

FULL USE OF TALENTS IN THE CHURCH

by

Betty Stirling, Ph.D.

FULL USE OF TALENTS IN THE CHURCH

A few weeks ago I sat beside a woman minister on the plane between Chicago and Denver. In response to my questions she told me about her work as a pastor of three community churches of evangelical persuasion in eastern Colorado--a parish of some seventy miles diameter. Preaching two or three sermons on Sunday was a small part of what she did. But I was particularly interested in how she felt about her acceptance as a regular ordained minister. She said there had been some hesitance at first in connection with weddings, funerals and baptisms--not too much with the preaching itself. But now she felt that she was fully accepted, and even preferred in the case of death in parishioner families. Somehow people seemed to think a woman might understand better in this situation. From my conversation with her I would say it was more likely her personality than her being a woman that reassured them in a time of trouble.

But the discussion made me question again why the Seventh-day Adventist church has hesitated so long to allow women full responsibility in an important area of church work. Here was a woman who obviously had talents for her work and who was definitely dedicated to it, and was keeping up professionally. She was working as a pastor in a conservative part of the country, among parishioners of traditional religious heritage, yet she was "voted in" by the congregations. I wondered why we were not using the similar talents of women in our church. We make use of women in various lay capacities in the church, but can we really make the maximum use of the talents of both men and women without giving equality to women? And can we ever say that we recognize women as equal within the church organization unless we can ordain them on the same basis as men?

Purpose of ordination

Ordination is a religious rite for the purpose of setting apart persons for certain categories of sacred activities, and is used in the Seventh-day Adventist church to designate persons to be deacons, elders or ministers. The church manual does not stipulate completely which offices require ordination and which do not, although there is some indication. While "deacon" and "elder" are offices as well as sacred activities, the ministry is not. When a man is ordained to be a deacon, he is ordained for a specific position in a particular church. His ordination does not entitle him to serve in other offices (although it may apply to the same office in another local church). The same is true of the elder, although there is some indication that ordination as an elder also qualifies a man as a deacon, since the elder job is "higher" than that of deacon. (1967 Church Manual, p. 81)

But ordination to the ministry is much less specific. The person is not ordained to the position of minister in a parish. He is ordained to the ministry in general, and in fact may not actually engage in pastoral ministry at all. Ordination does confer the responsibility of administering the rites of the church, such as baptism, communion, and weddings. Since only "properly credentialed" persons are supposed to address the congregation from the pulpit, ordination to the ministry does also carry preaching responsibility, shared with other "properly credentialed" persons. (1967 Church Manual, p. 177,8)

But although ordination is not to specific offices in connection with the ministry, some offices limit incumbents to those who have been ordained. Conference president is one of these, and while the Manual does not actually say so, the implication is that only those who are ordained would be eligible for a "higher" position, such as union conference president or general conference president. By custom, if not stated requirement, ordination is also a prerequisite

to some of the other administrative positions of the church and its institutions. However, in many cases the ordination appears to follow the selection for certain types of positions.

Effect of ordination

While the purpose of ordination is to set apart certain persons for a sacred work, and to distinguish their work from the secular or ordinary, this setting apart, or division, may work in less desirable ways. For example, ordination separates the church into professional and nonprofessional categories: the clergy (the ordained), and the laity (the unordained and those ordained to "lay" ministry). Professionalism per se is not bad, but it does imply that the nonprofessional are not competent to do the tasks that are set apart for the professional. The question then arises, To whom was the gospel commission addressed--to the clergy only or to the entire church?

I am not arguing against a professional ministry. I think that the better the professional training our ministers can have the more effective their ministry can be. But one does need to recognize the "side effects" of professionalization, such as exclusiveness, whether it involves the ministry, or medicine, or teaching or any other field. And where professionalization has built into it discrimination by sex or other characteristics, the side effects also include reducing the pool of talent available to the organization.

