
Women of Mission

by Nancy Vyhmeister

I grew up thinking women could do just about anything they set their minds to. One of my early childhood recollections is that of my mother preaching. When my parents became missionaries in Uruguay, Mother added fundraising to her dietitian's skills, and outfitted her own food laboratory. My first elementary school principal was a woman.

While my husband and I served 15 years in the South American Division, I watched women organize and direct workshops, cooking schools, and Vacation Bible Schools. One of my women friends was the medical director of a Seventh-day Adventist hospital in Paraguay. Another was associate director of the South American Division health department. Raquel Bellido was a masterful teacher of philosophy at River Plate College in Argentina. At the same college, I was well-accepted by both students and colleagues as a teacher of biblical languages. In Brazil, Eurides Brito, an active Seventh-day Adventist laywoman, led the primary schools of the whole country through a process of radical educational reform. Child psychiatrist Verna Alva, daughter of one of the early Seventh-day Adventist workers in Peru, is currently in charge of a multi-million dollar rural health-care program.

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Thus, my own experiences led me to wonder what women might be doing in other parts of the world. To learn how women are serving the world church, I supervised two informal surveys: the first, an overview of division papers published during the last five years; the second, the mailing of questionnaires to union and division headquarters. Besides asking for information regarding women serving the church in different capacities at different levels, I asked leaders to nominate outstanding women in their geographical areas.

From those surveys, I learned that women have been making a strong showing in fields outside of the traditional fields for women: health and education. Around the world, women manage Adventist Book Centers, retirement homes, and orphanages; direct communication, public relations, publishing, Sabbath school, and welfare departments; edit magazines and books; and pastor churches. In the divisions outside North America which returned my questionnaire, there were 23 women pastor-evangelists reported. One woman was a conference secretary, 16 were treasurers, 29 managed clinics and dispensaries, and over 175 administered schools.

Of the 94 questionnaires I sent out, in April, 1983, only 62 (66%) were returned. When my questionnaires came back with a total of 23 women listed as pastor-evangelists, I mailed another questionnaire to those 23 women—too late, however, to get an answer back from more than six. While I can not claim that their responses

represent all women working as pastor-evangelists, these six women are fascinating. What follows, then, is a division-by-division summary of posts held by women, plus the profiles of six women pastors in five widely separated parts of the world.

World Divisions

Africa-Indian Ocean Division. No women in this division held positions other than clerical on the division level. Two, however, were treasurers, one for a union and one for a mission. At the time of the questionnaire, the director of the health-temperance department of the West Africa Union was Ms. M. Adwoba-Erzuah. The Malagasy Republic (formerly Madagascar) reported one woman pastor-evangelist, one woman who was an editor, and women who managed an Adventist Book Center, a clinic, an orphanage, and four schools. Three more women administered schools in Ghana.

The outstanding women nominated in this division were Ms. K. Haapakoski, an accountant in Ghana, and Dr. Lucette Rakotoson, professor of medicine and a member of the Andapa Hospital board of trustees, in Madagascar.

Australasian Division. In the past decade, women headed two union education departments and one communication department, all in Australia. R.V. Moe, president of the Western Pacific Union Mission, reported that Drs. Douglas and Junelyn Picacha, husband and wife, were serving jointly as the medical directors of Atoifi Hospital in the Solomon Islands. Junelyn Picacha is, according to Moe, the "first and only Solomon Islands woman to graduate with an M.D. in the Solomon Islands." Moe added, "We operate 14 medical clinics within our field, eight of them have women in charge—nurses trained at our Atoifi Hospital." Ten women are school administrators in this same mission, which has 80 primary schools.

The front page of the Oct. 20, 1980, issue of the *Australasian Record* pictures a large group of women delegates to the Trans-

Tasman Union Conference session. The accompanying article describes these women, their varied activities, and the letter one received: "Dear Brother: We send you a cordial invitation to attend our conference tea and would be happy to have you bring your wife with you." Two of these women were appointed to the Union Executive committee for the next five years.

Several women in this division are active in the radio ministry. One Seventh-day Adventist woman, Janelle Bennett, teaches Bible on the "School of the Air" for children in the Outback (*Australasian Record*, Jan. 29, 1983, p. 8). Daisy Ardley, a housewife, has a regular radio program (Oct. 8, 1983, p. 1). Irene Ng is also heard regularly by thousands of Chinese on the mainland in a Chinese-language radio program aired from Macao and Hong Kong (Aug. 31, 1981, p. 5).

