

"A Power That Exceeds That of Men": Ellen G. White on Women in Ministry

Jerry Moon

Because Seventh-day Adventists have held from the earliest beginnings of their movement that the Bible and the Bible only is their rule of faith and practice,⁽²⁾ the bulk of the monograph of which this article forms a part, is rightly devoted to an examination of the scriptural evidence regarding God's purpose for women in ministry.

However, the Scripture also teaches that the Holy Spirit has placed in the church the gift of prophecy,⁽³⁾ not to add to the canon of Scripture, but to make authoritative application of the Scripture to specific situations in the ongoing, changing life of the church.⁽⁴⁾ Seventh-day Adventists believe this gift was manifested in the life and ministry of Ellen G. White, and that "her writings are a continuing and authoritative source of truth."⁽⁵⁾

Furthermore, the divine choice, as Adventists believe, of a woman as a prophetic messenger to the modern church, raises provocatively the question whether it was God's intention to limit the other gifts of Eph 4:11, particularly that of pastor-teacher, to persons of the male gender. Consequently, the question of Ellen White's personal belief, teaching, and practice regarding women in ministry cannot be ignored or omitted from a Seventh-day Adventist consideration of this issue.

The purpose of this article is to examine the writings and practices of Ellen G. White with specific reference to the following questions: (1) How did Ellen White use the term "ministry" with reference to women? (2) Did she characterize women's participation in ministry as essential, or merely optional? (3) What roles did she envision for ministering women? (4) What are the implications for the question of ordaining women to ministry?

Ellen White's Use of the Term "Ministry" with Reference to Women

Ellen White used the terms "minister" and "ministry" to encompass a broad spectrum of meaning. Most basic, she used the term ministry to designate the calling and work of every Christian. In one of her most widely circulated works, *Desire of Ages*, p. 822, she explains:

The Saviour's commission to the disciples included *all* the believers. It includes *all* believers in Christ to the end of time. It is a fatal mistake to suppose that the work of saving souls depends alone on the *ordained minister*. *All* to whom the heavenly inspiration has come are put in trust with the gospel. *All* who receive the life of Christ are *ordained* to work for the salvation of their fellow men. For this work the church was

established, and *all* who take upon themselves its sacred vows are thereby pledged to be co-workers with Christ.

"The Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come." Rev. 22:17. Everyone who hears is to repeat the invitation. Whatever one's calling in life, his first interest should be to win souls for Christ. He may not be able to speak to congregations, but he can work for individuals. To them he can communicate the instruction received from his Lord. *Ministry* does not consist alone in preaching. Those *minister* who relieve the sick and suffering, helping the needy, speaking words of comfort to the desponding and those of little faith. Nigh and afar off are souls weighed down by a sense of guilt. It is not hardship, toil, or poverty that degrades humanity. It is guilt, wrongdoing. This brings unrest and dissatisfaction. Christ would have His servants *minister* to sin-sick souls [emphasis supplied].

Note her assertion that "all" Christians "are ordained to work for the salvation of their fellow men." Then she associates the terms "minister" and "ministry" with any kind of Christian service "to sin-sick souls." Thus her basic definition of ministry is the calling of all Christians "to work for the salvation of their fellow men."⁽⁶⁾ Within this basic concept are two subdivisions, which I have arbitrarily labeled "category 2" and "category 3."

The second category of usage of the terms minister and ministry designates specific vocations that support and augment the "ministry of the word." Chief among these are "medical missionary work" and literature evangelism, the ministry of selling Christian literature house to house. Regarding the latter, Ellen White distinguished literature evangelism from "the ministry," but calls it "a part . . . of the ministry," and in "importance," "fully equal" to "the ministry."⁽⁷⁾

She describes "medical missionary work" in similar terms. The medical work is distinguished from "the ministry of the word," "the gospel ministry," yet it "must not be separated" from, but "connected with the third angel's message . . . and the ministry."⁽⁸⁾ She writes further that "medical missionaries who labor in evangelistic lines are doing work of as high an order as are their ministerial fellow laborers. . . . The faithful physician and the minister are engaged in the same work."⁽⁹⁾

Category three in Ellen White's usage of "ministry" employs phrases such as "gospel ministry," "ministry of the word," or "ordained minister," and refers to the officially recognized clergy of the church.⁽¹⁰⁾ While this three-part categorization may be an oversimplification of the range of Ellen White's usage of the terms "ministry" and "minister," nevertheless it is sufficient to give sharper focus to the study of women in ministry. It will be shown that Ellen White used the term "ministry" to designate the work of women not only in category one ("To all Christ has given the work of ministry"⁽¹¹⁾), and category two ("men and women . . . should be . . . working as medical missionary evangelists, helping those engaged in the gospel ministry"⁽¹²⁾), but in category three as well: "There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry."⁽¹³⁾

Perhaps her most emphatic statement about women "in the gospel ministry" comes from MS 43a, 1898, "The Laborer is Worthy of His Hire," and has been reprinted in several

sources.⁽¹⁴⁾ Here Ellen White asserts unequivocally, "There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry."⁽¹⁵⁾ Three paragraphs earlier she refers to the same group by a shorter expression, "women who labor in the gospel." She also speaks of women who do "work that is in the line of ministry," and who are "necessary to the work of ministry." The context of this statement is a question that "several" had asked Ellen White: "Should minister's wives adopt infant children?" To some of these she answered, "No; God would have you help your husband in his work." A few lines later she explains the reason for this "advice":

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. Husband and wife may unite in this work, and when it is possible, they should. The way is open for consecrated women. But the enemy would be pleased to have the women whom God could use to help hundreds, binding up their time and strength on one helpless little mortal, that requires constant care and attention.⁽¹⁶⁾

She quoted Isa 56:1-5, in which God promises the childless "a name better than [that] of sons and daughters," and then concluded, "This is the grand and noble work that the minister and his wife may qualify themselves to do as faithful shepherds and guardians of the flock."

