

# Moving Forward in Unity

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*Differing positions on ordination without gender distinction can be respected in the practices of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church and enhance the unity and mission of the Church<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

The question to be addressed in this paper is straight forward. With respect to the practice of ordination for gospel ministry, can diversity be respected and unity maintained in the Seventh-day Adventist Church so that the Church and its mission are strengthened?

### The Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to respond to this question by proposing that the Church can maintain its unity and adopt a position which allows for diversity in practice with respect to ordination to the gospel ministry without gender distinction.

### The Perspective of the Paper

The paper is written with deep respect for the differing positions held on the subject of the practice of ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, at the outset it is important to indicate that the paper does reflect a definite viewpoint and it is appropriate that a number of pre-suppositional perspectives be articulated. They are as follows:

1. Uncompromising loyalty to the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church
2. Full commitment to the God-given gift of global unity in this Church and respect for the mosaic of diversity within the global Church family
3. Full commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist methodology of Biblical interpretation referred to as the historical-grammatical hermeneutic
4. An understanding and respect for the reality that in the Church that there are different perspectives on ordination.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Some thoughts contained in this paper reflect aspects of a chapter written by the author for a forthcoming Festschrift to be published in honor of George Knight and edited by Woodrow Whidden and Gilbert Valentine.

<sup>2</sup> The Theology of Ordination Study Committee Report of the North American Division has expressed it this way: "Because the Bible does not directly address the ordination of women, and because the principle-based evidence is neither complete nor irrefutable, it can be expected that differing conclusions may be drawn by equally sincere and competent students of God's Word" (p6).

- 1 5. Dependence on Scripture and the writings of Ellen G White as they are applied to  
2 the needs of the Church and its mission. The pre-suppositions, proposals and  
3 conclusions of this paper are not in any way drawn from the philosophies of  
4 feminism nor those theologies and practices which are not representative of the  
5 Biblical understanding and accepted practices of the Seventh-day Adventist  
6 Church.
- 7 6. A foundation in a Biblical understanding of God’s call to the ministry and the  
8 reaffirmation of the freedom of the Spirit to call and use whomever He chooses to  
9 minister to His church and to be engaged in response to that call in the mission of  
10 the church.
- 11 7. A desire to acknowledge the work of the Spirit in addressing misunderstandings of  
12 the nature of Christian ministry which have been introduced into the Christian  
13 Church over the centuries. This is a call to include in our agenda as reformers of  
14 the Christian faith the restoration of a truly Christian ministry as defined by  
15 Scripture under the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- 16 8. The assertion that this issue alone is under consideration. Any assumption of  
17 linkage between the topic under discussion and other problematic issues is not  
18 appropriate. Credence is not given to any attempt to draw conclusions about  
19 positions on other issues on the basis of discussion about this issue.
- 20 9. The recognition that because of differing religious contexts, history and  
21 experience, the meaning attached to ordination is influenced by culture. Different  
22 cultures appear to bestow a different status upon a minister at ordination.
- 23 10. A position of affirmation for the practice of ordination without reference to gender  
24 in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

#### 25 26 Delimitation

27 This paper is written with full recognition that the purpose of the Theology of  
28 Ordination Study Committee is to give **study** to the topic of ordination and its practice  
29 in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Other ecclesiastical bodies will have the  
30 responsibility to assess and further develop in detail any recommendations which result  
31 from this study process. To that end, this paper is, in effect, a “broad brush strokes”  
32 case study of how differing practices may be implemented in the Church.

1 **Historical Reflections**

2 Building on our Seventh-day Adventist History and Heritage

3           Whatever we do as we move forward we should ensure that we build on the  
4 foundation laid throughout our history and that we respect our Seventh-day Adventist  
5 heritage. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century whenever we have had to make  
6 difficult decisions about matters of purpose and practice we have always asked the  
7 questions, “What does the Word of God say?” and “What is it that best serves our  
8 mission?” The same questions are to be asked as we move this discussion forward.  
9 Word and mission have been the ingredients of success for the Seventh-day Adventist  
10 Church that have distinguished the Church for the last 150 years.

