

Many parts, one movement!

Seventh-day Adventist Church Structure

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Objectives:

1. To understand Seventh-day Adventist Church structure in relation to other denominations.
2. To compare the ecclesiastical and legal structures of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
3. To appreciate fundamental operating principles for Seventh-day Adventist organizations.
4. To accept accountability for my leadership.

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

The biblical symbols for 'Church' and the multiple meanings for 'Church' may overshadow the realization that the Church has a **definite organizational structure** to facilitate the **accomplishment of its mission.**

A shift in attitude toward organization

1. SDA Church pioneers had an anti-organization bias—in part from their 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

Concurrent patterns of organization:

1. Ecclesiastical structure of the Church
2. Legal structure of the Church and its special purpose entities.

SDA 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 entities)

Three variations 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 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 polity:

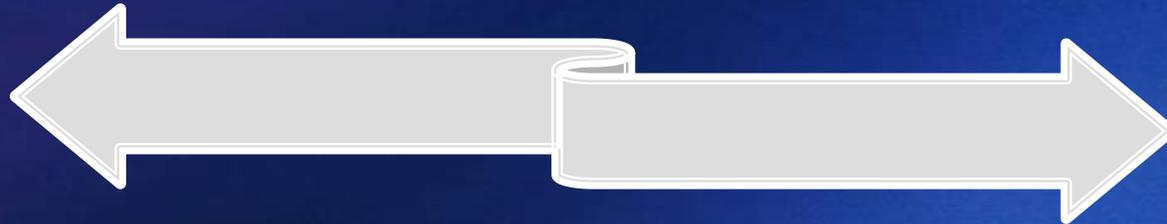
1. Final authority rests in the congregation
2. Congregation elects primary office holders authorized to make decisions—but the congregation can override
3. Independence/autonomy of local church
4. Examples: Baptists, Pentecostals, United Church of Christ, Non-denominational

Seventh-day Adventist Church polity:

