

WHAT IS OUR PURPOSE?  
GC Secretariat in the past and the future

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In the 152 years since the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded in May 1863, only a few things have remained the same about our organization. But one is the office of General Conference Secretary, which is as old as the General Conference itself. The constitution adopted at the founding General Conference Session on May 21, 1863, provided that the General Conference's "officers ... shall be a President, Secretary, Treasurer, and an Executive Committee of three, of whom the President shall be one."<sup>1</sup> Today the Executive Committee has increased a hundred-fold to around 300. But the Secretary continues to be one of the three chief officers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Of course, the role of the Secretary has changed. In 1863, when the denomination was founded, there were just six conferences, with 30 employees and only around 125 local churches and 3,500 members; so there just wasn't much for administrators to administer.

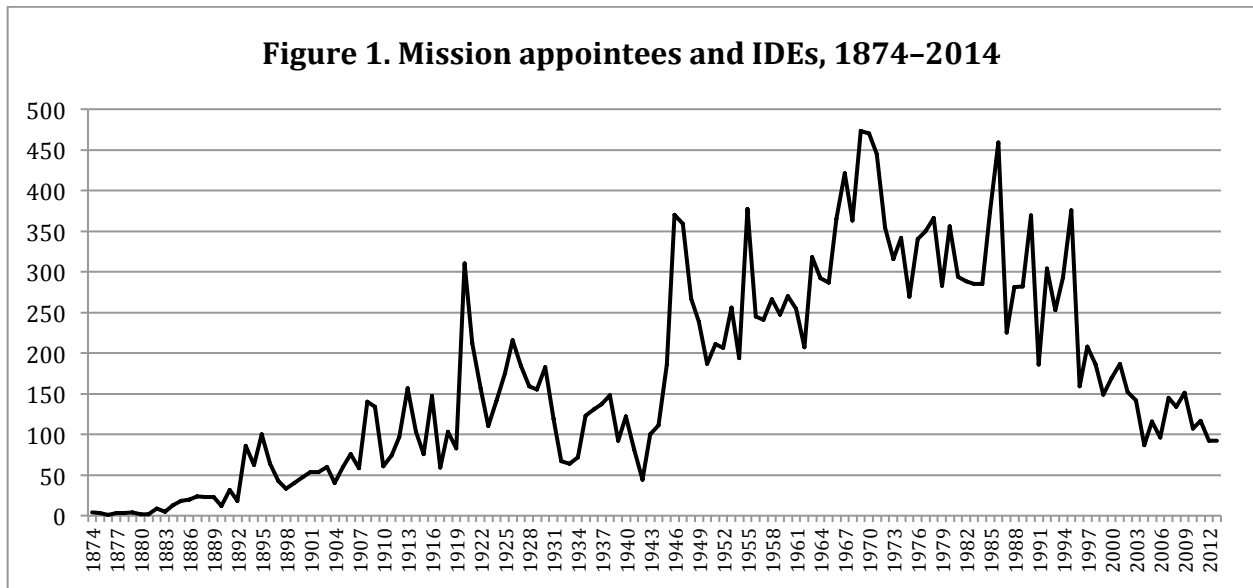
As the church grew, however, the three officers' roles evolved. In the early 1890s, the Secretary took on responsibility for coordinating the increasing numbers of foreign missionaries being sent out from North America. But organizational and financial problems led to a significant slow-down in mission expansion in the late 1890s. As a result, in 1901 a radical restructuring of the church's organization took place at the urging of Ellen White,

who had recently returned from nine years' mission service in Australia and recognized that reform was needed. The final steps in the reorganization were taken in 1903, including the election of a new Secretary, William A. Spicer, who totally reinvented the role. Spicer was a confidant of the president elected in 1901, Arthur G. Daniells, and both men were visionaries of global mission. They were officers of the General Conference together from 1903 until 1926. Acting as a team, along with the treasurer, and an enlarged Executive Committee, which became the Church's foreign mission board, world church leaders from 1903 onwards planned strategically for mission advances in an unprecedented way.

