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SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS ON WOMEN'S ORDINATION A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW¹

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Discussions on the role of women in the church have taken place within the Seventh-day Adventist Church throughout its history. It is noteworthy that the first 70 years of the denomination's history were assisted by the prophetic ministry of Ellen G White (1827-1915) who, having had significant leadership functions, was never ordained by human hands to any ecclesiastical office.² Since the 1970s such discussions have gained a new intensity. This has significantly polarized the church between those who are pro women's ordination and those who do not endorse such a proposal.

Reflecting this polarization, the historical surveys³ of the Adventist discussions on women's ordination are likewise divided between those in favor of it and those who are against it. Among those favoring it are Josephine Benton's *Called by God: Stories of Seventh-day Adventist Women Ministers* (1990);⁴ Michael Pearson's *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas* (1990);⁵ Bert Haloviak's "Women in Recent Adventist History" (1995);⁶ Kit Watts's "An Outline of the History of Seventh-day Adventists and the Ordination of Women" (1995);⁷ Beverly G. Beem, "Equality in Ministry: From 1881 to Now";⁸ Randal R. Wisbey's

¹The original version of this paper was presented at the Biblical Research Committee Meetings of the Inter-European Division of SDAs, Florence, Italy, September 17-18, 2012.

²This matter is further discussed under the subtitle "Historical Background," below.

³This list provides only representative "historical surveys" on the development of the discussions on women's ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Other major sources (with different approaches) are referred to sparsely throughout the present paper.

⁴Josephine Benton, *Called by God: Stories of Seventh-day Adventist Women Ministers* (Smithsburg, MD: Blackberry Hill, 1990).

⁵Michael Pearson, *Millennial Dreams and Moral Dilemmas: Seventh-day Adventism and Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 134-81.

⁶Bert Haloviak, "Women in Recent Adventist History," *Adventist Review*, May 1995, 21-23.

⁷Kit Watts, "An Outline of the History of Seventh-day Adventists and the Ordination of Women," in Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca F. Brillhart, eds., *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women* (Langley Park, MD: TEAMPress, 1995), 334-58.

⁸Beverly G. Beem, "Equality in Ministry: From 1881 to Now," in www.aaw.cc (accessed on Sept. 30, 2012).

“SDA Women in Ministry, 1970-1998” (1998);⁹ and Gary Patterson’s “Analysis of What Is Happening with the Ordination of Women Pastors” (2012).¹⁰

Historical surveys against women’s ordination include C. Mervyn Maxwell’s “A Very Surprising (and Interesting) History” (1998);¹¹ Samuel Korangteng-Pipim’s “Misleading and Erroneous Claims Regarding Early Adventist History” (2001);¹² Heber N. de Lima’s “Women’s Ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Brief Historical Overview” (2003);¹³ and Wellesley Muir’s *Daughters of Inheritance: A New Look at Women’s Ordination* (2010).¹⁴

More neutral historical overviews appear in Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf’s *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (2000);¹⁵ and David Trim’s paper “The Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Policy and Practice, up to 1972” (2013).¹⁶

Additional insights on the overall discussion are provided by Ján Barna in his Ph.D. dissertation, “Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Biblical and Theological Analysis and Synthesis of the Debate with Special Attention to Hermeneutical Matters” (2009).¹⁷ For a sociological critical perspective of this debate, see Laura L. Vance’s *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion* (1999);¹⁸ and Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart’s *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream* (rev. 2007).¹⁹

⁹Randal R. Wisbey, “SDA Women in Ministry, 1970-1998,” in Nancy Vyhmeister, ed., *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 235-55.

¹⁰Gary Patterson, “Analysis of What Is Happening with the Ordination of Women Pastors” (2012), in www.atoday.org (accessed on August 16, 2012).

¹¹C. Mervyn Maxwell, “A Very Surprising (and Interesting) History,” *Adventists Affirm* (October 1998), 18-22; republished in Mercedes H. Dyer, ed., *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 225-30.

¹²Samuel Korangteng-Pipim, *Must We Be Silent? Issues Dividing Our Church* (Ann Arbor, MI: Berean Books, 2001), 251-70.

¹³H. Nicholas de Lima, “Women’s Ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Brief Historical Overview” (B.Th. thesis, Brazil Adventist University College, 2003), 4-15.

¹⁴Wellesley Muir, *Daughters of inheritance: A New Look at Women’s Ordination* (Roseville, CA: Amazing Facts, 2010), 103-43.

¹⁵Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 2nd ed., rev. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 464-70.

¹⁶David Trim, “The Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Policy and Practice, up to 1972” (Paper presented to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Linthicum Heights, Maryland, July 2013).

¹⁷Ján Barna, “Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Biblical and Theological Analysis and Synthesis of the Debate with Special Attention to Hermeneutical Matters” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Bristol, 2009). A slightly revised version of this thesis was published under the title, *Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Theology: A Study in Biblical Interpretations* (Belgrade, Serbia: Preporod, 2012).

¹⁸Laura L. Vance, *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis: Gender and Sectarian Change in an Emerging Religion* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 172-229.

¹⁹Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 259-72.

The present paper provides a brief historical overview of the Seventh-day Adventist discussions on women's ordination. The subject is arranged under the following subheadings: (1) Historical Background; (2) Camp Mohaven Meetings (1973); (3) Washington, DC, Meetings (1985); (4) Cohutta Springs Meetings (1989); (5) Utrecht General Conference Session (1995); (6) Further Discussions (1996-2010); and (7) New Directions (2010-2014). Special emphasis is placed on official church documents, with only sporadic allusions to the contributions made by individuals and groups representing the different segments of the discussion.

Historical Background

Nineteenth-century Adventist theological discussions usually favored women's participation in church activities that would not require ordination. Commenting on the expression "let your women keep silence in the church" (1 Cor. 14:34), Uriah Smith wrote in 1866 that in this text Paul is not forbidding women to pray or prophesy in public (cf. 1 Cor. 11:5), for the Bible mentions several women who were prophetesses (Judges 4:4-9; 2 Kings 22:14-20; Luke 2:36-38; Acts 21:8, 9) and leaders in local congregations (Rom. 16:3-16; Phil. 4:2, 3). Based on his understanding of the male headship established at the creation and fall of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:16; 1 Cor. 11:8; 1 Tim. 2:13, 14), Smith argued that "this order is not to be reversed, and the woman take the position which has been assigned to the man; and every action on her part which shows that she is usurping this authority, is disorderly, and not to be allowed."²⁰

In 1878, in the *Signs of the Times*, J. H. Waggoner published an article on "Woman's Place in the Gospel" declaring that, according to Paul, women can labor for the Lord by prophesying, edifying, exhorting, and comforting. But they are not allowed to perform "all the duties of *business meetings*, which were probably conducted by men, or all the duties of *ruling elders*, and *pastors*" (cf. 1 Tim 2:12; 5:17).²¹ Following in the same line, "The S. D. A. Church Manual" (1883)²² favored the notion of women functioning as unordained deaconesses, because "it has not . . . been the custom with us to ordain such women."²³

In 1895 Milton C. Wilcox answered the question "Should women be elected to offices in the church when there are enough brethren?" He argued that "If by this is meant the office of elder, we should say at once, No"; because "we do not believe that it is in God's plan to give to women the ordained offices to the

²⁰[Uriah Smith], "Let Your Women Keep Silence in the Churches," *Adventist Review, and Sabbath Herald*, June 26, 1866, 28.

²¹[J. H. Waggoner], "Woman's Place in the Gospel," *The Signs of the Times*, Dec. 19, 1878, 380 (italics in the original).

²²See [W. H. Littlejohn], "The S. D. A. Church Manual," 18-part series in *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 5, 1883, 361-62; June 12, 1883, 377-78; June 19, 1883, 393-94; June 26, 1883, 409; July 3, 1883, 426-27; July 10, 1883, 441-42; July 17, 1883, 457-58; July 24, 1883, 474; July 31, 1883, 491; Aug. 7, 1883, 505-6; Aug. 14, 1883, 521-22; Aug. 21, 1883, 537-38; Aug. 28, 1883, 553-54; Sept. 4, 1883, 569-70; Sept. 11, 1883, 586-87; Sept. 18, 1883, 602-3; Sept. 25, 1883, 618; Oct. 9, 1883, 631-32.

²³*Ibid.*, July 3, 1883, 426-27.

church.” On the other hand, he admitted that there are offices that women can hold, such as church clerk, treasurer, librarian of the tract society, and deaconess.²⁴

Undoubtedly, women played a crucial role in the formation and development of the church. Between 1878 and 1915 there were, in addition to Ellen White, 30 other Adventist women “licensed to preach.”²⁵ Brian E. Strayer states that “California Conference president J. N. Loughborough regularly ordained female elders and deacons. In the 1890s, while in Australia and New Zealand, W. C. White also ordained female deacons.”²⁶ On numerous occasions White preached her sermons in the presence of ordained pastors, including the General Conference President. Apparently, people did not question her right as a female to use the pulpit to communicate God’s word.

From the early 1870s onward the leadership of the church granted Ellen White ministerial credentials, some of which retained the expression “ordained minister.”²⁷ In 1884, when the first *SDA Yearbook* was published, her name was listed among the “Ministers” (not Licentiates), and the same continued to be the case in the following *Yearbooks* and GC Bulletins.²⁸ But, according to the White Estate staff, “she was never ordained by human hands, nor did she ever perform a wedding, organize a church, or conduct a baptism.”²⁹

The first significant Adventist administrative discussion on the matter of women’s ordination surfaced at the 1881 General Conference Session, Battle Creek, Michigan. The Fifth Meeting (December 5) of the Session, with S. N. Haskell as chair and Uriah Smith as secretary, considered the following resolution,

Resolved, That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.

This was discussed by J. O. Corliss, A. C. Bourdeau, E. R. Jones, D. H. Lamson, W. H. Littlejohn, A. S. Hutchins, D. M. Canright, and J. N. Loughborough, and referred to the General Conference Committee.³⁰

The *Signs of the Times* of January 5, 1882, transcribed “among the resolutions adopted” at that General Conference only the first paragraph of this report, leaving the second one completely out.³¹ So the readers of the *Signs*

²⁴[Milton C. Wilcox], “No. 176. Who Should Be Church Officers?” *The Signs of the Times*, Jan. 24, 1895, 3.

²⁵See “Women Licensed as Ministers, 1878-1975,” *Spectrum* 16/3 (Aug. 1985): 60;. Though the published list contains 31 names during that time period, “Hetty Haskell” (1900) and “Mrs. S. N. Haskell” (1902) are the same person. So the actual number of women is 30.

²⁶Brian E. Strayer, “Adventist Roots” (letter), *Adventist Review*, Oct. 11, 2012, 4.

²⁷See White Estate staff, “Exhibits Relating to the Ordination of Women: From the Lifetime and Experience of Ellen G. White” (Paper presented at the Ministerial Meeting at the 1990 General Conference Session), White Estate.

²⁸See Ellen G. White Estate, “Records Pertaining to Ellen G. White’s Ministerial/Ordination Credentials,” in www.whiteestate.org (released in Oct. 2012) (see Appendix 1).

²⁹White Estate staff, “Exhibits Relating to the Ordination of Women.”

³⁰Uriah Smith, sec., “General Conference,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 20, 1881, 392.

³¹“General Conference,” *Signs of the Times*, Jan. 5, 1882, 8.

were not informed that the proposal, instead of being approved, was “referred to the General Conference Committee.” But the original minutes for the 1881 General Conference, kept in the General Conference Archives, read exactly as in the *Review*.³²

Ellen White did not attend the 1881 General Conference Session. Her husband had died on August 6, and two weeks later she left for California. In addition to being absent from the meeting that discussed the issue of women’s ordination, she also did not express herself about it. Some have understood her silence as an endorsement on the matter, and others, as disapproving it. Whatever the position one takes, the argument of silence is not conclusive and can lead to dangerous distortions. The fact of the matter is that the proposal was “referred to the General Conference Committee” (without any of the endorsing words such as “Adopted” or “Carried”), and it “was not heard of again.”³³

Unquestionably, Ellen G. White encouraged women to join men in the gospel ministry. Speaking of husband and wife being united in the work, she stated that “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.”³⁴ In a testimony on “The Canvasser as a Gospel Worker, she added, “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.”³⁵ But she did not directly address the issue of women’s ordination, except perhaps in the following paragraph from her article “The Duty of the Minister and the People,” published in the *Review* of July 9, 1895:

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.³⁶

Despite all the discussions around this statement, we should keep in mind that the women referred to (1) were not to be full-time workers, because they would consecrate only “some of their time to the service of the Lord”; (2) the function they would carry on would be more of a deaconess than of a pastor, for they would commit themselves “to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor”; and (3) they were “to counsel with the church officers or the minister,” thus indicating that Ellen White did not consider this “laying on of hands” to be the same as that of a minister or a church officer.

³²Minutes of the 1881 General Conference, in Records of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Vol. 2, Commencing Nov. 7, 1879, p. 61, GC Archives.

³³Schwarz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 131-32.

³⁴Ellen G. White, “The Laborer Is Worthy of His Hire,” Ms 43a, 1898; published in idem, *Evangelism* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 472.

³⁵Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1948), 6:322.

³⁶E. G. White, “The Duty of the Minister and the People,” *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 9, 1895, 434.

Speaking of her own call to the prophetic ministry, Ellen White wrote in 1911, “In the city of Portland the Lord ordained me as his messenger, and here my first labors were given to the cause of present truth.”³⁷ But this statement does not imply that she was ordained as a pastor by the laying on of hands. In a letter of June 16, 1916, to Mrs. L. E. Cox from San Antonio, Texas, Clarence Crisler, one of Ellen White’s leading secretaries, explained that he had “never seen from her pen any statement that would seem to encourage the formal and official ordination of women to the gospel ministry.”³⁸ To what extent Crisler understood or captured the basis of Ellen White’s concerns is not known, but this statement at least provides his testimony that she did not offer encouragement for women to be ordained.

Yet, neither the pro-women’s ordination proposal (which was not adopted at the 1881 General Conference Session) nor Ellen White’s 1895 statement raised much interest on the matter of women’s ordination at that time and even in the following decades. In 1950, the General Conference Officers’ Meeting minutes recorded, “In California some women have been ordained for Dorcas Society work. *Agreed*, To list this item on agenda for Home and Foreign Officers.”³⁹ As an unusual kind of ordination, this incident should not be considered an ordination to the gospel ministry.

Up to the late 1960s, there were only sporadic and sparse allusions to women’s ordination. But several factors contributed to making Adventists more interested in the topic. From a socio-political perspective, the American Civil Rights Act of 1964, with emphasis on “Equal Employment Opportunity,”⁴⁰ helped more women to be employed by the denomination, and later would be referred to as requiring women to be ordained to the gospel ministry. From the financial side, there was unequal pay between men and women, and American ordained ministers usually can pay lower taxes than non-ordained church workers, which may have stimulated some people (including women) to seek ordained ministerial status.⁴¹ From a pastoral perspective, in 1968 the Northern European Division forwarded a request from the Finland Union (which during World War II placed some women into pastoral positions) to ordain women to the gospel ministry; but that request was not followed up.⁴²

In 1972 Josephine Benton was ordained at the Brotherhood Church in Washington, DC, by the presidents of the Potomac Conference and the Columbia Union Conference, thereby becoming the first Adventist female local

³⁷Ellen G. White, “An Appeal to Our Churches throughout the United States,” *Review and Herald*, May 18, 1911, 3; also in idem, *Daughters of God* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2005), 252.

³⁸C. C. Crisler to Mrs. L. E. Cox, June 16, 1916, E G White Estate. See also Appendix C – “Exhibits Relating to the Ordination of Women,” in E. G. White, *Daughters of God*, 248-55.

