THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN IN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST
POLICY AND PRACTICE, UP TO 1972*

David Trim
Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research

This paper begins in the nineteenth-century and ends in 1972, but with a short excursus at the end to 1989. It is very difficult, in the time and space available, to do justice to the whole sweep of the Adventist history concerning women’s ordination. Accordingly, his paper concentrates on the nineteenth century before surveying forty years in the middle of the twentieth century. I have taken this approach because I feel, as an historian, firstly, that the nineteenth-century history of debates and discussions about the ordination of women—whether it be as ministers or deaconesses—has become somewhat subject to mythology: and historians are drawn to the prospect of myth-busting like a fly to honey. And I feel secondly that, when it comes to the episodes of the mid 1930s and the early 1950s–early 1970s, that they are little known and their significance has not been not fully appreciated. In short, I have concentrated on those aspects of the Adventist history of women’s ordination that seem to me to be most in need of having the light of historical criticism shone onto them. I fear that I may end up just casting them into deeper shadow; but the game, if I may continue the metaphor, seems worth the candle. I know that many people from both sides of this debate, will dislike and disagree with parts of this paper (albeit presumably not the same parts!). However, if in sparking debate I prompt further research and critical thinking about our history, it will have been a worthwhile enterprise.

I. HAS A SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST WOMAN EVER BEEN
ORDAINED TO GOSPEL MINISTRY?

That a woman has been ordained to gospel ministry with the sanction of the organized Seventh-day Adventist is highly unlikely, but is just possible. It is a big world and, in mission fields in early days, with inchoate denominational organization, or under the pressure of persecution, it is possible that

* I am greatly obliged to Benjamin Baker for his assistance in research, without which this paper could not have been written, and to Winifred Trim for her comments on an earlier draft. This is a revised and slightly expanded version of the text presented to the theology of Ordination Study Committee on July 22, 2013.
ad hoc measures were taken that departed from normal denominational praxis, as is happening in China today. Emergency measures unquestionably have been taken: ordinations of ministers and elders carried out in an ad hoc manner, under pressure from persecutory regimes, and in breach of denominational protocols. Some examples are known, though the subject of oral traditions rather than verifiable in the documentary record;\(^1\) and there can be little doubt that there have been other instances that time and circumstances have obscured. Yet not only should the significance of these stopgap measures not be exaggerated; but in addition some of the known cases actually indicate the desire of those involved to conform to official protocols, since they demonstrate belief that certain functions are properly performed by those who have been ordained.\(^2\) In any event, actions in frontline mission fields, under repression and/or where only sketchy denominational organization exists cannot be taken as normative.

There is some evidence, however, and certainly claims have been made, that in its early years in North America, some Adventist women were officially ordained. In particular, it has been claimed that Ellen White, Sarepta Henry and Lulu Wightman were all ordained to gospel ministry.

_Ellen G. White_

The facts about Ellen White been very well set out by the White Estate on its website,\(^3\) but I will briefly recapitulate the key points. Mrs. White held minister’s credentials from 1871, until her death in 1915, a fact that is widely known. She always is listed as holding ordained minister’s credentials, rather than a license.\(^4\) However, to quote from the website:

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.

Some writers have stressed that, whereas the 1885 credential has the word “ordained” crossed out, the 1887 credential does not, which could be implicit evidence for ordination in the interim, or an

---

\(^1\) E.g., there is a story that Adventist missionaries, evacuating China in 1949, ordained a local woman to ensure that at least one experienced church leader remained in that part of the country. The story derives from the late James Cress and is based on interviews with the woman in question, in China, and with an ex-missionary in the USA; Cress concluded that it meant at least one Chinese woman was a “properly ordained minister”. (Cress to Jones and Kent, Sept. 24, 2006, General Conference Archives [hereafter GC Ar.], Record Group [hereafter RG] 58, Miscellaneous Correspondence.) However, there is no documentation of any service; in any case, to be “properly ordained” the decision ought first to have been approved by appropriate committees first. Even if true, then, this episode is one of several examples of unapproved ordinations of women in the unorganized territory of the China Union Mission (though most of these are recent).

\(^2\) An example is the ordination of male elders by unordained women, in the Soviet Union—a measure taken, however, to enable the elders then to baptize new converts, which actually reveals church–members’ desire to abide by policies.


\(^4\) Her first credentials were issued by the Michigan Conference in 1871: “Michigan Conference of S.D. Adventists”, _Adventist Review & Sabbath Herald_ [hereafter R&H], 37 (Feb. 14, 1871): 69. From 1884 on, her credentials are recorded in the _Yearbook_ [hereafter YB], for 1884–1894 and for 1904–1915, and in the _General Conference Bulletin_ [hereafter GCB] for 1895–1903; they were issued variously by the Michigan and California Conferences and the General Conference. For details, see White Estate, “Records pertaining to Ellen G. White’s Ministerial/Ordination Credentials”. 
example of a mistake being corrected. In fact, the 1883 credential also does not cross out the word
“ordained”; there is thus no chronological trajectory, making interpretation difficult. Of course, the
fact that “ordained” is struck through in only one credential could be seen as a mistake. However,
equally, the 1885 credential could represent an effort to correct an earlier mistake—to make the
point that, while holding minister’s credentials, she had not been ordained. The striking out makes
the credential state she is a “minister in good and regular standing in the General Conference of
Seventh-day Adventists”, rather than an ordained minister. In other years, this may have been so
well known that no need to strike out “ordained” was felt necessary. In sum, the evidence of the
paper credentials is ambiguous, rather than demonstrating that Mrs. White was ordained.

In 1935, furthermore, Dores E. Robinson, son-in-law of Ellen White’s eldest son, W. C. White,
wrote to L. E. Froom that his father-in-law had just told him: “Sister White was never ordained, that
she never baptized, nor did she ever give the ordination charge to others.” Credentials, Robinson
continued, had been “issued to her because of her evident call of the Lord”. This statement comes
at second hand and was made 20 years after Mrs. White’s death, but given that it is attributed to her
son, with whom she worked closely, it cannot simply be dismissed. It strongly suggests that she was
issued with credentials as a courtesy and recognition of the importance of her prophetic role, rather
than because she had been ordained to ministry. This is borne out by the standard denominational
worker’s “Biographical information blank” completed on Ellen White’s behalf by her secretary Mary
Steward and submitted to the General Conference in March 1909. The information in this form is
highly accurate. The line next to the question “If ordained, state when, where, and by whom” simply
has an “x” through it.

Finally, reinforcing this evidence, it is striking that the Review & Herald printed the decision by
the Michigan Conference to issue her with and renew her credentials each year from 1872 though
1877—sixteen years of reports. Yet it contains no record of her being ordained, even though the
Review regularly published reports of ministerial ordination ceremonies. Given Ellen White’s
prominence, it is inconceivable that, if she had been ordained, it would not have been reported.

Ordination consists not of a certificate but of being set apart by prayer and laying on of hands.
There is absolutely no evidence that Ellen White was ever thus set apart to ministry—no date and
place have ever been suggested for an ordination service. Taking all the evidence together, there is
no reason to doubt that, although Ellen White carried an ordained minister’s credentials, she was
never ordained; or rather, she was not ordained by men. Credentials were issued to her as a gesture
of respect and because, as a prophet, she was sui generis and normal rules did not apply.

Sarepta M. Henry

As far as I am aware, no one has yet explicitly claimed in print that Sarepta Myrenda Henry (née
Sarepta Irish) was ordained, but it is one that I have heard made in seminars and public meetings

---

5 E.g., Josephine Benton, Called by God: Stories of Seventh-day Adventist women ministers [1990], rev. ed. (Lincoln,
egw_credentials.htm.
7 Completed Mar. 5 and received Mar. 10, 1909: GC Ar., “Personal information forms and biographical material pre-
1950”, RG 21, Box 7303, record no. 114952.
8 It is made implicitly, however: see below, pp. 10–11.
on several occasions. Henry only became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1896, at the age of 57, having already carved out a distinguished career as a poet, temperance reformer and revivalist preacher; and she died in 1900. She received an Adventist ministerial license in 1898 and 1899 (and probably would have been licensed again but for her death early in 1900). The chronology thus makes it virtually impossible that she could have been an ordained minister. But in any case, ordination was actually something she did not seek—indeed, something she probably opposed, since she seems to have felt that women ought not be ordained.

