
Commission Postpones Decision on Ordination of Women

by Debra Gainer Nelson

The Spring Meeting of the General Conference Committee recently recommended that the church take no definitive action regarding the ordination of women to the gospel ministry until 1989. Church leaders recommended on April 4, 1985, that the church maintain its present position on the subject until further studies can be made by Adventist scholars and theologians under the direction of the Biblical Research Institute. Discussion of these studies will be assigned to a committee that will meet in early 1988 and present its findings to the 1988 Spring Meeting. Then, under this plan, the 1989 Annual Council will undertake a complete review of the issue of women's ordination.

In taking this vote, the Spring Meeting was following the recommendations made by the General Conference Commission to Study the Ordination of Women to the Gospel Ministry, which had met in Takoma Park March 26-28, the week preceding the Spring Meeting. During the meetings, the commission's attitude changed from 35 percent in favor of women's ordination to 55 percent in favor, though most commission members believe that the church is not yet ready to take this step.

The commission, convened by the 1984 Annual Council, also became a forum for a wider discussion of the role of women within the church. Thus, in addition to recommending further study on the question of women's ordination, the commission also recommended—and the Spring Meeting subsequently accepted—that the church should:

- Institute an "affirmative action" plan to open to women leadership positions that do not require ordination;
- Re-emphasize the importance of the work of Bible instructors;
- Encourage pastors and their wives to work together in "team ministry";
- Recognize the need to educate people about the roles unordained women may have in the church, and formulate specific plans to achieve these educational goals and present them to the 1985 Annual Council.

The commission also recommended—again affirmed by the Spring Meeting—reformation of the church's ordination practices, proposing limitation of ordination to only those who clearly perform ministerial or evangelistic duties.

Finally, on the subject of fully licensed ministers—an issue that was brought to the forefront in North America by the Potomac Conference, which voted to give its three women pastors ministerial licenses and authorized them to conduct baptisms—the commission and the Spring Meeting voted to refer the question back to the North

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American Division Committee. The division was asked to "clarify the functions of ministerial workers who hold the ministerial licenses, including how those relate to women who serve as pastors." The North American Division was requested to submit a "complete proposal on procedure" to the 1985 Annual Council for consideration.

The first four items regarding ordination, women's participation in church work, reformation of ordination practices, and education of the church, will be presented as recommendations to the General Conference session in New Orleans this June. The subject of the function of licensed ministers will be presented as a report rather than as a recommendation, since it is currently at issue only in the North American Division.

Most commission members—including Neal Wilson—felt strongly that if women's ordination were presented this year to the General Conference Session for a yes-or-no decision, it would have met with resounding defeat. Most did not want to see a clear rejection which could set the issue back for at least another generation.

Because the recommendations, though apparently not the report, will be submitted for approval at the General Conference session, they are open for debate and could possibly be renounced or changed. "I expect there will be some discussion," said Robert Nixon, communications director of the General Conference, "but the consensus seemed pretty clear at the Spring Meeting that the recommendations were acceptable to the world church." He noted that all division presidents were present at the Spring Meeting, along with other church officers, and that all voted without reservation to affirm the commission's recommendations.

Many commission members seem to be satisfied that the commission made the best recommendations it could have, considering the timing and the circumstances. Some

ordination supporters on the committee are impatient with the delay of the decision until 1989, and many opposed would have preferred a definitive church stand against the issue. However, most commission members—including Neal Wilson—felt strongly that if women's ordination were presented this year to the General Conference session for a yes-or-no decision, it would have met with resounding defeat. Wilson and many members of the commission, though they had reservations about ordaining women now, did not want to see a clear rejection of women's ordination, which could, some said, set the issue back for at least another generation.

The commission was diverse, including leaders and laypeople from North America and around the world. Representatives included presidents of all divisions except Euro-Africa, which was represented by its division secretary. Neal Wilson chaired the commission, and George Reid, director of the Biblical Research Institute, served as secretary. The General Conference was represented by 15 additional members, including two women: Charlotte Conway, business manager of Home Study International, and Betty Holbrook, director of Home and Family Service. The SDA Theological Seminary was represented by Gerhard Hasel, dean, and Raoul Dederen, professor of New Testament, who have both published studies in the past supporting women's ordination. William Johnsson, editor of *Adventist Review*, and Ron Wisbey, president of Potomac Conference, were also members.