³⁹“Ordination of Women,” [General Conference] Officers’ Meeting, May 3, 1950, GC Archives.

⁴⁰See “Transcript of Civil Rights Act (1964),” Title VII, in www.ourdocuments.gov (accessed on Aug. 23, 2012).

⁴¹Maxwell, “A Very Surprising (and Interesting) History,” *Adventists Affirm* (Oct. 1998), 18-22.

⁴²Bert Haloviak, “The long road to Mohaven,” *The Adventist Woman*, Sept.-Oct. 1993, 1.

elder. In 1973 Benton became an associate pastor at the Sligo Church. Other women were soon ordained as local elders at the Walla Walla College Church and the Green Lake Church in Seattle, Washington State.⁴³ These incidents convinced the leadership of the church that a more in-depth study on the role of women in the church was needed.

Camp Mohaven Meetings (1973)

Adventist more in depth discussions on women's ordination to the gospel ministry began with the Council on the Role of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, convened in Camp Mohaven, Danville, Ohio, September 16-19, 1973. Under the sponsorship of the General Conference, the council gathered together a group of 14 women (including Josephine Benton, Madelynn Jones Haldeman, Hedwig Jemison, Leona G. Running, and Kit Watts) and 13 men (including C. E. Bradford, Raoul Dederen, Gerhard F. Hasel, Frank B. Holbrook, Gordon Hyde, C. Mervyn Maxwell, and Ed Zinke). The committee was chaired by a General Conference Vice-President, W. J. Hackett, with Gordon Hyde (from Biblical Research Institute) as Secretary.

Out of the discussions a document emerged suggesting, for instance, that (1) "the equality of all believers was established by creation and is being restored through redemption in Jesus Christ"; (2) there is "no significant theological objection to the ordination of women to Church ministries"; (3) "a pilot program for women in pastoral and evangelistic roles" should be established in receptive fields "on a two-year basis, with the expectation of renewal upon evaluation"; and (4) an interim report of the pilot program should be presented for the 1974 Annual Council, as "a basis for any recommendations concerning the ordination of women to the gospel ministry which would require consideration by the 1975 General Conference session."⁴⁴

The Camp Mohaven document was submitted to and evaluated by the 1973 Autumn Council (on October 18), which decided that (1) the report and recommendations of the Council on the Role of Women, and selected papers presented to it, "be made available to the divisions of the General Conference for study of this subject at the division level"; (2) "the divisions giving study to the subject share their findings and recommendations with the President's Executive Advisory if possible in time for consideration at the Annual Council of 1974"; and (3) "the emphasis of the report upon the priesthood of all believers and the necessity of involving the total resources of the Church for the rapid completion of the gospel commission be accepted."⁴⁵

In line with these suggestions, on October 17 the 1974 Annual Council voted at the same time (1) to reaffirm the emphasis on the priesthood of all

⁴³Beem, "Equality in Ministry: From 1881 to Now," in www.aaw.cc.

⁴⁴"The original Camp Mohaven document," *The Adventist Woman*, Sept.-Oct. 1993, 6.

⁴⁵1973 Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee (Washington, DC, October 7-18, 25, 1973)—*General Actions* ([Washington, DC]: General Conference of SDAs, 1973), 19-20; "Actions of General Interest from the 1973 Annual Council—2," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Dec. 6, 1973, 19.

believers for the rapid completion of the gospel commission; and (2) to deny the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. It was argued that

because the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a world church which includes in its fellowship peoples of all nations and cultures, and because a survey of its world divisions reveals that the time is not ripe nor opportune, therefore, in the interest of the world unity of the church, no move be made in the direction of ordaining women to the gospel ministry.

But it was requested that the President's Executive Advisory should "arrange for a continuing study of the theological and practical implications of the ordination of women to the gospel ministry."⁴⁶

Consequently, several articles and books on women's ordination appeared in print. For example, in 1976 La Vonne Neff's 2-part series "The Ordination of Women" considered the experience of some North American denominations who did not ordain females to the gospel ministry and others who did so.⁴⁷ Realizing that eventually the Seventh-day Adventist Church would have to decide where to stand on this matter, Neff warned that such decision should not be made "apart from an adequate understanding of God's Word."⁴⁸ In his 4-part series "Jesus and the Status of Women,"⁴⁹ Walter F. Specht concluded that women were treated by Jesus "in every sense as on the same level with men." "Although He did not designate women as apostles, He did accept a group of Galilean women as followers."⁵⁰

In the same year (1976), John G. Beach's book, *Notable Women of Spirit: The Historical Role of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* observed that by that time women had already served the denomination "as teachers, treasurers, evangelists, writers and editors, General Conference departmental leaders," and "have held every administrative position except president and ordained minister."⁵¹

A significant step toward an Adventist theology of ordination was taken by *Ministry* magazine in its February 1978 issue. That issue carried an article by T. H. Blincoe titled, "Needed—A Theology of Ordination",⁵² and a helpful 16-page insert entitled, "A Theology of Ordination: A Seventh-day Adventist Interpretation", with contributions by Gordon M. Hyde ("Introduction"), Raoul Dederen ("Nature of the Church" and "A Theology of Ordination"), and Gottfried

⁴⁶1974 Annual Council of the General Conference Committee (Loma Linda, California, October 9-17, 1974)—*General Actions* ([Washington, DC]: General Conference of SDAs, 1974), 12-14.

⁴⁷La Vonne Neff, "The Ordination of Women," 2-part series in *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 5, 1976, 1, 6, 7; Aug. 12, 1976, 6-8.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, Aug. 12, 1976, 8.

⁴⁹Walter F. Specht, "Jesus and the Status of Women," 4-part series in *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 19, 1976, 7-9; Aug. 26, 1976, 8-10; Sept. 2, 1976, 7-9; Sept. 9, 1976, 6-8.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, Sept. 9, 1976, 7, 8.

⁵¹John G. Beach, *Notable Women of Spirit: The Historical Role of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing Association, 1976), back cover.

⁵²T. H. Blincoe, "Needed—A Theology of Ordination," *Ministry*, Feb. 1978, 22-24.

Oosterwal (“Mission of the Church”).⁵³ In his “Introduction,” Hyde stated that even though “not authorizing the ordination of women to the gospel ministry at this time,” the church “has indicated its openness to continued study of the full context of the role of women in the church.”⁵⁴ While favoring the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, Dederen saw this as a matter to be decided by the worldwide church at an appropriated time. He argued that

since ordination is not only an answer to God’s call but an acknowledged form of designation by the church to an appointed office, I wonder whether it is wise to pass over too quickly the question as to whether the time is ripe for such an action. Would such a change be desirable while the church, as a whole, sensitive as it is to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has not recognized God’s leading in that direction?⁵⁵

But the early studies on the role of women in the church culminated indeed with the publication of *The Role of Women in the Church* (1984).⁵⁶ Coordinated by the General Conference Biblical Research Institute, the volume was composed of an Introduction by Gordon M. Hyde (“The Roles of Women”) and a series of 12 articles (some of which were originally presented at the Camp Mohaven Meetings) written respectively by Gerhard F. Hasel (“Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3”), Kenneth L. Vine (“The Legal and Social Status of Women in the Pentateuch”), Jerry A. Gladson (“The Role of Women in the Old Testament Outside the Pentateuch”), Julia Neuffer (“First-Century Cultural Backgrounds in the Greco-Roman Empire”), Walter F. Specht (“Jesus and Women”), Sakae Kubo (“An Exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and Its Implications”), Frank B. Holbrook (“A Brief Analysis and Interpretation of the Biblical Data Regarding the Role of Woman”), E. Marcella Anderson (“The Roles of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church: Significance of Ellen G. White Counsels”), LaVonne Neff (“The Role of Women in American Protestantism, 1975”), Betty Stirling (“Society, Women, and the Church”), Fritz Guy (“Differently but Equally the Image of God: The Meaning of Womanhood”), and Raoul Dederen (“A Theology of Ordination”).

Thus, by the early 1980s significant Adventist studies on the role of women and the theology of ordination had already been done. But, perhaps to avoid uneasiness either from the pro women’s ordination group or from those opposed to it, no final decision was made on women’s ordination, leaving the issue open to further discussions.

Washington, DC, Meetings (1985)

Discussions on the issue of women’s ordination continued in some denominational circles, trying to implement General Conference decisions. On

⁵³Gordon M. Hyde, Raoul Dederen, and Gottfried Oosterwal, in “A Theology of Ordination: A Seventh-day Adventist Interpretation,” insert to *Ministry*, Feb. 1978, 24A-24P. Dederen’s “Nature of the Church” and Oosterwal’s “Mission of the Church” were reprinted from *Ministry*, July 1972, 3-10, 36-39.

⁵⁴Gordon M. Hyde, “Introduction,” *Ministry*, Feb. 1978, 24A.

⁵⁵Raoul Dederen, “A Theology of Ordination,” *ibid.*, 24O.

⁵⁶General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, republ. in 1995); available at <http://biblicalresearch.gc.adventist.org>.

August 30, 1984, the Columbia Union Conference Committee requested the North American Division (1) to authorize ordained church elders to perform baptismal ceremonies even “in the presence of an ordained minister”; and (2) to establish “a representative study group to explore the feasibility of granting ministerial licenses to women pastors, either on world-wide basis or on a more local basis, depending on the findings of the study group.”⁵⁷

In response to this proposal, the 1984 General Conference Annual Council took two actions: one on women as local church elders, and the other one in direct response to the above proposal. The first action, taken on October 14, allowed each division to decide whether to elect and ordain women as local church elders within its own territory, and even provided detailed guidelines on how to proceed on this matter. One of the main reasons for this action was that “there are dimensions of spiritual service and counsel which cannot be properly fulfilled by a male elder.”⁵⁸

The second action (of October 15) requested the Potomac Conference Executive Committee “to keep tabled the issues of ministerial licenses for women and baptism by women who are in full-time pastoral work, and who are also local church elders, until the larger issue of women in the gospel ministry is decided by the Church.” It was also scheduled that (1) early in 1985 each of the world divisions should discuss the issue of women in ministry; (2) the Biblical Research Institute should organize a special committee meeting in connection with 1985 General Conference Spring Council with at least two representatives from each of those divisions; (3) the report of that committee should be presented to that Spring Council and recommendations should be referred to the 1985 General Conference Session; (4) the Biblical Research Institute should send to all delegates to that forthcoming session “a balanced summary of the available theological positions in connection with this subject”; and (5) the decision of the 1985 General Conference Session should be considered “definitive and should be accepted as such by the Church worldwide.”⁵⁹

Following the strategy outlined by the 1984 Annual Council, a committee of 66 people (including administrators, Biblical scholars, church pastors, and 15 women), representing all 10 divisions of the General Conference, met in Washington, DC, on March 26-28, 1985, to study the role of women in the church. At the 1985 Spring Council, the General Conference President Neal C. Wilson presented the resolutions of the committee, including the decision (1) “to take no definitive action at this time regarding the ordination of women to the gospel ministry”; (2) “to maintain the church’s present position on this matter”; and (3) “to prepare further Biblical and other studies on the question of ordaining women by assigning specific topics to scholars and theologians for research.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷“Minutes of a Meeting of the Columbia Union Conference Committee Held at the Union Conference Office Building,” Columbia, Maryland, August 30, 1984 – vote 84-35.

⁵⁸1984 *Annual Council of the General Conference Committee (Washington, DC, October 9-18, 1984)*—*General Actions* ([Washington, DC]: General Conference of SDA's, 1984), 56.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁰Neal C. Wilson, “Committee reports on women’s role in the church,” *Adventist Review*, Apr. 25, 1985, 23.

As already mentioned, the 1984 Annual Council stipulated that “the decision of the 1985 General Conference Session” would “be definitive and should be accepted as such by the Church worldwide.” But the New Orleans General Conference Session (1985) endorsed the recommendations of the 1985 Committee on Role of Women in the Church, including the one about taking “no definitive action” on women’s ordination.⁶¹

In line with the decision of fostering further study of the subject, the Annual Council of that year (1985) voted on October 15, “To utilize the *Adventist Review, Ministry, Journal of Adventist Education* and division and union papers as vehicles for educating our church members regarding the major roles that are open to women in the Lord’s work without the need to be ordained to the gospel ministry.” A special “Women’s Ministries Advisory Committee” was appointed, with Betty Holbrook, GC Coordinator for Women’s Ministries, as the committee chair.⁶²

Meanwhile, several independent women-supportive Adventist ministries appeared on the scene, some of which advocated a pro-women’s ordination agenda. Among these were the Association of Adventist Women (AAW), the Adventist Women’s Institute (AWI), and the Time for Equality in Adventist Ministry (TEAM).⁶³ In 1988 the first issue of *Ponderings—Publication of Adventist Women’s Institute* came off the press, advocating the equality of genders and promoting the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. Volume 3, No. 2 of that periodical published a money bill (like a US dollar) titled, “Daughters Of Ellen” (DOE), with a picture of Ellen G. White in the center; and, on the left side, the following quotation from a letter she wrote on April 21, 1898: “. . . I will in the name of the Lord, protest. I will feel it my duty to create a fund from my tithe money, to pay these women who are accomplishing just as essential work as the ministers are doing, . . .” On the right side of the bill there was a statement asking for tithe money for the pro-women’s ordination fund of DOE. The bill was distributed unofficially at the Indianapolis General Conference Session (1990).⁶⁴

Also in 1988, Iris M. Yob argued for Adventist feminism in her book, *The Church and Feminism: An Exploration of Common Ground*. Relying more on the inner witness of the Spirit than on biblical debates, Yob suggested,

Further study of the issues as they appear in Scripture will continue to be important, no doubt, but the inner witness to the value God places on them may have greater influence on the women in the church than continuing disputes over the occasional difficult

⁶¹“Session Actions,” *Adventist Review*, July 11, 1985, 20.

⁶²1985 *Annual Council of the General Conference Committee* (Washington, DC, October 8-17, 1984)—*General Actions* ([Washington, DC]: General Conference of SDA’s, 1985), 19.

⁶³See Ramona Perez-Greek, “Women’s Leadership, 1971-1992: The Expanding Years,” in Rosa T. Banks, ed., *A Woman’s Place: Seventh-day Adventist Women in Church and Society* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1992), 85-99.

⁶⁴Audrey Perkins, in “Letters,” *Ponderings—Publication of Adventist Women’s Institute*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1990): 14.

passages. Women in the Adventist church are already coming to sense within themselves the impact of the Gospel message that “proclaims liberty” to the oppressed.⁶⁵

Those opposing women’s ordination were also active. In 1987 the independent Adventists Affirm ministry came into existence, publishing in the spring of that year the first issue of its periodical *Affirm*, with the subtitle *A Publication Affirming Seventh-day Adventist Beliefs*. The title was changed in its second issue to *Adventists Affirm*, but preserving the same subtitle. This unofficial Adventist periodical became, since its first issue, an influential resource in opposition to the pro-women’s ordination movement. Its first editorial board included William Fagal (editor), Hedwing Jemison (treasurer), C. Mervyn Maxwell, C. Raymond Holmes, and Samuele Bacchiocchi. In 1994 *Adventists Affirm* also began to publish some of the most widely distributed anti-women’s ordination books. Also in 1987 Samuele Bacchiocchi published his 295-page anti-women’s ordination book titled, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Study on the Role of Women in the Church*.⁶⁶

Despite all efforts, the discussion on women’s ordination continued to absorb much of the time and energies of church administrators, pastors, and some lay members.

