

Adventism's Lost Generations:
The Decline of Leadership Positions
for SDA Women

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May 12, 1990

Introduction:

I recently took a week's vacation from my work at the GC and, as all GC workers do during their vacations, I read parts of the Church Manual.

I was interested in what the most recent Manual says on p 64:

"Deaconesses were included in the official staff of the early Christian churches (Rom 16:1,2)...There is no record, however, that these women were ordained; hence the practice of ordaining deaconesses is not followed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church."

That statement has been in the Manual since the earliest one in the 1930s.

What it reveals, however, is that its original framers did not know much about the history of Adventism in the 1890s. In 1895 Ellen White wrote an article in the Review which stated in part:

"Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands...Let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work." [RH, July 9, 1895]

In the aftermath of that statement, made while Ellen White was in Australia, a number of women were ordained in Australia and New Zealand.

Ellen White and the 19th century SDA church clearly were not concerned about the question of a lack of scriptural authority for resolving that matter of church policy.

I point out that situation to illustrate how little we knew about 19th century SDA ministry as we made most of our decisions

about women in ministry in the 1970s.

Not until the mid-1970s was the Ellen White ordination statement re-discovered.

We also didn't know that over 20 SDA women served as licensed ministers in the 19th century SDA church. The SDAs of the 19th century didn't seem overwrought over a lack of scriptural authority to license women as ministers.

Most didn't even know [myself included] that the church almost ordained women as full-fledged ministers as early as 1881.

What I Didn't Know About the 1920s:

That brings me to another issue. A few months ago I was asked by one of the committees at the GC to do research that would explain the decline of women in leadership positions within the church.

Here's how the assignment reads:

"Our office deals with equal employment opportunity for women and other special groups; therefore, we must continually be searching for strategies that we can recommend to leadership to improve in this area. Our discussion will not include the ordination issue. We are more concerned about finding ways to assure the hiring of qualified women in areas that are acceptable to the church."

As I began the research, I quickly saw that a major decline in women in leadership positions occurred in the 1920s. In the 1890s approximately 15% of the administrative positions within the North American conferences were held by SDA women. By the mid 1920s, women held only half that number (7.8% by 1928). By the mid-1930s, women held only 4.5% of the administrative positions.

As is usually the case in my research, I concluded that the main reason was precisely the reason that the committee didn't want to discuss: ordination.

In summary: SDA women lost their administrative positions because they were ineligible for ordination. Here's the scenario:

Earliest Evangelistic Focus:

The SDA church, in its post-shut-door view of ministry, focused entirely upon the newly-discovered third angel's message and effectively evangelized midwestern America during the 1850s and 1860s.

The duty of the minister was "to preach the word, to teach faithfully the plain declarations of the word of God" and then to move on.

If evangelists became "pastors" ;and settled down in the churches, they would emulate the fallen churches because "the church would look to [them] instead of the Lord."

The absence of a stationary pastorate, however, soon brought troubles to the church: churches were being disbanded, children were rejecting the religion of their parents, churches were plagued by disunity.

By the 1890s, Adventists had developed a "departmental" of team ministry concept within the church. Laymen and women assumed local responsibilities that included the offices of elder, deacon-deaconess, home missionary leader.

The very term "home missionary" indicated that "pastoral," nurturing concerns was indeed a "missionary" activity.

Home Missionaries:

When the church centered entirely upon its debating-evangelistic approach to ministry it developed a multitude of problems even as it expanded its membership.

Here's how Ellen White addressed the issue in 1879:

We are lacking in deeds of sympathy and benevolence, in sacred and social ministering to the needy, the oppressed, and the suffering. Women who can work are needed now, women who are not self-important, but meek and lowly of heart, who will work with the meekness of Christ wherever they can find work to do for the salvation of souls.

She wrote to Haskell, "there must be more visiting the churches and caring for those already raised up." She redefined ministry: "There are needed not only ministers, but those who can act as missionaries." Here is the concept of home missionaries. SDAs had become too wound up in debating.

Mrs White called for a force of workers "to go into the churches, large and small, to instruct the members how to labor for the upbuilding of the church, and also for unbelievers." The local church needed to be educated in such matters as "personal piety and home religion," understanding the ministry of Christ, how to give Bible readings and do missionary work. That worker-training force, according to Ellen White, should include both men and women and performed the functions we today assign the trained ministry.

Ellen White's perspective of a "ministry of compassion" resolved the pastoral-evangelistic dilemma of the 19th century and brought to the church a methodology for dealing with 20th century urban realities. Beginning in June of 1895, Ellen White wrote a series of articles that focused upon methodologies designed to evangelize the cities. One of the proposals made by Ellen White in her Review articles was that women involved in this evangelistic-pastoral methodology "should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands."

If this had occurred to any extent in the 1890s, more than likely women would not have lost their leadership positions in the 1920s.

Women, by the 1890s, had risen to conference leadership positions in those areas that most directly related to the work of the local church. Often women were the tract and missionary society secretaries, Sabbath school Association secretaries, health/temperance society officers.

The International Tract and Missionary Society was the effective missionary arm of the church. Those local societies became the fulcrum for the local and national work of the church. When societies began weekly missionary meetings, the spiritual tone of the church as well as its membership greatly increased.

Lines of work included: circulation of SDA literature, conducting of Bible readings, circulating petitions concerning religious liberty issues, foreign and domestic correspondence ministry, home visitation, pastoral encouragement of isolated believers and discouraged church members, searching for homes for the destitute and orphans, encouragement of tithe-paying and fundraising.

