

CHAPTER 2

**Moving Away
From the Table:**
*A Survey of Historical Factors
Affecting Women Leaders¹*

by Kit Watts

Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly to help forward this grand work- Ellen G. White, Review and Herald, July 9, 1895.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century in the United States women held approximately the same legal status as children and slaves. Married women generally could not own property independent of their husbands-If they were employed, their wages could be appropriated by their husbands. Legal say about their children resided entirely in the father's hands.²

Women were not admitted to colleges or universities.³ They were not allowed to enter professions. They could not vote or hold

an office. And women were not permitted to speak in public.⁴

Whenever these customs and laws were tested by proposals to change or enlarge women's role in the home, church, or society, emotional debate was likely to ensue.

Given the constraints on nineteenth century women in general, what were the attitudes in the early Adventist Church toward women? How does this compare with what was happening to women in other Christian groups?

Was Ellen Harmon White an exception in our ranks, or did a significant number of Adventist women serve as elected leaders and public figures? What trends emerged during the past 150 years? This chapter will briefly examine these questions and give evidence of the waxing and waning of Adventist women in leadership and ministerial positions.

Separate and Unequal

The reasons offered in the early 1800s for the low social status of women were not new, harking back to Roman and Greek times.⁵ Women were thought of as physically weak, intellectually feeble, and emotionally unstable. Therefore, they were assigned a separate sphere from men in human affairs. The moral worth of women has been debated through the centuries. Aristotle theorized that females were "misbegotten" males. They are "weaker and colder in nature," he said, "and we must look upon the female character as being a sort of natural deficiency."⁶

Churchman Thomas Aquinas (1227-1274) thought Aristotle went rather far. He reasoned that anything "misbegotten" would not have been made at Creation. Still, the only work which he could imagine that woman could help man with was procreation. In everything else, a "man can be more efficiently helped by another man," he said.⁷ Such views persisted in the nineteenth century. In 1840 a writer for Godey's Lady's Book, one of the earliest magazines for females in the U.S., defined women as "the connecting link... between man and the inferior animals, possessing a central rank between the mysterious instinct of the latter and the unattainable energies of the former."⁸

Gospel Soil

Christian teachings were often used to confine women. Yet, the seeds of change that began to modify the role of women in society sprang not from secular sources but from gospel soil.

Hints of this arose in the 1740s as the first Great Awakening swept England and the American colonies. Religion propelled women out of the shadows. "The conversion experience itself, for example, became a *public ritual* in which women were encouraged to join."

John Wesley, founder of Methodism in England, took another step by giving women *public* responsibilities, at first in small groups of other women. Next, he "welcomed their public speaking as it took the forms of prayer, personal testimony, exhortation, and exposition on religious literature."⁹

While mainline churches such as Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians lagged behind in expanding women's roles, the new evangelical groups quickly gave women voice.¹⁰

In England, George Fox argued from Scripture that women's equality and their speaking in public could be justified. Emboldened by this vision, women preachers crossed the Atlantic and endured enormous hardship—even torture and death—to share Quaker ideals in the colonies.¹¹

If such ideas blossomed in the first Awakening, what occurred in the Second Great Awakening (1795-1835)? Once again the convicting power of the gospel spurred many women out of traditional roles.¹²

Among the earliest reforms in which American women participated publicly was the antislavery movement. Awakened and energized by Christian principles, women soon began to spearhead other social reforms.

They rallied tens of thousands to join the Women's Christian Temperance Union. They worked tirelessly to improve conditions in mental asylums, prisons, hospitals, and schools. Through diligence and self-sacrifice they organized and funded great missionary societies that reached India, Africa, China, and the islands of the sea.

Ellen's World

In 1827 Ellen Harmon was born into a Methodist home in Maine. With her parents and siblings she was seized by hope and excitement as William Miller preached that Christ would come in 1843 or 1844. Although the Harmon family was disfellowshipped by their local congregation for their fervent Adventist belief, it seems likely that they retained many Methodist views and worship practices.

The occasion of Harmon's first vision should be noted here. After the Great Disappointment, she met in a small group to study and pray with *other young women*—a setting considered appropriate for evangelical women of the day.

It was these young women, along with the Harmon family and others, who encouraged Ellen to accept what she considered a startling and overwhelming call—the call to speak publicly and to mixed audiences, about her unusual personal religious experience. Some of her reluctance to do this stemmed from her youth, shyness, and poor health.

But for a woman to pray or speak publicly to both men and women was a daring thing in those days, even in religious circles.