The 66-member commission included a total of 15 women. In addition to Conway and Holbrook, other women were: Marsha Frost, pastor of the Fairfax, Virginia, church and one of the women pastors who has performed baptisms; Beatrice Neall, professor of theology at Union College; Shirani de'Alwis, a faculty member at Spicer Memorial College in India; Aulikki Nahkola, Greek professor at Newbold College,

England; Kit Watts, a librarian at Andrews University and one of the original participants in the Camp Mohaven Conference; Delores Maupin, a lay member of the General Conference Committee; Nancy Bassham from the Far Eastern Division headquarters; Joan Baldwin, a nurse in Sydney, Australia; Dorothy Eddlemon, member of the Pacific Union Conference executive committee; Hedwig Jemison, retired from the White Estate at Andrews University; Rosalee Haffner Lee, author and pastor's wife in Big Rapids, Michigan; Torhild Rom, an ordained local church elder in Pearl River, New York; and Delores Slikkers, a layperson from Holland, Michigan, and previously a member of the General Conference Role and Function Committee.

The highly male composition of the commission and the belief that it was "stacked" against ordination produced criticism of the commission before it convened. However, some commission members believed that the group turned out to be well-balanced. "Even if different members had been chosen," said Charlotte Conway, "the same issues would have been raised. I believe we discussed just about every aspect of the issue. It wouldn't have mattered if there were more women." In fact, the women on the commission expressed themselves on both sides of the issue.

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Wilson as commission chairman was "frank, democratic, and unbiased," says member Warren Banfield, director of the General Conference Office of Human Relations. The meetings were nevertheless closed to all but committee members and church officers, and the doors were firmly guarded against intruders. Commission members defended this approach, however, on the

basis that drop-in, occasional attendance might produce a distorted view of the proceedings because of the wide range of opinions being expressed. All meetings were faithfully attended by the commission members themselves; indeed, said Wilson, it was the only committee he could remember chairing that had 100 percent attendance for the entirety of every session.

Wilson began the meeting by introducing all members to one another, distributing a questionnaire to help determine initial group opinion, and listing a seven-item agenda—mostly on the theological aspects of the ordination of women. However, it soon became clear that members did not want to discuss the agenda topics systematically. Wilson set aside the agenda in order to listen to speeches from the floor. They took up much of the remainder of the meeting, which lasted until 5:30 p.m. the first day and until 9:45 p.m. on the last night. Some of the topics discussed included the theology of ordination; understanding of a minister's call; equality; unity of the church; and the roles of fathers and mothers in the home.

North American Division President Charles Bradford, by several accounts, made the most powerful and moving speech in support of full participation of women in the gospel ministry. Bradford, who was one of the last speakers of the session, pointed out that the ordination of women elders in North America has not caused division in the church. He said that "this is the age of the Spirit" and that Adventists must rid themselves of a "high church" view of the ministry. "We have a huge residual desposit of the sacerdotal in us," he said. "We need to purge this out of the lump." Saying that God is "an equal-opportunity employer," he contended that the gifts of the Spirit may be given to anyone and should not be wasted. "The Spirit gives out gifts," he said "and we need to recognize them."

While William Johnsson made one of the earliest speeches in favor of women's ordi-

nation, his personal support is not expected to color his coverage of the issue in the *Adventist Review*. Johnsson spoke from a New Testament view, noting that the church does not take literally Paul's instructions forbidding women to speak or teach. He noted that if there is no text to support the ordination of women, there is also no text to support the abolition of slavery, and he said that setting up barriers against any class of people violates the spirit of Paul's writings. Former *Adventist Review* editor Kenneth Wood also made a strong statement of support, noting that self-development is our responsibility to God, and that it is wrong for the church to keep people from reaching their full potential.

Richard Leshar, former director of the Biblical Research Institute and vice president of the General Conference, and current president of Andrews University, spoke forcibly in favor of women's ordination, illustrating with the story of Peter and Cornelius the fact that the church cannot always find a historical precedent for moving forward. Leshar said that some mistakenly have a highly sacramental view of ordination. "Which is greater—to minister or to be ordained? The greater is to minister. To be ordained is simply to be recognized for that ministry," said Leshar. Hasel and Dederen also reiterated their position that the Bible does not preclude women's ordination.

