

## When does the BUC Session Actually Start?

This is a question which has aroused a lot of interest since the report of the BUC Nominating Committee came out, and it was raised several times at a Town Hall meeting held on Thursday evening, 17 June 2021. In order to answer it properly there are a number of things we need to clarify and a number of other questions we need to answer, some of which were also raised at the Town Hall meeting.

## Unity in Diversity

Throughout the Seventh-day Adventist Church there are many different organisations at four different levels. These include:

- The General Conference, which includes different divisions
- Unions, including our own British Union Conference
- Conferences
- Missions
- Attached Fields

Every organisation will have its own constitution (though the Missions have “operating policies”) and, despite there being a model from the General Conference, all of them will be slightly different, depending on:

- the country they operate in
- the type of organisation they have chosen to be (we have chosen to be charities)
- the governance systems they have chosen to use

Even within one union conference there can be significant differences in the systems of governance being used. Here in the UK & Ireland there are differences between the BUC constitution and the constitutions of the two conferences. The main differences are as follows:

## Delegate Cap

The BUC has a cap on the number of its delegates. Currently this cap is 300 regular delegates. This is equivalent to around 350 total delegates, which is the wording in the proposed new constitution as it makes the numbers easier to work out. The vote to cap the number of delegates was taken at the BUC session in July 2006 when, as the minutes record, it was “voted almost unanimously” to cap the number of regular delegates at 400. The reason for this was that previously the number of regular delegates was calculated using a formula which was based on the number of members. In the 2001 constitution it reads as follows:

*Each local conference/mission shall be entitled to one (1) delegate without regard to membership and one (1) additional delegate for each fifty (50) church members or major fraction thereof.*

In 2001 we had a total membership of 20,637, but today we have over 40,000. If we were still following this formula we would have 800 regular delegates at the session!

The 2006 delegates realised that the success of the church was becoming a challenge to its governance processes. They could have simply changed the formula to reduce the number of delegates, but every time membership increased significantly the formula would have to be changed again. A cap solved the challenge once and for all.

In May 2009 a special BUC session was called to look at restructuring proposals for the church. The Standing Constitution Committee, set up in 2006, had done a lot of work on the constitution and they presented a proposal to dramatically reduce the cap on regular delegates from 400 to 200. One reason for this was to limit the vast expense of a session, but more importantly, as was stated at the 2009 session, *"the emphasis ... was not on finance but on finding and recommending a process that would be most effective in conducting the business of the church."*

And it is here that we return to the question in the title of this article, because the statement continued, *"This had as much to do with the preparation for the session, in terms of setting up committees before the session, as the session itself."*

So, the motivation for setting up the current system, where committees meet in advance of the session itself, was the same as the motivation for reducing the number of delegates. Yes, it was partly to save time and therefore money in running the session, but it was primarily to make the process more effective in conducting the business of the church.

In the event, the 2009 delegates felt that 200 was too few to give adequate representation to the conferences and missions and the number was revised to 300 regular delegates, which is where it still stands. They did however approve the proposals to carry out the preliminary committee work prior to the session and voted that,

*"The members of the Recommendations Committee shall be appointed by their respective conference/mission delegates at least eighteen (18) weeks before the session."*

Similarly, the Nominating Committee would meet at least 12 weeks prior to the session and would circulate a report to the delegates. Any objections would be considered by the Nominating Committee at least six weeks prior to the session.

With so much work done prior to the session, there was scope for the session to be reduced in length, and in 2011 a one-day session was held at the Stanborough Park church. On reflection it was felt that one day was probably not quite long enough and the 2016 session was therefore held over two days.

We should point out here that while these major changes to the constitution were implemented by the BUC and the missions, the conferences have their own constitutions and do things differently. The NEC continues to use a formula to calculate the number of regular delegates for its sessions, and the SEC has a cap on the total number of delegates of 600. In both the NEC and the SEC the Recommendations and Nominating Committees meet during the session itself.

### So, When Does the Session Start?

The difference in session processes between the BUC and the conferences can make things a bit confusing, so in answering the question we have to be clear about the rules we are working from. The question is, "when does the BUC session start?", so we need to work exclusively from the BUC constitution.

The word "session" or "sessions" occurs 86 times in the current BUC constitution. The phrase "in session", applied variously to "delegates", "the constituency", or the "Union Conference" occurs seven times. The phrase "at the session" or "at the Union session" occurs five times. The use of the words "in" and "at" implies an event which is limited both by time and location.

Furthermore, the words "prior to" or "before" are used seven times in relation to the session indicating a clear distinction between the session and the things which happen before it.

If you want a precise "starting gun" moment for the session it is given in Article 5 (b) of the current constitution:

*"At least fifty-one per cent (51%) of the authorised delegates must be present at any regular or special session to constitute a quorum for the transaction of business."*

Those with long experience of denominational sessions will be very familiar with the solemn moment when the secretary reads out the number of delegates present and the chair says, "I declare this session open for business".

There are of course session-related processes which take place before the session and, based on the BUC constitution these include:

- The Constitution Committee meeting and considering revisions to the constitution.
- The conferences and missions writing to their churches requesting suggestions for members who might make good conference or mission delegates to the BUC session.
- The conference and mission executive committees considering all of the names and making their final selection of which members should represent them at the BUC session.
- The conference and mission delegates caucusing, or using another method, to decide who they should appoint to sit on the Recommendations Committee.
- The Recommendations Committee meeting to select who they want to appoint to the Nominating Committee.
- The Nominating Committee meeting to nominate people to serve as officers, directors and members of the Executive Committee.
- This information being conveyed to the delegates.
- The delegates having the opportunity to object to any name proposed and to refer it back to the Nominating Committee.
- The Nominating Committee meeting again to consider these referrals.
- The Nominating Committee sending out a final list of nominees to be taken to the session.

All of these things have to happen before the session, not at the session.

### What Does Present Mean?

Just one final point, in Article 5 (b), what exactly does "present" mean? Until just over a year ago I would have had no hesitation in saying that it obviously means a physical meeting in a nice big hall, probably in a conference centre or on a university campus somewhere.

However, since COVID, definitions have become blurred. How many of us have been "attending" virtual church services since last spring? How many committee meetings have I "been to" virtually and recorded myself as "present"? How many companies and charities have held their annual general meetings by Zoom, with no concerns about being reported to the relevant authorities. The fact is that the word "present" is now being used to describe virtual as well as physical presence.

So far we have taken a conservative view on this and have been planning for a physical BUC session. For many reasons we feel that a physical meeting is far preferable to a virtual one. However, the legal advice we have received is that, if we were to hold the session virtually, because of the COVID situation and the way words such as "present" are now being

understood, we would most likely be within the terms our current constitution and the Charity Commission would be very unlikely to challenge us. This would be very much a last resort, but if COVID continues, with multiple waves for years ahead, we might need to consider it.