

Refocusing the Ordination Discussion as a Local Issue



Photo: Jay Racz/The Press-Enterprise

Jennifer Scott was ordained at the Loma Linda University Church on April 22, 2000.

by Georgia E. Hodgkin

"Today, the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a world movement. Ordained ministers are qualified to serve the denominational organization anywhere in the world. Yet a worldwide credential is not issued. Credentials are issued by the employing organization and are given to those clergy who serve in a specific area. This contrast between a world movement and local service highlights the dualism of present-day ministry. The concept of ordaining ministers to a world movement is in contrast to the position of the early church practice as well as that of early Adventists who often limited ministry to specific areas and among people who looked and thought like them." —Southeastern California Conference Ordination-Commission Procedures

When the Southeastern California Conference (SECC) Executive Committee voted on March 16 to issue male and female pastors in its district the same ministerial credentials, the event marked a first for the Seventh-day Adventist denomination, which operates a two-tier credentialing system for men and women. The twenty-seven-page document on ordination-commission procedures that the Executive Committee adopted spells out the responsibilities of the conference and congregation in the ordination process (pages 32-34). The last paragraph of the document is entitled "Equal Credentials be Granted," and its last sentence reads: "All ministers in the Conference will be issued the same credential."

"Treating women ministers without discrimination in our conference has been a long-standing goal," President F. Lynn Mallery said in the press release posted on the Adventist News Network (ANN). "The document [Ordination-Commission Procedures and Guidelines] was adopted without one dissenting vote."

Coming from the largest conference in the North American Division, the vote did not go unnoticed at the General Conference offices in Silver Spring, Maryland. On April 4, GC president Jan Paulsen posted a comment saying that he regretted the vote. "The issue is not the rightness or otherwise, ethically, morally, or biblically, of the position that there should be no difference between them," said Paulsen. "My regret is that the SECC could not, out of deference to the larger international family of Seventh-day Adventists, have held in check their exercise of 'freedom,' knowing that the Church makes her decisions sometimes frustratingly slowly, but in a very deliberate manner with an eye to many issues. Moving together until we have agreed to give room to differ on specific issues is the price we pay for unity."

The Southeastern California Conference's action also came up for discussion in April at the spring meetings of the General Conference Executive Committee, where committee member Selma Chaij commended the SECC for affirming the equality of women and men in ministry. "I believe the step they have taken is really courageous," she said.

According to the *Adventist Review Online*, North American Division president Alfred McClure took the opportunity to assure the General Conference Executive Committee that the division would not break ranks with the world church's decision not to ordain women. McClure said that he was uncomfortable with SECC's action because it blurred the perceived difference between the process of ordaining and commissioning candidates and thus created confusion. However, the GC Executive Committee did not take any action on the issue.

Southeastern California Conference Officers Support Ordination

The Southeastern California Conference has a long history of support for women's ordination. In 1966, Margaret Hempe joined the staff of the Loma Linda University Church, and was given the title of pastor in 1972. Members of the church, as well as people in the surrounding community, recognized her ministry. Furthermore, pastors of other denominations recommended her to their members for Christ-centered marriage counseling. Eventually, she was invited to participate in the process that lead to ordination. In 1987, Hempe successfully completed the final step, the traditional conference-led interview of pastoral interns. Southeastern California Conference officers immediately recommended her to the Pacific Union Conference (PUC) for ordination, but her name was never put on the PUC Executive Committee agenda.

The same thing happened later to thirteen other women pastors whom the SECC also recommended for ordination. Nonetheless, SECC officers continued to hire women pastors and to encourage them to participate in the internship process that customarily culminates in recommendation for ordination.

Women now comprise 10 percent of the conference's ministerial staff. Their names are routinely sent to the

PUC for affirmation of ordination. In January 2000, women's names finally did get to the PUC Executive Committee agenda. The prelude to the vote included an intonation of the vote against women's ordination taken at the 1995 General Conference session at Utrecht, which prompted the committee chair to support commissioning women rather than recommending them for ordination. The committee subsequently voted to commission.



Margaret Hempe



Sheryll Prinz McMillan

Southeastern California

Conference Constituent Actions

The Southeastern California Conference has two Adventist universities in its jurisdiction and pastors and scholars like Louis Venden, Fritz Guy, James Walters, and Raymond Cottrell who have led in the pursuit of equality and justice through sermons, writings, and polls of members. In January 1989, at a special constituency meeting, delegates registered their intention to ordain women in ministry as soon as possible and established a Gender Inclusiveness Taskforce. This twelve-member group was given the assignment to plan and implement a broad spectrum of programs and materials on gender inclusiveness in family and church using a positive biblical approach.

