Study discussions over, now on to solutions, says chair of theology committee
At least 10 of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s 13 world division Biblical Research Committees say they would either recommend the ordination of women to ministry or would allow it in some world regions without the matter harming church unity.

The recommendations were unveiled at last week’s Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC), which was the third study meeting of the committee.

The denomination is in the midst of a five-year process of studying the biblical foundation of the theology of ordination and how it relates to gender and its implications if women were to be ordained. The Adventist world church does not ordain women as ministers.

The five-year process was established following a pledge at the denomination’s General Conference Session in 2010 to examine ordination. Each of the Adventist Church’s 13 world divisions has formed its own Biblical Research Committee and delivered its recommendation to the TOSC. The committee has previously held two week-long study sessions, and a fourth and final meeting is scheduled for June.

Last week’s meeting, from January 21 to 25 in Columbia, Maryland, featured presentations on theology and descriptions of options for moving forward in worldwide unity regarding ordination as it relates to gender. Much of the discussion focused on the issue of “headship” as is found in 1 Corinthians 11. Papers from all meetings are available to view on the website of the Office of Archives, Statistics and Research.

Artur Stele, TOSC chair and director of the denomination’s Biblical Research Institute, told delegates on Friday that the time for researching and studying of the issue had come to an end. “From now on we’re going in a new direction. From now, including the June meeting, we’ll be looking for solutions,” Stele said.

Discussions have at times turned intense but have been conducted with respect and in a congenial manner.

“These meetings have featured frank—even very frank—descriptions of the positions on both sides of this matter,” Stele told the Adventist Review. “I believe that everyone who has participated in this process has come with a genuine desire to find out what the Word of God teaches, and how we can identify solutions that allow the church to stay focused on its worldwide mission. I’ve been gratified to see a growing sense of camaraderie and understanding as we’ve moved through this process.”

At the final TOSC meeting in June, it’s expected that the committee will make recommendations for the denomination’s Executive Committee meeting at Annual Council in October. From there, a recommendation will likely be made for the agenda of the 2015 General Conference Session.

TOSC Vice Chair Geoffrey Mbwana said regardless of what is ultimately decided, there is a sense of unity among TOSC members.

“All divisions have indicated they are willing to work with whatever is decided and to go forward with the mission of the church,” Mbwana said. “That has really comforted us.”

ANN has previously reported on several of the divisions’ Biblical Research Committee recommendations. Below is a summary of each division BRC recommendation to the TOSC last
Each position is presented by quoting directly from their own report and is offered in thorough and concise form:

East-Central African Division: “After thorough examination of Scripture, the Writings of Ellen White, and the scholarly papers that are for the ordination of women and those that are against, there is still not light as to whether [women] may be ordained as pastors….The committee is almost convinced that there are two possibilities: A. Both sides of the debate on women ordination do not really understand the New Testament passages which read like women ordination should not be considered; B. The whole church has not given much thought as to what women may do uniquely and be affirmed to advance the redemptive ministry and mission of God. So, before there is complete clarity about the authentic Scriptural intent about the issue, [our Biblical Research Committee] says ‘not yet’ to the ordination of women…. Our committee is convinced that the church needs to continue to ‘seek understanding’ so that the delegates to GC in [San Antonio] in 2015 may produce good results by voting intelligently.”

Euro-Asia Division: “[T]aking into account the cultural context in which the church is to fulfill its service in Euro-Asia Division, and keeping in mind the church’s missiological interests, the [division] Executive Committee discourages the practice of the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry.”

Inter-European Division: “Since ordination does not contradict the teachings of the Bible and might foster the mission of the church, we think that there is room for the church to ordain women for pastoral ministry….Whatever decision is considered, a basic unity of the worldwide church in faith and practice should be preserved.”

Inter-American Division: “There is no explicit mandate in the Bible for the ordination of women to church leadership, yet there is no command against the same….The Inter-American Division is willing to accept the ecclesiastical decision taken by the [Seventh-day Adventist Church] in plenary session.”