Thus, for some women who have special "ability" to "help to give the message," the work of the ministry could be a higher priority than child rearing. She made a similar point elsewhere when she recognized that a woman in ministry may sometimes need to put "her housework in the hands of a faithful, prudent helper," and leave "her children in good care, while she engages in the work."⁽¹⁷⁾

Ellen White also shows a clear preference for team ministry. Twelve times in five pages⁽¹⁸⁾ she refers to husbands and wives working together, strongly implying that this is the ideal ministerial team. Nevertheless, she also refers to "young women" without reference to marital status being trained for this work, and widows of ministers continuing in this work,⁽¹⁹⁾ showing that while a husband-and-wife team has many advantages, it is not the only setting in which women are called to ministry.⁽²⁰⁾

In support of the essential role of women in ministry, she urged General Conference President A. G. Daniells to "study the Scriptures for further light on this point. Women were among Christ's devoted followers in the days of His ministry, and Paul makes mention of certain women who were 'helpers together' with him 'in the gospel.'"⁽²¹⁾ The "elect lady" of 2 John 1 she believed to be one of the unnamed women leaders of the New Testament church--"a helper in the gospel work, a woman of good repute and wide influence."⁽²²⁾

Elsewhere she reiterated, "Women helped our Saviour by uniting with Him in His work. And the great apostle Paul writes, . . . 'I entreat thee also, true yoke-fellow, help those women which labored with me in the gospel'" [Phil 4:3].⁽²³⁾ Following the citation from Phil 4:3, she paraphrased Paul's words about "women who labored in the gospel,"

appropriating the Pauline precedent in support of "modern women who should labor in the gospel ministry."⁽²⁴⁾

The Need, Legitimacy, and Divine Mandate for Women in Ministry

The foundational premise that undergirds all of Ellen White's counsels about women in ministry is that neither men nor women can do alone the quality of work that the two can do together. "When a great and decisive work is to be done, God chooses men and women to do this work, and it will feel the loss if the talents of both are not combined."⁽²⁵⁾ Thus she reiterated that the participation of women in the work of the gospel is not merely an option to be allowed in exceptional circumstances, but is an essential element for the highest success in preaching the gospel. "Women can be the instruments of righteousness, rendering holy service," she wrote in 1879. "It was Mary that first preached a risen Jesus. . . . If there were twenty women where now there is one, who would make this holy mission their cherished work, we should see many more converted to the truth. The refining, softening influence of Christian women is *needed* in the great work of preaching the truth."⁽²⁶⁾

She believed women to be indispensable in ministry, because they can minister in ways that men cannot. "The Lord has a work for women as well as for men. . . . They can do in families a work that men cannot do, a work that reaches the inner life. They can come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach. Their labor is *needed*."⁽²⁷⁾ Elsewhere she affirmed that

There is a great work for women to do in the cause of present truth. Through the exercise of womanly tact and a wise use of their knowledge of Bible truth, *they can remove difficulties that our brethren cannot meet*. We *need* women workers to labor in connection with their husbands, and should encourage those who wish to engage in this line of missionary effort [emphasis added].⁽²⁸⁾

To those who questioned the legitimacy of a woman preaching to congregations, Ellen White cited her own experience.

When in my youth God opened the Scriptures to my mind, giving me light upon the truths of his work, 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! If you would give me all the gold your house could hold, I would not cease giving my testimony for God. I have respect unto the recompense of the reward. 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."⁽²⁹⁾

Furthermore, Ellen White insisted that women who devote their full time to ministry should be paid just as male ministers are.

Injustice has sometimes been done to women who labor just as devotedly as their husbands, and who are recognized by God as being necessary to the work of the ministry. The method of paying men laborers, and not paying their wives who share their labors with them is a plan not according to the Lord's order, and if carried out in our conferences, is liable to discourage our sisters from qualifying themselves for the work they should engage in.⁽³⁰⁾

Ellen White could have argued that as it is expected of every layperson to spread the gospel without pay, women should not object to these conditions. To the contrary, however, she urged the necessity of fair pay for ministering women. Asking women to do full-time ministerial work without pay, she calls "exaction," "partiality," "selfishness," and "robbery." "When self-denial is required because of a dearth of means, do not let a few hard-working women do all the sacrificing. Let all share in making the sacrifice."⁽³¹⁾ She warned of the danger of discouraging women from devoting themselves to ministry as a vocation. She believed large numbers of women ("twenty . . . where now there is one") should be "preaching the truth,"⁽³²⁾ "qualifying themselves" for "the work they should engage in,"⁽³³⁾ and that to hinder them would be to hinder the work of God.

"Seventh-day Adventists are not in any way to belittle woman's work," she affirmed. "If a woman puts her housework in the hands of a faithful, prudent helper, and leaves her children in good care, while she engages in the work, the conference should have wisdom to understand the justice of her receiving wages."⁽³⁴⁾

Finally, Ellen White asserted the legitimacy of paying women ministers from the tithe, which she elsewhere maintained is to be sacredly reserved for the support of the gospel ministry.⁽³⁵⁾ "The tithe should go to those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women,"⁽³⁶⁾ she wrote.

Many of the pertinent quotations mention "wives" of ministers.⁽³⁷⁾ Other references, however, apply the same concept to women not specified as minister's wives, and to widowed women, showing that Ellen White saw some form of ministry as an appropriate career choice for women.

