

LENGTH: 1,355

HEADLINE: The Women's Resource Center – A Pursuit of Truth

BYLINE: Dahlie Conferido, La Sierra University student

BODY:

Not many people know where the Women's Resource Center is. Even the cheerful greeter at the La Sierra University front desk couldn't locate it when I called for directions. But after a series of emails and phone calls to Penny Shell, director of the WRC, I was finally here, standing in the center's bare but attractive foyer, staring at a black Jesus. *A female* black Jesus.

When I first told my colleagues I would be doing my next piece on the Women's Resource Center, one person suggested I ask questions like "How should college women protect themselves against violence?" or "How can females fight sexual discrimination?" But this isn't your typical center for women. It is, in fact, the only one of its kind anywhere in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. Whereas almost every health clinic and student life office distributes information on date rape and domestic violence, it isn't often that an agency for women displays a picture of a female Australian Aborigine Christ dining at the Last Supper. The Women's Resource Center is such an agency. Through research, cataloging, mailing, and publishing, WRC personnel strive to fulfill a mission that uncovers the contributions of women in Adventist history, celebrates and supports women in Adventist present, and works to provide an environment of equality for men and women in Adventist future. Not a small task.

Penny Shell, director since 2002, led me from the foyer into the next room. Like many other rooms in this workplace, it has no door. The property was once a dental office, she informs me with a rueful smile, and while there weren't many doors, there were many sinks. But she isn't complaining. Doorless rooms are the least of the hurdles that the WRC has had to jump over the years.

Prior to the center's establishment in 1997, the Adventist world church had undergone what Shell and Special Projects Coordinator Kit Watts described as "huge, awful discussions" filled with negative female stereotypes and narrow interpretations of Scripture. Because of this controversy, no institution wanted to support a center that promoted women in pastoral roles. No institution, that is, except La Sierra University, which offers free rent and affiliation. For salaries and programs the center relies on donations, making its fiscal position precarious from year to year. It has been only through a recent special donation that Shell and Watts have been able to afford a new addition to the WRC family: their own copy machine.

I stood in the doorless room and watched as Penny Shell pulled out a drawer from a metal file cabinet lining the wall. Inside were folders upon folders squeezed together, each one containing a story of a woman pastor, chaplain, elder, teacher, Bible worker. These carefully labeled manila folders are the foundation for a network of women in professional ministry, a way that women can dialogue with others and together overcome what Shell calls the North American Division's "pretty spotty support." However, the center has also found another use.

Shell recently received a phone call from an East coast pastor whose church was considering its first female candidate for elder. The congregation was split; his wife was against it, and he himself was undecided. He wanted information on women elders in the church and Shell turned to her trusty files. Soon the woman in question herself contacted the center and has been dialoguing with Watts and Shell ever since.

I was soon directed down a short hallway into the library. Here two walls of shelves boast several dozen books and magazines. I glanced down by my feet and recognized the familiar header *Adventist Woman* emblazoned on a stack of newsletters. WRC staff have been involved in many of the church's periodicals for women. Watts currently edits *CONTACT*, a newsletter sponsored by the General Conference Ministerial Association. In addition to printed resources, the center also collects multimedia, offering a wide collection of presentations by women on audio and videocassette.

Yet some of the most visible work the WRC sponsors has been for La Sierra University students. For the past five years, the center has hosted university worships, assemblies, and class presentations featuring strong female role models. There were Virginia Richards Cason whose son was dying of AIDS; a special agent for the FBI, Marla Talbot; and Marla Anderson who works as a superior court judge in Monterey County. In partnership with other LSU academic departments, the WRC has cosponsored such events as the recent lecture by award-winning documentary filmmaker Freida Mock. The center has also extended support to student-run PHAIR—

Promoting Healthy Attitudes in Individuals and Relationships – an organization that provides information on issues such as sexual assault and dater’s rights.

Shell turned me from the library and invited me into the parlor. Against the wall were several black and white photographs of Anna Lula Joseph Ritchie, the woman who established one of the first churches in what would become the Southeastern California Conference. Born in the early nineteenth century, Ritchie began her ministry as a Bible worker with the Mission Girls, a group Shell says she later broke from because they regulated her like a child. Ritchie went on to graduate from Healdsburg College and became a missionary to Utah before returning to southern California. With her husband she built a home in early Corona, a building that could turn into a church complete with an organ.

Standing in the middle of the center’s parlor, I felt the stare of Ritchie’s eyes framed in a sepia face. She, like many other early pioneers, lived and died decades before the church she helped build began a bitter struggle over women’s ordination. Did those people ever see Ritchie’s portrait? There she is, standing outside a church she helped found. And framed beside it, there she is again with needy children she helped clothe. These pictures and the stories behind them ask if it is possible to deny pastoral roles to women who have already functioned as pastors.

That is the very question Penny Shell and Kit Watts strive to answer as they gather more and more evidence of women’s history in the church. They assert that church politicians are not completely to blame when popular resources like the 1996

*SDA Encyclopedia* cite 805 men and only 134 women. Shell and Watts believe that stereotypes can be changed only when there is enough material to prove them wrong.

And the material is growing. It is in the file cabinets, on the bookshelves, recorded on tapes, and reaching the world through mail, telephone, Internet, and face-to-face interactions. The staff of the WRC provides evidence itself that the stereotypes are wrong. Penny Shell and Kit Watts have both served as pastors. Watts was also an assistant editor of the *Adventist Review* and now works full time as assistant to the president for communication in the Southeastern California Conference. Shell has taught English overseas, is a published writer and certified chaplain, and was the first woman to become president of the Seventh-day Adventist Healthcare Chaplains Association. There are many more women like them around the world. According to the center's statistics, 60 percent of Adventists are women. The truth is out there.

On my way out, I thanked Watts for her time; she was already busy behind her desk. Penny Shell walked me to the door and I shook her hand, glancing one last time at the portrait of the female Aborigine Jesus seated at the Last Supper, surrounded by female disciples of all colors and ethnicities. To Jesus' right I spied the Western white woman chowing down on a cheeseburger and slurping soda. I smiled.

As I exited down the stairs I made a mental note to remember where the WRC is so I can tell someone the next time I am asked. It is in the complex near the LSU Market, on the second floor, and a few doors down from the radio station KSGN. You can't miss it. It is the one with a banner hanging outside that proudly declares, "Some leaders are born women." And if you don't believe it, step inside.

The truth is in there.