

The Status and Role of Women in the Adventist Church

LEONA G. RUNNING

I

Many women held high positions and made outstanding contributions in early Seventh-day Adventist history. Was this because they were qualified and valued as treasurers, Sabbath school conference secretaries, educators, and editors? Or was it because they could be paid less than men would be paid in those same positions?

One does not have access to records, if indeed they still exist anywhere. But experience would lead many persons to feel certain that women throughout the history of the church have generally been paid at a much lower rate than their male counterparts and that women have usually received few, if any, of whatever fringe benefits have been in vogue for males. Although women are willing to “sacrifice,” they think that there should be equal opportunity for sacrifice! In this day of rising democratic awareness, women believe that the sacrificial role should not be forced on them and that the degree of sacrifice expected by the church should not be greater for them than for men.

A survey could develop some interesting and valuable information about the Adventist church: What is the proportion of women to men in the general church membership? How many employees are women? How many working women have working husbands (in or out of the church)? How many women are the sole supporters of dependent husbands, children, or parents? How many women are single, with no choice but earning a living?

In the summer of 1971 it was announced that a “third woman” had been elected to the General Conference Committee (the top-level decision-

making body). Later one more woman was added — and more than a dozen extra men. What's there to cheer about with a ratio of 4 women to 275 men?

Before any male says (to himself if not aloud), “We always pick the best qualified — and practically all of them are men,” let me point out that women have not been permitted opportunity to develop their potential and to gain experience that would qualify them to participate as committee and board members in equal numbers. Those qualified, in fact, are often ignored. I doubt that intelligent women want to be included merely for tokenism. What they really want is to have a voice in discussion and decision because they have a contribution to make and a worthwhile role to fill.¹

As for remuneration, the financial situation was greatly improved in 1967 when the basis of the wage scale was altered. But many inequities remain. A married woman teacher, for example, is paid less than the proper wages and benefits for her rank — because her husband is considered “head of the house.” She does not get what a single woman of her educational achievement and experience gets. The married woman cannot leave retirement benefits to an invalid husband or dependent children. The current policy provides only for “widows and orphans,” not mentioning “widowers” who might be in need. Although the church has come a long way in recognizing that in some circumstances a woman, married or not, is “head of the family,” improvement still needs to be made. It is not true that women can live more cheaply than men. When single women do so out of necessity, it is at a lower standard of living.

Women who are secretaries and stenographers need also to be given serious consideration. In many cases they are kept on hourly rates so that they will not be eligible for the fringe benefits that salaried persons have. Some of them are not given the midyear cost-of-living raise. I am not referring to flighty girls or to those just out of high school or business college, but to mature, responsible, efficient women who have worked for years, in or out of church employment. Their plight illustrates further that women sometimes suffer insensitive and cruel treatment and are viewed by men as objects rather than as persons.

Committee W (on the Status of Women in the Academic Professions), was reactivated in 1970 after being dormant forty-two years. With the backing of the American Association of University Professors, the parent organization, it is moving into a strong campaign for the proper rank for part-time teaching women in higher education (the same as for part-time teaching men). As the other part of their work, part-time women teachers may have

the care of their small children, rather than (as some men) research, government work, or moonlighting in a second institution.

Women's life-styles are changing. If a woman chooses to rear a family, this probably occupies no more than ten years of her productive career life. She needs to keep up with the progress of her profession during those years until the last child is in school, and she may need some refresher courses before stepping back into her profession, with a career of a good thirty years, or longer, still ahead of her. In Russia, whose society Americans tend to look down on, women have equal opportunities for education and professions. Over 70 percent of Russian physicians and 83 percent of dentists are women. About 31 percent of Russian engineers (including, admittedly, most of the street cleaners and road builders) are women — but also about a third of all judges, lawyers, and college teachers.