The taskforce, which was chaired by Penny Gustafson Miller, developed videos, slide/tape programs, study guides, pamphlets, liturgies with music, and sermon topics in English and Spanish to be used throughout the SECC. Thousands of single-page information sheets were printed for local churches. Among the titles were: "Ordination in the Bible, the Early SDA Church, and Ellen White," "What Does Scripture Say About Women?", and "What Are the Positive Aspects of Ordaining Women?"

In May 1989, an informed SECC constituency voted in session that local qualified women pastors be considered for ordination in August 1990. This was expected to follow a vote in favor of women's ordination at the July 1990 Indianapolis General Conference session. However, the vote in Indianapolis actually rejected women's ordination, which made the educational work of the taskforce even more important. At the next SECC constituency meeting, the group was made more permanent, upgraded to a commission, and

named the Gender Inclusiveness Commission.

The commission is still chaired by Miller and continues its work. "Commission members have . . . served with grace and distinction," says Miller.

There is a need for continuing education on gender inclusiveness in the broadest sense of the words. Many issues of family justice and empowerment for women, we believe, can have a profound effect on the work of the Church, leading to a hastening of the spread of the gospel, and our Lord's soon return. We are ever searching for creative and effective ways to achieve full gender inclusiveness and involvement in all activities of our Church's life and leadership. We welcome ideas and support in this task.

Ordinations Throughout the Southeastern California Conference

Long ago, local SECC congregations became impatient with a world church that refused to grant equality to qualified ministers because of gender. Following the lead of the Sligo, Takoma Park, Maryland congregation, churches within SECC have ordained six women since 1995. At La Sierra, the University Church has ordained Madelyn Haldeman and Halycon Wilson. The Loma Linda Victoria Church has ordained Sheryll Prinz McMillan, and the Garden Grove congregation Margo Pitrone. In 1997, Loma Linda University Church ordained Margaret (Peg) Hempe—ten years after her recom-



Margo Pitrone



Jennifer Scott



Halcyon Wilson

mendation to the Pacific Union Conference. In April 2003, Loma Linda University Church ordained Jennifer Scott. Each candidate completed the SECC process for ordination and was recommended to the Pacific Union Conference.

Recent Southeastern California Conference Action

The document that the SECC approved grew out of two predecessors. At the Loma Linda University Church, a group of academicians and Bible scholars spent months articulating the process that the congregation wanted to follow for sponsoring ministers for ordination. The document that the members produced describes the need for women in leadership positions and offers biblical examples.

"Ministry at the University Church," as the document is entitled, begins with a discussion of ordination and goes on to discuss "headship" theology. Members well versed in evaluation developed the guidelines for ordination, which include criteria for pastoral internship, candidate qualifications, scope of preparation, and annual review. According to the document, the local church and conference both have responsibilities to prepare pastors. The local church must establish a ministerial committee, which will help supervise the intern. The pastoral intern, in turn, must develop a portfolio with defined materials for submission to the committee.

Not only did Southeastern California Conference's Executive Committee have access to the Loma Linda University Church's document, it also

consulted another developed by F. Lynn Mallery, the president of the conference. These two documents then went into the making of the third: "Ordination-Commission Procedures and Guidelines," which the SECC Executive Committee accepted in March 2000. The most recent document calls for a common credential, which will be issued in October, for women and men pastors within SECC.

Southeastern California Conference's assistant to the president for communication, Kit Watts has praised the Gender Inclusiveness Commission for playing its part in these developments. According to Pacific Union Conference president Thomas Mostert, who attended the SECC Executive Committee's ninety-minute discussion and vote, "This procedure could show the way for the rest of the Pacific Union and the North American Division on how to handle this matter with equality and yet abide by the spirit and letter of church policy."

Responding to those who questioned the SECC action, conference president Mallery says, "We support the ongoing mission of the eleven-million member church of which we are a part. We respect the variety of views that members elsewhere have on this subject. We hope that our fellow believers will also respect our moral conviction that men and women in this conference who are equally qualified and have had fruitful ministries should be treated in the same way."

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Southeastern California Conference Ordination-Commission Procedures

Introduction

The call to serve God is an awesome responsibility that is extended to all who profess to be Christian. All Christian believers are called to minister. This call is confirmed by baptism. At baptism, gifts are given to all believers by the Holy Spirit to assist Christian believers in fulfilling their call to ministry. All baptized believers are part of laity. Therefore the term "laity" refers to all believers and represents the total corpus of believers.

