

“It’s A Very Humbling Experience”

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Ted and Nancy Wilson accept the congratulations of the 2015 General Conference Session delegates. Photo: Josef Kissenger



Reelected president Ted N. C. Wilson talks about the burdens of his role, getting more sleep, handling disappointments, and what he will focus on in the next five years.

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Knott: You’ve just accepted your election by the delegates to serve as president of the General Conference for another five years. I know you well enough to know that a moment like this isn’t just a professional event: it’s also a deeply spiritual moment. What does it feel like when the church in which you’ve grown up asks you to lead it for another five years?

Wilson: It’s an exceedingly challenging invitation, and one for which any person feels unprepared. No one can handle this position except by the direct leading and guidance of the Lord. So it’s a very humbling experience. And you realize, especially as you look out into the eyes and faces of delegates and church members, that this is something much larger than anything you can handle on your own. You become exceedingly sobered by the whole thought. There are three things you can do at a moment like this: you can shrink from it and feel so totally inadequate that you become immobilized, and the Lord doesn’t want that. You could become so emboldened that you have been asked to lead out that you become overconfident, and the Lord doesn’t want that either. He wants to use the talents He’s given you, but He wants you to depend wholly on Him. So in this instance I feel the weight of the office and I take it to the foot of the cross. What else could you do?

There's a little plaque I keep in my office that I was given a long time ago. It carries a line from *Prophets and Kings*, page 31. "When a burden bearer desires wisdom more than he desires wealth, power, or fame, he will not be disappointed. Such a one will learn from the Great Teacher not only what to do, but how to do it in a way that will meet the divine approval."

I find myself in the same posture as Solomon early in his administration. Only the Lord is sufficient to carry the burdens of this role. During the last five years, I've seen how the Lord has intervened on many occasions, how He has orchestrated things far beyond anything I would have imagined or could have done personally. There's a supernatural Hand in this church, and the Lord's not going to leave it. So that's what gives me encouragement. All of us, in whatever capacity we are asked to serve—administrator, pastor, or layperson—ought to be humbling ourselves before the Lord, pleading with Him for the latter rain, for the Holy Spirit.



Ted Wilson prays with his wife Nancy over the phone behind the Session stage. Photo: Josef Kissenger

When I look at the schedule you've kept—the amazing travel schedule you've kept in the last five years—I'm wondering where you're going to find the stamina to do that for another term.

Well, I don't think I'll travel quite as much. If my wife has anything to do with it, we won't! Reality and reason impose certain limits. I think it will be vitally important to spend additional time in spiritual reflection to understand how the Lord wants this church to proceed. Dashing here and there may seem like progress, but with today's technology, it's far easier to make the needed connections electronically than it was even 10 or 15 years ago. Technology has advanced to the point where it's possible to be in constant contact on a

moment's notice just about anywhere in the world, and I've learned to make full use of e-mail and texting. But you're right: there's a limit to what a body can handle!

Trust me, many of us will be praying that you get more sleep in the next five years!

I'm joining you in that prayer!

Given the important decisions that are going to be taken at this GC session—in a very few days—on better language for the fundamental beliefs, on whether or not to allow divisions to make a decision to ordain women to ministry—there are likely to be persons or groups who might be disappointed with one of the decisions made here. You've been elected to lead the entire Seventh-day Adventist Church. What would you say to those who might be disappointed by some decision that's made here in San Antonio?

Well, I'd point them to the fact that regardless of what decision the church makes on any number of subjects, this church is still the apple of His eye. Whatever decisions are taken, even though they may not be to your liking, there is no other place to go. This is God's remnant church. If you don't believe that, then you have, in your own mind, another recourse. But I don't read anywhere in Scripture or in the Spirit of Prophecy that there will be another remnant of the remnant.