Some women are now teaching young women to work successfully as visitors and Bible readers.⁽³⁸⁾ Women who work in the cause of God should be given *wages proportionate to the time they give to the work*. . . . As the devoted minister and his wife engage in the work, they should be paid wages proportionate to the *wages of two distinct workers*, that they may have means to use as they shall see fit in the cause of God. The Lord has *put His spirit upon them both*. If the husband should die, and leave his wife, *she is fitted to continue her work in the cause of God, and receive wages* for the labor she performs [emphasis added].⁽³⁹⁾

Seven elements in Ellen White's call for women in ministry have been noted: (1) "There are women who should labor in the gospel minis-try;" (2) women's work is "essential," and without it the cause will "suffer great loss;"⁽⁴⁰⁾ (3) women in ministry should receive just wages; (4) these wages may appropriately come from the tithe; (5) the call to

ministry can in some cases take priority over housework and child care,⁽⁴¹⁾ (6) some women should make ministry a lifelong vocation in which they earn their livelihood; and (7) conferences should not "discourage" women from "qualifying themselves" for ministerial work.⁽⁴²⁾ All these factors in her appeal justify the conclusion that she considered the call to promote and encourage the participation of women in ministry, not merely as an option, but as a divine mandate, the neglect of which results in diminished ministerial efficiency, fewer converts, and "great loss" to the cause, compared with the fruitfulness of the combined gifts of men and women in ministry. Next we will consider what roles Ellen White envisioned for women in ministry.

Role Descriptions for Women in Ministry

The purpose of this section is to examine the evidence regarding the scope of Ellen White's call to women in ministry. What specific roles did she envision? What place did she see for women in relation to men in ministry?

The most frequently mentioned vocations in which Ellen White called women to minister are those of house-to-house ministry to families,⁽⁴³⁾ giving Bible studies,⁽⁴⁴⁾ in either evangelistic or pastoral contexts,⁽⁴⁵⁾ teaching in various capacities,⁽⁴⁶⁾ and "canvassing."⁽⁴⁷⁾ Also mentioned are medicine (specifically obstetrics and gynecology),⁽⁴⁸⁾ chaplaincy for medical and other institutions,⁽⁴⁹⁾ personal counseling with women,⁽⁵⁰⁾ and temperance leadership (particularly in connection with the Women's Christian Temperance Union).⁽⁵¹⁾

Supporting Roles in Team Ministry

Many of Ellen White's statements regarding women in ministry are set in the context of a team ministry in which women employ their gifts largely but not exclusively in teaching, visiting, and counseling private individuals and small groups, especially families. She specifically says that women will be more successful in this area of ministry than will men.

The Lord has a work for women, as well as for men. They may take their places in His work . . . and He will work through them. If they are imbued with a sense of their duty, and labor under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they will have just the self-possession required for this time. The Saviour will reflect upon these self-sacrificing women the light of His countenance, and will give them *a power that exceeds that of men*. They can do in families *a work that men cannot do*, a work that reaches the inner life. *They can come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach*. Their labor is needed [emphasis added].⁽⁵²⁾

These women are called "self-sacrificing" specifically in the sense that they most often carry supporting rather than leading responsibilities in their respective ministerial teams. Yet despite their relatively lesser public recognition (because they spend more of their time in private and small-group teaching, counseling, and visitation), it is precisely in this supporting role that they are promised "a power that exceeds that of men," to "do in

families a work that men cannot do," and "come close to the hearts of those whom men cannot reach."⁽⁵³⁾

Ellen White's references to women as teachers were not, however, limited to the private teaching of individuals, families, and small groups. She also mentioned Sabbath school teachers and superintendents, teachers of camp meeting Bible classes, and elementary school teachers, as well as those who teach from the pulpit.⁽⁵⁴⁾ During her ministry in Australia, she spoke approvingly of two Bible instructors, Sister R[obinson] and Sister W[ilson] who were "doing just as efficient work as the ministers." She reported that at "some meetings when the ministers are all called away, Sister W[ilson] takes the Bible and addresses the congregation."⁽⁵⁵⁾

Women as Teachers

One of the objections sometimes raised against Ellen White's own ministry was that women were not to "teach" men (1 Tim 2:12). This her colleagues refuted by arguing that this "general rule with regard to women as public teachers" did not constitute a rigid or universal prohibition.⁽⁵⁶⁾ J. N. Andrews argued that "there are some exceptions to this general rule to be drawn even from Paul's writings," as well as "from other Scriptures." Then he cited Paul's women co-workers (Phil 4:3); Phoebe's position as deaconess (Rom 16:1); Priscilla's association with Paul (Rom 16:3) and her participation in "instructing Apollos" (Acts 18:26); Tryphena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom 16:12); Philip's daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8-9); and others to prove that women were not absolutely excluded from teaching roles. He concluded that Rom 10:10, which requires public confession of the faith as integral to salvation, "must apply to women equally with men."⁽⁵⁷⁾

Ellen White seldom spoke in her own defense on this point. She generally allowed her male colleagues to formulate such responses. For example, note her account of a meeting in Arbuckle, California, at which S. N. Haskell was called on to explain this issue. "Before I commenced in talking," Ellen White recalled,

Elder Haskell had a bit of paper that was handed in[,] quoting certain texts prohibiting women speaking in public. He took the matter in a brief manner and very clearly expressed the meaning of the apostle's words. I understand that it was a Campbellite who wrote the objection and it had been well circulated before it reached the desk; but Elder Haskell made it plain before all the people.⁽⁵⁸⁾

While Ellen White did not often refer to the Pauline passages on women as teachers, she did cite the work of Aquila and Priscilla in teaching Apollos as an example of "a thorough scholar and brilliant orator" being taught by two laypersons, one of whom was a woman.

