Pacific Union Session Delegates Vote to Approve Ordinations to the Gospel Ministry Without Regard to Gender

CORRECTION: An earlier version of this release from the Pacific Union Conference incorrectly attributed statements made by General Conference President Ted Wilson to North American Division President Dan Jackson. The corrected attributions appear in paragraphs 4-6 below.

By Michael Peabody for the Pacific Union Conference

WOODLAND HILLS, CA – Delegates to a special session of the Pacific Union Conference voted 79% to 21% to “approve ordinations to the gospel ministry without regard to gender,” but narrowly defeated a motion to amend the Union bylaws by a margin of 1%.

The Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists is comprised of 220,000 members in five western states, including Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and Utah.

In his introductory remarks, Pacific Union President Ricardo Graham asked delegates to affirm both male and female pastors who are called by God. “We have been given a powerful message to live and to preach, and we want to find the best way to motivate all the talented people in our body to reach others for God,” said Graham. “We dare not close off God’s methodology.”

North American Division President Dan Jackson affirmed the role of women in the ministry, but said that the NAD representatives were present as counselors. “Mediation of the truth is often as important as the truth itself,” he said. “In matters of conscience, it is not the right of one man to direct another.” Trying to do so, he said, suggests that others are not capable of listening to and obeying the voice of the Holy Spirit.
General Conference President Ted Wilson called for unity, asking delegates to allow the Theology of Ordination Study Committee to finalize its report, expected in 2014, before making any decision that could jeopardize the structure of the church. “The church policies are the agreements we make with one another as to how we will work with one another,” said Wilson.

He also cautioned that a vote in favor of women’s ordination would not be in concert with the will of the world church, which at General Conference sessions in 1990 and 1995, turned down requests from the North American Division to ordain women.

“Sometimes we need to be prodded to progress,” responded Southern California Conference President Larry Caviness.

Andrea Trusty-King, pastor of the Imani Praise Seventh-day Adventist Church, near Riverside, Calif., shared her personal experience of being called to the ministry as a youth. She said that she had doubts about filling a pastoral role, but now faces tremendous challenges and successes as a minister in Moreno Valley and other places. “I should have expected this,” she said of being used by God to minister. “In the last days God said he would pour out His Spirit on all flesh.”

Randy Roberts, pastor of the Loma Linda University Church, said, “There is no text in Scripture that forbids the ordination of women — not one. In fact, Scripture tells of women who filled every leadership role conceivable.”

Roberts then claimed official church doctrinal ground for supporting women’s ordination, present in Fundamental Belief number 14. “In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation.”

“These are words voted by the GC in session. That’s doctrine. Doctrine is the basis for policy,” said Roberts, who then cited history from biblical times to the present. “In every age, followers of Jesus have been called to make very important and, at times, very frightening decisions. They have been told that to make such decisions would lead to the fracture of the church. But time and again, it did not result in its fracture, but in its salvation.”

Delegates expressed concern about the proposed change in the bylaws which would have replaced language saying that the Pacific Union would follow “all” of the polices of the General Conference, with new language saying that Pacific Union policies would “in general” be in harmony with General Conference policy. The amendment, which required a two-thirds vote to pass, failed by approximately 1%. 
Despite suggestions from some delegates that the failure of the motion to amend the bylaws should prevent the second issue, women’s ordination, from being heard, Pacific Union Conference legal counsel, Jon Daggett, advised the delegates that the issue of women’s ordination could still be voted and acted upon.

After intense discussion, delegates voted that the Pacific Union would approve ordinations, “without regard to gender,” when such approvals are requested by the conferences. In accordance with world policy, local conferences select candidates for ordination, and the local conferences ordain those who are approved by the unions.

The action applies only to the local conferences within the Pacific Union territory that choose to ordain women. Women who are ordained in a local conference within the Pacific Union will generally be recognized as “commissioned” in other conferences or unions.

Graham concluded by acknowledging the vigor of the debate. “The most important thing is how we stay together and move forward,” he said. “We have registered our conscience through our vote. We’ve had discussion and debate. Now let’s go do the work of God.”

Delegates affirm Randy Roberts’ presentation. Photo by Jim Paliungas.