
How Long Must Women Wait? Prospects for Adventist Church Leadership

by Janice Eiseman Daffern

It was one of those sultry days in Berrien Springs. I sat in the back row, leaning against the cool bricks of the seminary classroom wall while scratching out notes on Reformation theology. I liked this class. The professor came early each day, greeting the students and reaching out to shake hands. We often sang hymns for worship before the lecture. Sometimes while the rest sang, I closed my eyes and let the harmony of the male voices melt around me.

The professor warmed to his material: “The concept of the priesthood of all believers, perhaps more than any other Reformation idea, changed the practice of Protestant believers. The belief that each person is a priest before God with no special status reserved for a particular class of people is radical. Our Adventist pioneers continued to emphasize this important doctrine and particularly accented the gifts of the Spirit. Each member has a gift and an important role to play.”

I stiffened and looked at the men around me—still placid, taking notes. I raised my hand and the professor recognized my question: “What about Adventist women?

What does the priesthood of believers mean for them?”

Pens dropped and sixty men turned to look. There was silence and then a cold blast of laughter hit me. Just before the bell rang the professor inserted a reference to “work yet to be done on this thorny issue.”

The chill didn’t diminish until I stepped out into the sunlight. As I mounted the steps to the library, I heard running feet behind me. A divinity student from the front row of the Reformation class found me. I didn’t know him.

He was out of breath. “Are you some kind of crazy? Who told you that you belong here? You and the women’s libbers are trying to ruin the church! Why don’t you go home, get married and work out your problems some other way.”

Behind his pale face the sun stood frozen in the sky. I said nothing. He took huge breaths and talked on. All the while I imagined him pleasant—standing before his congregation, earnestly praying for his people, victoriously parting the waters of baptism. I saw him break the bread and bless the wine.

This experience vividly focused for me the dilemma facing all women in the Seventh-day Adventist church. Adventists affirm the priesthood of all believers, with each member of the body of Christ exercising his or her gifts. Meanwhile 60

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percent of the membership remains virtually excluded from the church's administrative structure.

That paradox was underscored for me last spring when I took a course at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., on the history of women in the church. The class, composed mainly of Protestant women from several denominations, regarded me with a great deal of interest because I belong to a movement led by a woman. In our discussion, it became clear that although I belong to a church which had recognized female authority in the nineteenth century, I was the only woman present who was *not* a candidate for ordination.

Our history began with a group of disillusioned people in desperate need of guidance who came to recognize the gift of prophecy in a teenage girl. In 1982 we still find ourselves wondering if women can lead. We suffer from an odd sort of forgetfulness which allows us to consult the writings of this woman on almost any topic while we debate over a woman's "proper place."

Perhaps we have forgotten what it must have been like for the pioneers of our movement to accept a very young woman who married, had children, and at the same time preached, wrote, and led a people. Certainly this is a prime example of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers taken seriously. But in the process of becoming institutionalized, we somehow have lost that sense of urgency which calls for every available vessel to be used in the service of the kingdom.

In the 1970's the issue of female leadership in the SDA church was discussed widely, from meetings of the Adventist Forum to General Conference committees, from the pages of SPECTRUM to the *Adventist Review*. The Biblical Research Institute spent four years studying the ordination of women and released a set of papers in 1976 available from the Institute for \$7.00. The papers are scheduled to be published in book form in the near future. In summary, the research indicated that there is no basis in the Bible or the writings of Ellen White for withholding ordination from women.

I was studying theology in college during the seventies, and I interpreted all the discussion as a sign of progress. Since then, I have nearly completed the master of divinity degree at the SDA Theological Seminary and for two years I have worked as an associate pastor at Sligo Church, Takoma Park, Maryland. Through my college and seminary years I not only had the continuing support of my husband, but I have been encouraged by a caring community of teachers and fellow students in these institutions. In my current role as a pastor, I am free to minister to the needs of the congregation in a way I had once thought impossible. My colleagues at Sligo Church, the Potomac Conference leadership, and the lay people I work with take my ministry seriously and affirm my call to pastoring.

