

2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio: A Study of the Interest Hype among Adventists in Southern Ghana

Josiah B. Andor

ABSTRACT—*This paper examined the Interest or Hype among members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Southern Ghana in the 2015 General Conference Session which took place in San Antonio. The focus of the study was to identify reasons why most Adventists in Ghana became interested in the San Antonio GC Session, unlike with previous GC Sessions. Using questionnaires to sample views from 158 randomly selected members from three conferences in the Southern part of Ghana, this study discovers that a majority of members who, until 2015, didn't know much about GC Sessions and had no interest in GC Sessions, became interested in the 2015 GC Session because of the issue of women's ordination that was on the agenda. This subject kept them continuously interested and it made them to follow proceedings at the session. The study also shows that the interest of members was kept alive due to the rampant discussion of the session and the issue of women's ordination on social media. The paper recommends that to keep members interested in future GC Sessions, the agenda should include engaging subjects that members will be keen to follow. Also, church leaders can resort to the use of social media to get members actively involved and interested.*

Keywords: General Conference, 2015 GC Session, San Antonio, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Ghana, Women's ordination

I. Introduction

The Seventh-day Adventist Church worldwide operates a very organized structure linking the individual member to the world church. The form of governance recognized in the church is the representative system. This system of church governance recognizes that “authority rests in the membership and is expressed through duly elected representatives at each level of the organization, with executive responsibility delegated to representative bodies and officers for the governing of the church at each separate level” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010, p. 28). The various separate levels range from the local church, the local conferences, Union of Churches, Union Conference/Mission, through the General Conference (GC) and its Divisions. In this system, governance is representative at each level (Vyhmeister, 2000, p. 18).

The General Conference (GC) represents the worldwide expression of the church. The 2010 edition of the Church Manual states that “in the church today the General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, is the highest ecclesiastical authority in the administration of the church” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010, p. 31). For this reason, it has been conventional that there is a General Conference (GC) Session every five years. Various representatives of the church at various levels attend to make important decisions for the worldwide church. It is also expected that “all subordinate organizations and institutions throughout the church will recognize the General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, as the highest ecclesiastical authority, under God, among Seventh-day Adventists” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2010, p. 31).

The 2015 GC Session took place from 2nd to 11th July, 2015. The venue was San Antonio, a place described as the seventh most populated city in the United States of America and the second most populated in the state of Texas (Wikipedia, 2015). Interestingly, the interest level in this GC session was particularly high among Seventh-day Adventists, especially in Ghana. Though GC sessions have generally been relevant to members of the church and some have shown keen interest in them, the San Antonio Session received a higher level of interest and discussion among members than previous sessions. This paper investigated the level of interest in the session among Ghanaian Adventists and identified possible reasons for such hype in interest. The paper also assesses the

perceptions of these selected members about GC Sessions and the San Antonio Session in particular.

A. Scope

The focus of the paper is to determine the level of interest hype as compared to member's interest in previous GC sessions. This will also include an investigation into the motivating factor(s) and how such factor(s) kept members continuously interested. Attention will also be drawn to the general perception of members on GC sessions and their understanding of the 2015 session in San Antonio.

The respondents of this study were limited to Seventh-day Adventists in selected Churches in three Conferences in Southern Ghana; namely, South Ghana Conference, South East Ghana Conference, and Mid-South Ghana Conference. These respondents were randomly selected from various educational, membership, marital, and gender backgrounds.

The aspects of the San Antonio GC Session that this paper does not focus on include the details of the program, key decisions taken, corrections approved for the Church Manual, and major church policies revised. The focus is solely on the interest hype and the possible reason(s) for it.

B. Procedure

As indicated, the data presented and analysed in this paper were gathered from various baptized and non-baptized members from selected churches within the South Ghana Conference, South-East Ghana Conference, and Mid-South Ghana Conference. I visited the selected churches and randomly distributed carefully-constructed questionnaires to some members. Since the questionnaires were randomly distributed, there is no even representation of the various churches, gender, age brackets, and membership statuses of respondents. Despite this uneven distribution, the representation is proportionate enough to represent the views of members in the church. The total number of questionnaires distributed was 170, out of which 158 were retrieved. The responses of members gathered on the questionnaires were critically analysed and the results presented. The demographics of respondents are presented in the next section. After that, the rest of this paper presents a brief review of literature on GC Sessions and the 2015 Session and the responses of respondents regarding their interest in the 2015 GC session, their

perceptions on GC sessions in general, and the 2015 GC session specifically.