More and more, modern educators are expressing what Ellen White said long ago — that the first few years of a child's life are all-important in determining the child's health, personality, and character. Adventist women are not advocating that mothers work outside the home during these formative years, unless it is necessary because they are sole supporters of the children. But to say any longer that “woman's place is in the home”² for her whole lifetime is to hide one's head in the sand and refuse to recognize life as it is in the latter third of the twentieth century.

The women who by necessity or choice enter the labor market in competition with men need opportunity for preparation. Often this is not given, and women are discouraged from entering many lines of endeavor. One may look at the few women who have achieved good careers in Adventist employment and think they really have nothing to complain about. But if their full stories were known, it would be clear that women's goals of education and service are not achieved without struggle against unreasonable opposition far beyond what men encounter. Every woman who has been in church service for ten or twenty or more years could tell dozens of stories about discrimination on the basis of sex.

II

Illumination is brought to the discussion of discrimination, in a different context, by F. L. Bland, who points out that theories of “superiority” are based on pretense, hoax, nonsense, and pseudoscience, and implies that these are at the foundation of “supremacy” ideas of practically any time or place or culture. His summation of the principles involved is direct and sobering:

The faith expressed by Paul that every nation is “made of one blood” is the foundation for a harmonious, compassionate society. On this battlefield science has long ago joined religion as an ally. . . . How free are we from the snobberies of caste and race? How free are we from the hypocrisies of a mythical superiority? . . .

We all stand condemned before God. Our politeness and our pretensions of culture without God only lead to moral and spiritual complacency. We begin to thank God as did the Pharisee that we are not “as other men are.” [Jewish men pray a daily prayer, “Blessed be God, that hath not made me a woman”!] It is significant for us that Jesus condemned this lordship of class and race. The following is a clear-cut picture of His attitude:

“Christ came to demolish every wall of partition, to throw open every compartment of the temple courts, that every soul may have free access to God. His love is so broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere. It lifts out of Satan's influence those who have been deluded by his deceptions, and places them within reach of the throne of God.... In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free.”³

Let us complete the quotation from a parallel text from Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is *neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:38, RSV, italics mine).

Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm (New York) has often stated in public that she has suffered more discrimination as a woman than as a black. When Cleveland's Carl Stokes, first black mayor of an American city, was visited by a woman mayor (white) from another city, he invited her to the city council meeting just convening. She found herself to be the only woman present. Later, when she chided him about having no women on his council, Stokes said a little sheepishly, “We're tackling one minority at a time.”

Dorothy L. Sayers was one of the first women students at Oxford University. Graduated with honors in 1915, she became a scholar and an author. In one of her two essays of some thirty years ago (now reprinted in paperback because they are so relevant), she mentions the matter of women's clothing and asks why men should preempt the comfortable (and modest) type of clothing, trousers, and then demand that women not wear anything similar.

The fact is that, for *Homo*, the garment is warm, convenient, and decent. But in the West (though not in Mohammedan countries or in China) *Vir* has made the trouser his prerogative, and has invested it and the skirt with a sexual significance for physiological reasons which are a little too plain for gentility to admit. . . . This . . . complicates the simple *Homo* issue of whether warmth, safety, and freedom of movement are desirable qualities in a garment for any creature with two legs. Naturally, under the circumstances, the trouser is *also* taken up into the whole *Femina* business of attraction, since *Vir* demands that a woman shall be *Femina* all the time, whether she is engaged in *Homo* activities or not. If, of course, *Vir* should take a fancy to the skirt, he will appropriate it without a scruple; he will wear the houppelande or the cassock if it suits him; he will stake out his claim to the kilt in Scotland or in Greece. . . .

Probably no man has ever troubled to imagine how strange his life would appear

to himself if it were unrelentingly assessed in terms of his maleness; if everything he

wore, said, or did had to be justified by reference to female approval; if he were compelled to regard himself, day in [and] day out, not as a member of society, but merely ... as a virile member of society....