Another woman, Kathy Hewlett, is the assistant administrator of Sydney Adventist Sanitarium (Sept. 3, 1983, p. 4).

Eastern African Division. In this division, a woman directs publishing (she is "a top colporteur and soul winner") for the East African Union; another woman manages transportation services in Zambia; and several other women administrate dispensaries and schools.

The outstanding women nominated in this division were Mary Angawa, magistrate; and Phoebe Asiyo, a member of the national assembly, both of Kenya.

Euro-Africa Division. No churches in the Eastern bloc responded, but the division reported seven women who were union or conference treasurers. Also, of 22 women workers, five were pastor-evangelists. Two other women were in charge of Bible correspondence schools.

The outstanding woman this division nominated was Ms. M.A. Pires, a successful evangelist in Portugal.

Far Eastern Division. The Far Eastern Division reported the largest number of women workers at both the union and division levels: one was a division comptroller, and

six were associates in departments in the past decade. In general, women in this division have been most active in the education and Sabbath school departments, and in the health/temperance work.

Vivian Nyberg, of Sweden, became a pastor "because I felt I could be happy with nothing else; I've been pulled to this from within."

The *Far Eastern Division Outlook* (April, 1979, p. 11) carried a picture of Marion Simmons who, after retiring as the associate educational director of that division, returned to serve as an associate in pastoral care at the Bangkok Seventh-day Adventist Hospital. The July, 1983, issue carried an article about "pastora" Nellie Salvan, whose pastoral district in the Philippines totaled 800 members in 14 congregations.

Another article in the same issue told about sister Shige Nakama, a literature evangelist in Okinawa, who sold books until 7:00 p.m., then gave Bible studies to a group of women until 11:00 p.m. every night. (Four of these women later became Christians.)

Inter-American Division. Treasurers—two assistants at the division level, one at the union level, and four at the conference level—headed this division's list of woman workers. At the time of my questionnaire, the ministerial/stewardship department was the only department that did *not* have a woman directing it in one conference or another. Women directed or co-directed conference/mission Sabbath school departments, six of them specifically for child evangelism. Book centers were another place where women shone; the division had eight women who were Adventist Book Center managers. Only five women were listed as school administrators, perhaps because only secondary school principals were listed. Finally, there were eight Bible correspon-

dence school supervisors in this division.

The *Inter-American Division *Flashes** (published in Spanish, French, and English, and edited by a woman, Wanda Sample) frequently reports the activities of the division's women, both those paid by the church and those who work for the church out of pure love.

North American Division. Only six of my questionnaires were returned so it would not be fair for me to generalize on the basis of so little information. The composite report, however, shows one woman serving as a union treasurer, in the Southwest Region Conference, and seven departmental directors or associate directors. Educational administrators included two women academy principals and one college academic dean.

This division did nominate several outstanding women: LeEllen Bradshaw, founder of the Adventist Adoption and Family Service; Mary Paulsen, area president of the Association of Self-supporting Institutions; Dr. Helen Evans Thompson, vice-president for administration of Loma Linda University; Juanita Kretschmar, health/temperance director for the Greater New York Conference (and director of the van program for New York City); and Sheree Nudd, director of development and public relations for Huguley Memorial Hospital. (Nudd recently received the Trailblazer and Philanthropy Award from the General Conference for raising \$3 million for the hospital.)

Northern European Division. This division reported three women directing its union departments. Of seven pastor-evangelists, five were working in Finland. In this division, six schools have women administrators, and a woman directs the theological training program for Finland.

The *Northern Light* had an article in its October, 1981, issue about the appointment of Erja Karkkainen as youth and Sabbath school director for the Finland Union. In the July, 1981, issue, a picture of the graduating class from Newbold College in England, the division's senior college, shows six women in the 24 theology graduates. In July,

1982, another picture shows four women in a class of 23.

This division nominated Dr. Margit Syring, director of the seminary at Toivonlinna Junior College, as one of its outstanding women. Dr. Syring was the first woman to receive a doctorate in theology from the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

South American Division. This division reported two women directing union departments: the department of education in Northeast Brazil and the department of welfare in Chile. There were women who directed these departments at the conference level as well. Seven women were editors, at the Brazil and the Buenos Aires publishing houses, and 118 were school administrators, including principals of elementary schools.

