

Women Pastors Expand Role in World Church

By Christopher Cassano

The role of women in ministry is expanding throughout the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. In North America, more and more women are serving as local elders, several conferences are authorizing women to baptize, and there is increasing support for the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry. In other parts of the world, women pastors are baptizing, performing marriages, and serving as full-time licensed ministers.

North America

Recent figures show dramatic increases in the numbers of women filling leadership roles in North American churches. Seventeen women now serve as full-time pastors, and 20 hold positions as full-time chaplains.¹ A survey conducted in 1988 by request of the North American Division reported a total of 960 women serving as ordained local elders in 457 (15 percent) of the 3,036 churches responding to the survey. Sixty-six of these women serve as first elders, and an additional 81 as assistant first elders.²

Women pastors are baptizing in two large North American unions—the Pacific and Columbia Unions. In February 1984, three women pastors in the Potomac Conference (of the Columbia Union) captured the attention of members in North America when they performed baptisms in

three different churches.³ That was followed, in September 1986, by the Southeastern California Conference constituency officially approving its women pastors to perform baptisms and marriages.⁴ Subsequently, the Potomac Conference executive committee also officially approved women with appropriate qualifications to perform baptisms.

Attention then shifted from the issue of women performing baptisms and marriages to the issue of ordination itself. Early in 1989, the Ohio Conference executive committee, by a margin of 20 to 1, voted to request permission of their union to ordain a qualified and experienced woman pastor in their conference. On May 4, the Columbia Union executive committee approved the ordination of that woman pastor, but not until after the 1990 General Conference Session.

On May 21 the constituency of the largest conference in North America, the Southeastern California Conference, voted 284 to 198 in favor of ordination of women. The resolution called for the conference executive committee to

Consider the ordination of women pastors in our conference who have already met regular ordination qualifications, and present those names for approval to the Pacific Union Conference executive committee.⁵

A little over two weeks later, on June 7, the Pacific Union executive committee, representing the largest union in North America, voted the following action:

We strongly encourage the General Conference to eliminate gender as a consideration for ordination to gospel ministry. We endorse the ordination of qualified women to the gospel ministry in divisions, unions, and conferences where deemed helpful and appropriate.

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Less than a week later, the nine union presidents of the North American Division voted unanimously in favor of a similar action, endorsing both performance of baptism by, and ordination of, women:

The union presidents of the North American Division endorse the concept of women's ordination in those divisions where it would be deemed to be helpful and appropriate.

At the same meeting, five of the six division officers also voted in favor of ordination of women.

Many assumed the developments in North America were unique. Actually, notable progress has been made outside North America as well. In Germany and the People's Republic of China, women pastors have been baptizing and performing marriages for several years. In China, one woman pastor has baptized almost 500 people over the past two years. In the Federal Republic of Germany, Margarete Prange has performed marriages and baptized some 20 people since receiving her ministerial license seven years ago.

People's Republic of China

In the People's Republic of China, several Adventist women are prominent pastors. According to Robert Wong, program director for radio broadcasting and a pastor in Hong Kong, a women pastor in charge of several Adventist churches in Canton Province has baptized 490 believers. A former elementary school teacher now more than 60 years of age, she carries out the duties of a full-time pastor of a multi-church district.

In Wuxi (population 1 million), the largest Adventist congregation in the People's Republic of China is led by two women pastors. The senior pastor, Chou Hui Ying, is a retired elementary school teacher. Her younger associate is Chou

Ming Xiu, a retired factory worker. Weekly attendance at the church is more than 700. Membership has increased by 400 since 1986, largely because of the ministry of these two women pastors.

Both women are reported to be recognized by the Three-Self Movement, the official governmentally sanctioned body of Protestant denominations inside China. The Three-Self Movement has increased the numbers of women pastors to the point that 30 percent of the Protestant pastors in China are now women.

Federal Republic of Germany

In the Federal Republic of Germany, Margarete Prange began her ministry in June of 1968. She was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist church in 1962, and attended Marienhoehe Seminary in Germany from 1965 to 1968. She started pastoring immediately following her graduation, and has continued her ministry for more than 20 years. In 1982, after recognizing the need in her area, church officials gave Prange authorization to carry out the duties and responsibilities of a licensed minister.⁶ She immediately baptized six individuals who had been forced to wait for baptism due to the unavailability of an ordained minister. Prange has baptized regularly since then. She currently serves as the district pastor of the Arnsberg, Soest, and Hamm churches in the Westphalian Conference.

Recently, Prange was sent as a delegate from the Euro-African Division to the General Conference's 80-member Commission on the Role of Women in the Church. There are other female licensed ministers in the Federal Republic of Germany, but Prange says she is the only one who is currently baptizing. While a few individuals have expressed objections, Prange says that congregations have been overwhelmingly accepting.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "Adventist Women in Ministry in the North American Division," compiled by Esther Ramharacksingh, pastor of the Association of Adventist Women and director of the Harvest 90 Education Project at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

2. Carole L. Kilcher, director of the Center for Human Relations and assistant director of the Institute of Church Ministries at Andrews University, and Ng Gan Theow, a doctoral student in religion at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University, "Women as

Local Church Elders," *Adventist Review* (February 23, 1989).

3. See "Women Pastors Begin Baptizing," by Judith P. Nembhard, *Spectrum* 15:2, and "Potomac Yields to GC; Baptisms by Women Halted," by Roy Branson with Diane Gainer, *Spectrum* 15:3.

4. Lori Kuehnert, "Women Pastors Baptize and Perform Marriages in North America," *Spectrum*, 19:1.

5. See *Pacific Union Recorder*, June 19, 1989, p. 5.

6. See page 36 of this issue of *Spectrum*.