

*Seventh-day Adventist Church*

# *Organizational Structure*



Many parts. One movement!

New Treasurers' Orientation Seminar  
General Conference of SDA, North American Division  
March 28-29, 2016, Columbia, Maryland  
Presenter: Lowell C Cooper

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# Objectives:

1. To appreciate history of structural development
2. To understand foundational principles for structure
3. To survey present global structure

# 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 the 'Church':

- A particular group of believers in a town or city.
- The larger family of faith, of which the local church is a part.
- One of many Christian denominations.
- The universal family of God.

# 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

# A shift in attitude toward organization

1. SDA Church pioneers had an anti-organization bias arising in part from their personal experience of being disfellowshipped from their denominations before and after 1844.
2. Organization was equated with “Babylon”
3. Practical considerations prompted need for organization:
  - a. Holding of property
  - b. Credentialing of ministers
  - c. Remuneration of ministers

# Guiding considerations for structure:

1. Structure is necessary to fulfill mission



*“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.”*

W. A. Spicer, "The Divine Principle of Organization," *Review and Herald*, 25 March 1909, 5

# Guiding considerations for structure:

1. Structure is necessary to fulfill mission
2. Bible contains principles not prescriptions

# The role of the Bible in organization:

Both James White and Joseph Bates initially claimed that organizational design should be patterned after the “perfect system of order, set forth in the New Testament.” (RH, Jan 23, 1855, 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.*” (RH, July 21, 1859, 68 emphasis supplied).

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.

# Guiding considerations for structure:

1. Structure is necessary to fulfill mission
2. Bible contains principles not prescriptions
3. Structural design informed by 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 message of the three angels must be preached to all the world before the end of time.

George Knight, *Organizing for Mission*, 48.

# Guiding considerations for structure:

1. Structure is necessary to fulfill mission
2. Bible contains principles not prescriptions
3. Structural design informed by mission
4. Balance centralization/decentralization

# Centralization vs. decentralization:

The purpose of centralization was more for coordination than for control.

The purpose of decentralization was more for responsiveness to local situations than for independence.



## Leadership attitude towards structure:

No part of the Church can exist on its own, nor can any part act as if it exists only for itself.



# Guiding considerations for structure:

1. Structure is necessary to fulfill mission
2. Bible contains principles not prescriptions
3. Structural design informed by mission
4. Balance centralization/decentralization
5. Preserve unity/permit diversity

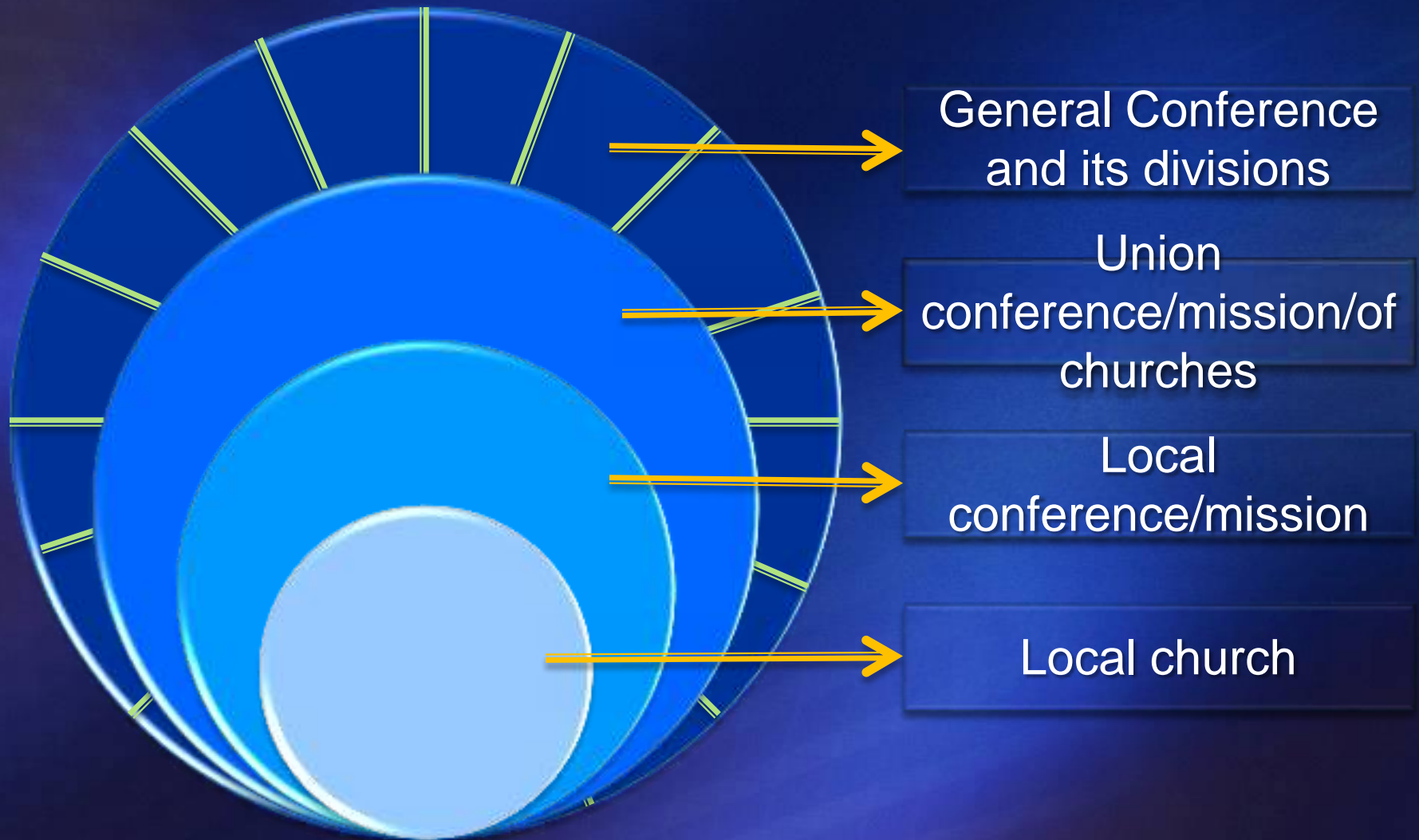
“If we will get this thing deep in our souls...we will not bind ourselves about with red tape and feel that everything must go in just the same way. There are different fields sometimes that demand different organizations, and I hope that when that field comes, and when that time comes, and that place 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.”

