

## On Mislaying the Past

by Otilie Stafford

---

“American women are not the only people in the world who manage to lose track of themselves, but we do seem to mislay the past in a singularly absentminded fashion.” Elizabeth Janeway was talking about the history of women in general, but her statement is certainly also true of the history of women in the Adventist Church. We perceive the past in strange ways, and then we shape the future by those distortions we have placed upon past events. In looking at what has happened to women in the church, we assume that things are better today than they were yesterday, that our age is enlightened and the past was dark. Yet in many ways the church’s treatment of its women today is less generous, and more unjust than was its treatment of our mothers or our grandmothers.

Something happened to women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, beginning in 1915 and sharply accelerating in the mid-1940s, that led to the almost total exclusion of women from leadership positions in the church. The reasons are not yet completely clear. Were men in 1915 so resentful of any woman’s leadership that when Ellen White died they conspired to prevent any other women from having power? Bertha Dasher’s research (see this issue of *Spectrum*, pp. 39 to 41) reveals clearly that it was after the mid-1940s—the period of my youth—when women were finally excluded from the

leadership positions in the church they had previously held. More study needs to be given to what it was that led to the all-male church leadership we have had for the past 36 or more years.

Nothing in my childhood or youth would have led me to believe that women were made to be silent, invisible, and submissive. When I was young I heard several women preachers on Sabbath mornings. Mary Walsh and Louise Kleuser preached frequently. They seemed no more dull and no more frivolous than the men who were more regularly the Sabbath morning speakers. In the New York Conference, my mother for several years was in charge of the Sabbath school department. For an even longer period, Mabel Vreeland was a district leader. Although Miss Vreeland loved young people, we ran when we saw her approaching, not because we disliked her, but because her handshake was so dynamic we feared for our elbows and shoulders.

When I started teaching, Nida Davis was the educational superintendent of the conference. She was an excellent educator and a very professional person, under whose leadership the schools of the conference flourished. At the same time Laura Clement edited the *Youth’s Instructor*, Flora Plummer was the Sabbath school leader for the General Conference, and churches were full of women in positions of leadership: teaching, speaking, and contributing their talents to the church. I know now that even in the days of my childhood there were fewer women leading out than there were during my mother’s childhood.

---

Otilie Stafford chairs the department of English at Atlantic Union College. She holds a doctorate in English from Boston University and is a consulting editor of *Spectrum*.

In my youthful naiveté I believed that there was room in the Adventist church for the talents of women to be used. I grew up expecting that if I had talents of any kind, they might contribute to the work of the church, and be used in the service of the Lord, just as fully as the talents of my male classmates might be. My daughters-in-law do not have that perception, nor do the women whom I teach. Nor do I anymore.

This is not to indicate that I have any feeling but joy in reflecting upon my own career in Adventist education. There have been times when anger would have been easy, however. The years of being on a 40-week salary during the year, because women were expected to be supported by husbands or fathers during the summer, were difficult. There was a long time that my salary was about two-thirds of the salaries of even the young, beginning, male teachers in the department I chaired. I might have become bitter, had I not enjoyed my work so much

---

**When I was young, I heard several women preach on Sabbath mornings. They seemed no more dull and no more frivolous than the men.**

---

that I would have paid to be allowed to teach. But, I was not happy when, long after the event, I heard that the college board had on one occasion investigated me to be sure that I was not neglecting my children. I never heard of such an investigation of any of my male colleagues who were fathers. It has never been easy for any women in denominational employ to feel their heads bumping against a ceiling and to know that at a certain level of accomplishment their male colleagues, however able or lacking in ability, would rise around them while they would remain where they were.

**F**or Adventist women who have an interest in the welfare of the church, it must be a matter of concern that more than half the membership, whatever their energies, dedication, or talents, are passive church members. Not only are they passive, but should they have the temerity to act in any way like leaders, they are condemned as unfeminine. Should they raise their voices in protest over what the church has done to them, they are contemptuously labeled "women's libbers." Sadly, many of those expressing such contempt are other women.

To believe that God-given abilities are to be used to the glory of the Giver, whether the gifts are to men or to women, seems simple Christian doctrine. To believe that the work of the Lord, whether it consists of teaching a Sabbath school class or practicing medicine or preaching a sermon, can be done by women as well as by men should be orthodoxy for a church with a woman as one of its strongest early leaders. To believe that the promise of freedom in Christ is a human promise, not a male promise, is to release energy and to create joy.