11

12 The Principle of Flexibility in Practice

13           Further, in being true to our history and heritage we need to remember that  
14 appropriate flexibility of practice has been a significant reason for the continuing  
15 growth, development and sustainability of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church.  
16 That flexibility has been a direct consequence of our commitment to the Word of God  
17 and commitment to our mission as mandated by Christ Himself. Our reading of  
18 Scripture makes it obvious that God Himself used various patterns of organisation and  
19 leadership in His dealings with His people. He practised the principle of flexibility. In  
20 the era of the nation of Israel He used at various times the patriarchs, the judges,  
21 prophets, priests and kings. Then in the New Testament, while it is clear that principles  
22 of order and organisation were a part of God’s intent for His Church, He did not  
23 prescribe one inflexible form of order and organisation. There is no mention of Sabbath  
24 School, a church board or business meeting. There is no requirement that we have a  
25 Church Manual, or that we establish a whole range of church officers in order to  
26 facilitate the fulfilment of our mission. Indeed we believe that God has given the Church  
27 the authority to establish such ecclesiastical practices and offices precisely because we  
28 are committed to the principles of Scripture and the fulfilment of our mission.

29           The words of the apostle Paul himself are probably the most defining with  
30 respect to how we are to approach flexibility in practice:

31

32           <sup>19</sup> For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I  
33 might win more of them. <sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To  
34 those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under

1        *the law) so that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I*  
2        *became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under*  
3        *Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became*  
4        *weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I*  
5        *might by all means save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may*  
6        *share in its blessings. [1 Corinthians 9:19-23. NRSV]*

7  
8        Without taking the time to fully exegete this passage, two things are clear. First,  
9        our commitment to our mission determines our practice. Second, appropriate flexibility  
10       of practice is not only permissible, but in the context of mission, it is necessary.

11       Study of the history of the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church  
12       reveals that we have generally well understood this principle of flexibility. Particularly  
13       was this the case in matters of Church order and organisation. For example, in 1855  
14       James White was insisting that the organisation of the Church should be patterned after  
15       what he regarded as a “perfect system of order, set forth in the New Testament.”<sup>3</sup> Just a  
16       few years later as he came to realise that the New Testament was not so specific as to  
17       prescribe a non-negotiable system of order, he argued that “we should not be afraid of  
18       that system which is not opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense.”<sup>4</sup> While  
19       ordination was not the specific topic under consideration in White’s discussion, the  
20       principle is established that change and flexibility for the sake of mission are entirely  
21       possible. Furthermore, wherever a definitive and unchallengeable view cannot be  
22       established on the basis of scripture alone, we are to use “sound sense” as a guide.

23       Ellen White herself also often demonstrated these principles in the counsel she  
24       gave to the leaders of the denomination. Her counsels to them took account of context  
25       and circumstances and while remaining focused on essential principle she was indeed  
26       adaptable. For example, in 1892 she gave some very specific counsel with regard to the  
27       shape of church organisational structure. Writing from Australia to the General  
28       Conference in session, [her letter was read to the delegates by O. A. Olsen, president of  
29       the General Conference], she explained:

30       *We had a hard struggle in establishing organization. Notwithstanding that*  
31       *the Lord gave testimony after testimony upon this point, the opposition was strong,*  
32       *and it had to be met again and again. But we knew that the Lord God of Israel was*  
33       *leading us, and guiding by his providence. We engaged in the work of organization*  
34       *and marked prosperity attended the advance movement. . . . The system of*

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<sup>3</sup> *Review and Herald*, 23 January 1855, 164.

<sup>4</sup> *Review and Herald*, 21 July 1859, 68.

1            *organization has proved a grand success. . . . As we have advanced our system of*  
2            *organization has proved effectual. . .*

3            *Let none entertain the thought, however, that we can dispense with*  
4            *organization. It has cost us much study, and many prayers for wisdom that we*  
5            *know God has answered, to erect this structure. It has been built up by his*  
6            *direction, through much sacrifice and conflict. Let none of our brethren be so*  
7            *deceived as to attempt to tear it down, for you will thus bring in a condition of*  
8            *things that you do not dream of. **In the name of the Lord, I declare to you that it***  
9            ***is to stand strengthened, established, and settled.***<sup>5</sup> *(Emphasis supplied).*

10            This statement is obviously one of very strong support for the need for  
11            organization and the "system of organization" operative in the church at the time of her  
12            writing. But please note the time of her writing. Ellen White wrote these words only  
13            nine years before the major reorganization of 1901-1903 when organizational  
14            structures underwent major reform: union conferences were introduced and the  
15            auxiliary organizations were brought under the umbrella of the executive committee of  
16            the General Conference as departments.<sup>6</sup> Obviously she did not intend that strong  
17            approval of the principles of organization or even of the specific system and forms of  
18            organization should preclude later changes when contingencies in the context of the  
19            world mission of the church made change desirable.

