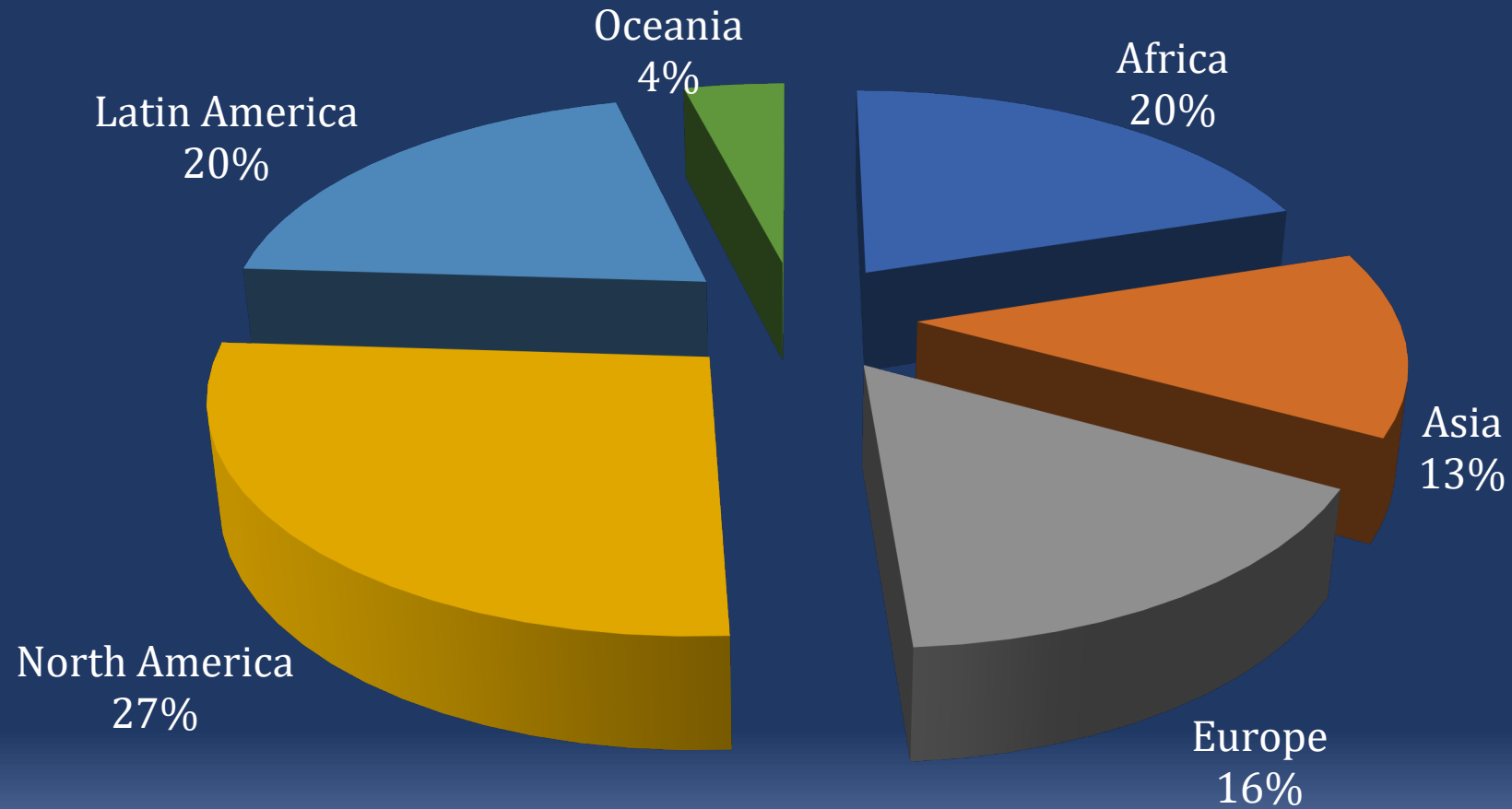
Union Conferences	63
Union Missions	60
Union of Churches (Conference)	11
Union of Churches (Mission)	4
Local Conferences	418
Local Missions	313
Divisions	13
Churches	92,876

# SDA Institutional Infrastructure—2020

Education (tertiary, training, secondary)	2,796
Food industries	22
Hospitals and sanitariums	229
Care facilities (nursing, child, retiree)	144
Medical/Dental (clinics, dispensaries)	1,603
Media Centers	18
Publishing Houses (and branches)	57