Within the city missions women were the successful canvassers and Bible readers. Indeed, William White, the son of Ellen, considered the women workers as "our leading workers in city missions" [HM Extra, Feb 1890]

During that Victorian it was, of course, inappropriate for men to work house to house in the cities during the daytime.

The tract society even published a paper, the Home Missionary: Designed to stimulate lay members to do those "missionary" deeds that it was possible to do in their own areas or afar through correspondence. "Practical missionary work, adapted to those who can give but a portion of their time to the work, and who cannot leave their homes, but must work in their own neighborhoods or through the mails....The large majority of our missionary workers are so situated that their work must be done at their homes. For this reason we feel as though it was very important that careful instruction should be given with

reference to methods of home work." [HM, Jan 1891]

Women served as editors of HM, as instructors of home missionary methods in SDA colleges [to ministers and workers], as secretaries of local state societies and as local church missionary leaders.

Now let's jump to the 1920s. Remember, we said that the latter part of the decade witnessed a dramatic decline in the role of women in church leadership positions.

The 1920s--A Conservative Reaction:

By the 1920s, the church had finally heeded the Ellen White counsel and entered the big cities, but a major issue arose. Many were uneasy about the big city churches and the local pastors that seemed to be "hovering" over them. Church administrators were fearful of this innovation. Not until the 1920s did SDAs begin to develop a local pastorate in any meaningful way. [A surprise to me as I worked through the documents of the 1920s.] The conservatives were fearful that we were losing our evangelistic fervor.

The Church Officers' Gazette, edited by GC corresponding secretary, Tyler Bowen, became the organ for the argument against establishment of local pastorates. All the Ellen White statements were carefully selected to endorse that position. [Misuse or selective use of EGW in 1920s] Bowen consistently argued against "pastorizing."

Another issue was the raising of funds for foreign mission work. Besides the 60c a week fund, there was Big Week, the week of sacrifice, missions extension and the annual Harvest Ingathering campaign. One way to avoid too much "pastoral" focus was to make the departmental leaders the missionary fundraisers.

Fundraising became so strongly identified with the home missionary department that Leroy Froom of the Ministerial Association wrote this in 1927: "The Home Missionary Department was originally founded to lead the laity into service, but it has so far been absorbed by the financial endeavors of the movement that it has become really an adjunct to the treasury. We must emphasize anew the call of God upon consecrated men and women to witness for Him."

When financial considerations assumed vital importance, that fact that the official clergy could obtain the railroad discounts was not lost to administrators.

Resolving the Problem--The Ordination Question:

Administrators sought to resolve the issues in 1923. Four days before the Autumn Council were spent by the GCC, and union

and NAD conference presidents.

John K Jones, New York Conference president, hit the issue that was most sensitive. In alluding to the fears of many as local church pastorates were springing up, Jones wanted to "impress upon every department both by voice and pen, that our departments have only one excuse for existing, namely, that of being soul winning agencies." He stressed that "only men who have as their objective the saving of souls" should be chosen as leaders.

The GC officers and union and conference presidents and later the Autumn Council approved the following:

"Departmental Work--Unity and Cooperation": We Recommend....3. That in the future the selection of educational secretaries or superintendents be made from those who have had practical experience in teaching and in soul-winning work, the desirability of normal training being also recognized. [Women had previously been prominent in those positions, since women had predominately been the school teachers.]

"4. That in the future home missionary and missionary volunteer secretaries be selected who have had successful experience in evangelistic work, preferably ordained ministers."

Women were thus inadvertently "recommended" to be eliminated from the three departments they had been most identified with. Thus began the demise of women in church administrative positions.

At the same time, a document entitled "The Work of the Minister" was approved. One of its provisions "Recommended that every minister, whether a resident pastor or a departmental secretary, make it his objective to engage in aggressive effort to win new members to the faith."

Since ordination effectively became a requirement for departmental leadership, such leaders were now explicitly defined as ministers.

At the local church level, women were still eligible to hold the position of church missionary secretary, even though it became an ordained position at the conference and GC level.

Economics impacted further on the position of women at the 1932 Autumn Council: "Because of the exigencies of the present economic conditions...We recommend, That our employing organizations spread their power of employment as far as possible among our members, and that the list of employees be so adjusted that both husband and wife shall not be remuneratively employed. Where, to maintain the efficiency of the work, or for special reasons, it seems necessary to vary from this rule by the

employment of a man and his wife, the wife be paid on the basis of a greatly reduced wage."

Conclusion:

In my view, the greatest hope for the SDA church of the future concerning the issue of women in ministry lies in the counsels of Ellen White. As a young girl, before ever receiving a vision, Ellen White felt her calling. She describes her experience:

When in my youth God opened the Scriptures to my mind, giving me light upon the truths of his word, I went forth to proclaim to others the precious news of salvation. My brother wrote to me, and said, "I beg of you do not disgrace the family. I will do anything for you if you will not go out as a preacher." "Disgrace the family!" I replied, "can it disgrace the family for me to preach Christ and him crucified! [One might ask today, can it disgrace the church for a women to preach Christ and him crucified? Mrs White continues:] If you would give me all the gold your house could hold, I would not cease giving my testimony for God....I will not keep silent, for when God imparts his light to me, he means that I shall diffuse it to others, according to my ability." [ST, Jan 26, 1889]

And she never seemed bound by fixed rules or definitions concerning ministry: "The scheme of salvation is not to be worked out under the laws and rules specified by men. There must be no fixed rules; our work is a progressive work, and there must be room left for methods to be improved upon." [RH, July 23, 1895]