C. Demographics

In this section, the demographic information of the members who responded to the questionnaire is presented. The areas covered within the section are: age bracket, gender, educational level, membership status, length of membership, marital status, and the conference.

Table 1. Age Bracket

	Frequency	Percent
Below 20	46	29.1
20- 25	56	35.4
26-30	20	12.7
30-35	20	12.7
Above 35	16	10.1
Total	158	100.0

The Table above reveals that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 25, making up 35.4% of the respondents. Another 29.1% was made up of young people below 20 years. These are mostly students who just graduated from High school or are in their first or second year of University or college. These figures imply that the majority of active membership in the selected churches are youth. Being students, most of these young people will soon make up the leadership of the church. The responses can be relied on because of the varied age brackets of respondents. There is also a fair representation of adults. In addition, if young people are showing much interest in the GC session, then there must be a good reason for such interest.

Table 2. Gender

	Frequency	Percent
Male	80	50.6
Female	78	49.4
Total	158	100.0

Table 2, above, portrays an almost equal proportion of male and female respondents. While the males are made up of 50.6% of the respondents, the females are made up of the remaining 49.4%. This is from the random distribution of the questionnaires. This implies that there will not be a biased presentation of ideas from the standpoint of one gender. Both male and female ideas are represented in the responses.

Table 3. Educational Status

	Frequency	Percent
Middle School Leaver	14	8.9
JHS Leaver	24	15.2
SHS Leaver	40	25.3
Tertiary	80	50.6
Total	158	100.0

As intimated earlier, the majority of respondents have a higher education. It is observed that over half of the respondents (50.6%) have an education up to the tertiary level. The 25.3% who responded that they were Senior High School leavers are mostly planning to go into tertiary institutions. This leaves out only a few who are either Middle School leavers (8.9%) or Junior High School Leavers (15.2%).

Table 4. Membership Status

	Frequency	Percent
Baptized member	132	83.5
Non-baptized Member	26	16.5
Total	158	100.0

Because the questionnaires were randomly distributed in the selected churches, some got to members who are not baptized members of the Adventist church, but are regular Sabbath School members. The Seventh-day Adventist Church accepts membership into the church only by baptism by immersion (General Conference, 2010, p. 45). All other persons who regularly attend church without being baptized are regarded as Sabbath School Members. About 16.5% of non-baptized members responded to the questionnaire. It is interesting to note that the interest of these non-baptized members in the Session will imply that there was great interest in the 2015 GC Session.

Table 5. Local Conference

	Frequency	Percent
South East	53	33.5
South Ghana	57	36.1
Mid- South	48	30.4
Total	158	100.0

The conferences where the respondents have their local churches located are shown in the table above. It is realized from the above that the conferences have an almost equal representation in the respondents: South-East Ghana Conference (33.5%), South Ghana Conference (36.1%), and Mid-South Ghana Conference (30.4%). These percentages are a fair and reliable representation of the three selected conferences.

II. San Antonio 2015

Because of the representative system of church governance practiced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, GC Sessions are an inevitable practice. The Church teaches that Organization is needed for Theological and practical reasons (Ministerial Association, 1997, p. 69). This teaching emanates from the belief that God has always been organized and that heaven, the universe, and all that God has made is organized. Hence, “Without organization no institution or movement can prosper. A nation without an organized government would be in chaos. A business enterprise without organization would fail. A church without organization would disintegrate and perish” (General Conference, 2010, p. 27).

For this reason, the church operates on three biblical models of organization: the Israel model, the body model, and the New Testament model (Ministerial Association, 1994, p. 18). The Israel model patterns church organization with that which is practiced by the Israelites in the Bible. This is explained by Ellen White:

“The government of Israel was characterized by the most thorough organization, wonderful alike for its completeness and its simplicity. The order so strikingly displayed in the perfection and arrangement of all God’s created works was manifest in the Hebrew economy. God was the center of authority and government, the sovereign of Israel. Moses stood as their visible leader, by God’s appointment, to

administer the laws in His name. From the elders of the tribes a council of seventy was afterward chosen to assist Moses in the general affairs of the nation. Next came the priests, who consulted the Lord in the sanctuary. Chiefs, or princes, ruled over the tribes. Under these were ‘captains over thousands, and captains over hundreds, and captains over fifties, and captains over tens,’ and, lastly, officers who might be employed for special duties.” (White, 1890, p. 374).

The body model and the New Testament model are also representative in nature and are all summed up in Paul’s counsel to the believers in Corinth: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40). This explains why the church operates a representative form of governance, ie the New Testament model. Periodically, delegates from the various levels must represent their respective levels in making key decisions for the world church. To meet this objective, GC sessions are organized.

