

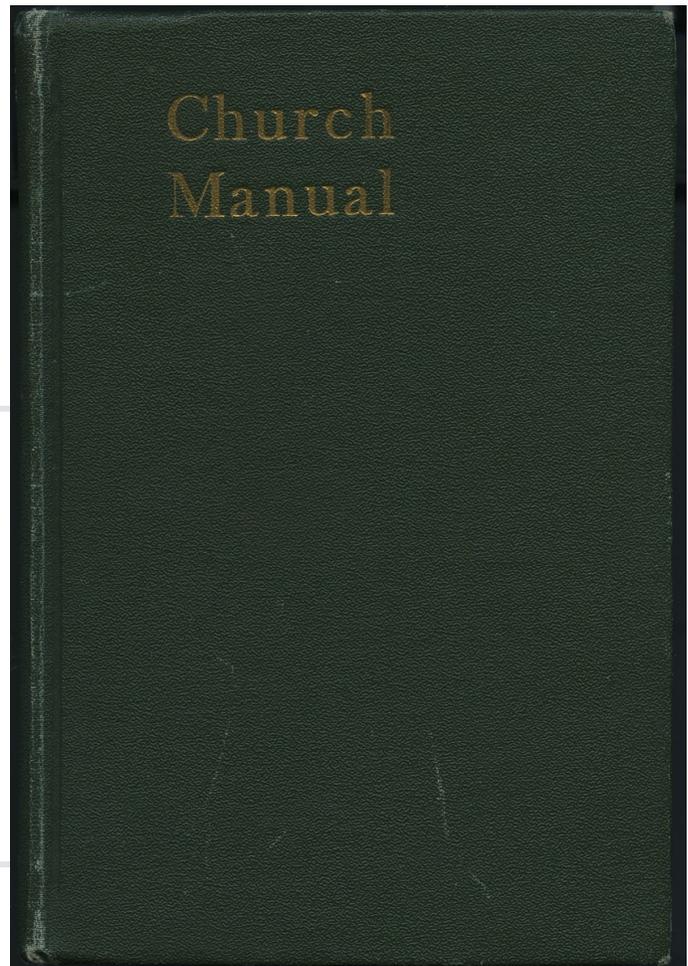
Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual

MARIO VELOSO

Mario Veloso (M.A., history and M.Div. from Andrews University, Michigan, U.S.A.; Th.D. from El Salvador University, Buenos Aires, Argentina). His service to the church included pastoring churches, teaching theology at graduate and post graduate levels, directing departments (conference, unions, and division levels), participating in administration (rector of the Latin American Theological Seminary, South American Division secretary, vice president of Euro Asia Division, associate secretary of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, secretary of the Church Manual Committee for ten years, 1990-2000). He is also a prolific writer and a laurel poet.

The concept of a manual suggests the existence of order and organization, with structure and instructions. It functions as a clear way of conducting and administering the church. “The Church Manual describes the governance, operations, and functions of the local church.”¹ It covers organization, authority, the function of pastors and other church employees, how to organize or dissolve churches, how to become members, church discipline, the role of officers, church structure and departments, elections, services and other meetings, including but not limited to the church board, finance, along with standards of Christian living, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and a list of fundamental beliefs. The current edition (voted in 2015 and published in 2016) presents all of this information in a 227 pages book.²

The development of a church manual is quite an undertaking for a church that began with a strong anti-organizational bias. They believed that all church organization was *Babylon*—confusion that opposes God. When the General Conference approved its first Constitution (May 20, 1863) Uriah Smith reported: “There was not a dissenting voice and we may reasonably doubt if there was even a dissenting thought.”³ In the same issue of the *Review and Herald*, after reporting about the May 21 decision, offers additional background about the shift in



1932 Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

views on church organization: "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace and order in all the churches of the saints."⁴ It reveals two unifying authorities—God's Revelation and God's order in the universe. The early denomination based its concept of organization, including the later *Church Manual*, upon these Scriptural principles.

