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About Those General Conference Presidents (Work Station One)

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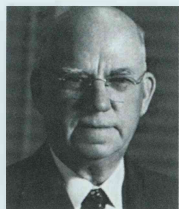
W O R K S T A T I O N O N E



Roland R. Hegstad

About Those General Conference Presidents

During my 35 years in the General Conference I worked with four presidents. In my college years or early ministry I heard two others. The current president and I share a Sabbath school class. Let me tell you something about each.



W. H. Branson
(1950-1954)

During my internship in the Upper Columbia Conference, Branson spoke at camp meeting, held on the campus of Walla Walla College. While he was appealing for funds for an African mission project, God reminded me of my golf game, which I had assured Him I played only for exercise. "Roland," He said, "Why are you spending money for those buckets of balls I see you hitting every week?"

"Well," I responded, "You've seen my miserable hook and abominable

slice. I'm trying to learn how to hit the ball straight down the fairway."

"Oh, I see. Well if you're really doing it for the exercise, Roland, don't you get more exercise zigzagging back and forth across the fairway from hook to slice than you would hitting the ball right down the middle?"

On the commitment cards Elder Branson handed out, I wrote: "I'll give one new set of Wilson golf clubs." So somewhere out in Africa, I suppose, there are converts who are now walking the straight and narrow because of my golf club money.



R. R. Figuhr
(1954-1979)

At 29, as book editor of the Southern Publishing Association (SPA), I showed constituents a copy of a book that I assured them would, for the sake of reading ease in sunlight,

be printed on off-white paper. Elder Fighur, who had followed Branson as General Conference president, arose to say that he was not sure he could approve what might well be the first “off color” book printed by an Adventist publishing house! I sent him the first copy off the press. A year later, he approved my appointment as associate director of the Religious Liberty Department and editor of *Liberty* magazine. We had a notable disagreement on the editorial policy of *Liberty* [See PD 3: 1999, “The Tale of Two Magazines.”] I remember him as a man who, once having made a decision, never changed his mind. (In all fairness, I must remind you that was the judgment of a very junior member of the General Conference).



Robert W. Pierson (1966-1979)

I came to admire Pierson not only for his commitment to God but also for his diplomacy and organization. A friend from seminary days told me that Pierson, while president of the Kentucky-Tennessee Conference, had visited him one weekend in his Kentucky district. On Sunday, before leaving, Pierson sat down and said, “Brother F, what are your plans for the next two years?” My friend confessed that he didn’t have any. Pier-

son pulled a little notebook out of his pocket. When he left, “Brother F” had a two-year schedule, as he ruefully told me. I told him that I suspected Pierson knew two years ahead of time when he was going to tie his shoes.

One day Pierson stopped me in the General Conference hallway. “Roland,” he said, “my wife and I are going to be holding evangelistic meetings in New Jersey in a couple months. I’d appreciate knowing you’re praying for us.” I assured him I would. “And,” he continued, taking a little notebook out of his pocket, “I’d feel even better knowing you were holding meetings also.” How do you tell the General Conference president that you don’t have time? I held meetings. And often I think of him while I’m tying my shoes. . . .



Neal C. Wilson (1979-1990)

Neal Wilson had been president of the Nile Mission and director of the Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Columbia Union before becoming General Conference president. I don’t recall that I ever told him how to do his work, which is just as well: He had a phenomenal memory. If he were to meet my son in Loma Linda, after not having seen him for a decade or

two, he would say, “Douglas, how are you? And how are David and Beth doing? And”— you get the picture.

Though not so pliable as Pierson, Wilson would change his mind if you produced persuasive evidence. And rather than resenting the contrary view, he was secure enough intellectually to appreciate it. I worked closely with him on ventures involving the Soviet Union, especially as Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost* portended great changes in that land. I admired Wilson for always doing his homework.

In 1987, at a Peace Forum in Moscow, Wilson presented a paper, “Proposal for Peace and Understanding,” that asked the Soviet government to declare an amnesty for all prisoners of conscience—more than 900—as an assurance that the promised changes were more than cosmetic. Later that day, Konstantin Kharchev, Chairman of the Council of Religious Affairs, brought assurances from Mr. Gorbachev that it would be done. And it was.



Robert S. Folkenberg (1990-1999)

Whatever his problems, Folkenberg left having propelled the church into the Information Age. It was he who insisted that every General Conference officer become computer liter-

ate. Had a less technically informed president been in office during his era, we likely would not have had the great down-linked evangelistic telecasts that have added tens of thousands to the church. And despite the howls from academia, I believe in his evaluation program (endorsed also by Paulsen). However, it might have been better received had the institutional leaders charged with implementing it been involved in its drafting.



Jan Paulsen (1999–)

When I heard of Folkenberg’s resignation, I told my wife, “If I were voting, my choice for General Conference president would be Jan Paulsen.” I first met Paulsen when he was president of the Trans-European Division. I was graduation speaker for Newbold College; he and his wife, Kari, were my gracious hosts.

Later, at the 1987 Peace Forum in Moscow, Paulsen and I played “good guy, bad guy” in a meeting with Konstantin Kharchev, Chairman of the Council of Religious Affairs. We had concluded that if we were permitted access to any one of five closed cities in the USSR, optimism was warranted. Paulsen was the optimist, agreeing with Kharchev that things were changing for the better. I was the skeptic,

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expressing my doubts that things would be different. When Kharchev offered me access to any city I wished, we knew that things they were a'changing.

Since the Paulsens came to the General Conference in 1995, we've been members of the same Spencerville Adventist Church Sabbath school class. He has, as you may be aware, a doctorate in Theology from Tübingen University. After listening to his perceptive comments for five years now, I am unable to classify him as a liberal or a conservative, labels I dislike anyway. He is a fine

centrist theologian who radiates a calm assurance of God's presence in the councils of His people. He is also scrupulously honest and forthright. What you see is what you get.

After a recent Sabbath school class, I reminded his delightful wife, Kari, that the Hegstads came from Trondheim. "Oh!" she said, "People from Trondheim are very tough. In Norway we say that it takes more than one bullet to kill one." I suspect that at General Conference session in Toronto, Paulsen will find that for a Norwegian from Narvik, it takes only one ballot to elect one. □

HOW TO BE LUCIFER'S HELPER

The biggest problem Adventists face is how to communicate truth. Truth that is shared lovingly and joyously has much greater impact than truth shared dogmatically and harshly. Truth that is not communicated in love is worse than no truth at all. Since all truth is really about Jesus (John 14:6; Eph. 4:21), when we distort the truth we distort Jesus. When we present truth in a dogmatic way, we present Jesus as dogmatic and uncaring. When we make truth a matter of "should" and "must," we make Jesus to be a dictator.

We would be horrified to learn that too often we are Lucifer's greatest supporter because of how we teach truth. People often reject truth because they do not see its joy, its positive blessing, its eternal value, or how it meets the deepest desires of the human heart.—Author Unknown.