The educated orator received instruction from *them* with grateful surprise and joy. Through *their* teachings he obtained a clearer knowledge of the Scriptures. . . . Thus a

thorough scholar and brilliant orator learned the way of the Lord more perfectly from the teachings of a Christian man *and woman* whose humble employment was that of tent making [emphasis added].⁽⁵⁹⁾

Thus she implicitly rejected the traditional interpretation of 1 Tim 2:12. On the contrary, she urged A. G. Daniells, then General Conference president, to employ in public evangelism "many men and women who have ability to preach and teach the Word." She continued,

Select women who will act an earnest part. The Lord will use intelligent women in the work of teaching. And let none feel that these women, who understand the Word and who have ability to teach, should not receive remuneration for their labors. They should be paid as verily as are their husbands. There is a great work for women to do in the cause of present truth. Through the exercise of womanly tact and a wise use of their knowledge of Bible truth, they can remove difficulties that our brethren cannot meet. We need women workers to labor in connection with their husbands, and should encourage those who wish to engage in this line of missionary work.⁽⁶⁰⁾

While Ellen White specifically commended women who served in supporting ministerial roles, she also encouraged women with greater gifts for public leadership to fully exercise those gifts. When Mrs. S.M.I. Henry, national evangelist for the Women's Christian Temperance Union, became a Seventh-day Adventist,⁽⁶¹⁾ Ellen White encouraged her to continue her public ministry.

We believe fully in church organization, but in *nothing that is to prescribe the precise way in which we must work; for all minds are not reached by the same methods. . . . Each person has his own lamp to keep burning. . . . You have many ways opened before you. Address the crowd whenever you can; hold every jot of influence you can by any association that can be made the means of introducing the leaven to the meal* [emphasis added].⁽⁶²⁾

Notice the emphasis on the freedom and responsibility of each individual under God to find the ministry in which her gifts can be most fruitful, and Ellen White's belief that no one should "prescribe the precise way in which" another Christian "must work." It should also be noted, however, that her counsel to S.M.I. Henry does not primarily concern participation in the organized church, but in a parachurch women's organization.

"Women Who Should Be Engaged in the Ministry"

Three further statements deserve more detailed examination. They refer respectively to ministry, to pastoring, and to women as administrative leaders in the local church. The first of these, published in 1903, is ambiguous regarding the specific roles of women in ministry.

The Lord calls upon those connected with our sanitariums, publishing houses, and schools to teach the youth to do evangelistic work. Our time and energy must not be so

largely employed in establishing sanitariums, food stores, and restaurants that other lines of work will be neglected. *Young men and young women who should be engaged in the ministry, in Bible work, and in the canvassing work should not be bound down to mechanical employment.*

The youth should be encouraged to attend our training schools for Christian workers, which should become more and more like the schools of the prophets. These institutions have been established by the Lord, and if they are conducted in harmony with His purpose, the youth sent to them will quickly be prepared to engage in various lines of missionary work. *Some will be trained to enter the field as missionary nurses, some as canvassers, and some as gospel ministers.*⁽⁶³⁾

The ambiguity occurs in the final sentence of the first paragraph. "Young men and young women who should be engaged in the ministry, in Bible work, and in the canvassing work should not be bound down to mechanical employment." The reason for the ambiguity is that both "Bible work" and "canvassing" are referred to elsewhere as aspects of "ministry."⁽⁶⁴⁾ The fact that she enumerates them individually would seem to imply that she is distinguishing them as different vocations, hence the usage "the ministry" most likely refers here to the pulpit preaching and administrative office of ministry in contrast to the more individual and family-oriented ministry of the Bible worker and the literature-distributive ministry of the canvasser. Of Ellen White's many references to women "in ministry," the majority refer specifically to the ministry of evangelistic and pastoral visiting, giving Bible instruction and spiritual guidance in families—the calling here spoken of as "Bible work."⁽⁶⁵⁾

Women as Pastors

At least two statements from Ellen White mention women in pastoral roles.⁽⁶⁶⁾ The central question, of course, is what did she mean by "pastoral"? Ellen White sometimes used pastoral terminology to denote the personal visitation aspects of a minister's work, as contrasted with public pulpit ministry.⁽⁶⁷⁾ In this vein she denounced ministers who "only preach," or worse yet, merely "sermonize," but "neglect personal labor" because they lack the "watchful, tender compassion of a shepherd. The flock of God have a right to expect to be visited by their pastor, to be instructed, advised, counseled, in their own homes."⁽⁶⁸⁾ Again, she says, "The pastor should visit from house to house among his flock, teaching, conversing, and praying with each family," as well as seeing that prospective members are "thoroughly instructed in the truth."⁽⁶⁹⁾ This is precisely the work Ellen White elsewhere recommends for women in team ministry--"visiting from family to family, opening the Scriptures to them."⁽⁷⁰⁾ It is in this pastoral work that they are promised "a power that exceeds that of men."⁽⁷¹⁾

"Women to Do Pastoral Labor"

The foregoing provides the necessary background for a consideration of two statements which indicate that the spiritual gift of pastoring is given to women as well as men.

The first of these occurs in *Testimonies*, 4:390.

If there is one work more important than another, it is that of getting our publications before the public, thus leading them to search the Scriptures. Missionary work—introducing our publications into families, conversing, and praying with and for them—is a good work and one which will educate men and women to do pastoral labor.⁽⁷²⁾

According to this paragraph, door-to-door "missionary work" literature evangelism has two particular benefits: (1) "It is good work" in itself; and (2) it is a useful preparation for larger responsibilities. It "will educate men and women to do pastoral labor." The same two themes also permeate the context of another mention of women as "pastors."

"Pastors to the Flock of God"

The themes that (1) literature evangelism is itself a form of pastoral ministry, and (2) that it also gives preparation for pastoral ministry within a congregation, are clearly evident in a citation from *Testimonies*, 6:322. The sentences are numbered for ease of reference.