During this era, the Secretary's office took responsibility for recruiting, dispatching, coordinating, and caring for missionaries, as well as for promoting foreign mission among church members in the denomination's original North American heartland and its new European and Australian heartlands. The end result was the creation of the GC Secretariat—a department working under the Secretary. In 1905, two new subordinate positions were created: that of Home Secretary, responsible for administration at the headquarters, and the Statistical Secretary, who started publishing the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* in 1904 and the *Annual Statistical Report* in 1907. This was crucial, because as the Secretariat amassed and analyzed data, it began to plan how to expand mission around the world. The 1913 GC Session added the post of Assistant Secretary; then the 1918 Session created a new position, that of Associate Secretary, as one of the officers of the General Conference.

The increase in the Secretariat helped to bring about a dramatic expansion in the mission program, which you see illustrated here. As you can see, up to 1889, few missionaries were sent out, but in the early 1890s there was a spike in the number before it declined as a result of administrative sclerosis and financial difficulties in the mid to late

1890s. After the 1901 reorganization, the numbers then increased steadily until World War I, then spiked again in the 1920s, before remaining buoyant for a decade until the Great Depression. In the first thirty years of our foreign mission program, from 1874 through 1903, a total of 788 “mission appointees”, as they were then called, were sent out; in the next twenty years, through the end of 1923, the total was 2,257.



The Great Depression inevitably led to some retrenchment and a decline in the numbers of missionaries sent out, but less than might have been, because church leaders during the Depression, including C. K. Meyers, one of the forgotten GC Secretaries, and his successor, M. E. Kern, spared the foreign mission program from cuts, as much as possible. In 1930-31, the denominational workforce was cut by 10% in North America but in the mission fields it decreased less than 5%, though salaries were cut. Kern reported to the 1936 GC Session “not one mission station has been abandoned during these hard years”.<sup>2</sup>

The Second World War had a major impact, but as soon as the war was over, there was a huge increase in the number of mission appointees sent out, thanks in large part to the men who served from 1936 to 1950 as General Conference President and Secretary:

respectively J. L. McElhany and E. D. Dick. With extraordinary boldness, vision and faith, in the war years, with the result still uncertain, they planned, set aside funds, and arranged training of missionary families, against the day that peace returned. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Secretariat continued to be drive the church's foreign mission program.

From the 1970s, however, the Secretary's role evolved yet further, from joint chief planner for mission expansion and chief executive of the foreign mission program to chief bureaucrat and guardian of Policy.

This partly was a result of the expansion, in every sense, of the denomination. By 1970, 107 years after the General Conference was founded, it had 75 member unions, comprising 379 conferences and missions, employing a workforce of over 26,000, with more than 2 million members of 16,505 local churches. Of course administration grew in size and complexity as well. In 1973, GC President Robert Pierson and Secretary Clyde Franz created the first permanent committees with significant authority delegated from the Executive Committee: the President's Administrative Council, or PRADCO; the President's Executive Advisory (PREXAD); and the GC Administrative Committee (ADCOM). The number of standing and ad hoc committees at the world headquarters multiplied.

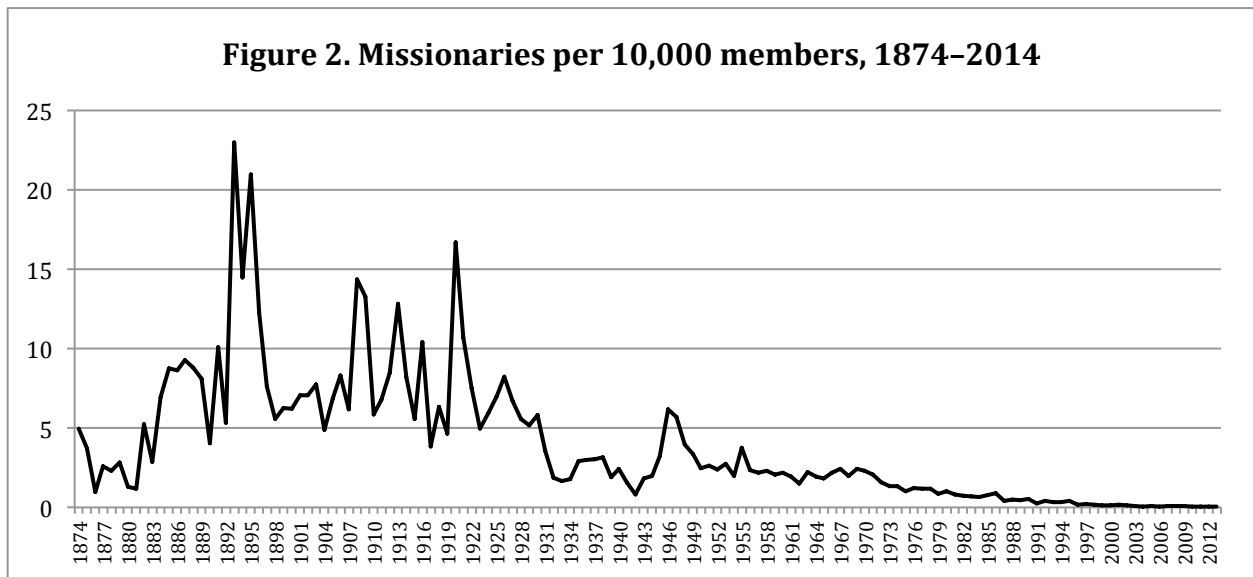
Secretariat provided the indispensable administration of the expanding committee system. At the General Conference Session of 1975 a new post, that of Under-secretary, was created and given responsibility for the General Conference *Working Policy* and for agendas for GC Session, Annual Council, Spring Meeting, and officers' meetings. The creation of an office dedicated to these functions speaks volumes about the trajectory of the Secretariat in the 1970s. The GC Associate Secretaries, meanwhile, spent more and more time advising and training their counterparts at other levels of church structure, helping them to ensure

