Large Majority Elects Woman as Conference President
It happened today (Sunday) by a large majority vote in the largest and often-most-experimental conference in the North American Division. The election of the first women ever chosen as a full-term conference president through normal channels cannot be other than a major milestone in denominational history—an election that apparently was meant to be. Strong opposition by the General Conference president came at the Eleventh Hour, directing the conference constituency delegates not to proceed at this time with the election of the nominee....see more
Delegates to the regular constituency session of the Southeastern California Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church voted today (October 27) to elect Pastor Sandra E. Roberts as conference president. A total of 72 percent of the delegates from the local churches and denominational employees voted in favor of Roberts' election while only 28 percent voted against it.

It is the first time on record that a woman has been elected to the office of conference president in the Adventist denomination, although women have served temporarily as the top officer on a number of occasions, even in the 19th century, and on many occasions as treasurer or secretary of a conference. And women who are ordained ministers serve in similar leadership roles among Adventists in China where the national church does not have the same relationship with the denomination that it does elsewhere. Denominational policy specifies that a conference president is to be an ordained minister, and Roberts is an ordained minister because a year ago the Pacific Union Conference in a constituency meeting established a policy ending gender discrimination in the ordination of clergy. She was the first of this new generation of ordained women to be nominated as a conference president.

When the nominating committee report was presented to the delegates, the chairman of the session, Pastor Ricardo Graham, president of the denomination's Pacific Union Conference, shared with the delegates a request from Pastor Ted Wilson, president of the denomination's General Conference or world headquarters. Wilson had phoned at 7:30 the prior evening, Graham told the assembled delegates, and asked that the session not move ahead with the election at this time because the denomination's international governing body is currently studying the question of the Biblical basis for extending ordination to both women and men.

If the delegates elected a woman as conference president they would be in "confrontation" with the General Conference, Wilson told Graham and asked that this be repeated to the delegates. A number of delegates went to the microphones to support the nomination of Roberts. Included were Dr. Randy Roberts, senior pastor of the largest congregation in the denomination, the Loma Linda University Church, and Dr. Randy Wisbey, president of La Sierra University. Both institutions are located in the conference. Very few delegates spoke against the nomination.

Those who spoke against electing Roberts stressed the issue of "unity" and conflict in the worldwide Adventist denomination. One delegate mentioned Roberts' "lack of pastoral experience," but another delegates pointed out that she had served as primary pastor of the Corona, California, Church for a number of years, as well as in several youth ministry roles.

The many speakers who urged the election of Roberts stated that discrimination against women in ordination and clergy leadership roles was wrong and unbiblical. It was pointed out that the Southeastern California Conference has been a leader in ending discrimination against women clergy for several decades and that this was a natural step.

"There are times to move forward despite the hierarchy and this is such a time," stated one speaker.

In some ways this is a routine development. Roberts has served as executive secretary of the conference, the second-ranking officer, since 2004. When a conference president moves on or does not want to continue in office it is common for the number-two officer to be selected as the next president.

Pastor Gerald D. Penick told the nominating committee at its first meeting on September 8 that he did not want to be considered for re-election. "Nine years is enough," he told the committee. Later he told one of the pastors in the conference that he did not want to retire yet, but had not made up his mind as to what he would do next. It is well...
known among veteran denominational employees that the work of a conference president is exhausting.

For five years prior to Roberts' election as the second officer in the conference she was director of young adult ministries and she was pastor in Corona from 1995 to 2000. She served as chaplain for the church school in Loma Linda from 1992 to 1995 and prior to that as director of the conference's youth camp. She was called to the conference from Central California in 1987 where she was Bible teacher at Modesto Adventist Academy. She started denominational employment in 1982 as a teacher at Cedar Lake Academy in the Michigan Conference. Roberts has a master's degree from Andrews University and a Doctor of Ministry degree from the Claremont School of Theology. She is the daughter of Adventist missionaries and has spent considerable time traveling around the world.

The Southeastern California Conference is the largest local conference in the denomination's North American Division (NAD) and one of the largest in the world, despite the fact that its territory only covers five counties east and south of Los Angeles, including the major cities of San Diego, Riverside and San Bernardino. It has more than 70,000 members and it is estimated that there are probably 300,000 Adventist adherents in the area. Its growth rate in the last decade has been about the same as the entire NAD.

California has the largest number of Adventists of any state in the U.S., a total of nearly 200,000 or 17 percent of the total national membership. It includes four local conferences of which the Southeastern conference is the most southern. It includes 143 local churches and at least ten women pastors who are ordained ministers. Some have served in the ministry for decades.