[1] All who desire an opportunity for true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the canvassing work opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future, immortal life. [2] The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the ministry. [3] It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God.⁽⁷³⁾

Sentence 1 indicates that "the canvassing work" is "true ministry." Sentence 2 recommends this work to "those who are fitting themselves for *the* ministry," i.e., ministerial leadership of a church. Sentence 3 affirms that the Holy Spirit "prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God." The deduction seems clear that the clause "prepares . . . to become pastors" in the third sentence stands in parallelism to "fitting . . . for the ministry" in the previous sentence.

This theme of preparation recurs several times in the immediate context. The chapter in which the quoted passage occurs bears the title, "The Canvasser a Gospel Worker," and opens with the declaration that "The intelligent, God-fearing, truth-loving canvasser should be respected; for he occupies a position equal to that of the gospel minister."⁽⁷⁴⁾ That is theme one: literature evangelism is ministry. One concern of this chapter is to elevate the importance of the work of the canvasser or colporteur⁽⁷⁵⁾ to an equality with other forms of ministry. However, the next sentence shows that Ellen White was not just promoting the canvassing work, she was promoting it specifically to "young ministers and those who are fitting for the ministry." That is theme two: literature evangelism as preparation for "the" regular ministry.

Many of our *young ministers* and *those who are fitting for the ministry* would, if truly converted, do much good by working in the canvassing field. And by meeting the people and presenting to them our publications they would *gain an experience* which they

cannot gain by simply preaching. As they went from house to house they could converse with the people, carrying with them the fragrance of Christ's life. In thus endeavoring to bless others they would themselves be blessed; they would *obtain an experience* in faith; their knowledge of the Scriptures would greatly increase; and they would be constantly *learning* how to win souls for Christ [emphasis added].

Three paragraphs later occurs the passage under consideration.

The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who are *fitting themselves for the ministry*. *It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God* [emphasis added].⁽⁷⁶⁾

The theme of preparation and growth in evangelistic effectiveness continues in the rest of the paragraph. Canvassers who are "fitting themselves for the ministry" will "learn," "be educated," "practice," "be purified," "develop," and "be gifted" with spiritual power.⁽⁷⁷⁾

On the next page occurs another explanatory connection with the main sentence under consideration. "The *preaching* of the word is a means by which the Lord has ordained that His warning message shall be given to the world. In the Scriptures the faithful *teacher* is represented as a *shepherd* of the flock of God. He is to be respected and his work appreciated. . . . [T]he canvassing work is to be a part both of the medical missionary work and of the ministry" (emphasis added).⁽⁷⁸⁾

Ellen White repeatedly applies to the literature ministry terms commonly associated with the ministry of preaching, to show that the true literature evangelist is a preacher. Similarly, she uses terms associated with teaching to reinforce her concept of the canvasser as a teacher. Thus the paragraph that groups the terms "preaching," "teacher," and "shepherd of the flock of God" constitutes a statement that not only the regular minister, but the canvasser also preaches and teaches, hence also deserves to be "respected" and "appreciated" as a "shepherd to the flock of God."

Finally, "shepherd of the flock of God" stands in direct parallel to the expression "pastors to the flock of God" on the previous page, showing that by "pastors," Ellen White includes all who teach and preach the gospel, including literature evangelists. Comparing these parallel statements suggests that the Holy Spirit "prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors," i.e., "shepherds to the flock of God," but this shepherding role may take a variety of vocational forms.

On one hand, literature evangelists who truly minister to the individuals they visit are, through their literature and their presence, giving immediate pastoral care. On the other hand, the experience gained prepares the faithful canvasser to give pastoral care in other contexts as well.

Finally, the references to the "Holy Spirit," "gifts," "pastor," "teacher," and "shepherd," as well as the focal sentence "the Holy Spirit . . . prepares workers, both men and women, to

become pastors to the flock of God, ⁽⁷⁹⁾ imply that the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher (Eph 4:11) is given to both men and women.

"Adapted to the Successful Management of a Church"

That Ellen White saw both women and men as potentially qualified for church leadership is shown by her statement that "it is not always men who are best adapted to the successful management of a church." The context is a scathing rebuke to a Brother Johnson who had "a disposition to dictate and control matters" in a certain local church, and who had only "sneers" for the work of women in the same church. "Jesus is ashamed of you," she wrote, and on the next page continued,

You are not in sympathy with the great Head of the church. . . . This contemptible picking, faultfinding, seeking spot and stain, ridiculing, gainsaying, that you with some others have indulged in, has grieved the Spirit of God and separated you from God. *It is not always men who are best adapted to the successful management of a church. If faithful women have more deep piety and true devotion than men, they could indeed by their prayers and their labors do more than men who are unconsecrated in heart and life* [emphasis added]. ⁽⁸⁰⁾

The words "It is not always men" point to the addressees' assumption that in any situation, the best leader for a church would always be a man. Ellen White asserts that there are times when the person best qualified to lead a church is a woman. The words "best adapted" point to personal talents and spiritual gifts, which, along with "deep piety and true devotion," constitute the qualifications for spiritual leadership. The primary determinant of fitness for church leadership is not gender, but character. ⁽⁸¹⁾

Set Apart by Prayer and Laying on of Hands

One further citation remains to be carefully examined in its historical context. It comes from the decade that Ellen White spent pioneering in Australia, and appeared in the *Review and Herald*, 9 July 1895. It is the one statement where she explicitly recommends an ordination service for women.

The burden of the article in which this statement occurs is the noninvolvement of the majority of church members in the work of the church. "A few persons have been selected as spiritual burden-bearers, and the talent of other members has remained undeveloped." To remedy this, she urges ministers to involve the congregation both in "planning" and in "executing the plans that they have had a part in forming." She further urges "every individual who is considered a worthy member of the church" be given a definite part in the work of the church. Then occurs the paragraph about women.