Ordination does not equate precisely with the distinguishing marks of professionalization in other occupations. To reach professional status, a candidate is usually required to meet certain educational qualifications, possess certain degrees, pass certain examinations, etc. But while ordin-

ation to the clergy is usually preceded by certain educational procedures and apprenticeship, it also seems to result from quite unrelated organizational activity--such as being a treasurer, or giving a "health message." Unlike the entrance into other professions, it also seems to be based heavily on the evidence of a "call" to enter the ministry. Ordination has another side effect which can be detrimental to the church. Dividing the membership of the church into two classes of people, the clergy and the laity, produces a hierarchy in which the clergy is higher than the laity, and the ordained laity higher than the unordained laity; and within the ordained laity those ordained to the church elder positions are higher than those ordained to the church deacon positions. (Church Manual, p. 81)

A hierarchical arrangement is not in itself a bad thing. In fact, it may result in more efficiency in getting the work done. But as long as the distinguishing characteristic in this hierarchy (ordination) is limited to men, no woman, regardless of her aptitudes, desires or education, can rise above the bottom rung of the ladder. She cannot be deacon, church elder or clergyman. It is true that she can be a deaconess. But the deaconess office is not "sacred" like the deacon's; it is not deemed worthy of ordination.

Does ordination really make that much difference? One might use as an analogy the effect of being able to add the magic letters of one of the higher educational degrees after his name. I was teaching at San Jose State College when I received my Ph.D. I was no better as teacher or sociologist the day I received word of the conferring of the degree than I had been the day before, but those letters made a world of difference in responsibility and privilege (including an immediate raise in pay and more authority on the

departmental committee!).

Another side effect of ordination is to limit entrance to church positions other than pastoral ministry. Because women are barred from ordination, they are also disqualified from any church positions which require, or traditionally include, ordination, in addition to the ministry itself. Even though they may have education and possibly even experience that qualified them for particular jobs, lack of ordination disqualifies them.

The method of selecting officers for denominational positions effectively precludes women from significant direct influence in who is chosen. Furthermore, it eliminates them from those positions. Women may be delegates from their own churches to the local conference constituency meeting, as delegates may help to select the local conference officers. But the delegates to the meeting which selects for the next higher level (union) are not from the churches but from the conferences. Since almost no women hold conference positions, these delegates are likely to be men, mostly ordained men. On the next higher level women are even more likely to be excluded. (See 1967 Church Manual, p. 188,9)

Qualifications for the ministry

First and foremost, the minister must be a dedicated Christian--a state open to women as well as men. But beyond that, if one were to write a job description of the parish minister, it would include certain competencies: reasonable public speaking skills, ability to analyze problems, ability to reach people and to get them to work with each other ("interpersonal relationship" skills), leadership ability, counseling skill, some knowledge of financial affairs, and some flair for public relations. A few other talents are nice but perhaps not as necessary (e.g. musical ability, storytelling

skill.)

But, like Christian commitment, these abilities and skills are not sex-linked traits. Because of our cultural patterns, men and women may differ in the amount of emphasis they have received in developing their talents, but the distribution of those talents seems to be irrespective of sex. This means that potentially women are as capable of the work of the ministry as men. They do not necessarily have the right training, since there have been no openings heretofore, but this lack can be remedied within a reasonable period. Undoubtedly many do have at least part of the training needed: Bible workers have often completed many of the educational requirements; Bible teachers may have taken almost the same program as ministers; social workers frequently have better developed skills in interpersonal relations, counseling, etc., than the minister.

The objection has sometimes been raised, with regard to women in the ministry, that there are not enough jobs now for the men who desire to enter ministerial work. But the observation is also made at times that some men who have entered the ministry make only mediocre ministers. If talents that qualify for the ministry are more or less evenly distributed between men and women, would it not be to the advantage of the church to take persons with highest potential, whether men or women, rather than to take only men, and thus get both mediocrity and high ability. Sometimes men express the wish to work as Bible instructors, but this work is traditionally reserved for women (who can be paid less, among other things), and men are not usually considered. But the talents for "Bible work" are not limited to women, any more than "ministerial talents" are limited to men. Putting women with ability and motivation into the public ministry, and putting men with relevant

ability and motivation into Bible work, might be of decided benefit in upgrading both types of work by putting people where their greatest potential and interest lies.

The same arguments should apply to the departmental and administrative offices of the church. Traditionally the men have occupied these positions, while the women have been their secretaries. It is common talk, however, that in many cases a reversal of the roles would accomplish more for the church! Seriously, why not reverse the administrator-secretary role where talent and interest would indicate an advantage? If the work of the church is to get the gospel to the world, is it necessary to follow a traditional way to do it? Or should the Lord's money be spent to the greatest advantage-- meaning the most efficient and speedy way of spreading the message?

Reasons for wanting ordination

Why would a woman want ordination? Who among the women would be interested? What are their alternatives?

