
The Debate About Women: What Happened? Why?

by Charles Scriven

Nothing was resolved or solved. Delegates to the July General Conference Session in Indianapolis refused to “recommend” the ordination of women to pastoral ministry. Yet they endorsed the policy of allowing certain unordained ministers—“selected licensed or commissioned ministers,” as the final wording put it—to perform the marriage ceremony.

The latter vote, taken with women explicitly in mind, assured an ambivalent outcome to the debate about equality and spiritual leadership in the church. A mixed signal went forth: women are neither fully accepted nor fully rejected in the Adventist pastorate. The status of women pastors—in the church, if not before God—was exactly the same as before the session began.

Whether this will energize or enervate the women’s movement in Adventism remains to be seen. For partisans of equality, hope is alive, but its full realization seems as distant as ever. Yet, judging from the defensive tactics several of these partisans employed, an even worse outcome was expected—a rollback, perhaps, of the pastoral privileges women enjoy at present, or even a policy barring women as local elders. To many, avoiding a setback was itself a surprise.

The subject of women in pastoral leadership came up at two points during the session in Indianapolis. Beginning Tuesday afternoon, July 10, the delegates considered a 1989 Annual Council document on the ordination of women. The An-

nual Council had said that “most of the world church” does not favor the ordination of women, and that world leaders do not agree on whether “Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White” support it. For these reasons, and because of possible “disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the Church,” the Annual Council had concluded: “We do not recommend authorization for women to be ordained to the gospel ministry.”

Even before debate began, it was widely believed that the delegates would adopt the Annual Council’s recommendation. Presumably with this in mind, Monty Sahlin, adult ministries coordinator in the Church Ministries Department of the North American Division and a partisan of women in ministry, moved at the start to table, or indefinitely postpone, action on the recommendation. The delegates defeated his motion.

Speakers through the afternoon and the following morning revealed a series of basic convictions that galvanize the partisans and opponents of women’s ordination. Although both sides appealed to Scripture, because of the time constraints, broad allusions were the rule, rather than subtle exegesis.

An opponent, Gabriel Boakye-Danquah, publishing director of the West African Union Mission, said that the Bible nowhere commands the ordination of women. “I tell you,” he said, “if it is in the Bible, we want it. If it is not in the Bible, this church must reject it.”

Against this, Robert Johnston, chair of the Department of New Testament, SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University, replied that

“Pathfinders are unbiblical,” and “Quinquennial sessions are unbiblical.” He suggested that something not forbidden in the Bible can still be biblical in spirit, and held up a \$50 bill, offering it to anyone who could find a “thus saith the Lord” prohibiting the ordination of women.

Other delegates claimed to find positive biblical support for their positions. An opponent, John Stevens, director of public affairs and religious liberty, Pacific Union, declared that the Bible is “very clear on roles.” Then he added cryptically, “God gave to Adam the gift of authority, which really is a lower gift than the gift he gave to Eve, which is influence.”

Another delegate, Alfredo Aeschlimann, retired ministerial director of the Inter-American Division, said that spiritual authority belongs to men, not women. In the Old Testament only men

became priests. In the New Testament only men became apostles. Aeschlimann declared that the reason no “written prohibition” of ordination of women can be found in the Bible is that “during the world’s history for almost 6,000 years everybody could see and know that the priesthood was a function for men.”

A delegate who favored ordination for women, Scott LeMert, a pastor from Idaho, said that according to Scripture the “church of the last days will have God’s Spirit placed upon both men and women, not on men only.” At the same time, he pleaded for the church to be “careful” in its use of Scripture. The church that fails to ordain women, he elaborated, should “forbid any woman to speak ever in the church because that also has biblical authority.” He then reminded delegates that, in the past, Scripture was misused to defend slavery

Voices of Global Change?

by Kendra Haloviak

Once again I was sitting in a General Conference Session, listening to a discussion on the issue of women in ministry. Five years before, as an 18-year-old woman planning to enter college as a theology major, I had sat in the Superdome in New Orleans and heard the 1985 General Conference Session debate the role of women ministers. Since then I have often shared with church members, young people, and others in the greater community, the events I witnessed in New Orleans. Now, in Indianapolis, I again believed it would be helpful for me, as a 23-year-old intern pastor, to hear firsthand the discussions and debates at the 1990 General Conference Session.

The week before, I had received the latest issue of *Spectrum* under my hotel door in Indianapolis. Its cluster title read, “Voices of Global Change.” Reading the articles, hearing voices from six different continents, I was proud of the Adventist church as it listens to the voices and experiences of people around the globe.