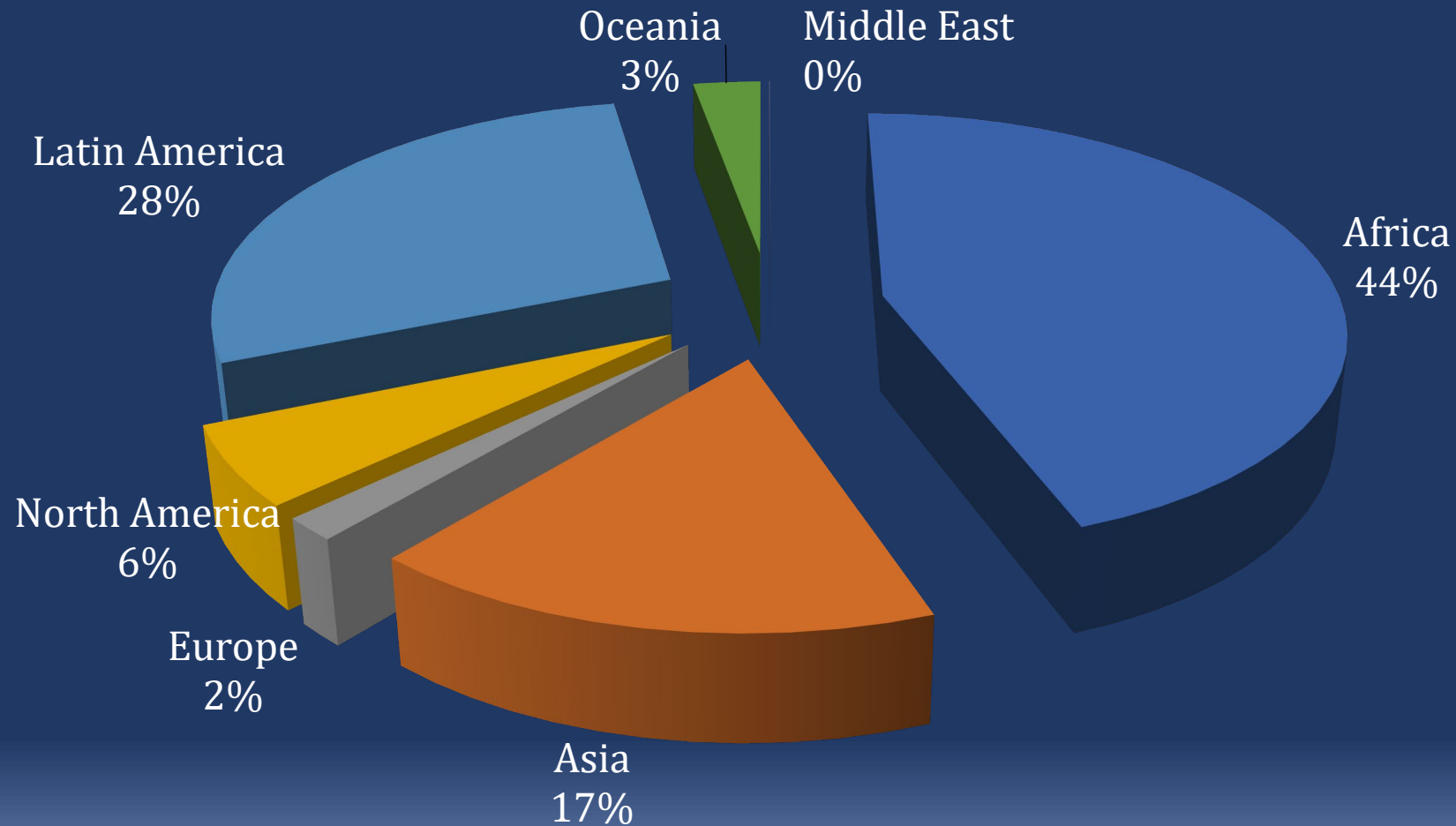
# SDA world membership distribution—1960

*Membership 1,245,125*



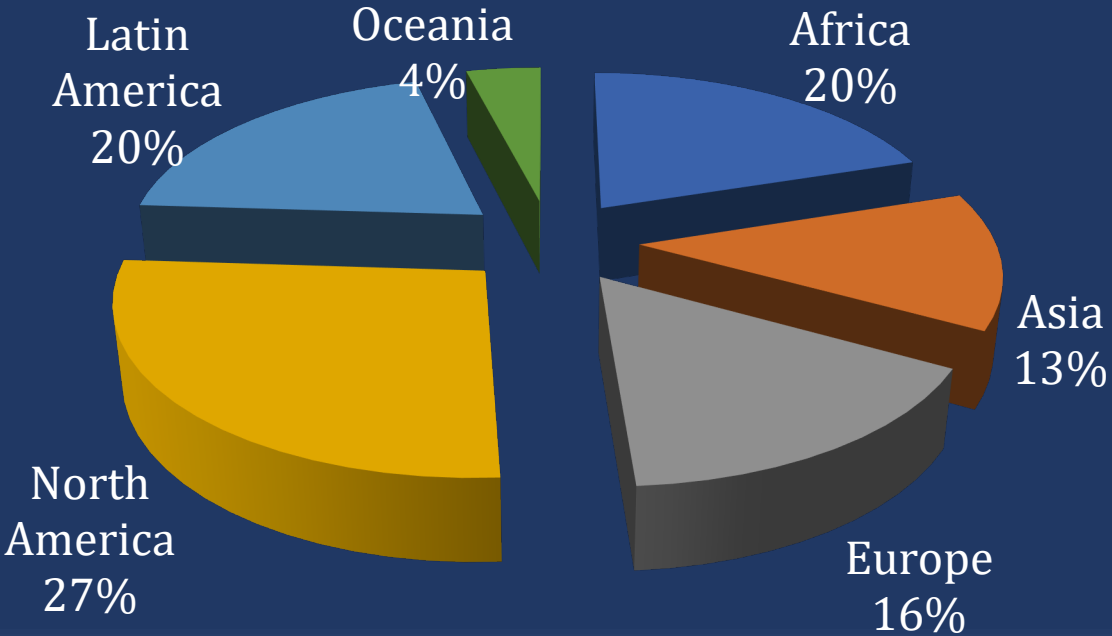
# SDA world membership distribution—2021