This was not because she thought that “women should remain silent” in church. The young Sarepta Irish had studied at Rock River Seminary, a Methodist seminary in Illinois, and had hoped to become a missionary. Later, as already noted, she became a successful preacher. However, she identified definite limits to the role of women in ministry. Her memoirs, edited by her daughter, Mary and supplemented by the latter’s own recollections, makes it plain that Mrs. Henry invariably sought to work with local ministers (of various Protestant denominations) when undertaking temperance or revival campaigns. Having labored for a year to build up a company in Rockford, Illinois, she urged her congregation that they “must be organized as a church” and urged them to find a pastor. When they initially expressed a hope of having her continue in that role, she recalled that she told them “that they needed church fellowship and the ordinances, which we could not administer”. The ordinances were for an ordained minister to celebrate. Even more telling is the story Mary, Henry’s daughter, tells of her mother taking her to visit Northwestern University, around 1876 or 1877. There she met a female scholar who, Mary recalled, “talked to me with enthusiasm about the wonderful opportunities for girls of my day, and sounded my mind as to any latent ambition I might have to study theology and help compel the ministers to let the women into their ordained ranks.” What is notable, however, is how the story ends: “But I shared my mother’s views as to the sphere of woman, and my whole child—being shrank from the thought.” It is clear that Sarepta Henry was never ordained.

Lulu Wightman

There is no question that Lulu Wightman was a powerful preacher. It is known that, in 1904, her husband, John (himself a licensed minister), appealed to the New York Conference to ordain his wife, but without success. However, the evidence that she was ordained a few years later seems at first glance definitive: the 1908 Yearbook lists her under the California Conference—and not among the licentiates, but among the ministers.

---

11 Ibid., pp. 205–6.
12 Ibid., pp. 207–8.
13 Ibid., p. 208.
15 Benton, *Called by God*, p. 56.
16 *YB 1908*, p. 68.
Nevertheless, there is contrary evidence: in the *General Conference Bulletin* in 1901 and 1902, and in the *Yearbooks* for 1904, 1905, 1906 and 1907, *and* for 1909 and 1910, she is listed as holding a license.\(^{17}\) In other words, only in 1908 is she listed as a minister, whereas both before and, crucially, afterwards she is listed as a licentiate. Now, 1908 was the year she and her husband, who was also a minister, moved to the California Conference after a number of years in the New York Conference. Josephine Benton suggests it is “possible that the California Conference may have invited the Wightmans with the understanding that both would be ordained ministers and may have turned in their names thus to the Yearbook, afterward being discouraged by church leadership from continuing Mrs. Wightman in that status.”\(^{18}\) However, there is no evidence to support this hypothesis. Indeed, Benton concedes that “no official records seem to exist of a discussion or action” to ordain Lulu Wightman.\(^{19}\) The only indication that she may have been ordained is that one entry in the *1908 Yearbook*. Yet the simplest and most probable explanation is that the entry is, simply, a mistake: whether a printer’s error, or a slip–up in the office of a conference in which Mrs. Wightman was, after all, a new employee—but a mistake that was immediately corrected the following year.

In addition to this evidence, there is no report of her ever being ordained in the *Review* or any of the union papers. There is, then, little reason to think that Lulu Wightman was ever ordained.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, there is no persuasive evidence that any woman has ever been set apart to gospel ministry with the sanction of the Seventh-day Adventist Church—not even in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. It was not our pioneers’ practice to ordain women to ministry.

**II. SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS AND WOMEN IN MINISTRY TO 1922**

This conclusion that no women have been officially ordained by the organized denomination, even in our early decades, runs contrary to the trend of much of the recent historiography on women’s ordination in Adventist history, which is written by proponents of ordaining women to gospel ministry. The sheer volume of books, chapters, articles, and papers arguing that, in Adventism’s early years there was no discrimination in setting apart to ministry, can seem impressive. However, this body of scholarship does not actually prove its case, due to a critical misunderstanding of what early Adventists supported when it came to the involvement of women in the work of the church.

Three different issues are conflated—those of women in ministry, the related issue of women’s right to preach, and the ordination of deaconesses. The result is to create a fallacious impression that Adventist pioneers, including Ellen White, approved of ordaining women to gospel ministry. Proponents have rightly stated, firstly, that early Seventh-day Adventists approved of licensing

\(^{17}\) *GCB*, 4 (1901–2): 526, 608; *YB* 1904, p. 20; *YB* 1905, p. 24; *YB* 1906, p. 22; *YB* 1907, p. 20; *YB* 1909, p. 29; *YB* 1910, p. 31.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 56.
women ministers; secondly, that they supported the right of women to preach the gospel; and
thirdly that Ellen White supported the setting apart, by ordination, of women to a certain type of
ministry. From these three demonstrably factual statements, however, they draw the conclusion
that Ellen White and early Adventists advocated the ordination of women to gospel ministry. And
this is palpably incorrect. The error arises from a misunderstanding of early Adventist conceptions
of ministry.

Adventist women in forms of ministry, 1872–1922

It is important, first, to be clear that our pioneers indubitably accepted the right of women to serve
as what they called “licentiates”—what became known as licensed ministers (though our pioneers
tended simply to use the term “minister” for ordained ministers).\(^{20}\) Many of the pertinent facts are
now known, thanks to the research of Josephine Benton, Bert Haloviak and Kitt Watts.\(^{21}\) However, it
will be helpful, I think, briefly to summarize the data.

The first known instance of a woman receiving a license was Sarah Lindsey in 1872.\(^{22}\) Others
received licenses later in the 1870s. By 1881 at least six conferences—New York–Pennsylvania,
Michigan, Kentucky–Tennessee, Kansas, Minnesota, and Illinois—had licensed around a dozen
women.\(^{23}\) In 1884, the first year for which we have a complete ministerial directory, six out of 130
licentiates were women. From 1884 through the epochal 1922 General Conference Session there
were between two and ten women licentiates every year, and on average five and a quarter per

\(^{20}\) David Trim, “Ordination in Seventh-day Adventist history”, unpubl. paper, presented to the Theology of Ordination

\(^{21}\) See Benton, *Called by God*, chaps. 1-3, 5-6, 8; Bert Haloviak, “Route to the ordination of women in the Seventh-day
adventistarchives.org/doc_info.asp?DocID=37]; idem, “Adventist heritage calls for ordination of women”, 52–60; idem,
http://docs.adventistarchives.org/doc_info.asp?DocID=51]; idem, “Ellen White and the ordination of women”, idem,
sermon preached at Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church (Oct. 15, 1988) [available to download at http://docs.adventist
archives.org/doc_info.asp?DocID=49]; idem, “Women and the SDA Church” unpubl. paper presented at a seminar at Sligo
Seventh-day Adventist Church (Oct. 15, 1988) [available to download at http://docs.adventistarchives.org/doc_info.asp?
DocID=55]; idem, “A place at the table”, pp. 27–44; idem, “Documentary analysis of the role of women in the SDA Church”,
Watts, “The rise and fall of Adventist women in leadership”, *Ministry*, 68, 4 (April, 1995): 8; repr. as “Moving away from
the table: A survey of historical factors affecting women leaders”, in Habada and Brillhart, *The welcome table*, pp. 45–59;
idem, “An outline of the history of Seventh-day Adventists and the ordination of women”, in Habada and Brillhart, *The
welcome table*, app. 5, pp. 334–358.