In general, theologians on the commission seemed to be supportive of women's ordination, except for Mario Veloso, a field secretary in the South American Division, assigned to matters having to do with the Spirit of Prophecy. Veloso said that he did not believe there was a strong enough case to support ordaining women—no "thus saith the Lord." He argued that as a Bible-based church, we must be able to find texts to support our position. However, Angel Rodriguez, president of Antillian Adventist College in Puerto Rico and a representative from the Inter-American Division, was a strong supporter.

Fairly outspoken opposition came from

several overseas representatives, particularly Bekele Heye, president of the Eastern Africa Division, who also spoke of the need for more biblical evidence to support ordaining women. Each division leader came prepared with a report of the feelings about ordination in his particular field, assessed by various studies and surveys. The consensus in most areas was that the membership was either actively opposed to ordination or else not yet ready to accept it, though Southern Asia indicated that it would accept whatever decision was made by the world church.

Not all opposition came from the overseas divisions, however. Some General Conference leaders such as Francis Wernick, general vice president, have continued to oppose vigorously the ordination of women.

Over the course of their deliberations commission members changed their attitude. This time, 34 of 60 members (56 percent) said they *did* support the ordination of women, an increase of 20 percent points, and 27 (or 45 percent) said they *did not* support ordination of women.

Wernick said that since we do not currently have the answers we need on the issue, we should not move forward at this time. He also said that perhaps the church had done the wrong thing by giving unordained men licenses to baptize and perform marriages.

The support for ordination of women among the lay members of North America is also far from unanimous. A General Conference survey of 1,048 respondents in North America recently showed that, overall, 57 percent oppose ordination, 33 percent are in favor, and 10 percent are neutral. Nearly half (48 percent) said they opposed the appointment of women to pastoral responsibilities, and 60 percent would oppose having their own church pastored by a woman. Surprisingly, a somewhat larger number of women than men (59 to 52 percent) oppose women's

ordination, and more predictably, older people (over 56) are most likely to oppose ordination (65 percent). No sex or age group had a clear majority in favor of women's ordination, though the 16-25 age group was evenly split with 39 percent on each side and 22 percent neutral.

According to a questionnaire filled out during the commission's first session, commission members at the beginning of their deliberations reflected the attitudes of the survey of North American members. In response to the question, "At the present time are you inclined toward the approval of ordaining women to the gospel ministry?" 35 percent approved and 50 percent disapproved. The results of the questionnaire were not revealed until the last day of the meetings, after which Neal Wilson, for the first time during the discussions, outlined his own thoughts on the issue. He said that ten years ago his position toward ordaining women was more favorable than it is today, as he has become more apprehensive about the divisiveness of such a change. He further said that although he is not basically opposed, he also does not feel that a good enough case has yet been made for the ordination of women.

After Wilson's presentation, another questionnaire was distributed. The results indicate that over the course of their deliberations a significant number of commission members changed their attitude. This time, 34 of 60 voters (56 percent) said they *did* support the ordination of women, an increase of 20 percentage points, and 27 (or 45 percent) said they *did not* support the ordination of women. Of the 34, however, only eight believed the church should approve of ordination now, while 26 thought it would not be wise to press the matter at this time. Nevertheless, commission members interviewed believed that the shift in viewpoint was an important indication of the effects of the process of educating people on the issues involved.

The change in attitude in the commission was the result of three days of discussion and

interaction. One illustration of this follows: A man stood up at the beginning of the meetings to say that he believed in equality. He said that his wife and he had worked as equals side by side for years, he as a minister and she as a Cradle Roll teacher. Later, during a break, a woman asked him how he would feel if his wife were doing the baptizing and he were cutting felts in Cradle Roll. After the meetings were over, he told the woman that he now saw that the church has not been treating women fairly and that they must be given more positions with real authority.

Nevertheless, women—and some men—cringed when some male commission members expressed surprise as the meetings closed at how very well the women had

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spoken and handled themselves. "I know they were trying to be complimentary," said one woman, "but did they really think we were going to be strident and demanding? I was disappointed that there was still such a patronizing attitude."