As early as 1882 such a need was recognized with "instructions to church officers." The General Conference Session (December 7-19, 1882)⁵ in its eleventh meeting (December 17) made the following resolution: "Resolved, That, we recommend that the General Conference Committee prepare, or cause to be prepared, instructions to church officers, to be printed in the Review and Herald or in tract form, as they may deem the better." Immediately afterward the chair appointed a committee of three to carry forward the resolution: W. H. Littlejohn, J. O. Corliss and H. A. St. John.⁶ This was the earliest attempt to create a church manual. From this point forward the history of the *Church Manual* can be divided into four time periods: (1) 1883-1930, Compilations of instructions for church order, (2) 1931-1945, a church manual of the General Conference Committee, (3) 1946-1999, a General Conference Session church manual and (4) 2000 to the present, a church manual with content and notes.

Precursors to the Church Manual, 1883-1930

Some church leaders were not yet ready to accept rules of order for the church which they thought a manual would convey. Therefore, three facts must be mentioned from this period (1) Publication of *instructions*. (2) Not yet a Church manual. (3) Compilation of instructions.

(1) The "instructions" for church order were published in a series of articles in the *Review and Herald* from June 5 to October 7, 1883. These articles began with a preface and a definition of the church. Although they came under the title "Church Manual," these articles were referred to as a "compilation."⁷ These articles addressed a variety of topics: the name of the church, organization of churches,⁸ officers of the church,⁹ elders or bishops,¹⁰ duties of local church officers,¹¹ ordination of elders, deacons and pastors,¹² reasons for denominational existence,¹³ requisites to church membership,¹⁴ admission of and letters granted to members,¹⁵ how to conduct church trials,¹⁶ how to disband a church, the administration of baptism,¹⁷ quarterly meetings, the church ordinances,¹⁸ marriage ceremonies, funerals,¹⁹ credentials, licenses, conferences and delegates, tithing system,²⁰ legal societies, legacies, rules of order,²¹ prophets, evangelists,²² and how to record church meetings.²³

(2) The 1883 General Conference Session approved new principles of church order. However, it did not authorize the publication of a church manual.²⁴ Only the compilations of principles were published.

(3) There were several compilations of instructions. Among them were: H. M. J. Richards' *Church Order and Its Divine Origins and Importance* (1906),²⁵ J. N. Loughborough's *The Church, Its Organization, Order and Discipline* (1907), and Clarence C. Crisler's *The Value of Organization* (1914). Loughborough's 177-page book became influential probably because the church members looked for a manual with authority and Loughborough's book

was “assertive, prescriptive, and almost authoritarian in tone.”²⁶

The “instructions” had strong biblical base. The following is an instruction for elders and bishops in the 1883 articles:

The qualifications which an elder should possess are shadowed forth by the titles applied to him in the Scriptures. He is sometimes called an elder, sometimes a bishop, and sometimes a pastor. The original term for elder in the Greek is *presbuteros* that for bishop is *episkopos*, while that for pastor is *poiman*. The first is applied to a person of advanced years; the second signifies an overseer or superintendent; the third, a shepherd or tender of sheep. These three terms taken together imply that the one to whom they are applied should be characterized by the dignity and wisdom of age, capabilities which fit him to act as an overseer or superintendent of the church, and that tender solicitude for the fold of Christ which the Eastern shepherd manifests toward the flock of sheep over which he is placed in charge. It is not necessary to infer from the ordinary signification of the term elder, that the office which it represents should be given only to aged persons. Anyone who possesses the sobriety and knowledge which are naturally the products of a long experience can safely be entrusted with the eldership of a church, though he may not have passed the noon of life. Besides the qualifications of an elder suggested by the considerations offered above, the following additional ones might be advanced: (a.) An aptitude for teaching publicly and privately (1 These. 5:12; Titus 1:9; 1 Tim. 5:17); (b.) Strong faith in God, since the elder is expected to visit and pray for the recovery of the sick (James 5:14); (c.) Generous hospitality (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8); (d.) Experience in the Christian life (1 Tim. 3:6); (e.) Blameless (1 Tim. 3:2); (f.) Temperate (1 Tim. 3:3); (q.). The ability to govern well his own house (1 Tim. 3:4).²⁷

The instructions sought to strengthen the believers’ acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God and the Adventist doctrines, study of the Word, confession of sins to God, faith in Christ, observance of the Seventh-day Sabbath, acceptance of God’s ownership of tithes, church discipline, belief in the Bible doctrine of spiritual gifts, observance of all the Ten Commandments and baptism by immersion.