Membership 21,912,161

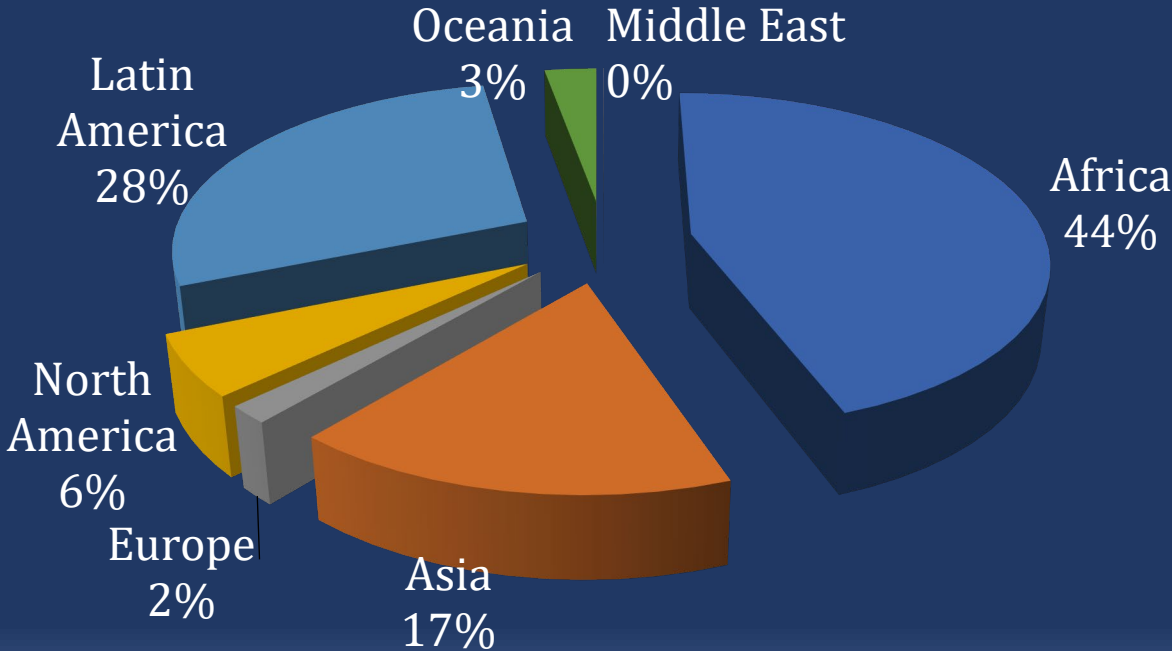


# SDA world membership distribution

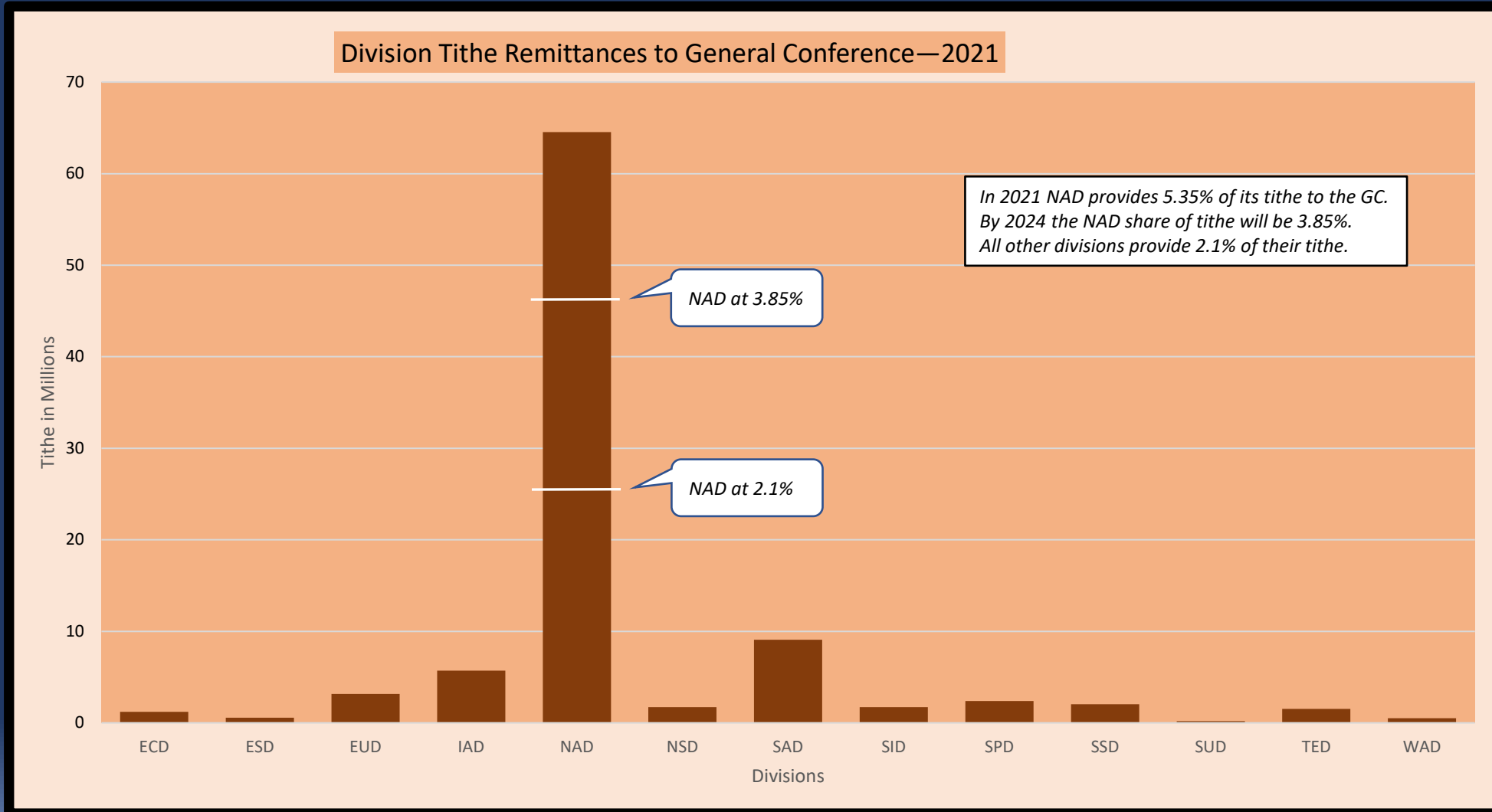
1960



2021



# 2021 Division Tithe to GC, Dec 31, 2021



# Objectives:

1. To understand Seventh-day Adventist Church structure and operating principles.
2. To recognize the governance framework and documents for a Conference.
3. To know essential components of “situational awareness” for new treasurers.



# Biblical Pictures of the Church:

1. Sheep with a shepherd (Isa 40:11, Jn 10:14-16)
2. Body of Christ (Rom 12:5, 1Cor 12:27, Eph 1:23)
3. Vine and branches (Jn 15:5)
4. Household of faith (Eph 2:19, 1Tim 3:15)
5. Family of God (Deut 14:2, Rom 8:15, Gal 4:5-6)
6. Children of God (Matt 5:9, Rom 9:26, 1Jn 3:1-10)
7. Building (Mt 16:18, 1Cor 3:10, Eph 2:21, 1Pet 2:5)
8. Bride (Isa 62:5, 2Cor 11:2, Rev 19:7)

# Multiple contexts for “Church”

- A particular group of believers in a town or city.  
(Pasco Riverview Seventh-day Adventist Church)
- The larger family of faith, of which the local church is a part. (The Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America)
- One of many Christian denominations. (Anglican Church, Methodist Church, Baptist Church, Roman Catholic Church, etc.)
- The universal family of God. (The Church down through history...)

# Contrasting aspects of “Church”

- Dual reality—divine and human
- Invisible and visible boundaries
- Incorporated and unincorporated
- Participation is voluntary and yet obligatory
- Global and local identities
- Not-for-profit but growth-focused

The biblical symbols for “Church” and the multiple meanings for “Church” may overshadow the realization that the Church has a definite organizational structure and specific operational procedures for accomplishment of its mission.

# Concurrent structural patterns:

1. Ecclesiastical structure of the Church
