

M Y R N A T E T Z



LEADERSHIP LESSONS From
the Life of
NEAL C. WILSON



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Preface

Leader.

How do you identify an effective leader? Even more important, how do you become an effective leader?

Written for leaders, specifically church administrators, this book is an example of what makes leadership effective and what skills and experiences are needed. Whether you are a pastor, church elder, deacon, deaconess, Sabbath School leader, church administrator, professor, chaplain, or fulfill some other leadership role, this book is written for you. On the surface, the book seems to be primarily a biography of Neal C. Wilson, a well-known and respected leader in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. While the book includes many features of a biography, it encourages us to look at how a particular leader functions in order to guide us in assessing our own leadership effectiveness, and to look at means of becoming better leaders.

There is a great deal of literature on leadership, but most of it focuses on political or business leadership. This book deals with leadership in the church—specifically spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership differs from secular leadership, for the mission and evaluation of spiritual leadership is radically different, and when measuring its effectiveness, evaluation becomes much more complicated. On the one hand, we give God credit when we note success, but, at the same time, we realize that success in the church also happens because we partner with God. Whenever we do not partner with God, failure usually follows. How then does God use leaders? We hope this book will open the door to this and other questions.

Spiritual leadership challenges every church leader; this is not always easy and, in fact, can be very difficult. I write this not to discourage leaders but

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to help us accept the reality of the challenges facing spiritual leaders. I recall reading an article that compared leaders in the corporate world with those in the not-for-profit world, including churches. The authors concluded that leadership in the latter group was more challenging and that such organizations demanded more effective leaders. Why is that? Churches and similar organizations consist of individuals who *choose* to be part of the church. With few exceptions, individuals are not forced to belong to a church. Jesus *invited* people to follow Him—He did not force them. Today, spiritual leaders, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, invite individuals to follow Jesus Christ. They must always focus on the spiritual aspect of their roles.

Why feature Neal C. Wilson? Some years ago, James A. Cress, who at that time was serving as Ministerial Secretary of the General Conference, and I were talking about Neal C. Wilson and his role as church leader. We shared an admiration for Pastor Wilson's ability to remember names, prepare for a discussion on an issue, effectively present what he thought was the best course, and, in the process, function as a Christian gentleman. His ability to analyze and summarize complex issues has become legendary. He possessed an exceptional ability to listen to a discussion about a complex matter, understand it, and then share a reliable summary of the issue. When he finished his summary, it was obvious that he understood the issue at hand. To James Cress and me, it seemed that perhaps church leaders could learn much from him. We do not present Neal C. Wilson as a perfect leader but as an effective spiritual leader. We hope that all will benefit by reading this book and that each reader will also become an effective leader.

While James Cress was alive, we asked Myrna Tetz to write this book, and she has spent many hours doing research and interviewing people. Her outstanding work will make this book a blessing to each reader.

Nikolaus Satelmajer, Editor
Ministry, International Journal for Pastors

Introduction

This biography of Neal C. Wilson, former President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, features accounts of his childhood, youth, and adult years as he served his Lord in a variety of positions. In 1978, the mantle of the presidency of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was laid on him. While the book gives just a glimpse into the life of this man who led church groups in a variety of roles, the emphasis will center on the multiple positive aspects of his leadership methods.

Elder Wilson served the church during a time in world history when monumental changes resulted in overwhelming demands and expectations. Without a doubt, he did not meet every person's expectations or needs, but he served courageously with skill and dedication. Unfortunately, many accounts of his leadership abilities could not be included because of a lack of space.

During his fifty-three years of church employment, from 1939 to 1992, he served as a leader in a variety of positions and locations: as an accountant in India, as a pastor-evangelist in Wyoming, and as an administrator of the Egypt Mission, the Nile Union, the Columbia Union Conference, the North American Division, and the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church. Even after retirement, he served as a presidential and administrative consultant to the Euro-Asia Division (the former Soviet Union territory) from 1990 to 1992.