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But in the Hoosier Dome, listening for two days to the debate on women in ministry, some of the people representing cultures that earlier intrigued me and made me rejoice, now aggressively spoke against the acceptance of women in pastoral ministry. They reminded me of just how long it will take a world church to become united on such an issue.

Two convictions warred at the core of my being. On the one hand, I appreciated and respected the diversity of cultures within our church—cultures whose voices must be heard. On the other hand, I believe that our church, in the congregations that have affirmed the ministry of women, should ordain qualified women as pastoral ministers. For several days at Indianapolis, as I listened to voices in the cafeteria and hotel lobby, voices in forum meetings and in business sessions on the main floor, the tension between my two convictions increased. I was no longer celebrating the voices from around the world.

Thursday, at the morning business session, the ordination of women was at the top of the agenda. In a speech to the delegates, Elder Neal Wilson, immediate past president of the General Conference, joined his voice to the opponents of the ordination of women. After reviewing the work of various General Conference commissions on women in ministry—which he had chaired—Wilson launched into a 25-minute rebuttal to arguments in favor of the ordination of women.

and the divine right of kings, which “turned out to be nothing more than the divine right of tyranny.”

The implication was that the Holy Spirit advances the church’s understanding, a point made also by Lourdes Morales-Gudmundsson, chair of the department of modern languages at the University of Connecticut at Stamford and a member of the Atlantic Union executive committee. God called Ellen White to be a prophet, knowing “that according to Paul, women should not exercise teaching authority over men.” That, she said, was a message to the “last-day church”—God would “call whomever he would.” Speaking for the ordination of women, she declared that the church today is “called upon to allow the Spirit to work.”

However, on the use of Ellen White to support ordination of women, one delegate, Ernesto Ugarte, a layman from Chile, remarked, “Let us

not forget that Ellen White was never ordained.”

As a North American had begun the Tuesday afternoon session with an effort to postpone a vote on the Annual Council recommendation, at the end another North American came forward with a similar effort. Leon Trusty moved to send the recommendation back to the commission that had written it—“with consideration,” he said, “of allowing the divisions to make a decision.” The chair, General Conference Vice President Robert Kloosterhuis, refused the motion, saying the delegates should decide the matter, not refer it back.

The debate the next day, Wednesday morning, began with a long speech from Neal Wilson, by then the former General Conference president. He defended the Annual Council recommendation against ordaining women, reviewing the his-

He concluded by rejecting the concept—urged especially the day before by North American conference presidents—that each division should be able to decide the matter for themselves. Ordination, he said, should be universal, for “this is a universal church.” The dome resounded with applause.

Shortly after Wilson concluded, dozens of delegates lined up at the “debate” microphone. Before the first speaker could begin, a delegate from the Inter-American Division called question on the motion. The chair ruled that it was a nondebatable motion and that a vote must be taken. Following a poll of the delegates, the chair’s announcement of the necessary two-thirds approval—1,058 in favor, 222 opposed—ended further discussion.

That was the moment I felt utter disappointment in my church. I had never anticipated that *discussion* would be voted down. What would I say to the college-age Adventists back home at Kettering? Can one continue to work for change within a church where voices of the global majority insist on drowning out the voices of the minority? For me, the most discouraging vote of the session was the vote to silence voices.

Quickly, the vote followed to declare officially that “we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry:” 1,173 voting Yes, and 377 voting No. Thus ended another five years. What will the vote be in 1995? 2000? Will the issue of the ordination of women even get

to the floor? In the future, as the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist denomination expands around the world, what voices will be permitted to be heard? Will the inclusion of more voices from Latin America, Africa, and the Soviet Union completely exclude the voices of young American professionals? It is disconcerting to feel threatened by the international voices of Adventism.

For me, the issue of the ordination of women is no longer only a moral issue, with implications for the presentation of the gospel. Now, it is also an ecclesiastical issue. How will congregations in Zimbabwe, and Hong Kong, and Brazil affect my church in Kettering, Ohio? Should not divisions, unions, and conferences be permitted to decide how to share the gospel in ways that enhance Global Strategy in their continents, including North America? A growing number of North American churches would insist that such a Global Strategy includes the ministry of qualified, ordained women.

I long not to be torn between the conviction that women should be ordained to the gospel ministry and my conviction that the “Voices of Global Change” enrich our appreciation for the power of the gospel. I want, once again, as the introduction to the last issue of *Spectrum* states, to “start genuinely celebrating the rich and exciting diversity of an expanding multicultural denomination.”

tory that led up to it and considering several objections.