2. Legal structure of the Church
3. Special entities sponsored by the Church

# Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiastical structure

How does the Church function as a spiritual body with a world-wide mission?

# Church polity

A term that describes the organization, governance, and operation of a Christian denomination. It addresses:

1. **Governance** (where authority resides/how it operates)
2. **Structure** (organizational design)
3. **Ministry** (minister authorization and functions)
4. **Association** (relationship among name-brand entities)

# Three common patterns of church polity

1. Episcopal
2. Presbyterian
3. Congregational



# Episcopal church polity

1. From Greek '*episkopos*' translated as '*bishop*' or '*overseer*'
2. Functions with a single leader who has final authority (bishop, archbishop, pope)
3. Examples: Roman Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal, and Greek Orthodox churches, Independent churches where pastor has ultimate authority ('strong pastor' model)

# Presbyterian church polity

1. From the Greek '*presbuteros*' usually translated '*elder*'
2. Mainly developed out of the Reformation
3. Authority rests not with one single individual but with a body of elders or presbyters
4. Examples include: Presbyterians, Lutherans, and other Reformed churches

# Congregational church polity

1. Final authority rests in the congregation
2. Congregation elects primary office holders authorized to make decisions—but the congregation can override
3. Independence/autonomy of local church
4. Examples: Baptists, Pentecostals, United Church of Christ, Non-denominational

## SDA Church polity most resembles?

1. Episcopal polity
2. Presbyterian polity
3. Congregational polity
4. Some aspects from each of the above
5. None of the above