As its outstanding women, the division nominated Dr. Irma Vyhmeister, from Chile, who is now the associate director of the health/temperance department of the General Conference; and Aurea Soares, who was the dean of women at the Educandario Nordestino Adventista (Northeast Brazil College), then director of education in Rio de Janeiro, then academic dean at the college, and finally director of the conference educational department in the Northeast.

Southern Asia Division. This division has had women as associate directors of the education and Sabbath school departments; two women who directed hospitals in Nepal and India; three women who managed Adventist Book Centers in Pakistan; six pastor-evangelists (three of them in Burma); and one woman who served as a conference secretary in Burma.

Among the many news items about women and tributes to women in the *Southern Asia Tidings*, I found a tribute to Gloria Thomas, who had passed away in that year (May 1980, p. 16). Thomas worked for the church beginning as a secretary in 1947, and ending as the associate director of the Sabbath school department, a post she assumed in 1970.

In the February, 1980, issue (p. 3), there is a picture of two smiling women dressed in saris, Ammini Davis and Chinnamon Thomas, carrying shiny new briefcases awarded to them for "working harder than many men" as literature evangelists.

Attached Fields. The South Africa Union reported a woman serving as a trust officer in the Transvaal Conference; seven women who were school administrators; two women who were retirement home administrators; and a woman who directed the South African Home Study Institute.

The Middle East Union remembers warmly the long years of service given by Mrs. Kruger at the orphanage in Cairo, Egypt.

The following five sketches of six women are based on answers to the questionnaire I sent to the 23 women pastor-evangelists reported by the divisions who responded to my original questionnaire. They include answers to questions on how being a woman makes being a pastor-evangelist easier or more difficult.

Women Pastors

Sweden. The newcomer in the group is Vivian Nyberg, a young woman in Sweden. She is still in ministerial internship with only 10 months of service—four months of evangelism and six in a church. She is now an assistant and has not yet worked alone, but in the autumn will be in full charge. She wanted to become a pastor "because I felt I could be happy with nothing else; I've been pulled to this from within." Most of her time is spent preparing for Bible studies, sermons, and visits.

Young and single, with no future plans for marriage, she finds it difficult but necessary to adopt "a cautious attitude to single men my own age." Yet, being a woman is an advantage as a pastor because "there are situations which I as a woman can more easily handle than a man—as there are situations a man can more fully meet than I. But, on the whole, I think [success] depends on per-

sonality and experience."

She finds no difficulty relating to her superiors; rather, they are "appreciative, encouraging, and supportive. There is a need for ministers in Sweden, so we need to cooperate." Optimistic, expecting acceptance from her future congregations, she is nevertheless realistic: "I also think there will come times when they will wish I were a man, because of always having had men." But she hopes they will realize not only what they are missing, but also what they have gained.

She encourages other young women to become pastors. Young, enthusiastic, and confident after the first 10 months, she considers her B.A. in theology "sufficient so far." But she adds, "In a few years I would not mind studying more after having worked a bit longer." Her message to the Adventist women of America: "Don't try to be a man. Be what you are in Christ, serving God with the gifts He has given you."

"What I am with my congregation is more than a man can do, therefore they have nothing to say. It is as with the members of the body. Every part is useful."

—Ernestine Rabesalama, Madagascar

Madagascar. From the Malagasy Republic comes a letter from a woman pastor, Ernestine Rabesalama, who has been working there a year and a half. She chose the ministry "because the feeling of happiness in knowing Jesus and his love made me choose to make that known to others." She collaborates with a pastor of a church in ministering and in public evangelism. Most of her time is devoted to giving Bible studies.

The only one of the six pastor-evangelists who is married, "I have adopted seven children," she writes, "and this large family is not an obstacle for my work." She obviously loves her work: "To be able to nourish someone from the Word of God and to have

that person convinced, and above all, converted, makes me overflow with joy."

However, she admits that sometimes, though rarely, being a woman makes her work difficult, "when the congregation is made up of traditional men and women who believe a woman cannot be a pastor or evangelist." On the other hand, "women are often misunderstood," she explains; "since I am a woman, I think I understand them and their problems better." She has had no difficulty with her superiors; and the church members, she says, "accept me as I am. What I am with my congregation is more than a man can do, therefore they have nothing to say. It is as with the members of the body. Every part is useful."

