
Women Pastors Begin Baptizing

by Judith P. Nembhard

On Sabbath, Feb. 25, 1984, Marsha Frost co-pastor of the Fairfax and Arlington, Va., Seventh-day Adventist churches, baptized Teresa Maria Castano, a young mother whom Frost had led to Christ. Two weeks later, on March 10, during the worship hour, Jan Daffern, associate pastor of the Sligo Church, baptized Patty Parks, a 20-year-old community college student with whom she had studied. Yet another baptism took place on June 2 at the Beltsville Church when Frances Wiegand, associate pastor, baptized 18-year-old Mike Manimbo and four seventh-grade girls, all of whom had studied with her for several months. These baptisms in the Washington metropolitan area, the first by Adventist women in North America, have touched off much discussion and debate in Adventist circles. The events have generated little or no controversy among pastors or in most local congregations; however, some General Conference officials (several of whom attend the congregations involved) have protested strongly against the baptisms. In fact, the baptisms have posed more than the question of who can baptize. They also raise the issue of the

extent to which a local conference has the authority to set policy in its own territory.

In the North American Division, three conferences (Potomac, Southern California, and Upper Columbia) employ a total of nine women as pastors. Daffern, Frost, and Wiegand now hold commissioned minister licenses, a special license granted only to women, and are ordained local elders. The women have ministerial training. Frost, a graduate of Southern College and valedictorian of her 1982 class at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, holds the master of divinity degree. Wiegand graduated from Southern College with a bachelor of arts degree in religion and earned a master of arts in religion from the seminary in 1979. Daffern will receive the master of divinity degree from the Seminary this year. The three women have served from three to five years in the Potomac Conference.

On Feb. 11, 1984, the Potomac Conference Executive Committee authorized eight ordained local elders to perform baptisms. In taking this action, the executive committee noted that

The Potomac Conference has given pastoral responsibilities to a number of individuals who are not credentialed or licensed individuals. Therefore, the Potomac Conference Committee approves the concept (to grant permission to baptize) and authorizes administration to extend the permission to baptize to credentialed and licensed commissioned ministers who are assigned a pastoral responsibility. They must be a local elder (sic) in the church/churches to which they

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are assigned and the authority to baptize is only valid for the duration of their pastoral assignment.

In addition to the three women, the action also involved five men who are ordained local elders. On the strength of the Feb. 11 authorization, the female pastors proceeded with plans to baptize.

Marsha Frost met Teresa Castano through Teresa's sister, who had been taking Bible studies from Frost. Teresa, eight months pregnant when she moved to the Arlington area from Minnesota, received much support from Frost. When Teresa went into labor prematurely, Frost took her to the hospital and, as Teresa's pastor, was allowed to be with her during the Caesarean-section delivery of her baby boy. Frost says that she and Teresa developed a bond which led to Teresa's decision to be baptized. She would have felt personally "let down" if she had not been allowed to baptize Teresa, Frost now says, but adds that if the conference had not given its permission, she still would have entered the baptismal water with Teresa. However, Frost's husband, Jim, with whom she co-pastors, would have done the baptizing.

For three months Jan Daffern held weekly

studies with Patty Parks, a Montgomery College student who had been introduced to Adventism by a student from Columbia Union College. Then Patty, a Roman Catholic, decided to be baptized. The same executive committee action which had allowed Frost to perform the earlier baptism served as the basis of Daffern's March 10 baptizing. In preparing to perform the rite, Daffern says she found both Sligo senior Pastor James Londis and Potomac Conference President Ron Wisbey "very supportive."

Neither Daffern nor Frost told their candidates that they might not be able to baptize them, and there was no build-up of tension before the event, the women point out. In the Arlington Church, according to Frost, the focus was on Teresa. The service took place at the vesper hour, and three church members—the church clerk, the head elder, and the head deacon—welcomed Teresa Castano into church fellowship afterwards. The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, says Frost. There was no negative feedback from the 60 people who attended the service. The head elder remarked: "You know, there was some-

Women Ministers in Adventist History: An Overview

by Josephine Benton

Spot-checking the *Adventist Yearbook* for every fifth year from 1910 through 1975 reveals 32 different women who were licensed ministers, some of them serving over a period of decades. Other women served as evangelists, pastors, missionaries, and administrators.