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# SDA Church polity

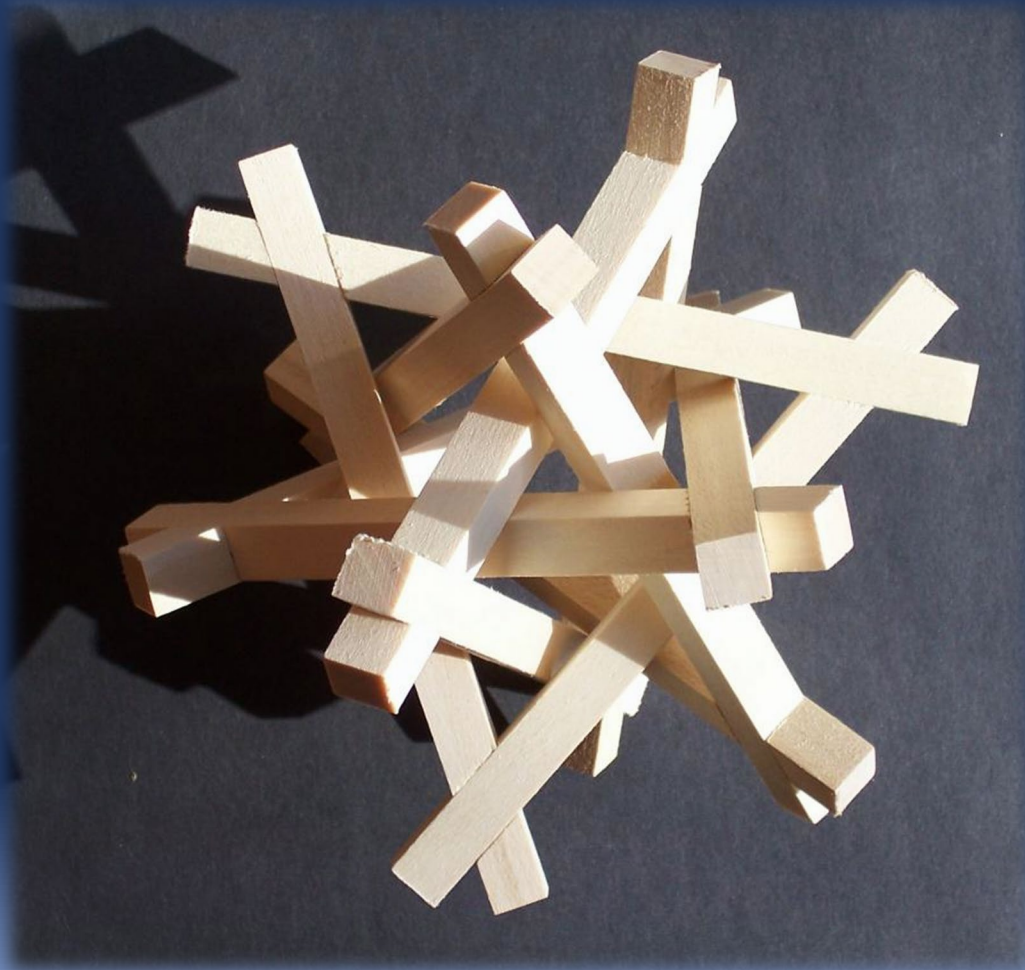
~~Congregational~~

~~Presbyterian~~

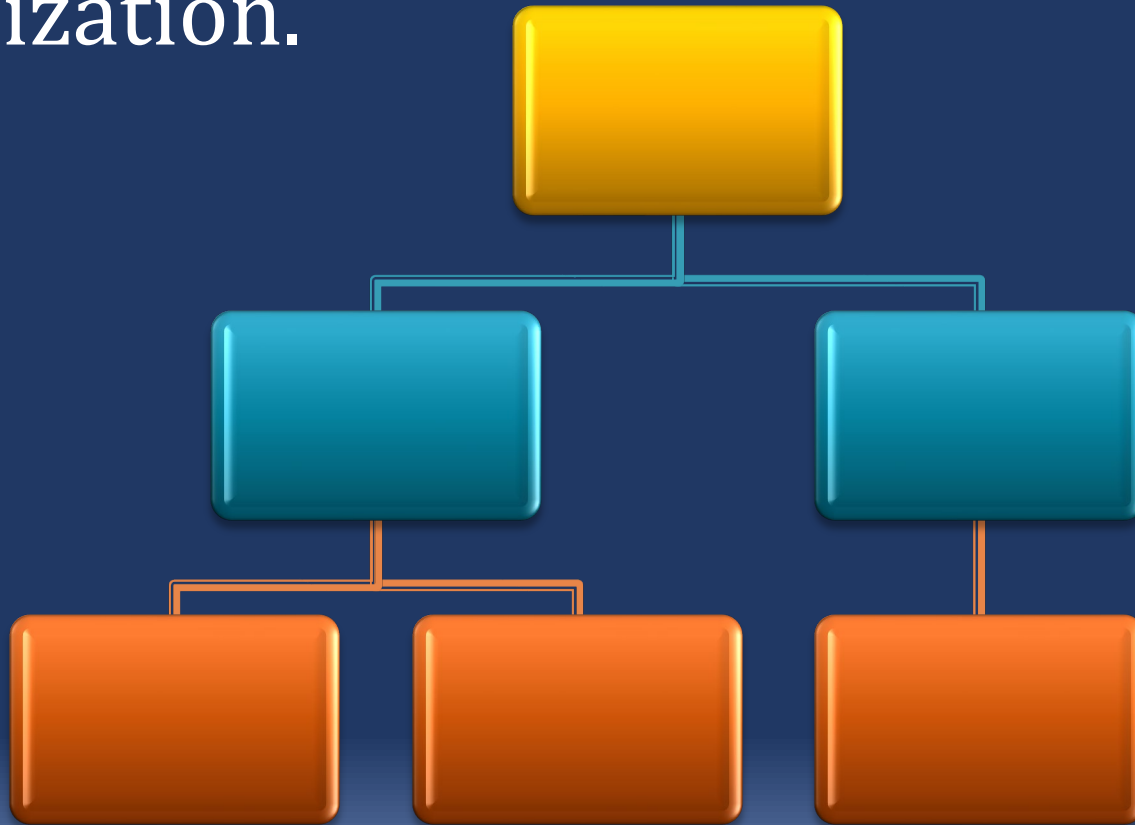
~~Episcopal~~



# SDA: Interlocking and Interdependent



A typical corporate organization chart is an inappropriate expression of SDA Church organization.





# Seventh-day Adventist Church polity

1. Representative (4 constituent levels)
2. Authority distributed throughout structure
3. Group-based authority and decision-making
4. One order of ministers
5. Synchronous local and global identity
6. Interdependent functions—each expression of SDA organization needs the others

# SDA ecclesiastical structure linkages:

How does the Church function as a spiritual body with a world-wide mission?

