

# General Conference Working Policy

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The General Conference *Working Policy* comprises the policies adopted by the Annual Councils of the General Conference Executive Committee. As such, it serves as the authoritative source for matters concerning the operations of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination globally. Given its administrative purpose, the *Working Policy* is distributed exclusively through the divisions to the administrative entities of the global Church.<sup>1</sup>

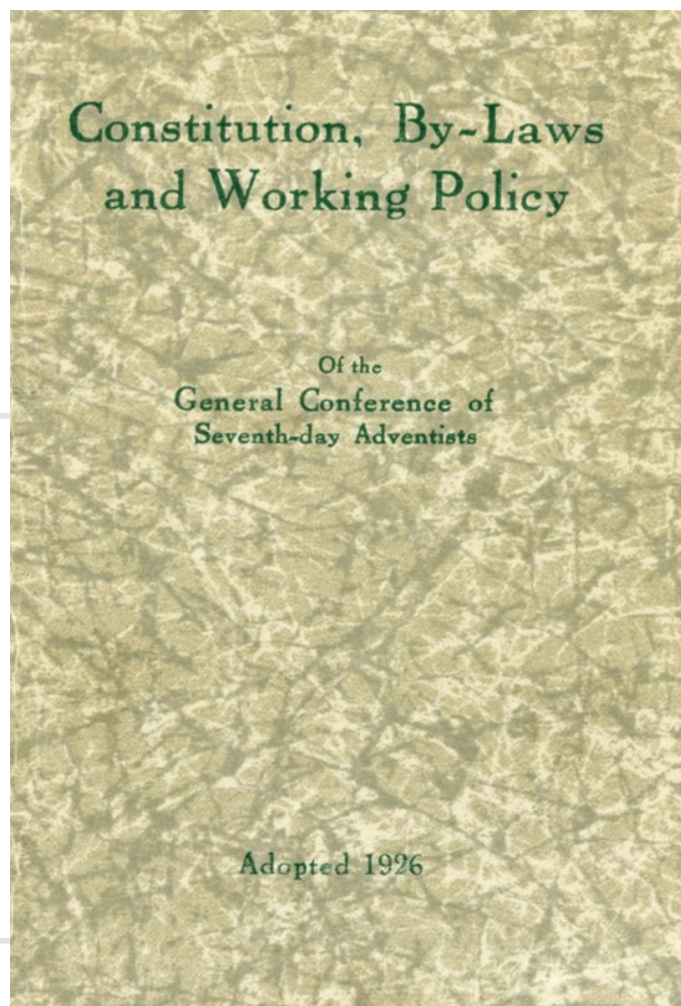


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## Circumstances Leading to the Creation of Adventist Working Policy

One of the General Conference Secretariat's most important contributions to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the twentieth century was not dramatic in appearance, but decisive in effect: it helped turn inherited custom into written policy.

As the Church expanded across continents, more territories, more workers, more institutions, and more layers of administration all created a new challenge as did the passing of generations. The denomination still needed unity of purpose and faith, but it could no longer rely on memory, habit, and informal precedent alone. What

earlier generations had simply known as the “Adventist way” increasingly had to be gathered, clarified, and written down. In that setting, Secretariat became a key architect of administrative coherence for a worldwide church. The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church can be understood through the pivotal role of the General Conference Secretariat in organizing, coordinating, and sustaining the denomination's worldwide missionary enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

## Territorial Expansion and Membership Growth

The development of the *Working Policy* belongs within the wider story of Adventist organizational growth. Official church records note that the 1901–1903 reorganization was the most significant restructuring in Adventist history and that the arrangements put in place then still form the denomination's basic organizational building blocks. That reorganization integrated departments and broadened the administrative system so that mission could be directed more effectively across the world field.<sup>3</sup> The General Conference session list maintained by the General Conference [Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research](#) shows the scale of change in only a generation: the 1901 session had 268 delegates, while the 1926 session in Milwaukee had 577.