Cohutta Springs Meetings (1989)

Significant for the ongoing discussion about women’s ordination was also the meetings of the Commission on the Role of Women in the Church that took place in Cohutta Springs, Georgia, July 12-18, 1989. After much discussion, two documents emerged from those meetings. A group of 18 leaders (including the General Conference president and secretary, as well as the presidents of the 10 divisions) developed the “Presidents’ Document,” which was adopted on July 16 by a vote of 56 to 11 with one abstention. The document concluded that (1) “a decision to ordain women as pastors would not be welcomed or meet with approval in most of the world church”; and (2) “the provisions of the Church Manual and the General Conference Working Policy which allow only for ordination to the gospel ministry on a world-wide (universal) basis have strong support by the divisions.”⁶⁷ So, the document excluded ordinations intended to be limited to a specific geographical area.

By their turn, the 17 women who attended the Cohutta Springs sessions of the Commission on the Role of Women in the Church formed an *ad hoc* committee to give further study to the subject. A set of “Women Commissioners’ Recommendations” was submitted to the commission, which voted to refer the recommendations to the General Conference officers for further study. Aiming “to affirm and address the wide-ranging talents of women,” the

⁶⁵Iris M. Yob, *The Church and Feminism: An Exploration of Common Ground* (Englewood, CO: Winsen Publications, 1988), 49-50.

⁶⁶Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Study on the Role of Women in the Church*, Biblical Perspectives, vol. 7 (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1987).

⁶⁷“Presidents’ Document, Cohutta Springs, July 16, 1989,” *The Adventist Woman*, Aug.-Sept. 1989, 2.

document appealed for equal job opportunities; better training and education for pastor's spouses; more respect and recognition; and more effective female representatives at all administrative levels of the church, including a General Conference vice-president.⁶⁸

The two Cohutta Springs documents on women's ordination were discussed at the 1989 Annual Council, and on October 5 two votes were taken. By 187 to 97 of all attendees, and by 104 to 77 of the General Conference Committee Members, a large document (combining much of the content of the two documents under discussion) was approved, including the resolutions that (1) "a decision to ordain women as pastors would not be welcomed or meet with approval in most of the world Church"; and (2) "the provisions of the *Church Manual* and the General Conference *Working Policy*, which allow only for ordination to the gospel ministry on a worldwide basis, have strong support by the divisions." The actions also (1) recommended a significant increase of female representatives in church committees; (2) spoke of ministerial calls made "without regard to gender"; and (3) suggested that "commissioned ministers or licensed ministers" could "perform essentially the ministerial functions of an ordained minister of the gospel in the churches to which they are assigned."⁶⁹ On October 9, the General Conference Executive Committee voted to submit the basic content of that report to the 1990 General Conference Session.

The proposal of the 1989 Annual Council not to ordain women to the gospel ministry generated strong discussion at the 1990 Indianapolis General Conference Session, especially on July 10 and 11.⁷⁰ Submitted to a vote, the proposal was carried by 1,173 votes in favor, and 377 against.⁷¹ The procedures and the actual content of the vote included again the statements that (1) "a decision to ordain women as pastors would not be welcomed or meet with approval in most of the world church"; and (2) "the provisions of the *Church Manual* and the General Conference *Working Policy*, which allow only for ordination to the gospel ministry on a worldwide basis, have strong support by the divisions."⁷²

In addition to voting not to ordain women to the gospel ministry, the 1990 General Conference made a few significant changes in the *Church Manual*, opening the doors for women to perform some functions allowed up to then only for ordained ministers. For example, previous versions of the *Church Manual* prescribed that "in the marriage ceremony the charge, vows, and declaration of marriage are given only by an ordained minister."⁷³ But in its 1990 revised edition, the *Church Manual* stated that "in the marriage ceremony the charge,

⁶⁸"Women Commissioners' Recommendations, Cohutta Springs, July 17, 1989," *The Adventist Woman*, Aug.-Sept. 1989, 3.

⁶⁹1989 Annual Council of the General Conference Committee (Silver Spring, MD, October 3-10, 1989)—*General Actions* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDAs, 1989), 34-38.

⁷⁰See "Ninth Business Meeting" and "Tenth Business Meeting," *Adventist Review*, July 13, 1990, 8-13.

⁷¹"Tenth Business Meeting," *ibid.*, 13.

⁷²"Session Actions," *ibid.*, 15.

⁷³*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. 1986 ([Washington, DC]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1986), 59.

vows, and declaration of marriage are given only by an ordained minister except in those areas where division committees have taken action to approve that selected licensed or commissioned ministers who have been ordained as local elders may perform the marriage ceremony.”⁷⁴

Another significant change in the *Church Manual* was in regard to the ordination of deaconesses. The version revised at the 1985 General Conference Session contained the following statement: “Deaconesses were included in the official staff of the early Christian churches (Rom. 16:1, 2). . . . There is no record, however, that these women were ordained; hence the practice of ordaining deaconesses is not followed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church.”⁷⁵ But the version of the *Church Manual* revised at the 1990 General Conference Session deleted the last sentence of the statement that referred to the practice of not ordaining deaconesses.⁷⁶

It is noteworthy that in China several Adventist women who “were ordained as elders in local congregations also performed the normal duties of a minister, including baptisms.”⁷⁷ Due to the political situation in that country, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has no formal organization there, and the General Conference does not have full control over their decisions. Schwarz and Greenleaf explain that, “ironically, isolation from the rest of the organized Adventist church also saved Chinese believers from debate about women’s ordination.”⁷⁸

Many discussions and publications were generated as a result of the non-approval of women’s ordination to the gospel ministry, as well as by the fear of others that the issue could come up again for discussion at the next General Conference Session (1995). Several books were published favoring women’s ordination. For example, in 1990, the Loma Linda University Press published the work of V. Norskov Olsen on *Myths and Truth about Church, Priesthood and Ordination*, written from a biblical-historical perspective.⁷⁹ In 1992 the Review and Herald Publishing Association released the book *A Woman’s Place: Seventh-day Adventist Women in Church and Society*, with 10 chapters by different authors, edited by Rosa T. Banks, uplifting female contributions to the church.⁸⁰ The next year (1993), the Center for Christian Bioethics at Loma Linda University published a new book by V. N. Olsen titled *The New Relatedness for Man & Woman in Christ: A Mirror of the Divine*, advocating plain equality between man and woman.⁸¹ In 1995, the Andrews University Press published a work with 12 chapters by various authors, titled *Women and the Church: A*

⁷⁴*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, rev. 1990 ([Silver Spring, MD]: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, [1990]), 59.

⁷⁵*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (1986), 64.

⁷⁶*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* (1990), 64.

⁷⁷Schwarz and Greenleaf, *Light Bearers*, 531.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹V. Norskov Olsen, *Myths and Truth about Church, Priesthood and Ordination* (Riverside, CA: Loma Linda University Press, 1990).

⁸⁰Banks, ed., *A Woman’s Place*.

⁸¹V. Norskov Olsen, *The New Relatedness for Man & Woman in Christ: A Mirror of the Divine* (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University, Center for Christian Bioethics, 1993).

Feminine Perspective, edited by Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson.⁸² The same year (1995) TEAMPress launched a 408-page book titled *The Welcome Table: Setting a Place for Ordained Women*, with 14 chapters and nine appendices by different authors.⁸³ Edited by Patricia A. Habada and Rebecca F. Brillhart, this work was one of the most important Adventist pro-women's ordination appeals published up to that time.

On the other side, two books published by Adventists Affirm questioned the claimed biblical basis for women's ordination to the gospel ministry. The first, authored by C. Raymond Holmes, was published in 1994 under the title *The Tip of an Iceberg: Biblical Authority, Biblical Interpretation, and the Ordination of Women in Ministry*.⁸⁴ The second book, written by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, was published the next year (1995) under the title *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity*.⁸⁵

As a result of previous decisions, women have been affirmed in some parts of the world more than in others, including being prepared for various positions, being encouraged to study for the ministry, and in anticipating opportunities for using their talents and skills in public leadership roles. Thus, the way was prepared for questions of ministerial ordination to arise with greater intensity. The publications listed above and other materials helped to build a great expectation about the issue of women's ordination that was scheduled to be discussed at the plenary session of the 1995 General Conference held in Utrecht, Holland.

Utrecht General Conference Session (1995)

Since the issue of women's ordination to the gospel ministry was not approved by the delegates of the worldwide church at the Indianapolis General Conference Session (1990), the North America Division decided to request special permission from the worldwide church to ordain women just for its own territory. Consequently, the 1994 Annual Council referred that request to the 1995 General Conference Session, worded as

The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize the ordination of individuals within its territory in harmony with established policies. In addition, where circumstances do not render it inadvisable, a division may authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender. In divisions where the division executive

⁸²Lourdes E. Morales-Gudmundsson, ed., *Women and the Church: A Feminine Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995).

⁸³Habada and Brillhart, ed., *The Welcome Table*.

⁸⁴C. Raymond Holmes, *Tip of an Iceberg: Biblical Authority, Biblical Interpretation, and the Ordination of Women in Ministry* ([Berrien Springs, MI], and Wakefield, MI: Adventists Affirm and Pointer Publications, 1994). Published in Spanish as *La punta de un iceberg: autoridad bíblica, interpretación bíblica y la ordenación de la mujer al ministerio* (Wakefield, MI: Pointer Publications, 1995); and in Portuguese as *A Ponta de um Iceberg: A Autoridade e a Interpretação da Bíblia, e a Ordenação da Mulher para o Ministério*, transl. by Delmar Faria Freire (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 1995).

⁸⁵Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 1995).

committees take specific actions approving the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, women may be ordained to serve in those divisions.⁸⁶

Paving the way for the approval of this proposal, Alfred C. McClure, President of the North American Division, published an article in the *Adventist Review* of February 1995 under the title “NAD’s President Speaks on Women’s Ordination.”⁸⁷ Likewise *Ministry* magazine for April 1995 and the *Adventist Review* for May of the same year advocated the pro-women’s ordination view. These are only a few examples of the large number of publications on the subject that circulated before that General Conference Session.

Finally, in the afternoon of July 5, 1995, the request of the North American Division was submitted for discussion and vote by the plenary session of the General Conference. The subject generated meaningful presentations and discussions,⁸⁸ but ended up being rejected by 1,481 votes against the proposal to 673 in favor.⁸⁹ On August 3, 1995, North American Division president Alfred C. McClure suggested in an open letter to all North American Division pastors and administrator that “a commissioning or dedicatory service, even with the laying on of hands, is biblical and affirming of the call to ministry (see Acts 13:2-4 and *Review and Herald*, July 9 1895), yet does not violate the spirit or the letter of the vote of the General Conference session.”⁹⁰ By distinguishing between ordination and commissioning, McClure tried to be at the same time loyal to the Utrecht vote of the worldwide church and supportive of some forthcoming ceremonies of “laying on of hands” (or ordinations) within the territory of the North American Division.

Many delegates imagined that the Utrecht General Conference Session (June 29-July 8, 1995) finally settled the Adventist debate on women’s ordination to the gospel ministry, but that was not the case. Indeed, in the post-Utrecht period several local Adventist churches in North America ordained women pastors. Pioneering the new trend, the Sligo Church, Takoma Park, Maryland, voted at its Business Session of August 1, 1995, (1) to “plan, for September 23, 1995, a festival service in which eligible women working in pastoral ministry at Sligo, and related institutions, undergo the laying on of hands as a public affirmation of their call to pastoral ministry”; and (2) to “ask the Potomac Conference and Columbia Union Conference committees to offer their blessing and participation—including the granting of credentials for ordained ministry—in connection with this joyful and historical occasion.”⁹¹

As planned, on September 23, 1995, at 3:30 p.m., the Sligo Church

⁸⁶1994 *Annual Council of the General Conference Committee* (Silver Spring, MD, October 3-10, 1994)—*General Actions* (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of SDAs, 1994), 189.

⁸⁷Alfred C. McClure, “NAD’s President Speaks on Women’s Ordination,” *Adventist Review*, February 1995, 14-15.

⁸⁸See “Thirteenth Business Meeting,” *Adventist Review*, July 7, 1995, 23-31.

⁸⁹“Session Actions,” *Adventist Review*, July 11, 1995, 30.

⁹⁰Alfred C. McClure, “An Open Letter to Church Leaders,” *Adventist Review*, Sept. 1995, 7. See also “McClure Suggests Women Be Commissioned, Not Ordained,” *Spectrum* 25/1 (Sept. 1995): 44-45.

⁹¹“Action of Sligo Church in Business Session, August 1, 1995,” *Spectrum* 25/1 (Sept. 1995): 39.

ordained three women (Kendra Haloviak, Penny Shell, and Norma Osborne) to the gospel ministry.⁹² The printed program for the event was titled “Ordination to the Gospel Ministry.”⁹³ The ordination certificate granted to the newly ordained female pastors read as follows,

**CERTIFICATE
of
ORDINATION**

This Certifies That
[name of the ordained women]

having given satisfactory evidence of her call to and preparation for the sacred work of the gospel ministry, was ordained at *Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church* on the 23rd day of *September, 1995*, and is duly authorized as an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister to perform all the function of the ministerial office.

SENIOR PASTOR, *Sligo Adventist Church*
VICE PRESIDENT, *Adventist Healthcare Mid-Atlantic*
PRESIDENT, *Columbia Union College*⁹⁴

The credentials given to the three women ordained at Sligo had the following reading:

MINISTERIAL CREDENTIALS

This is to Certify, That [name of the ordained women] is an Ordained Minister in good and regular standing in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and is authorized to perform the duties of said office.

SENIOR PASTOR, *Sligo Adventist Church*⁹⁵

The Sligo Adventist Church ordination ceremony generated noteworthy reactions. According to Beverly G. Beem, “it was the first time in the Adventist church that a local church conducted an ordination to the gospel ministry.”⁹⁶ The ceremony was reported in *The New York Times* of September 23 as “An Adventist Church Breaks Ranks.”⁹⁷ *The Washington Times* of September 24 referred to it as “Local Adventists rebel, ordain three women.”⁹⁸ Wikipedia.org still states, “The Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church in Takoma Park, Maryland,

⁹²The whole Sligo Church ordination process is described in *ibid.*, 33-62.

⁹³Original copy in the GC Archives.

⁹⁴Original copy in the GC Archives.

⁹⁵Original copy in the GC Archives.

⁹⁶Beem, “Equality in Ministry: From 1881 to Now,” in www.aaw.cc.

⁹⁷Gustav Niebuhr, “An Adventist Church Breaks Ranks,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 23, 1995, Religious Journal, p. 11.

⁹⁸Larry Witham, “Local Adventists rebel, ordain three women,” *The Washington Times*, Sept. 24, 1995.

ordained three women in violation of the denomination's rules."⁹⁹

In response to these new developments, on October 13, 1995, three endorsing decisions were made at the North American Division Year-end Meeting. Firstly, the division officially adopted a new "Christ-Centered Model of Diversity in Christian Unity" intended "to create a church body that transcends all social barriers of age, class, culture, disabilities, ethnicity, gender, race, etc."¹⁰⁰ Secondly, it was "VOTED, To authorize the appointment of a presidential Commission on Women in Ministry."¹⁰¹ Thirdly, the North American Division Union presidents released a statement expressing their disappointment "by the General Conference vote in Utrecht to deny ordination to women." The statement suggested not only that the church "grant women and men full equality in the practice of ministry," but also allow them to "perform pastoral functions outside one's own district."¹⁰² This would enlarge the concept of a female pastor ordained just by and for a local church.