One objection, he said, grows out of Galatians 3:28, which says that in Christ “there is neither male nor female” (RSV). This text prompts the claim that failure to ordain women is discriminatory and immoral. Wilson denied this claim on grounds that Jesus’ 12 disciples were male.

In a few moments the main motion—affirming a ministry for women but denying them a place as ordained pastors—passed. The vote was 1,173 for, 377 against.

Another objection, he said, is based on the analogy of slavery. The fact that this practice was once defended by the church but later opposed invites us today to “move away from” our policy against the ordination of women. Wilson denied this, citing Ellen White’s opposition to slavery and silence on ordination. “We don’t believe [the two issues] are similar,” he said.

He considered, too, the objection that without a consensus on the question of ordination for women, the church’s divisions could decide individually. Wilson said No, ordination is “universal,” and so is the church. Allowing the divisions to decide would “fragment” Adventism, leading to “further steps of pluralism” and “the danger of congregationalism.”

Some 45 delegates, in line the previous afternoon, had been authorized to speak and were now at the “debate” microphone. But speakers at the nearby “procedures” microphone, meant for questions of order, amendments, and the like, took precedence. Harold Camacho, secretary of the Southeastern California Conference, proposed an amendment to the Annual Council recommendation that would have given “fields” the authority to decide for themselves about ordination for women. Robert Kloosterhuis, again at the chair, ruled that it was “not truly an amendment”

since its effect was to “destroy the motion.”

Russell Standish, health and temperance director for the Southeast Asia Union Mission, then proposed an amendment to an early paragraph of the Annual Council document that would have expressed the world church’s disapproval, not only of ordained women pastors, but also of local women elders. Kloosterhuis said the suggestion pertained to the “report” section of the document and not to the recommendation itself and was therefore irrelevant to the main motion.

Next, Ruben Ponce, health and temperance director for the Northeast Mexican Conference, offered a motion to close debate. It passed by far more than the necessary two-thirds vote, and the 45 delegates lined up at the debate microphone reluctantly returned to their seats. In a few moments the main motion—affirming a ministry for women but denying them a place as ordained pastors—passed. The vote was 1,173 for, 377 against.

The actual recommendation from Annual Council concluded the first part of a document originally written by the church’s Role of Women Commission. The 1989 Annual Council had approved the entire document, but determined to take only the first part to the 1990 General Conference Session for a delegate vote. The second part gave “commissioned” or “licensed” ministers, including women, the right, under certain conditions, to “perform essentially the ministerial functions of an ordained minister.” But according to an agreement worked out at Annual Council and meant to conciliate the partisans of women in ministry, this was presented in Indianapolis as a nondebtable “report.”

Opponents of ordination of women, unhappy about the Annual Council agreement, knew that a proposed *Church Manual* amendment on the marriage ceremony would provide an opportunity for resistance. The *Manual* authorized only “ordained ministers” to give “charge, vows, and declaration of marriage” at a wedding. The proposed amendment allowed the charge, vows, and declaration to be given, where division committees approved it, by certain unordained ministers, or as the final wording had it, by “selected li-

censed or commissioned ministers.” The amendment also substituted gender-inclusive language for the pronoun *he*.

Under a broad interpretation of a *Church Manual* passage on “licensed ministers,” unordained male ministers had, at least in North America, been conducting baptisms and marriages for several years. The amendment was meant to resolve the conflict between that interpretation and the restrictive language of the passage on the marriage ceremony. It would also bring the *Church Manual* into line with the 1989 Annual Council action authorizing certain women pastors to perform “essentially” the functions of an ordained minister.

Opponents of gender equality in the pastorate saw recent history in North America and the 1989 Annual Council vote as incompatible with the spirit of the vote that had been taken the day before by the General Conference Session against the ordination of women. Debate began Thursday morning and again the focus was on the place and role of women in the church. Calvin Rock, the General Conference vice president serving as chair, refused efforts by some opponents of women marrying and baptizing to hurry the delegates to a vote. “We just can’t proceed with something this important,” Rock said before the lunch break, “without giving a representative portion of individuals who wish to speak the opportunity to do so.”