A Church Manual of the General Conference Committee, 1931-1945

It was only in 1931 that the General Conference Committee, not the General Conference session, took an action about the publication of a church manual. The action taken on October 28, 1931 reads as follows: “CHURCH MANUAL: J. L. McElhany presented a manuscript for a church manual, and it was-- VOTED, To authorize the General Conference Committee in Washington to take steps toward editing the manuscript, and proceed with its publication.”²⁸ J. L. McElhany, at the time, was GC vice-president for North America and later became the GC president (1936-1950).²⁹

The first edition of the Church Manual was published in 1932.³⁰ Its content on 208 pages included a preface, two pages signed by the General Conference Committee, eleven sections, and an index. The preface provides the

reasons and objectives for publishing the Church Manual: the expansion of the Adventist Church in the world and the development of Adventist missions, the need for consistency in church government and preservation of denominational practices overseas, and the increasing number of ministers and officers.

As the work of the church has grown and spread into many lands, it has become increasingly evident that a Manual on church government is needed to set forth and preserve our denominational practices and polity. An ever-increasing number of men are being called into positions of responsibility as ministers and church officers. To all these a work of this kind should prove helpful in the administration of church work.³¹

The Manual was based on the Bible, the Spirit of Prophecy, and the experience of the church.³² The following publications of the manual had no important changes until the 1946 edition.

A General Conference Session Church Manual, 1946-1999

In 1946 several changes were made. (1) *Authority*. The 1946 Church Manual would not only carry the authority of the General Conference Committee but, for the first time, the full authority of the General Conference Session. The action taken on June 13, 1946 has seven recommendations. Number one recommendation deals with the session's authority and number seven with several changes in the content of the Manual:

WHEREAS, There are several points in the present edition of the Church Manual which present problems in the administration of our church work in various lands, We recommend: 1. That the Church Manual be revised, and that all changes or revision of policy that are to be made in the Manual shall be authorized by the General Conference session. . . . 7. That the material on pages 105 to 110 and paragraph 2 on page 95 of the Manual be rearranged....³³

The rearrangement included several changes of content that the session made.³⁴ While the matter of having a Church Manual with the authority of the General Conference in session was settled, there was still another matter that needed attention, namely the specific needs of the world territories.

(2) *Territorial needs*. The full content of the Church Manual from 1946 was to be binding for the world Church. However, each territory has specific needs that needed to be addressed that were not necessarily relevant for the other parts of the world. For that reason, the Autumn Council recommended that the divisions prepare a supplement to the Church Manual to be approved by the General Conference Committee. The recommendation has five points. Number five reads:

5. That each division, including the North American Division of the world field prepare a "Supplement" to the new Church Manual not in any way modifying it but containing such additional matter as is applicable to the conditions and circumstances prevailing in the division; the manuscripts for these Supplements to be submitted to the General Conference Committee for endorsement before being printed.³⁵

(3) *Division supplements*. The 1951 edition of the *Church Manual* contained a “complete revision,” based on actions from 1946 and 1950, and “significant changes” were introduced.³⁶ The 1951 edition carried on those recommendations and became a 279 page-book with a preface, 16 chapters of content for the world church, a North American supplement, a general index, and an index of Scripture texts. This format was followed in every edition until the year 2000.

A Church Manual with Content and Notes, 2000 to Present

In 2000 the General Conference Session authorized a new format for the Church Manual:

The 2000 General Conference Session authorized the reclassification of some existing Church Manual material and approved the process for making such modifications. The content of this Church Manual, as it is presented in chapters and sections within the chapters, is divided into two types of material: Main content and notes. The main content of each chapter is of worldwide value and applicable to every church. Recognizing the need for some variations, additional material that is explanatory in nature appears as Notes at the end of some chapters and is given as guidance. The Notes have subheadings that correspond to chapter subheadings and correlate to specific page numbers.³⁷

Authority of the Church Manual

The 1946 General Conference Session bestowed the official acceptance of the denomination on the *Church Manual*. The reasons for this decision came from three sources:

(1) The Bible. Paul speaking about the way to proceed in “all the churches of the saints” says, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:33,40). This need was used from the beginning of the conversation about the church manual.