If, after a few centuries of this kind of treatment, the male was a little self-conscious, a little on the defensive, and a little bewildered about what was required of him, I should not blame him. If he traded a little upon his sex, I could forgive him. If he presented the world with a major social problem, I should scarcely be surprised. It would be more surprising if he retained any rag of sanity and self-respect.⁴

Men's unconscious assumptions and attitudes show more than they realize. For example, a college president made this statement: “/ don't have any prejudice against women. In fact, I *prefer* to hire them for my faculty; *they cost less money*” Women don't blame men for absorbing cultural attitudes without *conscious* evaluation of those attitudes. What is important now is whether men will give some conscious thought to what has long been accepted unthinkingly.

The fact is that all of us, men and women alike, have been conditioned to certain ideas in society and the church — all our lives. Our religious outlook has come to us filtered through male minds, from a Holy Book written by men with the prevailing cultural assumptions of millenniums of male domination of the world. We are accustomed to hymns with such lines as “strong men and maidens meek” and to selected biblical passages that portray women as they were regarded by predominating male cultures.

If we think about it, however, even in biblical times a few women broke through those barriers — Deborah, Hulda, Lydia, and others. Solomon praised the executive position of a woman in the home (Proverbs 31:10-21), which encompasses work with wool and flax, bringing foods from afar, overseeing her women workers, buying fields and planting vineyards, spinning and weaving fine cloth, and making garments.

But as Dorothy Sayers made clear, the modern home is quite different. So Adventist women, along with women in secular life, are beginning to see themselves more clearly in the light of today and to take a place — in the world, in the home, and, under God, in the church — that befits them as children of God even as men are. They are not in accord with those in the women's liberation movements who have extreme social views (such as doing away with marriage), but they may question why a woman should have to lose her name when she marries. Rather, why not add a name?

What women really want of the church is a Christian environment and an educational environment and a work environment that will enhance not only their own outlook on life but the outlook of those with whom they associate in work or in marriage. Among other things, they want the maximum of the

marriage relationship. They want their husbands to think of them as partners, to enjoy loving and caring for the children as fathers of the household, rather than relegating child care to the category of “women's work.” (How will a child fit in society if he has been a chore instead of a family member loved and tended by both parents?) Secular society is leading the way on many such points.

The Genesis One story culminates with the creation of both man and woman “in the image of God.” As Kenneth L. Woodward states:

This is a radical affirmation of sexual equality, and a sharp contrast to the creation myths of the Hebrews' neighbors in the Near East

The feminist point of view, then, offers an understanding of the story of Eden that is close to the ancient Hebrews' own view. ... As happens in all cultures the ideals the Hebrews expressed in their literature did not always govern their social practices. The Hebrew woman, like her Greek or Egyptian sister, suffered under double moral standards imposed by a patriarchal society....

There are those who believe that Jesus himself did or said nothing to liberate women. It all depends on the cultural bias one brings to the study of Scripture. “Jesus was a radical feminist,” says Dr. Leonard Swidler, a Catholic theologian at Temple University. “It is an overwhelming tribute to men's intellectual myopia that they have not recognized this over the past two thousand years.”

Jesus' attitude toward women becomes truly radical only when measured against the customs of his society. At the great Temple in Jerusalem, women were restricted to an outer court, five steps below the court for men. And on the streets, it was considered beneath the dignity of a rabbi to speak to a woman — even his own wife or daughter. The basis of the Hebrew woman's second-class status was plainly sexual.⁵

Ellen G. White made some enlightened statements as early as 1898 that have been well ignored.

Women who work in the cause of God should be given wages proportionate to the time they give to the work. God is a God of justice, and if the ministers receive a salary for their work, their wives, who devote themselves just as interestedly to the work as laborers together with God, should be paid in addition to the wages their husbands receive, notwithstanding that they may not ask this. 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.⁶

If a woman is appointed by the Lord to do a certain work, her work should be estimated according to its value. Some may think it good policy to allow persons to devote their time and labor to the work without compensation. But God does not sanction such arrangements. When self-denial is required because of a dearth of means, the burden is not to rest wholly upon a few persons. Let all unite in the sacrifice.