She recommends the ministry to other young women. "At the seminary I had two friends who were studying to be pastoral assistants and two others who were taking theology. In our union we need more workers. "Sisters, we have our parts to finish in the Lord's work. Let's go! Our Lord will soon return!"

Germany. From Germany came a letter from Margarete Prange, a woman with 16 years of experience as a pastor. She is in full charge of a district of four churches and her time is taken up in "everything a pastor must do—pastoral care, Bible studies, administration, evangelism, funerals, weddings, and the like." She does "public evangelism alone, and also with my colleagues. Normal attendance." Most enjoyable and satisfying to her are pastoral care, Bible studies, and preaching.

Her motive for becoming a pastor was her conviction that "a woman should employ her gift or talent." As for the questions as to whether her being a woman made her work either easier or harder, she ignores the first and says a flat no to the second. On her relations with her superiors and with her congregations, her answers are "No problems" and "I am accepted. When I begin in a new district the congregation must get accustomed to a lady pastor."

Would she encourage other young women

to become pastors? "Yes, if they are strong enough." Then she adds an explanation, citing Genesis 2:18 ("It is not good for man to be alone."). "This text I find is fitting not only for marriage, for man should not be alone in pastoral work."

Philippines. From the Philippines comes the reply of a very busy woman, Paciencia Sumaylo, who awakens my admiration. She has full charge of a district of 25 churches and companies. What takes up most of her time is, above all, shepherding her flocks. Evidently her flocks are far spread. The only difficulty she finds in being a woman is going "hiking in the rural areas, because of no land transportation available." On the other hand, being a woman makes it easier when she has to take public transportation—perhaps because she gets a seat in the jeepney!

Her last evangelistic meetings, ending a month ago, boasted an attendance of 150 to 200 people. What still gives her the greatest enjoyment and satisfaction is "to have people decide to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior and desire to be baptized." She reports no difficulty with her superiors caused by her being a woman, and in her long 19 years of experience, the church members "are satisfied with my services."

Finland. The two women with the longest records (both now retired) were pressed into service as pastor-evangelists in Finland when World War II caused all ministers of military age to be drafted. Both were already Bible instructors.

One, Elsa Luukkanen (her life story was written in *Elsa*), was pastor for 40 years and had had her own assistant for 35. The other, Hanna Vaananen, served 38 years as Bible instructor, chaplain, departmental worker, assistant pastor, and pastor.

Elsa still conducts public evangelistic campaigns, which sometimes last for six months, and makes pastoral visits. Hanna held her last evangelistic campaign in 1967-1968. Both find their greatest joy and satisfaction in bringing people to Christ; Elsa adds "and

to the Advent Hope."

Both women state they've had few problems from being women in the ministry—"rather the opposite," says Elsa; Hanna agrees, "We can do most of what men do anyway." They maintain that pastoring is easier for a woman because "the congregation is mostly female. Elsa has "always been accepted as a revival preacher;" Hanna points out that "some workers prefer female co-workers."

As for encouraging other women to become pastors, Elsa states: "If a woman has a talent for speaking and love for souls and is free, what could be more blessed?" But Hanna cautions, "Evangelism requires physical strength. Maybe it is more a man's work," and Elsa also warns, "Ministry takes all your time. One who is married cannot really be an evangelist because evangelism takes the totality of time and life." Most importantly, adds Hanna, "Dedicate yourselves completely to God. Further the Gospel so we can soon go home."

The results of this informal survey seem to confirm my suspicions that women are actively participating in and directing church activities. From South America to the Philippines, Seventh-day Adventist women are following *and* leading. It seems to me that the situation is comparable to that of the first-century Christian church. From the New Testament we learn of Priscilla, a "fellow-worker" of Paul's (Rom. 16:2), of Nympha, the leader of a house church (Col. 4:15), of Lydia the seller of purple, whose hospitality Paul enjoyed in Philippi (Acts 16:14,15), and of Phoebe, whose ministry to the church of Cenchrea and to Paul made her worthy of a warm reception in Rome (Rom. 16:1,2). I think Paul would not have minded addressing to the Seventh-day Adventist women of the 1980s the same admonition he addressed to the Galatians: "So let us not become tired of doing good; for if we do not give up, the time will come when we will reap the harvest" (Gal. 6:9, Today's English Version).