

A Sacred Moment At Sligo

Bryan Zervos recounts the biography of the first ordination of women to gospel ministry in the Adventist Church.

by Bryan Zervos

“THIS SABBATH IS A SACRED MOMENT, . . . FOR me, for Sligo, for the entire Seventh-day Adventist Church.” The words were Kendra Haloviak’s. They expressed the sentiments of the more than 1,100 people in the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church attending the first ordination of women to gospel ministry. “Today,” she said, “we let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Today we are more Adventist than we were last Sabbath.”

Adventist Church leaders from around the world attended the September 23 service. A score of women in ministry came from different parts of North America. Ordained Adventist ministers from across the United States participated in the ordination to gospel ministry of Penny Shell, director of pastoral ministries at the Shady Grove Adventist Hospital; Norma Osborn, associate pastor of the Sligo

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church; and Kendra Haloviak, assistant professor of religion at Columbia Union College.

Why did this service happen when it did? How did it come about?

The short answer is that when the 1995 General Conference in session voted to deny women the privilege of full ordination to the gospel ministry—as the session had in 1990—it provoked a moral maelstrom. And the Spirit began wooing local congregations into action.

Ten days after the July 5 vote on women at Utrecht, approximately 50 people crowded into the Sligo Sabbath school class led by Roy Branson, editor of *Spectrum*, and Donald Ortner, acting director of the American Museum of Natural History. Members discovered that they were sitting in concentric rectangles, representing the typical layout of Dutch cities—their chairs corresponding to buildings, their feet dangling in what would have been canals. A large panel of class members who had gone to Utrecht shared their experiences at the 1995 General Conference Session: exhausting committee meetings on reorganiza-

tion, musical performances that moved delegates to tears, lively discussions at breakout groups on biblical interpretation, family violence, and tobacco control.

A hush fell over the class as the panel began reporting the final item: *the* vote by the Session, 1,481 to 673, denying ordination of women to gospel ministry anywhere in the world. At the end of the sad account, Roy Branson said that after the vote, he had not found one North American conference or union president contemplating ordaining women to gospel ministry. That meant action had to be taken by others. It was time, he said, for women in ministry to go to their ordained colleagues and say, "It's time; ordain me now." It was time for Penny Shell to go to Les Pitton, vice president for new business, Adventist Healthcare Mid-Atlantic; for Norma Osborn and Esther Knott to go to Arthur Torres, senior pastor of Sligo church; and for Kendra Haloviak to go to Charles Scriven, president of Columbia Union College, and for each of them to say, "It's time; ordain me now." It was time, Branson said, for congregations in Adventism to ordain women *now*. The class erupted in applause and intense discussion.

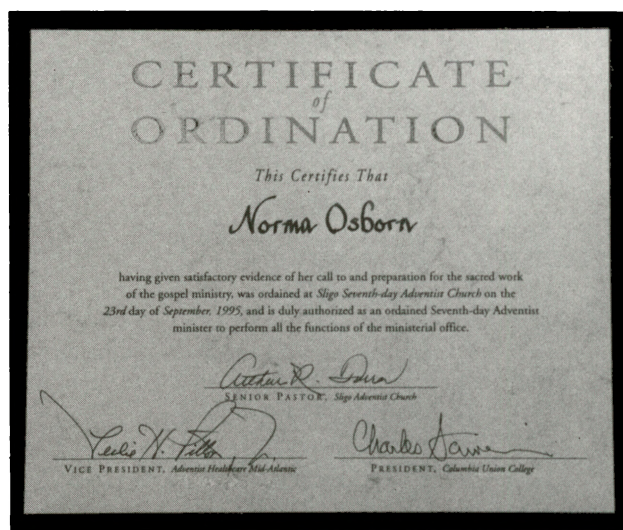
Scriven, a member of the panel, supported the proposal wholeheartedly. Haloviak, followed by several others, wondered about

women initiating discussion of the matter. Uncharacteristically, some members remained deep in conversation for an hour after class. During that time, Scriven asked Haloviak, an assistant professor at the college, "Are you ready to go ahead?" She smiled; "I am."

Energized by the hope of accomplishing locally what the world church had declined to do globally, the class quickly focused on a regularly scheduled Sligo church board meeting, convening three days later on July 18. By Sunday morning, two who had been at the Sabbath school class, Charles Scriven and James Greene, vice president for finance at Columbia Union College, had already drafted proposals for action.

At the church board meeting, Torres repeated what he had said in his sermon to the Sligo congregation July 8—that the negative vote at Utrecht on ordination of women was so personally painful that he had literally gone to his home and wept. Now, Torres said, he had received a letter from which he would read. An active member of Sligo requested that her name be dropped from membership in a denomination that officially discriminated against women. Torres suggested that a church business meeting be scheduled for August 1, two weeks away, and that an *ad hoc* group be appointed to propose to the business meeting an appropriate response to the Utrecht action. Torres' suggestion was voted by the church board (with only one negative vote), and the members chosen from the floor: Roy Branson, Dorita Boulden, John Butler, Israel Castro, Dolores Maupin, Charles Scriven, Mitchell Tyner, and Kit Watts. Attending *ex officio* were Pastors Torres and Paul Anderson, and Robert Visser, a systems analyst who chairs the Sligo Church board, and who was also selected chair of the *ad hoc* committee.