Women choose careers on the basis of several considerations. Some of these are the same ones that affect choices made by men. Others may be different. If a young woman interested in caring for the sick has superior grades, is in good health and has a dedication to professional life she may choose either nursing or medicine. Why would she choose one and not the other? Time is one factor. She can reach professional (paying) status much quicker in nursing than in medicine. Competition is much lower in nursing, and the educational program is less demanding. But if she wants to study medicine she can do so. Being a woman is a handicap, but does not bar her way.

But suppose she is interested in healing the soul rather than the body.

Here the two professional choices are the pastoral ministry and Bible work. But she has no choice between the two, because one is for women and the other for men. To reach professional status requires the same time for each (although men may be encouraged to go on for further training). She may study many of the same courses in her undergraduate work; she may desire to take graduate courses and in some cases do so. She may actually do many of the same things once she is hired. But she will be paid much less, of course, because she is in "women's work."

What is the difference in the occupations? Both may give Bible studies. But only the minister can baptize the converts. Both may counsel young people. But only the minister can perform a marriage ceremony. Both may comfort the sorrowing. But only the minister conducts a funeral. It is ordination rather than training, dedication, ability or experience that makes the difference in what they can do. The minister does more public work, but it is because he is ordained, not because he is more qualified.

The minister can also consider other opportunities branching out from his pulpit ministry. He can go into conference administrative or departmental work. He can go into teaching--either academy or college. He can go into public evangelism. None of these are open to the Bible worker, because she is not ordained as a minister.

Not so!

Why then would a young women want to become an ordained minister rather than a Bible worker? Because the ministry offers a greater variety of work, provides more challenge, opens the way for further possibilities, includes greater responsibility, and brings greater reward, both in terms of satisfaction with results and better pay.

Given the choice of either occupation, would women totally reject Bible

work? No. Bible work does have its own advantages of more opportunity for personal work, and more direct responsibility for the convert.

Perhaps a way to most effectively utilize the talents in the church would be to designate two kinds of pastoral ministry: one that is more public, and the other more personal. Both would have appropriate educational qualifications, and both would be set apart by ordination. And both would receive the same pay. Only equalization of pay would make the two really equal as choices for either men or women. Restricting men to the clergy and women to Bible work, according to the present policy, restricts the church's access to talents of both, but does the most harm in restriction on women.

Educating the church

What would happen if the administration of the church were to decide to assign jobs on the basis of ability rather than gender? Would there be a great rush of women toward the ministry? Probably not. Women are just as much traditionalists as men. In fact, because of culture patterns they are often more conservative. Many who might be interested for themselves would hesitate, and need encouragement. The clergy will have to develop new attitudes, and learn to see women as colleagues. The laity, both men and women, would need to be educated to the change.

Mature women who have been serving the church should be helped to obtain any additional training they need to enter the formal ministry. This should include financial help, if necessary, on the same basis it would be given to men. In some cases they do not need additional training but only ordination as a recognition of the work they are already doing. Younger women should be encouraged to go through the regular ministerial educational program.

Over a hundred years ago the following plea was published in the Review and Herald. It did not come from a woman, but from a man. (S. C. Welcome, "Shall Women Keep Silence in the Churches?", Review and Herald, 15:109 (February 23, 1860)).

We are informed on the authority of divine revelation that male and female are one in Christ Jesus; that in the relation in which they both stand to him, the distinction is as completely broken down as between Jew and Gentile, bond and free. Thus revelation has made known the important truth, and reason will bear testimony to the same thing. The mind of the female is certainly susceptible of all those sensibilities, affections and improvements which constitute the christian character. In a state of renovation we must admit it has equal access to the fountain of light and life. And experience has proved that many females have possessed the natural qualifications for speaking in public, the range of thought, the faculty of communicating their ideas in appropriate language, the sympathy with suffering humanity, a deep and lively sense of gratitude to God, and of the beauty of holiness, a zeal for the honor of God, and the happiness of his rational creatures--all these are found among the female part of the human family, as frequently and as eminently as among the men. Then let no stumbling-block be thrown in their way, but let them fill the place that God calls them to fill, let them not be bound down to silence by church rules, but let their tongues speak forth the praises of God, and let them point sinners to the Lamb of God, and grieve not the holy Spirit by silence in the congregation.

How much progress have we made since this was written in making better use of the talents of women in the church?

The question which must be seriously considered now--since it was not answered in 1860--is whether it is possible for the church to make maximum use of the talents of its members without giving full equality, both privileges and responsibilities, to that half who happen to be women. And this raises the corollary question of whether it is possible to give full equality without allowing ordination in a church organization so strictly divided between the clergy and laity.