
The Media and the GC Session: Women Make the Most News

by Ronald Knott

American newspaper readers as a group may not know much about Adventists, but after the General Conference Session in Indianapolis, they are certain to know that Adventists don't ordain women to the ministry.

Newspaper clippings sent to the General Conference communication department this summer from national clipping services show that the women's ordination issue overwhelmingly dominated press interest in stories about Adventism and the session.

Associated Press wire stories and a syndicated feature article by *New York Times* religion writer Ari L. Goldman (see box) were responsible for the majority of the coverage. Two Associated Press stories, covering the denial of ordination and approval for women pastors to perform marriages and baptisms, were picked up and reprinted in various forms in hundreds of papers across the nation. Versions of Goldman's feature article showed up in many papers, though apparently not as widely as the Associated Press stories.

Headlines attached to the Associated Press stories ranged from the inflammatory "Adventists Reject Women," and the inaccurate "Seventh-day Adventists Bar Women From Pulpits," to the more charitable "Adventists Decline to Ordain Women."

Church communication leaders were pleased with the volume of news about the church that

went into media around the world during the session, according to Herb Ford, session news director. Ford, who has worked in or directed news operations for several General Conference sessions, said that new technology, particularly FAX transmissions, was the most significant factor in pushing stories about the church into the public eye. In addition, the local, national, and international press expressed greater interest in Adventist news than in previous sessions, Ford said. The Soviet News Agency TASS called twice. "This has never happened before," he said.

"The FAX machine helped us get news out in a manner that hasn't been possible before," Ford said. Even as recently as the New Orleans session in 1985, the General Conference news operation was dependent on the telex machine. Ford said he was particularly pleased with the steady stream of information sent to news agencies in Paris, London, the Soviet Union, and to church communication offices in overseas divisions.

Ford noted that writers from Associated Press were on the floor of the session for three days, something that has never happened before. He also said that the Associated Press Indianapolis news bureau chief told him that "Adventists ran the best news machine of any religious body to hold a convention in that city."

Ford, who worked under Shirley Burton, director of the General Conference Communication Department, supervised a staff of more than 30 newswriters from conference, union, division, and institutional communication departments.

In addition to the role of women, the major item of interest to the press outside Indianapolis was

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the election of Robert S. Folkenberg as General Conference president. A third Associated Press story reported on a two-hour plenary session devoted to how trans-national corporations are focusing their marketing toward third-world women and children. The result is 2.5 million tobacco-related deaths each year. The story not only ran a quote from one of the guest speakers, Ronald M. Davis, director of the Office of Smoking and Health of the U.S. Public Health Service, but also from Robert Folkenberg's speech to the delegates: "When big tobacco companies are making millions of dollars on the pain and death and suffering of multiplied millions, we have no option but to speak out." Another Associated Press story, which told of the church's vote to establish a division in the Soviet Union, ran in many papers at the end of July, two weeks after the session ended and nearly four weeks after the fact.

The most significant newspaper to run a story was the *New York Times*. The feature piece by Goldman ran in the July 18 issue. Goldman flew to Indianapolis on Friday, July 13, after being contacted by Betty Cooney, a session newswriter

and communication director of the Greater New York Conference. Goldman spent Friday evening and Sabbath conducting interviews with delegates and church officials.

According to Ford, Goldman said he came to Indianapolis admittedly "looking for controversy." His article focused on the women's issue as a barometer of the church's changing political power base.

Human interest aspects of the remarkable session, reportedly the longest-running religious convention held at the Hoosier Dome, earned almost as much attention in the local press as hard news. Indianapolis newspapers, which supplied their own writers, ran stories on vegetarianism, the large food-service operation, the massive increase in city-wide fruit consumption, visitors from Eastern Europe and Pitcairn Island, surgeon Ben Carson, healthy octogenarian Mavis Lindgren, and others.

A video clipping report of what appeared on Indianapolis television stations listed 23 stories or mentions of Adventists or the session, totaling more than 40 minutes of air time. This was in addition to a series of paid spots run before and during the session by the General Conference Communication Department.

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Foreign Influence Gains In the Adventist Church

By Ari L. Goldman
Special to The New York Times

INDIANAPOLIS, July 15 — Thirty-five thousand members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a faith born and nurtured in 19th-century America, came to terms this past week with the stark fact that theirs is no longer an American church.