Some of the laity feel called to the vocation of pastoral ministry. Just as baptism is the confirmation for all Christian believers (laity) who are called to minister, so ordination-commission is the confirmation of one's calling to pastoral ministry. This call is recognized by those blessed by the pastor's ministry and it affirms that the pastor has performed well the tasks associated with ministry. Through ordination-commission the church confirms that they have been ministered to by the called person.

Today the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a world movement. Ordained ministers are qualified to serve the denominational organization anywhere in the world. Yet a worldwide credential is not issued. Credentials are issued by the employing organization and are given to those clergy who serve in a specific area. This contrast between a world movement and local service highlights the dualism of present-day ministry. The concept of ordaining ministers to a world movement is in contrast to the position of the early church practice as well as that of early Adventists who often limited ministry to specific areas and among people who looked and thought like them.

Many complex factors affect how Adventism is practiced in the world church. The denomination's attempt to maintain a unified, world church structure is constantly confronted by the many tensions within cultures and traditions. Language alone forces the church to proclaim the gospel in new ways using new idioms and thought structures that are understandable in some communities and not in others. Not all have the same level of religious development nor do all share the same understanding of the Adventist experience. First generation Adventists are at a markedly different religious and church experience level than fourth generation Adventists. Education also produces tensions between world church members. Those with higher levels of education tend to view church life differently than those with little or no education. These educational differences often drive many of the special interests found in lifestyle practices and theological understanding.

Social customs affect church practices. The church forbids polygamy yet in some African communities people who are converted retain their polygamist status because of the significant social disruption that would occur if the family was disbanded. The principles of religious liberty are carried out differently in the world church. In some cultures the church refuses government money to support church run schools, yet in other places the church accepts government funds. The Adventist Church makes adjustments for these and other stressors.

A major cultural stressor is the fact that the world church refrained from authorizing more than fifty percent of its members to be eligible for ordination to ministry.

Adventists in some parts of the world find it unconscionable to discriminate against women and prohibit their ordination. In an attempt to ease the stress, several local congregations have ordained women pastors in their church and vouched to others the validity of this ordination. In these local ordinations, each congregation establishes its own ordination criteria and liturgy. There is no standardization among these congregation-initiated services. Furthermore, an excellent woman pastor may never be ordained because the congregation she serves chooses not to ordain her. Other women will be ordained because they serve congregations that are eager to practice inclusiveness. Currently, the ordination credential a congregation gives to a woman is not recognized by other Adventist entities.

It is important that an ordination-commission process be sensitive to various cultures, educational backgrounds, and stages of religious development. This will provide a framework that affirms a person's call to ministry as well as her/his ministry in the local Conference. The intention of this document is to affirm ordination-commission by outlining the roles of the congregation and Conference in the ordination-commission process. It is designed to provide a means to recognize, affirm, and ordain-commission all those who are called to the gospel ministry.

A Model for Ordination-Commission

From earliest times, the Christian community has consecrated its leaders. In its simplest form, these leaders were set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands. Over the centuries, elaborate ceremonies emerged for the ordination of church leaders. The Protestant Reformation eliminated many of the ceremonial elements but retained the laying on of hands with the prayer for consecration. Through the act of ordination, the community prays that the gift of the Spirit will fill the ordained person and direct his/her ministry.

The Southeastern California Conference believes that the initiative to ordain-commission someone to ministry should originate from among those who have primarily benefitted from a person's ministry. While serving in a local church, the pastor evidences his/her call to ministry. The congregation acknowledges the minister's gifts and commits itself to be open towards these gifts. Ordination-commission is a public recognition and affirmation by a community of faith that God has called a person to ministry. The role a congregation plays in the ordination-commission of ministers is illustrated by the process the Apostles used in response to a church leadership crisis.

When the early church experience significant multicultural growth, the apostles found their limited numbers were inadequate. Congregations which were socially and culturally unique felt they were neglected by various ministries of the new church.

In response to this crisis a precedent was established to provide basic principles for filling leadership positions. Apostles called the community of believers together. Simply put, they had a meeting. The problem was clearly stated. The Apostles pointed out that they were not able to meet the demands of the expanding community. They needed additional workers. These new workers, the Apostles said,

must be members in good standing and must be full of the spirit as well as full of wisdom. The community was asked to find individuals from among the group of believers who could serve as their leaders. Once they were found, the Apostles would appoint them to their task.