In 1889 Ellen recalled that her own brother had begged her not to go public. "I beg of you do not disgrace the family. I will do anything for you if you will not go out as a preacher," he wrote to her.

Ellen replied, "Can it disgrace the family for me to preach Christ and him crucified. If you would give me all the gold your house could hold, I would not cease giving my testimony for God."¹³

When revivalist Charles Finney began to allow women to assume these public roles in 1827, fellow revivalists accused him of supporting a cause that would split churches.¹⁴

Phoebe Palmer, a Methodist preacher, was frequently challenged about the appropriateness of her public work. In 1859 she published a 429-page book in defense of women who spoke in church, launching her biblical arguments from Joel 2:28.¹⁵

Early Adventist Views

Joel 2 was familiar ground for early Seventh-day Adventists for similar reasons. To deflect criticism about the public and prophetic ministry of a *specific* woman (Ellen Harmon White, who had married James in 1846), they sometimes addressed the role of women in *general*.

As early as July 30, 1861, Uriah Smith, editor of the *Review*, reprinted an article from the *Portadown News*, with these words of approval: "We consider the following a triumphant vindication of the right of the sisters to take part in the public worship of God. The writer applies the prophecy of Joel—'Your daughters shall prophesy,' etc.—to female preaching; but while it must embrace public speaking of some kind, this we think is but half of its meaning."

In the August 18, 1868, *Review*, M. H. Howard spoke of "that conservatism which so readily takes fright at the prominence accorded to a woman."

The topic of women's public role in the Adventist Church resurfaced many times. In 1879, J. N. Andrews and James White wrote articles supporting it, as did G. C. Tenney in a *Review* editorial published first in 1892 and reprinted in 1894.¹⁶

An Advocate for Women

Ellen White became a model and spokesperson for her Adventist women contemporaries. She encouraged women to make full use of their talents in both traditional and nontraditional (public) roles. She also asked men to support them. The following three statements illustrate her growing conviction that women should engage in public ministry.

In 1878: "Sisters, God calls you to work in the harvest field and help gather in the sheaves."¹⁷

In 1886: "It was Mary who first preached a risen Jesus; and the refining, softening influence of Christian women is needed in the great work of preaching the truth now."¹⁸

In 1898: "There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry. In many respects they would do more good than the ministers who neglect to visit the flock of God."¹⁹

Ellen White ever upheld the importance of a mother's role in rearing children. Like Christians around her in the nineteenth century, she saw the home as a high-priority mission.²⁰

My own research, however, leads me to conclude that the longer Ellen White lived, the more emphatic she became about women's place in public ministry.²¹

She was also an outspoken advocate for fair wages and policies affecting women. In 1898, for example, she stated:

*If a woman is appointed by the Lord to do a certain work, her work is to be estimated according to its value . . . It may be thought to allow persons to give talent and earnest labor to the work of God, while they draw nothing from the treasury ... God will not put His sanction on any such plan.*²²

Women Decision-Makers

What impact did White's advocacy have upon women and the church? One measure may be the number of women whom the church employed in key leadership roles.

Bertha Dasher has tabulated the number of women leaders listed in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* for various years (See graphs).

This study shows that scores of women were once elected to key decision-making roles where today there are almost none. In 1905, for example, women held 20 out of 60 conference treasurer positions.

The number of women heading conference departments was even more remarkable. In 1915 approximately two-thirds of the 60 educational department leaders and more than 50 of the 60 Sabbath School department leaders were women.

As the graphs show, women's influence as decision-makers in the Seventh-day Adventist Church peaked between 1900 and 1915

Some of these women held high offices very early in our church history. Three were elected as General Conference treasurer before the turn of the century: Adelia Patten Van Horn (1871-

1873), Fredricka House Sisley (1875-1876), and Minerva Jane Loughborough Chapman (1877-1883).

Fewer gained prominence after Ellen White's death in 1915. One was Flora Plummer whose career began during White's lifetime when she was elected secretary of the Iowa Conference in 1897. Plummer is also the first woman known to have been an *acting conference president* (when Clarence Santee was called to California in 1900).²³

Plummer's most remembered contribution came during the 23 years she led the General Conference Sabbath School department (1913-1936). No General Conference Sabbath School leader since has exceeded her record.

Women Evangelists and Preachers

Another measure of the impact of White's advocacy for women may be shown by the number of Adventist women who have carried *ministerial licenses*.