The early categories of ministers were credentialed (ordained) ministers, licensed ministers (licentiates), and people who held the missionary license. At the General Conference Session of 1881, the delegates voted that the following resolution be passed on to the General Conference committee for study: "Resolved that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of Christian ministry" (*Review Herald*, Dec. 20,

1881, p. 392). The committee did not adopt the resolution but in 1904, five women in as many different conferences were listed as licensed ministers. If every year in the *Yearbook* were checked, one can only guess what the total might be. The following are only a few of the women who have held ministerial positions during the early years of the Seventh-day Adventist Church:

- **Dr. Caro:** Dr. Caro was a New Zealand dentist with an excellent practice. Ellen White wrote of her: "She is a queenly woman, tall, and every way proportioned. Sister Caro not only does her business, but she has a ministerial license and bears many burdens in their church at Napier" (Manuscript 22, 1893, p. 2).
- **Minnie Sype:** Mrs. Sype was an evangelist whose husband was listed as a credentialed mis-

thing different about this service. It's the first time I have seen a woman baptize. I like it." The reaction has been similar in the Sligo Church: Daffern says they have received between 15 and 16 letters of support and only one negative comment thus far. Sligo Pastor Jim Londis calls the baptism "a positive thing, a powerful symbol" for women in the congregation, some of whom came to him in tears after the service.

For Frost, the authority to baptize is not a right which she has finally achieved but "an opportunity, a fulfillment of my ministry." She finds it personally beneficial "to have the official church recognize the call God has given me." To Daffern, the baptism opens the door for the recognition of women's ministry. "It gives the congregation a heightened awareness that I actually am a minister."

Frances Wiegand's experience has been somewhat different from those of the other two women. Since January 1984, she had been studying with Mike Manimbo, a high school student. Wiegand says that she had been scheduled to baptize Mike on May 12, but there had been too much resistance to the event in the Beltsville Church; the

baptism was postponed. Dan Goddard, Beltsville's senior pastor, points out that of the active church membership, about 25 percent are General Conference employees, and, says Goddard, this high concentration of General Conference personnel seems to make accepting baptism by a female pastor difficult. Between the last Sabbath in April and the third Sabbath in May, Goddard preached a series on the role of women in the church. He says that at that time he sensed among even non-General Conference employees an "antagonism to the idea of women in the ministry."

Strong objections to the executive committee action of Feb. 11 surfaced among General Conference officials, who felt that policy had been violated, that there had been a too liberal interpretation of the *Church Manual*. The *Manual* (1976 revised, p. 86) states: "In the absence of an ordained pastor, the elder shall request the president of the conference or local field to arrange for the administration of the rite of baptism to those desiring to unite with the church." The Feb.

sionary as was the Bible worker who assisted her. She held tent meetings, debated non-Adventist ministers when necessary (she didn't enjoy it), conducted 'quarterly meetings' (communion services), and showed a cheerful, resourceful, virtually indomitable spirit. She appears in the *Yearbook* first as a licensed minister in Oklahoma in 1904, and last as a minister in the Southern Union in 1945.

- **Mrs. J.S. Wightman:** A licensed minister in the Central Union Conference during the early 1900s, she did a great deal of preaching and public speaking. During 1909, when Sunday law legislation was an issue, Mrs. Wightman addressed the Missouri Legislature on the subject.
- **Anna Lo:** She carried her ministerial license during the mid-1940s and was connected with the Kwangsi Mission in China.
- **Jessie Weiss Curtis:** Mrs. Curtis, who died in 1972 at 89, was a well-known minister in the Pennsylvania Conference during the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1960s. As a result of tent meetings which

she conducted throughout northeastern Pennsylvania, she organized several new churches. Many young interns got their introduction to the ministry under Jessie Curtis' supervision.

- **Mrs. E.B. Lane:** Married to a minister, E.B. Lane, she was a highly acclaimed preacher as well as a licensed minister.
- **Mary E. Walsh:** Extremely active in the church during the 1940s, 1950s, and the 1960s, Ms. Walsh conducted evangelistic meetings and Bible studies in churches and homes in the United States and Europe, as well as in Mexico. She now lives in Glendale, Calif.