*Note:* Subsequent writers are heavily reliant on these works, which are cited in chronological order, but note that
while Haloviak’s work predates Benton’s 1990 book, he attributes primacy to her research: Haloviak, “The pit dug for

\(^{22}\) Lindsey’s evangelistic prowess was briefly described in R. W. Schwarz, *Light bearers to the remnant* (Mountain
View, Calif., Omaha, Nebr. & Oshawa, Ont.: Pacific Press Publ. Assoc., 1979), p. 135. This was probably the cue for Brian E.
which is the basis for descriptions of, or references to, her work in: Benton, *Called by God*, 105, 109-10; Haloviak, “Longing
for the pastorate”, p. 9; idem, “Documentary analysis”, p. 2; and Watts, “Rise and fall”, p. 8 ("Moving away from the table",
p. 53).

year each year, over these four decades.\(^{24}\) Although Watts, in an influential essay, asserts that, from 1915 onwards, “the number [of women licentiates] decrease steadily”,\(^{25}\) the greatest number in any single year was actually the 10 reported in the 1917 *Yearbook*.\(^{26}\) Their statistical significance ought not to be overstated, since in those forty years women were at most 4.62 per cent of the total number of licentiates and were on average just 1.62 per cent. This is very similar to the proportion of Freewill Baptist and Christian female licensed preachers in the mid-nineteenth century, which a recent study estimates at “between 1 and 5 percent”.\(^{27}\) However, in addition, in the forty years through 1922, between 2.68 and 13.82 per cent of all union, conference and mission officers were women—the annual average was 8.42 per cent.\(^{28}\)

These true pioneers were largely forgotten by church leaders and church members alike for much of the twentieth century, until their stories were recovered by the labors of Josephine Benton, Bert Haloviak, and others, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s. The careers of some of these women have now been sketched out and their stories told.\(^{29}\) If there were never very many of them, there is no doubt but that women could be and were licensed by Seventh-day Adventists. Furthermore, this was a practice that Ellen White endorsed.\(^{30}\)

There is, moreover, no question but that early Adventists asserted the right of women to speak in public, to proclaim the gospel, and to evangelize—“triumphantly vindicating the right of the sisters” to preach, to borrow the language of an early Adventist periodical article. Here we owe much to the scholarship of Beverly Beem and Ginger Hanks Harwood.\(^{31}\) It was doubtless because a wealth of articles in Adventist periodicals maintained the right of women to preach that Adventists accepted female licentiates. In light of the fact that some recent statements by those opposed to ordination of women to gospel ministry seem to imply that *any* kind of public ministry by women is

---

\(^{24}\) Analysis of *YB* and *GCB* by Melissa Bedford and Benjamin Baker of the Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research. See Appendix 1, below, p. 24.

\(^{25}\) Watts, “Rise and fall”, p. 8 (“Moving away from the table”, p. 52).

\(^{26}\) This is a year for which Benton lists no women licentiates; indeed, she lists none for the four years between 1915 and 1920: *Called by God*, p. 160.


\(^{28}\) For data, see Appendix 1, below. For analysis, see Bert Haloviak, “The decline of leadership positions for SDA women”, unpubl. G.C.R. Research Paper (March 20, 1990) [available to download at http://docs.adventistarchives.org/doc_info.asp?DocID=47]; Watts, “Moving away from the table”, pp. 50–52.


prohibited by the Bible, it should be stressed that this is very far from our pioneers’ understanding and from their practice.

Finally, it is also incontrovertible that Ellen White supported ordaining women. There are a variety of statements that might (or might not) be interpreted as showing approval of women’s ordination. However, there is one that is unmistakable. In 1895, she directly addressed the issue of women’s ordination in an article entitled “The duty of the minister and the people”. She declared:

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.\(^{32}\)

The question, “What were these women were to be ordained to?” is key (and is discussed below). But certainly it is clear that there is support in the Spirit of Prophecy for ordaining women.

From these three demonstrable facts, however, the conclusion is drawn that in the formative years of the denomination, Adventists supported ordaining women to gospel ministry. And to be sure, a few individuals seem to have done so.\(^{33}\) However, taking the church as an organized body, this assertion is demonstrably false.

**Drawing conclusions from the data**

The mistake is to conflate ordained ministers and licensed ministers as all engaged in the same type of ministry, and all ordinations as equivalent. However, as I showed in a functional analysis (in my previous paper for this committee), in early Adventism, ordained ministers, licentiate, elders and deacons had roles that were distinct and understood to be so.\(^{34}\) How, then, should this impact our understanding of the facts covered thus far?

**Ellen White’s 1895 article**

To take the last point first: what Ellen White describes in her 1895 article is very clearly not the role of either a minister, or even a licentiate, even though it has been used as support for ordination to gospel ministry by some commentators since, after all, it does advocate ordaining women. But to what role?

Nowhere is preaching mentioned, much less baptism, administration of the ordinances, or the raising up of new churches.\(^{35}\) The function of these women, who deserve ordination, is instead “to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor”. Similarly, theirs is not a full-time role; just the opposite, for they are “to consecrate [only] some of their time to the service of the Lord”. Finally, they are “to counsel with the church officers or the minister”, which shows that Mrs. White distinguishes them from “church officers or the minister”. The functional


\(^{33}\) See below, p. 12–13.


\(^{35}\) See ibid., esp. tables 1 and 2, pp. 10, 19.
role described is, in sum, neither that of ministers (whether ordained or licensed) nor that of elders
(“church officers”). Ellen White here is calling for the ordination of deaconesses.

To be sure, she uses neither the terms “ordination” nor “deaconess”; however, her language is
unmistakably that of ordination (“set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands”). And
there can be no doubt that she is describing the function of an Adventist deaconess of the era. The
1882 provisional Church Manual (which, though drafted and never adopted, was prepared at the
instance of a General Conference Session and hence is a good indicator of contemporary Adventist
practice, albeit not of policy) defined the duties of the deaconess thus:

They should visit the sick and the poor, and interest themselves generally in works of charity. In
fine, they should act the part of mothers in Israel, lending a helping hand to all who need their
assistance, and striving in every way to promote the peace and prosperity of the church.37

Furthermore, it is striking that this was written while Ellen White was living in Australia and that,
within five years, in August 1895 and January 1900, there were ordination services at two local
churches in Australia at which elders, deacons and deaconesses were ordained. The first was carried
out by J. O. Corliss, a distinguished church leader; the second by W. C. White, not only an important
leader but also, of course, Ellen White’s son and confidant.38

In light of all this evidence, there can be no doubt that Ellen White supported the ordination of
deaconesses. Neither can there be any doubt that ordaining them was denominational practice, at
least for a period.

Preachers, not “ministers”

When we come to the first two points, they are integrally interconnected. It is no coincidence
that all the statistics cited above were for female licentiates—reinforcing my earlier point that there
is little or no evidence of any female ministers. What, then, did a license, as opposed to a ministerial
credential, signify in Adventist ecclesiastical polity? This is a key question,39 one that I addressed in
some detail in my previous paper.40

A license’s essential meaning in Seventh-day Adventist policy and praxis was captured by the
veteran denominational administrator Oliver Montgomery, in his path-breaking 1942 study of
church organization and administration.

The licensed minister does not have authority to preside at any of the church ordinances. He cannot
administer baptism or the Lord’s Supper, or perform the marriage ceremony. He cannot preside at
sessions or meetings of the church in which members are received into fellowship or dismissed from
church membership. His ministerial license does not clothe him with such authority. He is authorized

---

37 W. H. Littlejohn, “The duties of local church officers”, R&H, 60 (July 3, 1883): 427 (I am indebted to Clinton Wahlen
for this reference). On the history of this proposed Church Manual, see P. Gerard Damsteegt, “Have Adventists abandoned
the Biblical model of leadership for the local church?”, in Samuel Koranteng-Pipim (ed.), Here we stand: Evaluating new
Moon for drawing this article to my attention.) A third such ordination may have been carried out in California in 1916,
though the evidence is not clear: see Moon, “Ellen White on women in ministry”, pp. 202, 209 n. 87.
to preach, to assist in a spiritual way in any church activities, to lead out in missionary work, and
especially to engage in evangelistic efforts.\footnote{41}

In other words, the licentiate was a preacher and evangelist. It is hardly surprising that, having
vindicated the right of the sisters to preach in theory, Adventists were also willing to license some
of them to preach in practice.

