

Seventh Day Adventist Archives

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THE PROBLEM of a continually increasing worldwide membership and a concomitant growing volume of records, together with the greater interest in the past which comes with greater age, has resulted in a recent decision by the leadership of the Seventh Day Adventist Church to develop a central archives of the General Conference, or top administrative body, of the church.

The General Conference occupies a four-story modern office building at Takoma Park, Md., near Washington, D. C. The General Conference headquarters is organized administratively into: (a) 12 worldwide geographical divisions, reflecting the extensive foreign mission activity of the church; (b) 11 functional departments, including education, home missionary, medical, ministerial, North American colored, publishing, radio, religious liberty, Sabbath school, temperance, and young people's missionary volunteer departments; and (c) approximately 11 other major nondepartmental bureaus, commissions, corporations, or services, including such organizations as an insurance service, a bureau of press relations, and a council on industrial relations. Administrative and fiscal services and overall coordination are the responsibility of the equivalent of an administrative department under the secretary of the General Conference.

At present there is no central collection of the records of the church. Each major division, department, bureau, commission, corporation, or service maintains its own records. Current records are maintained in offices; noncurrent records, in basement vaults, in other basement facilities, and in transfer cases in the attic. Each of the above major organizational elements decides for itself what records should be kept permanently, what should be destroyed, and when such destruction should take place. The same is true for the various regional and local church or church-related offices through-

¹ This article is based upon a visit by the writer on Feb. 16, 1954, to the offices of the General Conference of the Seventh Day Adventist denomination, and interviews there with Elder Denton E. Rebok, secretary of the General Conference, and Miss Bessie Mount, a curator of the Ellen G. White collection; *The Custody and Use of the Ellen G. White Writings* (1953); and the *Seventh Day Adventist Yearbook*, 1953.

out the world except for administrative records, which cannot be destroyed without approval from the administrative department under the secretary of the General Conference.

The records of this last department constitute probably the most important records in terms of the institutional history of the church. The department's records go back to the formal organization of the denomination at Battle Creek, Mich., on May 21, 1863, with a constituency of 125 churches and 3,500 members in the United States. The records trace Seventh Day Adventist growth since then to a status of 910,369 communicants (estimated Sept. 30, 1953), and 10,830 churches (as of Dec. 31, 1952), in 197 countries (as of Dec. 31, 1952), operating 43 publishing houses and branches issuing 342 periodicals. During the Church's history since 1863 its headquarters has been moved only once, from Battle Creek, Mich., to Takoma Park, Md., in 1903.

Originally all the administrative department records were kept under the supervision of the statistical secretary. Relatively soon after the move to Takoma Park, however, during the statistical secretaryship of H. E. Rogers, the records were separated into three record groups: (1) statistical and related records documenting the various aspects of denominational growth; (2) correspondence and related records of the secretary and of various administrative officers from 1863; and (3) official records of General Conference and various committee meetings from 1863. All three record groups are considered adequately indexed by the secretary of the General Conference. The first record group is under H. W. Klaser, the others under Miss Katie Farney. Research access by recognized authorities is permitted only to the first; some of the third has been published and is thus available to researchers. The rest is closed to researchers. After records in the first two record groups above are 2 years old, they are screened by Mr. Klaser and Miss Farney to separate records of temporary value from those of permanent value. Recommendations for disposal are submitted for approval to a small general committee under E. D. Dick, a former long-time secretary of the General Conference.

Besides the three record groups above, the administrative department is indirectly responsible for two other groups of particular importance in documenting church history. One is a collection of Advent sources, housed in the Seventh Day Adventist Seminary Library in Takoma Park. It was begun about 25 years ago by L. E. Froom in connection with his preparation of the four-volume *Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*. The other record group is a col-

lection of all publications, including both books and periodicals, issued anywhere and by any Seventh Day Adventist church element throughout the denomination's history. This collection, which is housed in the seminary library under Mrs. Mary Jane Mitchell, the librarian, was begun only 3 years ago and is as yet incomplete. A major acquisition program is in progress to fill gaps in the collection of past publications. Current publications are acquired systematically by automatic deposit of copies in the collection by the responsible publishing houses. There is no restriction on access by researchers to either the publications or Advent sources.

A specialized and important body of papers is the Ellen G. White collection, separately administered by a specially appointed board of trustees. This is housed in a 15 x 26 ft. vault in the basement of the General Conference building. Mrs. White (1827-1915) was a major prophet of, and source of inspiration to, the church. She was also the wife of James White, second president of the General Conference from 1865 to 1867. Principal components of the collection, which is maintained by a staff of four under Elder Arthur White, are: (a) 50,000 manuscript pages of Mrs. White's writings kept in a 72-drawer Shannon file cabinet; (b) 4,000-5,000 periodical articles by Mrs. White; (c) her diaries; and (d) her published books. There is a 14,000 card index to the manuscripts and periodical articles. The collection was moved to Takoma Park in 1938 from Mrs. White's last home near St. Helena, Calif. The collection is accessible to responsible researchers who are approved by the board of trustees, but to avoid possible distorted use, publication of material based upon such research is dependent on approval by responsible church authorities. The church is seeking donations for a \$50,000 fund to finance the preparation of a 2,500,000 card concordance-type index to the collection.

Current planning by the secretary of the General Conference, Elder Denton E. Rebok, looks toward the establishment within the next 5 years of a central archives for all noncurrent and permanently valuable records of all organizational elements of the General Conference. This archives would also include manuscript collections of the papers of such leading figures in the history of the church as the church may desire, and is able, to acquire. A program for the acquisition of such papers is already under way. The archives would be housed in a special section of a projected large new seminary library building in the Takoma Park area. One person would be designated as Archivist.

As yet no consideration has been given to the problem of whether

or not to establish centralized control over the disposal of the present separately-managed divisional, departmental, and other records. Detailed planning, however, is just beginning. Thus, as yet no inventory has been taken of the volume of present holdings of all permanently valuable records of all organizational elements of the General Conference, nor has any accurate estimate yet been made of the current and projected annual rate of accrual of such records. Such preliminary groundwork will be necessary to determine adequate physical requirements for the central archives. That such an archives is being planned, however, is an important development in American religious institutional history.

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