

The Welcome Table

In Search of a Roundtable

Concerning the why and how
And what and who of ministry,
One image keeps surfacing:
A table that is round.

It will take some sawing
to be roundtabled,
some redefining
and redesigning.

Such redoing and rebirthing
of narrowlong Churching
can painful be
for people and tables.

But so was the cross,
a painful too table
of giving and, yes,
dying.

And from such death comes life,
from such dying comes rising,
in search of roundtabling.

—Chuck Lathrop

Introduction

Women have had prominent leadership positions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church since its beginning. Seventh-day Adventist journals have published articles on the role of women in the denomination since 1861.¹ Concern over a woman's place in church leadership flared up in the 1980s and 1990s. The central theme of the concern was whether it was appropriate for the Seventh-day Adventist denomination to ordain women. Other denominations were wrestling with the same question.

When I was asked to write the introduction to a book written for the purpose of stating the case *for* the ordination of women, I almost said No because I don't believe in female ordination. The fact of the matter is that I don't believe in male ordination either. Since the debate has not been settled during the past decade from a purely theological thus-saith-the-Lord perspective, I continue to be troubled by some questions for which I have not received satisfying answers: Why did we study gender-based ordination without ever studying ordination as a church rite? Are men entitled to be pastors just because they are male? Should the Seventh-day Adventist denomination's policy allow a male without theological education to be assigned to a church and ordained just because of a history of being an active layman, yet a woman graduating with theological training from an Adventist seminary could find it almost impossible to receive a call to pastor a church within the Seventh-day Adventist denomination worldwide? Currently, if fortunate enough to receive an invitation to pastor, she will not be ordained because she was born female. Why do males who have a background in finance and become treasurers at the denomination's conference, union, or division levels get on an ordination track and women doing the same work do not? Should both males and females who receive degrees in religious education and become

Bible teachers be on an ordination track or, as currently is the case, just the males? Why do many principals of Seventh-day Adventist academies presently receive ministerial credentials even though they do not have a background or training in theology? Is the policy of removing the ministerial credential from a female academy principal when she no longer serves as principal but not removing them from a male principal who is no longer serving as a principal justified? Should the fact that one is male and graduates from a college religion department or the Adventist Theological Seminary be the criteria for validating one's "call" to ministry regardless of personal, family, or financial difficulties? Would a denomination spend the same amount of time studying the issues related to a decision to ordain persons because of their race? These and other unanswered questions like them made me say Yes to writing the introduction to this book written by both males and females who have been touched in one way or another by the past decision not to ordain women to the gospel ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

I was the Assistant Director at the Institute of Church Ministry (ICM) when the women's ordination deliberation began. (The Institute is the research arm of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists.) Little did I realize how involved I, as a church researcher, would become with the varying opinions on the subject of female ordination. From this vantage point, I would like to share with you what I learned about ordaining female elders of congregations from reading questionnaires filled out by men, and from those completed by women.

Let's look first at the background leading up to the request for those two research studies. "In 1973 the General Conference Executive Committee established an ad hoc Committee on the role of women in the church. The Annual Council that year voted 'that continued study be given to the theological soundness of the election of women to local church offices which require ordination and that in areas receptive to such action, there be continued recognition of the appropriateness of appointing women to pastoral evangelistic work.'"² At the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Committee in 1975, a vote was taken "that the greatest

discretion and caution be exercised in the ordination of women to the office of local church elder.”³ In 1984 the Annual Council voted to “advise each division that it is free to make provision as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders.”⁴ This action extended the freedom to ordain local church elders to the world church “as each division should see its way clear to proceed.”⁵ By 1988 the NAD administrators wanted to determine the effect the decision to allow women to serve as church elders had within the Division and requested that the Institute of Church Ministry conduct that research study. Dr. Roger Dudley, ICM’s director, and my research mentor, asked me to be the principal investigator of this project. I was to prepare to survey the pastor or first elder of all of the churches in the North American Division (NAD).

Since the division had no indication where women were serving as local elders, a questionnaire was developed and mailed to each of the 4,444 churches. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the effect the decision by the local church to ordain women as church elders was having on the congregation in which they were serving. Allowing a woman to be church elder was then perceived to be an exception to the usual church tradition of male-only elders. Under certain circumstances it was deemed necessary for a woman to be elected leader of the congregation to serve in the absence of the pastor when a church did not have a pool of qualified males, no man was willing to serve, or, as is the case in several NAD churches, there were no male members in the congregation. According to statistics available in the North American Division Office of Human Relations, 60 percent of the membership in the NAD at the time of the study were women.⁶

Questionnaires were returned by 3,036 churches, a 73 percent response rate, reflecting the strong interest in the topic. The 1988 study revealed that 960 women had been selected and were serving as both elders and first elders in NAD churches.⁷ Some female church elders had been ordained while others were serving as elders or first elders but were not ordained. Women had been serving as elders, one for as many as 25 years, in churches with qualified males. Those serving on the board of elders for the previous two

years were in the greatest number. The study showed that female elders were distributed among churches of every size, each of the four major ethnic classifications, and within each union conference.