(2) The Spirit of Prophecy. As early as 1875 Ellen G. White wrote:

Christ would have His followers brought together in church capacity, observing order, having rules and discipline, and all subject one to another, esteeming others better than themselves. Union and confidence are essential to the prosperity of the church. If each member of the church feels at liberty to move independently of the others, taking his own peculiar course, how can the church be in any safety in the hour of danger and peril?³⁸

In 1909 Ellen G. White wrote:

When, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered.... Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the

decision of the general body. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority.³⁹

(3) The policy of the church. The 1877 General Conference Session took the following action:

Resolved, that the highest authority under God among Seventh-day Adventists is found in the will of the body of that people, as expressed in the decisions of the General Conference when acting within its proper jurisdiction; and that such decisions should be submitted to by all without exception, unless they can be shown to conflict with the word of God and the rights of individual conscience.⁴⁰

According to the 1963 edition of the manual it “is found not only the justification for this Church Manual but also its rightful claim upon us all, both ministry and laity.”⁴¹ This “rightful claim” is a reference to the full authority of the manual over every church in the whole church organization around the globe including every single church member.

The 2010 printing (18th edition) affirmed the authority of the Church Manual in this way:

The standards and practices of the Church are based upon the principles of the Holy Scriptures. These principles, underscored by the Spirit of Prophecy, are set forth in this Church Manual. They are to be followed in all matters pertaining to the administration and operation of local churches. The Church Manual also defines the relationship that exists between the local congregation and the conference or other entities of Seventh-day Adventist denominational organization. No attempt should be made to set up standards of membership or to make, or attempt to enforce, rules or regulations for local church operations that are contrary to these decisions adopted by the General Conference in session and that are set forth in this Church Manual.⁴²

The same authority is reaffirmed in the same way in the most recent 2016 revision (19^h edition).⁴³

Importance of the Church Manual

The Church Manual has helped the preservation of the Adventist Church worldwide and the fulfillment of its mission. It provides overall church unity by providing a consistent set of beliefs and lifestyle practices. It provides instructions about how to operate a church, especially when churches have conflicts, providing consistency of governance in the whole world. It preserves the denominational practices and the “good actions taken through the years.”⁴⁴ The opening sentence in the preface of the first edition of the Church Manual (the 1932 edition) sums up the significance of the manual: “It has become increasingly evident that a manual on church government is needed to set forth and preserve our denominational practices and polity.” The significance of the Church Manual in preserving the denominational practices worldwide is highlighted also in the last edition of the Church Manual (the 2016 edition): “This was no attempt to suddenly create and impose upon the Church whole pattern of church governance. Rather it was an endeavor first to preserve all the good actions taken

through the years and then to add rules required by the Church's increasing growth and complexity.⁴⁵

The Church Manual provides the necessary governance for the world church to fulfil its mission globally in a united worldwide action.

Changes in the Church Manual

From the first printing of the Church Manual in 1932 there have been several changes to respond the needs and challenges of the growing church. At the 1946 General Conference Session an action was taken to define that changes would be made "by the General Conference Session"⁴⁶ The 1948 Autumn Council voted an initiative authorizing the world divisions to prepare a "supplement" with materials applicable to their specific conditions, but not changing the content of the Church Manual. This supplement needed the endorsement of the General Conference Committee to be printed.⁴⁷ The last important change of the Church Manual was approved by the 2000 General Conference Session and it involved a reclassification of the Church Manual's content, which now had two parts: main content and notes.

In 1990, the *Church Manual* was published twice for the simple reason that the first printing did not include several changes voted in the 1985 and the 1990 General Conference sessions. To correct such a mistake, it was necessary to provide a second printing that carried an explanation.⁴⁸ As far as it is known this has never happened again, either before or after.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The Apostol Paul defines the church as the united, spiritual body of Christ (Eph. 1:23; 2:16) that partakers in God's promises (Eph. 3:6) and mission (Eph. 4:16). The Church Manual exists to help the church to fulfill Christ's commission that He entrusted to His church (Matt. 28:18, 20).

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