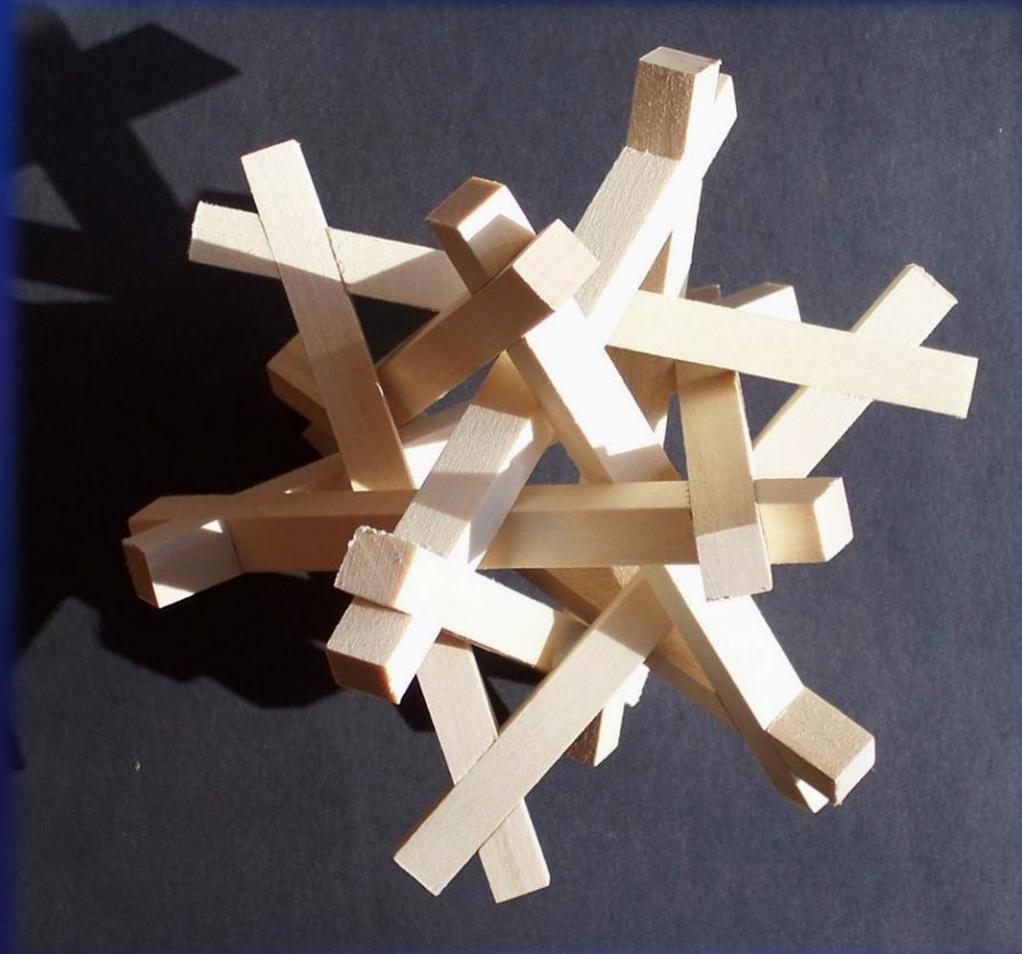
~~Congregational~~

~~Presbyterian~~

~~Episcopal~~



Interlocking and Interdependent



Seventh-day Adventist Church polity:

1. Representative (4 constituent levels)
2. Authority distributed
3. Group-based decision-making
4. One order of ministers
5. Synchronous local and global identity
6. Interdependent functions

Concurrent patterns of organization:

1. Ecclesiastical structure of the Church
2. Legal structure of the Church and its special purpose entities.

SDA legal structure:

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 structures

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:

Much of the evangelistic and ecclesiastical activity... is accomplished through unincorporated organizations. However, the Church increasingly uses various legal vehicles in furtherance of its mission. In order for an organization to exercise certain rights, privileges, duties, and to be held accountable for certain liabilities, it is necessary to have a legal persona.

Legal entities in the SDA Church: —cont'd

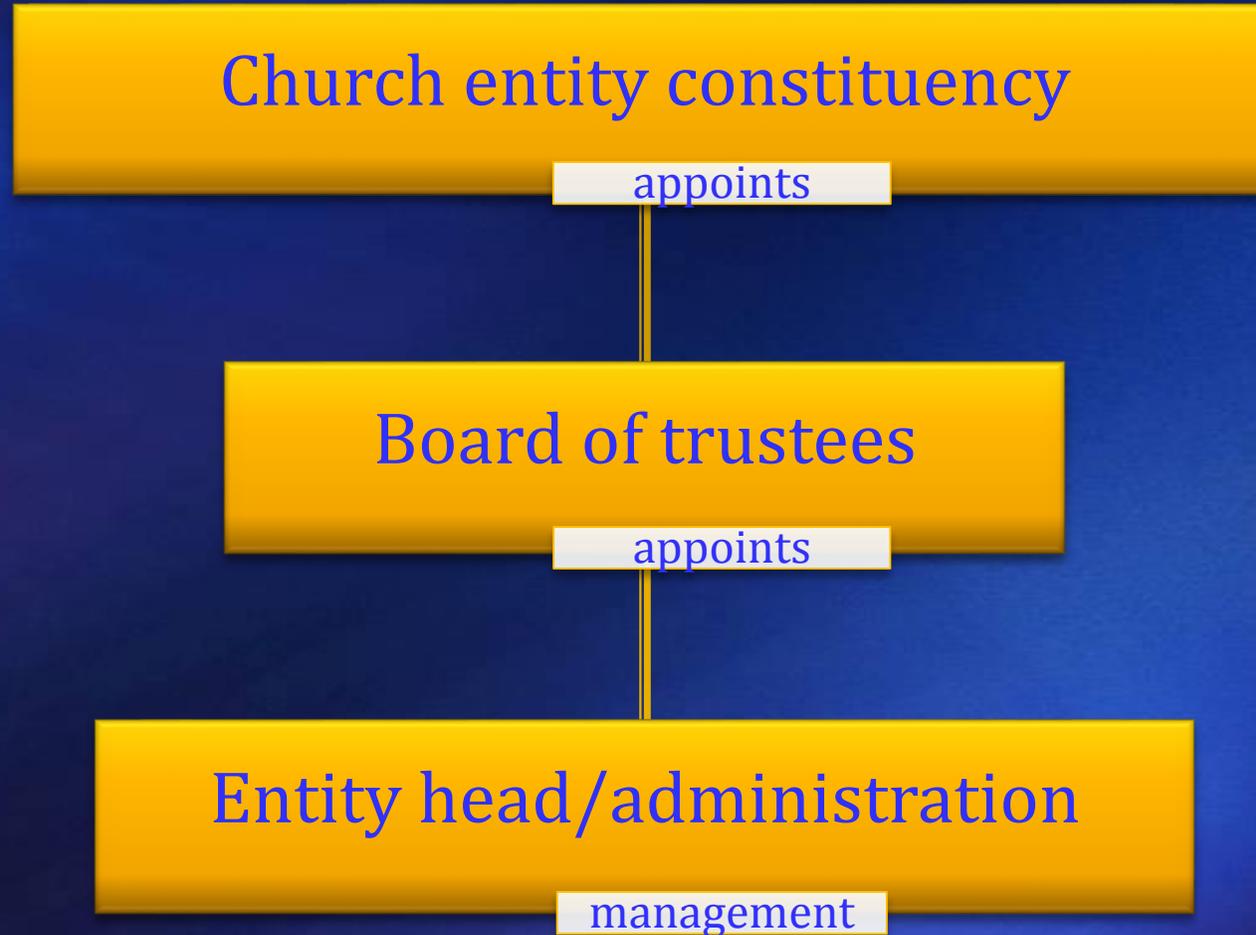
A corporation is the most common form of this legal personality. From time to time corporations, institutions or other legal entities, such as trusts and associations, are formed for specific functions related to the Church and its mission. Such organizations are established in harmony with local laws governing charitable, religious, not-for-profit associations, societies, or foundations.