Statistical evidence underscores why informal understandings were no longer enough. The 1936 Annual Statistical Report, looking back over the preceding decades, records that in 1922 the church had 208,771 members, 4,927 churches, 7,600 evangelistic laborers, and work in 194 languages; by 1926 the total of evangelistic and institutional laborers had risen to 17,946, while the work was carried in 256 languages and 126 countries; by the end of 1936 the denomination reported 438,139 members, 8,243 churches, 26,553 laborers, and activity in 378 countries, islands, and island groups using 649 languages and dialects. Administration did not replace mission; it was what made mission at that scale governable.<sup>4</sup>

## Administrative Challenges

The need for written policy emerged because Adventist mission had successfully expanded beyond the capacities of an earlier, simpler church administrative structure. In 1863 the denomination had been organized with local churches, conferences, and the General Conference. By 1901, however, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had established publishing, educational, medical, and missionary organizations that frequently operated with overlapping authority and inadequate coordination. Although these bodies were affiliated with the Church, many remained legally independent. The 1863 church organization did not establish integrated structures for managing publishing, education, health, and missionary activities, resulting in the development of these ministries as separate legal entities outside the conference administrative framework. Consequently, coordination problems had become chronic by the 1890s. The reforms of 1901–1903 aimed, in part, to place decisions closer to the field while also preserving the cohesion of a world movement.<sup>5</sup>

That earlier generation still functioned largely by common understanding. The denomination had decisions, procedures, and precedents, but not yet a single, comprehensive administrative digest. The same basic pattern can be seen in the history of the [Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual](#). As early as 1882, church leaders recognized the need for “instructions to church officers.” However, the 1883 General Conference Session did not authorize a permanent manual. In the following decades, guidance was available through compilations and articles, but no official, universally recognized manual existed. This reluctance demonstrated a strong Adventist tendency to avoid developments that could solidify into creeds or promote excessive formalism.<sup>6</sup>

Although that instinct was understandable, by the 1920s it was no longer adequate, as recognized by church leaders of the period.<sup>7</sup> As official studies on governance later observed, the first generations of Adventist leaders passed from the scene, the Executive Committee expanded, business increasingly moved to councils as well as sessions, and world representation grew. In that context, the Church’s long-standing practices had to be collected and ordered so they could be transmitted, interpreted, and applied consistently from one field to another. What had once been preserved socially now had to be preserved textually.<sup>8</sup>

## From Unwritten Practice to Written Policy

The move toward *Working Policy* was not an abrupt innovation but a gradual act of codification. In 1922 the General Conference created a “Committee on Constitution and Working Policy,” not to invent a new system but to gather actions already taken and make them usable. That description is important because it reveals the original intent: the *Working Policy* began as a summary of accepted practice and previously voted actions, not as a bureaucratic reinvention of Adventist governance.<sup>9</sup>

This helps explain why the Secretariat’s role mattered so much. The office of the General Conference secretary was already central to minutes, records, correspondence, and the tracking of committee and session actions. The current General Conference Constitution and Bylaws<sup>10</sup> still designate the secretary as responsible for keeping the minutes of General Conference sessions and Executive Committee meetings, a continuity that reflects the office’s historic nature. In other words, once the Church decided that its decisions needed to be gathered and systematized, the Secretariat was institutionally positioned to do that work.<sup>11</sup>

Adventist policy was intended to advance the Church’s mission. Policy can effectively facilitate mission when it emerges from collective decision-making and remains adaptable to actual field conditions. This principle is particularly applicable to the 1920s. The Church did not implement policy due to a decline in missionary focus. Rather, it adopted policy because its missionary activity had expanded so significantly, and its operations had become so global, that standardized procedures and clear lines of responsibility became necessary.

## The Turning Point in Milwaukee

The crucial public turning point came at the 41st General Conference session in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, held from May 27 to June 14, 1926, with 577 delegates. During that session, General Conference President William A. Spicer publicly articulated the problem that many leaders already felt. According to the proceedings, Spicer said that important items were “scattered all through our minutes” and proposed that they be collected into “a little pocket pamphlet” so leaders could “turn to it and see what the working policy is.”<sup>12</sup> The language is memorable because it reveals how practical the original concept was: accessible, portable, concise, immediately useful, and not creating policy but recording what had already been voted.

This proposal should not be misunderstood as merely clerical housekeeping. It was a strategic response to a governance problem created by missionary expansion. The same 1936 statistical materials that document 256 languages and 126 countries in 1926 also show a rapidly growing labor force and widening institutional complexity.<sup>13</sup> Decisions made in one location increasingly impacted leaders in various regions, frequently at significant distances from denominational headquarters. As the Church identified itself as a global movement, it required a standardized administrative reference applicable worldwide.