The community of believers who gathered to resolve this matter were delighted with the suggestion. They proceeded to choose from among themselves those who would fulfill the requirements. These individuals were filled with the Holy Spirit and full of grace. They exhibited ministerial gifts and were filled with wisdom. Each appeared to be a good speaker. Some worked as evangelists. The ones chosen by the church met the specific social-cultural demands of the neglected communities. In other words, these new ministers culturally mirrored the community they were to serve. We have here an early affirmation that spiritual gifts are given to all God's people regardless of gender, ethnicity or social status. Once the community made its choice, the new leaders were presented to the Apostles. They stood before the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. The next statistical report implied that the number of disciples (term for believers), despite adversity, greatly increased in Jerusalem because of this new work and additional leadership.

The account of the calling and commissioning of the first deacons in the Christian church provides a useful model for filling ministerial roles in congregations today. These first deacons, or more accurately servants, did much more than wait on the tables of the Greek widows. In fact, after the initial statement of needs, there is no mention that these new workers ever waited on tables. They did, however, function in ministerial roles in their specific community. Their calling and appointment gave them much more responsibility than what we have traditionally come to associate with the work of a deacon. They became the ministers or pastors to their community. It is therefore appropriate to allow this initial process established by the Apostles to inform us as we consider the role of the local church in the development and ordination-commission of new clergy to ministerial positions in our Conference.

Initially, the community and the Apostles cooperated in the process for adding the first ministers to the early Christian church. Four basic elements can be extracted from this narrative that demonstrates this cooperation. These four elements are:

1. There must be a need for ministers. This need originates within the community of believers and is seen as a means to resolve specific issues. In the early church, the request for ministers resulted in naming seven deacons to minister to the community. Ministers were not chosen by the Apostles.

2. Once the need was presented, the criteria for ministers was established by the Apostles. The community was instructed to find ministers from among their own group and not from other places. Those selected were individuals respected by the community. Their lives reflected that the Holy Spirit was working through them. In addition, they had wisdom.

3. The community has the responsibility to recognize those in their midst that have received the call to ministry. Today God calls all laity to minister. Among laity he calls some to the specific function of pastoral ministry. The

Holy Spirit gives gifts for this purpose.

4. The final step in the selection process involved both the church and the apostles. This was the formal recognition that God had called these individuals to serve in pastoral ministry. Those who were to be set apart for ministry were brought by the congregation to the Apostles. The Apostles prayed and laid their hands on them and finally appointed them to their task. Though these first pastors initially served a specific congregation, the appointed task pronounced by the Apostles allowed them to be free to minister in other locations.

The established criteria for ministry continues to develop as the church grows and changes. Today, the Conference establishes the criteria for ministry, extends calls to first time pastors to serve congregations, and directs in their development of ministerial arts. Like their early church counterpart, the congregation is called to the unique role of recognizing that the Spirit has blessed an individual with the gifts of pastoral ministry. This recognition results from the affirmation that people have been blessed by an individuals pastoral ministry. The final cooperative step of both Conference and congregation is the formal public ceremony of recognition that includes prayer, the laying on of hands, and appointing ministers to their task.

The Role of Conference and Congregation in Ordination-Commission

Congregations which are served by pastors who are not ordained-commissioned have a great responsibility. This community will have first-hand knowledge that God has truly called someone, for they are the ones who primarily benefit from a pastor's ministry. Because of this, they take the initiative in the ordination process. This section will first outline the role of the Conference in calling and training a candidate for ministry and will provide guidelines for congregations on the care and nurture of a pastor.

Conference Responsibility. The Conference places calls and assigns a pastor to a parish in consultation with a congregation and/or the senior pastor. A call, in essence, is a job offer which the pastor either accepts or rejects. The Conference Personnel Committee is responsible to research available pastors, work with congregations regarding placement, and recommend placement of pastors to the Conference Executive Committee. At times, a larger congregation will establish its own search committee to address openings when they occur. A representative from the Conference Personnel Committee will meet with a church committee. Recommendations from a congregation's search committee will be presented to the Conference Personnel Committee for approval and recommendation to the Conference Executive Committee. The Conference Executive Committee is responsible for the hiring of all pastoral staff.

A part of the vote of the Executive Committee to hire pastors is to place them on a ministry track that could lead toward tenure and ordination-commission. When a candidate is placed on such a track, an extensive program begins. The purpose of this program is to focus on ministerial arts and issues. This process takes approximately four to five years and normally would include the satisfactory completion of a Master's degree. . . . The Conference Ministerial Director is the one primarily responsible to supervise the introduction to ministry process.

Responsibilities of Local Congregations. Pastors are the most important resource our Conference has in assisting congregations to fulfill their missional purpose. Therefore the Conference takes seriously the need to match a pastor's skills with the expectations and needs of the congregation. Congregations are expected to treat pastors with respect. It is vital that congregations encourage and support pastors in their ministry. In this way a church is a sanctuary, especially for young pastors as they learn and grow in ministry. The congregation needs to be patient, helpful encouragers of all ministers.