they were in accordance with world church policies and practices, and assisting them to improve the professionalism and effectiveness of division and union Secretariats.

All these are worthy and valuable contributions to the global Seventh-day Adventist Church. But distracted by heavy administrative responsibilities, Secretariat was unable to stop the world church's mission program experiencing mission drift.

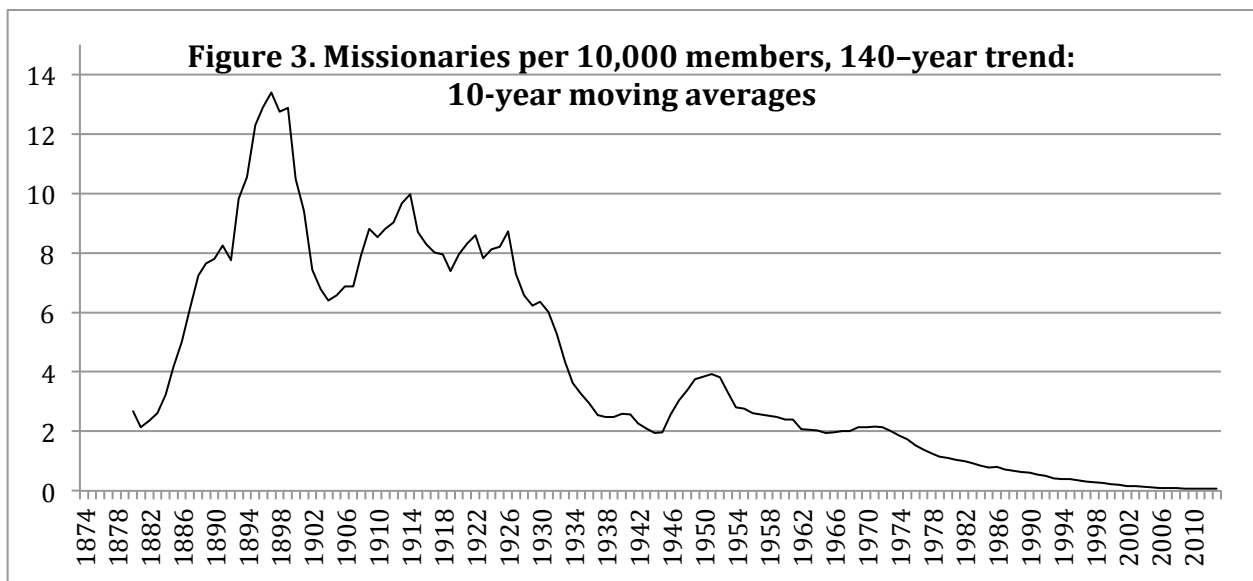
The most foreign missionaries (or interdivisional employees [IDEs], as they had become known) recruited and dispatched in a single year was 473, in 1969; in 1970 the number was 470, only slightly less. But in the forty-five years since then—the period in which Secretariat's focus gradually shifted—the number of IDEs annually sent to serve decreased steadily. This is partly due to changes in the wider missional environment within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, but it is also a symptom of a larger problem.