The Lord desires those entrusted with His goods to show kindness and liberality not niggardliness. Let them not, in their zeal, try to exact every cent possible. God

looks with contempt on such methods.⁷

These quotations are only a drop in the bucket, the total, of good and pertinent statements made by Ellen White. In trying here to make the men of the church aware of the thinking of the women of the church — and of the nation and the world — I thus draw attention to the fact that the principles about which people are concerned today are principles clearly set forth many years ago by this respected church leader. It is a pity that the Adventist church so often has to be driven by the law of the land to do the good, right, and fair thing (minimum wage levels, equal employment opportunities, etc.). Some day the government will probably force the church to give women across-the-board equality of remuneration and opportunities. For once let the church organization do the good and right thing before the government says it has to!

What about ordaining women as ministers ? Churches are doing this increasingly. Ellen White and other prominent early women of the Adventist church surely deserved ordination and were qualified for it. Undoubtedly today there are women, both in North America and overseas, who deserve this recognition of God's call to work just as men are ministers, pastors, evangelists, and administrators. If women have heard God's call in this way and have the qualifications in talent, preparation, and temperament, why should anyone stand in their way? Women in other lands care for one or two churches exactly as a man would — preaching, conducting evangelistic meetings, and doing all the rest of the pastoral work — and yet are paid as stenographers!

III

Only a few of the many, many experiences of discrimination against women — whether by persons or policies — have been cited here. And not all of these experiences are in the past; many inequities that exist are governed by current policy. Men pay lip service to the inspired guidance of Ellen White, but conveniently they ignore the clear statements that deal with the principles that are basic to bringing about a change in the status of women in the church.

Women ask only to be treated as worthwhile *persons*. Their role? They want to use for God and humanity the talents given them, and to devote their energies to God's cause. Their status ? They want equality as persons. Why should one attempt to define the “role,” singular, of women any more than the “role,” singular, of men? The issue is that of the infinitely varied wishes and capabilities of *human beings*.

The following statements suggest the direction which the Adventist church might consider:

1. Church leaders, in recognition of the fact that society is changing, should use their initiative and influence to broaden the educational, indoctrinational, and cultural systems of the church to permit preparation for the genuine partnership of men and women in all aspects of life.
2. Men of the church should seek to discover that women have individual talents to develop and use in God's work. Those men who are in positions of strength should work for the inclusion of women in every role for which individual women may be qualified or may become qualified — including committee, faculty, and trustee structures, together with every professional and business relationship.
3. Church organizations and institutions should give across-the-board equal pay and equal fringe benefits for equivalent work, service, or professional performance, with reference only to years of experience and level of responsibility. Assistance for the benefit of children might be made by tuition rebates rather than by less equitable means.
4. All church agencies should give equal opportunities for women to prepare, advance, and compete for jobs that people wish to have because of their individual interests, talents, and preparation.
5. Administrators and leaders should insist on provision for women to represent women in whatever organizational bodies discuss women's interests and vote policies concerning women. Women should be on all committees-- for the value of the viewpoints that women can add to the consideration of any topic.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Today one cannot pick up a magazine or a newspaper without reading such headlines as: The feminine role is commemoration day topic (*Johns Hopkins Journal*, Spring 1971) ; Hobgoblins that hold down women, a *Life* review of July 2, 1971, by Carol E. Rinzler of a book by Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place* (William Morrow and Company) ; From Adam's rib to women's lib, an article by Kenneth L. Woodward (*McCall's*, June 1971) ; Set stage for new equal rights battle (the Equal Rights Amendment before Congress), by Sarah Booth Conroy, and The liberation of Betty Friedan, by Lyn Tornabene (both in *McCall's* May 1971 issue) ; Women pressure Lansing for new equal pay law (*The News-Palladium*, Benton Harbor, Michigan, June 29, 1971) ; and a new regular column in *Ladies' Home Journal* entitled "The Working Woman," by Letty Cottin Pogrebin. This is a very broad spectrum of publications on this subject sampled in a brief period. Do not for a moment deceive yourselves into thinking that American Adventist women are not reading such articles (not to mention books) and thinking long thoughts. They are.
- 2 *Bulletin of the Michigan Association of Women Deans and Counselors*, June 1971, pp. 1-5, passim.
- 3 F. L. Bland, Of one blood, *Review and Herald* (July 8, 1971) .