Legal entities in the SDA Church: —cont'd

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

Formation patterns of legal structures:



Formation patterns of legal structures:

Church entity executive committee as
constituency

appoints

Board of trustees

appoints

Entity head/administration

management

Formation patterns of legal structures:



Examples of incorporated entities:

1. Conference associations/corporations
2. Colleges and universities
3. Hospitals and health systems
4. Publishing houses
5. Property holding corporations
6. Retirement Fund corporations
7. Trust Associations
8. Foundations
9. Special purpose (ADRA, AWR, Hope TV, etc.)

Structural principles—Corporate entities

1. Accountability to a membership body
2. No self-perpetuating boards
3. Constituency and board of trustees composed of Seventh-day Adventists
4. Alignment with Seventh-day Adventist Church, teachings, values, and mission.

Incorporated entities:

1. Support the overall identity and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
2. Shield the church from ascending liability
3. Function in alignment with the Church but do not have direct accountability to ecclesiastical administration.

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.

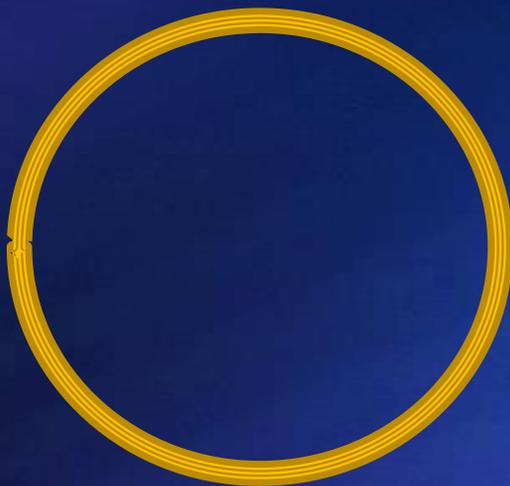
—General Conference *Working Policy* BA 25 05

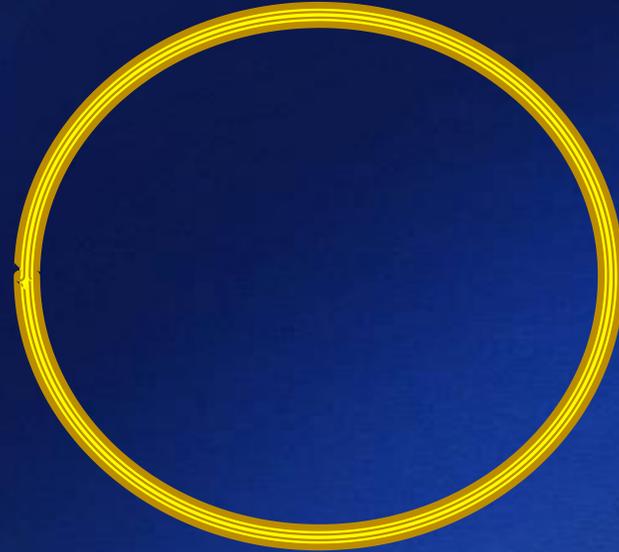


A **Local Church** is the smallest constituency-based unit of SDA structure.