20            In fact, on the day before the official opening of the 1901 General Conference  
21            session she declared, "God wants a change . . . right here . . . right now."<sup>7</sup> The following  
22            day when reiterating the concerns which she had communicated in no uncertain terms  
23            on the previous day, she added, "according to the light that has been given me--and just  
24            how it is to be accomplished I cannot say--greater strength must be brought into the  
25            managing force of the Conference."<sup>8</sup> She called for change and flexibility but did not  
26            attempt to dictate at key times in our history the particular shape that structures were  
27            to take. She left that to due process.

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<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White to Brethren of the General Conference, 19 December 1892, Letter 32, 1892; GC Bulletin, 1893, 20-25.

<sup>6</sup> The adoption of some of these structures became possible because there had been an earlier flexibility of approach which made their general adoption more acceptable.

<sup>7</sup>"Talk of Mrs E. G. White, before Representative Brethren, In the College Library, April 1, 1901, 2:30 P.M.," MS 43a, 1901. This manuscript together with MS 43, an edited edition of Ellen White's speech is available in Ellen G. White Research Centres.

<sup>8</sup> General Conference Bulletin, 1901, 25. By "greater strength," Ellen White did not mean more authority. She was referring to the wider participation of other gifted people in the work of leadership in the Church.

1           It appears that for Ellen White, the bottom line with respect to practice was the  
2 facilitation of the mission of the church. Structures which inhibited or detracted from  
3 task accomplishment, which led the church to focus its time and attention inward rather  
4 than outward, were not at all appropriate. For example, soon after the General  
5 Conference session of 1901, Ellen White wrote to A. G. Daniells, the newly elected  
6 president of the General Conference regarding the work among the "colored people" in  
7 the South. She admonished Daniells to be flexible in his administration because of the  
8 unique needs of the South. The church was not to become "narrow" and confined by  
9 "regular lines." Different methods of organization and approach were necessary in  
10 culturally diverse situations. For administration to be tied to an inflexible  
11 predetermined policy which could not adapt to diverse cultural and sociological needs  
12 was, for Ellen White, an abuse of administrative prerogative.<sup>9</sup> The very same day, Ellen  
13 White wrote to her son Edson, who was working in the southern part of the United  
14 States. Edson was inclined to be too adventurous in his innovations. Whereas Daniells  
15 the administrator had to be counselled to allow change and innovation in a different  
16 socio-cultural milieu, Edson had to be cautioned not to be too hasty. Ellen White wrote:

17           *"You need now to be able to think and judge with clear discrimination. Great care*  
18 *must be exercised in making changes which differ from the old-established routine.*  
19 *Changes are to be made, but they are not to be made in such an abrupt manner*  
20 *that you will not carry the people with you. You who are working in the South must*  
21 *labor as if in a foreign country. You must work as pioneers, seeking to save expense*  
22 *in every way possible. And above all, you must study to show yourselves approved*  
23 *unto God."*<sup>10</sup>  
24

25           If it was appropriate for Ellen White and the pioneers of the Church to  
26 demonstrate this level of flexibility in order to facilitate the unity and the mission of the  
27 Church it is no less so today when the level of diversity and complexity in the world  
28 Church is so much greater. Yes, it is important to act together and it is important to hold  
29 dearly to those things which make us who we are. But in the context of diversity where  
30 Scripture is not definitive, surely we can agree to act in a manner consistent with that of  
31 our pioneers as we work together under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

32           The mission of the Church is realised to the extent that we are loyal to our  
33 understanding of the teachings of Scripture and we translate those beliefs into

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<sup>9</sup> See Ellen G. White to A. G. Daniells, 30 June 1901, Letter 65, 1901.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen G. White to J. Edson White, 30 June 1901, Letter 62, 1901.

1 appropriate praxis within the diversity of cultures and environments in which we share  
2 the love of God. To the extent that we continue to be successful in doing just this, to that  
3 extent we will continue to flourish and be instrumental in fulfilling the commission that  
4 Christ has given us.

5

## 6 **The Way Forward**

7 The principle of flexibility in the pursuit of our mission as it was experienced in  
8 the time of Ellen White's leadership has served us well in the Church during the decades  
9 that have followed. Subsequent to an earlier discussion in 1975 on the role of women in  
10 the Church, and following careful study of Scripture, the General Conference Executive  
11 Committee at its Annual Council in 1984 took action with respect to the  
12 appropriateness of ordaining of women as local church elders. While a number of  
13 guidelines for the implementation of the decision were included, the substance of the  
14 action is stated in the minutes as follows:

15 *"To advise each division that it is free to make provision as it may deem necessary*  
16 *for the election and ordination of women as local church elders."<sup>11</sup>*

17

18 This action has served the global Church well. There have been no deep schisms.  
19 Indeed, it has promoted the preservation of unity of the Church and enabled mission to  
20 flourish by encouraging appropriate flexibility in practice. Time has shown that it was a  
21 wise decision in the face of the diversity of the Church on the issue of the role of men  
22 and women in the local church. It has not fractured the unity of the church and neither  
23 has it damaged the message and mission of the church. It is my observation that in the  
24 places where it was possible to implement the decision the church has been blessed.