But for the women of the Adventist Church, such energy and joy are usually not present in the life of the church and the abilities lost by the church as a result are increasing. A young friend of mine, an excellent teacher and a fine administrator, looking for a challenge, asked what opportunities for educational administration there might be for her in the future. She was told that because she was a mother, there were none. In discouragement, she left her teaching position and entered law school. Her children are no better off, and the denominational schools have lost a most competent person.

Young women studying at denominational colleges and universities observe and learn from such events. The brightest of the young women these days are looking toward the secular world for opportunities in areas like law, business, and medicine. Although the need for teachers is growing acute, few

young women are interested in the hassles of teaching. Even fewer are interested in the additional limitations of denominational teaching. What this means for the future of church education is sobering.

If the exclusion of women is justified by the emphasis on the home, motherhood, and feminine submissiveness, we are not thinking clearly. To begin with, we must take into consideration the large percentage of women who are not married, are married and childless, or are married and have older children or children in school. The number of women left is such a small percentage that to anchor a policy on them is ridiculous. The fact is, many mothers manage to care for their children, run their households, cater to their husbands, and succeed in careers. Certainly Ellen White provides Adventists with a powerful example of a woman who not only did all those things herself, but urged other women to do them too. Why the husbands, families, employers, and friends of such women do not rise up and call them amazing is the question. Instead, the society of the church loads them with guilt by making them feel they are acting inappropriately.

Perhaps what is inappropriate is the idea that a mother and a child should be tied by an unbreakable cord to each other for the first six, or 12, or 21 years of a child's life. Never in the history of the world has this idea been so hysterically preached. In the more natural world of the pastoral society, or the small-town society, children were the concern of not just mothers, but of fathers, cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors. We must wonder what neuroses our children are developing by being the center of attention of an exceedingly small world.

A student in one of my classes once said, in discussing the question of where a woman's place was, that she was glad her mother did not work because she liked having her home when she got there, waiting with hot chocolate or lemonade, ready to talk or iron a blouse. It seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, one of the most

selfish statements I have heard. Had she been four, it would have been understandable. But she was 19 and should have seen her mother as something more than a convenience for herself. My mother, who worked during most of my years at home, was not always there when I came home from grade school or academy. But when she was there she was a more interesting person, the guests in our home were livelier, and my concept of what a woman could be was certainly more expansive because she was a competent and successful professional person. I was not the poorer for it, but the richer.

---

**After taking into consideration the large percentage of women who are not married, are married and childless, or are married and have older children, it seems ridiculous to anchor a church policy on the small percentage that is left.**

---

After the nomination of Geraldine Ferraro, Sylvia Watson said, "It seems theological, this event; it is the way the world was meant to look, and it has taken so long." How ironic that it is the secular world of politics that has a vision of the redeemed world in which freedom in Christ creates equality among all persons. How sad for women who love their church that the church is less just and less visionary than the world where power is a recognized value and pragmatism a respected philosophy.

What creates the greatest sadness is a conviction that nothing will be done. That the all-male church leadership sees nothing wrong in its exclusion of women. That rather than trying to do what can be done, the attitude is to dismiss the problem as trivial, or to condemn any discussion of it as disruptive.

**W**hat can be done? Immediately it should be possible to look at those areas where ordination is not an issue and to establish an equitable basis for employment in those positions. All of the leadership positions in conferences, unions, and general conference structures that once were open to women should once again be available and immediately provide opportunities for qualified women. Certainly women are as qualified as men to head conference or union Sabbath school and education departments, treasurers' offices or publications. Often they are more qualified. Administrative positions in medical and academic structures as well should be available to women. In the elementary school, the academy, and the college and university, women are as experienced, as trained, and as competent as their male colleagues, and should not be limited to non-administrative positions.

Finally, the question of just treatment of those women who feel called to pastoral work should be confronted, not circumvented. If the church cannot act on the basis of what is right, in what do we believe? What power there would be in a church that opened up channels for the energies of all—

men, women, and youth—to be used to their fullest.

Nothing is so depressing as looking at a picture in the *Adventist Review* or in a union paper of the officials in connection with some church endeavor, and seeing a row of men, not a woman there. At the Annual Council, women present are mostly wives,

---

**How sad for women who love their church that the church is less just and less visionary than the world where power is a recognized value and pragmatism a respected philosophy.**

---

and are not able to speak to issues or to vote. Perhaps the next General Conference session in New Orleans will make evident what Neal Wilson promised in his talk at the last General Conference: a marked increase in the involvement of women, not just in performing music or conducting shepherdess meetings, but in the decision-making processes of the church.