So I would appeal to anyone who is disappointed, even those who may feel dejected, that there is a much larger picture. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is going to go through, but not simply as a human organization. It's a movement, a movement with a biblical message. That understanding helps all of us find stability for our own lives and the mission of the church. There may be times when you will continue to disagree with a decision for a long period of time, but the Spirit of Prophecy urges us that when the General Conference in session makes a decision, we need to humble ourselves before that and not persist in our own thinking and agitate. I recognize that some people may not see that as a valid response, but dejection or disappointment can turn into bitterness if we're not careful. We have to put the matter before the Lord and say, "Lord, help me work my way through this and see the big picture, because the mission and the ultimate salvation of people at Your soon coming are most important."



Photo: Josef Kissenger

My own experience of periodically preaching evangelistic meetings such as I recently did in Zimbabwe—preaching these incredible biblical truths—reminds me that God’s purposes for His church are always bigger than any single decision. My viewpoint on any matter, however strongly I hold it, must ultimately be yielded to the greater purposes God has for His end-time people.

I’m guessing that you’ve often had to lead committee processes that ended with decisions other than what you might have wished.

Various times. And I’ve learned how important it is to look at the big picture, to remember that the Lord is in charge of the outcome.

You’ve been known in these last five years for launching a series of major initiatives—“Revival and Reformation,” “*The Great Controversy Project*,” “Comprehensive Health Ministry,” and “Mission to the Cities.” Should we expect more major initiatives of this kind in the next five years, or are you chiefly hoping to build momentum for those already launched?

The broad-based initiatives which have given us a strong foundation for this last quinquennium—and I take no credit because they are all from Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy—those will remain the foundation. But there are three areas of focus that I hope will characterize all we do in the next five years.

The first is an emphasis on Christ and His righteousness: that’s the core of the Three Angels Messages. This message turns people back to the true worship of God, to realizing the beauty

of His righteousness and the grace that covers us, and to the experience of sanctification, which is also His work, too.

All of the initiatives that have been launched point to the restoration that the Three Angels Messages intend—restoring people back to a complete relationship with the Lord. We'll feature Christ and His righteousness in every program and process we begin or continue.

The second area of focus is faithfulness. We live in a very existential culture that suggests that no loyalty can be permanent. But God calls us to increasing faithfulness to Him and to His Word. We'll be talking about faithfulness in personal relationships, faithfulness in biblical truth, faithfulness in the study of the Word. We'll underline faithfulness in prayer, in studying the Spirit of Prophecy, in family relationships, and in areas that I personally have a special burden for, such as Sabbath school attendance. Faithfulness is only possible when we realize our complete dependence on Christ and His righteousness.

The third thing is really critical, and that is total membership involvement—total empowerment of lay people for evangelism and witnessing, so that we don't have only a paid professional group that does the outreach, but that the church members around the world recognize that this is *our work*. Ellen White makes this wonderful statement in *Testimonies*, volume 9, page 117: "The work of God in this earth can never be finished until the men and women comprising our church membership rally to the work and unite their efforts with those ministers and church officers." This is going to be one of the largest areas of emphasis in the new quinquennium—getting everybody involved. Not everyone one needs to preach an evangelistic series—though many could do that who haven't even imagined it yet! But understanding the gift of salvation means that everyone needs to find an area in which they can become part of God's plan for reaching the world. I saw how energizing involvement can be recently in Zimbabwe, where 20 young people from the Arkansas-Louisiana Conference came and held evangelistic meetings with ShareHim. It just changed their lives!



Ted Wilson greets family members after reelection. Photo: Josef Kissenger

If you're sharing your faith—whether by preaching, teaching, or simply talking with a neighbor—the Lord will do something dramatic for *you* as well. That's why Jesus in His mercy has asked us, as a people, to get involved in outreach—because we need the new life and revival it brings as well.

You just named ShareHim, an organization that works with church members and supporting ministries for international outreach. Tell me about the role supporting ministries will play in “every member mobilization.”