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11 authorization notes that "in spite of the wording in the *Church Manual*, 'in the absence of an ordained minister,' leaders of the General Conference assure us it is understood that local elders can be authorized to conduct baptisms." According to executive committee member Nancy Marter, a layperson from Silver Spring, Md., "We were told that this had been discussed with people high in the General Conference, and the conference leadership thought that they were in order in interpreting in this way what was said." Londis, also an executive committee member, was "skeptical" and "apprehensive" of the General Conference's willingness to interpret the *Manual* liberally, but he had "no theological reservations" about the correctness of the move to allow women to baptize: "If the church will not see fit to change the manual, then the church is in defiance of the will of God," says Londis.

All of the principals involved in the current situation agree that there is no theological reason to exclude women from the ordained ministry.

The executive committee in the past had requested two or three times that the General Conference make some movement on the issue of women being granted the ministerial license, but the General Conference refused each time even to discuss the issue. The Potomac Conference, therefore, "had to do something," Londis says. Both the conference president, Ron Wisbey, and the Columbia Union president, W.O. Coe, believed that they had the support of the General Conference. In Nancy Marter's view, there was "a difference of opinion as to the clarity of the authorization, but I don't perceive one side to be at fault. There has been a misunderstanding, but I don't want to place blame."

On May 16, 1984, a second meeting of the Potomac Conference Executive Committee

was held to discuss the issue. Present at that meeting were C. E. Bradford, vice president for North America, and J.W. Bothe, associate secretary of the General Conference for North America. Concerning his presence at the meeting, Bradford says that he had been invited by the president of the conference, who, in Bradford's words, "felt himself between a rock and a hard place." Bradford, in turn, invited Bothe to attend "as an expert witness" and because "he is a good policy man."

This meeting, Frances Wiegand explains, was a time to resolve conflicts. At issue was policy. The General Conference representatives, Bradford and Bothe, maintaining their support for church policy, asked the executive committee to withdraw its authorization of women baptizing. Instead, the committee voted to support the women in their ministry. Executive committee member Russell Isaac, an insurance representative, says that the committee thought the best way to solve the problem was to license the women, since they had already met all the criteria for licensing as stipulated in the *Manual*. The executive committee, therefore, voted 18 to one, to issue ministerial licenses to Jan Daffern, Marsha Frost, and Frances Wiegand. The committee action states:

Because of our concern for the value of the souls now being prepared for church membership, we will continue to support the baptisms planned on the basis of our earlier action (February 11, 1984) to proceed.

This is to give the North American Division appropriate time to study Potomac's concern for women in ministry. We will not implement the following action until after Annual Council 1984. . . .

We recommend that the Potomac Conference Executive Committee issue them (Daffern, Frost, and Wiegand) the ministerial license.

The General Conference representatives argued in the meeting that the *Manual* had been violated since the *Manual* stipulated "in the absence of an ordained minister" and in both the Feb. 25 and March 10 baptisms there had been no "absence of an ordained minister." Bradford declares that the authorization for a local elder to baptize is given only in extreme cases, in what he terms "ad

hoc situations," to be determined case by case. In the May 16 executive committee meeting, Ronald Halvorsen, formerly ministerial director of Mid-America Union and now pastor of the Takoma Park Church, responded to the General Conference brethren. It seemed strange, he said, that at a time when the General Conference was strongly urging 1,000 baptisms a day during the 1,000 Days of Reaping, General Conference officers were urging a local conference to stop pastors from baptizing. The concern, Halvorsen contended, should be for baptisms, not for who does the baptizing.

The committee's action granting ministerial licenses to the three women, which passed with only one dissenting vote, will not be effective until after October 1984. The delay, says Isaac, is an attempt to cooperate with the General Conference. He suggests that the effective date has been delayed in the hope that the church will clarify its position on "the potential for women in ministry."

Daffern finds both the Columbia Union and the Potomac Conference leadership supportive of women in ministry. Farther afield, in California, Louis Venden, pastor of the Loma Linda University Church, which has Margaret Hempe on its pastoral staff, "is working on the matter," Venden says. He reports that in a board action which passed with only one dissenting vote, the University Church board voted to send a letter of support to Ron Wisbey. That letter, dated April 3, 1984, reads in part: "I want to commend your courage and also the principles which you have put into practice." In Venden's personal view, "Young women who have prepared for ministry the same as men should not be penalized because they are women."