Those who are new to ministry are often placed with a senior, supervising or mentioning pastor. These pastors will guide new ministers in their assignments with congregations. Among other things, the supervising pastor will advise the new minister in personal growth and in the development of personal relationships, provide experience in preaching and in organizing worship, direct in areas of pastoral care and nurture, offer experience in evangelism, church growth, and lay training and provide training in church organization and administration.

At times a pastor, after several years under a supervising pastor, is placed in a congregation where there is not direct supervision from a senior pastor. Care must be taken with such placement so that pastors are placed in an environment that is conducive to their growth and development. In such situations, it would be well to have a local elder who will take a special interest in the pastor and provide needed support. It may also be well to establish a small committee which can mentor or encourage the pastor's relationship with the congregation.

While progressing through the ordination-commission track, the pastor should accumulate in a presentable form, material that represents one's ministerial experience. This can include a statement regarding the call to ministry, a biographical profile, a outline of responsibilities and work locations in ministry, learning experiences, anecdotal material reflecting on ministry, letters of support, congregational and church board assessment, and other items that reflect the ministerial experience. This vehicle will serve as one item that indicates ministry is happening.

The Process Leading Toward Ordination

As a minister approaches the completion of the tenure track, the supervising pastor or local church elder at the direction of the Conference will initiate with the church board the possibility of ordaining-commissioning the pastor to the gospel ministry. It is important that this move toward ordination-commission have the participation of those who have experienced the pastor's ministry and can recognize that God is truly working through him/her. The local congregation with the encouragement of the Conference should then move toward the ordination-commission process for their pastor. The congregation or senior pastor should work directly with the Conference ministerial director in this process.

When a minister is working with a senior pastor, the senior pastor at the prompting of the Conference may choose to initiate the ordination-commission process. The ministerial director may contact the senior pastor to encourage the process. The senior pastor would go to the board of elders of the church for their support and approval. Data can be gathered from the congregation in the form of a simple survey that could indicate the congregation has benefitted by the pastors ministry. . . . A formal vote of the church board is made recommending the pastor for ordination-commission, establishing a date for the ordina-

tion-commission, establishing an ordination-commission planning committee, and informing the Conference of their intent to proceed toward ordination. Included with this vote would be a request that the Conference proceed with their traditional peer examination of ordination-commission candidates since the Conference ultimately votes ordinations-commissions.

When the pastor is the sole pastor of a congregation, the local head elder will be encouraged by the Conference to proceed with the process in the absence of a senior pastor. The ministerial director may contact the local elder to encourage the congregation in this process.

Conference Initiated Ordinations-Commissions

In the rare event that a church is not receptive to participating in the ordination-commission process, the Conference will make every effort to reassign the pastor to another congregation that is supportive and cooperative with her/his ministry and would participate in the above ordination-commission process.

At times there are those associated with a denominational institution who are serving in a ministerial role and have not yet been ordained-commissioned. Where there is clear evidence that ministry is happening and people are benefitting from her/his God given gifts, the institution in cooperation with the Conference should endeavor to find a church which would be willing to sponsor and participate in this person's ordination-commission process. The most likely church would be the one where they currently hold their membership.

Recognized by Conference Executive Committee

The names of those ministers recommended by local churches for ordination-commission are presented at a regular meeting of the Conference Executive Committee by the ministerial director. Information about the candidate will also be presented and will include a profile of the pastor's ministry, the voted action of the congregation, and a statement of recommendation from a committee constituted of Conference officers and ministerial peers which would review a candidate's readiness for ordination. If meeting their favor, the Executive Committee would vote the pastor's ordination-commission.

Announcement of a Candidates Ordination

After the Conference Executive Committee votes the pastor's ordination-commission, the Conference Secretary will send the name of the ordained-commissioned candidate to the Union Conference Executive Committee for their action. A yearly announcement of those who have been set apart for ministry will be sent to all North American Unions and Conferences indicating with pleasure that the pastor has entered the ranks of ministers serving our Conference. The Conference is anxious to tell other institutions about the excellent people who recently entered ministry. . . . This announcement would be sent by the Conference Executive Committee, President, and Secretary.

Equal Credentials be Granted

Credentials for those ordained to ministry will be issued by the Southeastern California Conference. These credentials would grant ministers the authorization to perform duties associated with their office. . . . All ministers in the Conference will be issued the same credential.

***Note:** In the document voted by SECC, five appendices followed this text with specific suggestions for ordination services.*