
Ellen White Endorsed Adventist Women Ministers

by Bert Haloviak

In the late 19th century, Mr. and Mrs. Truman Russell watched with pride as three of their children entered the Seventh-day Adventist ministry. Kit Carson Russell gave 32 years of denominational service as a pastor, conference president, and General Conference religious-liberty secretary. His ministry was summarized in his obituary that appeared in the *Review and Herald* of January 29, 1920. His brother, Edgar Torrey Russell, served the Adventist church for 45 years as a pastor and conference and union president. His obituary appeared in the October 22, 1925, *Review*. The third Adventist pastor from the Russell family was Kit and Edgar's sister, Lulu Russell Wightman. Her obituary never appeared in the *Review*, and behind that fact is a sad story.

Lulu Wightman was the most successful minister in New York state for over a decade. Her official church ministry began when she was licensed as a Seventh-day Adventist minister in 1897 and continued after she left New York to engage in religious liberty work in Kansas and Missouri in 1908. As a licensed minister, Mrs. Wightman pioneered work that established companies or churches in a number of places in New York where Adventism had never before gained a foothold. The results of her ministry rank her not only as the most outstanding evangelist in New York during her time, but among the most successful ever in the Adventist church. At the New

York state conference meeting of 1901, it was suggested that Lulu be ordained. R. A. Underwood, the union president, favored her ordination. But the General Conference president, A. G. Daniells, who just happened to be attending the meeting, did not believe that a woman could "properly be ordained, just now at least." The conference, however, voted her the salary of an ordained minister without the ordination. Meanwhile, her husband John received only a nominal salary for assisting his wife.

This situation presented no problems until 1903, when John also received a ministerial license. The conference then urged Lulu to lower her salary to the rate of a licensed minister, perhaps to avoid appearing to hold more authority than her husband. Against her husband's objection, her salary was lowered. In 1905, two years after he had been licensed, John Wightman was ordained. His wife, New York state's most effective minister, was not.

The Wightmans dedicated many more years of service to the church. In New York state, a dozen churches—Hornellsville, Gas Springs, Wallace, Silver Creek, Geneva, Angola, Gorham, Fredonia, Avoca, Rushville, Canandaigua, and Penn Yan—owe their establishment or re-establishment to Lulu Wightman. The churches of Avon, Lakeville, Hemlock, South Livonia, and Bath were born later after Mr. Wightman joined his wife as a licensed minister. But by 1910, 13 years after Lulu received her ministerial license, the Wightmans had come to oppose the church structure. They were dropped from church employ-

ment, which is why their obituaries never appeared in the *Review*.

What happened to Lulu Wightman was tragic because A. G. Daniells was wrong when he said in 1901 that a woman could not properly be ordained in the Adventist church. What is even more tragic is that we are still making that assumption nearly a century later. Daniells did not rightly understand his heritage, and I believe if we knew our own history better, we would not still be having difficulties with this issue.

It seems to me there are two major questions in the dilemma we face today concerning the ordination of women: (1) Can a woman truly be a min-

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ister, as we understand ministry? and (2) Would we be acting against Scripture to ordain a woman?

The 19th century Adventist church answered the first question when it licensed Lulu Wightman and other women as ministers. During the 1870s in particular, the Adventist church encouraged women to enter the ministry, and made it relatively easy for them to do so. A number of male ministers had left the church in the 1860s, and vast areas within the United States were still untouched by the Advent message. The church needed more evangelists, so it encouraged both men and women to receive training and enter the ministerial ranks. Certain functions, such as baptizing and solemnizing marriages, were reserved for ordained ministers. But the focus of ministry in the 19th century was evangelism, and there was no aspect of this ministry that excluded women. They belonged to ministerial associations; they held ministerial licenses or a “license to preach”; they conducted evangelistic campaigns; they visited churches in a pastoral role; and, perhaps most significantly, they were paid from tithe funds that

Ellen White considered reserved for the official church ministry. These women were Seventh-day Adventist ministers in the fullest sense defined by the church in their day. Ellen White praised such women and commented favorably on their holding ministerial licenses.

Ellen White consistently defined ministry by the relevant functions ministers performed. Her ideas concerning true ministry came into sharper focus during her years in Australia, where she conceived of the “ministry of compassion” as a model for the church. In the poverty of many of the Australian members and the hardship they suffered as a result of Sabbath observance, she saw a design for true ministry:

You cannot know how we carry the heavy burden as we see these souls tested, thrown out of employment, unable to obtain labor unless they will give up the Sabbath. We must comfort and encourage them; we must help them as they shall be brought into strait places. There are many souls as precious as gold, and every sinner saved causes rejoicing in the heavenly courts.¹

For Ellen White, true pastoral labor was working as Christ worked to present truth to the needy. A few weeks after writing the above statement, she wrote to her son:

Yesterday it all opened before me that in this very line of hospitality, I have been repeatedly shown that we can unite the people with us, and can have twofold influence over them. This was unfolded before me in the first experience in this work, many years back, and we have ever linked our interest with humanity.²

In the 1890s, church leaders found that in such places of tremendous need, women were the most effective and active ministers. During this period of emphasis on compassionate pastoral service, Ellen White made her most memorable statements concerning women in ministry.