Following the new trend, on December 2, 1995, the La Sierra University Church ordained two other women (Halcyon Wilson and Madelynn Haldeman) and the small Loma Linda Victoria Church ordained their female pastor (Sheryll Prinz McMillan) to the pastoral ministry. On July 6, 1996, the Garden Grove Church in California ordained a man and a woman (Jared Fulton and Margot Pitrone) to the pastoral ministry.¹⁰³ Yet, the worldwide church did not recognize such local church ordinations to pastoral ministry. Furthermore, many church members expressed their concerns about this new ordination trend.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, two special issues of *Spectrum* magazine placed the discussions of women's ordination on a socio-cultural and ethnic platform. Volume 25, No. 1 (September 1995), with a special section on "From Utrecht to Sligo," affirmed women's ordination as a moral issue of equality and social justice that supersedes ecclesiastical policies and decisions, such as the Utrecht vote.¹⁰⁵ Volume 25, No. 2 (December 1995), devoted to what is called "The Browning of Adventism" (from the Hispanic brown-skin color), suggested that the anti-gospel Latino "machismo" influenced not only the Utrecht vote but also "our understanding of Scripture."¹⁰⁶ So the post-Utrecht discussions on women's ordination moved perceivably from theology to sociology.

⁹⁹"Ordination of women," in <http://en.wikipedia.org> (accessed on Sept. 4, 2012). See also "An Astonishing Event in Adventist History—The Women's Ordination at Sligo," 3-part series in www.sdadefend.com (accessed on Sept. 4, 2012).

¹⁰⁰See "531-95Na Diversity: A Christ-Centered Model in Christian Unity for the North American Division—Guidelines" and "531-95Nb Strategies for Modeling the Diversity Initiative—Guidelines," NAD Year-end Meeting, Oct. 13, 1995 p.m., in <http://ast.gc.adventist.org> (accessed on Sept. 10, 2012).

¹⁰¹"592-95N Commission on Women in Ministry," *ibid.* (accessed on Sept. 10, 2012).

¹⁰²NAD Union Presidents, "Union Presidents' Statement on Women's Ordination," *Spectrum* 25/2 (Dec. 1995): 53-54.

¹⁰³Beem, "Equality in Ministry: From 1881 to Now," in www.aaw.cc.

¹⁰⁴For an example of those reactions, see the 7-page handout *Yes, it has happened—The First Conference and Union Approved Women's Ordination Service*, now available in www.pdaja.info.

¹⁰⁵See *Spectrum* 25/1 (Sept. 1995): 30-62, special section on "From Utrecht to Sligo."

¹⁰⁶See *Spectrum* 25/2 (Dec. 1995): 1-62, special issue on "The Browning of Adventism."

Further Discussions (1996-2010)

With the purpose of restudying the subject of women's ordination from a more biblical-theological perspective, the Dean's office of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, established an ad hoc committee of 15 members. As a result of the committee's activities, in 1998 Andrews University Press published a work of 439 pages and 20 chapters under the title, *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*.¹⁰⁷ Edited by Nancy Vyhmeister, the work represented a strong pro-women's ordination emphasis.

Of special significance for that committee were (1) Paul's statement that "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" (Gal. 3:28); and (2) the toleration manifested by the Jerusalem Council on the issue of circumcision (Acts 15:19). From this perspective, the committee concluded (in opposition to the decision at Utrecht) "that ordination and women can go together, that 'women in pastoral leadership' is not an oxymoron [that excludes one another], but a manifestation of God's grace in the church."¹⁰⁸

For Richard M. Davidson, (1) "before the Fall there was full equality with no headship/submission in the relationship between Adam and Eve (Gen 2:24)"; (2) the "post-Fall prescription of husband leadership and wife submission was limited to the husband-wife relationship," and was "never broadened to the covenant community in such a way as to prohibit women from taking positions of leadership, including headship positions over men."¹⁰⁹ Equating opposition to women's ordination with being proslavery, Walter B. T. Douglass argued that as the church today opposes slavery and any form of human bondage, so should she "embrace the ordination of women."¹¹⁰

In the year 2000 Adventists Affirm published a work of 423 pages and 22 chapters (plus four appendices) titled, *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, edited by Mercedes H. Dyer.¹¹¹ Among the authors of the chapters one also finds Andrews University professors and alumni. P. Gerard Damsteegt, who spoke against women's ordination at Utrecht and was not invited to join the Seminary's ad hoc committee, was one of the main contributors to *Prove All Things*. In the "Epilogue" of the work, Dyer warned that "the central conclusions of the book *Women in Ministry* are lacking the needed biblical fountain. In some cases, Bible texts are used to support the desired conclusion

¹⁰⁷Vyhmeister, ed., *Women in Ministry*.

¹⁰⁸"Epilogue," in *ibid.*, 436.

¹⁰⁹Richard M. Davidson, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in *ibid.*, 284. See also *idem*, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 22-34, 213-96.

¹¹⁰Walter B. T. Douglas, "The Distance and the Difference: Reflections on Issues of Slavery and Women's Ordination in Adventism," in Vyhmeister, ed., *Women in Ministry*, 394.

¹¹¹Dyer, ed., *Prove All Things*.

while other texts on the subject, leading to a different conclusion, are overlooked.”¹¹²

Three works by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim opposed the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry. In 1996 his 368-page book, *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle*, appeared, with some pages suggesting that the issue of women’s ordination conspires against the normative authority of the Bible.¹¹³ In 2001 Pipim dedicated Part II – “A Gender Agenda” of his 640-page work titled, *Must We Be Silent? Issues Dividing Our Church*, to what he called “The Ideology of Women’s Ordination.”¹¹⁴ In the chapter on “The Feminist Campaign for Equality,” the author argued that “feminism’s ideology of full equality lays the foundation for women’s ordination.”¹¹⁵

Other significant anti-women’s ordination appeals appeared in 2005 in chapters 44 (by C. Mervyn Maxwell) and 45 (by Laurel Damsteegt) of the 810-page work titled *Here We Stand: Evaluating New Trends in the Church*, edited by Samuel Koranteng-Pipim and published by Adventists Affirm.¹¹⁶ Later on, Amazing Facts published Doug Batchelor’s booklet *God’s Role for Women in Ministry* (2009)¹¹⁷ and Wellesley Muir’s book *Daughters of Inheritance: A New Look at Women’s Ordination* (2010),¹¹⁸ expressing similar concerns about women’s ordination.

Meanwhile, many texts in favor of and against women’s ordination were posted on websites, webpages, blogs, etc. Some of the main non-official Adventist pro-women’s ordination websites are spectrummagazine.org and www.atoday.org. Among the ones who oppose women’s ordination are www.adventistsaffirm.org, www.womenministrytruth.com, and OrdinationTruth.com. By accessing those websites one can get a general idea regarding how polarized (and even bellicose) the discussion on women’s ordination has become in some segments of the church.

New Directions (2010-2014)

The issue of women’s ordination was raised again in early 2010 at the General Conference President’s Executive Administrative Council (PREXAD). Consequently, on January 19, a letter from Elder Jan Paulsen, President of the

¹¹²Dyer, ed., “Epilogue,” in *ibid.*, 351.

¹¹³Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Receiving the Word: How New Approaches to the Bible Impact Our Biblical Faith and Lifestyle?* (Berrien Springs, MD: Berean Books, 1996), 119-29; published in Spanish as *Recibiendo la Palabra: ¿Cómo afectan a nuestra fe los nuevos enfoques bíblicos?* (Buenos Aires: Asociación Casa Editora Sudamericana, 1997), 135-47.

¹¹⁴Koranteng-Pipim, *Must We Be Silent?*

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*, 154.

¹¹⁶Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, ed., *Here We Stand: Evaluating New Trends in the Church* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2005), 705-732.

¹¹⁷Doug Batchelor, *God’s Role for Women in Ministry* (Roseville, CA: Amazing Facts, 2009).

¹¹⁸Muir, *Daughters of Inheritance*.

General Conference, was sent to the division presidents asking two basic questions:

Question #1: To what extent does the Church in your division endorse and encourage women in various roles of leadership, ministry and service? How does the Church in your division practice the consecration or ordination of women to such positions? Would the ordination of women to ministry be an option for your division?

Question #2: In what ways might the mission of the Church in your division be negatively impacted if provision was made for other areas of the world field to ordain women to ministry in situations where this is believed to advance the mission of the Church in those areas?¹¹⁹

At the General Conference Spring Meeting (on April 6, 2010), Paulsen reported to the delegates that only three of the 13 divisions “responded by saying either they were ready to affirm women in ministry by the process of ordination, or significant parts of their division would do it.” Eight of the divisions “said they would not ordain women, and the people in their part of the world would be negatively affected. ... [It would] seriously undermine the unity [of the church].” Consequently, according to Paulsen, the issue of women’s ordination would not be part of the agenda at the 2010 Atlanta General Conference Session.¹²⁰ Even so, Michael L. Ryan stated at the Session that “the General Conference administration commits to establishing a process to review the subject of ordination and will report back to an Annual Council during this quinquennium [2010-2015].”¹²¹

During the October 2010 Annual Council, world church President Ted N. C. Wilson declared that “the Biblical Research Institute at the world church headquarters will coordinate the process of studying ordination with corresponding Biblical research committees in each of the church’s 13 divisions.” Artur Stele announced the timetable of the process as follows:

In November 2013, each division committee at their 2013 year-end meeting will review the study made by their division Biblical Research Committee and recommend it to the Biblical Research Institute director for consideration by a Theology of Ordination Study Committee. The General Conference Administrative Committee will also appoint a Theology of Ordination Study Committee with appropriate division representation.

From December 2013 to June 2014, the Theology of Ordination Study Committee will analyze the materials received from the divisions and prepare a combined report.

In June 2014, the report will be reviewed by General Conference executive officers and later by with [*sic*] the President’s Administrative Executive Council and the General Conference Administrative Committee.

In October 2014, the General Conference administration will process the report for Annual Council, which will review the report and, if needed, take any appropriate action. If

¹¹⁹ Jan Paulsen to “Dear Colleagues,” Jan. 19, 2010.

¹²⁰ Mark Kellner, “Women’s ordination issue not on World Session agenda, Adventist president says,” in news.adventist.org (released on Apr. 7, 2010), square brackets in the quoted source. Cf. Bonnie Dwyer, “BREAKING: Eight Men Veto Women’s Ordination,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Apr. 6, 2010).

¹²¹ In “Fourteenth Business Meeting” on July 2, 2010, *Adventist Review* (GC Bulletin, No. 8), July 8-22, 2010, 34.

voted material needs to be placed on the 2015 General Conference Session agenda, it will be processed accordingly.¹²²

Shortly thereafter (November 2010) the Trans-European Division Executive Committee voted to request the General Conference to (1) “review and amend General Conference policies, so that the wording is gender neutral and that all leadership pathways are open to male and female”; (2) make constitutional and bylaw provision so that both ordained and commissioned ministers could serve as conference and union presidents; and (3) grant permission for the Trans-European Division to ordain women to the gospel ministry within its territory.¹²³

Meanwhile, Jan Paulsen, after his retirement in the summer of 2010, became more public in advocating women’s ordination, as evident in his book *Where Are We Going?* released by the Pacific Press on September 1, 2011. Admitting that the ordination of women to the ministry may split the church, Paulsen added that “not ordaining women may be every bit as likely to split the church.” In his opinion, “what the North American Division requested in 1995, which was voted down by the session, should probably be looked at again.” After explaining why another General Conference Session would most probably not approve women’s ordination either, he suggested a new administrative strategy:

I see no prospect that some future session will resolve the question of the ordination of women differently than past sessions have. If the leadership of the church requests the session to transfer responsibility for this matter to Annual Council, then I believe we will have a forum that can deal with this question effectively.¹²⁴

Following up on the discussion started in 2009, the North American Division changed the content of topic “E 60 Conference/Mission President” of its *Working Policy*. Up to the end of 2010 that specific topic followed the *GC Working Policy* and stated, “Inasmuch as the conference/mission president stands at the head of the ministry in the conference/mission and is the chief elder, or overseer of all the churches, a conference/mission president should be an ordained minister.”¹²⁵ But on November 7, 2010, the North American Division’s Executive Committee added the word “commissioned” to the expression “should be an ordained minister” in order to read “should be an ordained/commissioned minister.”¹²⁶ The modification, published in the *NAD*

¹²²Ansel Oliver, “Process, timetable unveiled for review of theology of ordination,” in news.adventist.org (released on Oct. 10, 2011).

¹²³“Leadership and Ordination of Women,” in www.ted-adventist.org (released in Nov. 2010).

¹²⁴Jan Paulsen, *Where Are We Going?* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2011), 38-43.

¹²⁵*North American Division Working Policy, 2009-2010* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, [2009]), E-31.

¹²⁶Mark A. Kellner, “Commissioned ministers can lead North American conferences, leaders vote,” in news.adventist.org (released on Nov. 7, 2010).

Working Policy 2010-2011,¹²⁷ would open the doors to non-ordained, commissioned women ministers to become conference/mission presidents.

This wording change generated some administrative uneasiness because as a division (or extension) of the General Conference, the North American Division (and any other division) is obligated to be in compliance with the *General Conference Working Policy*. Instead of reversing its vote, the North American Division and also the Trans-European Division sent official requests to the General Conference for commissioned ministers (including women) to serve as conference presidents in North America and as union/conference presidents in northern Europe. On October 11, after a six-hour discussion, the delegates of the General Conference Annual Council denied the request of the North American Division by a vote of 167 to 117, which by extension also denied the Trans-European Division request.¹²⁸

A report of the Annual Council decision was provided to the North American Division Executive Committee on October 31, 2011. However, that Executive Committee voted to reaffirm its earlier decision that “a conference/mission president should be an ordained/commissioned minister.”¹²⁹ Likewise, on November 16, 2011, the Trans-European Division voted “to affirm that each union can apply parity between male and female pastors within the framework of TED’s existing policies and guidelines for ordained/commissioned minister credentials.”¹³⁰

After requesting an independent review of Church governance documents and counsel in the matter, the North American Division President Dan Jackson wrote a letter on January 31, 2012, to the members of the North American Division Executive Committee apologizing for the former decision and explaining that “the North American Division Executive Committee does not have the right to establish policies which are out of harmony with the General Conference Model Constitution or General Conference Working Policy.”¹³¹ So, the *NAD Working Policy 2011-2012* was issued with the former expression “should be an ordained minister” reinstated.¹³² By contrast, the Trans-European Division kept its reaffirmation action of November 16, 2011.

Meanwhile, President Ted Wilson invited the retired former President Jan Paulsen to present a devotional on April 17, 2012, during the 2012 Spring Council. Paulsen took advantage of the opportunity to address the issue of

¹²⁷*North American Division Working Policy, 2010-2011* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, [2010]), E-31.

¹²⁸Mark Kellner, “‘Variance’ for North American, Trans-European Division constitutions fails Annual Council Vote,” in news.adventist.org (released on Oct. 12, 2011).

¹²⁹“2011 Year-end Meeting Report #3,” *NADNewsPoints*, Oct. 31, 2011; Adventist Review staff, “North American Adventists reaffirm commissioned ministers as conference, mission presidents,” in news.adventist.org (released on Nov. 1, 2011).

¹³⁰Miroslav Pujic, “Women in Leadership,” in www.ted-adventist.org (released on Nov. 16, 2011).

¹³¹Dan Jackson to “Members of the North American Division Executive Committee” (Jan. 31, 2012), accessible through Ansel Oliver, “North America retracts ‘commissioned’ ministers as top leader candidates,” in news.adventist.org (released on Feb. 14, 2012).