In churches that had women elders, they were appreciated. In several churches, the pastor or first elder who filled out the questionnaire indicated that the idea of change from a male-only board of elders to one that included a female was not universally accepted. After a woman had served for a time, however, there was general agreement that having a woman elder had strengthened the board of elders. The female elders' strong ministries to other women were especially acknowledged. In the majority of churches having women elders, those women were serving in the same capacity as their male counterparts, including being a part of the speaking rotation in the pulpit.

By contrast, many church pastors or head elders reported not being able even to discuss the topic of ordination with their church board or with their congregation for fear of reprisal or splits in the church. In churches with no female elders, both men and women were equally opposed to the concept of ordaining females to the office of elder.

A factor that heightened the apprehension within churches where discussing the ordination of women elders caused concern, was the fact that thousands of air miles, committee hours, administrative time, and church dollars were being spent by the General Conference to study the question: Should women doing the same work as males in pastoral ministry receive the same credentials and ordination rite? Papers by biblical researchers and scholars, theological professors at the Andrews University Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, university and college teachers around the world, influential laity, and officers of the denomination flooded the computers, copy machines, and church journals with position papers for and against women being ordained to the gospel ministry.

By 1989, so powerful and touchy was the word *ordination* that in some circles it could not even be spoken. The word was closely associated with both the female local church elder AND female

pastoral gender debate. It was not uncommon for ordination to be referred to as “the ‘O’ word.” Uttering only the “O” and not the word suggested ordination was like a naughty word that should not be allowed in Adventistspeak. Like the words love or justice, it seemed there were as many different emotions associated with the word as there were people hearing it. At this same time, within the American society as well as within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, “women's rights,” “feminist movement,” “unfair sexism,” “male domination,” “gender bashing,” and other new word combinations were becoming more prevalent. Indeed, there were men who were for ordination of women and men who were against it; there were women who were for it and women who were against it. Biblical quotes and words from Ellen White's writings were given as reasons not to support the ordination of women; biblical quotes and words from Ellen White's writings were given as reasons to support it.

Soon after the findings of the women elder study were released to the public in February 1989, another research study on the role of women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church began at ICM. The General Conference officers asked the General Conference Women's Advisory to (1) identify a network of women currently employed in leadership positions throughout the world church, and (2) to access the direct observations and opinions of these women regarding their employment and the role of women in the church. The chair of the General Conference Women's Advisory at that time, Karen Flowers, turned to ICM for assistance with the study. ICM coordinated this first-ever study by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination seeking the opinion of Adventist women in all of the divisions and attached fields of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

By July 1989, the study entitled “The Role of Women in the church: An International Survey of Seventh-day Adventist Women in Leadership” was completed.⁸ The findings from this study were presented at the last meeting of the General Conference Role of Women Commission just prior to the 1990 General Conference session in Indianapolis, Indiana. Through lists sent to ICM by presidents of world divisions, a network of 1,872 women working

as administrators, departmental directors and associates, pastors, chaplains, and Bible instructors became the population of women to receive the “Seventh-day Adventist Women Employees Survey.”⁹ Of those who responded, 60 percent were from world divisions other than NAD, which means that 40 percent were respondents from the North American Division. The study dealt with levels of job satisfaction, economic issues, leadership positions, and ordination of women.

Women responding to the survey included letters or wrote long comments on the questionnaires. I was surprised to learn that equal pay for equal work is an American concept—a result of an American government's policy enforced in the NAD—not a world church action. Some women wrote of working in areas where they get paid only if there is enough money to go around. The men are issued their paychecks first, even if the woman is the head of household, and women get paid only if there is enough money left over. In another description of difference, one woman wrote about a canoe that is supplied to transport the male headmaster and male teacher across the river to the school. The female teacher must ford the river on foot and stand before her class wet until the air dries her clothing. Some women reported more concern about the demeaning treatment of women such as physical and/or sexual abuse than alarm that women were not in more leadership positions in the church. The use of their daughters for male pleasure in some countries was a much greater concern to some women than was the issue of ordination. Still others wrote they didn't have any information about the ordination of women. It had never been mentioned in their church.

It was evident from the responses that many women were most appreciative to the researchers who would even ask a woman for her advice because in her country the opinion of a woman is neither sought nor taken into consideration. The belief that what she thought or said didn't matter was a much repeated theme. Women in some countries appealed to American women to assist them with their survival and need for the bare necessities because they believed help would never be available within their own country.

Women in the research study registered their strongest feel-

ings about the need for ordination for the local church senior pastor, and for presidents and evangelists at every level. They also feel that ordination is essential for elders and associate pastors at the local church, for vice presidents and ministerial secretaries at all levels and chaplains in medical institutions.