For Francis Wiegand, the issue of her baptizing was still far from settled by the May 16 executive committee action affirming women in ministry. Russell Isaac, who is

also chairperson of the Beltsville Church board, says that he was asked to explain the actions of the conference executive committee to his board. This he attempted to do at a Beltsville Church board meeting on May 21, 1984. However, J.W. Bothe of the General Conference insisted that the Beltsville Church board, of which he was a member, discuss Francis Wiegand's impending baptism. Heated discussion proceeded for several hours with Bothe insisting that the Potomac Conference Executive Committee was not conforming to General Conference policy. But no action was taken opposing the baptism. However, after the issue had been raised by Bothe at the church board meeting, it became sufficiently controversial that Beltsville's pastor, Dan Goddard, appealed to conference president Ron Wisbey for assistance in resolving the problem.

In response, Wisbey held an executive committee meeting of the Potomac Conference via telephone on Wednesday, May 20, 1984, from 10:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. with 21 of the 23 committee members on the line. At that time Wisbey reported that certain General Conference officers were recommending that the Potomac Executive Committee reverse its earlier decision. However, the committee voted unanimously to support Frances Wiegand in her ministry and reaffirmed its previous action that women should continue to baptize.

Thus on June 2, 1984, a baptismal service took place at the Beltsville Church with Wiegand and Goddard officiating. Ron Wisbey was present to preach the sermon and to read a statement on behalf of the executive committee, outlining the sequence of events leading to that particular service. Wisbey said that the executive committee had unanimously "voted to stay by its earlier motion." He cited the action taken by the committee on May 20 regarding the Beltsville Church specifically. It had voted to "express deep concern that unity

and spiritual harmony be maintained in the Beltsville Church." The conference president closed his remarks with a "prayer that this will be a high day in this church."

The covenant of baptism, led by Dan Goddard, followed, and the baptism proceeded with Goddard baptizing the first candidate. Then Wiegand stepped into the baptismal pool, and after a few remarks about the candidate, baptized Mike Manimbo into membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Emotions ran high, with tears coming to the eyes of church members, male and female alike. Following the service Wiegand received greetings and hugs from church members. Goddard reports that following the service, responses from church members have been overwhelmingly positive.

In making its case, the Potomac Conference Executive Committee cited the precedent in earlier periods of Adventist history when ministerial licenses were granted to women who pastored churches or were church leaders. Ms. Welch of Massachusetts and Mary Walsh are two that the committee mentions in its May 16 statement. Why then the hesitancy on the part of church leadership today? Lowell Bock, general vice president for the General Conference, at a May panel discussion on "Ordination of Women Pastors" (sponsored by the Washington Metropolitan Chapter of the Association of Adventist Women), gave his thoughts but "not the official church policy." Bock observed that more than half the church is female and that all of the church must be used. However, there are four million members worldwide. We cannot, he said, ignore tradition. The world church looks to North America for leadership. Commenting on this point, on another occasion, Bradford observed that the church has members in East Africa and in Arab countries that have views on the role of women in the church that are different from North America's. There are social differences in these areas alone, he says, that tell us

to continue to study, and adds, "there is a hornet's nest out there."

Robert Coy, member of the Potomac Conference Executive Committee, acknowledges that some Adventist brethren probably do have a philosophy of the role of women in Adventist churches which precludes female pastors from baptizing. He appreciates that the General Conference has reached out to various cultures and has tried to understand the needs of the worldwide church, but "this can adversely affect those of us in the United States with cultural views different from Europe's. Non-American Adventist leaders are slower to recognize the kinds of equality that North Americans want." Coy sees Adventist men from beyond the shores of North America who have a more traditional view of women in ministry as "men of good will, not malicious," but as "slowing progress."

One of the issues that has emerged from the debate is the extent to which local conferences have control over their own affairs. Some participants in the discussions over church policy concerning female pastors baptizing, point out that in the present structure on certain issues, local areas in the Adventist church do have autonomy. However, Bradford insists that while conferences have the autonomy and the power to act and to create new programs, a conference is a member of a sisterhood that makes up a union. "If women can baptize in Potomac but not in Chesapeake, a dichotomy will exist. All must act in unison," he cautions.

Yet giving the local field the power to decide, members of the Potomac Conference Executive Committee argue, allows the members to live out their convictions in relation to their culture. Londis believes that local conferences in North America should decide in those cases where the local situations can bear such decisions. Isaac

thinks that the General Conference is avoiding the issue. It is the local conference that hires and licenses ministers, he points out, not the General Conference. The local conference, he believes, should be able to deal with local problems such as the one now facing Potomac.

