

THE MAKING OF A PRESIDENT

On Sunday, March 27, 1994, Steven Gifford was elected president of the Texas Conference.

The news came as a total surprise to everyone we have spoken with.

The two overmastering questions are these:

(1) How could this happen so suddenly?

(2) How could unexpected elections be avoided?

Certain things were known in southern California which, the sudden election in Texas, did not reveal to the church members in Texas.

When the Venden scandal broke, Steve Gifford, then president of the Southeastern California Conference, was the one willing to take him on a transfer into his conference. He thereafter protected him.

Steve Gifford was the one who gave Dan Simpson the go-ahead to start the first California Adventist Celebration church (at that time, only the second such Adventist church on the continent). Gifford frequently attended it, and was observed taking part in the audience skits.

Steve Gifford delivered the most fiery delegate response of disgust at the 1990 Indiana General Conference Session, just after the delegates turned down the women's ordination proposal. Shortly thereafter, back home the constituency of the Southeastern California Conference nearly voted to rebel against the General Conference.

Steve Gifford was one of the two "stars" in the Keith Knoche fictitious Western movie video, filmed in the California desert in the spring of 1992. The filming, which required several days, involved over twenty church members and their small children, and portrayed drunkenness, cigarette smoking, bandits, robberies, several gunfights, and (if possible)

worst of all—a scene in a brothel when a prostitute strokes one of the gold miners, reminds him of her perfume and soft skin, and pleads with him to tell her where their newly-found gold mine was located.

Steve Gifford portrayed that man in the house of prostitution in the video. His name was on the lengthy credit line as one of the two "stars" in the movie.

Copies of the video were then sold for \$20 to church members by Knoche, so it was not a private video, but filmed for public sale and presentation. If the movie was not designed to lower the standards of church members in southern California, one wonders what other reason there might be for making it.

When Steve Gifford planned to perform the double-ring wedding ceremony of a Southeastern California Adventist pastor who had just left his wife to marry another woman, Gifford was warned by Tom Mostert, the Pacific Union president, that it could result in his discharge.

Gifford went ahead and performed the ceremony anyway, and then, under pressure from Mostert, issued a letter of resignation. Published the next month in the *Pacific Union Recorder*, it said he was retiring because he was weary of the overload of being a conference president, and wanted a change of pace. That occurred in the late summer of 1993.

Will Gifford be a good leader in the office of president of the Texas Conference? He will probably be an outstanding one, for he was president for several years of one of the largest and most difficult Adventist conferences in the world field. He is said to be an excellent organizer and a strong pusher.

The problem is that he was also the strong, liberal head of an extremely liberal conference. Is this what Texas really wants? Did they realize that this was what they were getting?

Once again, we return to those two special questions:

(1) How could this happen so suddenly—the hiring of a new man to the

presidency of the Texas Conference, without anyone knowing who was to be selected prior to election day?

(2) How could such a sudden, unexpected election have been avoided?

That which happened at the Texas Conference Constituency Meeting on Sunday, March 27, regularly occurs in every conference constituency election in our denomination. The meeting convenes—a meeting which leaders and members knew about months in advance, although not one word is mentioned to the laity—or even the delegates—about possible candidates.

This is something like holding the U.S. presidential election on the first Tuesday in November, and then, when the people arrive at the poll, they learn for the first time the name of those they are to vote for!

But there is more: They are only given one name to vote on! That is the way it is done in totalitarian regimes.

And still more: Only the most knowledgeable people at the constituency meeting are acquainted with the man or his background. Just before the vote is taken, a brief resume is given to the assembled delegates. It consists only of selected information.

In the case of the April 27 election, the delegates were told that Gifford had earlier been president of the Southeastern California Conference, but no time was available for anyone to check elsewhere for additional information on Gifford. They might have obtained excellent references on Steve if they had time to check it out (he is a very capable man), but our point here is that they were given no time to investigate the matter. The pattern followed by the union president, who presides at the constituency meeting, is generally the same:

"Here is the name. Oh, you would like a second name to choose between? I'm sorry, but we only brought one name with us today. I'm sure you will understand. Here is a little information about the man. We recommend him. Let us briefly discuss it, and then we need to

get on with the vote; for we have other matters which we should consider, and we want to be able to adjourn early to-night."

How could the situation be remedied, so this will not happen again?