Over the last five years we've tried to broaden the understanding as to what a supporting ministry really is, and it's an understanding completely endorsed by the Spirit of Prophecy. I'm not talking about organizations that feed off of the church, but ones that give—to use a phrase that some people like—“added value.” True supporting ministries are exactly what they claim to be—supporting. And if they're not supporting, then of course they are not really part of the ongoing mission of the church. Supporting ministries are made up of people who, for whatever reason, aren't paid by the church. They find other ways in which to support themselves, but they are intently focused on the mission of the church to share with people the Three Angels Messages and that Christ is coming soon. So supporting ministries will play a vital role in all of this. Every church, every pastor, every church member can be part of some ministry organized to reach out, not as spectators, but as highly involved participants. I'm not interested in putting guilt trips on people. I don't want members dreading involvement as though, “Oh no, we've got to go hand out literature.” Just let the Lord lead you to something uniquely suited to you and still productive for His kingdom. It can be creative—it can be different from what others feel called to do—but if the Lord is in it, it will help to build up His kingdom.

At moments like this, an interviewer typically asks a newly elected leader, “What's the biggest issue facing the Adventist church today?” What do you think that biggest issue is?

Well, I think there are two issues, actually. One is the enormous attempt by society—and I believe, by the devil—to neutralize Scripture, and even the knowledge of Scripture. Even in an Adventist context, many Adventists may know *about* the Bible, but they don't really know the Bible very well. That's why we've launched the “Believe His Prophets” and “United in Prayer” initiatives for this new quinquennium—as an encouragement to really know the Word and the Spirit of Prophecy and find great strength and humility in prayer leading us to the latter rain of the Holy Spirit. As members immerse themselves in Bible truth and the inspired counsel of Ellen White, they're going to find a depth of spiritual experience they may not have previously known.

The second major issue has been a concern of mine for a long time. Many Seventh-day Adventists may not understand the prophetic role of this movement in society—that the

Seventh-day Adventist church is a unique organization, a prophetic people. As I've said before—we're a prophetic movement, with a prophetic message, on a prophetic mission. And if members don't understand all of that—and you, Bill, as a historian will resonate with this—they don't understand the story of God's miraculous leading of this movement and how He will continue to leading it in the tumultuous days ahead.



Ted Wilson talks with the leadership of the Session Nominating Committee after reelection. Photo: Josef Kissenger

Almost every week, the *Adventist Review* and *Adventist World* team gets news of church members who are being persecuted for following Bible truth. What would you say to Adventists who are in difficult places right now, where they can't openly practice their faith or share the truths to which God has led them?

God calls us in whatever situation we're in to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. Those beautiful characteristics will automatically make you a witness, even if you can't openly speak about God's last-day message. The Lord will help you to know best how to impact people's lives—and people will notice the difference. They'll come and ask you why you are kind, gentle, and patient. The Lord can help each us find creative ways to bring out His truth, even if we can't always speak openly about it.

The church is moving quickly into areas where there's potential for great opposition from other religions and some governments. I find myself often thinking and praying for believers who are sometimes just struggling to hold on to their faith.

I hope they will know that there are a lot of people—millions, in fact—who are remembering them in their prayers. Everywhere I go, I try to remind our members that if you feel like you're in a small little corner somewhere and not very connected, don't forget that you are an integral part of the world family of Seventh-day Adventists. Faithful people are lifting you up in prayer every day to heaven, and heaven is listening, acting, and protecting. Whether you're

in the most liberty-loving country in the world or one of the most restrictive, that connection with heaven will help you when you feel discouraged or isolated. You're part of a universal family, for all God's angels are also right there with you. I know God is working on the hearts of many around the world for the last great final cry. As I view what is happening in so many situations around the globe, I see that the end of time is upon us. The Lord is coming soon! God is working in an unusual way, and the latter rain is about to fall. What a privilege to be part of His Advent movement at this time in history. So look to the Lord at every moment. Lift up Christ, His Word, His righteousness, His sanctuary service, His saving power in the great controversy, His Three Angels' Messages, His health message, His last-day mission to the world, and His soon second coming. Be of good courage, for as our 2015 General Conference Session theme so beautifully proclaimed, "Arise! Shine! Jesus Is Coming!"

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