The issue of ordaining women to the ministry was presented for serious consideration at the General Conference Session of 1881. The resolution, which obviously did not pass, was nevertheless amazing for its time. It read: “Females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.”

Beyond the personal qualifications considered

necessary to compassionate ministry in the late 19th century, various other tests were applied to candidates for the ministry: doctrinal and educational qualifications, knowledge of Scripture, spiritual well-being, and success in ministry. All during this period women continued to be licensed as ministers by the state conferences. The 1881 resolution thus strongly implies that its framers considered that there were women who did indeed possess the necessary qualifications for ordination. They had been issued a “license to preach,” had given evidence of their “call,” and were reissued licenses year after year. The qualification of women was not the issue in 1881; the question debated was the “perfect propriety,” the wisdom of ordaining women. If women had not been considered ministers, the question of their ordination would not have arisen.

After some discussion between competing “progressive” and “conservative” camps, the question was deferred and referred to the three-man General Conference Committee, where it died. No Adventist woman was ordained to any position until after 1895 when Ellen White made a landmark statement concerning ordination. That statement was contrary to the past history of the church, and appears to have been lost to most subsequent Adventist history:

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the [local] church officers or the [conference] minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work.³

Here Ellen White calls for some women to be “appointed” to labor “publicly” in the ministry of compassion. Such “public” work in the 19th century Adventist church was considered official conference labor and meant payment from conference or tithe funds.

But whether one understands “ordain” to mean ordination to being a deacon, a local elder, or a full-time pastoral minister, Ellen White is clearly proclaiming that, contrary to the hesitation of the General Conference in 1881, Adventist women, based on their personal qualifications for true Christian ministry, could be ordained “with perfect propriety.”

The question of scriptural authority for ordaining women can also be seen as a historical problem. The dilemma is illustrated by the latest *SDA Church Manual*, 1986 edition:

Deaconesses were included in the official staff of the early Christian churches (Rom. 16:1, 2).

Phoebe was a servant—servant in this instance meaning “deaconess”. . . Other references indicate that women served in the early church as deaconesses. There is no record, however, that these women were ordained; hence the practice of ordaining deaconesses is not followed by the SDA Church.⁴

This statement, that women cannot be ordained as deaconesses because there is no scriptural authority for doing so, is virtually the same statement that has appeared since our first *Church Manual*

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in 1932. Attempts at both the 1975 and 1985 General Conference sessions to allow for the ordination of deaconesses were unsuccessful.⁵

Interestingly, the church had wrestled with the question of scriptural authority and church policy much earlier in its history. The first question involved whether or not to adopt the name “Seventh-day Adventist.” After all, many said at the time, “Where is there in the Scriptures a body of believers called Seventh-day Adventist?” Indeed, it was wrong to take any name to ourselves except “Church of God,” for all the other scriptural names were already taken, they argued. (Our

church was actually called the Church of God until 1860, when the name "Seventh-day Adventist" was adopted.)

Others opposed regular conference meetings, constitutions, or, worst of all, registering church property with the state, because there was no explicit scriptural authority for doing so. These issues were not resolved without splits in the church, but James White's position, endorsed by Ellen White, prevailed at the time:

Obviously, the question of whether or not to ordain women to the Adventist ministry did not go away with the 1881 General Conference resolution. . . . It continues to this day in the plight of women who feel called to the role of minister, as the church has historically defined it.

If it be asked, Where are your plain tests of Scripture for holding church property legally? we reply, The Bible does not furnish any; neither does it say that we should have a weekly paper, a steam printing-press, that we should publish books, build places of worship, and send out tents. Jesus says, "Let your light so shine before men," etc., but he does not give all the particulars how this shall be done. The church is left to move forward in the great work, praying for divine guidance, acting upon the most efficient plans for its accomplishment. We believe it safe to be governed by the following RULE:

All means which, according to sound judgment, will advance the cause of truth, and are not forbidden by plain Scripture declarations, should be employed.⁶

In general, the church has proceeded on this principle, distinguishing church policy from doctrine.⁷ But regarding the ordaining of women to ministry, the 1986 *Church Manual* is more than 90 years behind Ellen White's instruction that women "should be set apart by prayer and laying on of hands." Ellen White favored ordaining women to the particular ministry they felt called to perform, despite the lack of clear scriptural precedent for doing so. She did, however, offer a scriptural foundation for her position. Where the church seemed to founder on the question of

whether to ordain women, she resolved the issue on the basis of a scriptural definition of ministry (Isaiah 58 and 61) and Christ's model of compassionate care for the needy:

If men *and women* would act as the Lord's helping hand, doing deeds of love and kindness, uplifting the oppressed, rescuing those ready to perish, the glory of the Lord would be their rearguard. . . . Of those who act as his helping hand, the Lord says, "Ye shall be named priests of the Lord; men shall call you the ministers of our God."⁸

Obviously, the question of whether or not to ordain women to the Adventist ministry did not go away with the 1881 General Conference resolution. It did not go away with Ellen White's 1895 statement on ordination. It did not go away with Lulu Wightman at the turn of the century. It continues to this day in the plight of women who feel called to the role of minister, as the church has historically defined it.

A poignant contemporary example is Margarete Prange. Because she does not live in the United States, Ms. Prange is one of the very few Adventist women who continues the 19th century practice of holding the ministerial license. Since 1975 she has been licensed as a minister by the Westphalian Conference in Germany (see page 12 of this issue). The following is a plea from the secretary of that conference, written in 1977, to then-General Conference President Pierson:

Dear Brother Pierson:

The reason for my writing is my promise to give you some more information about the work of our lady-ministers in Germany. You will remember our discussion about the problem of having extremely able lady-ministers without any chance [for them] to be ordained. The churches this special lady [licensed minister Margarete Prange] works in always ask why we do not ordain her, since they very soon see her good standing and her spiritual abilities.

Our sister Margarete Prange has studied a full education at our theological college in Darmstadt. After completing her courses and passing her examinations with getting her diploma she began her work in July 1968 in Bad Oeynhausen. There she remained until the end of 1969 and was sent to Gutersloh, where she worked until May 1976. From June 1976 she has her responsibilities in Gelsenkirchen, a comparably large church. . . . She has

the full responsibilities for this district, and has another intern to guide. To give her the full authority the churches want her being ordained. That is the situation.

A lady-minister in Germany has the same obligations as her male colleagues. That means she has to give sermons every Sabbath in the different churches in her district—no matter how large the churches are. They give Bible studies—and we expect the same amount of work of her as of the other ministers. Besides this, they have to give religious instruction to the children. Then they have to look for the youth work and the other departments of the church. Public meetings have to be held as well; that means public Bible studies as well as evangelistic meetings. They do not function just as helpers, but have to take an active role in the [church] representations. She is an evangelist! . . .

We are only fair in saying that she is one of our best ministers we have within our Union. This is true in respect of her capability as well as of her baptisms.

As far as I see—and you said the same [recalling a conversation he had with Pierson]—there is no reason, neither from the Bible nor from the Spirit of Prophecy, not to ordain female ministers. . . . I think we should try to find some way to give these ladies the full accreditation. Perhaps it would not be good to open the way for the ordination of ladies irrespective of the different countries of the world with their different cultures. But if we as a church could go so far as to allow the Unions to decide in the single case, it would surely help. The ordination of a lady should be the exception, but in such a case as we have it here we should find some way to go ahead.

Please, Brother Pierson, try to find some solution to our problem. If the church could give a free hand in direction of an ordination, it would surely help our lady and it would make happy her churches, because they always press us to this end. . . .

P.S. I write this letter with the full support of my president, Brother Fischdick, as well as with the knowledge and authority given by Brother Kilian, the Union Conference President, and by Brother Ludescher, the Division President.⁹

A diary entry of Ellen White's seems to support Gunter Fraatz's plea to ordain Margarete Prange to the pastoral ministry, as it makes an important statement about her concept of the role of women in ministry:

The Lord has given Christ to the world for ministry. Merely to preach the Word is not ministry. The Lord desires His ministering servants to occupy a place worthy of the highest consideration. In the mind of God, the ministry of men *and women* existed before the world was created.¹⁰

Ellen White's premise that God conceived of a ministry for both men and women before He created the world destroys the notion of women's subordination. Her writings and the history of the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the 19th century illustrate that women were indeed serving as "priests" and "ministers" of the Lord. We must harmonize with that heritage.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen White to Brother Harper, July 8, 1894, H30a, 1894.

2. Ellen White to W. C. White, August 6, 1894.

3. *Review and Herald* (July 9, 1895).

4. *SDA Church Manual* (1986, p. 64).

5. Although later Spring Meeting and Annual Council actions have allowed for the ordination of women as deaconesses and elders, they are "illegal" in the sense that the *SDA Church Manual* can only be modified at a General Conference Session.

6. James White, *Review and Herald* (April 26, 1860).

7. Adventist leadership of the 1870s clearly was not troubled over the lack of scriptural authority for licensing women as ministers.

8. Ellen White, January 17, 1901, B7-1901, emphasis supplied.

9. Gunter Fraatz, Secretary of Westphalian Conference, to Robert Pierson, July 1, 1977.

10. Ellen White, diary entry, March 12, 1891, Ms. 23-1891, emphasis supplied.