

Women Seek More Involvement in Church Life, Says Leader

Women want to be more involved in the life of the church, says Ardis Stenbakken, director of women's ministries for the Seventh-day Adventist world church, speaking out on International Women's Day, designated March 8 by the United Nations.

Adventist women have skills to contribute and a passion for service, says Stenbakken, reflecting on both the achievements of Adventist women over the past years, and the challenges they face. She wants to see a women's ministries group active in every Adventist church. "We're trying to meet real needs in our churches and in our communities," she says. "One of the first things Christ did was to meet people's everyday needs."

"Seventy percent of the church is made up of women," she adds. "If you want something to happen, get the majority involved."

From the Philippines to India to the United States, evangelism is one area in which women are becoming more active, says Stenbakken. She attributes some 260,000 baptisms over the past three years to women's ministries outreach programs around the world. "To hear the gospel and Bible stories from a woman's point of view often has great impact," she explains. "In many parts of the world, only women can reach out to women. Previously they've often been involved in only behind-the-scenes work that has been assigned to them."

Women's ministries also works to address problems facing women in the general community--problems including poverty, abuse, illiteracy and poor health.

"Literacy is still a major problem," she says. "In many parts of the world education of women is not a priority. But the ability to read and write is essential for learning important health information, for economic development, and for spiritual growth. We are working both at the United Nations and through local literacy programs to raise awareness of the importance of literacy for women."

The women's ministries department of the world church is also the driving force behind Abuse Prevention Emphasis Day, August 24, which will raise awareness of the problem of abuse and distribute information through churches around the world. Stenbakken says the Adventist Church has realized the necessity of providing a safe, caring place for victims of abuse. "And in order to do that we've got to talk about the issue of abuse--its causes and solutions."

In looking to the future, Stenbakken would like to see greater acceptance of women as leaders. In women's ministries departments for local regions, directors are sometimes paid a stipend, and sometimes not at all, she says. Several regions still have men as women's ministries directors. "It's changing, but it still hasn't changed," says Stenbakken.

According to Stenbakken, women need more education if they are going to be involved. "Some of our institutional money for graduate work goes only to men," she says. Her department has given 630 scholarships to women in more than 60 countries. The money comes primarily from the sale of devotional books produced by women's ministries.

Women's ministries traces its roots to 1898, when Sarepta Myrenda Irish Henry championed the initiative with the encouragement and affirmation of church pioneer, Ellen White. But in the years that followed, women's ministries declined as a functioning department of the church's General Conference.

"In the 1980s and '90s women started saying, 'Hey, we have something of value we want to share, too,'" says Stenbakken. The current women's ministries department was established in 1990. Today its mission is to encourage women in spiritual growth, participation, decision-making, and outreach in the church, and through their work, to minister to others--both men and women.

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"Whatever is true, whatever is respectable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there be any virtue or of be any praise, think on these things."

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