Using lists found in old *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks* (which were first published in 1883), Josephine Benton discovered at least 53 women who were licensed as ministers between 1884 and 1975. Most worked in the United States, but some were licensed in Finland, New Zealand, China, and South Africa.

Twenty-eight of these women were granted these licenses in the 31-year period between 1884 and 1915. From that point on the numbers decrease steadily. In the 60-year period between 1915 and 1975, only 25 women are named in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* as carrying this credential. (The cut-off in the late 1970s was made when the question of women's ordination arose. The church then halted its 100-year practice of issuing ministerial licenses to females.)

Actually, *more* than 53 women have carried a ministerial license in Adventist history; the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, like any record, has inaccuracies.

Sarah A. Hallock Lindsey's record reflects one of these inaccuracies. As a pioneer evangelist who worked among churches

in New York during a period marked by apostasy and disarray, she was licensed in 1872.²⁴ However, her name does not appear in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* until 23 years later, in 1895.²⁵

Records can also be misplaced or overlooked. Helen Stanton Williams (Mrs. E. R. Williams) attended Battle Creek College, became a Bible instructor, a popular camp meeting speaker, and an effective evangelist. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, she was first licensed in 1897. In 1906 she and her husband became pastors in Chicago, each leading separate churches, and later were missionaries in South Africa.

But, late in life, Williams was grieved to be accused of lying about having once held a minister's license. A church leader assumed her dishonesty when he failed to locate the record.²⁶

Bert Haloviak has subsequently discovered a *dozen* women who were issued ministerial licenses by six conferences *before* 1884. The names of at least two of them, Helen Morse and Ida Ballenger, do not appear in the yearbooks at all.²⁷ Thus, the total number of Adventist women who have carried ministerial license is definitely greater than 53.

The Importance of Ministerial Licenses

How important were ministerial licenses to early Adventists?
Did women and men receive them on the same basis?

Licenses were taken very seriously in the nineteenth century. For example, Haloviak points out that the Michigan Conference adopted a resolution in 1881 asking churches *not* to "encourage individuals to preach who have not been licensed..,"²⁸ For a time, licentiates were tested—each year.

Women "followed the same path to the ministry as that followed by men."²⁹ They were paid by local conferences or the General Conference from tithe funds. They took the same training that men did and passed the same tests.

Although the emphasis of Adventist ministry did change over time, *women* were as effective as men in all of these roles—as evangelists, resident ministers, and local pastors.³⁰

Why the Decline?

Several factors contributed to the dramatic decline both of Adventist women who were decision-making leaders and licensed ministers.

In 1923, for example, church leaders enacted new policies at Annual Council, policies intended to ensure that departmental leaders would be soul winners.

For example, they recommended that "in the future home missionary and missionary volunteer secretaries³¹ be selected who have had successful experience in evangelistic work, *preferably ordained ministers*." Women had held many departmental positions up until then. Because women were not ordained these new policies became a key factor in bringing about their demise as church administrators.³²

Socioeconomic trends in the United States made an impact on the church.³³ During the Great Depression that began in 1929, Adventist leaders enacted other policies designed to save the church from financial ruin. Some of these impacted more negatively upon women than men, including wage cuts, mergers of conferences, and term limits for conference positions.³⁴

As budgets constricted, ordained ministers were often the last to lose jobs. Lacking this credential, women were vulnerable.

There were other issues. The number of professionally trained male ministers increased. And, as men returned to the United States at the close of World War II, society gave renewed emphasis to home and motherhood.³⁵

Ellen White's death in 1915 must not be underestimated as a factor in women's declining visibility in the church. When an advocate's voice becomes silent, there is less incentive to maintain inclusive policies, especially if leaders have had doubts about them to begin with.

Some had these doubts. If all had agreed with White's view, she would have had no occasion to write the pointed counsel on fair pay noted earlier.

More Women, Lesser Credentials

Another element has affected the decline in the number of women who were issued ministerial licenses since 1915: the subjective judgment of church administrators.

Leaders have not always been willing, or have not always received permission, to measure women's ministry by the same criteria used to measure men's.

In all likelihood, the actual number of Adventist women *doing* evangelistic and ministerial work has *increased* since 1915. But the number of administrators who have issued appropriate credentials recognizing the content and quality of these women's work has *decreased*.