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.* In some

cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. 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 [emphasis supplied].⁽⁸²⁾

A few observations may be made at this point. These are laywomen, who are "willing to consecrate some of their time," not their full time, to church work. Thus it is clear that this is not a career choice by which they will earn their livelihood, but a part-time volunteer ministry.⁽⁸³⁾ Regarding the terms "appointed" and "set apart . . . by prayer and laying on of hands," there can be no doubt that these were Ellen White's characteristic expressions for a ceremony of ordination.⁽⁸⁴⁾

No extensive research has been done to discover the extent of the church's response to this appeal. Three instances are known, however. On 10 August 1895, about a month after Ellen White's article was published in the *Review* (but possibly in response to an earlier local circulation of the prepublication manuscript), the Ashfield Church in Sydney, not far from where Ellen White was then working, held an ordination service for newly elected church officers. "Pastors Corliss and McCullagh of the Australian conference set apart the elder, deacons, [and] deaconesses by prayer and the laying on of hands."⁽⁸⁵⁾ Notice that identical ordination terminology is used for all three offices. Another record from the same church five years later (6 January 1900) again reports the ordination of two elders, one deacon, and two deaconesses. The officiating minister was W. C. White, whose diary of the same date corroborates the records of the Ashfield Church clerk.⁽⁸⁶⁾ A third example comes from February or March, 1916, when E. E. Andross, then president of the Pacific Union Conference, officiated at a women's ordination service and cited Ellen White's 1895 *Review and Herald* article as his authority.⁽⁸⁷⁾

Both the internal evidence of Ellen White's 1895 article and the responses of those close to her at the time--the Ashfield Church; her son W. C. White; and E. E. Andross, who was a church administrator in California during Ellen White's Elmshaven years⁽⁸⁸⁾--seem to confirm that Ellen White approved the formal ordination of laywomen to a role then associated with the office of deaconess in the local church. The work of a deaconess was not confined to ritual functions at the Lord's Supper and footwashing, but was rather seen as a work of practical ministry to persons in need. This is the apparent significance of Ellen White's job description, "to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor."

This evidence shows, first, that Ellen White did not view ordination, as such, to be a gender-specific ordinance, but a ceremony of consecration that may rightly be conducted for both men and women. It includes "designation to an appointed office," "recognition of one's authority in that office," and a request for "God to bestow His blessing" upon the one ordained.⁽⁸⁹⁾

Second, the association of ordination with the office of deaconess suggests a line for further investigation. In current usage, both the office of deacon and its feminine equivalent, deaconess, have become stereo-typed as largely ceremonial offices, expanded slightly to include (for the men) physical upkeep of the church building and grounds, and (for the women) cooking and cleaning and serving at social functions. However, the New Testament word transliterated as deaconess is rightly translated "minister" (see Eph 3:7, where Paul uses the same root word for his own ministry), and there were women who filled this ministerial office (see Rom 16:1).⁽⁹⁰⁾

Finally, note also that of the original seven who were elected to "serve tables" in Acts 6:2, two of them far superseded the terms of their ordination, becoming highly successful public speakers and evangelists. In view of Ellen White's endorsement of ordaining women as deaconesses, perhaps the significance of the New Testament precedent needs to be more fully explored, remembering that Ellen White's motivation for recommending this ritual was to stimulate the involvement and mobilization of the rank and file of church members by vividly impressing on them their divine calling to exercise outwardly the priest-hood of every believer bestowed on them at their baptism.⁽⁹¹⁾ If the church would even now act on the instruction given a century ago that women "should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands"—a ritual that connotes the delegation of church authority and a request for the bestowal of divine blessing⁽⁹²⁾—the church should not be surprised if some of those "set apart" to minister to the "sick," the "young," and the "poor" would go on to evangelizing and planting churches in which the sick, the young, and the poor would become healthy, mature, and prosperous, and continue the expansion of the Kingdom.

Conclusions

Regarding Ellen White's concept of the ministerial responsibilities that might appropriately be exercised by women, five points may be noted.

1. The combined talents of both men and women are essential for the highest success in the work of the ministry. Therefore the ideal is team ministry, especially by husband-and-wife ministerial teams.
2. The list of roles open to women in gospel ministry embraces a wide range of job descriptions and vocational options, including preaching, teaching, pastoral care, evangelistic work, literature evangelism, Sabbath School leadership, chaplaincy, counseling, and church administration.
3. She believed that the spiritual gifts of pastoring and teaching (Eph 4:11) are given by the Holy Spirit to both men and women, and some women possess gifts and abilities for the "successful management" of churches.
4. Ellen White's most strongly worded recommendation regarding women in ministry was that self-sacrificing wives who join their husbands in team ministry should receive wages proportionate to the time they devote to ministry. The issue of fair pay for every

ministerial wife who chooses to devote herself to ministry rather than to some other profession was certainly a higher priority with Ellen White than ordination; yet her strong denunciations of paying only the male half of the ministerial team are still, with a few isolated exceptions, largely disregarded.⁽⁹³⁾

5. Ellen White recommended the ordination of laywomen to a local ministry that would meet the needs of "the sick," "the young," and "the poor." Thus she showed her understanding that ordination is an ordinance of appointment and consecration that may rightly be conducted for both men and women. Her contemporaries understood this as a call for ordaining deaconesses on the same basis as deacons, but the practice was never widely accepted in the church.