The GC Session is regarded as the official world meeting of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists which is held quinquennially (Neufeld, 1976, p. 593). This is a forum in which world church officers are elected, changes are voted on the constitution of the church, and delegates hear reports from the various divisions of the church.

The first Session was held on May 20, 1863 in Battle Creek, Michigan with 20 delegates in attendance. The Sessions which followed this were held annually in smaller churches in Battle Creek. In fact, Battle Creek remained the site for 26 of the first 31 GC Sessions (Adventist Archives, 2015). However, as the membership of the church grew, the time between sessions lengthened, the meeting places got bigger, and the number of delegates increased. In 1889 the constitution was amended to convene sessions biennially. From 1905 to 1970 the constitution provided for regular quadrennial sessions. Since 1970 sessions have been held every five years (Neufeld, 1976, p. 593). GC Sessions are held at the time and place determined by the General Conference Executive Committee, although they could be postponed for as long as two years during unusual world conditions such as war, natural disasters that threaten life, etc. From the beginning, GC Sessions were held in churches, but in recent times, sessions have been held in stadia that can offer large seating capacities, support staff who speak English, reliable and cost-effective transportation, and food safety for delegates. The last GC Session (the 60th since the first one was held in Battle

Creek) was held in San Antonio on July 2 to 11, 2015 at the Alamodome and Convention Center, in the state of Texas (General Conference, 2015).

Unlike previous Sessions, the 2015 GC Session appears to have provoked much interest among members in various parts of the world. There were comments all over social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc). The leadership of the church made things known at various levels: The General Conference had an official website specifically dedicated to the 2015 GC Session; there was a Twitter account dedicated to the Session and this account reported everything that was happening at the Session; An application was available on the App Store for the session. This application updated all happenings at the session including announcements, menu, session materials, etc. The agenda was also made available ahead of time. In brief, the 2015 GC session was given much more attention and publicity than previous sessions.

In addition, this researcher observed that there was hype in interest among church members. Members discuss the session on social media, asking prominent leaders of the church about happenings, following proceedings on various media including Hope Channel, the GC website, etc. Such interest hype is the basis for this research. The rest of this paper presents the findings regarding the hype in interest among Adventists in Southern Ghana.

III. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study. The findings are from the responses of selected church members within the study area. The focus is on the level of interest in the 2015 GC session in San Antonio, General Perceptions of members on GC sessions in general, and the San Antonio session in particular.

A. Interest in 2015 GC Session

This section presents the responses of respondents on their interest in the 2015 GC Session in San Antonio. The questionnaire required respondents to answer questions on how they got to know about the session in the first place, what their interest was in the session, and what kept them continuously interested.

Table 6. First source of Information about 2015 GC session

	Frequency	Percent
In Church	112	70.9
Through a Friend	10	6.3
Social Media	30	19.0
My Pastor	4	2.5
Other	2	1.3
Total	158	100.0

From the above table, it is quite clear that the majority (70.9%) of members got information about the GC Session from their local churches. The next source of information was social media which accounted for 19.0% of members' first information about the Session. The church and social media are places where information spread wider than other media such as a pastor or a friend. For the majority of respondents to have had their initial information from these sources, then the information about the GC Session was widespread. This is a possible explanation of the interest hype.

Table 7. Main point of interest in the Session

	Frequency	Percent
Elections	14	8.9
Women's ordination	96	60.8
Church Manual Revision	10	6.3
Fundamental Beliefs	28	17.7
Other	10	6.3
Total	158	100.0

Respondents were asked about their main points of interest in the GC Session. The majority (60.8%) of them declared that their main point of interest was the issue of women's ordination which was part of the agenda. The only other issue was the issue of Fundamental Beliefs and discussions surrounding them. It is obvious that an important subject such as the Election of officers was the main point of interest for only 8.9% of members. From these responses, it can be concluded that the majority of people became interested in the GC Session because they had heard from the church or seen on social media that the issue of women's ordination was to be voted upon.

Table 8. What kept the interest going?

	Frequency	Percent
Trending on Social Media	24	15.2
Genuine Interest	20	12.7
Women’s ordination	84	53.2
Election of officers	8	5.1
Nothing really	16	10.1
Other	6	3.8
Total	158	100.0

Though social media and the church were the sources of firsthand information about the GC Session, the interest was kept by a different factor. In line with the main point of interest of members, the responses as displayed on the table above reveal that over half (53.2%) continued being interested in the session because of the issue of women’s ordination. The other reason accounting for 15.2% of interest was the fact that it was trending on Social media. On social media, this researcher can confirm that the discussions were mostly on the issue of women’s ordination.