Local churches are grouped into
Missions or **Conferences**.

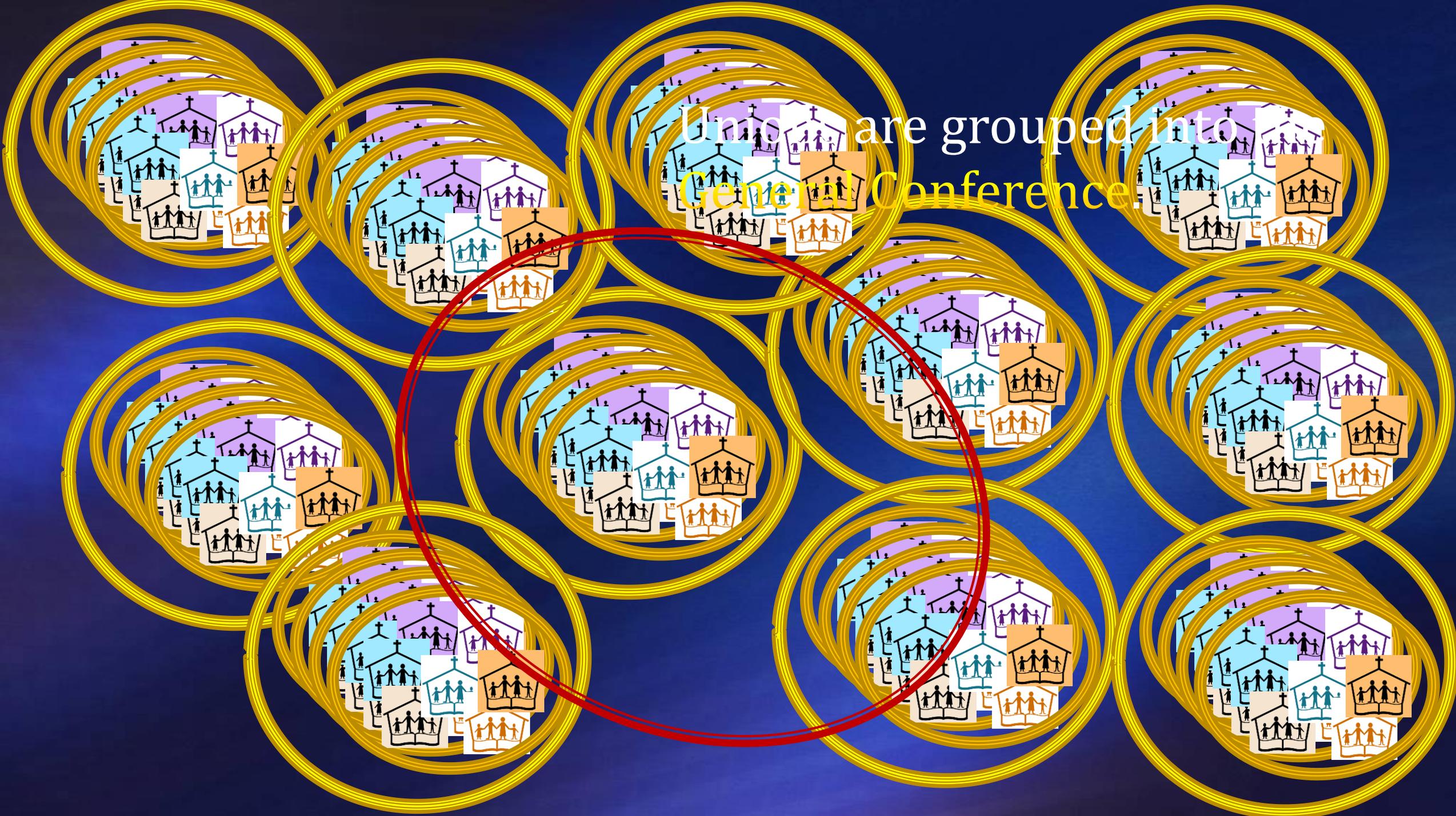




conferences and missions are
grouped into **unions**.

