

Women's Leadership in the Church: Lessons from Church Planters

By Doug Tilstra

The long and heated Adventist debate over women in ministry and women's ordination has detracted needed emphasis from a very basic fact of Adventist history: God has used women in a significant way to build the Church. For instance, some of the most effective church planters in the denomination have been female, especially prior to Ellen White's death in 1915.

Take Lulu Wightman. During the nine years from 1896 to 1905, she planted twelve churches in the state of New York. Later, her husband joined her and together they planted another five churches. Archivist and church historian Bert Haloviak says of Wightman that "the results from her evangelism would rank her not only as the most outstanding evangelist in New York state during her time, but among the most successful within the denomination for any time period."¹

The first one hundred years of Seventh-day Adventist church history explode with the stories of such powerful women leaders, at least nine or ten of whom were notable church planters. The last fifty years of recent church history reveal fewer women in recognized leadership roles and almost no record of any women church planters.²

Ellen White and the women who planted churches in the early days of the

Adventist Church were part of a larger movement for women's rights that centered in American religious revivals of the early 1800s.³ The fledgling Adventist Church, strongly influenced by Ellen White, was no exception. She endorsed women ministers and gave personal support to those Adventist women of her day who were planting churches.⁴

Minnie Sype and her family left Iowa to homestead in Oklahoma after the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889. During the summer of 1901 a heat wave destroyed thousands of acres of farmland, including the Sype's homestead. Agriculturally, the venture failed, but Minnie discovered she could grow something else.

That fall, she gathered other disillusioned farm families to encourage them with friendship and spiritual hope. The gatherings became regular religious meetings, and Minnie was the leader and speaker. Her husband assisted her, lead-



ing song services in the meetings and doing the housework at home. That winter, the group organized officially as the Gyp, Oklahoma, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Minnie had just started her church-planting ministry. The Oklahoma Conference sent her an appreciation check of \$25. That spring, the conference leadership hired her as an evangelist and her husband as her assistant. For the next fifty years Minnie served as a licensed minister in Oklahoma, Iowa, Pennsylvania, Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Florida, and the Bahamas.⁵

In 1927, Jessie Weiss, a forty-five-year-old, single, successful businesswoman, sensed the call of God to evangelistic ministry and arranged to preach a series of Bible lectures in a large tent near Drums, Pennsylvania. Eight converts and a new church planted in Drums marked Weiss's success and the beginning of twenty-five more years of active ministry and church planting.

Weiss was noted in the newspapers of her day as a skilled and successful preacher. Her many accomplishments included supervising construction of new church buildings, raising funds, sponsoring students' education, filling interim pastoral assignments, doing innovative graphic design for sermon illustrations, and training others for ministry.⁶

Ellen White's enthusiasm for the nontraditional public role of such women met with mixed responses from her male counterparts in the Church. Some, like J. N. Andrews, G. C. Tenney, and her husband, James, wrote vigorous articles in defense of women in ministry generally and Ellen White's ministry in particular.⁷ Others opposed women's full acceptance in ministry, among them A.G. Daniells, General Conference president in 1901, who prevented Wightman from being ordained.⁸

One of the indications of White's influence as an advocate for women in ministry and church planting is the rapid decline in the number of women in church leadership roles after her death.⁹ Just before White's death in 1915, 30 percent of all conference treasurers in North America were women; more than 60 percent of educational department leaders were women; and more than 80 percent of the Sabbath School department leaders were women. Between 1915 and 1975, those percentages dropped to almost zero. The number of women licensed as ministers dropped more than half during that same period.¹⁰

Some Adventists today believe that encouraging women in ministry or church planting is a drift away

from Scripture and Adventist heritage and an accommodation to evil societal trends. Actually the opposite is true. What is needed in the Adventist Church today are women of the caliber of Lulu Wightman, Minnie Sype, or Jessie Weiss, and the administrators who will hire and urge them to excellence.

During the summer of 2002 I went in search of Adventist women who are planting churches today. I found six. My interviews with them revealed, among other things, the crying need for dialogue—dialogue about women in church planting ministry and about women in pastoral and other ministries.