But in spite of my delight with my own day-to-day work, I am distressed about the possibilities for all women whatever their role in the church. Only two percent of the students enrolled in the four graduate religion programs at Andrews University are women. Of the 245 enrolled in the master of divinity program, I am the only woman. Six women of a total of 53 are working towards the master of arts in religion and two women of 33 are candidates for the doctor of theology. No women are doctor of ministry candidates since one of the requirements for entrance is ordination. The February 3, 1982, issue of *Christian Century* reported that Protestant seminary women number between 30 and 50 percent of the total enrollment of their schools. A group which matches us sociologically and theologically more closely than mainline Protestants are Mennonites. The Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, reports that 38 percent of the students in their programs of study are women.

When the accrediting team from the Association of Theological Seminaries visited the SDA Theological Seminary, they made observations pertaining to the women on campus. While the team was pleased by the racial and ethnic pluralism among the students, they noted the scarcity of women. The report included quotes from seminary

women which revealed their high degree of isolation from the rest of the seminary community. The accrediting team recommended that Andrews University not only increase the number of women who enter the seminary, but work to improve the atmosphere for female students once they have arrived.

The church set up an associate in pastoral care internship in 1977 to allow women to function in ministerial positions without ordination. The church's awareness of this program, however, has not always been acute. Last year I was told that women are not being hired in the program in large enough numbers and therefore some administrators thought that it should be discontinued. Since I am an associate in pastoral care, I immediately called the ministerial department of the General Conference to inquire. An administrator in that department expressed surprise that associates in pastoral care existed and asked me to send him a copy of the policy concerning such roles for his department's files.

Of the 33 women graduates of college theology programs in the past five years who hoped to find ministerial positions, only eight have been successful, according to a study done by Roger Dudley at the Institute of Church Ministry, Andrews University. Of those eight, two have been hired immediately after completing undergraduate study. The others have gone on to graduate school or worked elsewhere while waiting for the positions to open.

Three conferences—Potomac, Upper Columbia, and Southeastern California, now employ women in pastoral care positions, and Dudley reports that a survey found only three other conference presidents interested in hiring associates in pastoral care. This offers little hope for the 20 women now studying theology in the colleges and universities in North America and who say they are looking forward to ministerial service in the church.

In a variety of settings, Adventists are being confronted with the fact that most Protestant churches ordain women. (For example, over a 1,000 women work as ordained ministers in the United Methodist

Church in America alone.) Yet, Adventist leaders exhibit an astonishing lack of awareness about these facts. A church official learned the hard way at a recent PREACH seminar (meetings held by the ministerial department of the General Conference for non-Adventist clergy in cities in North America). Welcoming the room full of non-Adventist ministers to the first session, the Adventist church official commented that he was pleased that so many of the ministers had brought their wives. He had to be informed that the women who had enrolled in the seminars were not wives of ministers but *the* ministers.

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The issue of ordination is important for several reasons. Most importantly, for women in pastoral ministry the impossibility of ever becoming ordained creates a lack of balance in their relationships with the “official” church. Ordination symbolizes a mutual commitment on the part of the pastor and the hiring organization. The pastor is asked to commit himself to the task given him by the church. The leadership in turn makes a commitment to trust the pastor with the authority to do the task. Women are now in the uneasy position of accepting the task while the leadership remains unwilling to publicly commit themselves to trust women with pastoral authority.

Second, the relationship between a woman pastor and the members of her congregation is, to a certain degree, at stake as

well. Her inability to baptize or marry is more than a minor inconvenience. Essentially the female pastor has permission to represent the church privately in preparing people for marriage and baptism, but she may not publicly represent the body of Christ at the deeply significant moments shared by the whole church. This leaves both the pastor and parishioner with a profound sense of loss. On a broader level, the entire community suffers by seeing only male representatives participating in the events so important to the life of the church.

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Finally, ordination is access to decision-making in the church. Young pastors with whom I work are acutely aware of the fact that they will never be a conference, union, or General Conference president unless they are ordained. Many develop jitters if they are not considered for ordination on schedule. Withholding ordination from women ministers guarantees that they will be excluded from “line” administration in the church.