This becomes especially clear if we look not at the annual totals of missionaries, but at numbers of missionaries deployed in relationship to total membership. Figure 2 shows the same 140 years of data on missionaries sent out for service, but this time it shows the



number of missionaries per 10,000 church members. With this chart, we are looking at our mission program in terms of the potential personnel resources available.

Because annual fluctuations can be volatile, it is helpful to look at the trend using ten-year moving averages, which smooth out the variations. You can see even more clearly the sharp rise in the early 1890s and the drop-off in the years leading up the epochal 1901 Session; the steady growth and stability from 1903 through 1930; and the sharp decline during the Depression and World War II. In terms of the resources available to the world church, the 25 years from the end of the war do not appear as remarkable, but the decline since the late 1960s is even more marked. Brothers and Sisters: Our mission effort relative to world church membership is but a fraction of what it was half a century ago.



By the early twenty-first century, to quote our Executive Secretary, Dr. Ng, Seventh-day Adventist mission was “on autopilot”.<sup>3</sup> Now, nobody took a conscious decision that Secretariat should downplay mission; and neither did anyone deliberately decide to shift the focus away from entering new territories & reaching unreached people groups. Rather,

both happened gradually, and partly because the growing strength of what once had been mission fields meant that the nature of global mission changed. But “as the church grew, mission appeared to lose its intentionality and attention.” By 2009, as Dr. Ng wrote at the time, “mission appear[ed] to be running by default, without a strategic focus”.<sup>4</sup> The world church perpetuated patterns of planning for and resourcing worldwide mission that reflected the needs of the early and mid twentieth century, rather than of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

We kept doing the same thing because it brought extraordinary success in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and the islands of the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. But as a result, to some extent we lost sight of the many unreached or under-reached people groups across the 10/40 Window, in Europe, and in large cities across the world, even in areas which otherwise have large concentrations of church members, such as North America, Australasia and Latin America. Globally, we shifted from an emphasis on “pioneer mission to mission of least resistance.”<sup>5</sup>

In the last quinquennium, things have begun to change. By 2010 it had become plain that more collaboration and unity of purpose was needed. And so the General Conference Mission Board was created, to oversee the world church’s mission program. All the GC’s mission-related entities were placed under the Executive Secretary: the Office of Adventist Mission, the Institute of World Mission, Adventist Volunteer Services, the renamed and reshaped International Personnel Resources and Services, and the renamed Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research. Together with the Associate Secretaries (the Secretariat proper) they formed what we call the “Mission Family” of entities, headed by the Secretary.

In 2012, the Office of Membership Software was added. We work together, utilizing our different areas of expertise collaboratively and intentionally.

Have we solved all the problems? No. Much still remains to be done. But Secretariat has changed course.

What should the role of Secretariat be in the twenty-first century? The duties it has taken on in the last forty years are important, but strategic planning for mission advances, of the kind that characterized the early twentieth-century Adventist Church, can only take place at the world headquarters. And there is an unparalleled concentration of mission expertise in the GC Mission Family, because of its responsibilities for recruiting, training, sending, sustaining, supporting and returning international service employees, for planning and resourcing global church planting, and for promoting mission around the world. The GC Secretariat is the logical location for “mission control”, as it was for much of our history. And mission needs to be Secretariat’s top priority—as it was for much of our history.

If the Seventh-day Adventist Church is to make significant advances in Asia, North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, then we need to recapture both the boldness and the vision shown by church leaders of 50 years ago and more. The world church needs to continue to consider how resources are distributed worldwide; it needs to develop innovative, less bureaucratic structures and processes for mission and for international, intercultural service. As church leaders, we cannot be content with the progress we made in the late twentieth century. Our mission should never be again be set to autopilot.



## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> The text of the constitution is in *Review & Herald* 21 (May 26, 1863): 204-5.
- <sup>2</sup> M. E. Kern, "The Secretary's Report." *Review and Herald*, 113.24 (May 31, 1936): 59.
- <sup>3</sup> G. T. Ng, "Mission on autopilot". *Encountering God in life and mission: A festschrift honoring Jon L. Dybdahl*, ed. Rudi Maier (Berrien Springs, MI: Department of World Mission, Andrews University, 2010), 203-24
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.