¹³²*North American Division Working Policy, 2011-2012* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, [2012]), E-31.

women's ordination as a missiological concern to be decided regionally based on the values and challenges of each local culture. He even stated that in settling such issues, "Our leaders in California cannot make that decision for their colleagues in Africa; and our very accomplished mission church in South America cannot speak for struggling Europe."¹³³

The influence of Paulsen's speech is difficult to know. Even so, shortly after it was given some unions felt they should decide for themselves whether to ordain women to the gospel ministry. So on April 23, 2012, the North German Union Conference Constituency voted to ordain "female pastors [*Pastorinnen*] like their male colleagues [*männlichen Kollegen*]" in its territory.¹³⁴ It was reported that "the most recent support for this pioneering process was given by the former president of the World Church Council, Dr Jan Paulsen, when he addressed the audience of the Spring Session of the General Conference in [*sic*] April 17, 2012 (available in ANN)."¹³⁵

Moving a step further, the Columbia Union Conference Executive Committee took an action on May 17, 2012, (1) recognizing "its responsibility to act morally and ethically by expressing unyielding commitment to ordain qualified persons to the gospel ministry without regard to gender"; and (2) calling for July 29, 2012, "a special constituency meeting for the purpose of authorizing ordination to the gospel ministry without regard to gender."¹³⁶ Prior to that "special constituency meeting," the cover of the July 2012 issue of Columbia Union Conference's *Visitor* magazine carried on its cover the title, "Weighing the Issues: Why We're Advocating for Women's Ordination."¹³⁷

Concerned with those moves, on June 29, 2012, the General Conference Presidential Office released "An Appeal for Unity in Respect to Ministerial Ordination Practices" approved by the General Conference officers, including the presidents of the 13 divisions of the General Conference. Recognizing that "earlier studies have been conducted by commissions," the document explained that "this is the first time that a study of ministerial ordination engages the whole Church through the 13 divisions." So, the document appealed

1. That your union continues to operate in harmony with the global decisions and global decision-making processes of the Church.
2. That until such time as the Church decides otherwise, your union refrains from taking any action to implement ministerial ordination practices that are contrary to the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Session actions.
3. That the union membership be informed concerning the implications for the entire Church in the event that one entity, for whatever reason, chooses a course of action in

¹³³Jan Paulsen, "This Is What He Said," in spectrummagazine.org (released on Apr. 17, 2012).

¹³⁴Zentralredaktion, "Norddeutscher Verband der Adventisten unter neuer Leitung," in www.adventisten.de (released on Apr. 24, 2012).

¹³⁵CD-EUDnews, "North German Union Conference Constituency Session Votes to Ordain Women," in www.euroafrica.org (released on May 9, 2012).

¹³⁶"Columbia Union Executive Committee Calls Special Constituency Meeting to Authorize Ordination Without Regard to Gender," in www.columbiaunion.org (released on May 17, 2012).

¹³⁷See *Visitor*, July 2012—special issue on "Weighing the Issues: Why We're Advocating for Women's Ordination," available at <http://issuu.com/columbiaunion/docs/july2012visitor>.

deliberate opposition to a decision of the whole Church.

4. That the union actively participates in the global discussion about the Church's understanding and practice of ordination. The contributions of a union in this discussion can be forwarded to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee through the respective Ordination Study Committee set up by each division.¹³⁸

Despite the written "Appeal" from the General Conference, the Columbia Union Conference held its "special constituency meeting" on July 29, 2012. With 209 in favor, 51 opposed, and nine abstentions, the delegates of that constituency meeting voted, "That the Columbia Union Conference authorize ordination to the gospel ministry without regard to gender."¹³⁹ In response to this action, the General Conference issued, on August 7, the document "An Appeal for Oneness in Christ: A Response by the General Conference Officers and Division Presidents to the Columbia Union Conference Constituency Meeting Action"¹⁴⁰ and, on August 9, the document "Questions & Answers Regarding Current Issues of Unity Facing the Church" (see Appendix 2).¹⁴¹ The first document included the following warnings,

It was thus very disappointing to the senior leaders of the worldwide church to learn of the unilateral action taken by the delegates of the Columbia Union Conference at a special constituency meeting on July 29, 2012. That action is not in harmony with General Conference Working Policy—the collective decisions of world leadership that define the operating procedures and relationships applicable to all organizations. Further, the action sets aside the 1990 and 1995 decisions of the General Conference in Session respecting the practice of ordination. It pre-empts the process voted by the General Conference Executive Committee for the current study of ordination theology and practices by committing the Columbia Union Conference to a particular outcome before the study-and-discussion process is completed. In so doing, it asserts the right of one entity to place its conclusions above the principle of unity in the Body of Christ. By this action, the delegates have allowed for a principle of unilateralism and autonomy throughout their territory that can only be disruptive to the harmonious functioning of the Columbia Union Conference, as well as to that union's relationship with the world church family. Unfortunately, some conferences, congregations, and individuals may try now to incorrectly cite the example of the Columbia Union Conference itself as justification for pursuing any independent course of action. It is possible that some who voted for the resolution on July 29 may not have fully understood the danger their action poses to the functional unity of their own region and to the wider denomination.

The action taken by the Columbia Union Conference represents a serious threat to the unity of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church, and thus, at its next meeting in October 2012, the General Conference Executive Committee will carefully review the

¹³⁸"An Appeal for Unity in Respect to Ministerial Ordination Practices," in news.adventist.org (released on June 29, 2012). The document's explanatory footnotes, withdrawn from this text, are available in its online version.

¹³⁹"Columbia Union Constituency Overwhelmingly Approves Ordination Without Regard to Gender," in www.columbiaunion.org (released on July 29, 2012); *Adventist Review* staff with Taashi Rowe, "Columbia Union Votes Gender-Neutral Ordinations," *Adventist Review*, Aug. 16, 2012, 8.

¹⁴⁰"Church leaders issue 'An Appeal for Oneness in Christ,'" in news.adventist.org (released on Aug. 7, 2012).

¹⁴¹"Questions & Answers Regarding Current Issues of Unity Facing the Church," in news.adventist.org (released on Aug. 9, 2012). See also Mark A. Kellner, "In Televised Interview President Appeals for Unity," *Adventist Review*, Aug. 23, 2012, 8-9.

situation and determine how to respond.¹⁴²

Dealing with several contemporary issues related to women's ordination, the second document, "Questions & Answers Regarding Current Issues of Unity Facing the Church," highlights that (1) the General Conference does "have authority to determine the criteria for ministerial ordination at the union level and below"; (2) the worldwide Theology of Ordination Study Committee (established at the 2011 Annual Council) is studying the issue of women's ordination to the gospel ministry; (3) it was "constitutionally appropriate for the General Conference Sessions of 1990 and 1995 to discuss and vote on the issue of ordaining women to ministry"; (4) the 1881 General Conference Session did not vote to authorize the ordination of women to the gospel ministry; (5) "while the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church acknowledges the fact of women's ordination in China, it neither recognizes it nor endorses it," and never considered it as "a model for the world church"; (6) some matters can be decided at an Annual Council but other ones, impacting the worldwide church, should be dealt by a General Conference Session; (7) all entities of the world church should "operate and minister in harmony with the teachings and policies of the Church, and the actions of the world Church in the General Conference Executive Committee or in General Conference Session"; (8) in the post-1901 reorganization period Ellen White recognized the abiding authority of the General Conference Sessions; (9) we should work in unity (as all part of the whole) and not in uniformity (as only of the same form).¹⁴³

A number of arguments have been presented in support of these union actions. One of the most influential was Gary Patterson's text "General Conference in Violation of Its Own Policy," released on August 15, 2012. The author argues, for instance, that (1) the General Conference Policy provides that "decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference"; (2) "the General Conference has no authority over the union decisions as long as these decisions are in harmony with the criteria established for ordination by General Conference policy"; (3) of the fifteen criteria for ordination listed in the GC Working Policy none refers in any way to gender; (4) the previous action of the church in regard to women's ordination (1975, 1985, 1990, and 1995) were only denials and did not define policy; and, thus, (5) "the unions are not out of policy on this matter of gender inclusiveness in the ordination of ministers, the General Conference itself is out of policy."¹⁴⁴ To some, such reasoning seemed to justify the Columbia Union Conference decision to ordain females to the gospel ministry right away.

Aware of the General Conference disapproval of the Columbia Union Conference action, on August 19, 2012, the Pacific Union Conference voted by 79% to 21% to "approve ordination to the gospel ministry without regard to

¹⁴²"Church leaders issue 'An Appeal for Oneness in Christ,'" in news.adventist.org.

¹⁴³"Questions & Answers Regarding Current Issues of Unity Facing the Church," in news.adventist.org.

¹⁴⁴Gary Patterson, "General Conference in Violation of Its Own Policy," in spectrummagazine.org (released on Aug. 15, 2012).

gender.”¹⁴⁵ General Conference President Ted Wilson attended the constituency meetings of both the Columbia Union Conference (July 29) and the Pacific Union Conference (Aug. 19). At each meeting he asked the delegates to wait for the outcome of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee mentioned above. But the majority of the delegates felt that further delay would not resolve the matter and that it was appropriate for the union organization, which normally approves ordination anyway, to determine how it would relate to the presence of women in ministry.

On August 19 the General Conference Officers released “A Response to the Actions of the Pacific Union Conference Constituency Meeting on Sunday, August 19, 2012.” Resembling somewhat the response to Columbia Union Conference (released on August 7), this new document warned,

The action of the Pacific Union to grant Ministerial Ordination “without respect to gender” preempts the process voted for the current study of ordination theology and practices by committing the Pacific Union Conference to a particular outcome before the study-and-discussion process is completed. It also expresses a lack of trust in the integrity of the general process accepted and voted by General Conference administrators and personnel, division officers, and pastors and lay members from all the world divisions who serve on the General Conference Executive Committee, which includes the presidents of the 125 unions representing the world church, regarding how we approach common challenges.

Further, the action is contrary to General Conference Working Policy and sets aside the 1990 and 1995 decisions of the General Conference in Session respecting the practice of ordination. The action taken by the Pacific Union Conference represents a serious threat to the unity of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church, and thus, at its next meeting in October 2012, as indicated in another recent public statement by General Conference officers and division presidents, the General Conference Executive Committee will carefully review the situation and determine how to respond.¹⁴⁶

Some members supported and even applauded what they saw as the courage of both the Columbia Union and the Pacific Union in bypassing the General Conference and the worldwide church by approving ordination “without regard to gender.” Others saw the votes as rebellion, with ecclesiological consequences far beyond the ordination/no-ordination issue. In their thinking, if a union can bypass the General Conference, why cannot a local conference/mission or even a local church do the same to its own union? Still others pointed out that “without regard to gender” is an inclusive expression used today in reference to men, women, and intersexed individuals.¹⁴⁷ By incorporating this expression into their action, some wonder if these unions were promising in theory something that in practice they will not carry on (namely the ordination of homosexuals) or are they already contemplating such a possibility?

¹⁴⁵Michael Peabody, “Pacific Union Session Delegates Vote to Approve Ordinations to the Gospel Ministry Without Regard to Gender,” in pauc.adventistfaith.org (released on Aug. 20, 2012); idem, “Pacific Union Session Delegates Vote to Approve Ordinations to the Gospel Ministry Without Regard to Gender,” *NADNewsPoints*, Aug. 21, 2012.

¹⁴⁶ANN staff, “Church officials say Pacific Union vote on ordination preempts study process,” in news.adventist.org (released on Aug. 19, 2012).

¹⁴⁷See Rich Hannon, “Adventism and the Intersex Problem,” *Spectrum* 40/3 (Summer 2012): 32-34. See also the follow up reactions to the article on pp. 34-36.

Whatever the case, this expression is loaded with possible meanings presumably not intended by the delegates who voted the respective actions.

The documents and publications referred to in this paper reflect a discussion that took over important segments of the church. This discussion has been taken also to the pulpit by preachers like Dwight K. Nelson (favoring women's ordination)¹⁴⁸ and Doug Batchelor (speaking against women's ordination).¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, on September 5, 2012, "the Pacific Union Conference Executive Committee approved fourteen women and two men for ordination."¹⁵⁰ Soon after, ordinations of women to the gospel ministry took place at both the Pacific Union Conference and the Columbia Union Conference.

The General Conference responded to these moves at its 2012 Annual Council. On October 16, after a sermon by Mark A. Finley on "The Acts Model: Settling Differences in the Context of Mission" (see Appendix 3) and much prayer, the delegates voted the document, "Statement on Church Polity, Procedures and Resolution of Disagreements in the Light of Recent Union Actions on Ministerial Ordination." Approved by 264 votes in favor and 25 opposed,¹⁵¹ the document reads as follows:

Foundational principles for Seventh-day Adventist Church structure and operations are rooted in the Bible and draw heavily from the teachings of Jesus, the apostles and the experience of the early Church. In the New Testament the people of God are urged to demonstrate unity (John 15 and 17, Ephesians 4); to engage in worldwide mission (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:7-8, Acts 10-11); to acknowledge differences/disagreements and to have a process for their resolution (Acts 6, 15, Galatians 3:26-29, Philippians 2); and to live as a transformed and transforming community in a fractured and sin-burdened world (Ephesians 2-4).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church seeks to preserve its identity as a united global family while addressing mission opportunities and challenges in widely differing cultural, political and economic environments. The desire to hold two objectives, global unity¹, and global mission, in creative and dynamic balance has led to an organizational structure that shares and delegates responsibility for mission within a framework of participation in and respect for collective decision-making processes. Within this organizational structure, decisions of a General Conference Session represent the highest authority²—the voice of the whole Church in respect to beliefs, procedures and relationships.

It is natural to expect that in response to diverse and ever-changing circumstances differences will arise in determining the most appropriate ways of accomplishing mission while also preserving Church structure and relationships. The articulation of different viewpoints and the expression of disagreement are important ways by which the Church gains new insights and more fully understands the global impact of decisions. Speaking and listening, when done respectfully, are essential to the operational health of the whole body and its continuing effectiveness in mission. The process adopted by the Church for

¹⁴⁸See e.g. Dwight Nelson, *The Last Days, Part 2: "Of Perfume and Tears and Grumpy Old Men"* (sermon delivered at Pioneer Memorial Church, Andrews University, on January 21, 2012), in www.pmchurch.tv and www.youtube.com (accessed on Sept. 4, 2012).

¹⁴⁹See e.g. Doug Batchelor, "Women Pastors: A Biblical Perspective" (sermon delivered at the Sacramento Central SDA Church, Sacramento, California, on Feb. 6, 2010), in www.amazingfacts.org and www.youtube.com (accessed on Sept. 4, 2012).

¹⁵⁰Jared Wright, "Pacific Union Conference Approves Fourteen Women for Ordination," in spectrummagazine.org (released on Sept. 7, 2012).

¹⁵¹Mark A. Kellner, "After debate, Annual Council votes Statement on Church Polity," in news.adventist.org (released on Oct. 16, 2012).

the resolution of disagreements involves forums where all those affected by a decision are represented in the exploration and adoption of decisions.

The call, by both individuals and organizations, for change in ministerial ordination practices illustrates one expression of disagreement. This subject has been on the global agenda of the Church at General Conference Sessions for several decades. Thus far the General Conference Session (by actions in 1990³ and 1995⁴) has chosen the pathway of uniform practice worldwide—ministerial ordination for males only. A recurring question is whether or not the authority to grant ministerial ordination without regard to gender could be granted to divisions without making the provision mandatory everywhere. Several unions in various parts of the world have voiced support for this kind of change in ministerial ordination practices. Three union constituency sessions have authorized their executive committees to approve ministerial ordination without regard to gender. Of these, two have recently chosen to proceed according to the constituency decision.

Decisions to pursue a course of action not in harmony with the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Session decisions (with respect to ministerial ordination) represent not only an expression of dissent but also a demonstration of self-determination in a matter previously decided by the collective Church. The General Conference Executive Committee regards these actions as serious mistakes. They directly challenge two world Church decisions on the matter of ordination. They create doubts about the importance of collective decision-making as a basic feature of denominational life. They weaken the fabric of Church life and operations by giving opportunity for other entities to follow this example in order to justify independence and autonomy in other matters rather than maintaining a mutual commitment to collective decision-making.