M C Wilcox (Sten 1903, April 9, a903, 20, 20a, cited in Barry Oliver, *SDA Organizational Structure*, p. 302)

“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.”

European Conference Bulletin, 2, quote from A G Daniells in 1902

# Primary layers of SDA structure



The General Conference represents the collective and worldwide expression of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Church organizations around the world recognize the General Conference in Session as the voice of the Church. The General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, is the highest ecclesiastical authority in the administration of the Church.

“Local churches, local conferences/missions/fields, union conferences/missions, unions of churches, and institutions are, by vote of the appropriate constituency, and by actions of properly authorized executive committees, a part of the worldwide organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.



Whereas each has accepted the privilege and responsibility of representing the Church in its part of the world, each is therefore required to operate and minister in harmony with the teachings and policies of the Church, and the actions of the world Church in Session.

While individual units of the Church are given freedom to function in ways appropriate to their role and culture, no part of the worldwide organization of the Church has a unilateral right to secede.”

—GC Working Policy B 10 25

# Eight key organizational concepts:

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



# Is the SDA Church hierarchical?

SDA Church structure is often described as being very hierarchical with multiple levels of organization exercising various degrees of control over subsidiary units. This is an unfair caricature of denominational organization. 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 viewed in the context of collaboration and cooperation

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.

# Organizational structure and authority

In order to function at all every organization requires a system of authority. The dominant models for organizational authority may be seen in government (spectrum of autocratic to democratic); business (sole proprietor to share holder, CEO); and military (top down authority).

The church is different from other organizations (government, army, business) in many respects. It has a different system of authority, a different purpose for existence. It is a voluntary organization and functions on a not-for-profit basis.

# Institution or Movement?

The Church has always had to wrestle with its self-perception as an institution or a movement.

Institutions tend to define, protect, and preserve their role.

Movements are always dynamic and run the risk of dissipation and loss of focus.



From its NT beginnings and for varied reasons the institutional Church gradually exercised increasing control of ecclesiastical functions and resources.

History underscores the importance of organizational structure.

An uneasy coexistence of the institutionalized church and private initiative developed.

# Peter Waldo:

- 12<sup>th</sup> century French merchant
- Wanted to restore NT teachings
- Translated scripture into vernacular
- Encouraged Bible study and memorization
- Was branded as a heretic
- Followers persecuted, scattered, and destroyed

# John Wycliffe:

- Native of England
- Translated Bible into language of masses
- Taught that laity could participate in ministry
- Branded as a heretic, enemy of Church
- Died a natural death
- Council of Constance 40 years later, bones exhumed and publicly burned

# Protestant Reformation:

- Generally portrayed as theological revolt against papal distortion of forgiveness
- Heart of the reformation was the conviction that all believers were priests
- Every believer has right and responsibility to study Bible, to be involved in ministry, administer sacraments

“When my church preaches about the ministry of the laity, it speaks in broad and idealistic terms, but when it comes to reality, my church sees lay ministry purely in terms of service to the institutional church... teaching, leading worship, visiting members, serving on committees, and giving time and money to the organization.”

—William Diehl

“My church expects from me that I will come to the church services with the holy book, the hymn book and the pocket book; and to be quiet and compliant.”