North American Division: “In harmony with our biblical study, we recommend that ordination to gospel ministry, as an affirmation of the call of God, be conferred by the church on men and women….The committee humbly recommends that the North American Division support the authorization of each division to consider, through prayer and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, its most appropriate approach to the ordination of women to gospel ministry.”

Northern Asia-Pacific Division: We recommend that the World Church place “Mission First” as a priority and that we focus on sharing the three angels’ messages with the world. This means that we recommend that both men and women should be encouraged and recognized by the church through ordination to the pastoral ministry…. We further recommend that the implementation of ordination of women will be determined by each division taking into consideration its impact on mission and unity within its territories.

South American Division: “[W]omen should not be ordained to the pastoral ministry…. The church should further investigate the possibility of the ordination of men and women to ministries other than the pastoral ministry.”

South Pacific Division: “The Biblical Research Committee of the South Pacific Division does not see any scriptural principle which would be an impediment to women being ordained…. The calling of the Holy Spirit needs to be recognized for both men and women. There is a sense of injustice that needs to be addressed…. The mission of the church is a primary determinant of praxis, both in
the history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and in its climax as the Holy Spirit is poured out on both men and women during the latter rain."

Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division: “The Old Testament and New Testament demonstrate that no women were ordained….Since there is no biblical support for the ordination of woman pastors, then the ordination of women elders should also not be considered.

Southern Asia Division: “We recognize that there is no direct teaching in the Scriptures or the Spirit of Prophecy that either prescribes or prohibits the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry. …In the absence of direct teaching in inspired writings we accept the authority of the church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to take a decision. … We have no objection if the world church takes a decision to allow certain areas of the world to ordain women to pastoral ministry.”

Southern Asia-Pacific Division: “[The Southern Asia-Pacific Division] will follow the voice of the Spirit and the world church upon its voted decision in July 2015 at the GC Session.”

Trans-European Division: “We propose that a recommendation be brought to the General Conference Session in 2015, that it approves a revised policy in which unions, whose constituency meetings in session have voted approval and whose division committee has voted approval, be allowed to maintain an inclusive pastoral ministry which removes all gender distinctions within the work of the church in that union territory.”

West-Central Africa Division: “The West-Central Africa Division by consensus does not recommend the ordination of women into ordained pastoral ministry. However, if at the General Conference Session the world church votes in favor of women’s ordination, [the division] will not threaten the unity of the church despite its disagreement to such a decision. Instead, we will consider women’s ordination as a matter of conscience, and will continue to study and pray for light on the subject brighter than there is now.”

—The full report from each division’s Biblical Research Committee will soon be available on the website of the Office of Archives, Statistics and Research.

Academic conference in Spain promotes tolerance toward religious minorities

Religious freedom advocates in Europe are hoping an academic conference in Spain last week could lead to more recognition for the cause of religious liberty for minority faiths in the nation and surrounding states.

The International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty (AIDLR) and the Human Rights Institute at Spain’s highest-ranked public university held the first International Conference on Religious Liberty and Religious Minorities January 17 to 20.
The event drew dozens of leading scholars, political figures and lawyers—among them Seventh-day Adventists—to the sprawling campus of Complutense University of Madrid, a seven-century-old university in the country.

Speaking at the conference, Alexy Koshemyakov, head of the National Minorities and Antidiscrimination Department at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, made the case for establishing a specific institution in Europe to address religious liberty issues.

He also gave an overview of the latest developments in interreligious dialogue in Europe.

"Maybe this will open the door to one day have a day of religious freedom in the country," said John Graz, secretary-general of the International Religious Liberty Association.

About 100 law students from the Complutense University of Madrid School of Law, which hosted the event, joined attendees for afternoon discussions.

Much of the conference focused on finding the appropriate balance between the needs of religious minorities and those of broader society.