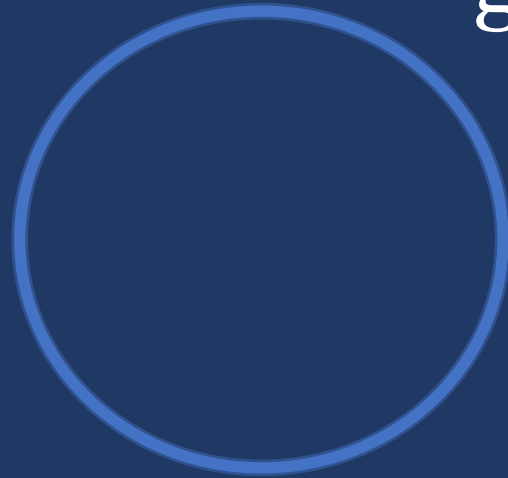
How do the ecclesiastical structures relate to each other?

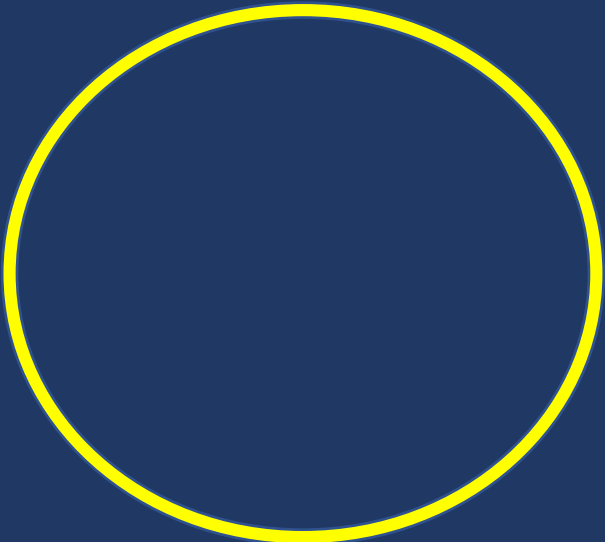


A **Local Church** is the smallest constituency-based unit of SDA structure.



Local churches are grouped into **Missions** or **Conferences** with geographic boundaries.