Case Study

The history of credentialing women in Finland illustrates a trend to give ministerial licenses only to men. The first native Finnish ministerial worker in Finland was Alma Bjugg. A former captain in the Salvation Army, she was equipped to be a leader and was so recognized.³⁶

The *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* shows Bjugg (alternatively spelled "Bjdigg") as carrying a minister's license in both 1904 and 1905. Bjugg would have been 40; she continued in ministry. Why wasn't the license renewed? Did the nature of her work actually change or did union or division leaders view it differently? (By 1909 she was receiving a Bible instructor's license.)

In fact, as time passed throughout the Adventist Church, ministerial licenses came to be granted not on the basis of work but of gender.

The statistics for 1949 in Finland are one illustration of this trend. Records for that year list 12 ordained ministers. It also lists 12 licensed ministers—all men, and 36 licensed missionaries of whom 25 were women. Among these 25 women, 11 were institutional workers. Of the other 14, nine were *considered* by people who knew them to be holding "ministerial positions."³⁷

This estimation is amply backed up by articles describing the women evangelists' crusades in the *Northern Light*, an Adventist newsletter for Europe.³⁸ In other words, in 1949 at least nine women were not issued credentials that represented the true ministerial nature of their work.

Since the turn of the century between 20 and 40 women in Finland are *considered* to have done ministerial work.³⁹ Yet Alma Bjugg is the only one known to have carried a minister's license.

Given that this dichotomy had existed for several decades, the Finnish Union surprised both the Northern European Division and the General Conference by asking to rectify the situation in 1968. What they asked for, however, was not ministerial licenses for women.

Finland wanted to ordain women.⁴⁰ W. Duncan Eva, president of the Northern European Division, conveyed Finland's question and sought counsel from W. R. Beach, General Conference secretary.⁴¹ Beach replied that Adventists had not ordained women in the past. He suggested that GC and division officers should "look at the problem" during the 1968 Biennial Council.⁴²

These two letters began a 27-year discussion that is still under way.⁴³ At this writing, women's ordination is unresolved.

In Conclusion

By 1915 scores of Adventist women held decision-making posts. Because the church was relatively small at the time (fewer than 137,000 members worldwide), women made up a noticeable proportion of the church's leaders.

But their numbers declined dramatically. By the time World War II ended, Adventist women lost all the ground they had gained in the previous 100 years. They completely vanished from conference leadership. Now, 50 years later, it has become more and more difficult to recall women's former prominence and effectiveness.

In a similar trend, the number of women holding ministerial licenses has also dwindled. During the late 1970s the church halted its 100-year practice of granting ministerial licenses to women.

Despite these tremendous setbacks, there are Adventist women

who have kept the faith. Stories of their courage and accomplishments persist. They preach, evangelize, and minister throughout the world although their work is not appropriately evaluated or recognized.

Today, many Seventh-day Adventists have forgotten—or never had the chance to learn—about the church's rich and innovative history when Adventist women were welcomed as more equal partners in the church's life, decision-making posts, and gospel mission.

Kit Watts is an assistant editor of the Adventist Review. A prolific writer of articles and poetry, she lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

1. This chapter was first published in *Ministry*, April 1995, and is reprinted here with permission.
2. Loma Tobler, "A More Faithful Witness." Unpublished paper presented at the West Coast Religion Teachers' Conference, May 2-4, 1985, pp. 2-6.
3. When schools for women were established later in the 1800s, their curricula focused on domestic and social skills rather more than academic skills.
4. See, for example, Sheila Ruth, *Issues in Feminism, A First Course in Women's Studies*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), under the section, "Women Before the Law: Some Relevant Principles," pp. 322-326
5. *Ibid.*
6. Cited in Ruth, p. 98, from *De Generations Animalium*, IV, 6, 775a 15.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
8. *Godey's Lady's Book*. 20 (1840), p. 273. Cited in Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books/Alfred A Knopf 1977), p. 67.
9. Barbara J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 84. Emphasis supplied.
10. Barbara Brown Zikmund, "The Feminine Thrust of Sectarian Christianity," in *Women of Spirit*, edited by Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), pp. 206-209.
11. MacHaffie, pp. 90, 91.
12. Dorothy C. Bass, "'Their Prodigious Influence': Women, Religion and Reform in Antebellum America," in Ruether and McLaughlin, *Women of Spirit*, p. 281.
13. *Signs of the Times*, June 24, 1889. From a sermon Ellen White preached in Washington, D. C., on January 26, 1889, entitled "Looking for That Blessed Hope."

14. Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton, and Donald W. Dayton, "Women in the Holiness Movement: Feminism in the Evangelical Tradition," in Ruether and McLaughlin, *Women of Spirit*, p. 230.
15. Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI- Francis Asbury Press, 1986), pp. 187-193.
16. J. N. Andrews, "May Women Speak in Meeting?" *Review and Herald* January 2, 1879; James White, "Women in the Church," *Review and Herald* May 29, 1879; G. C. Tenney, "Women's Relation to the Cause of Christ " ' *Review and Herald*. May 24, 1892. (Reprinted on June 5 1894)
17. *Review and Herald*, December 19, 1878. (Cited in *Evangelism*, pp. 477 478)
18. *Signs of the Times*, September 16, 1886. (Cited in *Welfare Ministry* p 146) Emphasis supplied.
19. Manuscript 43a, 1898. (Cited in *Evangelism*, p. 472.)
20. See Michael Pearson, "Early Adventist Women: In the Shadow of the Prophetess," *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas* (Cambridge, England- Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 134-151
21. Kit Watts, "The Role of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church " pp 21-46. This unpublished manuscript was completed in February 1972 and was among the papers studied by the Camp Mohaven Council on the Role of Women in September 1973.
22. *Evangelism*, p. 492.
23. The only other Adventist woman presently known to have been an acting conference president since 1900 is Phyllis Mosley Ware. *Adventist Woman* Woman Becomes Acting President as Conference Weathers Crisis," by Wanda Grimes Davis, June/July 1994, p. 1.
24. Brian Strayer in *Adventist Heritage* vol. 11, no. 2, Fall 1986 pp 18-24
25. Josephine Benton, *Called by God* (Smithsburg, MD: Blackberry Hill Publishers, 1990), Appendix B, p. 229.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.
27. Ben Haloviak, "Longing for the Pastorate: Ministry in the Nineteenth Century," p. 9. Unpublished manuscript.
28. Haloviak, p. 8. (Cited from "Actions of Michigan Conference," *Review and Herald*, October 11, 1881.)
29. Haloviak, p. 7.
30. Haloviak, pp. 34, 35.
31. At that time the term *secretary* was used to designate a department head Today, department heads are called *directors*.
32. Actions of the Autumn Council, October 9-17, 1923, p. 21 See also- Bert Haloviak, "Adventism's Lost Generations: The Decline of Leadership Positions for SDA Women," unpublished paper. May 12, 1990
33. See Pearson, pp. 152-155.

34. Patrick L. Alien, "Effects of the Depression on the Role of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," unpublished honors paper presented at Andrews University in May, 1985. (Cited in "Women in SDA Leadership Lost Ground During Depression," *Adventist Woman*, July/August 1985, p. 4).
35. See Bertha Dasher, "Women's Leadership, 1915-1970: The Waning Years," in *A Woman's Place: Seventh-day Adventist Women in Church and Society*, edited by Rosa Taylor Banks (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1992 P. 4).
36. Letter to the author from Anna-Liisa Halonen, treasurer, Finland Union Conference, November 18, 1994.
37. Ibid.
38. The success of women evangelists in the 1950s as reported in the *Northern Light*, includes these examples: "Itinerating in Sweden and Finland," by E. L. Minchin, March 1951, p. 10; photo of six "lady evangelists" published in October 1951, p. 5; "Women Evangelists in Finland," by Hanna Vaananen (identified as one of them), November 1952, p. 7; "Jesus Christ, the Same Today" by Ida Matilainen, identified as a "self-supporting lay evangelist in Finland," January 1954, p. 8; "An Evening With the Northern European Division [June 1, 1954]," July/August 1954, p. 5 (another report by C. Gidlund on women evangelists); "Northern European Division" by A. F. Tarr, July/August 1954, p. 11; "Greetings From Finland" by Onni Peltonen, president, April 1957, p. 7. etc.
39. Letter from Anna-Liisa Halonen, cited above.
40. This is not the first time women's ordination was discussed by Adventists. The first on record occurred in 1881 when the General Conference passed this resolution: "Resolved: That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry" (*Review and Herald*, December 20, 1881). No known action resulted from this resolution.
41. W. Duncan Eva to W. R. Beach, March 28, 1968, General Conference Archives.
42. W. R. Beach to W. Duncan Eva, April 15, 1968, General Conference Archives.
43. Haloviak sees Eva's letter about Finnish women evangelists as a factor that eventually resulted in calling the Council on the Role of Women in the Church that met in September 1973, Camp Mohaven, Ohio. See "The Long Road to Mohaven," *Adventist Woman*, September/October 1993, p. 1.