—A laymember



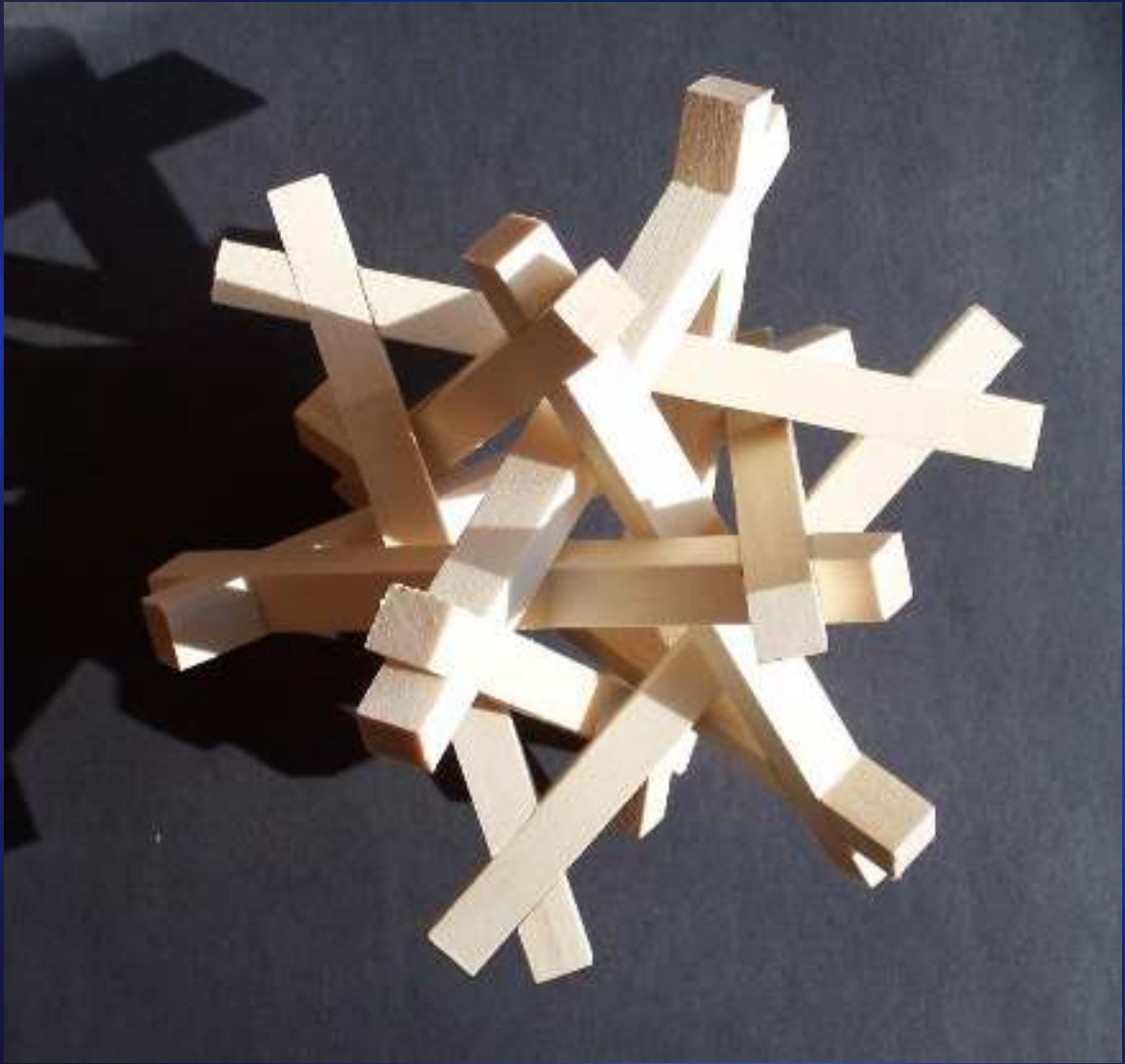
# SDA Church polity



Interlocking and interdependent







"Because leadership is necessarily an exercise of authority, it easily shifts into an exercise of power. But the minute it does that, it begins to inflict damage on both the leader and the led."

—Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Introduction to 2 Corinthians

There is no question but that there should be authority in the Church—but who should have it? And how does authority operate in a faith-based community that considers Jesus as its head?

In the early 1870's General Conference President George Butler authored a pamphlet entitled *Leadership* (1873) built upon the premise of "authority centralized in one person" He presented it at camp meetings and preaching appointments to rave reviews by hearers who were accultured to the "Great Man" model of governance. The essence of this tract communicated that "one person was in charge and other leaders were subordinate to that person." All were to acquiesce to the decision of one man.

The 1873 General Conference Session affirmed by majority vote that the position proposed by Butler reflected the view of the General Conference on leadership.

Butler did not argue that he, the GC President, should have this authority. Instead he advocated this for James White who had such a foundational role in the development of SDA structure.

But neither James nor Ellen White were in favor of such an arrangement. Ellen White informed Butler:

“When this power which God has placed in the church is accredited to one man, and he is invested with the authority to be judgment for other minds, then the true Bible order is changed...

Satan's efforts upon such a man's mind will be most subtle and sometimes overpowering, because through this mind he thinks he can affect many others.



Your position on leadership is correct, if you give to the highest organized authority in the church what you have given to one man. God never designed that His work should bear the stamp of one man's mind and one man's judgment.

—E. G. White communication to G I Butler, *Testimonies to the Church*, Vol 3. p. 493

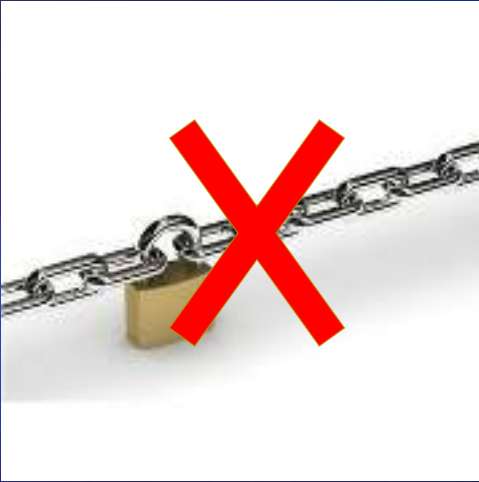
# Summary on Authority in the Church:

1. Authority is rooted in God.
2. Authority is distributed—no place has final authority in everything.
3. Highest human authority in the Church is in a group not in a person.
4. Every leader is accountable to someone else or to a group.
5. Authority is entrusted, not inherent in an individual.