- 4 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1971), pp. 38-42.
- 5 Kenneth L. Woodward, From Adam's rib to women's lib, *McCall's* June 1971 p.118.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *Manuscript 43a*, 1898; Manuscript Release Number 267 (emphasis added) . Cited from research paper by John G. Beach, a seminary student.
- 7 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, volume seven (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press Publishing Association 1902), pp. 207-208.

Doctor Running's paper was originally undertaken at the request of the Biblical Research Committee (whose chairman is Dr. Gordon M. Hyde) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. EDITOR.

Comments

BETTY STIRLING, Loma Linda University

Doctor Running has summarized well the major charges expressed by the working women of the Adventist church and has made some pertinent recommendations to improve the situation in which many find themselves. Some of the points she raises concern major problems. Three of these particularly need to be emphasized: (1) the persistent discriminatory behavior toward women who work; (2) the ignoring of qualified women (often while filling jobs with less qualified men) ; and (3) the practice of having men decide policy pertaining to women — without women representatives participating in the decision-making.

Discriminatory behavior toward women employed in the church is slowly disappearing — frequently as a result of pressure from outside the church. Wage scales and promotion policies are being brought into line. But as Doctor Running says, much remains to be accomplished.

Ignoring qualified women in favor of men for certain positions is related, of course, to our social definitions of “men's work” and “women's work.” Both men and women almost automatically classify certain jobs with a “he does” and certain others with a “she does.” Those responsible for hiring and promoting will need to exert much conscious effort to eradicate this firmly held, though often unconscious, practice.

The practice of men's deciding questions about the working women of

the church without consulting women or making them part of the decision-making group is also a social custom. Men are the church's decision-makers on most things anyway. So why worry if they are making decisions about women? The alternative — having women alone decide policy for men — is unthinkable, of course, and in the normal course of social events simply would not happen.

Doctor Running mentions also such matters as the reasons for the kind of clothing worn by men and women. These aspects and others (like the frequently mentioned generic use of “man,” “men,” “he,” etc., to refer to both men and women) may illustrate how discrimination is built into the language or the everyday customs of society, but they are minor aspects that will gradually change as more important problems are settled.

In her recommendations Doctor Running expresses well what many of the working women of the church would like, especially the professional women. Whether or not the “temporarily” employed, or the nonworking church women are very much concerned is another question. The chances are that the support for an Adventist women's liberation movement is not yet widespread, among either the women or the men.

Because there is a question as to the support for change, I would like to raise some questions from another viewpoint. Doctor Running has made her plea on behalf of the concerned woman. Could we look also at the question of women's status and role in the Adventist church from the viewpoint of the church organization?

The basic question would then become: What would be the benefit to the church of stopping discrimination against women? It seems to me that the church would benefit in many ways. A wider pool of women from which to select, and women workers who are satisfied workers are but two of the advantages to the church. It is true that eliminating discrimination might initially cost more in wages and fringe benefits. But would these not ultimately balance out in greater efficiency and less turnover? We might ask the question this way: Can the church afford not to make use of its women to their full capacities?