The intention had been to have the new policy digest adopted at the 1926 General Conference Session, but the task proved larger than expected. The committee had to identify a great many previously voted actions and arrange them in coherent form. The matter was therefore referred from the session to the 1926 Autumn Council. That delay is revealing in itself: the Church was not creating policy from scratch; it was discovering how much policy it already possessed in dispersed form.<sup>14</sup>

## 1926 Autumn Council and the First Working Policy

The 1926 Autumn Council completed what the General Conference session had begun earlier that year. *Working Policy* was inaugurated in 1926 as a “careful digest” of General Conference actions voted in earlier sessions and councils, and that this digest was to “constitute a working policy.”<sup>15</sup> The first compilation published in 1926 contained decisions of both the General Conference Executive Committee and General Conference sessions. These descriptions align with the purpose stated in Milwaukee: the new volume was not a substitute for the church’s representative processes but a distillation of them.<sup>16</sup>

At just 63 pages, the first edition was modest in size compared with the 837-page 2025–2026 edition—a striking indication of how much the *Working Policy* has developed over the past century. Yet the original edition’s significance was enormous. It established the principle that the world Church’s administrative decisions could be assembled into an organized, authoritative reference book. Once that principle was accepted, revision and expansion became normal. Policy could now be updated as circumstances changed and as new actions were voted, while the Church still retained continuity with earlier actions and practices.<sup>17</sup>

The development of the *Church Manual* only a few years later confirms that the Church had entered a broader era of codification. In 1931 the General Conference Committee voted to authorize publication of a church manual, and the 1932 edition explained the reason in strikingly similar terms: as the work had grown and spread into many lands, a manual had become necessary to preserve denominational practices and polity for the increasing number of ministers and local-church officers. *Working Policy* and the *Church Manual* thus emerged as related, though distinct, instruments: the former aimed chiefly at denominational governance beyond the local church, while the latter addressed congregational order and practice.<sup>18</sup>

## The Significance of *Working Policy* in the 1930s

The creation of the *Working Policy* in 1926 did not end the process; it began it. Governance studies note that the Constitution and *Working Policy* were continually revised as the church faced new realities and enlarged representation in its Executive Committee. By 1930 a new edition of the *Constitution, By-Laws, and Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists* was already in circulation. This quick development suggests that leaders immediately recognized the value of the first digest and the need to refine it as experience accumulated.<sup>19</sup>

By the early 1930s, church leaders were already describing *Working Policy* as a unifying force. Hampton W. Cottrell's assessment that a "well-defined working policy" had been a strong factor in binding Seventh-day Adventists together "as one in purpose in Christ."<sup>20</sup> That statement shows that policy was not understood merely as regulation. It was seen as one of the means by which a global body remained recognizably one church.<sup>21</sup> Policy could not create spiritual unity by itself, but it could protect cooperative action, common expectations, and fair process across cultures and regions.<sup>22</sup>

## Lasting Implications

The historical origins of the *Working Policy* help explain why it should be interpreted missiologically, not just administratively. Official Adventist governance documents today still treat it that way. The General Conference Constitution and Bylaws state that divisions are to act in harmony with the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws, the General Conference *Working Policy*, and actions of the Executive Committee. The document further states that the Annual Council exists, in part, for "the adoption of policies that may be necessary in the operation of the worldwide work." As a result, the *Working Policy* continues to function in its original capacity as an instrument for conducting the worldwide mission.

Revisions to the General Conference *Working Policy* are approved, as needed, by the General Conference Executive Committee at an Annual Council. Early editions of the *Working Policy* were published at irregular intervals, ranging from one to seven years between editions; today, a new edition is published following each

Annual Council. Revisions may include the addition of new policies, the deletion of provisions that are no longer needed, or amendments to existing policies designed to clarify their intent, respond to changing circumstances, and, above all, strengthen the mission of the Church. For example, in 2021, the “Purpose” statements in the model constitutions and operating policies for unions and local conferences were amended to align their wording with the revised General Conference Mission Statement. Such an amendment illustrates how the *Working Policy* is periodically refined to ensure that its provisions remain consistent with the Church’s mission and current organizational needs.

## Historical Assessment

Seen in historical perspective, the birth of *Working Policy* was one of the clearest expressions of the Secretariat’s transition from record-keeper to institutional strategist. The Secretariat did not originate Adventist mission, nor did it replace the authority of General Conference sessions or committees. What it did was gather, preserve, organize, and make operational the decisions through which a worldwide Church could act with coherence. In the 1920s and 1930s, that quiet labor was foundational. It gave the denomination a practical administrative memory at the very moment when personal memory was no longer enough.<sup>23</sup>

The Adventist mission has historically relied on spiritual conviction, sacrificial service, and confidence in divine guidance. To enable a church operating across diverse languages, cultures, and legal contexts to fulfill its mission, effective governance also requires standardized processes, durable records, and shared rules. The General Conference *Working Policy* emerged to meet these needs. It was born not from a love of bureaucracy for its own sake, but from the conviction that a world church aiming at nothing less than the whole world needed orderly ways to live, decide, and labor together.<sup>24</sup>

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