At a 10-day convention at the Hoosier Dome that was attended by church members from 184 nations, delegates resoundingly rejected a resolution favored by members from the United States that women be ordained as full-fledged ministers. The change was vigorously opposed by delegates from Latin America and Africa; the vote was 1,173 to 337.

That vote was the most striking sign that overseas Adventists hold increasing power in the church and are not afraid to use it. While the church's newly-elected president, the Rev. Robert S.

Folkenberg, is an American, he is also the son of Puerto Rican missionaries and he spent two decades serving the church in Latin America.

Many Americans at the convention said it was paradoxical that Americans who founded the church no longer controlled it. "But it's not anything to be sad about," said Roy Branson, a writer and editor who is a son and grandson of American Adventist preachers. "Maybe it's something to celebrate. Aside from the Catholic Church, the Adventists are now the most international church."

With 6.2 million members worldwide, the Adventists, who emphasize winning converts, have been remarkably successful in spreading their message. The church has grown by about 40 percent over the last five years. Virtually every nation in the world

has an Adventist church.

Founded in 1863 in Battle Creek, Mich., the Adventist Church is based on the belief that these are the "last days" and that the end of the world is near. Out of the chaos of destruction, they believe, a new earth will emerge in which those redeemed by Christ will live eternally. Unlike some other apocalyptic groups, however, the Adventists do not set a date for the end of the world.

And, while waiting, they are very much concerned with matters of this world. They have put a great deal of emphasis on health care and have built a network of hospitals. Adventists do not drink alcohol or smoke tobacco.

While faithful to the New Testament, Adventists give great authority to the laws enunciated in the Old Testament. Invoking the Fourth Commandment, they observe Saturday rather than Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. They also distinguish between "clean" and "unclean" meats as spelled out in Leviticus, observing a modified form of the kosher laws kept by observant Jews.

According to church statistics, Adventism has grown by 1.8 million members since the church held its last world convention in 1985, although the rate of growth is much higher abroad than in the United States. In 1989, for example, there were 90 conversions to the faith each day in North America, while there were 361 a day in East Africa.

F. Donald Yost, the denomination's director of archives and statistics, says the number of Adventists abroad has exceeded those in North America since 1922.

Until now, however, Americans were able to retain control of the direction and policies of the church, in part through their financial dominance. Even today, 80 percent of the \$160 million annual budget of the church's world headquarters in Silver Spring, Md., comes from American donors.

Today, only 12 percent of Adventists live in North America. About 30 percent live in Africa and 40 percent in Central and South America and the Caribbean.

On the question of whether women should be fully ordained, both sides invoked the name of an early church leader, Ellen White, whose written accounts of visions of heaven continue to shape the

theology of the church.

"It's not only ironic but appalling that we can't ordain women when our leading founder was Mrs. White, someone we quote more than St. Peter or St. Paul," said Capt. Herman Loris Kibble, an Adventist minister who is a Naval chaplain based in Oakland, Calif.

The Rev. Mario Veloso, a church official based in Brazil, responded: "But Mrs. White never accepted ordination. Instead she followed the biblical pattern, in which only men were ordained for service by God."

Captain Kibble quoted another California delegate in appealing to third world church members to support the ordination of women. "We sent our sons and daughters to the mission field where they adjusted to your culture," he quoted the woman as saying. "Will you now give us back a little consideration for our own culture?"

For most of the American delegates, Captain Kibble said, there was no option but to ordain women. "It's impossible for us to turn back the clock," he said.

Hurdles in Industrial Nations

Mr. Folkenberg, the newly elected president of the international church, said in an interview that Adventists had a much harder time winning adherents in "first world countries, where materialism and humanism predominate."

One American associate pastor said that she was worried that the effort to evangelize in North America would be badly hurt by the vote not to ordain women to the full church ministry. The associate, the Rev. Esther Ramharacksingh Knott, was ordained an elder of her Maryland church, but does not have the full authority of ordained men.

Mrs. Knott, 31 years old, said the lack of support from the third world members for the full ordination of women came as a great disappointment to her. She said Adventists abroad had both a religious and financial interest in keeping the American church healthy and growing. "By crippling us, they will cripple themselves," she said.