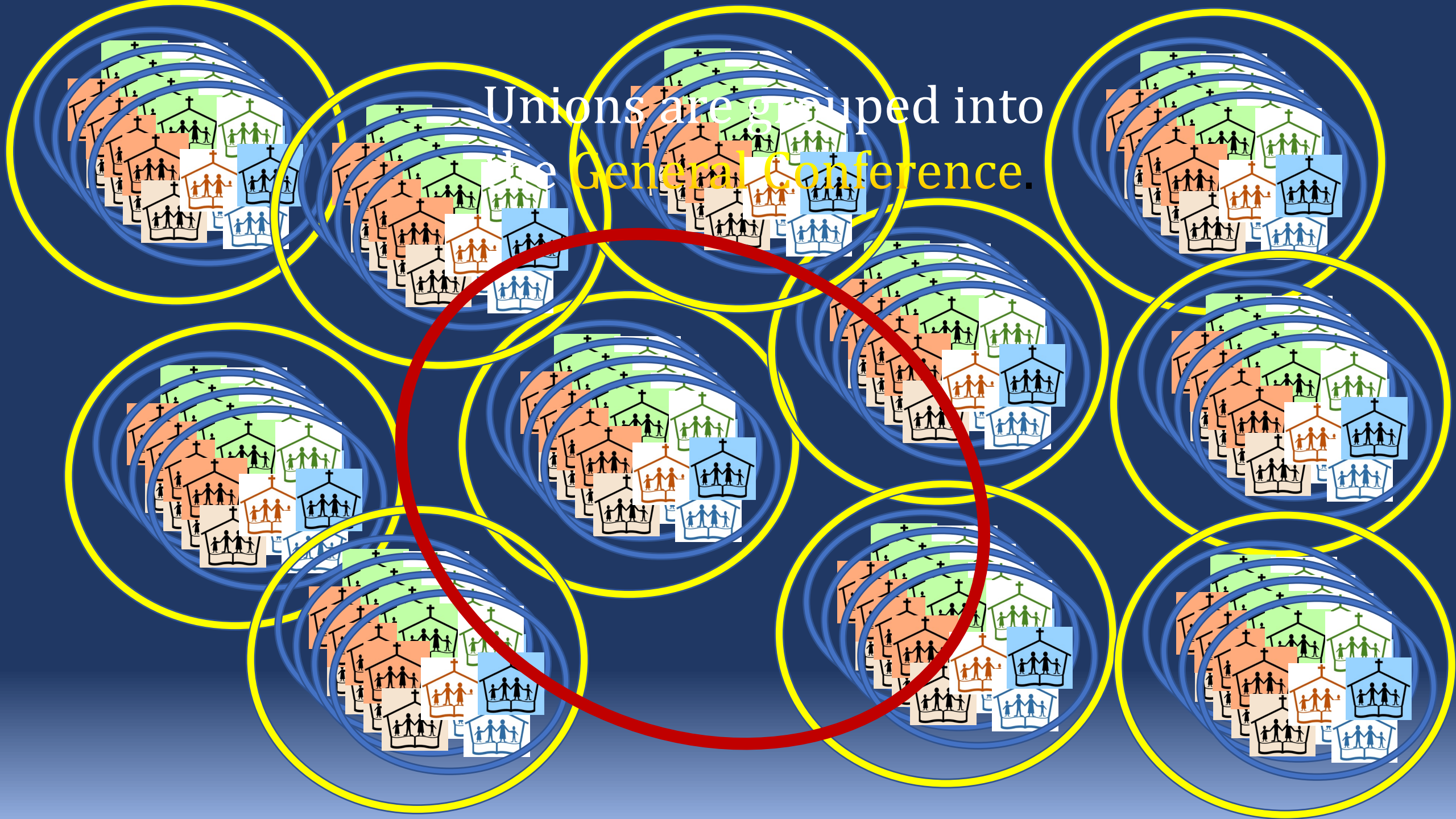




conferences and missions are  
grouped into **unions** with  
geographic boundaries.



Unions are grouped into  
the General Conference.



**Divisions** are 'field offices' of the General Conference. They are not constituency based.

# Two views of SDA ecclesiastical structure

## Constituency-based

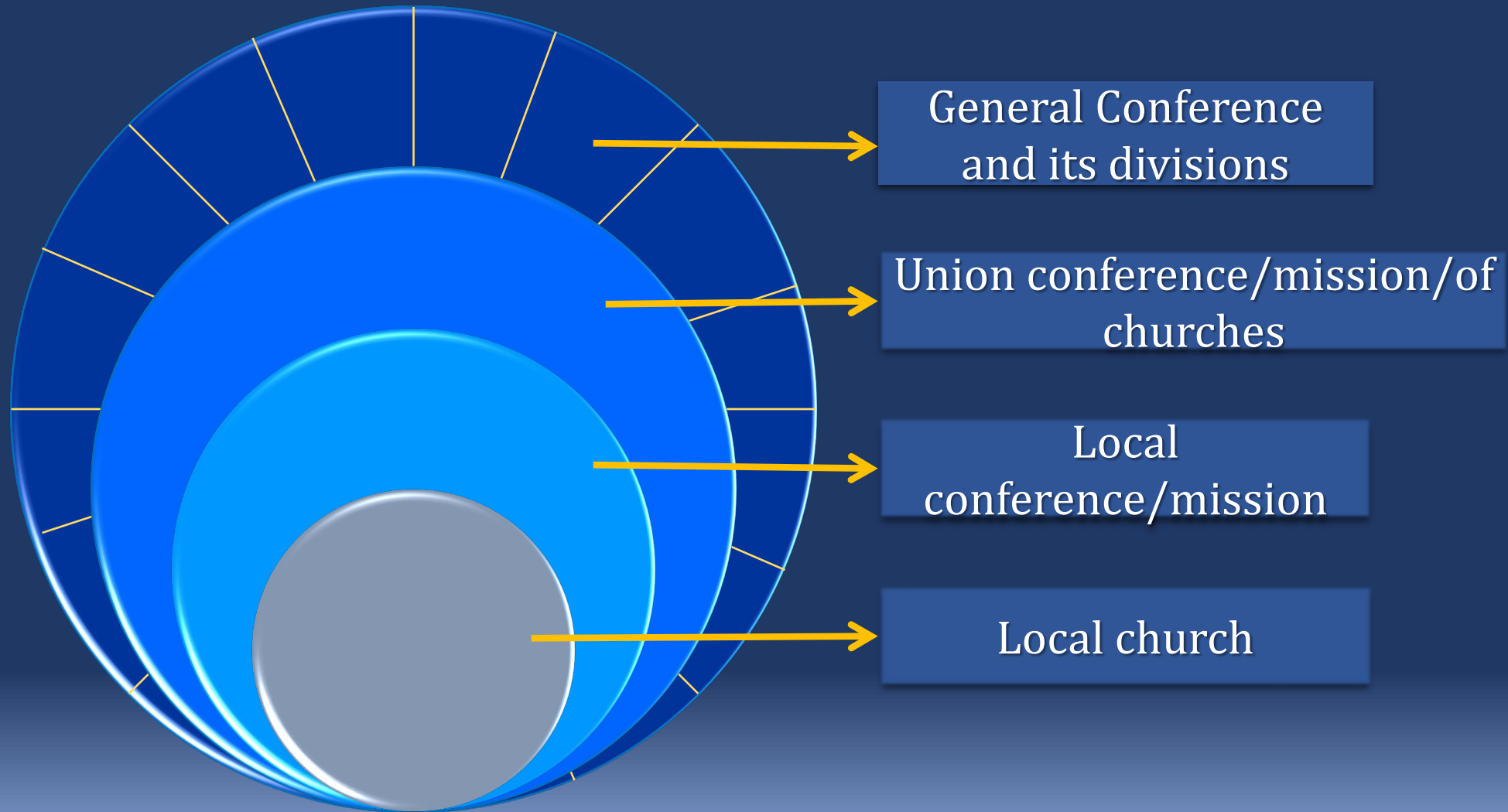
1. Local church
2. Local mission/conference
3. **Union** (mission/conference/union of churches)
4. **General Conference**

## Operationally-based

1. Local church
2. Local mission/conference
3. **Union** (mission/conference/union of churches)
4. **Division** (of the General Conference)
5. **General Conference**



# Primary layers of SDA structure



# Key operational concepts

1. Membership basis of organization
2. Conferred, not self-determined, status
3. Representative and constituency-based
4. Group-based authority system under God
5. Shared administration, not presidential
6. Unity of entities (mission, purpose, beliefs, fellowship)
7. Resource sharing (tithes, offerings, personnel)
8. Separate but not independent organizations

No matter who you are, where you live or what title you hold—you are part of something much bigger. Your post of leadership, important as it may be, must stay connected/aligned/in sync with the rest of denominational structure.

