

## Equality in Ministry: From 1881 to Now

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The current discussion of women in ministry has deep roots in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and in its understanding of its mission. This brief study will trace the main stages of the discussion from its beginnings to the Utrecht action and beyond.

The official record begins in 1881 when a motion to ordain women to the gospel ministry was presented to the General Conference Session and reported in the *Review and Herald*. It was referred to the General Conference Committee, where it stayed for nearly 100 years.

Most of the early church references to the subject defend vigorously the equality of men and women. After all, the founder and prophet of the church was a woman. The right of a woman to teach, to speak, and to lead was important in Adventist thought. A study of the roles that women played in the early Adventist Church shows that they were active, working side by side with men, even in leadership and administrative positions. Over time, however, that situation changed. For instance, in 1905, 20 out of 60 conference treasurers were women; in 1950, there were none. The highest numbers of women serving in departmental leadership positions cluster around the year 1915, the year Ellen White died. After her death, the participation of women in administrative or departmental leadership roles declined until 1950, when no women held positions of administrative or departmental leadership in any conference in North America.

The question of the role of women in the church arose again in 1968 with a request from the Northern European Division for counsel on ordaining women ministers. In 1949, according to the leadership in Finland, they had 21 active ministers; however, only 12 were listed in the SDA Statistical Report for that year. Nine women ministers accounted for the difference. During World War II, the male ministers were in government service, and women Bible Instructors were trained to fill these ministerial roles. They did so successfully, continuing in their service even after the war ended. After seeing their effective ministry for twenty years, the church in Finland wondered if there was any reason why these women ministers should not be ordained. The Home and Overseas Officers of the General Conference appointed a committee to study the matter. The committee never met.

In North America, the question arose in the context of revival and reformation. A great time of spiritual renewal swept through our college campuses in the early 1970's. I was teaching at Union College at the time and remember well the intense revival through the student body and the influx of new students, many of them new converts, wanting to serve the Lord in the ministry. They were not all male. Women, too, were moved by the Spirit of God and wanted to serve Him. They studied beside their brothers in theology classes and worked alongside them as student missionaries. The question was asked: Is there a place for women in the ministry of the church?

The story of the next twenty years is the story of one ad hoc committee and three commissions attempting to answer that question. The study of the role of women in the church began at Camp Mohaven in Ohio in 1973 with a committee of 13 men and 14 women established by the GC Committee. In their study they found no theological reasons not to ordain women. They recommended that women be ordained as local elders and that they be hired as associates in pastoral care with a pilot program put into place that would lead to the ordination of women as ministers in 1975.

In 1973, the Annual Council received the Mohaven report and voted "that continued study be given to the theological soundness of the election of women to local church offices which require ordination." In 1974, the Annual Council called for "more study," saying that "The time is not ripe nor opportune" to ordain women to the gospel ministry. The first woman to serve as a local elder was Josephine Benton, ordained in 1972 at the Brotherhood Church in Washington, D.C., by the presidents of the Potomac Conference and the Columbia Union Conference. The Walla Walla College Church ordained women as local elders in 1973-74, and the Green Lake Church in Seattle, Washington also ordained its first woman elder in 1973. In 1984 the Annual Council reaffirmed the Spring Meeting decision of 1975 that allowed women to be ordained as local elders and voted to "advise each division that it is free to make provisions as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders."

The next fifteen years, from 1975 to 1990, were exciting years of growth and study. Women were becoming more active not only in their local churches, but also on conference and union levels. Year by year the recommendation to allow the ordination of women in areas where it was acceptable came to the Annual Council. And year by year it was tabled or postponed or sent back, always with the explanation that the world field was not ready for this yet.

In North America, women were hired on pastoral staffs. Josephine Benton was the first, becoming an associate pastor at Sligo in 1973. She and the women who followed her could not baptize or perform marriages, but they were serving in every other way as pastors. Young women were presenting themselves to theology departments for ministerial study, hoping to serve the Lord in ministry. Women were proving themselves effective as pastors, but they were also finding it increasingly difficult to be a pastor without being able to do the full work of a pastor. They prepared people for baptism only to have to call in a male colleague to baptize them. Some unions solved the problem by authorizing their women pastors to baptize based on their ministerial license, just as unordained men were able to do.

The General Conference officers felt that such a situation could not go on any longer. In 1984, the Annual Council appointed a Commission on the Role of Women in the Church consisting of 65 delegates representing all divisions to settle the question of women's ordination "definitively." This commission decided against making any definitive decision and recommended more study and also a reform in ordination practices. While the church would not ordain women working as pastors, they were freely ordaining men

working in many other capacities. Clearly, a study of the meaning of ordination was needed.