A call to end discrimination had been sounded in the discussion about ordination, and it was repeated now. Susan Sickler, a laymember of the Columbia Union Executive Committee, linked this theme with the pragmatic argument that the church must move toward justice to save its children. She declared that young people who feel that the church has a “lower standard for treating all people with justice and equality than the secular society has” conclude that the church “has nothing to offer them and they leave.” And this, she went on, costs money as well as loved ones. “Who is going to bear the burden of world church finance if our children leave?” she asked.

A pastor and delegate from Germany, Heintz Ottschoffsky, echoed the point. The amendment

is important beyond North America, he said, for in Euro-Africa, too, “many loyal Adventists will be driven to the end of their acceptability” if it fails to pass.

Opponents also mustered pragmatic arguments. Theirs focused on the possibility of schism. Rick Blythe, a pastor in the Marshall Islands, said the amendment would move the church toward “disunity.” Paul Yeboah, from the African-Indian Ocean Division, decried how the amendment would shift decision-making power downward to the divisions. “[T]here is no telling what we can bring into the church,” he said. Then he referred ominously to a future of “homosexuals” and “abortion rights people” lining up for privileges and input.

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F. W. Wernick, a retired General Conference vice president from North America, objected that the amendment allowing unordained pastors to conduct marriages would “further erode the importance and sacredness of ordination.” Earlier, James Coffin, editor of the South Pacific Division *Record* and himself a defender of the amendment, had remarked that the Bible contains no record of the “ordination of pastors, per se.” Before that, during debate about whether to recommend the ordination of women, Faye Haupt, a member of the Carolina Conference Committee, had suggested that “the problem is probably in ordination itself.” She asked, “How much emphasis have we put on this, or do we believe in the priesthood of all believers?” The real meaning of ordination provided an unspoken background throughout the discussion, but remained unresolved to the end.

Debate stretched far into the afternoon, affording delegates unfamiliar with the issue an opportunity to hear the arguments for the first time. Many had never heard a woman express the pain connected with exclusion. Fay Blix, an attorney and a member of the Southeastern California Conference Committee, said she favored the amendment even though having women do the work of ministry while withholding ordination was like having a “common law wife without giving her the dignity of a marriage license.” Her stand was a “compromise” made “because I know that my sisters in ministry in this country are in pain today.” She wanted them to see the fruits of their labors. “I don’t want them,” she went on, “to have to choose between the call of God and the call of their church.”

By late afternoon, the chair, now Kenneth Mittleider, another General Conference vice president, recognized a motion to refer the amendment back to the *Church Manual* Committee. The pressure to do this came in part from North America, still jittery about the vote. The motion was defeated.

Mittleider then called Floyd Bresee, General Conference Ministerial Association director, to the main podium. Contradicting many North Americans, including two conference presidents, Ed Mottschieder (Ohio) and Steve Gifford (Southeastern California), who had spoken earlier, Bresee said that ordaining women division by division would bring disunity. But he nevertheless appealed to delegates from outside North America to respect the need here to “encourage women in pastoral ministry.” He asked, “Can we—both sides—give a little, meet in the middle, and go out from Indianapolis united?”

Then Neal Wilson came to the podium. He, too, spoke for the amendment. He believed North

American leaders would “abide by the decision” taken the previous day against ordaining women. “I do not believe,” he declared, “that we are going to find insubordination or rebellion or defiance on the part of the North American Division.” But a defeat of the amendment allowing unordained ministers, male or female, to conduct marriages would put North America’s cooperative spirit at risk. “Parents,” he said, “provoke not your children to anger.” It was a pointed allusion, if not a fully apt one. The application was obvious.

Soon after Wilson’s remarks, the delegates voted. Those in favor of the amendment numbered 776. Those opposed, 496. Despite their overwhelming resistance to the ordination of women, delegates had approved an action meant, as Floyd Bresee had said, “to encourage women in pastoral ministry.”

But if in the end nothing was fully resolved, at least one opponent of women pastors thought the momentum had turned against his own position. Russell Standish, from the Far Eastern Division, approached a delegate who had spoken on behalf of women and said, “You won.”

The assessment is a guess, not a certainty. Can opponents come to accept the claim that the New Testament overcomes the ideology of roles and the masculinity of the priesthood? Can they welcome a Holy Spirit who guides the church to faithful transformation of itself? Can they embrace a unity among all members that is distinct from uniformity? Can North America persist in its struggle when assurances of cooperation and nondefiance seemed to abet passage of the amendment? Could a fresh look at the meaning of ordination reveal a new path to the goal?

No one knows for sure. Meanwhile, a few women in pastoral positions continue to work, and, like good Adventists, continue to hope.