The fact that members in Ghana, a country in West Africa, are interested in the GC session because of the issue of women’s ordination requires further query. Though this paper does not particularly look at the reason for their interest in women’s ordination, it is probable that the issue of patriarchy in Africa is the reason for this interest. The place of the woman in society is different in most patriarchal societies in Africa, including some parts of Ghana. Though this does not necessarily relate with the biblical arguments on women’s ordination, the background and the society one grows in can affect his/her view of ideas. It is possible that this patriarchal cultural background is the major factor increasing the interest of members. In addition, since the first source of information about the session for majority of members was in church, the interest in the subject of women’s ordination could also be because of the respective stances of the leaders in various churches and how they spoke about it in their churches.

B. General Perceptions on GC Sessions

In this section, the responses of respondents regarding their general perceptions on GC sessions are presented. Respondents were required to respond on a scale of 1-5 whether they agree or disagree with certain

statements about GC Sessions in general. Their responses are presented in the following table:

Table 9. General Perceptions on GC Sessions

		I think every member must attend a GC Session at least once	I think GC Sessions are a waste of Time and Resources	I do not know much about GC Sessions	I have been following GC sessions since I became a member	Until this year, I did not know much about GC Sessions
Strongly Agree	Frequency	-	4	26	12	34
	Percent	-	2.5	16.5	7.6	21.5
Agree	Frequency	50	14	40	38	40
	Percent	31.6	8.9	25.3	24.1	25.3
Neither Agree nor Disagree	Frequency	30	10	20	14	16
	Percent	19.0	6.3	12.7	8.9	10.1
Disagree	Frequency	16	26	46	64	32
	Percent	10.1	16.5	29.1	40.5	20.3
Strongly Disagree	Frequency	62	104	26	30	36
	Percent	39.2	65.8	16.5	19.0	22.8
Total	Frequency	158	158	158	158	158
	Percent	100	100	100	100	100

The table above reveals the general perceptions of members in the study area about GC Sessions. It is observed that majority of members (39.2%) strongly disagree with the statement that every member must attend a GC Session at least once. There is also a high number (31.6%) who seem to agree on this. This dissension of ideas reveals the fact that members generally accept the importance of attending a GC session, but they also know that it is not a “compulsory pilgrimage” for every Adventist. The importance of GC sessions is observed in the responses to the statement enquiring whether the GC session is a waste of time and resources. A great majority (65.8%) strongly disagreed with the statement. Only a few indicated that they agreed to the statement. The responses to these two statements reveal that members in Southern Ghana generally see the GC Sessions as a very important event that is necessary for the church.

Despite these perceptions, as much as 25.3% agree to the statement that they do not know much about GC Sessions. Another 16.5% strongly agreed to the statement. Though the majority (29.1%) disagreed, the number of members that responded that they do not know much about GC Sessions is quite high. This is confirmed in the responses on whether

members have been following GC sessions since they became members. The majority (40.5%) of members disagreed with that and another 19.0% strongly disagreed. This means that more than half of the respondents have not been following GC sessions since they became members of the Church. Because of this trend, the majority (25.3%) agreed that until this year (ie, 2015), they did not know much about GC sessions. Another 21.5% strongly agreed to that. This clearly communicates that the 2015 GC Session in San Antonio was followed more than previous Sessions. This, according to the earlier responses, was because of the issue of women's ordination.

C. 2015 GC Session: San Antonio

Respondents' ideas and perceptions about the San Antonio Session are presented in this section. Just like the previous section, they were expected to respond on a five-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with some statements about the GC Session in San Antonio. The various responses are summarized in the table below:

Table 10. Views on 2015 GC Session in San Antonio

		This years' GC Session was the most critical of all	My interest in this year's GC Session was higher than any other	My interest in the session was the issue of Women's ordination	My interest in the session was with the Officers to be elected	My interest in the session was with the Church Manual amendments
Strongly Agree	Freq.	80	68	72	18	18
	Percent	50.6	43.0	45.6	11.4	11.4
Agree	Freq.	50	46	30	40	34
	Percent	31.6	29.1	19.0	25.3	21.5
Neither Agree nor Disagree	Freq.	22	28	22	50	48
	Percent	13.9	17.7	13.9	31.6	30.4
Disagree	Freq.	4	14	18	28	40
	Percent	2.5	8.9	11.4	17.7	25.3
Strongly Disagree	Freq.	2	2	16	22	18
	Percent	1.3	1.3	10.1	13.9	11.4
Total	Freq.	158	158	158	158	158
	Percent	100	100	100	100	100