The world Church cannot legitimize practices that clearly contradict the intent of General Conference Session actions. This applies to ordination decisions as well as to other matters in which a local organization may feel constrained not just to voice its disagreement with the world Church but to proceed along a pathway that directly conflicts with the expressed will of the worldwide Church. Accordingly, the world Church does not recognize actions authorizing or implementing ministerial ordination without regard to gender.

This statement deals with Church structure and procedures. It does not address the question of ministerial ordination practices per se. The central issue is one of Church polity—how the Church defines its organization, governance and operations. Historically, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed on the principle of interdependence rather than independence. A course of action contrary to the will of the whole places the organization at risk.

Discussion and debate about ministerial ordination practice is a separate matter and is under global study and review. General Conference Session decisions (1990 and 1995) did not authorize ministerial ordination without regard to gender, either globally or regionally. Any change in this practice requires action by a General Conference Session. Every Church organization in the world has been given the opportunity of participating in the current global study. This can be accomplished through interaction with the respective division-appointed Biblical Research Committee. Division Biblical Research Committees will interface with the General Conference-appointed Theology of Ordination Study Committee. The study is to be completed by 2014 with a report from the Theology of Ordination Study Committee presented to the General Conference Executive Committee at its 2014 Annual Council, which will decide what to refer to the General Conference Session in 2015.

The role of women in ministry and leadership has been a long-standing question. It is one that attracts strong yet differing convictions and can readily divide families, congregations and constituencies. The process toward finding acceptable solutions must not obscure the contribution that women have made and continue to make in many areas of Church life and leadership.

The General Conference Executive Committee specifically affirms the important roles that women fill in the life of the Church. Their giftedness and commitment is a blessing to the whole Church and a necessary part of its work in mission.

Moments of tension in denominational life can be opportunities for both learning and enhancing relationships. The presence of conflict and the expression of difference can help make the Church stronger. In such moments the commitment of all to informed and collective decision-making processes is the best way to resolve matters while keeping the Church together as a world family.

The General Conference Executive Committee appeals to all organizations—local churches, local conferences/missions, unions, institutions and divisions—to consider thoughtfully the impact and implications of decisions beyond the boundaries of each entity's territory of operations. General Conference *Working Policy*, the *Church Manual*, and General Conference Session decisions are designed to assist the Church in demonstrating the unity for which Jesus prayed and at the same time to provide a structure that advances the gospel commission in every part of the world.

This appeal is also addressed to individual Church members everywhere. Drawing upon Paul's analogy of the Church as a body (1 Corinthians 12) it is a call for all parts of the body to perform their individual service, to express their unique giftedness with the realization that each is part of something much larger—a worldwide family that seeks to do all things in the name of Jesus (Colossians 3:17).¹⁵²

Even so, in November 2012 it was reported, “16 Female Pastors Approved for Ordination” by the Columbia Union Conference,¹⁵³ and “Seven More Women Approved for Ordination by Pacific Union Conference.”¹⁵⁴ By adding “seven more” to the 14 approved two months earlier, the Pacific Union total came to 21 female pastors. These decisions were followed by several women's ordination ceremonies at those two union conferences.¹⁵⁵

Another controversial step was taken by the constituency of the Southeastern California Conference (part of the Pacific Union Conference) on October 27, 2013, when they elected Sandra E. Roberts as president of that conference.¹⁵⁶ According to the General Conference *Working Policy*, “a conference/mission/field president shall be an ordained minister.”¹⁵⁷ So, the tension was created by the fact that although she was one of the females

¹⁵²“Statement on Church Polity, Procedures and Resolution of Disagreements in the Light of Recent Union Actions on Ministerial Ordination,” in *ibid.* The document's explanatory footnotes, withdrawn from this text, are available in its online version.

¹⁵³Visitor Staff, “16 Female Pastors Approved for Ordination,” in www.columbiaunion.org (released on Nov. 8, 2012). Cf. Taashi Rowe, “How Josephine Benton Blazed the Trail for Women in Ministry,” in *ibid.* (released on Nov. 19, 2012).

¹⁵⁴Alexander Carpenter, “Seven More Women Approved for Ordination by Pacific Union Conference,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Nov. 16, 2012).

¹⁵⁵E.g., AT News Team, “History-making Woman to Be Ordained as an Adventist Minister on February 16,” in www.atoday.org (released on Feb. 7, 2013); Bonnie Dwyer, “Unique Ordination Services Being Held,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Feb. 13, 2013); Alexander Carpenter, “Video: Columbia Union Leaders Ordain Josephine Benton at Sligo Church,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Feb. 16, 2013); *idem*, “Another Step Forward: A Photo Essay of Cherise Gardner's Ordination,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Apr. 28, 2013).

¹⁵⁶Bonnie Dwyer, “Woman Nominated to be President of Southeastern California Conference,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Sept. 20, 2013); David Olson, “Religion: Corona's Sandra Roberts Makes Adventist History,” in www.pe.com (released on Oct. 28, 2013); “Sandra Roberts Elected President of Southeastern California Conference,” in adventistreview.org (released on Oct. 29, 2013).

¹⁵⁷*Working Policy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*, 2012-2013 ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2012), E-60.

previously ordained in the territory of the Pacific Union Conference, the General Conference and the worldwide church did not recognize such ordinations.

On October 31, 2013, the General Conference Executive Officers released the document “Moving Forward Together: A response from the General Conference to recent actions in North America,” which states,

Working Policy, which is the recording of our agreements as to how we will work together to do the Lord’s work and mission, serves as one of the practical unifying agents that the Holy Spirit uses to bind the church together. Policy is not inflexible. It can be changed but it reflects the understanding of the collective group, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When personal convictions are placed ahead of the collective policy decisions of the worldwide church, troubling precedents are set. God works in an orderly way and wishes His church to exemplify this sanctified behavior through the power of the Holy Spirit. Humility and submission to God for the good of the church body as outlined in the Word of God and the Spirit of Prophecy are fundamental Biblical principles for the benefit of the church.

At the 2012 Annual Council in a voted action entitled, “Statement on Church Polity, Procedures, and Resolution of Disagreements in the Light of Recent Unions on Ministerial Ordination,” the world church strongly indicated that it does not recognize as ordained ministers individuals who do not meet the criteria outlined in policy. It deeply concerns the world leadership of the church that recently a local conference constituency elected as a conference president an individual who is not recognized by the world church as an ordained minister. Ordination to the ministry is one of the criteria set forth for being a conference president. General Conference administration is working with the North American Division administration as they deal with the implications of this local conference action, which is contrary to the 2012 Annual Council action.¹⁵⁸

Meanwhile, the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC)¹⁵⁹ had already met on January 15-17, 2013 (Laurel, Maryland), when the subject of “ordination” in general was considered¹⁶⁰; and July 22-24, 2013 (Linthicum Heights, Maryland), when papers both for and against women’s ordination were read.¹⁶¹ The forthcoming meeting on January 21-23, 2014 (Columbia, Maryland), will consider not only some additional papers on women’s ordination but also the reports from the Biblical Research Committees (BRCs) of the world divisions, some of which were previously

¹⁵⁸General Conference Executive Officers, “Moving Forward Together: A response from the General Conference to recent actions in North America,” in news.adventist.org (released on Oct. 31, 2013). Cf. Trevan Osborn, “An SECC Delegate Responds to GC Executive Officers,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Nov. 1, 2013).

¹⁵⁹ANN Staff, “Committee Members Identified for Study of Theology of Ordination,” in news.adventist.org (released on Dec. 6, 2012).

¹⁶⁰Adventist Review Staff, “Theology of Ordination Committee Ends First Session,” in news.adventist.org (released on Jan. 18, 2013); AR Staff, “Theology of Ordination Committee Ends First Session,” in www.adventistreview.org (released on Jan. 18, 2013). Cf. AT News Team, “Theology of Ordination Study Committee Ends First Meeting Thursday & Has Little to Say,” in www.atoday.org (released on Jan. 18, 2013); Alexander Carpenter, “The Ordination Study Committee at Work,” in spectrummagazine.org (released on Jan. 21, 2013).

¹⁶¹Mark A. Kellner, “Multiple Viewpoints Aired on Women’s Ordination Question,” in adventistreview.org (released on July 25, 2013).

released online.¹⁶² The fourth and final meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee is scheduled for June 2-4, 2014), after which some concrete decisions should be made.

Concluding Remarks

Since the early 1970s Seventh-day Adventists have been discussing the subject of women's ordination to the gospel ministry. Many actions, documents, and publications have been produced with the intension of settling the disputes. But already in 1999 Laura L. Vance could describe this as "the most persistent and pervasive dispute among Adventists (with the possible exception of the dispute concerning the relative degree to which justification and sanctification are necessary for salvation...)." ¹⁶³ Indeed, many of those who oppose or at least do not favor women's ordination are convinced that sufficient discussions have already taken place, and that the decisions of the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Sessions are still valid and should be respected. However, for many in favor of women's ordination it seems that the matter will remain unresolved until the church finally approves it or at least allows every division or union to decide what is to be done in its own region. But there is also a third group that, without a specific agenda to push, is waiting for the church to produce a clearer exposition of the biblical testimony on this subject.

Further studies on the *nature of ordination* (as suggested in 2010) can clarify some issues involved in the overall discussion. But there are other correlated areas that cannot be overlooked. One is the matter of *ecclesiastic authority*. By glancing through the documents quoted above, one ends up with some basic questions: How abiding and authoritative are the General Conference Session actions for the worldwide church? To what extent can a division, union or conference/mission accommodate its practices to its local culture without breaking the overall unity of the church? In regard to women's ordination, an increasing number of voices are claiming that it should be seen as a cultural option to be decided on a local basis without interference from the worldwide church. Others see it as a moral obligation for the entire church. But do these perspectives reflect the biblical understanding of the subject?

Another crucial area is the relationship between women's ordination and other prevailing forms of so-called *social injustice/discrimination*.¹⁶⁴ Mark Chaves concludes his insightful book *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Harvard, 1997) by stating that

rules about women's ordination largely serve as symbolic display to the outside world, and they point to (or away from) a broader liberal agenda associated with modernity and

¹⁶²E.g., tedNEWS staff, "TED Executive Committee Recommends Inclusive Ministry Without Gender Distinctions," www.ted-adventist.org (released on Nov. 18, 2013); "NAD Executive Committee Approves Recommendation," in nadordination.com (accessed on Dec. 17, 2013).

¹⁶³Vance, *Seventh-day Adventism in Crisis*, 192.

¹⁶⁴Some other forms of so-called social injustice/discrimination are addressed in the section "LGBT Community News and Conversation," in *Spectrum* 40, Issue 3 (Summer 2012).

religious accommodation to the spirit of the age. From this perspective, a denomination's formal policy about women's ordination is less an indicator of women's literal status within the denomination and more and more an enactment of its position vis-à-vis the liberal and modern agenda of institutionalizing individual rights.

Women's ordination, then, is about something more than females in religious leadership. This book has tried to say what that "more" is.¹⁶⁵

In general, those Adventists who favor women's ordination more from a biblical perspective try to deal with it as an isolated matter. Some who defend women's ordination see it as part of a larger social-justice concern that might be extended in some cases to include even homosexuality.¹⁶⁶ Only a more thorough analysis can determine to what extent the church will be able to deal with the topic under discussion without absorbing the broader social agenda of modern culture. Helpful in that process would be a comparative study between the Adventist experience and the experiences of other Christian denominations that also have dealt with the issue of women's ordination.

Despite all the challenges the church is facing today, we must trust in God's leadership and pray for the leaders of the church in these difficult days when authority in all its forms is being undermined. After all, Ellen White reminds us,

There is no need to doubt, to be fearful that the work will not succeed. God is at the head of the work, and He will set everything in order. If matters need adjusting at the head of the work, God will attend to that, and work to right every wrong. Let us have faith that God is going to carry the noble ship which bears the people of God safely into port.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192. See also Nancy Carol James, *The Developing Schism within the Episcopal Church (1960-2010): Social Justice, Ordination of Women, Charismatics, Homosexuality, Extra-Territorial Bishops, Etc.* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁶The issues of women's ordination and homosexuality are treated in *Spectrum* 40/3 (Summer 2012).

¹⁶⁷Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), 2:390.

Appendix 1

RECORDS PERTAINING TO ELLEN G. WHITE'S MINISTERIAL/ORDINATION CREDENTIALS

A. Ellen White's Biographical Information Form

On March 5, 1909, Ellen White's biographical information form was filled out by her assistant, Mary Steward, as requested for General Conference records. Question 19 asked, "If ordained, state when, where, and by whom." The line was marked with an "x" indicating that she had not been ordained, just as an "x" was recorded for question 26, "If remarried, give date, and to whom."

B. Conference Credentialing Records in the *Review and Herald*

Ellen White's name is not found in lists of Michigan Conference credentialed ministers prior to 1871. (See, for example, lists published in RH, May 31, 1864, May 28, 1867, and May 26, 1868.) She was first issued ministerial credentials on February 10, 1871, by the Michigan Conference:

"Moved and voted, That Sr. Ellen G. White receive credentials from this Conference."—RH, Feb. 14, 1871, p. 69.

Her credentials were renewed by the Michigan Conference annually thereafter through 1887.¹⁶⁸ The 1886 report was introduced with the words: "Your committee on credentials and licenses would present the following names of ordained ministers for a renewal of their credentials the ensuing year." (Ellen White was not listed in the Michigan Conference report for 1888.)

C. Listings in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* & *General Conference Bulletin*

The first listing of ministers in the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* was in 1884. Ellen White was listed under both "General Conference" Ministers and "Michigan" Ministers. The listings appeared the same in 1885, 1886, and 1887. In 1888 she was listed under "California" Ministers, as well as under "Michigan" Ministers and "General Field" Ministers. She was also listed under "Ministers" (not Licentiates) in the "Alphabetical List of Laborers."

¹⁶⁸See RH, Sept. 10, 1872, p. 102, Sept. 16, 1873, p. 110, Aug. 25, 1874, p. 79, Aug. 26, 1876, p. 63, Oct. 5, 1876, p. 106, Oct. 4, 1877, p. 107, Oct. 17, 1878, p. 127, Oct. 16, 1879, p. 134, Oct. 14, 1880, p. 253, Oct. 11, 1881, p. 237, Oct. 10, 1882, p. 637, Oct. 9, 1883, p. 636, Oct. 21, 1884, p. 668, Nov. 17, 1885, p. 717, Oct. 26, 1886, p. 668, Nov. 1, 1887, p. 684.

Beginning in 1889, all the workers were listed alphabetically, as well as by territory, with letter codes inserted to indicate whether the worker was (l) licensed to preach or (m) an ordained minister. Ellen White was listed under “General Conference” Ministers only (not “Michigan” or “California”) and an (m) appeared after her name in the directory. She was listed the same way from 1890-1894. No yearbooks were published from 1895 to 1903, however, “Workers’ Directories” were published in the *General Conference Bulletin*.

In the 1895/1896/1897/1898 *Bulletins*, Ellen White was consistently listed in the “Workers’ Directory” with the code for “Minister” (m) in the absence of any separate coding for ordained ministers in the directory, as well as appearing in the list of “General Conference” Ministers. In the 1899/1900 *Bulletins*, the Ministerial Directory listed (m) for ordained minister and (l) for licensed minister. Ellen White was listed with the (m) code, and in the list of “General Conference” Ministers.

In the 1901/1902 *Bulletins*, the codes were not used, but a distinction between Ministers and Licentiates was made in territorial listings. Ellen White was listed in the General Conference “Ministers” list rather than the “Licentiates.” No directory was published for 1903, but she was granted “ministerial credentials” from the General Conference by action reported in the *General Conference Bulletin*, Apr. 14, 1903, p. 216.