25 Given the ongoing nature of the global discussion and the deliberations of the  
26 Theology of Ordination Study Committee the challenge again faces us as to how to  
27 preserve unity and move forward. In order to do that it is here recommended that the  
28 global Church take an enabling action which gives a similar flexibility to global Church  
29 practice with reference to the ordination of gospel ministers. Such an action could be  
30 worded something like this:

31 *That each division be given the prerogative to determine and make provision as it*  
32 *may deem appropriate within its territory for the ordination of men and women to*  
33 *the gospel ministry.*

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<sup>11</sup> General Conference Committee Annual Council, October 14, 1984.



1           How would this work in practice? Subsequent to an enabling action, the primary  
2 operational documents of the Church [*The Church Manual* and *General Conference*  
3 *Working Policy*] would need to be adjusted and appropriate wording found in order to  
4 express the principle of flexibility and permit freedom for the relevant various  
5 organizational entities of the Church to exercise their conscientious conviction on this  
6 matter. For the sake of the unity of the Church it is important for us to find the means of  
7 expression which bring the Church together; especially when there is difference such as  
8 is the case in this instance

9           As an example of how this wording might be adjusted, it could be stated that  
10 while all ordination as such is for the world Church, (deacons, elders and pastors), the  
11 scope of authority to perform the functions of an ordained person is determined by the  
12 appropriate authority-granting entity. For example, a person who is ordained as a  
13 deacon or an elder is authorised to function in those capacities only when elected to do  
14 so by a local church, for a specified period of time. If such an ordained person were to  
15 move to another local Church anywhere in the world, they would only be granted the  
16 authority to function as an elder or deacon in that local church, if elected through due  
17 process to do so. They would not need to be ordained again. On the other hand, if they  
18 were not authorised to function in those capacities by a local church, they would not  
19 function, even though ordained. The same would apply to pastors. Although the  
20 ordination of a pastor is recognition for ministry in the global Church, authorisation to  
21 exercise the functions of an ordained pastor would be granted by the body authorised to  
22 issue the ministerial credentials to individuals, whether male or female, within the  
23 territory in which they reside or are employed.

24           In fact there is a sense in which this principle is already at work. Ordination does  
25 not automatically enable a male pastor to minister in any part of the world. A process of  
26 careful selection still needs to occur to prevent the wrong person going to a place or  
27 responsibility for which he is totally unsuited. It is always appropriate to ensure that  
28 the right person ordained or otherwise is appointed to fill any vacancy. Credential-  
29 granting entities should always exercise their prerogative to meet the needs of their  
30 constituents in the best way for them and the Church.

31           On the basis of the changes made to documentation, each Division would then  
32 have the prerogative to determine how the issue would be handled within its own  
33 territory. Some Divisions would continue to do as they do at present and ordain only

1 men. Some will determine that they are going to ordain both men and women. It could  
2 be that some Divisions will determine that each union or employing entity within the  
3 Division may make the decision and make provision as each may deem appropriate  
4 within its territory for the ordination of men and women. It would be important that  
5 assurance be given in each circumstance that there would be mutual respect and  
6 recognition of the actions of each other and that within a Division, an employing entity's  
7 decision on the matter will not be overridden by the senior entity. There will be  
8 differences in practice just as there are right now with respect to ordination of local  
9 Church elders.

10         These differences should not be seen as insurmountable problems. Ministerial  
11 credentials are issued by an employing entity (usually a conference or a mission) upon  
12 the endorsement by the relevant Union. The credential grants authority to perform the  
13 functions of an ordained minister within the territory of the issuing authority. Even  
14 now, while we say that ordination is for the world Church this does not mean that  
15 ordained ministers can organise or disband churches within a specific territory, for  
16 example, without the approval of the local conference or mission. We expect that every  
17 ordained minister will function within the parameters of formally expressed approval  
18 by the supervisory entity for that territory.