There is a corollary to the question of advantages to the church of stopping discrimination against women: What would be the advantages to the church of stopping discrimination against men? This is not a facetious question. Just as some women have the talents and preparation for what is called “men's work,” some men have the talents (though usually not the training) for what is called “women's work.” Should not the church stop discrimination both ways? Why shouldn't men with relevant talents and in-

terests be encouraged to take jobs as secretaries, nurses, teachers in lower grades, and other jobs they are really barred from now ? Can the church afford *not* to make use of its men in their true abilities ?

Obviously, if the church is to do something about the position of women (and men) in the church, there is a big educational job waiting. The church ought to study seriously how to educate young women to stop hiding their talents, how to educate young men to be willing to try jobs that are called “women’s,” how to educate the decision-makers of the church to choose a person on merit rather than sex, and (possibly most difficult) how to educate the rank and file of church members to accept the new situation of equality of opportunity and responsibility for men and women in the church.

EDNA MAYE LOVELESS, Loma Linda, California

There can be no quarrel with Doctor Running's statement that many injustices have been done to women, even within the circle of the Adventist church. I'm not sure, however, that women have been the special object of injustice. Those who fail to value women as people valuable to God and to his work may also be insensitive and critical of men, children, blacks, whites, the uneducated, or the educated — depending on which camp they are in. I think discrimination is typically *un-Christian* rather than male, or white, or black, or whatever.

That the injustices should be corrected is incontrovertible also. I think, however, that there is more than one way to attain equal opportunity to sacrifice. Instead of raising women's wages to the level of men's, might we be more in the spirit of sacrifice to lower men's wages to the level of women's ? We might then be *starting* toward a bit of an equalizing spirit with the Seventh-day Adventist workers in the world field, some of whom have come home from mission appointments when their children reached college age because their total wages were less than the children's tuition would be. If we're attacking inequities, it may be that we should give our attention to the grosser ones first.

If women lack qualifications to serve where men are serving, Doctor Running suggests, it may be because they have not had equal opportunity. This may be true in some cases, but I think we should not overlook other reasons. Often women are not qualified because of the choices they have made.

Many choose to marry and stay at home rather than complete their education. Some choose to accept the support of a man rather than pursue a career. After the childbearing and childrearing years, often they choose the freedom of movement that nonpursuit of a career provides. Some noncareer women choose to contribute to society and the church by using their skills and education in volunteer projects worthy of their time and talent.

On the other hand, some choose to be frivolous and are not deserving of position or recognition. Many women with inordinate interest in fashion, decorating, dining, and matchmaking for their offspring have damaged the image of the Seventh-day Adventist woman. If a man has such a woman for his wife, he may have difficulty (God forbid) discerning that there are capable and intelligent women working in his organization.

Although Doctor Running asserts rightly that women have not always had equal opportunities, we should not overlook the fact that there are some specific roles that women play best. Their opportunities may not be identical with men's, but women have roles no less important. The opportunities open to a woman seem to me to be extremely wide-range. A woman can pursue a career, singlemindedly. Or, if she chooses wisely, she can marry a man who is able to support her (so that her choice to work is optional) and who will not be threatened by her choice to pursue a career. She can choose to remain childless. Or she can choose the greatest of professions, motherhood. This is not to denigrate other occupations of either men or women. Persons who perform a service to mankind through their work are achieving personal dignity and underlining the dignity of work.

But if a woman pursues motherhood adequately (Doctor Running's estimates notwithstanding), she is likely to devote more than ten years of her life to it. Getting the last child in school does not terminate her duties, although some parallel activities may be possible then. It is true that some options must be bypassed if one pursues motherhood. But such conditions are not peculiar to this career. Many a surgeon at great personal loss may have stifled another career in the process. And the inequities of financial backing have probably operated more effectively than those of sex to bar hosts of potential professional people from a desired course. As Robert Frost says:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Any of our choices preclude a variety of other choices. It might be profitable to consider that making choices is as crucial as decrying injustice.