However, in neither case does it demonstrate any commitment to ordaining women. And this is
what has been lost sight of in much recent writing on women in ministry in early Adventist history.
All of the work of Benton, Haloviak, Watts, Beem, Hanks Harwood, and others—all the many superb
quotations they have mined from Adventist periodicals—all go to show no more than that early
Adventists affirmed the right of women to preach and to evangelize. In all this historiography, \textit{there
is nothing} to show early Adventists arguing for women’s right to baptize, to preside over the
ordinances, to organize local churches—no evidence of any commitment to ordination.

The problem is that the proponents of women’s ordination in the present have projected their
views back onto the past, using modern terminology in a way that elides different categories in late
nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Adventist ecclesiastical polity. The early Adventist
women who were licensed are typically described simply as ministers or pastors, or as “in ministry”
—but this conflates a small group, whose members were rarely called “minister” at the time, with
the much larger official pastorate, for whom ordination, as I showed in my January paper, was
highly important and a key qualification.\footnote{42} My point here is not to assess whether female licentiates
were (or were not) engaged in ministry in the same way as men, which is a theological question.
Rather it is that, in early Adventism, the roles of ministers and licentiates were distinct and were
seen as such; and that influential writers on the role of women in Seventh-day Adventist history do
not do justice to these facts—in fact, they do just the opposite.

Benton, to be sure, points out that her subjects were licensed; moreover, some early licentiates
were married to ministers and she several times refers explicitly to the ordination of husbands, thus
highlighting the different nominal status each enjoyed. She brings out the fact that some men held a
ministerial credential (granted to the ordinee) while others, men and women, held a license. But
she also strongly implies that in practice there was no distinction. For example, she describes \textit{all}
the women whose stories she narrates as being in “ministry”—a term never qualified. She repeatedly
writes of women being “called to [or into the] ministry” and being in “formal ministry” or “official
ministry”.\footnote{43} These are terms that would typically be applied, both at the time and since, to ordained
ministry. Furthermore she describes the work of Helen Williams in terms that show Williams was
fulfilling the function of a licentiate (she “preached [and] gave Bible studies” and later was “Giving
Bible studies faithfully two or three days a week [and] conducting regular prayer meetings”); yet
her work is then characterized simply as “ministry”.\footnote{44} These usages are significant, since ordained
ministers (all men) are also described only as being “in ministry”.\footnote{45}

\footnote{42} Trim, “Ordination in Seventh-day Adventist history”, pp. 8–9.
\footnote{44} Ibid., pp. 12, 14.
\footnote{45} Ibid., pp. 14, 107, 109.
All this allows Benton to take a letter from Mrs. White to Mrs. Henry, encouraging her to preach, and cite it as an example of how “Ellen White also repeatedly encouraged other women to use their gifts in ministry,”\(^\text{46}\) although, as we have seen, not only was Sarepta Henry a licensed, not ordained, minister, but there is also good evidence that she rejected ordination of women to gospel ministry. Benton elsewhere suggests that women licentiates were regarded as being on the same footing as the “majority of the male ministers”.\(^\text{47}\)

There is no doubt that nineteenth-century Adventists did, at times, use “ministry” for the work of both ordained and licensed ministers.\(^\text{48}\) However, Benton uses terminology consistently, carefully, to blur distinctions which were drawn between “ministers” and licentiates and which were held to be important. The net effect is to prompt readers to conclude that early Adventists recognized only one kind of “ministry” and, too, recognized female licentiates as engaged in that ministry in identical fashion to male ordained ministers.

Haloviak likewise elides the significant distinctions between the roles of ordained and licensed ministers in early Adventism. In one essay he avers that “women were clearly defined within the … Adventist definition of ministry” of the nineteenth century:

> They belonged to ministerial associations, they held the Seventh-day Adventist ministerial license or the “license to preach,” they conducted evangelistic campaigns, they visited churches doing pastoral labor, and were paid from tithe funds that Ellen White considered reserved for the official church ministry. Thus Lulu Wightman [who has been subject of a case study] was a Seventh-day Adventist minister in the fullest sense defined by the church.”\(^\text{49}\)

No evidence is adduced of their membership of ministerial associations; and the “license to preach” is implicitly conflated with ministerial ordination. Similar is his assertion, elsewhere, that: “In the fullest sense of the meaning of ministry in the 19th century, Mrs. E S Lane was an SDA minister”\(^\text{50}\)—this despite the fact that Haloviak has already conceded that “her lack of ordination prevented her from organizing churches, baptizing, or leading the ordinance services.”\(^\text{51}\) As I showed in my earlier paper, these were not things taken lightly by early SDAs—they are not somehow minor omissions or unimportant exceptions!\(^\text{52}\) On the contrary, they mean, *ipso facto*, that neither Lulu Wightman nor Mrs. Lane was a minister in the “fullest sense”. Rather, they exercised a more limited ministry—which is another way of saying they were licentiates, not ministers. The conclusion “that women were licensed and fully considered ministers in the nineteenth century”\(^\text{53}\) is an oxymoron.

In addition, Haloviak conflates (thereby confusing) ordination to the diaconate with ordination to gospel ministry. For example, he discusses Ellen White’s statement of July 1895, on ordaining women and recognizes that its applicability is to ordaining women to the diaconate rather than to gospel ministry.\(^\text{54}\) However, later, in his conclusion, he simply declares: “Ellen White considered

\(^{46}\) Ibid., p. 100. Benton also describes Henry simply as “this gifted, active minister” (Ibid., p. 108), again implying that there was only one kind of minister.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., p. 32.

\(^{48}\) Cf. Moon, “Ellen White on women in ministry”, pp. 188–90.

\(^{49}\) Haloviak, “A place at the table”, p. 30.

\(^{50}\) Haloviak, “Longing for the pastorate”, p. [12].

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. [11].

\(^{52}\) Trim, “Ordination in Seventh-day Adventist history”, pp. 8–9, 12, 14, 17–19, 21.

\(^{53}\) Haloviak, “A place at the table”, p. 34.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., pp. 33-35.
women as ministers during her time and... she favored the act of ordaining women." Both of these statements are strictly accurate; but are in fact misleading.

There is, in sum, as much wishful thinking as historical fact in many of the conclusions drawn about women ministers in the nineteenth century. Adventist women were readily granted a role as preachers and evangelists, and in visitation and what might be called social ministry. But they were not ordained—they were never given the right to administer the ordinances, to baptize, to organize new churches, or to ordain. These differences are neither accidental nor insignificant; rather they reflect distinctions that nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Adventists thought important. All this does not constitute an argument against ordaining women to gospel ministry in the twenty-first century. But it is an attempt to be realistic and authentic about what the sources actually show.

### III. The 1881 General Conference Session

In the late nineteenth century there was one notable attempt to approve ordination of women to the ministry, but then the issue apparently became dormant for almost eighty years, save for a few seemingly isolated incidents. I suspect that this reflects the influence of the rise of fundamentalism, whose wider impact on attitudes to gender among American Protestants is addressed by Nicholas Miller in his paper. However, first we need to consider the celebrated 1881 GC Session.