Since she believed ordination is important for laywomen in a ministry to physical and emotional needs, would she also see some form of ordination as important for women who are laborers "in word and doctrine"? In any case, woman's place in ministry is secure. Even if "the hands of ordination have not been laid upon her, she is accomplishing a work that is in the line of ministry."⁽⁹⁴⁾

Endnotes

1. Ellen G. White, "Words to Lay Members," *Review and Herald*, 25 August 1902, 7-8. For the context of this phrase, see p. 186.
2. See, e.g., James White, *A Word to the Little Flock* (Gotham, ME: James White, 1847), 13; James White, quoted in "Doings of the Battle Creek Conference, October 5 and 6, 1861," *Review and Herald*, 8 October 1861; both reproduced in *Witness of the Pioneers Concerning the Spirit of Prophecy: A Facsimile Reprint of Periodical and Pamphlet Articles Written by the Contemporaries of Ellen G. White* (Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1961), 4, 26; see also, Arthur L. White, "The Position of 'The Bible and the Bible Only' and the Relationship of This to the Writings of Ellen G. White," Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1971.
3. Eph 4:11-13; Joel 2:28-29; Rev 12:17, 19:10.
4. Ellen G. White, *Great Controversy*, vii.
5. *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1990), 28.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Ellen G. White, *Colporteur Ministry*, 6, 101, 8.
8. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Health*, 558, 557.

9. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 79, 1900, in *Evangelism*, 546.
10. *Ibid.*, 557, 558.
11. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People*, 211.
12. Ellen G. White, *Loma Linda Messages*, 386.
13. Ellen G. White, "The Laborer is Worthy of His Hire," MS 43a, 1898, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:325.
14. Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:325; also cited in *Evangelism*, 472.
15. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:325.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 324.
18. *Ibid.*, 323-327.
19. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:323-324.
20. For a historical example, one could hardly recall a more illustrious figure in the annals of Adventist women than that of Mary E. Walsh (1892-1997), evangelistic Bible instructor, author, and sometime pastor, who never married. "Mary Walsh, Pioneer Bible Worker, Pastor, Dies at 105," *Adventist Review*, 20 November 1997, 23.
21. Ellen G. White to A. G. Daniells, 27 October 1909 (Letter 142, 1909), *Manuscript Releases*, 17:37. The Scripture reference appears to be a conflation of Rom 16:3 and Phil 4:3, possibly with 2 Cor 1:11 in the background.
22. Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 554.
23. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:324.
24. *Ibid.*, 325.
25. Ellen G. White, Letter 77, 1898, cited in *Evangelism*, 469; see also *Counsels on Health*, 544, 547.
26. Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, 2 January 1879, cited in *Evangelism*, 472; cf. *Desire of Ages*, 568.
27. Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, 26 August 1902, cited in *Welfare Ministry*, 145.

28. Ellen G. White, Letter 142, 1909, cited in *Evangelism*, 491.
29. Ellen G. White, "Looking for that Blessed Hope," *Signs of the Times*, 24 June 1889.
30. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, 1915 ed., 452-453, cited in *Evangelism*, 492-493.
31. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 47, 1898, excerpted in *Evangelism*, 492; see also *Manuscript Releases*, 5:323-327; 12:160-167; 17:36-37.
32. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, 471-472.
33. *Ibid.*, 492.
34. *Ibid.*, 492-493.
35. Ellen G. White, *Counsels on Stewardship*, 81, 101-103; *Testimonies*, 9:247-250.
36. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 149, 1899, cited in *Evangelism*, 492.
37. See, e.g. *Manuscript Releases*, 12:160-167.
38. "Bible readers" refers to persons who give "Bible readings," a question-and-answer form of Bible study.
39. Ellen G. White, "The Laborer is Worthy of His Hire," Manuscript 43a, 22 March 1898, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:323-324.
40. White, *Evangelism*, 493.
41. Similarly, in *Testimonies*, 8:229-230, she wrote that "young men and young women who should be engaged in the ministry, in Bible work, and in the canvassing work should not be bound down to mechanical employment."
42. *Ibid.*, 492.
43. White, *Evangelism*, 459, 464, 470, 471, 478, 491.
44. White, *Evangelism*, 493, "carrying the truth into families;" see also *ibid.*, 456, 469, 470, 475, 477. *Evangelism*, 491-493, speaks of women sharing with men in evangelistic work. Though roles are not specified, the context and SDA history imply the specific roles of visitation, Bible studies, other teaching roles, and pulpit preaching. See chapter by Michael Bernoi.
45. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, 2:322-323; 4:390; 8:229-230; *Evangelism*, 467-473, 491-493.

46. White, *Evangelism*, 469, 473-477. "Again and again the Lord has shown me that women teachers are just as greatly needed to do the work to which He has appointed them as are men." The context refers to house-to-house pastoral-evangelistic visiting and Bible teaching (E. G. White, "The Laborer is Worthy of His Hire," Manuscript 43a, 22 March 1898, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:325).

47. "Canvassing" denotes door-to-door sales of Christian books and periodicals, a vocation currently called "literature evangelism" (idem, 469-470; *Testimonies*, 2:322-323; *Testimonies*, 8:229-230).

48. "It is not in harmony with the instructions given at Sinai that gentlemen physicians should do the work of midwives. The Bible speaks of women at childbirth being attended by women, and thus it ought always to be. Women should be educated and trained to act skillfully as *midwives* and *physicians* to their sex. It is just as important that a line of study be given to educate women to deal with women's diseases, as it is that there should be gentlemen thoroughly trained to act as physicians and surgeons. And the wages of the woman should be proportionate to her services. She should be as much appreciated in her work as the gentleman physician is appreciated in his work" (idem, *Counsels on Health*, 365, emphasis added).

49. White, *Testimonies*, 8:143-144.

50. White, *Evangelism*, 460.

51. Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 1:125.

52. Ellen G. White, "Words to Lay Members," *Review and Herald*, 20 August 1902, 7-8; this paragraph is quoted in idem, *Welfare Ministry*, 145.