So, in 1988, a second commission on the Role of Women in the Church was appointed. It consisted of 80 members from the world church, including 19 women. Women pastors were able for the first time to speak to the commission from their own experience. The commission recommended further study. The Annual Council had rejected in 1985 the North American Division recommendation that qualified women pastors with seminary training be able to baptize and solemnize marriages, just as unordained men with similar training had been able to do since 1979. However, more and more women had already begun baptizing in the NAD, with the authorization of their conferences and unions. Jan Daffern, Marsha Frost, and Frances Wiegand began baptizing as a part of their pastoral roles in 1984 with the authorization of the Potomac Conference Committee.

By this time the continued study no longer focused on whether or not women could be ministers. That question had been resoundingly answered by the effective ministry of women employed by the church as pastors. Rather, discussion focused on the equality of men and women as ministers. The Third Commission on the Role of Women in the Church, which met in 1989 in Cohutta Springs, Georgia, focused on the issue of equality. The commission had 67 members from every world field and included 17 women, though three divisions refused to send a woman. Their study resulted in a controversial compromise. Though they voted "no" on women's ordination, they voted to authorize women to perform baptisms and marriages. This action brought women ministers closer to functional equality with their male colleagues. In addition, the women delegates called for the church to address more specifically the needs of Adventist women and involve them in positions of leadership.

Though it has become increasingly clear that the world church will not soon come to agreement on this issue, resolution after resolution has been sent to the NAD calling for an end to discriminatory practices in ministry in North America. Conference by conference, union by union, various groups study and recommend. The issue is seen as one of justice, fairness, and equality: These women are our pastors and, as such, they should be ordained. For this reason, in 1989 the Ohio Conference Executive Committee approved Pastor Leslie Bumgardner as a candidate for ordination, and the Columbia Union Conference Executive Committee approved her for ordination after August of 1990 on the grounds that it is "morally right and theologically correct."

As the church moved toward the GC session in Indianapolis in 1990, various unions, conferences, and other groups, including the West-coast religion teachers, called for the elimination of gender as a factor in ordaining to the gospel ministry. In 1989, the NAD union presidents voted unanimously to endorse women's ordination "in those divisions where it would be deemed helpful and appropriate." The GC delegates in Indianapolis voted 1173 to 377 not to recommend that women be ordained, but they did vote 776 to 494 to extend ministerial privileges to women that included the right to baptize and to perform marriages in divisions which authorize it.

This action brought women closer to equality in their work as gospel ministers, but still the GC did not recommend women's ordination for the world church. And that is not surprising. Ordinarily issues of ordination are not considered by the General Conference. They are determined by the unions on the basis of the recommendations of the conferences. A candidate's fitness for ordination is thought to be best determined by those who know the person's work and have witnessed the gifts of the Spirit. The insistence of the General Conference that the issue be decided on a world church basis, even though many other issues of church practice are decided on a division level, ensured that this issue remain unresolved.

Could the GC session in Utrecht in 1995 cut this Gordian knot? Could it separate the call to ministry from the demands of culture by allowing each field to determine the issue for itself? To do so would be to return the responsibility for determining who should be ordained to the unions and conferences. Each field could recognize and honor the call of God in its pastors. The recommendation did not call for approval or disapproval of the ordination of women, just that the decision would be made at the division level rather than at the GC level.

The vote at Utrecht overwhelmingly opposed allowing the divisions to make the decision. Some have mistakenly thought that the action at Utrecht denied women the right to serve as pastors and elders. This simply is not true. Even though speeches were made in favor of women's ordination and in opposition to it, the GC action did not in any way rescind the previous commitments made to women serving as local church elders and as pastors. It might seem that this decision would stop the conversation, but that has not happened. The main issue remains to be resolved: How is the church to recognize the spiritual gifts given to men and women for ministry?

Conferences, unions, and individual churches are now addressing this issue. For example, on October 13, 1995, all the union conference presidents of the North American Division issued a joint statement pledging themselves to work for the ordination of women, affirming their belief in its "Biblical rightness." Some fear this continuing discussion will bring disunity to the church. However, the Utrecht decision, by defining unity as agreement on this issue, forces a choice between unity and other Biblical principles, thus ensuring disunity.

The first and most dramatic response to the call for equality after Utrecht occurred at the Sligo Church when it ordained three women on September 23, 1995. It was the first time in the Adventist church that a local church conducted an ordination to the gospel ministry. The church issued credentials acknowledging Kendra Haloviak, Penny Shell, and Norma Osborne as ordained ministers. The church also invited the Potomac Conference to give its credentials, but the proposal was defeated by a narrow margin in the conference executive committee.