Although no Adventist women were ordained as ministers in the nineteenth century there were Adventists who supported a move in that direction. This is unsurprising. During the first half of the nineteenth century, many (though by no means all) American Protestant denominations witnessed an increasing willingness to allow women to preach. Among Quakers, Congregationalists, Christians, Universalists, and some kinds Methodists and Baptists (including Millerites), women were licensed as “assistant preachers”, “exhorters” and “female laborers in Christ”. Most American Protestants, however, drew a line between licensing and ordaining women. It was a distinction drawn by many female pastors and preachers as well. Most “did not seek ordination, and some accepted that only men should celebrate the gospel ordinances of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.” But if Sarepta Henry is indicative of one position among religious women, her daughter’s experience in the second half of the 1870s highlights that there was increasing talk in wider Christian circles that women should push to oblige “ministers to let the women into their ordained ranks”.

Unitarians and Congregationalists were increasingly willing not only to allow women to preach, but

---

55 Ibid., p. 40.
59 Rossiter, My mother’s life, pp. 207–8.
The events of 1881 have been widely misunderstood. It is widely claimed as fact in Adventist circles that a decision to ordain women was taken at the 1881 General Conference Session—that the celebrated resolution proposed at that Session was “passed” or “voted”.\footnote{This is in fact not so, but misapprehensions and misunderstandings about the vote have proliferated. Confusion exists for a number of reasons, which are addressed below.} This is in fact not so, but misapprehensions and misunderstandings about the vote have proliferated. Confusion exists for a number of reasons, which are addressed below.

**Confusion between what was reported in Review and Herald (R&H) and Signs of the Times (ST)**

The church had two periodicals in 1881, R&H, the original paper, and ST, which was for the growing West Coast community of Adventists. GC Session minutes were published in full in R&H; but ST naturally included reports on GC Sessions, though they are selective. The minutes printed in R&H note that the motion to ordain “females” was referred to the GC Committee.\footnote{However, the report in ST lists this resolution among several “resolutions adopted”.} There is a misconception that both papers simply printed minutes and that their reports are, therefore, of equal weight—so that one is free to take the ST report as accurate and R&H as inaccurate if one wishes.\footnote{This is not the case.} The report in R&H was in fact the official record. Thus, in the actual minute books of the GC Sessions in the 1870s and 1880s, the minutes consists of copy cut—and–pasted from the Review; there are some handwritten corrections and additions, but the overwhelming body of text is simply that from R&H. It should be noted that there are no handwritten annotations or corrections in the original minute book for the 7th meeting of the 1881 GC Session, at which the resolution on ordaining women was proposed.\footnote{That the ST report is not authoritative should in any case be obvious from looking at it. In R&H is a full report, spread over two full pages. In contrast, the report in ST is less than one full column and begins with a slightly apologetic preface: “We can give only a partial account of the proceedings . . . We give extracts of the most general interest, as far as we have received. The following were}

---

\footnote{**E.g.** Monte Sahlin, “What did happen in 1881?”, Adventist Today Online: http://www.atoday.org/article/1326/blogs/sahlin-monte/what-did-happen-in-1881; Haloviak, “Longing for the pastorate”, p. [15], although it is notable that Haloviak, in another paper of the same year, concluded that the 1881 GC resolution “obviously did not pass”: idem, “Ellen White and the ordination of women”, p. [4].}

\footnote{**E.g.** Billington, “Female laborers”, pp. 380, 391; Miller, “Ordination of women”, pp. 1-2.}


\footnote{**R&H**, vol. 58, no. 25 (Dec. 20, 1881), p. 392.}

\footnote{**ST**, vol. 8, no. 1 (Jan. 5, 1882), p. 8.}


\footnote{**Vol. 58, no. 25, pp. 392-93.}
among the resolutions adopted." It then lists several. It is very clear that the resolution on ordaining women has been placed here by a simple error.

Confusion over the presence of the word "Resolved" in the record

During the nineteenth century, motions at GC Sessions frequently, though not invariably, included the word "Resolved." To modern ears, the fact that the word "resolved" is present in minutes of a meeting can make it sound as though the motion in question was passed. This is no doubt one reason why many have taken the ST record as accurate, because it chimes with what seems to be in front of their eyes. However, things were different in the nineteenth century.

It was common parliamentary procedure in English-speaking countries in the mid-nineteenth century and up to the mid-twentieth century for a motion on a substantive issue to be offered as a proposition, which would then be debated and either adopted, rejected, or referred to a committee for further deliberation. This procedure was followed at Seventh-day Adventist General Conference Sessions. Indeed, draft resolutions were, by design, a very significant part of the business of early sessions, though this, too, has been misunderstood. As capable an historian as Richard Schwarz has declared that the resolution on ordaining women was proposed by "[a]n enthusiastic delegate to the 1881" Session.67 But that was far from true. Instead, it came from a special committee.

The 1865 Session had voted "that a committee of three be appointed by this Conference to draft resolutions on such subjects as they deem important to be brought before the meeting".68 It was duly formed and came back with twelve draft resolutions, on subjects ranging from organization, theology and mission to an expression of distress at the assassination of President Lincoln, all of "which were unanimously adopted".69 From 1865 through 1895, except in 1867,70 one of the standing committees elected at each Session was the "Committee on Resolutions". In 1897 this committee became the Committee on Plans and Resolutions,71 which was a standing committee at each session until 1905 GC Session (though still sometimes referred to in passing simply as the Committee on Resolutions).72 Beginning with the 1909 Session, this committee became the Committee on Plans, though for at least two more sessions it in fact continued to present proposed resolutions to sessions.73

Now, many actions proposed during sessions were, of course, simply "Moved"; however, substantive motions brought to the Session by the Committee on Resolutions were presented prefaced with the word "Resolved". The process is well described in the minutes of the 1866 Session: "Committee on Resolutions reported so far as they had prepared resolutions. Report

---

67 Light bearers to the remnant, p. 135.
68 Third Session, May 17, 1865, morning meeting (MGCS, p. 11).
69 As above, afternoon meeting (MGCS, pp. 12-15).
70 No Resolutions Committee was appointed.
71 Thirty-Second Session, 6th meeting, Feb. 26, 1897, minutes in in General Conference Daily Bulletin, 1 [sic, for 7], no. 12 (March 1, 1897): 191.
72 Thirty-Fifth Session, 8th meeting, May 15, 1905, 2.30 p.m. and 14th meeting, May 18, 1905, 2.30 p.m., minutes in R&H, 82: 21 (May 25, 1905): 12, 23.
73 See Thirty-Sixth Session, 22nd meeting, May 26, 1909, 10.30 a.m., minutes in GCB, 6 (May 27, 1909): 172; Thirty-Eighth Session, 17th meeting, May 25, 1909, 10 a.m., GCB, 7 (May 23, 1913): 139.
accepted. The Conference then proceeded to act upon the resolutions."\(^{74}\) Thus, the presence of the word “resolved” in the draft resolutions did not mean that it was resolved by the Session—rather it was the resolution which the Session then decided to adopt—or not!

If one was to ask what was the point of the standing Committee on Resolutions/Plans and Resolutions, the committee’s own description in the 1888 Session was that it was “appointed to consider what subjects should come before [each] Conference in the form of resolutions.”\(^{75}\) At times, it was asked by the Session to prepare a resolution on a specified subject.\(^{76}\) But perhaps the best summary comes from 1903, when former GC President G. A. Irwin described the Committee on Plans and Resolutions as “a committee, which will thoroughly consider all ... propositions, and bring some definite recommendations before the Conference.”\(^{77}\) Resolutions were not simple actions to accept reports, appoint committees and sub-committees, move personnel, or appropriate funds—though sometimes resolutions were used to move personnel and spend money). Resolutions frequently included prefatory sections headed “Whereas”, which set out the basis for decisions and/or ideological positions. Resolutions seem to have been especially used for making statements on substantive issues, or for setting out positions for wider consumption outside the denomination. For all these reasons the actual wording of a resolution was of great importance and so, rather than adopting a form of words in haste, a committee was created whose task it was to draft and craft statements.\(^{78}\)

Confusion over the outcome

All this is important to recognize because it helps to explain why, in practice, resolutions proposed by the Resolutions Committee were almost never simply defeated; and the significance of this point will become clear in a moment. I have gone through the minutes of the first 27 years of GC Sessions, looking at every resolution proposed by the standing Resolutions Committee.\(^{79}\) There were, in practice, five possible outcomes: —

1) Unanimous adoption: which happened to the great majority.
2) Adoption by a divided vote: which happened sometimes.
3) Attempts to amend it: sometimes successful sometimes not.
4) Referral back to the Resolutions Committee, or to a special ad hoc committee for study.
5) Referral to the GC Committee.