When asked about the appropriateness of a woman serving as a local church elder, 74 percent of the women reporting agreed that it is appropriate. In addition, a clear majority, again 74 percent, feel that ordaining women as associate or assistant pastors is appropriate. While 87 percent of the women felt that the senior pastor should be ordained, slightly less than half, or 49 percent, feel that it is appropriate for women to serve in that position. It should be noted that only slightly more than one-fourth (27 percent) of the women responding registered disagreement regarding the appropriateness of women serving as senior pastors. “This survey does not support the contention that women in leadership oppose women serving in pastoral roles.”¹⁰

Women in this study stressed that individual ability and professional qualifications are far more important factors than is gender. Qualities most often mentioned in the study that women bring to leadership are: administrative and management skills, compassion and emotional support, enthusiasm, industry and dependability, dedication and commitment to God and mission, and warmth, sensitivity, and perceptiveness. “Writes a woman from a world division: ‘Women bring sensitive leadership where human relationships are of prime importance.’ Another from NAD comments: ‘The greatest strength which I believe women bring to leadership in the church is a relational orientation that is as key to the church's mission as a cognitive orientation. Of course, some of both is bound up in all human beings, but women's gifts in the relational realm can go far to keep balance between “You are My disciples if you follow My teachings” and “You are My disciples if you know how to be intimate with Me and love one another.”’”¹¹ Perhaps putting the capstone on the respondents remarks was this thoughtful comment from a woman in one of the world divisions: “Women and men look at things differently. Leadership of the church will be predominantly from a male point of view as long as

nearly all males lead it. Human life is male and female. Leadership will be more healthy, more human, more whole when men and women share the task and provide leadership that is truly balanced and caring for ALL church members.”¹²

As I studied the responses, I felt a strong sense of commitment by women to their local church and to the larger, corporate church, the entire denomination. There were many indications that women wanted to do all they possibly could to help in the ministry of telling others of Jesus' soon coming. I became aware of many different ways of looking at the question of whether or not it was “right” to ordain women as church elders or pastors, or to allow them to be leaders of any kind within the Seventh-day Adventist Church structure. I felt sad that the study of the terms ordain, ordination, or the laying on of hands was not studied in the larger context, thus leaving ordination a gender-based debate. I therefore concluded that personally, I am not for female-ordination or male-ordination.

I still need answers to the larger questions. Are the spiritual gifts given at the time of one's baptism gender specific? Why is there an absence of an ordination process in the New Testament commissioning of the 12 and the 70 disciples? Are only men sent as His messengers or representatives and thus the only ones ordained? Or is ordination as we know it today a tradition we've followed but have studied little? Why has Gerald T. du Preez, an M.Div. student at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University who recently completed his thesis on the subject of ordination, concluded from his research that much of our thinking and feeling about the ordained priesthood comes more from tradition than from the Bible? Du Preez's account of the development of the “appointment service,” the use of “laying on of hands,” and the necessity for “credentialing” in the early Adventist church organization leads to further questions.¹³ By what or whose authority is one appointed to lead in our church today—male or female?

The authors of this book invite the reader to share in 10 biblically based principles of gender equality and to consider important questions such as those mentioned above. The authors also encourage readers of this text to look at the differing views of

issues pertaining to ordination. This scholarly approach will give the reader a basis for making an informed decision on an issue that has no bearing on one's salvation nor is clearly a case of “right” or “wrong.”

As then president of the North American Division, Charles Bradford, stated in 1989 at an address to members of the North American Division Role of Women Commission,

By this time it should be patently clear that this vital issue (and it must be a vital issue for us to have spent so much time and energy on it) will not be settled by the exegesis of limited and selected scriptural passages, or inferences drawn from a few of the biblical narratives (the anecdotal approach). Further, the testimony of and from silence is not overwhelmingly convincing, even in the minds of those who use it (i.e., Jesus did not ordain women, there is no text that is explicit on the matter, either positive or negative).¹⁴

If we can't settle the debate about female ordination by theological consensus, maybe it's time to extend the freedom to ordain women as each division should see its way clear to proceed. Or there is still time for critical evaluation of our current practices—time to restudy “ordination” as a rite in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination.

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1. See Adventist Review Seminar: "Women in Early Adventism," February 4, 1988.
2. Neal C. Wilson, Adventist Review, May 12, 1988, p. 6.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. North American Division Office of Human Relations, "Women in Leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," p. 4.
7. See Carole L. Kilcher and Gan-Theow Ng, "Women as Local Elders," Adventist Review, Feb. 23, 1989. Full statistical information from the "Survey on the Status of Women Elders in the North American Division" can be obtained by writing to the Institute of Church Ministry, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI, USA 49104.
8. For a complete copy of the study, contact the General Conference Women's Ministries Advisory, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD, USA 20904
9. Karen Flowers, "The Role of Women in the Church: An International Survey of Seventh-day Adventist Women," Adventist Review, September 28, 1989, p. 16.
10. Ibid., p. 18.
11. Ibid., p. 19.
12. Ibid.
13. See Gerald T. du Preez, M.Div. thesis, Andrews University, July 1994 (unpublished).
14. See Charles E. Bradford's speech to the members of the North American Division Role of Women Commission, "Women in Pastoral Ministries and Ordination," 1989 (unpublished).