While the Sligo Church waits for its conference to issue its credentials, these women can function in their communities as ordained ministers. They do not have to wait for more study or more commissions. Penny Shell, chief of chaplaincy service at Shady Grove

Adventist Hospital, can now work with her patients and colleagues as an ordained minister. No longer does she have to explain that she is indeed a minister, just not ordained. Likewise, Kendra Haloviak, assistant professor of religion at Columbia Union College, and Norma Osborne, associate pastor at Sligo, can work as ordained ministers. As Penny Shell said, "Even more difficult than not being ordained, when it's expected, is to belong to a church that will not ordain women. I no longer belong to such a church, and it's a great joy."

Other churches have conducted similar services. On December 2, 1995, the La Sierra University Church ordained Halcyon Wilson, their pastor, and Madelynn Haldeman, a teacher on the university's religion faculty for thirty years. On the same day, the small Loma Linda Victoria Church ordained their pastor, Sheryll Prinz McMillan. In the first service to ordain men and women together, the Garden Grove Church in California ordained two pastors, Margot Pitrone and Jared Fulton, on July 6, 1996.

Ordination by the local church may prove to be a stop-gap measure until the denomination can find a way to grant equality to men and women in ministry. Even so, it follows closely the Biblical model of ordination reflected in Acts 13 where the local church at Antioch set apart Barnabas and Saul with the laying on of hands.

Now other congregations are determining how they will address the issue of equality in ministry. The Walla Walla College Church has been committed to the principle of equality since the mid-1970's, when a gathering consensus focused attention on the gifts God gives to both men and women for ministry. The commitments of both members and pastors to inclusiveness in ministry led to the hiring of the church's first female pastor, Diane Forsyth, in 1981. Other women serving as pastors of the College Church since that time have included Pam Cress, Nancy Canwell, and Leslie Bumgardner.

In the aftermath of the action at Utrecht, the Walla Walla College Church Board established a Steering Committee to lead the church into a discussion of issues relating to the ordination of women pastors. A series of three public forums featured six presentations on such subjects as the Biblical backgrounds to ordination, church structure, and the recent history of the discussion in North America. These meetings also offered opportunities for dialogue among members.

On December 4, 1995, the College Church Board and Business Meeting voted by an overwhelming margin to "support the ordination of qualified women to the gospel ministry." A second action requested that the Upper Columbia Conference approve Pastor Leslie Bumgardner for ordination, with the understanding that the date for such a ceremony would need to be coordinated with church officials. This recommendation is not unique. The earlier recommendation for Leslie Bumgardner was rescinded after the 1990 GC, but similar recommendations are being made currently. For instance, the Potomac Conference has recently voted to recommend Esther Knott, an associate pastor at Sligo, for ordination.

Discussions have also focused on other ways to achieve equality in ministry, including a new proposal for the common credentialing of both men and women for ministry. On May 6, 1996, the College Church Board and Business Meeting resolved "that the male and female pastors of our congregation have full equality in every aspect of pastoral ministry" and voted to plan for a service of affirmation of equality in ministry which was held on September 28, 1996, the first Sabbath of the new school year. In that service many members of the congregation came forward to lay hands on all the members of the pastoral staff, both men and women. The church also requested "that the Upper Columbia Conference recognize the equality of the pastors of the Walla Walla College Church by issuing each of them a common credential that does not discriminate on the basis of gender." A corollary action requested that a similar credential be made available to any qualified pastor in the conference who seeks it. The idea of the common credential addresses the issue of justice and equality in a new way.

The issue as it is being currently addressed involves more than the ordination of women. It involves the nature of ordination and the role of the local church in the recognition of its ministers. It asks the church to consider what is meant by unity and how to achieve unity in a world-wide church. The North American Division has established a President's Commission on Women in Ministry to study these issues. This sounds very close to where we were in 1973. But there is a difference. Now there are over a thousand women serving as local elders and fifty women serving as pastors and chaplains in North America. How the church is to recognize the gifts of ministry the Spirit gives to both men and women is the focus of the question the church faces now.

1. Kit Watts, "The Rise and Fall of Adventist Women in Leadership," *Ministry*, April 1995, pp. 6-10. This special issue of *Ministry* on Unity in Diversity is devoted to a study of women in *ministry*. For an overview of the history, see "An Outline of the History of Seventh-day Adventists and the Ordination of Women" by Kit Watts in *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women*, edited by Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca Frost Brillhart (Langley Park, MD: TEAM, 1995). In this history, the author traces in chronological order the major events affecting women in ministry in North America and in the world field. In her treatment of the years 1844 to 1915, she cites the articles which helped define the early Adventist position on the role of women in the church. Several early Adventist articles were reprinted in "Women in Early Adventism," *Adventist Review*, February 4, 1988, pp. 16-21. For additional documentary material, see *The Adventist Woman*, a publication of the Association of Adventist Women.