The paucity of women in responsible posts extends from the pastorate to the highest reaches of the Adventist church structure. Very few women now serve in local and union conference executive committees. Even fewer are part of union or conference administration. Sixteen women serve in North America as local conference associate departmental directors—almost all supervisors of elementary education. Interestingly, as late as the 1940’s, women served

as departmental directors in many departments, including sabbath school, publishing, and treasury.

At the General Conference level, six women serve as departmental associate directors. Three work in the Health and Temperance Department, two in Sabbath School, and one in Education. Two women serve in the General Conference secretariat as assistant secretaries, a position created in 1981. In a recent conversation, an official in that department emphasized their administrative function, pointing out that they meet with the men of the department in staff meetings. He said that neither have personal secretaries because one directs the department’s typing pool as part of her job description and the other one was previously a secretary. The official continually referred to the two women as “the girls.”

The General Conference Executive Committee, which acts as the decision-making body between General Conference sessions, has approximately 365 members from around the world. Only eight are women, including six departmental associate directors and two lay women. This figure is not even respectable tokenism. No women sit on PREXAD, the 14-member President’s Executive Advisory Committee composed of vice-presidents and secretaries of the General Conference.

The Office of Human Relations of the General Conference is giving some attention to the role of women in the Adventist church. However, the two men assigned to that department also carry the duties of representing the black and hispanic populations of the church. Both men have stated publicly their wish to have a woman appointed to the department, but no such appointment is on the horizon. There are only two women on the Office of Human Relations Advisory Board, a 30-member group of pastors, administrators, and lay people. Warren Banfield, director of the Office of Human Relations, recognizes the inconsistency of such poor representation of women on a board which is commissioned in part to study women’s issues in the church.

He states he is working to remedy the situation.

The dearth of women in positions of responsibility is not limited to pastorates, conferences, unions, and the General Conference. While women compose the vast majority of elementary school teachers in our educational system, only 11 women are elementary school principals, according to Roger Dudley's survey. Of 78 secondary schools in North America, three have women principals. Administration of Adventist higher education in North America is virtually exclusively male. Only two women sit on the 47-member Board of Higher Education which coordinates policies of all the senior colleges in the U.S. and Canada. The only women in a major administrative post among Adventist colleges and universities is Merlene Ogden, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Andrews University.

It is interesting to note routes to leadership on Adventist campuses. Some deans of student affairs and presidents of SDA colleges were formerly deans of men. However, a dean of women has never been named a dean of student affairs, let alone president. The other route of advancement to the presidency of an Adventist college is through the post of academic dean. Of the few women who have chaired departments of Adventist colleges, only two have been appointed academic dean.

In spite of the Adventist church's refusal to trust the leadership of women on almost all levels of our institutions, I see some hopeful signs. Women are beginning to gather strength from one another. While Adventist women do not have the history of women's missionary organizations which other Protestant church women have enjoyed for almost a century, they are beginning to realize they can work together simply for the joy of sharing talents and support and to initiate change. Women on the faculty of Andrews University have

begun to meet together to discuss common concerns. A group of women in the Washington, D.C., area recently met with Charles Bradford, president of the North American Division, to talk about the role of women in the church. A new national organization, the Association of Adventist Women, has just been formed to assume responsibilities for the newsletter *The Adventist Woman*.

Adventist women are not giving up on their church. While deeply committed Adventist women feel constrained to use their professional expertise elsewhere, others, despite inequities, continue in church employ. Both groups express frustration at not being able to serve their church more fully. When will the leaders of the church acknowledge their responsibility to accept the gifts of women? If the leaders do not assume this essential task, the church stands to lose the valuable resources of 60 percent of its membership.

The following recommendations were passed by the Office of Human Relations Advisory Board at its annual meeting, March 16, 1982. They have been submitted to the North American Division Committee on Administration.

- VOTED: That the North American Division administrators give study to ordaining women.
- VOTED: To elect a woman to the Office of Human Relations staff.
- VOTED: To add more women to the Office of Human Relations Advisory Board.
- VOTED: To have workshops for men on how to work with professional women.
- VOTED: To have a North American Division commission on women who would work with the Office of Human Relations.