# What holds the Church together?



# What holds the church together?

- Our submission to the Holy Spirit
- Commitment to worldwide mission
- Respect for the Church as a 'body'
- Willingness to keep striving for togetherness



# Attitudes about organizational structure

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.

Together we are better, stronger, and can do more!

# Legal structures in the SDA Church

How does the Church function as a corporate body under various government jurisdictions and legal environments?

How does the Church, and its various special purpose entities, embody 'civil personality'—the capacity to be have rights and/or obligations in society?

# Unincorporated/Incorporated?

The bulk of church activity (ecclesiastical functions such as preaching, teaching, healing, serving) is done through unincorporated organizations.

The business activity of the Church (owning property, financial investments, operating institutions) is carried on through incorporated organizations.



# Legal entities in the SDA Church

A corporation is the most common form of this legal personality. “The incorporation or registration of legal entities of the Church, other than at the General Conference level, is subject to division policy that takes into consideration the principles of denominational organization and representation, relevant provisions in law, and the specific needs of the Church in the geographic areas served.”

—General Conference Working Policy BA 25

# Incorporated entities

1. Institutions and special purpose entities are an expression of the Church in mission.
2. Support the overall identity and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
3. Shield the church from ascending liability
4. Function in alignment with the Church but do not have direct accountability to ecclesiastical administration.
5. Separate but not in a spirit of “independence”.

The GC, divisions of the GC, unions, and local conferences/missions/fields have separate identities for their legal purposes. No church organization or entity assumes responsibility for the liabilities, debts, acts, or omissions of any other church organization simply because of its church affiliations.

Unless local laws require otherwise, **the local church operates under the legal structure of the local conference**, mission, or union of churches and not as a separate legal entity.



Local Conference Constituency

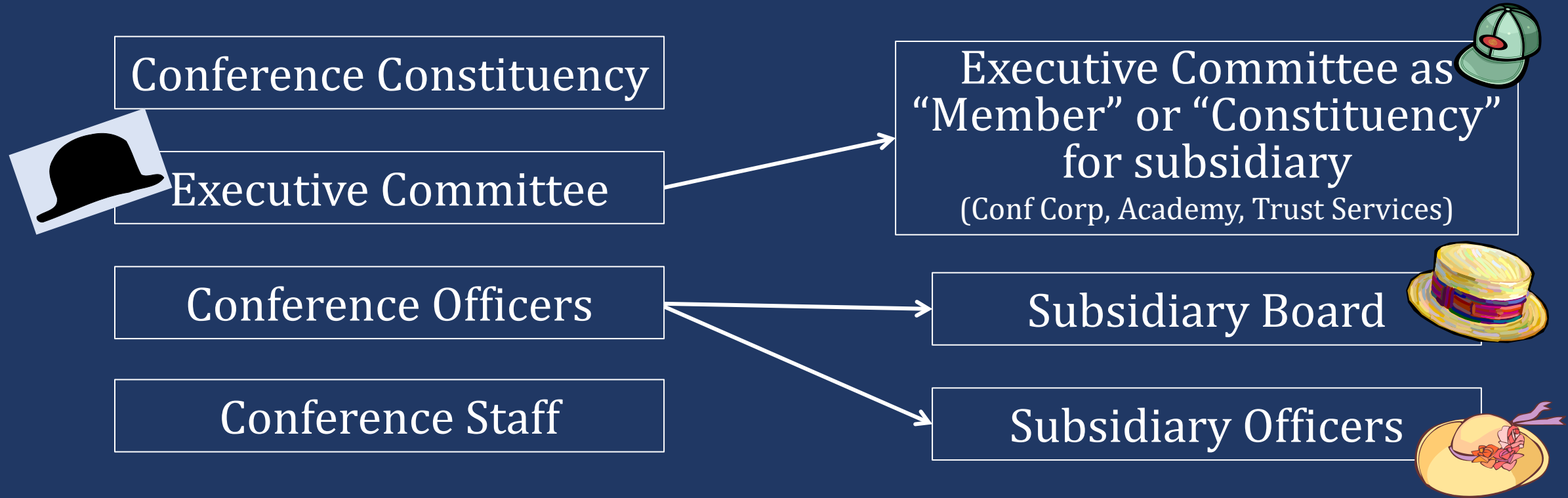
Local Conference Executive Committee

Local Conference Officers

Local Conference Constituency

May also serve as “Member”  
or “Constituency” for  
subsidiary organizations

# Exec Comm members—several hats



**Situational awareness or situation awareness (SA)** is the perception of environmental elements and events with respect to time or space, the comprehension of their meaning, and the projection of their future status. SA is required for effective decision –making.



# What new treasurers need to know/have

1. **Organizational structure of the entity:** (status as conference/mission, affiliated entities, subsidiary entities, sponsored entities—and legal structure of each)
2. **Staffing chart** (accountabilities of employees)
3. **Property** (what is owned, leased, rented, etc.)
4. **Governing documents** (Constitution and Bylaws, Working Policy, Executive Committee policies)
5. **Documentation** (financial statements, budgets, minutes, legal records—where and how maintained)

# Objectives:

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What do you wish you had known about Church structure and organization when you began your job in treasury?