On January 21-25, 2014 the General Conference (GC) Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) met in Columbia, Md. to continue their study on the issue of women's ordination to the gospel ministry. Historically the church has approved the ordination of only men as pastors. Some regions of the world have been issuing credentials for women to serve as Commissioned Ministers, but not for full ordination.

The TOSC was formed at the request of the delegates at the 2010 GC Session held in Atlanta, Ga. Each world division also formed their own Biblical Research Committees which have been meeting over the past two years and formulating the reports which were shared at the beginning of the January meetings.

Of the 13 world divisions, five have shared that they are in favor of women’s ordination, two have said that they have divided opinions, while five others are not in favor but will not stand in opposition if the world church votes in favor of it. One division reported that they are not in favor of women’s ordination at all. All of the reports emphasized that research was done through a delicate process of studying the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy while under a season of prayer. The division reports will be compiled into a larger report that will be presented to the GC for consideration at Annual Council in the fall of 2014.

Gordon Bietz, president of Southern Adventist University and chair of the North American Division (NAD) TOSC shared his thoughts on the meetings, “The opportunity to talk, listen, and fellowship with those who have differing convictions on the subject of women’s ordination was valuable and increased my understanding of the variety of ways that we approach the words of scripture. I am deeply appreciative of the strong commitment that everyone had to maintaining the unity of the church and I am optimistic that we will find a way forward to maintain our unity.”

At the end of its hour-long presentation on Tuesday, the NAD TOSC presented what had been voted by the
NAD Executive Committee at their 2013 Year-end Meetings: “The North American Division humbly recommends that the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee 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.”

On Sabbath the committee members met in worship led by Mark Finley, assistant to the president of the GC. They then met in small groups and continued their prayerful discussions and Bible study. As the meetings concluded, GC Vice President Geoffrey Mbwana and co-chair of the GC TOSC shared a presentation titled “We Need Each Other” where he observed “It’s easier to build a fence than to build a bridge” and that TOSC committee members must “build a bridge for our people to walk on, not walk away.”

The NAD had several of their pastors and educators serving on the GC TOSC and they felt encouraged by the meetings. “In significant ways our TOSC committee turned a critical corner in our third week together,” said Dwight Nelson, senior pastor of the Pioneer Memorial Church on the campus of Andrews University. “We now can articulate each other’s position in interpreting the salient Bible passages. And now we realize how vital collective prayer is in seeking to discover God’s will for our world church. And so we must intensify our praying.”

JoAnn Davidson, professor at the Adventist Theological Seminary measured the tone of the meetings as they discussed the differing views offered supporting each side of the discussion, “It has been a week of intense fellowship. I was reminded of times in the early Christian church (Acts 15) and our early Adventist church history, where there was debate, and through it the church grew stronger, and we will too!”

The GC TOSC will next meet in June where it will formulate the final report that will then be given to the GC for consideration for inclusion at the 2015 GC Session which will be held in San Antonio, Texas.

-- Prepared by the North American Division Communication Department; Photos by Adventist News Network

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