# What holds the church together?



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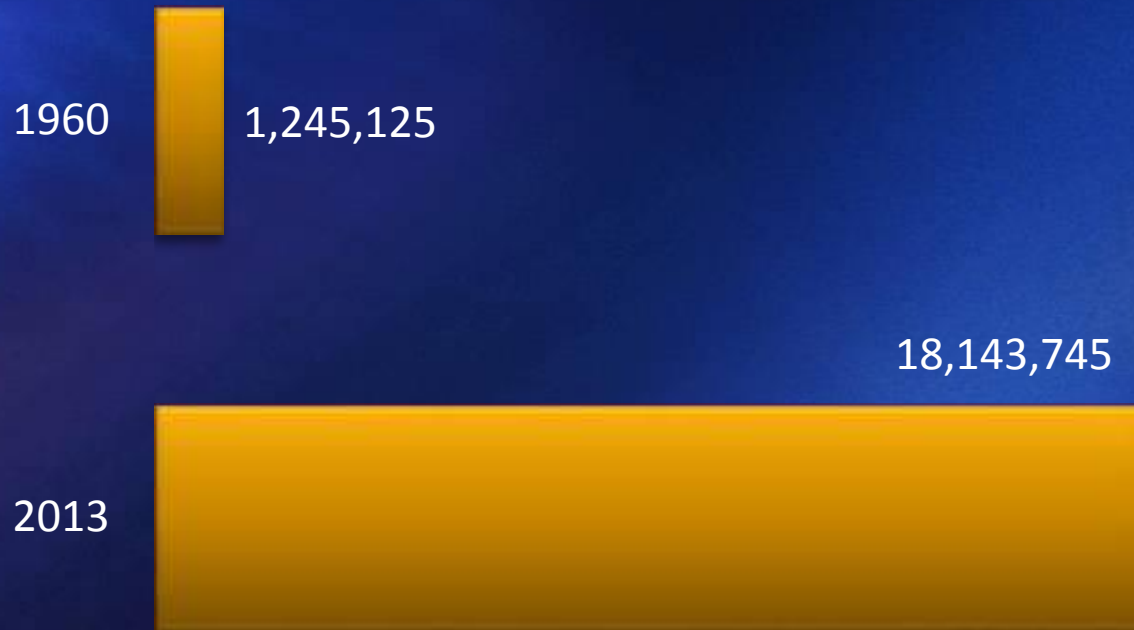
- Our submission to the Holy Spirit
- Commitment to worldwide mission
- Respect for the Church as a 'body'
- Willingness to keep striving for togetherness



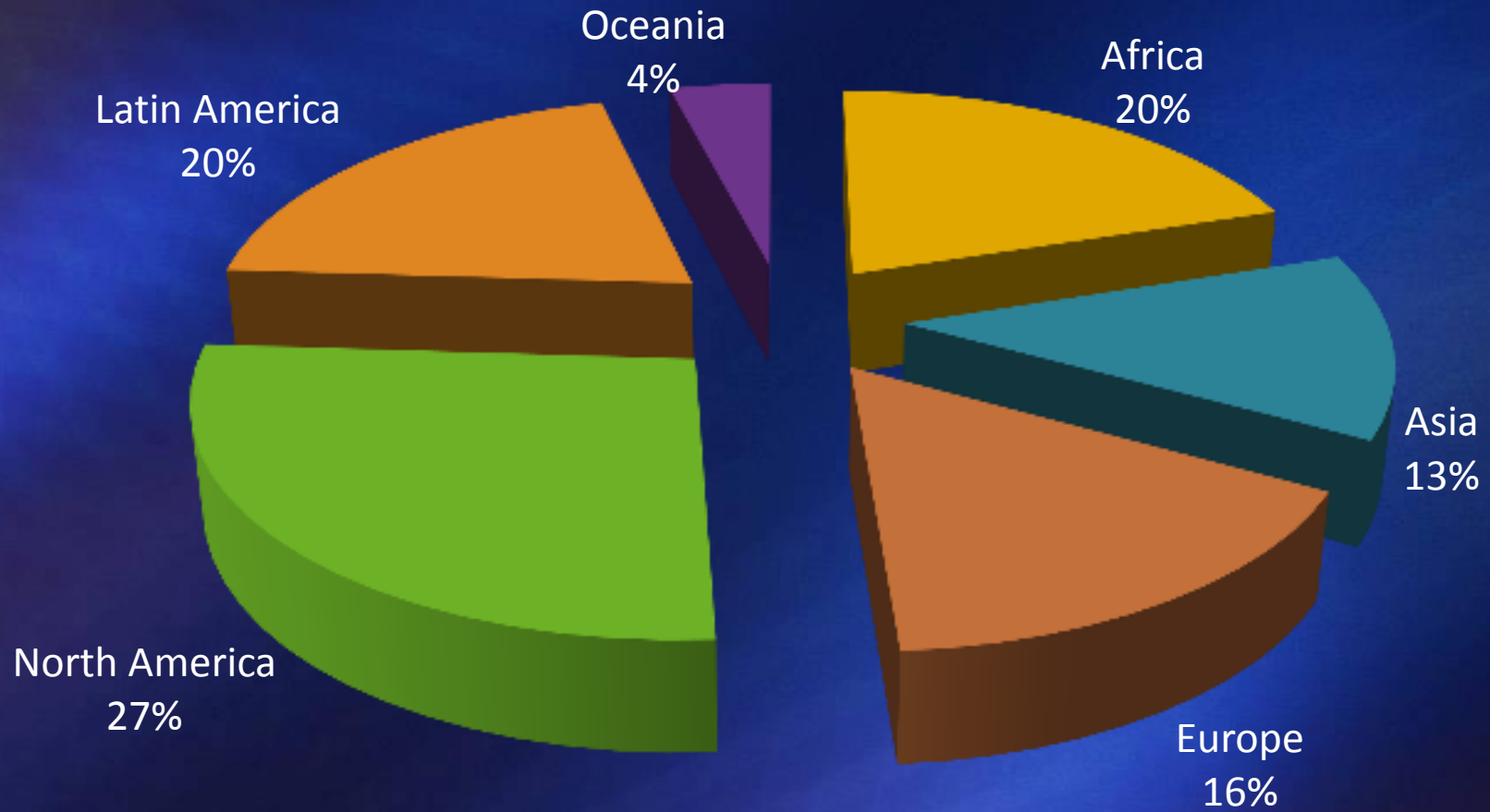
# 1. Membership growth:



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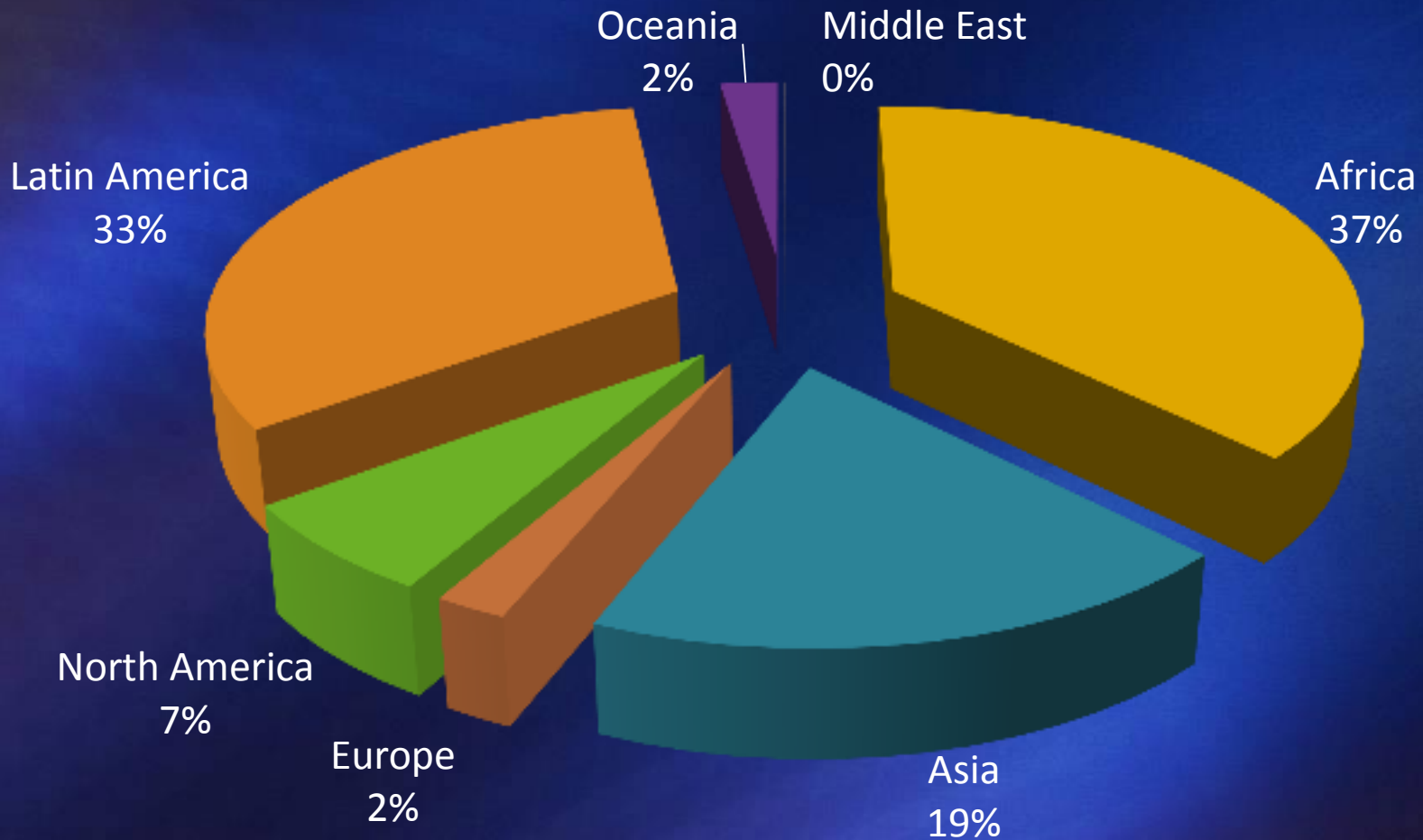


