



World Votes *No* to Women's Ordination

North America's request is voted down at Utrecht by more than a two-to-one margin—1,481 against, 673 for.

by Charles Scriven

NORTH AMERICA, WITH HELP FROM NORTHERN Europe, roared Yes.

The rest of the world roared No. (The exact count? Who knows, division by division?)

The No's roared loudest, dashing, although by no means killing, hope for women pastors.

On July 6 in Utrecht, the labyrinthine movement for gender equality in the Adventist pastorate took a dramatic turn. With the delegates crowded into their seats, and the galleries at their weekday fullest, the 56th General Conference session rejected a proposition, presented by North America, that the ordination of women pastors to gospel ministry be permitted in the Seventh-day Adventist Church on a division-by-division basis.

The proposition would have opened the way for the North American and Trans-Euro-

pean Divisions, the two with the most interest and the most candidates, to offer ordination to all pastors "without regard to gender." But only 673 delegates marked their ballots Yes; 1,481 opposed the proposition.

Procedure

On the days leading up to the Wednesday vote, *ad hoc* groups from North America clustered in hallways and side rooms to discuss strategy. One group involved Alfred McClure, the North American Division president, along with a few union and conference presidents and selected women delegates.

No one thought seriously that the issue was how to win. The partisans of justice for women knew that resistance to the proposition was overwhelming, especially in the giant African and South American delegations. They knew, too, that since the 1990 vote in Indianapolis against church-wide approval of women's ordination, the General Conference president

Charles Scriven, president of Columbia Union College, received his Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California. He is the author of several books, including The Transformation of Culture (Herald Press, 1988), and The Demons Have Had It (Southern Publ. Assn., 1976).

had been publicly neutral about the proposition that was coming to the floor in Utrecht. Where thunderous blasts might have had an impact, the world church leadership team had barely piped up.

It seemed clear that, for the proposition's partisans, the issue was how to lose with a minimum of damage—either to church unity or to women's prospects in the future. A recurring question was whether to use parliamentary or other means in an effort to block a formal vote. This would have prevented the negative outcome everyone was predicting. By Wednesday, most supporters of the proposition, aware that opponents might force a vote in any case, were prepared to put up the best effort possible. It would be, if nothing else, a witness.

History

At 2 p.m. on Wednesday, July 6, Calvin Rock, GC vice president and chair for the meeting, introduced the agenda. The recent conversation began, he said, in 1971, with a formal request from Adventists in Finland who wanted to ordain women serving as pastors in that country. But in 1881, 90 years before that, Adventists at a General Conference Session had considered ordaining women. At that session they had even resolved to do so, although the three-person General Conference Committee authorized to act on the resolution had failed to follow through.

The request from Finland had led to a 1975 conference at Camp Mohaven in Ohio, where the consensus was that the Bible does not prohibit the ordination of women. But no authorization of ordination to pastoral ministry for women had followed that meeting. Now, even though women local elders were receiving church-approved ordinations, the question of full equality in the Adventist ministry was still unresolved.

Rock explained that the North American Division president would speak on behalf of the proposition, and that two theologians, arguing opposite positions, would introduce debate. Then delegates would be able to line up at *for* and *against* microphones for two-minute speeches (three minutes if translation into English was required). The vote would be taken at 5 p.m. or thereabouts.

Alfred McClure affirmed the North American Division's "unshakable commitment" to the world church, but implored the delegates to grant "freedom" to the divisions to ordain women to pastoral ministry. In North America, he said, the church's success in mission required such freedom.

"Tomorrow's leaders believe [women's ordination] is right," he said, and would be disillusioned if the proposition failed. He described himself as a "convert" to the view that women are fully equal in their potential for ministry, and argued that God gives "spiritual gifts irrespective of gender."

McClure ended his remarks by reassuring delegates that, although some would be disappointed whichever way the vote went, the North American Division would remain loyal to the other divisions, and the world church would remain united.

Debate

P. Gerard Damsteegt, a professor at Andrews University, made the formal case against the proposition. Though "equal before God," men and women are "different in their functional roles," he said, citing 1 Timothy and Titus. Women must never exercise "headship" or "authority" over men, and are thus disqualified from ordination to pastoral ministry. He linked the North American Division request to the spirit of "Babylon," saying it amounted to rejection of the authority of Scripture. With respect to the Bible, he said, the requirement

is “submission, not reinterpretation.”

In arguing that ordination of women is permissible, Raoul Dederen, also from Andrews University, appealed to “the development of Scripture.” The opposition, he said, overlooks what is summarized in Galatians 3:28, namely, that Jesus has brought about a new understanding of human relations. Now dividing walls are cast down. Although the Bible speaks no conclusive word about women and the ritual of ordination, equality best honors the spirit of the Bible as crystallized in Jesus. Oddly, however, Dederen weakened his case by saying that the idea of male headship still applies in the relation between husbands and wives.

Discussion

At the signal for the opening of floor debate, speakers—many more than would have a chance to speak before the 5 o’clock deadline—rushed to the *for* and *against* microphones. The arguments were familiar from the past quarter century of debate. As in 1990, one North American delegate, Ernest Castillo from the Pacific Union, spoke in Spanish and aimed his remarks at his brothers and sisters overseas. North America was in desperate need of a Yes vote, he declared, and would surely assist other divisions if they faced similar mission-based needs. “I guarantee you the North American Division would help,” he said.

The opposition stood its ground. One delegate, a middle-aged man, pulled his wife from her chair near the microphone, enclosed her in a severe hug, and made her sad-eyed, voiceless presence a prop for his defense of male headship. To anyone looking on, she seemed negligible. Whether that mattered depended on the beholder’s perspective, and

by now it seemed unlikely that many delegates would change their viewpoint as a result of the afternoon’s conversation.

Applause for opposition speeches mounted as the afternoon wore on. Not long after 5 p.m., Humberto Rasi, director of the General Conference Department of Education, made the motion to cut off debate. Before the delegates marked their ballots, Robert Folkenberg strode to the main podium to urge solidarity, no matter how the vote turned out. Taking no position of his own, he declared that he was pleased with the “process and decorum,” and prayed that the delegates would leave the room “in one accord.”

The delegates then divided, 673 votes Yes, 1,481 No. Although the outcome was expected, the actuality of defeat left supporters numb. Later in the evening, Alfred McClure faced the cameras, and in a comment beamed to North America by satellite, asked members of his North American Division to maintain unity with one another and with the wider church. Members should regard the vote, he said, as God’s “will to the body.” Nodding to the church outside North America, he declared: “We do not wish to break ranks with this great global family.”

He then promised further attention to the role of women in ministry, with a view to “equity” at “decision-making levels.” But it was his hope, he said, that this topic would not “distract us from our mission.”

For proponents of women’s ordination, justice belonged to the mission. Their frustration appeared to be a catalyst for deeper solidarity. Certainly, for supporters of North America’s motion, the belief that women and men are absolute equals in their capacity for spiritual leadership was as strong as ever. Clearly, the conversation would continue.