Whenever a resolution was referred as described in no. 4, the draft resolution always came back to the Session having been amended or nuanced in some way. It seems clear that, when there was support for a resolution, but doubt about its wording, it was sent back, or in cases of particular significance sent to a special committee to consider the implications. But since the resolutions were

---

\(^{74}\) Fourth Session, afternoon meeting, May 16, 1866 (MGCS, p. 16).
\(^{75}\) As described in the Committee’s first report to the 26th Session: 5th meeting, Nov. 16, 1887 (MGCS, p. 345).
\(^{76}\) E.g., Sixth Session, 2nd meeting, May 13, 1868, 2 p.m. (MGCS, p. 34).
\(^{77}\) Thirty-Fifth Session, 4th Meeting, March 31, 1903, 10:30 a.m., minutes in GCB, 5 (April 1, 1903): 36.
\(^{78}\) E.g., see the Session’s vote “That the Committee on Resolutions be authorized and requested to prepare an address to set forth our views on certain existing evils”: Sixth Session, 3rd meeting evening, May 12, 1868 (MGCS, p. 34).
\(^{79}\) See Appendix II, below.
always brought back from those committees to the floor at the same Session, and were then passed, it is clear that they must have had significant support, hence my suggestion that what motivated referral was doubt about the wording or particular aspects.

Referral instead to the GC Committee only happened rarely—in the Church’s first twenty-five years, I have found only three draft resolutions proposed by the Resolutions Committee that were referred to the GC Committee.\textsuperscript{80} Now, we do not know what happened when the Committee discussed the proposal, simply because there are no official minutes of the GC Committee from before 1889. This makes it all the more important to know what “referral to the GC Committee” actually meant.

Unlike the proposed resolutions referred back to the Resolutions Committee, or to a special committee, none of those referred to the GC Committee ever come back to a Session, and neither are they ever acted on outside a GC Session. Thus, while some students of 1881 have suggested that referral to the GC Committee was the Session sending an approved proposal forward to the GC Committee for action is, I think, reading our current committee approach back into the nineteenth century. It is not based on a close study of how GC Sessions worked in that period.

We need to take into account the fact that, in the first 25 regular annual sessions, no resolution proposed by the Resolutions Committee was ever simply defeated.\textsuperscript{81} Resolutions proposed from other quarters (from other committees or from the floor) were not infrequently lost—but not those proposed in reports of the Committee on Resolutions. Taking all this evidence together, I think a picture emerges: one based, to be sure, on circumstantial evidence, but a clear picture even so.

Referring resolutions from the Resolutions Committee to the GC Committee was a tactful way of rejecting them. It was the Resolutions Committee's job to come up with Resolutions; it had been given the difficult task of taking ideas from around the delegates and probably from those unable to attend Sessions and formulate them into cogent propositions, in a short space of time. It would be natural if there were some hesitation about simply rejecting them.

I have described this in conversation to one Adventist scholar who suggested that delegates would not have been aware of such fine distinctions as whether a resolution came from the Committee on Resolutions or some other body. But if one reads the minutes of early Sessions, it is clear that our pioneers, like many Americans of the era, were steeped in parliamentary practice and the rules of debate. At the first so-called “general conference” in 1860, after preliminary remarks, much of the first page of minutes in the \textit{Review & Herald} is taken up with detailed points relating to proper parliamentary procedure.\textsuperscript{82} I think it entirely credible that delegates to General Conference Sessions were aware of these fine distinctions.

I want to emphasize that it is very significant that the Committee on Resolutions at the 1881 GC Session presented a report that included a draft resolution providing for ordination of “females . . . to the work of Christian ministry.” Indeed, because of the tendency to overstate the approval of women in ministry, which I argued earlier, I think we lose sight of just how extraordinary the proposal is. Furthermore, it did not come from an enthusiastic delegate on the floor, or it could be

\textsuperscript{80} In addition to 1881, the other two instances were in 1883 and 1886: Twenty–second Session, 8th meeting, 3 p.m. Nov. 13, 1883 (MGCS, p. 236); twenty–fifth Session, 14th Meeting, Dec. 6, 1886 (MGCS, pp. 329–30).

\textsuperscript{81} The first time this occurred was in 1887: twenty–sixth Session, 10th and 11th meetings, 4 p.m. Nov. 22, and Nov. 24, 1887 (MGCS, pp. 353–55).

easily dismissed. It was brought by one of the most trusted standing committees. Here was a fork in
the Adventist historical road! Clearly there were some of our pioneers who saw no objections to
ordaining women to gospel ministry. In the end, however, even more significant is the fact that the
resolution was not adopted. There were simply not enough Adventist leaders who wanted to go
beyond licensing females to ordaining them.

IV. GENERAL CONFERENCE COMMITTEES CONSIDER
WOMEN’S ORDINATION, 1936–1972

The history of the official study processes—beginning with the "Role of Women in the Church
Committee" appointed in 1973—along with the history of their outcome in official proceedings
through 1995, is reasonably well known and so are not presented now.\textsuperscript{83} That said, there are still
enough misconceptions, albeit mostly minor, that it is my hope, in another paper to explore the
actual study committees and commissions that considered ordination and the role of women in the
1970s and 1980s, their chronology, and their interactions with General Conference Sessions and
meetings of the GC Executive Committee. For now, however, I will simply summarize some key
developments over the four decades preceding the establishment of the first Role of Women in the
Church Committee and its meeting at Camp Mohaven in 1973—developments that are little known
or whose significance are not well understood. That will bring us up, as it were, to the present
day—at least to within the lifetimes of most members of the present study committee.

(Mis)reading Mrs. White: 1936 and 1950–51

Earlier we considered Mrs. White's advocacy both of the important work to be done by deaconesses
and of their being ordained. Isolated in Australia, as she was in 1895, however, Mrs. White's counsel
seemed to have been overlooked—certainly she was not able to push her views as she would have
been had she been in the United States. Nonetheless, her views were there, in print; if they were not
much noted at the time, they garnered continuing attention over subsequent decades.

First concerns: 1936

One of the extraordinary facts about the 1881 draft resolution is that it was, in effect, the end of
the matter. For two generations, women’s ordination was a dead issue—whether to gospel ministry
or, indeed, to any church office.

Not until 55 years later did church leaders again discuss the issue of ordaining females—though
not, on this occasion, to ministry. In 1936 the Home Missionary Department wanted to reprint Ellen
White's original 1895 article “as a leaflet", but before doing so, J. A. Stevens, the department head,

\textsuperscript{83} A timeline of these study committees is available at the Theology of Ordination Study Committee webpages on the
went to the General Conference Officers for counsel. The minutes record that he sought “advice regarding a paragraph in the article which seems to recommend the ordination of women.” The Officers’ response was enigmatic. Evidently there was a discussion, but the minutes record simply: “Inasmuch as this matter has never been acted upon during the years . . . it does not seem desirable to raise the question now.” Accordingly, it was voted: “To recommend that the entire paragraph be eliminated from the leaflet.”