Dr. Jeremy Gunn, professor of International Studies at the Al Akhawayn University in Morocco, said some of the "biggest clashes" are within, rather than between, faith groups, as religious sects jostle for influence.

"There are minorities even within religions," Gunn said. "Tolerance and respect must be the founding values of each group."

Participants also discussed ways that governments, faith groups, academia and civil society can promote and protect religious liberty.

Belen Alfaro, ambassador-at-large for the U.N. Alliance of Civilizations, highlighted the need for "a culture of peace that fights intolerance through dialogue."

AIDLR President Bruno Vertallier agreed. "My wish is that we may establish new paths for religious freedom, tolerance and respect through dialogue," he said.

Ganoune Diop, UN liaison for the Adventist world church, said remembering that dignity is at the core of all human rights, including religious liberty, is essential.

"Dignity is a sacred and divine seal," Diop said. "Every human being has dignity because every human being has been created in the image of God."

When the issue of public policy came up, Harri Kuhalampi, a representative from the Culture and Education department of the European Parliament, pointed out that personal attitudes toward tolerance, hospitality and respect are equally vital.

"Cooperation within communities is as important as governmental legislation," he said.

Heiner Bielefeldt, United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, had another reminder: religious liberty is dynamic, not static. When attention and awareness dwindle, so can religious liberties, he said.
The conference included a tour of historic Toledo, a city organizers called an "oasis" of religious tolerance among Christians, Muslims and Jews. Many synagogues, mosques and churches dating to the 10th century now serve as museums.

The Adventist Central Church in Madrid hosted a religious liberty concert on the final night of the conference, drawing about 500 community members. Organizer Liviu Olteanu called the church a fitting venue for an event spotlighting the rights of religious minorities.

Spain is 94 percent Catholic. The country's 16,000 Seventh-day Adventists are among other faith groups that make of 6 percent of the population.

The International Association for the Defense of Religious Liberty is a non-governmental organization based in Berne. The organization is committed to defending freedom of thought and publishes the annual journal "Conscience and Liberty."

**Police hold suspect after U.S. Adventist campus was on lockdown**

*January 23, 2014*

A Seventh-day Adventist university campus in the U.S. state of Tennessee was put on lockdown for more than two hours today after campus safety officials received a "perceived threat" against the university, a university spokesperson said.

The lockdown at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale began at 12:10 p.m. and ended at 2:21 p.m. when campus officials announced that Collegedale Police had a person of interest in custody, said Lucas Patterson, a spokesman for the university.

Patterson said a former Southern student was on the campus of Chattanooga State Community College earlier in the day making complaints against Southern. "It was a localized perceived threat against our campus," Patterson said. Officials from Chattanooga State contacted Campus Safety officials at Southern to warn them of the threat, he said.

Patterson said Collegedale police detained a person of interest at a local YMCA. He was taken into custody, Patterson said, but he has not been arrested. Patterson said the man in question had not attended Southern for several years.

A spokesperson for the Collegedale Police did not immediately return requests for comment.

Students and staff were advised to lock their doors and stay away from windows, Patterson said. The nearby Adventist elementary school, middle school and high school were included in the lockdown, as well as the nearby Adventist Book Center. No one was injured in the incident, Patterson said.
“We handle threats very seriously, that’s why we err on the side of caution to protect people,” Patterson said. “Sure it was inconvenient, but inconvenience is a small price to pay for protection.”

The university will hold an assembly in the university church this evening at 6 p.m. to address the incident and answer questions from students and staff. “Through social media we saw some rumors that ended up not being true,” Patterson said. During the lockdown, Colledale Police had responded to reports of gunshots on Southern’s campus, a university statement said. Police found no evidence of this, the statement said.

Patterson said counseling is always available on campus, and school administrators have asked counselors to “clear their plate” to prioritize students wishing to receiving counseling over today’s incident.

Southern’s enrollment is approximately 3,300 students—more than 2,500 of whom live on or around campus. The school has been in operation since 1892, when it was known as Graysville Academy.