Transitional Solutions Needed

Perhaps it would be helpful, at least initially, to separate the discussion of female church leadership from the discussion of women's ordination. It seems that there are women in ministry today open to the idea. Despite the stigma from the lack of ordination/affirmation, many women are nonetheless willing to move forward, allowing their ministry to speak for itself. This is not an ideal solution. Perhaps, though, it could be seen as a transitional solution while everyone matures and explores the dialogue.

If members at large and administrators and scholars in particular can respond with equal candor and grace, perhaps genuine dialogue can occur. That dialogue needs to include discussion, for one, with women who are doing ministry—church planting and otherwise. Their insights, needs, concerns, observations, and ideas must be heard.

They also need to hear the fears, concerns, insights, and goals of administrators. The discussion must also include those who receive the ministry of female church planters and those who work with them as colleagues. The dialogue must be open and ongoing. It needs to continue until all participants feel it is no longer necessary.

To illustrate the crucial role of such dialogue consider one issue that surfaced during my interviews with Adventist women who are planting churches. The women clearly identified the dramatic differences between church planting and traditional pastoral work. In every case they identified more closely with male church planters than with female pastors. Part of the reason is that church planters, male or female, must assume a posture primarily focused on leadership and only secondarily on nurture. In contrast, many pastors, and almost all female pastors assume a nurturing posture.

This dichotomy poses concerns particularly

for women currently in training for ministry. If they intend to enter more traditional pastoral ministry, then a nurturing model will work well. If, however, they enter a church planting ministry they need to prepare for an entirely different style of leadership. Their background may not have prepared them for that style or the anguish of being misunderstood as they use it.

This issue of leadership style (nurture vs. “take charge”) is just one example of dozens of topics that remain unaddressed. They are not addressed, in part, because the dialogue to date regarding women in ministry has largely focused on “yes/no”, “right/wrong”, “biblical/unbiblical” types of questions. Perhaps it is time to explore the creative ministry questions (many of which can be appreciated by those on varying points along the women-in-leadership continuum) and build dialogue around those issues.

An early starting point for dialogue is the local church, along with academy and college campuses. We need to develop ways to raise the profile of women leaders. Many high school and college-age young women have never even heard of church planting, let alone a female church planter.

Very few of these young women have ever considered that God might be calling them to such a ministry, but they may sense that call while reading article in *Insight* magazine or listening to a class presentation from another young woman telling her story of planting a church. Such presentations awaken curiosity, interest, and life-altering dialogue at a formative age.

Another place for dialogue could be in the planning councils for new church plants. Typically, leaders who plant churches are open to new and innovative ideas. They might be willing to ask new and probing questions about the role of gender in church planting. They might be able to model the growing ability to understand, celebrate, and capitalize on gender differences in their church rather than deny, debate, or decry them.

For example, if it proves true that women, as a general rule, bring a stronger relational style to church planting, they might ask how that factor can work in favor of church planting in North America. Also, they might ask what unique traits, as a general rule, male church planters bring. How can those traits complement the unique traits of female church planters? How can geographic areas be evaluated to know the unique traits, including gender mix, needed on a given church planting team? These and dozens of other questions could be creatively explored in an atmosphere of respectful yet probing dialogue.

Such dialogue would inevitably lead to better

Seventh-day Adventist Men and Women in Ministry

NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION, JULY 2003

Total Number of SDA Women within North American Division Known to Be Educated in Theology or Religion and/or Currently or Formerly Employed in Ministerial Capacities within or outside Denomination 475

SDA Women within NAD Known to Be Educated in Theology or Religion and/or Currently or Formerly Working within Denomination as:

Active Pastors	80
Administrators or GC Employees	63
Bible Instructors	54
Chaplains	
Campus	9
Medical	47
Pastors' Wives Working as Associates	16
Teachers/Professors of Religion	60
Student Majors in Theology or Religion	53
Mothers on Leave	6

Total 388

Total Number of SDA Males Working within NAD as Active Pastors or Administrators 5,086

Sources: Dúane Schoonard, Associate Director, NAD Ministerial Association, from the NAD Ministerial Association database; and the General Conference Office of Archives and Statistics.

Note: All numbers should be considered approximations due to incomplete, overlapping, and often outdated data.

training and equipping for leaders of both genders. It could prompt the development of a new approach to church planting—an approach based on a team model rather than a solo pastor model. This team model would always include at least one woman either as the leader or one of the team members.