19         All employing entities will continue to have the prerogative to issue ministerial  
20 credentials to those they appoint. They will continue to be able to choose whom they  
21 transfer into their territories and to issue credentials accordingly. They will also  
22 continue to have the prerogative through the service request process to grant  
23 appropriate authority to guests from other places who are invited to visit within their  
24 territory.

25         Consideration would need to be given to the situation if a female ordained  
26 person were to be called to serve in the General Conference or even in a Division where  
27 not all entities held the same position. The question to be faced in such a circumstance  
28 is whether holding a Ministerial Credential as compared to holding a Commissioned  
29 Minister Credential imposes any different or additional burden on any entity where  
30 ordination without gender distinction is not accepted. This paper contends that such  
31 should not be seen as an imposition because the functions unique to ministerial  
32 ordination (organising/disbanding Churches; functioning as a president, etc), can only  
33 be performed with the express consent of the supervising entity and the local

1 membership group involved. A person from the General Conference and/or a Division  
2 cannot simply travel around undertaking those tasks indiscriminately. Ministerial  
3 ordination, while it is for the global Church does not give authority for un-controlled or  
4 unsupervised activity which is out of harmony with the wishes and convictions of the  
5 local entity. There are parameters in place at present which moderate the scope of  
6 activity of an ordained minister and such would continue to be the case. Further, it  
7 should be noted that the widespread ministry and leadership of women who hold  
8 Commissioned Minister Credentials has not become a divisive issue in the Church. If  
9 some of these women or others holding similar positions were to receive ministerial  
10 ordination their functions with respect to their role in the global Church would really be  
11 unchanged.

12

### 13 **The Outcome for the Church**

14 In order to move forward it is important that it be made clear that any motion to  
15 be brought before the world Church will impact only those Divisions which are ready to  
16 proceed with the ordination of women as well as men. No entity which is opposed to  
17 ordaining woman need be affected in its practice. But those entities which  
18 conscientiously believe it is imperative could do so.

19 Unity does not mean uniformity. The essence of unity is not uniform action. The  
20 lessons of the Jerusalem Council make that abundantly clear. The Jerusalem Council did  
21 not consider uniformity the same as unity. It did not vote on the one hand that all  
22 members should be circumcised or on the other that all should be uncircumcised. The  
23 Jewish members could continue to circumcise while the Gentile members need not be  
24 circumcised [Acts 15:19-35]. Unity was obtained without uniformity.

25 No matter which position you or I personally take with reference to the  
26 discussion of ordination, as Seventh-day Adventists we have a responsibility to guard  
27 the unity and promote the mission of the Church. Right now we are at a watershed. We  
28 have opportunity to move forward in unity. In fact we all have the responsibility to  
29 maintain the unity of the Church and promote its mission. Even though it may come at  
30 what some may consider a cost, to do nothing will come at a greater cost: a deep schism  
31 in the Church. I do not believe that is what any of us want.

32

33

1 **Conclusion**

2 Finding a solution is the task to which the global Church must remain committed  
3 —if we are to remain a global Church family. Such a solution can maintain the integrity  
4 of our belief structure. The practice of ordination with or without gender distinction is  
5 not included within our statement of 28 fundamental beliefs. We can agree that the  
6 practice does not impinge on the content of our end-time message or on the fulfilment  
7 of our global mission, nor on our global unity. And we can surely agree to modify our  
8 essential operational documents in order to reflect our mutual decision. Whenever in  
9 our history we have faced a situation such as this we have taken the decision which will  
10 best fulfil our mission. Our unity has always been a function of our commitment to the  
11 Word of God and the mission He has given to us.

12 Right now, the situation we face is a threat to the unity of the Church. But I am  
13 confident that we will be able to avoid that outcome. Why? Because of our love and  
14 respect for God and one another; and our shared commitment to the mission of the  
15 Seventh-day Adventist Church. These complementary allegiances are the two things  
16 which are an antidote to schism in this Church. They are twin sisters, foundational to  
17 unity. Both must be present. One without the other will not do it. Allegiance without  
18 involvement is pointless. Involvement without allegiance is aimless and most likely  
19 dangerous. In both instances unity is the casualty.

20 This Church exists because there are people who have given their allegiance to  
21 God and the church, and they act on it. They come from “every nation, kindred, tongue  
22 and people” and they go to “every nation kindred, tongue, and people” (Revelation 14;  
23 6). They are one but they are different. Difference requires adaptation. Unity is  
24 ultimately dependent on the recognition that diversity exists. We can move forward  
25 together as the Holy Spirit leads us to love and respect one another and to find a  
26 solution which works.