## 2. Membership distribution—1960

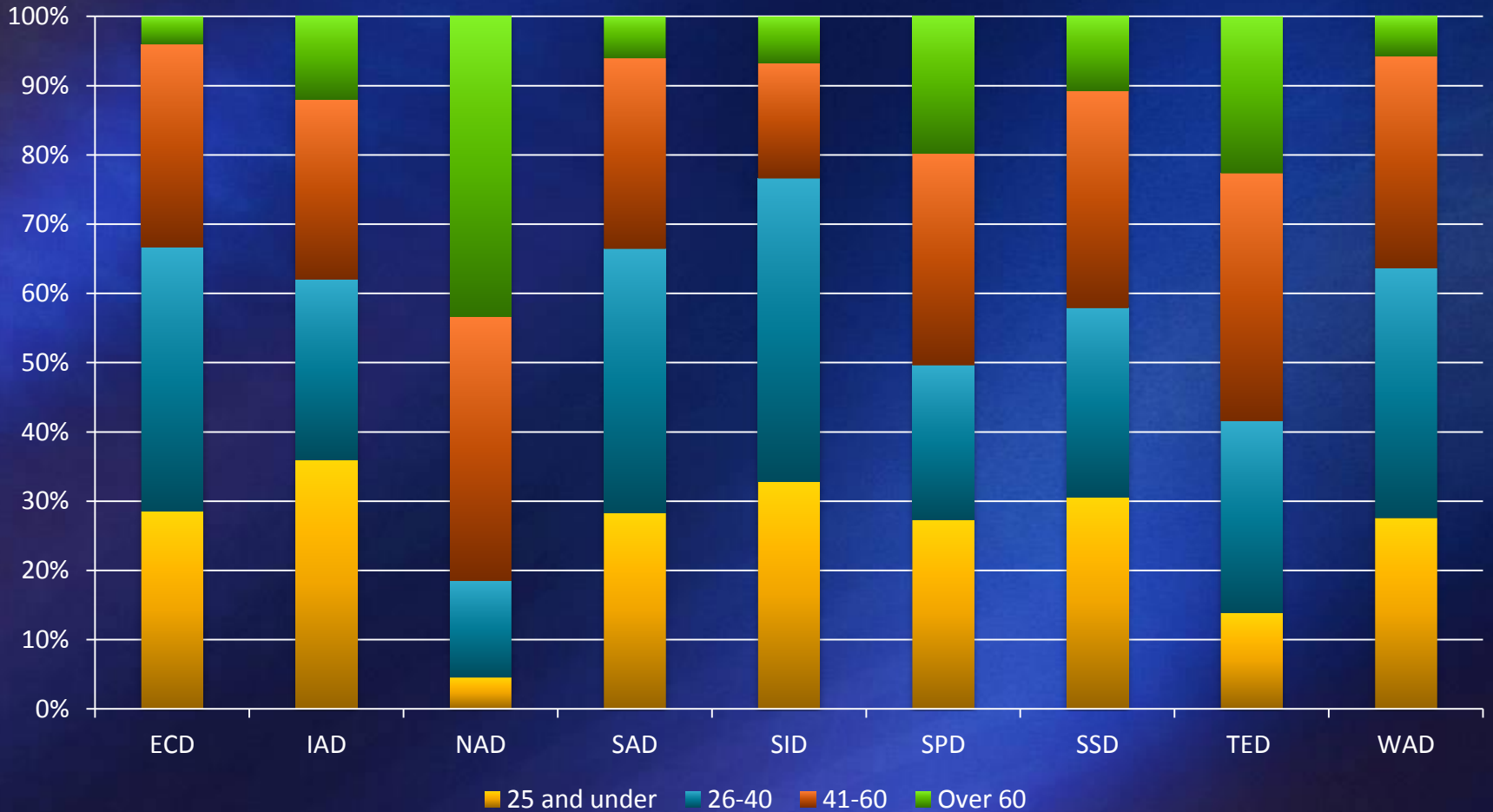




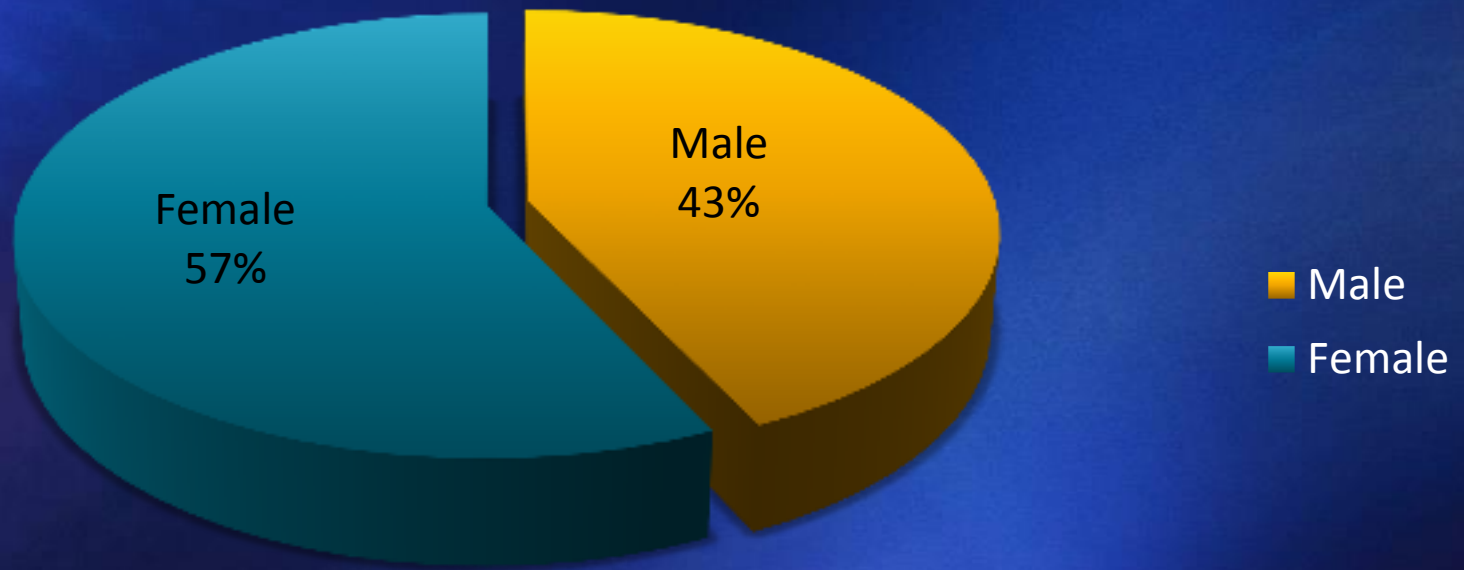
## 2. Membership distribution—2013