Not all of the dialogue will be creative or even pleasant. In addition to discussions among students or church planting leaders, administrators need to tackle



some tough issues. Sexual harassment certainly needs attention. This includes both education and user-friendly organizational systems that function fairly and flawlessly. When there is an abusive situation, all parties need to see the entire process as much more than a politically correct posture, but rather as an integral part of the faith that they profess.

Just as important are such issues as promotion of healthy and productive work relationships between male and female co-church planters, support structures for spouses and families of church planters, support of conference administration, and eventually the topic of ordination. These are a few of the topics raised by the women interviewed. They would like to see the discussion widened.

Rebuilding the Culture for Diversity

Once the dialogue becomes part of the fabric of the leadership culture in the Church, we will move beyond merely allowing diversity, or even encouraging it, to managing it wisely. Administrators will undoubtedly look for models that will enable them to manage the diversity better. Several models are briefly suggested below.

R. Roosevelt Thomas, Jr.'s model for moving beyond affirmative action to affirming diversity might be relevant. Thomas challenges the traditional concept of an American melting pot and suggests that managers do the internal work of examining their own motives, vision, and focus before evaluating the corporate culture. Then he advises modification of assumptions, systems, and models before equipping pioneers who will actually translate the new theories into behaviors.

Another model is from Catalyst, a "nonprofit organization with the mission of furthering women's advancement in corporations and professional firms."¹¹ The Catalyst model has similarities to Thomas's model. As with Thomas's model, it begins with introspection as the first of three phases. In the first phase of introspection and foundation building, there is a subphase of evaluating gender initiatives in light of the organization's strategic mission and then drawing leadership into that vision. Building a fact base is the aim of the second phase. Finally, in phase three the work of developing, piloting, and implementing action plans is done.

A third model, entitled "Reframing Diversity," takes a different approach.¹² Reframing Diversity focuses almost entirely on the reflective and self-evaluation aspects. It does not make separate suggestions for

action, as do the other two models. Rather, it envisions the reflection process extending through all of the action phases.

The reflection process of the Reframing Diversity model begins with the recognition of the leader's multiple identities and evaluates which identity is most pronounced in the given situation. With that awareness, the leader can evaluate costs and benefits associated with that identity, and finally the possibility of shared goals with others of differing identities.

The Reframing Diversity model is a good tool for forming a mental framework, though it is a bit theoretical and more difficult to apply than the other models. What it lacks in user-friendliness it has in depth of insight. The questions alone that accompany each stage probe the heart and soul of the leader. This model has the potential to shift one's basic paradigms regarding diversity management.

Impact on Those Outside (and Inside) the Church

The corporate witness of the Church will be greatly affected by what leaders decide to do regarding women. One of the church planters I interviewed told of the positive impression made on community people when they learned that the new church had a female pastor. The existence of women pastors began to break down stereotypes about the closed-mindedness and irrelevancy of the Church.

For some, such a discovery was the first step toward fellowship in the church community. But another story by another women shows another side to corporate witness. During her church planting experience she was not supported by some leaders in her church and actually opposed by others. Her friends from the community were dismayed. "What kind of church do you work for, anyway?!" they demanded.

The spirit that fosters open dialogue and confrontation of tough issues could also foster another needed trend in local churches. Too many Adventist churches understand the harmful effects of individual behavioral sin better than relational sin and its dangers. Bitterness, jealousy, rage, and contempt may actually work more havoc in Adventist churches than cigarette smoking or alcohol drinking. We condemn the latter and often ignore the former.

One female church planter described how she is working to confront the relational dysfunction in her church. She believes that church planters are in a

unique position to address those ills and work for healing. She also believes that women are more likely to discern and successfully address such issues.

Her view is that ideally every church needs a pastor of each gender and that relational healing could be a specialty area for many women pastors. Perhaps she is right. Perhaps a denomination that creates an atmosphere of open dialogue mature enough to address tough issues is ready for deeper relational healing.

Finally, there is a need for the Adventist Church to hold issues in tension without becoming paralyzed or fossilized. Sometimes holding a matter in tension is merely a political tactic to stall or force a default decision, but it can also be a wise way to deal with an unstable environment.

Holding matters in tension can include tentative, temporary, or transitional solutions until issues become clearer or people become more mature. That is the type of wisdom needed in current discussions of Adventist women who plant churches in North America, as well as women in leadership throughout the Church.

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