All of the principals involved in the current situation agree that there is no theological reason to exclude women from the ordained ministry. Several executive committee members are convinced that the conference must move ahead and affirm the rights of women in ministry. "We believe we have the right to go ahead," says Coy.

"There is nothing in the *Manual*, nothing in the theology of the church to prevent ordination," he says. Goddard, whose congregation has debated the most over the issue, hopes that a resolution can come "with a minimal amount of disturbance in the church. We must maintain peace in the church," he says. The May 16 executive committee statement in support of the female pastors concludes by saying, "We believe that we are acting in the best interest of the church and that we would be out of harmony with the will of God if we did not give our women in ministry this affirmation."

Potomac Conference Executive Committee Action

Because of our concern for the value of the souls now being prepared for church membership, we will continue to support the baptisms planned on the basis of our earlier action (Feb. 11, 1984) to proceed.

This is to give the North American Division appropriate time to study Potomac's concern for women in ministry. We will not implement the following action until after Annual Council 1984.

For many years the Potomac Conference Executive Committee has applauded the vision and leadership of the General Conference as it has encouraged women to qualify themselves for ministry to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Both the General Conference subsidies for women to attend the Seminary and the use of women as associates in pastoral care have received enthusiastic support in Potomac. We have hired a number of women for ministry and were among the first to have a woman on a local church pastoral staff.

A number of years have passed since our initial commitment to women in ministry began. Since that time, the women in our conference have met the requirements for seminary education and have served the required years of an internship. When this program began we all knew that the time would come when the women we have sponsored would be fully eligible for a ministerial license under the provisions of the *Church Manual* and the *Manual for Ministers*.

We find it significant that the role of women in ministry has been discussed by church leadership since the 1880's in the pages of the *Review and Herald*. In that era, a number of editorials examining the meaning of those Scripture passages that discuss the role of women in the church concluded there was no biblical reason women should not be in the ministry. Consequently, a formal recommendation to the General Conference supporting the ordination of women to the ministry was published in the pages of the *Review* on Dec. 20, 1881. While the resolution was never adopted, the fact it could even be recommended while Ellen White was alive and elicit no negative response from her, strongly suggests she was not opposed to it.

Up until recent years, this openness to the idea of women in ministry found expression in several cases where women were granted ministerial licenses as they pastored churches or occupied other roles of leadership. Ms. Welch of Massachusetts and Mary Walsh are two examples among several that might be cited.

Then, in the 1970s, a commission under the auspices of the Biblical Research Committee studied the theology of ordaining women to the

ministry and concluded (as the *Review* writers did in 1881) that there was nothing theologically improper about ordaining women to the ministry of the church. On the basis of that study, the church has encouraged women to serve the church as ministers wherever it was feasible, and the Potomac Conference hired women because of that encouragement. (The church has delayed ordaining women for reasons of church unity, even though it has supported the utilization of women in pastoral roles.)

Since they have exercised the prerogatives of ministry in Potomac, our members in their churches and we on the executive committee have come to recognize their calling to the ministry. They have demonstrated that the Holy Spirit is behind their desire to work as pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist fellowship. It was because we felt so deeply the importance of affirming them in their ministry that we authorized them, if locally ordained elders, to baptize the people they lead to the church. We did not intend nor wish to be in defiance of the *Church Manual*; however, we also do not wish to rescind our affirmation of their ministry in our midst.

Therefore, to affirm the ministry of these women pastors, we affirm the following:

1. Frances Wiegand, Marsha Frost and Jan Daffern have met the requirements for seminary education and internship according to the policy;
2. The language concerning the issuing of ministerial licenses in the *Manual for Ministers* and the *Church Manual* does not exclude women;
3. All other pastors in the Potomac Conference meeting these requirements hold the ministerial license;
4. There are historical precedents for women holding such licenses;
5. They are locally ordained elders;
6. The license grants pastors the privileges of ministry only in the congregations to which they are assigned;
7. The ministerial license does not lead to ordination in every case.

We recommend that the Potomac Conference Executive Committee issue them the ministerial license.

We would be happy to participate in further discussions about our affirmation of women in ministry with the church leadership. We believe that we are acting in the best interests of the church and that we would be out of harmony with the will of God if we did not give our women in ministry this affirmation.

—May 16, 1984