In the book *Embrace the Impossible*, author William G. Johnson, former Editor of the *Adventist Review*, gives a view of Elder Wilson as a leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church that should set the tone for this book.

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His leadership style was unhurried, deliberate—focused on one-to-one encounters and committees. . . .

Wilson’s mastery of the agenda at the councils of the church became legendary. He studied and prepared for every item, becoming thoroughly versed in the pros and cons, options, nuances, concerns, anxieties. If a major matter came up for consideration, Wilson always took the chair. He usually introduced the item with such words as “Let me make a few remarks . . .” and the delegates smiled. Wilson would weigh out loud all the arguments; he would explore the various aspects; and he did it in such a way that almost everyone, regardless of their opinion on an issue, felt confident that the president agreed with their viewpoint. These “preliminary remarks” always went long, up to one hour or more, depending on the gravity and complexity of the issue at hand.¹

James A. Cress, Ministerial Secretary of the General Conference, and Nikolaus Satelmajer, Editor of *Ministry* magazine, envisioned this book. Elder Cress made a commitment to this project, but his untimely death in 2009 prevented him from providing input that would have been valuable. Nikolaus Satelmajer has been involved from its inception, and because of his counsel, knowledge, and foresight, this manuscript has become a reality.

Many individuals who worked alongside Elder Wilson were asked to share their memories of Wilson’s life as a leader of the church. However, not every person who contributed could be included because of the lack of space, and many memories, even by those who were quoted, were left out.

Most of the book’s accounts of memories of Elder Wilson come from individuals who knew him well and had worked with him. Many accounts of his ministries, including articles written by Elder Wilson and others, come from denominational magazines.

1. William G. Johnsson, *Embrace the Impossible* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2008), 111.

Fan the Embers

When eleven-year-old Neal C. Wilson, with his father and a group of other men, came to a clearing in the jungle deep in the heart of central Africa, they set up camp, fixed supper, and had worship. Then they continued to sit around the campfire, discussing how they would keep the fires burning brightly all night as protection from wild animals—especially man-eating lions.

They divided the night into hour-long watches and assigned certain hours to several of the men. Fuel had to be added to the fire every so often to keep the fire in a steady blaze. If the fire started to get a little low, it had to be fanned in order to get the new supply of wood to catch fire and break out into a bright flame.

After the schedule was in place, the group lay down on their cots, pulled mosquito nets around them, and fell sleep. Everything went fine until about two o'clock, when Neal woke with a rather uneasy feeling. Being an adventurous boy, he had imagined and dreamed about all sorts of wild animals. *What kinds roam the jungle here? How big are they? What do they eat, and what does their howl or growl sound like?*

He sat up on his cot, lifted the mosquito netting, and looked around. Thinking at first that he was just imagining things, he stared at what seemed to be several glowing coals in the darkness. Then he realized that not more than twenty or thirty feet away were wild animals coming closer, and those glowing coals were actually their eyes. He hardly dared to move or speak lest he attract the attention of one of those beasts.

As he looked toward the fire, he saw that the man who was supposed to have that particular watch was asleep on the ground, with his head on a log.

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“Stoke the fire! Put some fuel on! Fan those embers!” Neal began softly. Finally, the sleeping guard heard him and slowly got up and did what Neal had suggested. As the flames began to rise, Neal could see the lions’ shining eyes begin to retreat. But he didn’t sleep much the rest of the night.

When the fire again burned down to embers, Neal could see the eyes coming closer. And when the fire flamed brightly, he watched the eyes of the lions as they retreated to a safe distance.

This incident in the young life of the fourteenth person to hold the office of President of the Seventh-day Adventist Church gives evidence of his focus and determination to protect himself and his family, and later, the church and its members throughout the years of his leadership. This biography will provide stories and testimonies of Neal Wilson’s loyalty to his church family and will include accounts of his determined efforts to spread the offer of salvation to the world. His many years of service for the Seventh-day Adventist Church included preaching, working as an administrator, and writing, culminating in leading as President of the world church from 1978 to 1990.