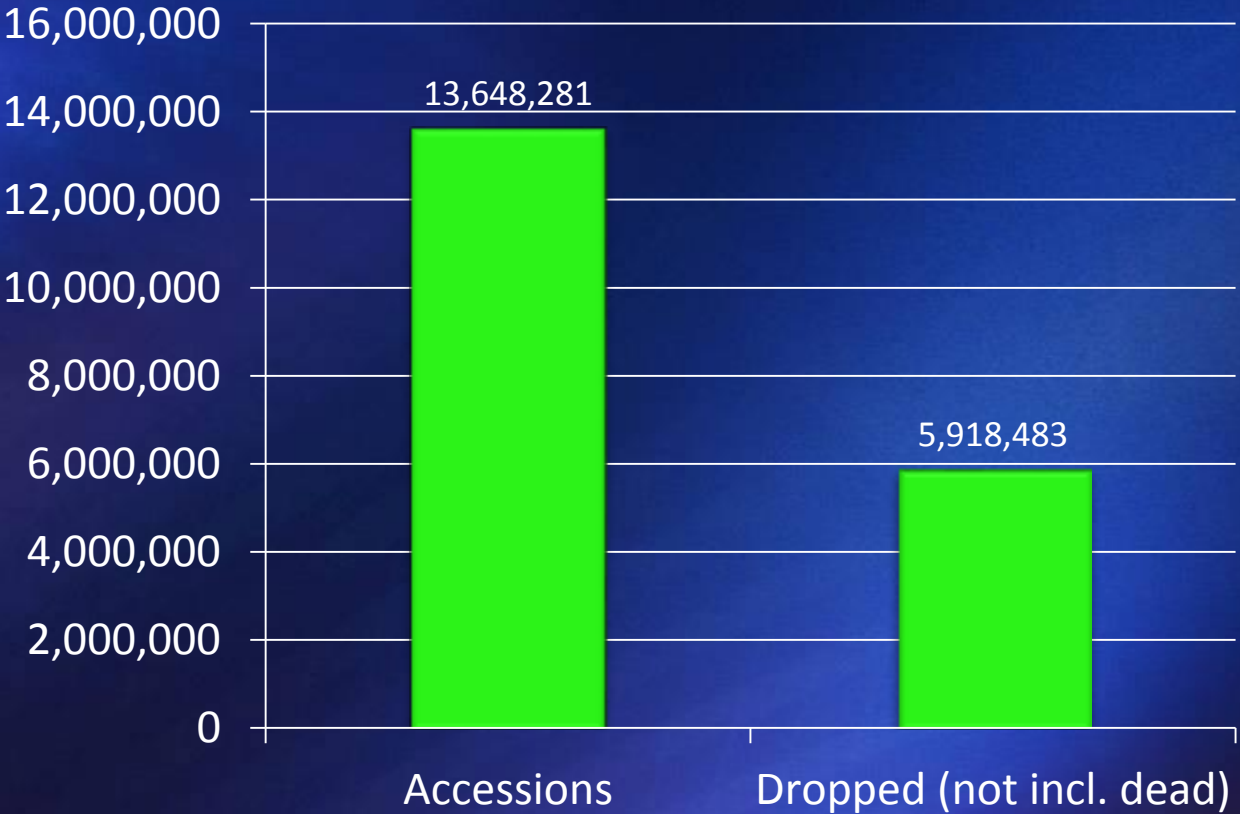
# 3. Membership age distribution:



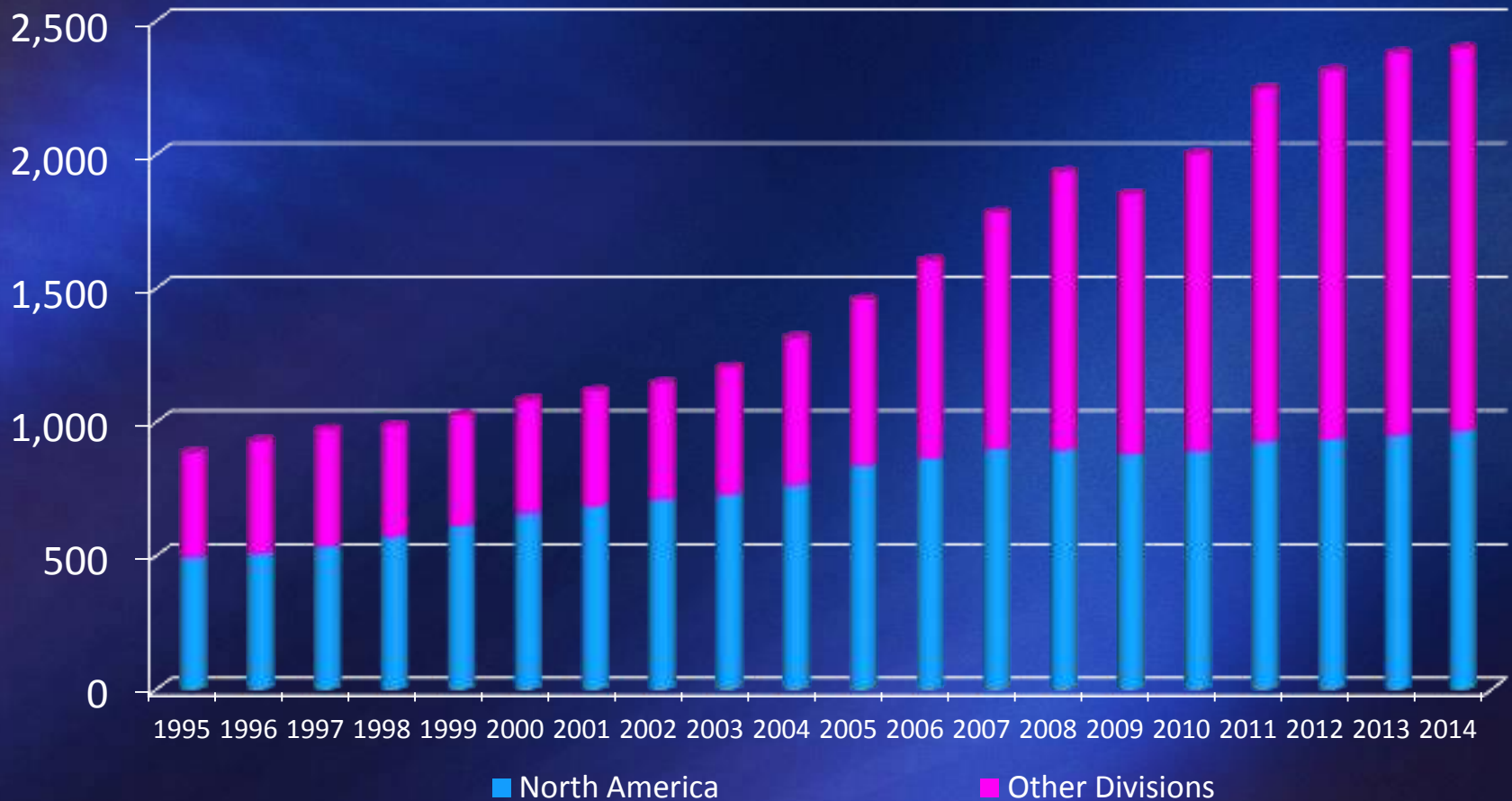
# Male/female demographics:



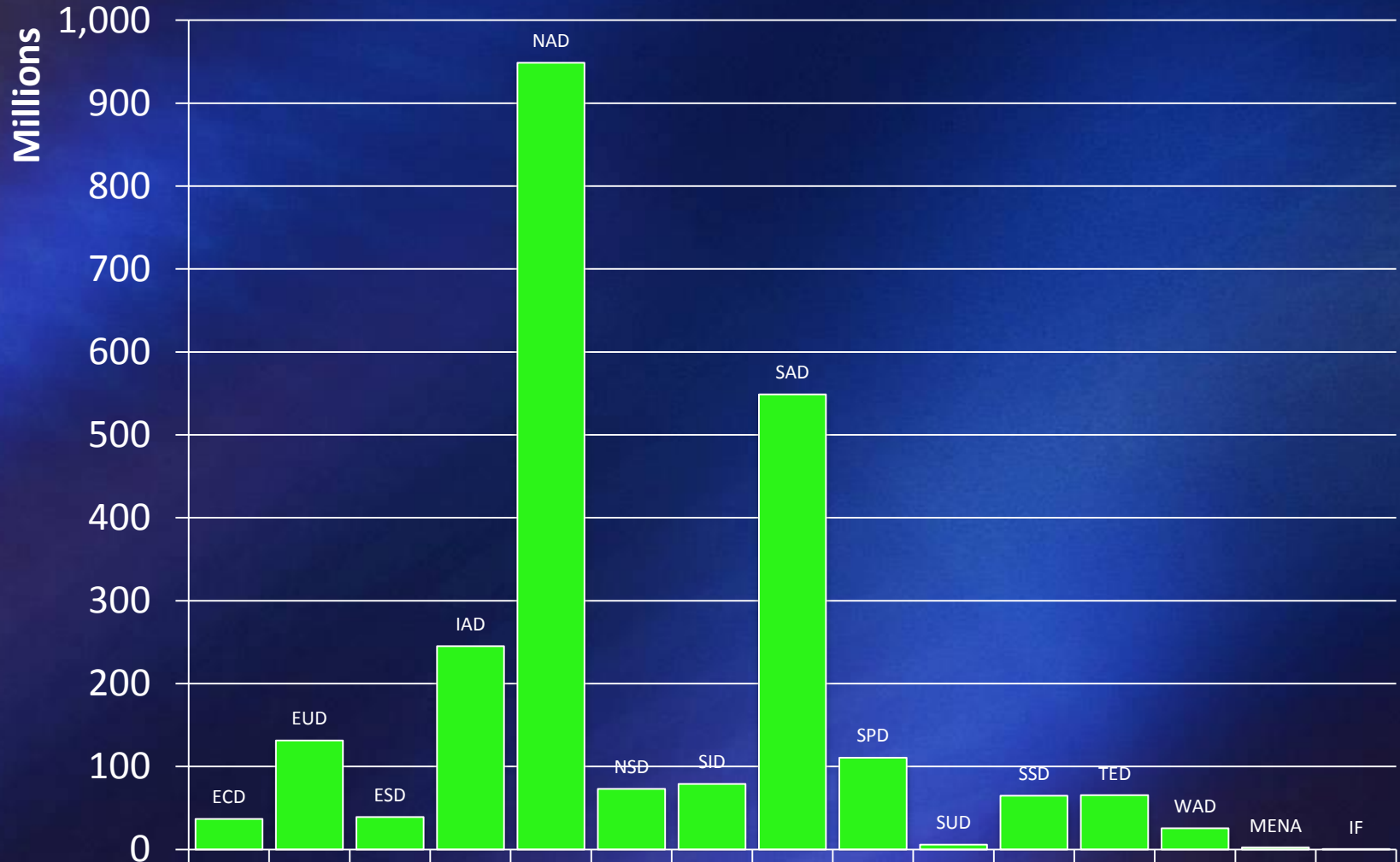
# Membership accessions vs. dropped 2000—2012



# Worldwide tithe 1995-2014 (millions)



# Tithe by divisions—2013



# Global infrastructure—2013

Church members	17,214,683
Churches	71,048
Companies	65,553
Local conferences	321
Local missions	264
Union conferences	51
Union missions	55
Unions of churches	13
Divisions	13
Countries with SDA presence	209

## Conclusion:

The Church organization is strong, and fragile.

Any leader, with determination, can weaken the structure.

Any leader, with determination, can help to keep it strong.



# A Symbol of Organizational Life

Excerpts from  
1 Corinthians 12  
*The Message*, by Eugene Peterson

...God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit.

God's various ministries are carried out everywhere;  
but they all originate in God's Spirit.

God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all.

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people!

...You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts--limbs, organs, cells--but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ.

...We each used to independently call our own shots,  
but then we entered into a large and integrated life  
in which he has the final say in everything...

I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together.



If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so?

If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body?

If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear,  
how could it smell?

But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster.

...When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons.

...The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together... every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't.

...You are Christ's body--that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything.