Incorporating some of Greene's wording, Scriven's draft was a Rembrandt, exquisite in every detail. Not surprisingly, the principal discussion within the committee revolved



around setting the September 23 date for an ordination service to gospel ministry, even if the conference and union were to decline to vote ordained ministers' credentials. After two sessions of vigorous debate and editing, the *ad hoc* committee, with only one abstention, approved the proposal.

Tuesday evening, August 1, less than a month after the vote in Utrecht, more than 200 members packed into the Fellowship Room of Sligo church—more than had attended the business session to approve a multi-million dollar addition to the Sligo church building. The church board, meeting in business session, was called to order by Visser. When the resolution proposed by the *ad hoc* committee was distributed and read, a buzz spread through the room. The church was being asked to approve not just words, but action. A three-minute limit on each speech and a one-hour limit on the debate was adopted.

From the start, discussion was brisk but cordial (see excerpts on pages 37-44). First, members wanted to be reassured—and were—that Sligo was not breaking away from the Potomac Conference. Then, young people and women expressed how affirmed they felt by the convening of the meeting and the proposal. As the deadline for the end of the discussion approached, Ralph Thompson, a Sligo church member and secretary of the General Conference, rose to speak. Thompson stated that a letter was even then on its way from A. C. McClure, president of the North American Division, to the president of the Columbia Union, Ralph Martin, urging unity. Thompson personally favored ordination of women, he said, but approving the proposal meant that Sligo could be held in “rebellion,” and “then some of us [would] have to make decisions whether or not we belong to a rebellious church.”

After debate had been prolonged for another half hour, a vote was taken and the results announced: 138 in favor, 21 opposed.

Within three hours, Sligo's action had been distributed over CompuServe's SDAs Online forum, and, by noon of the following day, hundreds of reactions had been posted. Free association on the action—and the “meaning” of ordination—ranged from thoughtful comments for and against the proposal to allegations that it was satanically inspired.

For the next three weeks, the focus of attention turned toward the Potomac Conference Executive Committee. Passionate letters poured in to committee members in support of granting licenses to eligible women pastors (see pages 44-55). At the conference committee meeting, Sunday, August 25, Ralph W. Martin, president of the Columbia Union, explained that thoughtful Adventists are faced with a moral dilemma—following the dictates of justice and equality, or following the actions of the General Conference in session. Torn between an intense personal conviction that women should be treated equally and a sense of responsibility to the corporate church, Martin and Harold Lee, secretary of the Columbia Union, resolutely opposed the granting of credentials to women.

At a pre-meeting discussion, Scriven had invoked the example of Christ consistently acting on behalf of the oppressed. He pled with the committee, as well as with the conference and union officials, to vote according to their consciences, to take a stand on behalf of what was right. Repeating a long list of totally unfamiliar surnames, he asked if anyone recognized them. Hardly anyone did. These were all names of conference and union presidents, Scriven said. But you, he told the denominational officials, by doing what is right, could go down in Adventist history.

Torres said that his congregation simply could not fathom the Seventh-day Adventist Church's preventing women being fully recognized, ordained ministers of the gospel. Almost all the committee members who spoke

agreed with Scriven and Torres. But when the vote was announced (union officials did not cast ballots), the committee had voted 11 to 8 against granting women ordained ministers' licenses. Eleven years before, the same Potomac Conference Committee had tabled its action granting women the same license given to ordained men (see *Spectrum*, Vol. 15, No. 3, pp. 2-4).

The drama shifted to the potential ordinands. In the light of the conference's action, would they still accept Sligo's invitation to proceed with ordination? Kendra Haloviak remained committed. After careful personal reflection, and assurances from Les Pitton that she would not be penalized professionally for proceeding, Penny Shell decided to participate in the ordination service. Norma Osborn believed in ordination of women to gospel ministry, but did not want to be part of what some would perceive as a rebellion. However, in a September 5 letter, she declared her decision to accept her church's invitation to participate: Because it is "more than, bigger than myself. It is for others—my children, my friends, my church. I must take my place in history"; because "change takes place from the grass roots up"; and because she believed that on September 23 "all our sparks can come together to make a great big joyful fire for the Lord."

All three candidates were examined by three ordained ministers. The candidates also participated heavily in planning the ordina-

tion service, along with other pastors and lay persons in a committee chaired by Marianne Scriven, director of the Sligo church choir, and a former Sligo minister of music. Eleven weeks after the vote at Utrecht, Sligo held its ordination service.

Saturday morning, the *New York Times* carried a feature report about the first ordination of women to gospel ministry among Seventh-day Adventists. The Sunday after the service, the *Washington Times* ran a front page account of the event, complete with two photos. The following days, officials in the General Conference were trying to minimize the significance of the event.

Whatever denominational officials may say, those who attended the event, lay persons and ordained ministers alike, affirm that it was the most moving ordination—indeed worship service—they had ever experienced. They agreed with the importance Penny Shell saw in the ordination. "Even more difficult than not being ordained, when it's expected, is to belong to a church that will not ordain women. I no longer belong to such a church, and it's a great joy."

Worshippers at the ordination service, September 23, believe that they and the Adventist Church experienced the reality of Paul's words quoted by Norma Osborn after her ordination: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NRSV).