(1) Four months in advance, notify all church members of the date and location of the constituency meeting. This should be a personal letter in writing, sent to their homes. It is business and need not be brought up during the holy Sabbath hours.

(2) In that advance notice, give them a partial agenda, including officer changes. In later follow-up notices, provide them with agenda updates. Provide a slip on which they can vote for a delegate from their local church. Those receiving the most votes will be the delegates and alternates (in case delegates later move away or are ill). A return packet should be sent from the conference office, listing the number of votes each received, who has been elected, and their addresses and phone numbers. In this way, the church members can keep in close contact with their delegates in the weeks ahead. Included in that packet will be a suggested agenda for the forthcoming meeting.

(3) Delegates from all the conference churches should meet in a special session three months before the constituency meeting, to select a search committee to investigate names recommended by union and General Conference officials, plus other names they themselves may recommend. In that and subsequent meetings, the delegates will also consider agenda items proposed by leadership, plus others they feel should be discussed. At that time, the delegates should also elect a constituency meeting chairman, as well as schedule the actual meeting agenda.

(5) By prearrangement, the Constituency Meeting should adhere to a careful schedule: It should start promptly at 8 a.m, 9 at the latest. The introductions of visiting dignitaries should be completed by 8:15, the worship talk by 8:30, to be followed by a prayer service until 8:45 (talking to God should be at least as important as talking about Him).

This leaves the entire rest of the day for the business session, instead of the present plan to spend much of the morning in a talk by some official, followed by later pleas that "we do not have time to discuss or consider this matter."

(9) If anything surprising happens, or if extra time is needed, it is understood that one or more special committees will be appointed to care for it and report back to the constituency at a subsequent meeting.

By following such a plan, we will have to give extra time to conference work, but is it not worth it? Is not church work as important as our secular business?

The way we now do it, by default we, the members, hand over management of the church to a few men—because we are too lazy to take more of the responsibility ourselves.

Someone may inquire how such an arrangement could be possible. What is not generally realized is that the church belongs to the church members, not just to a few key leaders. As it now stands, the only time the members exercise that authority is for a few brief hours at the biennial conference Constituency Meeting. And then they generally undercut it by selecting their pastor to represent them! But he is not able to properly do that, for he is a conference employee. He dares not question or vote against any conference-urged recommendation. Frankly, if pastors are to be delegates, all voting—including that of the small committee which nominates conference officers—should be done by paper ballot.

After the president is appointed, he should receive careful guidance in his work. What is needed are wise, spiritual counselors. There is a question whether the Conference Committee is able to effectively handle that task.

The problem here is two-fold:

First, the conference committee only meets once a month, and then only cursorily reviews a few items placed before it by the conference president. During that brief session, it learns only a limited amount about what has transpired in the interval since the last meeting. For the most part, it merely rubber-stamps that which the president places before it. The rest of the time, the president has almost unlimited control in the conference office or among the workers out in the field.

Second, the president is the only person in the conference who has nearly absolute power. He can hire or fire anyone, without being questioned by any worker. For practical purposes, only three men are above him: the union president,

the division president, and a General Conference vice-president in charge of that particular area. But the union president generally leaves the conference president alone, and, as long as no waves are made, those further up do the same.

Therefore, attention should be given to reforming the Conference Committee, so that it is more representative of the church members and keeps closer watch over the actions of the president.

One last point should be noted before we close.

Church members only have authority over the local conference, and that only through their representation at the biennial Constituency Meeting.

They have no authority over any entity higher than the conference office. Although it is said that the members elect men who elect men, etc., in reality, they have no control over what is decided in the union office, division office, or General Conference world headquarters. The solution here is to reform the control over other church entities also: This would include hospitals, academies, colleges, universities, unions, divisions, General Conference, and, lastly, General Conference Sessions.

At the present time, only eight percent of the delegates attending General Conference Sessions are laymen. In contrast, 91 percent are church employees who know to vote correctly (delegates are always seated in blocks, with their leaders sitting behind them to watch their hand votes), and one percent are the leaders who determine the agenda and the outcome of the vote.

If we are to maintain our historic standards and beliefs, changes are needed. Someone may say "It is impossible and will never be done." In Bible times, many things were urged which were never done by the Hebrew leaders. Read the Bible. Whether or not the right course is pursued, God's people today should still uphold it.

We are very happy to let the leaders do the leading—as long as the leaders are leading us in the right paths of high standards and pure doctrines, as given us in the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy.