
1985 Annual Council: Female Pastors Are Not As Equal As Others

by Barry L. Casey

The 1985 Annual Council may have lacked the sense of history-in-the-making that drew many interested persons to the balcony of the Takoma Park church during last year's sessions on the ordination of women, but according to one General Conference official, if this council was historic at all "it is in the area of the role of women." In addition, actions taken at the recent Annual Council are expected to have a significant effect on tithe allocation, employee tithing practices and the relationship of the North American Division to the General Conference.

Women in Ministry

The story of the Annual Council decisions on women in ministry began with a meeting of the North American Division Committee (NADCOM) in the General Conference chapel the Tuesday before the 1985 council opened. NADCOM heard from a committee proposing the following:

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To recommend to NADCOM that the words "except baptizing and solemnizing marriages" be deleted from NAD L 21 10, thus permitting associates in pastoral care who meet the requirements of NAD L 21 05 to baptize and solemnize marriages within the limitations of this policy.

Passage of the recommendation would have meant a formal recognition that qualified women designated as associates in pastoral care would be able to baptize and perform marriages, just as licensed ministers do. Currently, men who are licensed as ministers—and only men can be—may, under certain circumstances even before they receive ordination, perform baptisms and marriages in their local congregations. Discussion in the North American committee followed two lines of thought. One group felt the time had come for decisive moral action: in the words of Warren Banfield, director of the Office of Human Relations, "the North American Division has a moral responsibility to inform the committee about our personal feelings on the matter." Another group cautioned against passing the recommendation because it would jeopardize the unity of the world church and would complicate the whole issue of the ordination of women before the proposed study had been completed.

Several younger union and conference officers urged adoption of the recommendation.

“This is not an issue of the ordination of women,” said Ronald Wisbey, Columbia Union Conference president. “We are simply asking that associates in pastoral care who are qualified be allowed to baptize those whom they have brought into the church.” Herb Broeckel, newly elected president of the Mountain View Conference (West Virginia), spoke of his involvement in the “women’s issue” over the past year as secretary of the Potomac Conference. “What we are talking about here,” he said simply, “is discrimination against women,” a theme that would be sounded in future discussions on the floor of Annual Council.

Gary Patterson, president of the Pennsylvania Conference, commented that part of the problem at issue was that the church “has no theology of ordination; we have developed our ordination policies according to the Internal Revenue Service rather than theology.” Ordination, he continued, is a theological concept, while licensure is an

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ecclesiastical concept. He wondered aloud if we were setting ourselves up to ordain the job or the person.

Some veteran leaders opposed women being given the authority to perform baptisms and marriages. For example, Ben Leach, then-president of the Southwestern Union, cautioned that the “unity of the church is all-important,” raising again the specter of the world field. Adoption of the recommendation by North America would be seen as divisive for the world church—and could be viewed as defying the General Conference. “In my younger days,” continued Leach in his soft Texas drawl, “I

didn’t always listen to the General Conference brethren. But I’ve learned to listen to them.”

Other leaders vigorously opposed the argument that North America should wait until the entire world field was ready for women to be credentialed to perform baptisms and marriages. Clifford Sorensen, executive director of the North American Division Board of Higher Education, noted that since licensed ministers (and thus, associates in pastoral care as well) had authorization to baptize and perform marriages only in their own districts, it was difficult to see how a claim by the world field that this would have a tremendous impact on them could be substantiated. Delmer Holbrook, newly elected director of the General Conference department of church ministries, spoke from his recent experience of presenting church leadership seminars in many different divisions. “Let’s not try to marshal the world field behind us on this issue,” he said, “when they are just as divergent in their opinions as we are.” In division after division, he reported, leaders had concluded that the ordination of women in North America would not break the unity of the world church.

Charles Bradford, North American Division president, reported that the president of the General Conference had phoned him the night before and urged that NADCOM not approve the recommendation allowing associates in pastoral care to perform baptisms and marriage, but that the division committee refer it back to the officers. After Bradford assured the committee that some statement would come out of this Annual Council on the issue, the North American Division Committee voted to refer the recommendation back to the General Conference Committee for further study and counsel.

Within the week, the General Conference officers, division presidents and North American union presidents met, and a few

days later their recommendation was reported to the full Annual Council by General Conference President Neal Wilson. Wilson urged the delegates to consider the unity of the church and to pass the recommendation, which read:

1. To adhere closely to the General Conference/North American Division Working Policy and the *Church Manual* in all matters of practice pertaining to ministerial functions.
2. To await the outcome of the process established by the 1985 General Conference session before introducing any significant changes into North American Division policies affecting ministerial functions which relate to women.
3. To take immediate steps to correct any practices in the area of ministerial function which are not in harmony with the General Conference policy and the *Church Manual*.
4. To encourage women who aspire to serve in ministerial/gospel work to focus on the broad range of church activities open to them (see also agenda item on Women's Participation in Church Work), but to encourage no expectation of broadened functions in the area of gospel ministry until the church has completed its study and announced its decision.

With the motion open for discussion, Ralph Martin, newly elected president of Potomac Conference, rose to speak. "There are three things that are sure," he said with a smile: "death, taxes and the Potomac Conference president speaking on women ministers" (see "Women Ministers Begin Baptizing," "Potomac Yields to GC: Baptism by Women Halted," and "Right Turn on the Road to General Conference," in *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, Nos. 2, 3, 4). The issue went beyond ecclesiastical matters, he said. "We have the beginnings of a movement to bring about human equality. I believe in fairness, and if women are not receiving a fair chance to minister, I want to help that." The woman's role in the home is not the issue, he continued, just as women's ordination is not the issue. "The issue is: Can two people with the same training and experience perform ministry in the same way?" He proposed an example. What if, he wondered, we took a white man and a black man, trained them both for ministry, gave them

the same experiences and then told the black he couldn't baptize or perform marriages because of his race? Or suppose we trained an English-speaking man and a Spanish-speaking man and told the second he couldn't perform all the functions of a pastor because of his language? "We don't separate pastors by race or by language, but we do it by gender," he concluded. "This is not a great worldwide issue, just a matter of fairness to women trained to do ministry."

Wilson responded sharply: "We're not talking about equality," he said, "but about function. If it were just a matter of equality we wouldn't have to study it anymore."

Some leaders from overseas divisions seemed to believe that the integrity of ordination was at stake. Although he insisted that he was sympathetic to the women's plight, "It is difficult for me to see," said Walter Scragg, president of the South Pacific Division, "how the sacraments of baptizing and marrying can be separated from ordination." Others suggested that the new

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"affirmative action" policy of the church opened the door for many women to function in the work of the church without needing to be ordained.

Charlotte Conway, interim president of Home Study International and a member of the commission established before the General Conference session to study the women's issue, brought the Annual Council dramatically back to the issue of equality. Noting that licensed ministers (men who have not yet been ordained) are permitted under certain circumstances to perform baptisms and marriages, she moved that such

men not be allowed to baptize or perform marriages until the status of associates in pastoral care was settled. In the sudden silence that followed, a low whistle could be heard. Wilson shrugged and said, "The motion is out of order because it would simply destroy the main motion on the floor."

Before a straw vote was taken, Ronald Wisbey, recently elected to the presidency of the Columbia Union Conference from the presidency of the Potomac Conference, said

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quietly but passionately, "We are not going forward, we are going backward. This is a moral issue." He proposed an amendment that would allow for a two-track system: one track for men would lead to ordination to the ministry; a second track for women would provide commissioned minister status and would not lead to ordination, but would allow women to baptize and perform marriages. "Let's not debate this," he said. "Let's simply vote our consciences."

"I'm going to rule that amendment out of order," Wilson quickly responded. He called for a secret ballot, asking for a simple "yes" or "no" on the recommendation. When the results were tabulated, 201 votes had been cast: 120 for and 81 against.

Several church leaders expressed surprise at the comparatively high number of votes opposing the officers. A shift of only 20 votes would have kept alive the question of women ministers baptizing and performing marriages. In fact, North American leaders in favor of equality of treatment for men and

women in ministry continued to feel that North American women would find it difficult to wait a minimum of three more years before any progress on this question could be achieved.

In a speech charged with feeling, Charles Bradford, president of the North American Division, delivered what he said was his last public word on the subject. "Ten years we've been discussing this," he said. "I was at Mohaven; I read the papers. There is no theological difficulty in this, it's just an ecclesiastical matter. We gave the wrong signal [to women theology students]. I'm not going to encourage any more women to take the M.Div. degree because we simply cannot place these women in a deep freeze for another four or five years." The church has an obligation to come clean on the issue, he said, and to say to women committed to gospel ministry: "Don't expect this church to grant you equal status." "I believe that women *will* be ordained before Jesus comes," said Bradford, "but we're not going to resolve this in the near future."

Bradford's position surprised some delegates. "I was sitting here listening to Elder Bradford," said Robert Coy, a Washington attorney and a lay delegate from the

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Potomac Conference, "and at first I thought he was in support of this issue. Now I'm not so sure, but I will say this: If women will be ordained before Jesus comes, then let's not hold up the Second Coming by refusing to ordain them!"

The action on women in ministry taken by the Annual Council included redefining the role of associates in pastoral care as including "essentially the same duties" as male pastors. This change in status allows associates in pastoral care to claim an IRS deduction for parsonage expenses, a move seen by those who support the gospel ministry of women as a welcome step, but irrelevant to the debate over the role of women in ministry.

The vote adopting the officers' recommendation also created a General Conference coordinator of women's ministries. A committee was formed with Betty Holbrook, associate director of church ministries, as chairperson, to encourage the publication of more materials on the role of women in the church.

The Use and Abuse of Tithe

Another issue provoking extended debate was the use of tithe funds. (The subject had first come up at the 1976 Annual Council in reference to a percentage of tithe being used to pay elementary school and academy teachers.) A key element in the document "Administration of Tithe Funds" recommended by the officers was the characterization of the local conference office as the "storehouse" to which all tithes should be brought. While General Conference officials privately concede that direct biblical support for such a designation is lacking, appropriate Spirit of Prophecy quotations provide, in their view, abundant affirmation of the point. Furthermore, while the Bible may not support identifying the local conference with the "storehouse," doing so promotes equal distribution of financial resources. Tithe from large churches is distributed to benefit smaller churches or establish new congregations.

While everyone supported the authority of the local conference, Annual Council members differed as to how conferences ought to spend tithe. Many conferences would like

to be given greater discretion over the use of tithe funds. Representatives from several areas, for example, spoke in favor of liberalizing the use of tithe for building projects. Funds are often needed for building or maintenance of facilities such as academies or youth camps—projects which must rely on non-tithe sources such as special offerings. Other more conservative members advocated limiting tithe to the support of the evangelistic and nurturing work of pastors.

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The document reiterated the accepted view that offerings, not tithe, are to be used in maintaining the local churches. Again, discussion from the floor supported this principle; Annual Council delegates do not seem to suffer from incipient congregationalism.

In the midst of a lengthy discussion on the use of tithe for conference and union building projects, questions were raised concerning Spirit of Prophecy quotations as sole support for recommended committee motions. Early in the debate, Gary M. Ross, associate director of public affairs and religious liberty for the General Conference, noted with some irony that the supporting quotes in the document on the use of tithe were entirely from the writings of Ellen G. White. "Could someone explain to me why we have no scriptural framework for this document?" he asked. Earl Amundson, then-president of the Atlantic Union Conference, suggested that a lengthy quote from Ellen White's son, Willie, supporting a somewhat controversial plan to pay Australian literature evangelists from tithe, be deleted. "We cannot go on assumptions

about Ellen White's support of such things," he said. "We must have documented Spirit of Prophecy and scriptural support." One delegate then rose to make a successful motion entering the familiar text of Malachi 3:10 into the final document.

While all agreed that the tithe is the main source of funding for the work of evangelism and nurture, much of the discussion turned to the definition of who qualified as evangelistic and nurturing workers and what constituted such work. The guidelines held that tithe should support not simply pastors, evangelists and Bible instructors, but also conference officers, departmental directors, accountants, clerks and office secretaries—people who enable those directly engaged in evangelism and nurturing to accomplish their goals. Why, questioned some delegates, should conference office secretaries be paid from tithe funds while local church secretaries, who surely share the burden of evangelistic support, may not receive tithe monies?

In the midst of this discussion on the document recommended by the officers, one member of the Annual Council moved that sending of tithe by laypeople to Adventist

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self-supporting institutions be prohibited. He was greeted with a loud chorus of amens. The motion was carried enthusiastically, demonstrating how strongly administrators feel about diversion of tithe funds.

Finally, in a revision of an existing policy, the Annual Council provided the means to terminate the employment of credentialed and licensed workers who do not pay a regu-

lar tithe. The policy stipulates that upon being hired, employees of the church shall be informed in writing of "the expectancy of a regular tithing program," and also informed "that their tithing practices will be audited annually." If non-payment of tithe occurs and efforts at spiritual counseling fail, the appropriate administrative body is to be informed after a reasonable amount of time. If efforts at this level prove unsuccessful, "discontinuance of employment will result."

Revised Baptismal Certificate

The Annual Council voted to postpone formal approval of a new baptismal certificate until the 1986 Annual Council. However, the General Conference ministerial department, supervising the revision of the present certificate, expects the new document to be in use before that time; the new certificate will still be able to benefit, the department says, from suggestions from world divisions in 1986.

At stake is whether a new member must vow a detailed statement of 27 beliefs, making that extended document virtually a creed. (See "Right Turn on the Road to General Conference," *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, No. 4.) The baptismal certificate now includes a brief 13-point baptismal vow, under which the baptismal candidate signs his or her name. In addition, the certificate reproduces an outdated statement of beliefs printed before the expanded statement of 27 beliefs was adopted at the 1980 General Conference session.

On the new baptismal certificate, the ministerial department plans to keep the separate baptismal vow and statement of beliefs. However, it will revise the wording of the baptismal vow and replace the outdated statements of belief with the 27 statements of belief adopted at the 1980 General Conference session.

Floyd Bresee, secretary of the General Conference ministerial association, says changes in the baptismal certificate are being

adopted "to make it a little more certain we're not being unfair to people who want to be baptized and who might say, 'I didn't know what Adventists believe.'"

Model Constitution Provisionally Accepted

Annual Council delegates voted to give "provisional" acceptance to a model constitution drawn up as a guideline for use by unions and conferences. In so doing, the Annual Council asked unions to follow the "essence" of the model as closely as possible as the study continues. It was said that the 1986 Annual Council in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, will take up the matter again, make revisions as needed and vote the guidelines as policy. This runs counter to Wilson's clear statement at New Orleans that the model constitutions would not be adopted until the 1990 General Conference session. (See "Fifteenth Business Meeting," *Adventist Review*, July 11, 1985, pp. 16, 17.)

Lines began forming at the floor microphones after J. William Bothe, former General Conference associate secretary, noted that in preparing the articles of the constitution he had determined that most were "non-negotiable." Several delegates balked at that. "We need to know which items are non-negotiable and which are negotiable," insisted Philip Follett, president of the Northern California Conference. Bothe replied that of the 14 articles contained in the model, two were "somewhat negotiable" but only one was fully negotiable. Pacific Union Secretary Major White was just as emphatic: "We've spent thousands of dollars and many hours on this matter. We in the Pacific Union have to approve our constitution."

Some delegates were concerned that unions and conferences would be required to adhere to the model line by line. In reply, Wilson stressed that "this is a provisional endorsement today" and also indicated discussion might be kept to a minimum since

so much time had already been spent in committees, hammering out details.

Other delegates clearly remained unhappy about the term *non-negotiable*. "Couldn't we find a less harsh term?" asked Ronald Wisbey. Wilson agreed, suggesting that the intent of the document might be accomplished through unions being in "harmony" with the "essence" of the model, rather than a rigid adherence to the letter of the law.

Delegates also expressed concern about the potential for disillusionment among laypeople who had spent much time on the various constitutional committees. How were church leaders to explain that the Annual Council and the General Conference had shrugged off all their hard work, some wondered. "Laypeople are requesting more and more participation," said Atlantic Union secretary Aaron Brogden. "We are operating from crisis to crisis—we need guidelines. What if our constituency should vote contrary to General Conference guidelines?"

Ben Leach, then-president of the Southwestern Union, suggested avoiding such entanglements altogether. "We didn't spend any time on these constitution committees in our union," he said. "When people asked me if we were going to form a committee I said, 'We don't need these kinds of fiascos. We'll just go along with what the Annual Council recommends.'"

But Bruce Johnston, president of the Washington Conference in the North Pacific Union (the union suggesting the most innovative changes in its constitution), spoke warmly of lay participation. "Our people love their church and want to work through the channels," he said. "They want their leaders to be sensitive to them. If we vote these as guidelines it will be acceptable to them, but if we vote these as policy it will result in loss of confidence." "Remember," he warned, "laypeople vote with their tithe dollars."

The motion to accept the document as guidelines and to refer it to the 1986 Annual Council was carried.