In the 1904 *Yearbook*, Ellen White was listed in the Ministerial Directory and with “Ministers Under the Direction of the General Conference.” There was no separate coding for ordained ministers in the directory. In the 1905/1906/1907/1908 *Yearbooks*, she was listed in the Ministerial Directory and with Ministers listed under “Laborers Engaged in General Work and in Mission Fields, Under the General Conference.” Again, there was no separate coding for ordained ministers in the directory.

In the 1909/1910/1911/1912/1913 *Yearbooks*, Ellen White was listed in the Ministerial Directory and with Ministers under “Laborers Engaged in General Work Under the General Conference” (with no separate coding for ordained ministers in the directory).

In the 1914/1915 *Yearbooks*, Ellen White was listed in the Ministerial Directory and with Ministers listed under “General Laborers Holding Credentials From the General Conference” (with no separate coding for ordained ministers in the directory).

D. Ellen White’s Paper Credentials

The White Estate possesses six paper credentials that were issued to Ellen White. The first credential is dated October 1, 1883, from the Michigan Conference. The second is dated December 6, 1885, from the General

Conference. On that one credential, the word “ordained” was crossed out. The third is dated December 27, 1887, from the General Conference. The fourth is dated March 7, 1899, from the General Conference. The fifth is dated June 14, 1909, from the General Conference. The sixth is dated June 12, 1913, from the General Conference.

E. Statement by Ellen G. White’s Family

In a letter dated Nov. 17, 1935, Dores E. Robinson replied on behalf of W. C. White (Ellen White’s son and Robinson’s father-in-law) in response to a query concerning Ellen White’s ministerial credentials. He wrote: “[W. C. White] tells me that Sister White was never ordained, that she never baptized, nor did she ever give the ordination charge to others.”

Summary

From 1871 until her death in 1915, Ellen White was issued ministerial credentials. From 1871 to 1887 she was credentialed by the Michigan Conference, and from 1884 until her death, she was credentialed as a General Conference Minister. On one of the credentials (1885), the word “ordained” is struck through. (In the 1888 *Yearbook* she was also listed among the California Ministers.) Throughout the years, her name was listed along with ordained ministers rather than licentiates, although her biographical information sheet and the testimony of her family indicates that she did not receive ordination at the hands of church officials.

Compiled by the Ellen G. White Estate, Inc.
October 2012

SOURCE: Ellen G. White Estate, “Records Pertaining to Ellen G. White’s Ministerial/Ordination Credentials,” in www.whiteestate.org (released in Oct. 2012).

Appendix 2

**QUESTIONS & ANSWERS REGARDING CURRENT
ISSUES OF UNITY FACING THE CHURCH**

Aug. 09, 2012 Silver Spring, Maryland, United States

The following document addresses issues raised regarding the unity of the church, the authority of the General Conference, and its relationship to other levels and entities of the world church in connection with the current discussion on ordination to the gospel ministry. This document does not address whether ordaining women is appropriate but rather clarifies and corrects arguments that have been used throughout the discussion.

1. Does the General Conference have authority to determine the criteria for ministerial ordination at the union level and below, or does the union conference have the delegated authority within its territory to establish such criteria, including gender?

Decisions of the General Conference Sessions profoundly impact the church at all levels, including General Conference/division, union conference/mission, conference, and local church. While it is true that local churches approve candidates for baptism, and local conferences recommend to unions for approval all requests for ordination, none of these levels establish the criteria for baptism or ordination. A local church board determines who is going to be baptized; it does not determine the criteria for baptism. The 28 Fundamental Beliefs and the baptismal vows have been mutually agreed upon by the world church. This keeps the church unified internationally. In the same way a union conference has the delegated authority to approve candidates for ordination based on their satisfying the criteria for ordination established by the world church; it does not have the authority to ignore this mutually agreed-upon criteria. That is why the unions are not authorized to move forward unilaterally with ordination without regard to gender. If the church were to accept such a premise, there would be varying standards of ordination and criteria for ministry. Such a path would not likely end there. It would open the door to varying standards for baptism, church membership, etc. The issue here is not women's ordination per se; it is which level of church organization has the constitutionally given authority to determine what qualifies a person for ordination. This can only be done by the General Conference in Session, or the General Conference Executive Committee, which acts between General Conference Sessions (General Conference Working Policy L 35).

Notice how the Church Manual describes the relationship between the various levels of church organization:

In the Church today the General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, is the highest ecclesiastical authority in the

*administration of the Church. The General Conference Executive Committee is authorized by its Constitution to create subordinate organizations with authority to carry out their roles. Therefore all subordinate organizations and institutions throughout the Church will recognize the General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, as the highest ecclesiastical authority, under God, among Seventh-day Adventists.*¹

The requirement for all church entities, including conferences and unions, to follow existing policies is made clear in the Bylaws of the General Conference: “Administrations of all organizations and institutions within a division’s territory shall be responsible to their respective executive committees/boards and operate in harmony with [the] division and General Conference Executive Committee actions and policies.”² For the above reasons, the recent action taken by the Columbia Union Conference Constituency Session to approve ordination without respect to gender represents a violation of these policies.

2. Is the worldwide Theology of Ordination Study Committee, requested at the 2010 General Conference Session and established at the 2011 Annual Council, also studying the issue of the pastoral ordination of women?

Yes. The process for studying the theology of ordination voted by the General Conference Administrative Committee was handed out and reviewed by the 2011 Annual Council. As the document explains, “each division is asked to request their biblical research committee [BRC] to make a study of the theology of ordination and its implications for church practices.”³ As has been consistently explained verbally and in writing, these practical implications involve many questions related to ordination, including the ordination of women. For example, in a letter from the Biblical Research Institute to all the division presidents and BRC directors sent on May 1, 2012, numerous issues and questions were listed that could be considered by the division study committees. A number of these items relate directly to the question of ordaining women as pastors, including “Does the Bible teach leadership role distinctions between male and female in ministry?”

The Biblical Research Institute has provided the necessary materials for the divisions to establish biblical research committees, and all 13 world divisions are in various stages of the study process. In addition, the General Conference Administrative Committee will be appointing a Theology of Ordination Study Committee, to which each division is invited to send representatives who will be able to represent the study done by their division on this larger, worldwide committee. A report of the worldwide study committee will be presented to the General Conference administration, which will report the findings to the 2014 Annual Council. This would allow any agreed-upon resolutions to be placed on the agenda of the 2015 General Conference Session. Further details of this process are available through the Adventist News Network:

<http://news.adventist.org/en/archive/articles/2011/10/10/process-timetable-unveiled-for-review-of-theology-of-ordination>.

3. Was it constitutionally appropriate for the General Conference Sessions of 1990 and 1995 to discuss and vote on the issue of ordaining women to ministry?

Yes. “The General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, is the highest ecclesiastical authority in the administration of the Church.”⁴ The General Conference in Session can deal with matters of global importance to the Church as well as matters referred to it from the General Conference Executive Committee. The General Conference in Session is the final place of appeal in matters of difference among organizations. “When differences arise in or between churches and conferences or institutions, appeal to the next higher constituent level is proper until it reaches an Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee or the General Conference Session. Between these meetings, the General Conference Executive Committee constitutes the body of final authority on all questions. The committee’s decision may be reviewed at a General Conference Session or an Annual Council.”

The 1990 General Conference Session addressed a report and recommendations that were referred to it by the General Conference Executive Committee.⁵

The 1995 General Conference Session addressed a matter that originated as a request from the North American Division (NAD) officers and the NAD union presidents. This request was processed through the General Conference Executive Committee and placed on the agenda for the General Conference Session.

4. Did the 1881 General Conference Session vote to authorize the ordination of women to the gospel ministry?

No. However, a surface reading of the minutes of the session could leave a wrong impression. It was common to introduce motions at GC Sessions of the time with “Resolved.” In our day, it sounds as if it has been decided, but in fact it was merely the accepted way to place a motion up for consideration. Then it would be discussed by the delegates and put to a vote. The resolutions voted on and passed at the 1881 General Conference Session are clearly listed in the minutes as “adopted.” With regard to the ordination of women, the following resolution was presented for discussion: “Resolved, That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.” Eight individuals are listed as speaking to this resolution prior to it being “referred to the General Conference Committee.”⁶ It is never listed as having been adopted, nor is there any evidence it was ever taken up again, either at this Session or at any subsequent GC Session.⁷

5. If female pastors have already been ordained by some organizations in China, why not allow the ordination of women to the ministry in other regions of the world?

Women have and are doing a powerful work for God in ministry in China. They are serving as pastors and church planters. Of more than 6,000 pastors in China, approximately 4,000, or 70 percent, of them are women. While a few (currently, 20 women) have been ordained, we need to understand the complexity of the situation in China and the reality of life there. In China, the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have a formal church organization. There are no conferences or unions. There is no official Adventist Theological Seminary in China. There is no standardized ministerial training. Pastors typically are chosen from the members of a local congregation as they demonstrate a calling for ministry by teaching Sabbath school, lay preaching, and church planting. Chinese pastors, male or female, are usually ordained in one of two ways: either by the local congregation with the participation of Adventist senior pastors from their region, or by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement operates under the China Christian Council and is a nondenominational entity approved by the Chinese government.

Female Adventist leaders in China are not in agreement among themselves about the appropriateness of ordination: there is no uniform approach to the issue among the women who pastor Adventist churches in China. Some allow themselves to be ordained, some do not; while the large majority has not engaged in the discussion because women's ordination has never been an issue among women pastors in China. While the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church acknowledges the fact of women's ordination in China, it neither recognizes it nor endorses it. It doesn't seek to initiate, guide, or control the process. The church in China functions in the context of its environment and with the limitations imposed upon it by the government where it exists. However, because of this anomalous situation, its practices with respect to the ordination of female pastors cannot be cited as a model for the world church.

6. Is the ordination of female pastors in China recognized by the world church?

No. Ordination in China is not officially recognized by any entity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church outside of China. The document, "An Appeal for Unity in Respect to Ministerial Ordination Practices," written and approved by all General Conference officers (25 persons) and division presidents (13 persons) worldwide, makes this clear:

... these ordinations were not authorized or conducted according to the policies of the Church. Nor are these ordinations approved or recognized/endorsed by the Northern Asia-Pacific Division. The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have an officially organized structure in China that is comparable to other areas of the world. Government regulations

do not permit outside involvement in church affairs within China. The practice, in China, of ministerial ordination for women is acknowledged as a reality that has arisen in China and is beyond the influence of the world-wide structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁸

7. How is General Conference policy determined, and how is it related to practice? What is the connection between decisions voted by the General Conference Executive Committee, the General Conference Session, and policy?

Policy is thoughtfully developed, based on sometimes lengthy deliberations over issues both theological and practical, and recommendations made for consideration by duly appointed and elected representatives at these sessions and meetings of the world church. It is not accurate to assert that policy follows practice. It is more accurate to say that practice informs policy but that policy itself is based on Seventh-day Adventist principles found in Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White. A recent example of how this process works in practice is the use of tithe. For several years, a committee at the General Conference has studied principles of tithing found in the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. Based on this study and discussion, the committee has formulated recommendations for General Conference administration that have been refined, adopted at the Annual Council, and then included in the Working Policy.

However, certain policies cannot be acted upon at Annual Councils but only at a General Conference Session. These sessions, held every five years, address matters of global importance that impact the entire world Church, such as the election of world leaders (officers and department directors serving from the General Conference office and officers of divisions), revision and approval of Fundamental Beliefs, amendments to the Church Manual, amendments to the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws, appointment of the General Conference Auditing Service leaders and board, etc.

The General Conference Church Manual and General Conference Working Policy contain the decisions that define the operating procedures and relationships among the various levels of church organization (churches, local conferences, unions, and the General Conference with its divisions). The policies of the Church Manual are determined by General Conference Sessions and those of the Working Policy are determined by the General Conference Executive Committee at Annual Councils. Between General Conference sessions the General Conference Executive Committee is delegated to act on behalf of the General Conference Session. A General Conference Session is not prevented from establishing policy by virtue of having given to the Executive Committee that prerogative between Sessions. Membership on the Executive Committee includes General Conference and division officers; presidents of all the unions worldwide; as well as representation, recommended by divisions, from laity, pastors and frontline employees within each division.

8. Is it obligatory for all entities of the world church to be in full agreement with the General Conference model constitution and working policies, or are they permitted to be only in “general” agreement?

The model constitutions and bylaws contain basic templates of language and concepts to be included in the constitution and bylaws of an organization such as a union or local conference. Some of the material in the model documents is optional. Other material, represented by bold lettering, is obligatory. The obligation for organizations to operate in harmony with General Conference Session and Executive Committee decisions is also shown elsewhere in the Working Policy. No organization is able to claim an exemption from such obligation merely because it has not adopted such language in its constitution and bylaws:

Local churches, local conferences/missions/fields, union conferences/missions, unions of churches, and institutions are, by vote of the appropriate constituency, and by actions of properly authorized executive committees, a part of the worldwide organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Whereas each has accepted the privilege and responsibility of representing the Church in its part of the world, each is therefore required to operate and minister in harmony with the teachings and policies of the Church, and the actions of the world Church in the General Conference Executive Committee or in General Conference Session. While individual units of the Church are given freedom to function in ways appropriate to their role and culture, no part of the worldwide organization of the Church has a unilateral right to secede.⁹

9. What did Ellen White say about the authority of the General Conference?

In the years preceding the reorganization of the church in 1901, Ellen White made several statements about the General Conference no longer being the voice of God because the General Conference president and his advisors were not willing to heed the messages from the Lord. An example of this is a statement in 1898: “It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God.”¹⁰ With the rapid growth of the church during these years, it was also clear that three or four leaders at the General Conference office in Battle Creek should not be making day-to-day decisions for fields half a world away. However, after the reorganization at the 1901 General Conference Session, Ellen White’s attitude was very different:

1909—“God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has invested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.”¹¹

1911—“God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God.”¹²

10. What is the difference between unity and uniformity?

The difference between “unity” and “uniformity” is in how these words end. They both start with “uni”—a Latin prefix meaning “one,” but it is what comes after that “one” that explains the oneness. Unity is “the state of being one, being united, as of the parts of a whole,”¹³ but uniformity is “the state or quality of being uniform,”¹⁴ that is, in form being one, but not in heart, mind, and soul.

As evidenced from the Creation account to the story of the Earth made new, God is clearly a God of diversity. He did not make only one kind of animal, plant, flower—or even human. Instead, He created the diversity that we see in the world around us.

But God is not the author of confusion, nor did He intend the world to be fragmented and divided. The purpose of Creation was to give Him glory, and the purpose of the Church is to point people toward God as revealed in His Word.

When Jesus prayed, “That they all may be one” (John 17:21, NKJV), it was in the context of purpose and mission for those who believed (and would believe) in Him. He pleaded with His Father to “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (vs. 17). Regarding mission, He prayed, “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (vs. 18). Summing up the unity Jesus desires for His followers, He prayed, “And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as you have loved Me” (vss. 22, 23).

Our goal is to work unitedly toward the realization of the kingdom of God. This is accomplished as a worldwide body of believers by coming together in belief and practice.

Nowhere is this more evidenced than during every quinquennium when the worldwide church comes together in a General Conference Session to pray, worship, fellowship, and conduct the business of the church. It is here, with the input from a wide diversity of representatives from every part of the globe, that the voice of the entire church is heard. It is here where our statements of belief and practice are voted. It is these beliefs—based on the truth of God’s Word and the practices that outline how best to accomplish our mission—that guide us and keep us united as we move together in mission.

¹ Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 18th ed., rev. 2010, p. 31.

² Section I.4 of the Bylaws of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook, rev. 2011, p. 11. The yearbook in PDF is available at: <http://www.adventistarchive.org/docs/YB/YB2011.pdf>.