This probably reflected both a genuine feeling that home missionaries, for all their merits, simply did not warrant a separate ordination service, whether for males or females, and a desire not to stir up unnecessary debate and confusion. But even if the motive is understandable, the action seems a touch disingenuous. Furthermore, the wording is striking, in that the problem is portrayed as being the “paragraph in the article which seems to recommend the ordination of women”—note this wording. The emphasis is on the gender question, not the role or function question (home missionary versus minister, elder or deacon). The Officers seem not to have identified that Ellen White was writing about the function of a deaconess, though it may not have mattered, for in this period they if anything encouraged a downgrading of the deaconess’s standing. Thus, for example, in 1939 the Officers regretted that, in practice, “among our churches it is not uncommon for the deaconesses to dispose of the leftovers” after Communion, which they evidently saw as too sacred a task for deaconesses, and they agreed that the next edition of the Church Manual should address this. In any event, having discussed “the ordination of women”, church leaders must have felt that they had quietly put an end to the matter.

The case of “certain sisters”: 1950–51

The next significant episode involving Mrs. White’s statement did not come until 1950, though it is one whose chronology has been slightly misrepresented by writers on the subject. Kit Watts, in a timeline of women’s ordination in Adventist history states that in May 1950 the General Conference Officers “Agreed, To recommend to the General Conference Committee … that a small committee be appointed to study and report” whether the Spirit of Prophecy provided for “the ordination of certain sisters in church service.” In fact, Watts gets her dates wrong. In May 1950 the Officers received a rather more puzzling piece of information, namely that, “In California some women have been ordained for Dorcas Society work.” It was agreed to take wider counsel on this issue with the meeting of the “Home and Foreign Officers” scheduled for just before the 1950 GC Session. When this meeting took place at the end of June, one of the General Conference general vice presidents:

A. V. Olson explained how the item had come to be listed. A statement from the pen of Sister White, as found in the Review and Herald of July 9, 1895, has been understood by some to provide for the ordination of certain sisters in church service.

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the sentiments the quotation expresses, that it seems to have been taken as warrant for ordaining members of Dorcas Societies, not deaconesses. It was at this point

---

84 General Conference Officers’ Meeting (hereafter GCO), Feb. 2, 1936 minutes, p. 2.
85 GCO, minutes of Dec. 13, 1939, p. 3.
87 GCO, May 3, 1950, Minutes, 50–117. Note: the ultimate successor of “Home and Foreign Officers” is what is known today as “GCDO” (GC and Division Officers).
88 GCO, June 29, 1950, Minutes, 50–158.
that the action cited by Watts was taken: “To recommend to the General Conference Committee
following the session that a small committee be appointed to study and report on this question.”

It is significant, however, that when the GC Executive Committee duly met, after the Session,
and considered the matter it voted: “That a small committee be appointed to study, and report on
the question of the ordination of women for Dorcas work, and as Bible workers.” It is unclear why
Bible workers were added. But this is, in fact, seems to be the first time that church leaders
considered ordaining women to some kind of spiritual, as opposed to social, ministry. It is thus a
noteworthy, albeit forgotten precedent. However, when the report of the “small committee” was
submitted to the GC Officers, in the spring of 1951, it apparently made no mention of Bible Workers.
The report itself does not survive, but the Officers’ decision does:

Agreed, To ask W B Ochs and H T Elliott to confer with the union conference presidents regarding
the question of ordination of women Dorcas leaders, believing that this procedure will care for any
agitation which may be in the field at this time regarding the matter.

What Ochs, a general vice president, and Elliott, an associate secretary, were to say to the NAD
union presidents was left unspecified, as is exactly what degree of “agitation . . . may [have] be[en]
in the field at this time”. However, one can speculate that Ellen White’s words were prompting
women to propose that they should be ordained, though to what role exactly remains unclear—the
reference is to “women Dorcas leaders” suggests that the debate may have become about “setting
apart” women to leadership positions. It is possible, indeed, that ordaining deaconesses (maybe
even the ordination of women as elders) was now being discussed, given the reference to women
leaders and in light of the inclusion of Bible workers in the Executive Committee’s 1950 action.

In any event, the episode, while it remains a little puzzling, may be significant not only as a
precedent for later agitation, but also for when it occurred. A number of scholars opposed to the
ordination of women to gospel ministry identify the campaign in favor of ordaining women as a by–
product of the radical Sixties and especially of the “Women’s Lib” movement. While it is difficult to
imagine that the Civil Rights Movement and Feminism have not in some way influenced proponents
of women’s ordination, it is nevertheless striking that, according to the testimony of the General
Conference Officers, there was “agitation . . . in the field” in 1951 about “the question of ordination
of women”. Almost certainly it was not about ordination to gospel ministry. Nevertheless, efforts to
have women leaders “set apart” by the laying on of hands cannot be dismissed simply as a spin–off
of radically secular movements associated with the 1960s and 1970s; they date back to the socially
conservative early 1950s.

89 Ibid.
91 Although not cited, as far as I am aware, by any previous scholar. Watts makes no reference, in her timeline, either
to the GCC’s action, or to the GC Officers’ response to the eventual report (on which see below).
92 GC0, March 14, 1951, Minutes, 51–69.
93 E.g., C. Raymond Holmes, The tip of an iceberg: Biblical authority, Biblical interpretation, and the ordination
of women in ministry (Wakefield, Mich.: Pointer Publications, 1994), chap. 6; Laurel Damsteegt, “Feminism vs. Adventism:
Why the conflict?”, Adventists Affirm, 3:2 (Fall 1989): 33–40; idem, “Spiritualism and women: Then and now”, in Mercedes
Steps towards Camp Mohaven

In 1968 the General Conference Officers received a request from the Northern European Division for “counsel regarding ordination of women”, as it is described in the minutes, which continue: “The question has arisen in Finland. Historically Seventh-day Adventists have not ordained women. Yet it is believed that the subject should be listed for the 1968 Autumn Council agenda.” The Officers voted: “To list on the agenda for the 1968 Autumn Council the subject of ordination of women.”

But in practice this seems to have meant discussing it with the various officers prior to Annual Council. For at their meeting just before the 1968 Annual Council, the “Home and Overseas Officers briefly discussed the desirability of a study on the theology of ordination of women.” This gathering of senior church leaders from around the world did not put the issue on the agenda of the meeting of the full Executive Committee at Annual Council, but instead: “Agreed, To request the chairman to appoint a committee of three theologians to study the theology of ordination of women.” The three men appointed by the committee were two veteran scholar-administrators, H. W. Lowe and M. K. Eckenroth, and a youthful but already distinguished theologian, Raoul Dederen. The committee came back with a report that noted Ellen White’s statement from July 1895, but concluded, quite reasonably, that it applied to deaconesses, rather than to ministers. This suggests that, whatever other grounds were given for the request from Finland (which almost certainly included the extraordinary achievements of unordained women evangelists in the country over the previous 26 years), the Finnish Union or Northern European Division also cited Ellen White’s 1895 article.

Two years later, the General Conference Session in Vienna requested the General Conference Officers to prepare “a statement on the role of women in the church organization.” The Officers were asked “to appoint an adequate committee to consider this large topic, and give special study to the theology involved and the importance of the home and family in the life of the church, and to submit a report for consideration at the 1970 Autumn Council.” However, looking at the minutes of the discussion in Vienna, there is no reference to ordination, and if it is hinting at it, it is doing so unusually opaquely. This is probably a response to the perceived challenge of “Women’s liberation”, rather than being about ordination, per se.

However, that said, there is no further report in the GC Officers’ Meeting Minutes. And no report was brought during the 1970 Annual Council—there is no reference to anything like this in its minutes; only a note in the minutes of the meeting of Officers and Union Presidents before Annual Council, “To refer … To forthcoming meetings of the available General Conference personnel and North American Union Presidents” a number of agenda items, including the vaguely titled “Women

---

96 Cf. Haloviak, “The pit dug for Adventist women ministers”, p. 35: in light of his treatment of history (outlined above) it is ironic, to say the least, that Haloviak criticizes Lowe’s report on the grounds that it was written “without probing into the context of nineteenth-century ministry”.
98 GCO, June 5, 1970, Minutes 70-299; copy of statement encl. not enumerated, between pp. 299-300.
in the Church”. But while “Women in the Church” was item no. 18 on the agenda of the NAD Union Presidents and Officers meeting in January and February 1971, it was one of a few items that were never actually dealt with. Eventually, though, in April 1971, the GC Officers voted: “To request the Biblical Research Committee to arrange for studies in the following areas: 1. Ecology, 2. The place of women in the Church, 3. The theology of the Church’s mission, 4. The priesthood of the member.”^101 There is no report of any response.