This table presents the responses of selected members in the study area regarding the 2015 GC session in San Antonio. The data clearly reveals that 50.6% or members strongly agree that the 2015 GC session

was the most critical of all. Another 31.6% agree to this fact with the rest either being indecisive, or disagreeing. From the previous data, it can be deduced that the reason for this consideration is because of the feelings of members about the issue of women's ordination and how it will affect the church. Because of this critical issue, respondents believe that the 2015 GC Session was the most critical of all. Furthermore, 43.0% of members strongly agreed that their interest in the San Antonio Session was higher than any other. Another 29.1% agree with this assertion leaving just a few who are either undecided or who disagree.

As to what members' interest in the Session was, 45.6% strongly agreed that their interest was the issue of women's ordination while another 19.0% agreed to that. The majority didn't have the election of officers and the amendments to the Church Manual as a major area of interest. The figures reveal that though some had their interest there, the percentages of such persons were low. In all, it is clear that the main interest of members was the issue of women's ordination with a little of other subjects here and there. Because of this subject, the San Antonio Session was regarded as a very critical session in the history of the Church.

IV. Discussion of Data

The data that the questionnaire revealed gives much information to answer the quest of this research. The data revealed that the majority of members got information about the GC Session from their local churches (70.9%) and from social media (19.0%). These were channels of information to greater numbers of the people, hence more effective. In a typical Ghanaian church, a church leader could ask members to pray on a particular subject related to the GC Session. Another will write it on Facebook or Twitter, or other social media. It will be the subject of discussion on various WhatsApp groups. These will spread the information further and further and hype the interest of several members.

The data revealed that about 60.8% of members had the issue of women's ordination as their main point of interest in the session. Other issues of interest were the Fundamental Beliefs, amendments to the Church Manual, and election of officers for the world church. These other issues had fewer people showing interest in them. The responses in this study suggest that majority of people became interested in the GC Session because they had heard from church or saw on social media that the issue of women's ordination was part of the agenda. This same

subject kept them continuously interested. About 53.2% continued being interested in the session because of the issue of women's ordination. The interest in the issue of women's ordination is probably because of the patriarchal cultural background of most African societies, including Ghana. Another 15.2% continued following the session because it was trending on social media. As expected, the aspect of the session that was trending on social media was the issue of women's ordination.

The data also revealed that members see GC sessions as very important and that it is not a waste of time or resources by the church. This understanding could stem from the fact that members understand the church's governance system and the need to send delegates to a session periodically for key decisions. This notion might also have been developed because the increased interest in the 2015 Session might have exposed members to many issues that they previously didn't know. This conclusion is reached because about 40.5% revealed that they have not been following GC sessions since they became members and 25.3% agreed that until 2015, they did not know much about GC sessions. In sum, the perceptions of members about GC sessions are generally favorable though many do not know much about GC Sessions.

In addition, the data reveal that a majority of members regard the San Antonio Session to be the most critical of all. This conclusion is clearly because of the issue of women's ordination. It is also the reason for the interest hype in the session. Members had several ideas about how the decision on the matter was going to affect the church, especially in Africa. No wonder 45.6% strongly agreed that their interest was the issue of women's ordination. The issue of election of officers, amendments to the Church Manual, and fundamental beliefs were not given as much attention as the issue of women's ordination. Hence, the subject of women's ordination has made the 2015 GC Session in San Antonio one of the most followed and discussed GC Sessions in the history of the Church.

V. Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from this research is that indeed there was a great hype in interest in the 2015 GC Session. The GC session that is referred to as highly critical in the history of GC Sessions is the one that took place in Minneapolis in 1888 (Schwarz, 1995). This was because of the discussion on the doctrine of Righteousness by faith. The kind of attention it received perhaps may not be up to the level of attention

received by the San Antonio Session. The reasons for such interest hype are varied but key among them is the fact that members were interested in the issue of women's ordination that was part of the agenda for the session. In addition, the use of social media played a key role in rousing the interest of persons who hitherto had no knowledge or interest in GC Sessions. In conclusion, the issue of Women's ordination and the use of social media can be regarded as the factors that caused the hype in interest in the 2015 GC Session in San Antonio. Church leaders can take a cue from San Antonio and arouse the interest of members in future sessions by putting engaging subjects in the agenda and making use of social media.

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