Women were also disappointed by the opinion expressed by some commission members that the whole issue was simply an outgrowth of the feminist movement. For example, in his paper reviewing the principal arguments on both sides of the question, which was sent to all commission members, George Reid wrote that "the ordination of women issue arose in the context of counterculture social movements that developed, particularly in the United States and Europe in the 1960s, continuing into the early 70s. . . The feminist demand for sexual equality was translated into a demand for ordination." (In fact, the question of ordaining women ministers was first raised in the Adventist Church before the turn of the century, when a recommendation for women's

ordination was made in 1881, though it apparently was never adopted.) Commission member Marsha Frost, pastor of the Fairfax, Virginia, church in the Potomac Conference, responded that women pastors, who she said are not seeking ordination now, are motivated by their conviction of being called into God's work rather than by their feminism or women's rights.

Robert Coy, a lay member of the Potomac Conference executive committee who was not on the General Conference commission, said, "We don't believe this is a feminist issue, though the question of equality is clearly involved. Our primary reason for supporting an expanded role for women in ministerial work is our firm belief that it will have an overall beneficial impact on the church. We have already seen women who have served with great ability and strength in our conference, and we feel ready to move forward." He also reiterated that Potomac Conference is not asking for ordination of women at this point, but rather for an authorization for women in pastoral roles to perform the same ministerial functions—including baptism—as men in an identical role.

The topic of the functions of licensed ministers apparently caused some confusion in the commission, particularly among overseas representatives. The action to grant ministerial licenses to unordained seminary graduates, allowing them to perform baptism and marriages in the United States, was taken by the General Conference ten years ago in order to allow unordained ministers to claim certain tax deductions. Outside of North America, the policy has not changed; ministers do not perform these duties before ordination. Therefore, baptizing by women is not an issue in divisions outside of North America. It has become an issue in North America because women are allowed to attend the seminary and are given pastoral positions but are restricted from performing baptisms and weddings. The church's posi-

tion, said Neal Wilson during one session, is "untenable. We cannot stay as we are. . . There must be movement forward. . . It is immoral how we are currently handling this situation."

While it is often said that the ordination of women is being held back by the world church, those opposed to women's ordination also argue that the church does not have an explicit biblical basis for ordination. The studies that followed the Mohaven Conference in 1973 showed a broad consensus among scholars that the Bible and the writings of Ellen White do not prohibit the ordination of women. In reaction to the Camp Mohaven papers, the Biblical Research Institute requested position papers with "balancing" viewpoints, which have resurrected theological questions. Three papers (by George Reid; Brian Ball, president of Avondale College; and George Stevany, president of the Swiss French Conference) against ordination and two supporting it (by Wilmore Eva, associate director of the ministerial-stewardship department of Potomac Conference; and Louis Venden, pastor of the Loma Linda University Church) were given to the commission prior to the meeting.

George Reid wrote in his paper introducing materials distributed to the commission: "All sides agree there is no direct discussion in the Bible of the ordination of women, for the practice is unknown to scripture. For that reason, those who argue positions do so because of their convictions on the way they understand God acts [and] how we are to interpret biblical passages and themes." Reid characterizes theologians who "undertook the project of reinterpreting the scriptures and theology" in response to the growth of the ordination issue as "revisionist theologians," in contrast to the "traditionalists" who support the historic restriction against women's ordination, as set forth by what he calls the doctrine of divine order, which teaches functional subordination of women. He and the other authors of papers

opposing ordination, all warned that if women are ordained the Adventist Church may well next have to deal with demands for ordination by homosexuals. None of the new study papers are currently available to the Adventist membership (the Mohaven papers are available from the General Conference Biblical Research Institute for \$10.)

Because of these rooted differences of opinion and the lack of a clearly understood scriptural mandate supporting ordination of women, Wilson felt—and the commission as a whole agreed—that the church is not pre-

pared to move forward on the issue at this time. Wilson and other leaders have asked for a convincing theological argument before they take the concept before the world church.

Still, many believe that the church is moving inexorably toward eventual ordination of women. In the short term, Robert Coy believes that with the strong, progressive leadership of Charles Bradford and the support of Neal Wilson, there is a reasonably good chance that North America will in 1985 provide a greater role—though short of ordination—for its women pastors.