One suspects that one of the issues rolled up in that omnibus item, “Women in the Church”, was the issue of ordination. But in 1970 and 1971 it seems that a number of committees based in and around the General Conference and North American Division were playing pass the parcel with the issue. Matters eventually came to a head, however, in 1972, when the GC Officers received a request from an unusual quarter.

For it was a request from the Far East Division (rather than a European division) that seems to have been a spark for Mohaven in 1973. In June 1972, the Officers’ Meeting discussed the following:

The Far Eastern Division has requested counsel about ordaining women. The Biblical Research Committee has been assigned the task of studying “the place of women in the Church”. It is believed that the Far Eastern Division’s request should be referred to the Biblical Research Committee for study and counsel in connection with its study of the subject.

Agreed, To refer the Far Eastern Division request about ordaining women to the Biblical Research Committee. (J R Spangler will provide material on the subject for A H Roth to relay to the Chairman and Secretary of the Biblical Research Committee.)^102

How and why this request came from the Far East Division is a subject for ongoing research. But with it, a corner had been turned. Significantly, later that summer, the Officers: “Agreed, To name a special Officers Ad Hoc Study Committee to consider: Making use of capable S D A [sic] women in the Church.” This ad hoc committee comprised three members: the General Conference president, secretary, and treasurer.^103 The nettle, finally, was being well and truly grasped. But in some ways, we are grasping it still.

VI. CONCLUSION

We have taken the story up to 1972. A detailed analysis of events since then must await another occasion. However, in conclusion, I want to highlight two particular weaknesses in the official study

^100 Officers and Union Presidents, Oct. 7, 1970, in GCO Minutes, 70–490. Thus, the claim that a study committee was set up by the GC to study women’s ordination in 1970 (Robert Jacobson, “General Conference Issues Unusual ‘Appeal’ Regarding Women’s Ordination”, Spectrum, June 29, 2012: http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2012/06/29/general-conference-issues-unusual-appeal-regarding-womens-ordination#gtextcite3) is simply incorrect. Similarly inaccurate is the claim of Laurel Damsteegt (“Pushing the brethren”, Adventists Affirm, 12:3 (Fall 1998): 24) that “Various committees were appointed” between 1968 and 1973. No study committee was set up to consider women’s ordination between 1968 and 1973.

^101 GCO, Apr. 7, 1971, Minutes, 71–133.

^102 GCO, June 21, 1972, Minutes, 72–204.

^103 GCO, Aug. 30, 1972, Minutes, 72–300.
process of the 1970s and 1980s, and two lessons that can be learned as we go through this current process. The first is that too much of the proceedings were kept secret for too long. I myself have been angrily asked by church-members, "Why didn’t they release the Mohaven papers?” I have been pleased to be able to reply that all are now available freely online to download, but it did take nearly forty years! And it is not a new question. In June 1975 the President’s Executive Advisory (or PEXAD) considered whether or not to release those papers produced by members of the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) for the meeting at Camp Mohaven, which had subsequently been revised. The minutes note that: “Requests have been received from the field for the release of the papers.” It is noteworthy that PEXAD approved a plan proposed by the BRI for publication of this selection of the Mohaven papers. However, not for nine more years would those papers actually be published.

There is an undoubted need for discretion with discussions as sensitive as those with which the Theology of Ordination Study Committee is currently concerned; but discretion must not blur into secretiveness. When discussions and papers are kept in the dark, wild fantasies and conspiracy theories flourish. Our proceedings should be as transparent as reasonably possible, for that is the best way to avoid destructive suspicions and speculations—these tend to wilt and fade in the light. I realize there is a difficult line to tread, but it does not hurt to look critically at ourselves and our processes.

The second weakness of past study processes is that all those committees did not do justice to the theological question that was at stake and did not reflect the global nature of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This Committee is the first time that the worldwide Church has explored the theology of ordination. The three–man committee in 1968 considered the “Theology of ordination of women,” starting in 1973, in a sixteen–year span from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, five special committees or commissions considered the “role of women in the Church”—a remit that in practice largely, though not wholly, meant whether or not women should be ordained. None of these was given the task of establishing the fundamental question of what ordination means, as is the case with this Committee.

Furthermore, none of the previous study committees or commissions operated as part of a global process—the GC seems to have requested, in 1972 or 1973, in the run-up to the Mohaven meeting, that Divisions submit papers setting out theological or Biblical perspectives on the role of women. However, only two such papers survive, both submitted by the Australasian Division. It is difficult to know whether it submitted other papers, or whether many, or any, other divisions submitted papers. Furthermore, all of the members of the committee that met at Mohaven were based in North America. Some members, like Gordon Hyde and Gerhard Hasel, had been born in Europe but had spent virtually all their professional pastoral and scholarly careers in the United

---

107 GC, Apr. 8, 1968, Minutes 68–183.
109 Papers by A. S. Jorgenson and D. Ford, GC Ar., RG AU 1, MSS 4323 and 4324; Australasian Division Committee, meeting of Nov. 29, 1973, minutes in GC Ar., RG AU 1, Box 6578, f/d. "Minutes November-December, 1973", p. 1096.
States.\textsuperscript{110} Church leaders took steps to ensure the committee had African–American representation, yet there was no representation from the rest of the world.\textsuperscript{111} It is unsurprising that its recommendations failed to win the support of leaders from outside North America at subsequent annual councils. As for the two "Role of Women Commissions" of 1988 and 1989, they had a wider global representation, and every Division nominated representatives to the 1898 Commission, as is the case with the current committee.\textsuperscript{112} However, the 1988–89 deliberations were not part of a global study process involving study within each of the divisions, as well as "at the top".

Thus, even though one of the comments one hears most often about this Committee’s work is “Why do we need another committee? Why does the issue need more study?”, actually what we are doing is unique. We face an extraordinary challenge. But we also have an unusual opportunity. I pray that we are open to cooperating with the Holy Spirit, to make the most of it.


\textsuperscript{111} See PREXAD, July 17, 1973, Minutes, 73–74; GCC, July 19, 1973, Minutes, 73–1593.

# Appendix

Women licentiates and union, conference and mission officers, 1883–1922

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Licentiates</th>
<th>Total Women</th>
<th>Percentage Women</th>
<th>Total Conference Officers</th>
<th>Total Women</th>
<th>Percentage Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.08%</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.13%</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.68%</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.23%</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.20%</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.10%</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.10%</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.85%</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.43%</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.46%</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.14%</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.09%</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.35%</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1899</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.64%</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.46%</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12.88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.50%</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.96%</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>11.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>NO DIRECTORY</td>
<td>NO DIRECTORY</td>
<td>NO DIRECTORY</td>
<td>NO DIRECTORY</td>
<td>NO DIRECTORY</td>
<td>NO DIRECTORY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.37%</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.61%</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.28%</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.99%</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.98%</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>11.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>441</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.36%</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>10.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.57%</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>11.29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.31%</td>
<td>429</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>11.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>482</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.83%</td>
<td>458</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.79%</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8.40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.83%</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7.61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915</td>
<td>469</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.85%</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>7.28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.83%</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.24%</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>887</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.56%</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.75%</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>931</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.75%</td>
<td>580</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.76%</td>
<td>623</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td>5.2368</td>
<td>1.62%</td>
<td>AVERAGE</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8.42%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIN</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.56%</td>
<td>MIN</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.68%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAX</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.62%</td>
<td>MAX</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13.82%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIAN</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.39%</td>
<td>MEDIAN</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>