53. A pronouncement Mrs. White made with reference to wages seems equally applicable to issues of rank and position: "As we bring ourselves into right relationship with God we shall have success wherever we go; and it is success that we want, not money [or rank or position, but]--living success, and God will give it to us because He knows all about our self-denial. He knows every sacrifice that we make. You may think that your self-denial does not make any difference, that you ought to have more consideration and so on. But it makes a great difference with the Lord. Over and over again I have been shown that when individuals begin to reach out after higher and still higher wages [or rank or position], something comes into their experience that places them where they stand no longer on vantage ground. But when they take the wage that carries on the face of it the fact that they are self-sacrificing, the Lord sees their self-denial and He gives them success and victory. This has been presented to me over and over again. The Lord that seeth in secret will reward openly for every sacrifice that His tried servants have been willing to make" (Ellen G. White, MS 12, 1913, quoted in *Selected Messages*, 2:179-180).

54. White, *Evangelism*, 469, 473-477; *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, 90-96.

55. Ellen G. White, Letter 169, 1900, cited in *Evangelism*, 473; names supplied from idem, "The Laborer Is Worthy of His Hire," Manuscript 43a, 22 March 1898.
56. J. N. Andrews, "May Women Speak in Meetings?" *Review and Herald*, 2 January 1879.
57. Andrews, "May Women Speak in Meetings?" emphasis his; see also, Uriah Smith, "Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches," *Review and Herald*, 26 June 1866; James White, "Women in the Church," *Review and Herald*, 29 May 1979.
58. Ellen G. White to James White, from Oakland, CA, Letter 17a, 1 April 1880, *Manuscript Releases*, 10:70.
59. Ellen G. White, *Sketches from the Life of Paul*, 119, emphasis added.
60. Ellen G. White to A. G. Daniells, 27 October (Letter 142), 1909, *Manuscript Releases*, 17:35-36.
61. A. L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Australian Years* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1983), 346-348.
62. Ellen G. White to S.M.I. Henry, 24 March 1899 (Letter 54, 1899), quoted in *Review and Herald*, 9 May 1899, and excerpted in *Evangelism*, 473.
63. White, *Testimonies*, 8:229-230.
64. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:323; *Testimonies*, 6:323, quoted in *Colporteur Ministry*, 101.
65. See, e.g., MS 43a, 1898, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:325, 323-327.
66. White, *Testimonies*, 4:390; 6:322-323.
67. See White, *Testimonies*, 3:232-233; *Evangelism*, 350.
68. Ellen G. White, *Appeal and Suggestions to Conference Officers*, Pamphlet no. 2, 17.
69. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (1915), quoted in *Evangelism*, 350.
70. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:323; cf. 325-7.
71. Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, 145.
72. Ellen G. White, "Our Publications," in *Testimonies*, 4:390.
73. White, *Testimonies*, 6:322.

74. Ibid., 321.

75. The "evangelistic canvasser" (*Testimonies*, 6:325), or "colporteur" (ibid, 323), was a door-to-door seller of Christian books and periodicals, who not only sold them, but read and explained them to people, seeking to lead them to a personal and growing relationship with Christ.

76. Ibid., 321-322.

77. Ibid., 322.

78. Ibid., 323.

79. White, *Testimonies*, 6:322-323.

80. Ellen G. White to Brother Johnson, Letter 33, 1879, *Manuscript Releases*, 19:55-56.

81. See chapters by Richard M. Davidson and Peter M. Van Bemmelen in this book.

82. Ibid.

83. Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, 342; idem, *Acts of the Apostles*, 355.

84. See, e.g., White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 160-161; idem, "Separated Unto the Gospel," *Review and Herald*, 11 May 1911; idem, *Gospel Workers*, 15, 452; idem, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:29, 323; idem, *Testimonies*, 6:444; idem, *Manuscript Releases*, 2:32, 8:189; idem, *Messages to Young People*, 226; idem, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers*, 188. See also chapters by Keith Mattingly and Denis Fortin in this book.

85. Minutes of the Ashfield SDA Church, Sydney, Australia, 10 August 1895, cited by Arthur N. Patrick, "The Ordination of Deaconesses," *Adventist Review*, 16 January 1996, 18-19.

86. Minutes of the Ashfield SDA Church, Sydney, Australia, 6 January 1900, and W. C. White Diary, 6 January 1900, cited by Patrick, "The Ordination of Deaconesses," 18-19.

87. Mrs. L. E. Cox to C. C. Crisler, 12 March 1916; reproduced in Roger W. Coon, "Ellen G. White's View of the Role of Women in the SDA Church." Shelf Document, E. G. White Estate, 1986. Mrs. Cox says, "I have been a Bible worker for a number of years and have recently been granted a ministerial license." She reports that she "was in a recent meeting where Elder A[n]dross set aside women by the laying on of hands. . . ." Crisler, in reply, calls the service "the ordination of women who give some time to missionary work." (C. C. Crisler to Mrs. L. E. Cox, 22 March and 16 June 1916, both reproduced in full in Coon, "Ellen G. White's View of the Role of Women in the SDA Church," Appendix H, pp. 24-25).

88. *SDA Encyclopedia*, 1995 ed., s.v. "Andross, Elmer Ellsworth."
89. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 162; see also Keith Mattingly's chapter, "The Laying on of Hands."
90. See Robert Johnston's chapter in this book.
91. Ellen G. White, "Our Work," *Signs of the Times*, 25 August 1898, cited by Denis Fortin, "The Concept of Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White," chapter 6, above.
92. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 162.
93. James A. Cress, "Selective Disobedience," *Ministry*, June 1998, 28-29.
94. White, *Manuscript Releases*, 5:323.