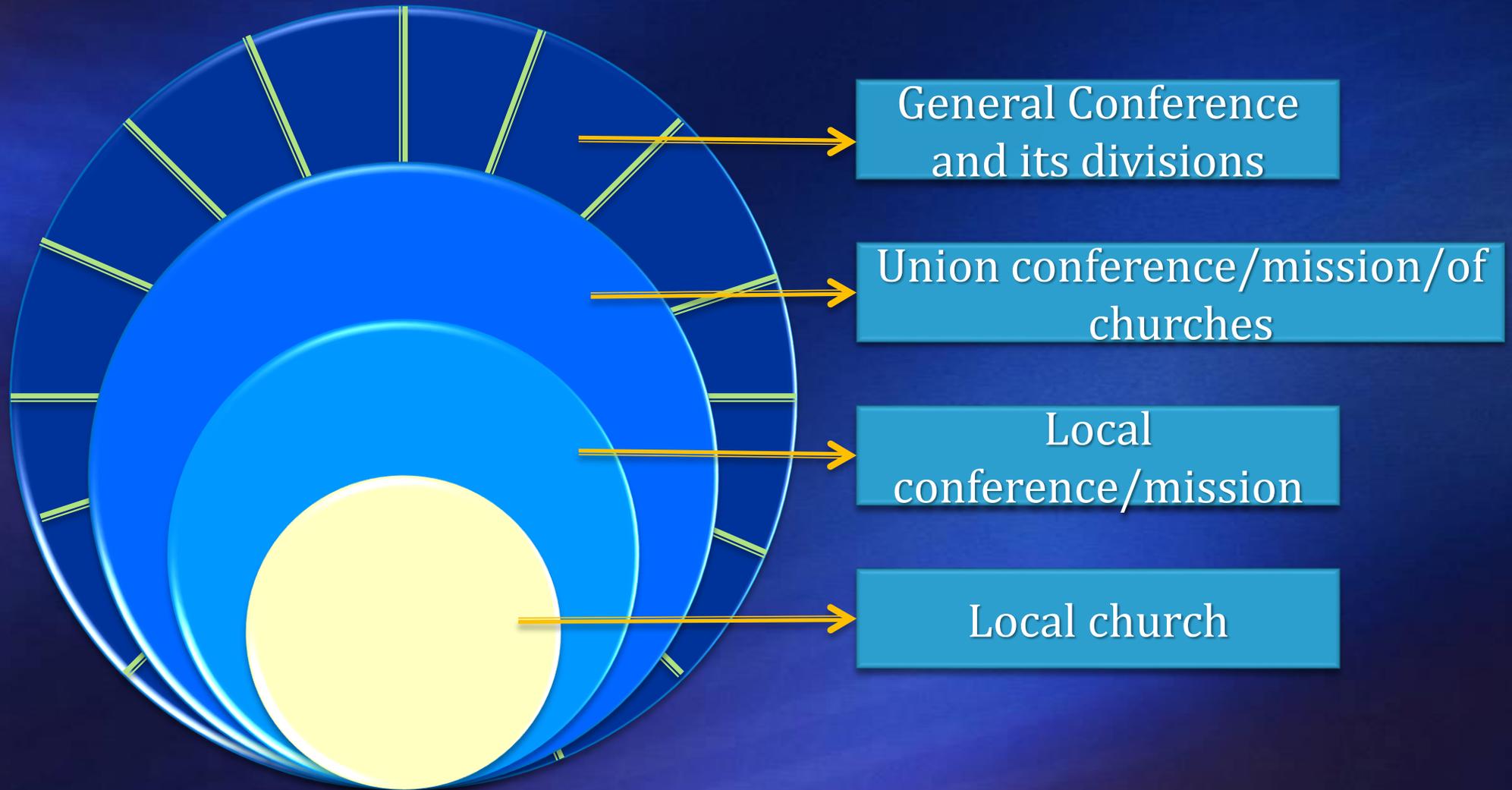


Unions are grouped into
General Conference

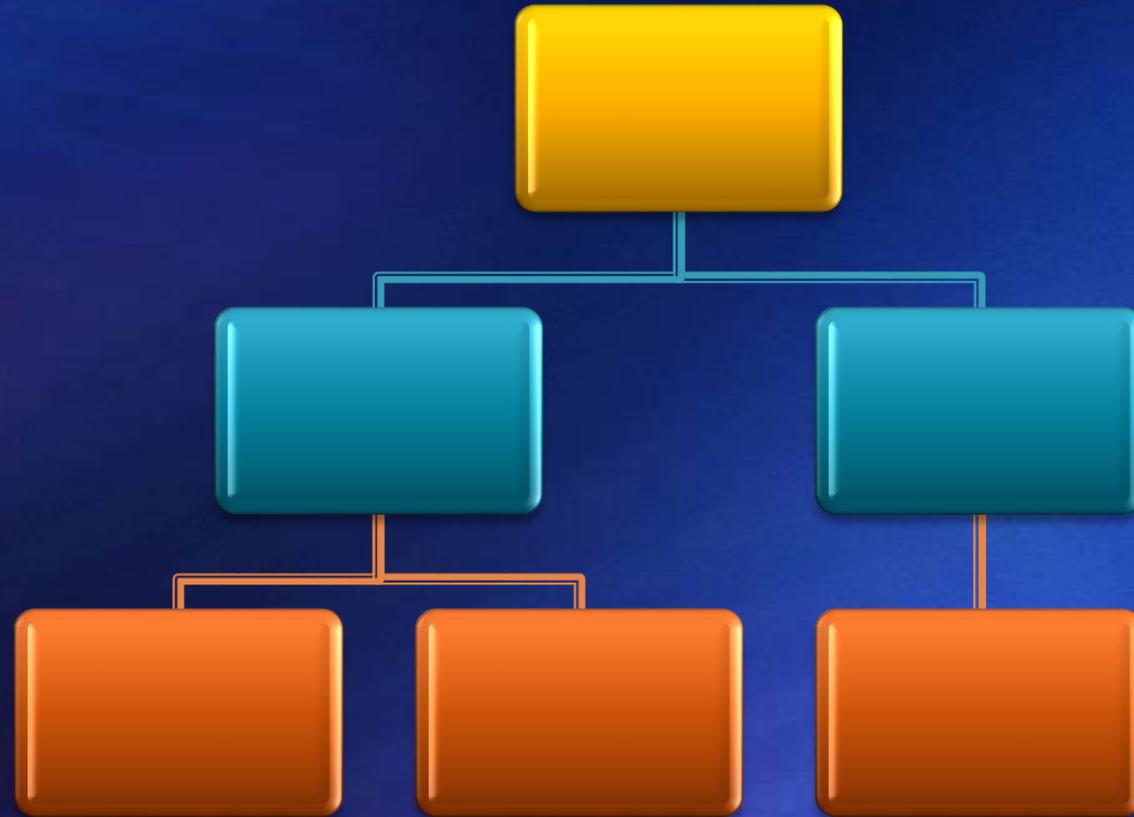


Divisions are 'field offices' of the General Conference. They are not constituency based.

Primary layers of SDA structure:



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



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.

Is the SDA Church hierarchical?

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

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.”

—General Conference *Working Policy* B 10 25

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

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.

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

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:

- 12th 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

"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?

Summary on Authority in the Church:

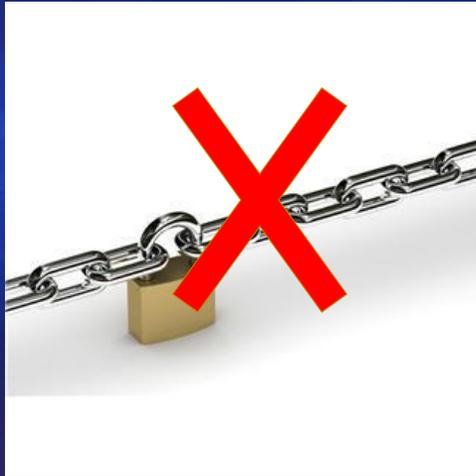
1. Authority is rooted in God.
2. Authority is distributed—no place has final authority in everything.
3. Highest human authority in the Church is in a group not in a person.
4. Every leader is accountable to someone else or to a group.
5. Authority is entrusted, not inherent in an individual.

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?



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



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.