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Leaders and members of the Adventist Church’s Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) wondered aloud if the fourth and last multi-day session of the group would yield a consensus on the thorny issue of ordaining women to ministry.
One TOSC member wistfully noted to the group that Wednesday, June 4, was Pentecost in the Jewish calendar. He hoped, he said, that a miracle of unanimity might conclude the two-year study process as members were asked to choose their preferred solution, or “Way Forward,” on the issue the church has wrestled with for more than 25 years.

However, when TOSC chairman Artur Stele announced the results of an informal survey of the group of scholars, church administrators, pastors and laypersons, three positions emerged from the data, with no position claiming a majority of the 95 votes received.

Forty TOSC members identified as their first choice a position that “Each entity responsible for calling pastors be authorized to choose either to have only men as ordained pastors; or to have both men and women as ordained pastors.”

Thirty-two members favored a proposal that affirms the “practice of ordaining/commissioning only qualified men to the office of pastor/minister throughout the world church . . ..”

A third option was the first choice of 22 participants. It stated, “Christ is the only head of the church,” noting that there is a “biblical pattern of male leadership, under the headship of Christ, in the office of the ordained minister.” But this option also added that “We recommend that denominational leadership at a proper level be authorized to decide, based on biblical principles, whether such an adaptation [permission to ordain both men and women] may be appropriate for their area or region.”

General Conference president Ted N. C. Wilson spoke to committee members after the poll results were announced by Stele. “As we move forward with this process, I’m asking that we each act with humility—not authoritatively or in an overbearing manner,” Wilson urged. “We should do all things in the spirit of Jesus.”

Wilson also thanked participants for an action they voted unanimously earlier in the day. TOSC members acted “to affirm that in spite of the differences of opinion on the subject of women’s ordination, the members of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee are committed to the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as expressed through the 28 Fundamental Beliefs.”

“We will be very open and fair in the way we approach the handling of this matter,” Wilson assured the committee as he sketched key stages the church will follow in the months ahead.

Several administrative groups at the church’s world headquarters will consider the written report of the TOSC process during meetings June 16-19, Wilson said, and will place the matter on the agenda of the denomination’s Annual Council convening in Silver Spring, Maryland October 9-14. General Conference leaders have promised to make all materials from the recent study process and supplemental documents available in advance to the 300+ member Executive Committee, which decides what to recommend to the church’s quinquennial General Conference session planned for San Antonio, Texas, 13 months from now.

Wilson said that multiple presentations will be made at the scheduled administrative meetings as part of helping church representatives openly review the subject.

“The results of today’s poll shouldn’t dictate any outcomes for the world church, but they should be given their appropriate weight,” said TOSC vice chair Geoffrey Mbwana, also a vice-president of the church. “No one should quickly say, ‘This is all a clear matter.’ All that is really clear at this
moment is that we have strong differences about the matter of ordaining women to ministry.” TOSC leaders saw the survey as an evaluation tool to determine if consensus positions had developed in the committee.

The TOSC group’s assignment was to do an in-depth study and analysis of the subject of ordination with input from world divisions of the church: the committee wasn’t organized to be proportionately representative of the world church. A more international assessment will come in the process at the 2014 Annual Council and 2015 General Conference session when delegates selected by church constitutional and policy provisions will consider the issue.

Karen Porter, TOSC Secretary and assistant secretary of the world church, underlined the value of the study.

“What we’ve experienced here could be an important template for the world church as it considers other international issues,” Porter said. “We’ve learned lessons of both kinds—what works, and what doesn’t—and we’re all better for having spent so many days and hours listening to people we may not always agree with.”

Steple also praised the spirit of committee members as the 24-month study process concluded. He suggested that the fourth session had probably been more positive because of the greater amount of time spent in caucuses and working groups instead of plenary presentations.

“Though we’ve had challenging and difficult discussions at times, we’ve developed a camaraderie—a respect for each other—during the last two years,” he said. “A large majority of participants learned to trust each other as they prayed together, ate meals together, and talked in the hallways. This is the first truly global study process on this issue that has ever been attempted. It’s been gratifying to see and feel how much this unique process has built up mutual understanding and better relationships.”

Lisa Beardsley-Hardy, director of the Adventist Church’s education department and a TOSC member, focused on the long-term gain to the church from the study process. “One of the most important developments for us as a global, multi-national church was to revisit our hermeneutics, and think about how we study the Bible across many cultures,” she told Adventist Review. “This experience helped us to clarify what we believe—and why we believe it, as well as focusing us on how we unitedly pursue our mission.”

Wilson urged committee members to remain hopeful about the ultimate outcome of the process as the Wednesday session ended.

“We may not yet see just where the Spirit is taking us on this issue,” he said. “But we firmly believe that God will open the way for His church to fulfill its mission.”

Adventists support World Blood Donor Day on June 14
This year’s theme focuses on blood for expectant mothers

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Seventh-day Adventists are strong supporters of the World Health Organization’s annual World Blood Donor Day on June 14.

This year’s theme is “Safe blood for saving mothers,” which focuses on expectant mothers. The campaign’s goal is to increase awareness about why timely access to safe blood is essential for all countries as part of a comprehensive approach to prevent maternal deaths. Approximately 800 women die each day from pregnancy or child-related complications, according to the World Health Organization.

Dr. Peter Landless, Health Ministries director for the Seventh-day Adventist world church, who has previously donated blood, said access to blood during labor can be critical in helping to save a mother’s life.

"Donating blood could save the life of someone you love, but it could also save the life of someone who can give life," Landless said.

Seventh-day Adventists, who operate one of the largest network of hospitals and clinics worldwide, support the use of blood transfusions when necessary. The Church has been recognized for its positive promotion of blood drives, from its own world headquarters to local churches.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Costa Rica last year was recognized by the National Blood Bank as the most successful organization in obtaining blood donations, the Costa Rica Star reported. The Church has also been recognized throughout Latin America for its coordination of blood donation drives, such as in Brazil and Colombia. Adventists work in collaboration with local governments as part of a collaboration with the Pan-American Health Organization.

For more information on World Blood Donor Day, visit: www.who.int/campaigns/world-blood-donor-day/2014/en/.