³ Minutes of the General Conference Executive Committee, GCC 11-105.

⁴ Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 18th ed., rev. 2010, p. 31.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Minutes of the 1881 General Conference Session, 197 GCS 63-88, published in The Review and Herald, vol. 58, no. 25 (Dec. 20, 1881), p. 392.

⁷ A short outline of General Conference and North American Division decisions relating to women and ordination, including this item, together with images of the original supporting documents, may be found at: GC and NAD Actions Related to Women's Ordination (PDF).

⁸ "An Appeal for Unity in Respect to Ministerial Ordination Practices," June 29, 2012 (p. 2, n. 5; the full document is available by [click here](#)).

⁹ From General Conference Working Policy, B 10 25 Structural Stability, p. 57.

¹⁰ 17MR 216; this and similar statements can be found in LDE 50, 51.

¹¹ 9T 260, 261; this and similar statements can be found in LDE 55, 56.

¹² AA 164; also in LDE 56. For further reading, see George E. Rice, "The church: voice of God?" Ministry, December 1987, pp. 4-6, available at the Ellen G. White Estate: <http://drc.whiteestate.org/files4483.pdf>.

¹³ From dictionary.com at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/unity>.

¹⁴ From dictionary.com at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/uniformity?s=t&id=1089>.

SOURCE: "Questions & Answers Regarding Current Issues of Unity Facing the Church," in news.adventist.org (released on Aug. 9, 2012).

Appendix 3

**THE ACTS MODEL: SETTLING DIFFERENCES
IN THE CONTEXT OF MISSION**

Mark A. Finley

Their fear was gone. It danced away like a fading shadow. The dark night of their gloom was over. Morning had come. Faith filled their hearts. They no longer cowered in fear trembling in the upper room. They were filled with faith. Hope overflowed in their hearts. One glimpse of their resurrected Lord changed their lives. Jesus gave them a new reason for living. He gave them what has come to be known as the Great Commission. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

Now they were clinging to the great promise. For without the great promise they could not fulfill the great commission. Imagine that you were in the upper room with the disciples two thousand years ago. The integrity of God's word is at stake. His reputation is on the line. The honor of God's throne depends on the fulfillment of His promise.

The Great Promise

In spite of overwhelming obstacles and insurmountable odds the disciples clung to that precious promise. "And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which,' He said, 'you have heard from Me.'" "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:4, 8).

The disciples clung to Jesus word. They trusted the Savior's promise. They were confident that if they fulfilled the conditions He would fulfill His word. They waited. They confessed their sins. They prayed. They believed. And heaven answered. The Holy Spirit was poured in abundant measure on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).

The outpouring of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost was not simply because the disciples met the conditions. Certainly the Holy Spirit would not have been poured out if they had not met the conditions, but meeting the conditions of receiving the Spirit alone was not enough.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost as a signal to the early church that Jesus sacrifice was accepted by the Father in the heavenly sanctuary. Luke makes this clear in Acts chapter two. "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear" (Acts 2:32, 33).

The mighty outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost was heaven's gift confirming the Father's acceptance of the magnificent sacrifice of Christ on

Calvary's cross. The three thousand baptized that day were an eloquent testimony of the risen Christ's power to change lives. The fullness of the Spirit testifies to the fullness of Jesus power.

The disciples gathered in the upper room that day numbered one hundred twenty. The challenge of reaching the world with the gospel seemed impossible. The best population estimates for the first century range in the one hundred and eighty million range.

Although there certainly were a few more Christians than those gathered in the upper room, the percentage of Christians to the world population was infinitesimal. For example if we use the 120 figure there would have been one Christian to each 1.4 million people in the world.

If you compare that to the number of Seventh-day Adventists in the world today there is approximately one Adventist to every four hundred and twenty two people in the world today. In an age of Roman military might and materialism, Greek philosophy and pagan religion their task would have appeared much more daunting than ours.

These early believers did not have mass media, radio, television or the internet. They did not have the social media network like *face book*, *twitter* or *text messaging*. They did not have a network of satellite television stations. They did not have seminaries, publishing houses and a worldwide hospital system. They did not have a worldwide church organization, but this they had, the fullness of the Spirit. They had Jesus promise that through the outpouring of His Holy Spirit they would impact the entire world with His message of love and truth.

Explosive Growth in Acts

The results were astounding! Journey with me through the book of Acts and catch the inspiration as we stand back in awe at the moving of the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts reveals what God can do through consecrated men and women in a very short time c who believe His promise and act upon His Word.

When the disciples woke up on the day of Pentecost they had no idea that the church would add three thousand new members that very day. Acts 2:41 records, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them." And this was just the beginning. Acts 4:4 adds, "However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand."

You will notice that the text says the number of men was five thousand. If we add women and children the numbers dramatically increase. Most estimates are by the time of Acts 4 the Christian Church numbered fifteen to twenty thousand. In just a few short weeks the church exploded in growth. This amazing phenomena continues in Acts 6:7, "And the word of God spread and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith."

As the disciples preached under the influence of the Holy Spirit the risen Christ touched the hearts of many Jewish religious leaders. Many of them

along with their congregations accepted this newfound faith. The New Testament Church continued to impact the world in remarkable ways.

One Roman writer put it this way, “You are everywhere. You are in our armies, you are in our navies, our senate and market places,” referring to the wide spread reach of Christianity.

Pliny, the younger, governor of the Roman province of Bithynia on the north coast of modern Turkey wrote to Emperor Trajan around A.D. 110. Pliny’s statement is significant because it was nearly eighty years after the crucifixion. Pliny described the official trials he was conducting to find and execute Christians. He stated, “For many of every age, of every social class, even of both sexes, are being called to trial and will be called. Nor cities alone, but villages in even rural areas have been invaded by the infection of this superstition (Christianity) (*Epistulae* 10.96, gjr).

This is a rather remarkable quote from Pliny. He shows us that in a remote, out of the way province Christianity had invaded every level of society in a few generations. Ninety years later around A.D. 200 Tertullian, a Roman lawyer turned Christian, wrote a defiant letter to the Roman magistrates defending Christianity. He boasted that, “nearly all the citizens of all the cities are Christians” (*Apologeticus* 37.8, gjr). The story of the book of Acts is the story of remarkable growth of the Christian Church in a very short period of time.

The Devil’s Strategy

In light of this explosive growth and this passionate commitment to mission, the devil attempted to break up the unity of the church and thwart its outreach. Let’s study three very specific instances in the book of Acts where the unity of the New Testament church could have been easily fractured and discover lessons for the church today.

1. Acts 6 – The issue of fairness, justice and equality threatens to fracture church unity.
2. Acts 10, 11 – The issue of personal opinions and prejudice in the light of divine Revelation threatens the unity of the church.
3. Acts 15 – Strong cultural traditions with the possibility of unilateral actions and conflict between Jew and Gentile threatens the unity of the church.

Let’s carefully look at each of these scenarios and discover not merely the outcome but the process the disciples used to solve these differences.

I. A Conflict over Food Distribution

In Acts the sixth chapter there was a serious conflict between the Jewish Christians of a Greek background and the Jewish Christians from Palestine. The Greek widows felt they were being treated unfairly in the distribution of the food. They believed there was an inequality. Acts 6:1 states the

issue succinctly, “Now in those days when the number of disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution...” Notice carefully that the “disciples were multiplying and there arose a murmuring...” When the Holy Spirit works powerfully, the devil brings in dissension. Dissension places a stranglehold on mission. It stifles growth. It limits soul winning effectiveness. Conflict is the anesthetic that puts a passion for witness asleep. Unity is the very culture where witness flourishes. Commenting on the conflict in Acts 6 Ellen White makes this insightful statement, “Satan knew that so long as this union continued to exist, he would be powerless to check the progress of gospel truth; and he sought to take advantage of former habits of thought, in the hope that thereby he might be able to introduce into the church elements of disunion” (AA 87).

Conflict saps our energy and absorbs our attention.

Dissension distracts us from mission.

The devil is well aware of this so he introduces elements of mistrust and conflict.

The Holy Spirit led the disciples to find a way through the difficulty. The challenges the church faces today are nothing new and I am confident that the Holy Spirit will help us find a way through them. How did the early church solve problems that had the potential to divide the church and blunt their soul winning effectiveness?

Here are three vital lessons from Acts 6:

1. The disciples Acted Promptly. Dissension does not solve itself. Conflict usually does not go away. Leadership must be courageous enough to find solutions. Commenting on the conflict in Acts 6, inspiration puts it this way, “Prompt measures must now be taken to remove all occasion for dissatisfaction, lest the enemy triumph in his effort to bring about a division among the believers” (AA 88).
2. The disciples sought consensus. They met with those involved, discussed the situation and proposed a solution. A representative body was called and their counsel sought. (Acts 6:2)
3. Seven men were chosen to solve the problem. Look at the group that was chosen. Two are very well known, Stephen and Phillip- choosing those who are well known in any community gives credibility to the choice. Four were relatively unknown but were honest, spiritual, and wise. One was from Antioch. Most of the names were Greek names so the Greek widows must have had a perception of fairness.

Here is our first principle in resolving conflict in the church over real or perceived differences.

Leadership must act promptly, seeking consensus, with a representative group to propose just, equitable solutions.

Problems do not go away, leaders must solve them.

II. Conflict over Peter's Witness to Cornelius

We now turn our attention to the second major conflict in the book of Acts. It is found in Acts Chapters 10 and 11. You know the story well. A Roman Centurion named Cornelius was visited by an angel during his prayers and instructed to send his servants to Joppa to find Peter. At the same time Peter was praying and was given a vision by God and told to "rise and eat" a sheet full of unclean animals (Acts 10:13). Peter was totally confused. While he attempted to discover the meaning of the vision, a knock came on his door and the men from Cornelius arrived. Up until this point Peter believed the Gentiles were unclean. God used the vision to impress upon His mind the necessity of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. Peter responded positively to Cornelius servants' invitation and accompanied them to Cornelius house. In Cornelius, he found one with an open mind and receptive heart. The centurion and his entire household accepted Jesus and were baptized. Peter was thrilled but the Jewish Christians were deeply offended. Acts 11 reveals Peter's course of action. He went up to Jerusalem to meet with his brethren and explain his actions. His meeting with the "brethren" did not start out well. "When Peter came up to Jerusalem those of the circumcision (Jewish Christians) contended with him." What was Peter's defense? Divine Revelation. Peter calmly explained that his actions were based directly on instructions from God. God had given him a vision and he could not deny it. As Peter spoke, the Holy Spirit changed the minds of those who opposed him. Notice the marked contrast between these two verses.

- a. Verse 2 – They "contended with him"
- b. Verse 18 – They "glorified God."

Ellen White describes this amazing change in Peter's strongest opponents this way, "On hearing this account, the brethren were silenced. Convinced that Peter's course was in direct fulfillment of the plan of God, and that their prejudices and exclusiveness were utterly contrary to the spirit of the gospel, they glorified God, saying, 'Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.'"

Thus, without controversy, prejudice was broken down, the exclusiveness established by the custom of ages was abandoned, and the way was opened for the gospel to be proclaimed to the Gentiles" (AA 142).

A conflict which could easily have divided the church if Peter's attitude had been different or if he would have failed to spend time in dialogue with his brethren was avoided.

Here is a vital second principle of resolving church conflicts in Acts.

Principle #2 – When an issue threatens church unity, don't judge too quickly or harshly. Discover the facts. Listen to another's point of view. The Holy Spirit may be speaking to you through your brother or sister. Honest people can have differences of opinion. Consensus often comes through discussion and dialogue.

Peter calmly explained his actions were based on divine revelation and his opponents were touched. Prejudices were broken down, walls centuries old crumbled, and the unity of the church was preserved. The Holy Spirit enabled them to find a way to preserve their “oneness in Christ.” But it took the willingness to listen to one another.

Acts 15 – Seeking Consensus

There is a third issue that could have easily divided the early church. It is found in Acts 15. The issue is whether or not the Gentile believers should be circumcised. The process and the lessons learned are vital in understanding how to resolve difficulties. A group of Jews visit Antioch and demand that the Gentile converts accept and practice Jewish customs. They claimed salvation depends upon it. Acts 15:2 reveals that Paul and Barnabas had “no small dissension and dispute with them.” If we think we have challenges at times, the early church had them too but the Holy Spirit helped them find a way through them. In the context of this debate they determined that Paul and Barnabas should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders” to find a solution. (Acts 15:2, last part)

What if Paul and Barnabas would have argued, “These are our conscientious convictions and called council meeting in Antioch and never worked for a collaborative solution with church leadership in Jerusalem? By that unilateral action they may have caused considerable misunderstanding and conflict.

The language of Acts 15 is extremely instructive. Verse 4 informs us that the representatives from Antioch were, “received by the church.” Verse 6, declares, “they came together to consider the matter.”

“When dissension arose in a local church, as later it did arise in Antioch and elsewhere, and the believers were unable to come to an agreement among themselves, such matters were not permitted to create a division in the church, but were referred to a general council of the entire body of believers, made up of appointed delegates from the various local churches, with the apostles and elders in positions of leading responsibility. Thus the efforts of Satan to attack the church in isolated places were met by concerted action on the part of all, and the plans of the enemy to disrupt and destroy were thwarted.” (AA 95)

In verses 7-21, Peter speaks first, then Paul and Barnabas add their counsel, then James, the apostle who presided at the Jerusalem Council, proposed a solution – The Gentile Christians need not follow the exact same pattern of life as the Jewish Christians. The disciples were united in their commitment to their Lord, His message and His mission. They were committed to constructive dialog and solving problems together.

“In the church at Antioch the consideration of the question of circumcision resulted in much discussion and contention. Finally, the members of the church, fearing that a division among them would be the outcome of continued discussion, decided to send Paul and Barnabas, with some responsible men from the church, to Jerusalem to lay the matter before the

apostles and elders. There they were to meet delegates from the different churches and those who had come to Jerusalem to attend the approaching festivals. Meanwhile all controversy was to cease until a final decision should be given in general council. This decision was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country" (AA 190).

Once the solution was accepted by the "apostles and elders along with the whole church" representatives were sent to the local congregation with a letter or the voted action of the Jerusalem Council to clearly explain the action to avoid misunderstanding. The essence of unity is not uniform action, it is respecting one another enough to listen carefully, respond thoughtfully and decide together. On this matter of church policy, the entire NT Church would not march in lock step but they would decide together. There would be differences of opinion. The Jews certainly had strong convictions. Paul and Barnabas were men of conviction. The convictions of both were respected as they made their decision together. They were united through the Holy Spirit in a divinely appointed church structure. What Ellen White calls "insurmountable difficulties" were resolved as early church leaders met together, prayed, and surrendered their personal opinions to the decision of the larger corporate body.

Here is the third principle for resolving conflict in the early church.

God has established church structure to preserve its unity and keep it from fracturing. When the church makes decisions together not everyone will always be pleased but mature Christian leaders accept the consensus of the body. The "oneness" for which Christ prayed is more important than individual opinions or personal agendas.

Here is a clear, unambiguous statement, "God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God" (AA 164 [1911]).

When the church faces challenges, when difficulties loom on the horizon, when strong opinions are formed and positions hardened, our loving Lord invites us to come together, to graciously express our varying viewpoints, to listen to one another, to dialog, to propose solutions and then under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to decide together. If we are committed to a spirit-directed collaborative process of decision-making and respect the decisions of the corporate body, Jesus will be honored, the devil will be defeated, and the church will triumph.

May we face our challenges together, committed to solving them in the Name of Jesus with the absolute assurance that in Jesus and by Jesus and through Jesus, His church will triumph at last. The Holy Spirit will be poured out on a praying, united church and our Lord will soon come... Amen.