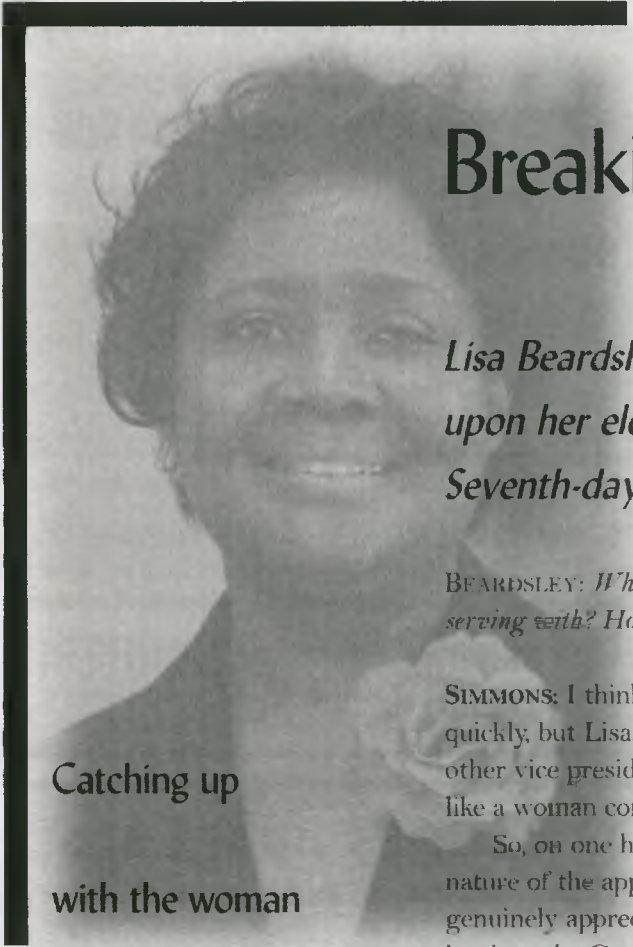


Discussed: historic appointment, education, family support, hope for young women, equal bearing of responsibilities

PHOTO BY NICOLETTA PUIK



Breaking the Glass Ceiling

Lisa Beardsley interviews Ella Simmons upon her election as a general vice president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

BEARDSLEY: *What is your experience with the other vice presidents that you will be serving with? How are they responding to you?*

SIMMONS: I think we're all a little surprised that everything happened so quickly, but Lisa, I am just so pleased to share with you and the world that the other vice presidents have received me so warmly. I have not felt necessarily like a woman coming into this position, but just another colleague coming in.

So, on one hand, they congratulate me and they talk about the historic nature of the appointment, but they welcome me as a colleague. I'm feeling genuinely appreciated as just another colleague with certain experiences coming into the General Conference leadership team.

Catching up
with the woman

who took

BEARDSLEY: *You said that you're already starting to think about the nuts and bolts of what you'll actually be doing. What are some of those nuts and bolts?*

the General

SIMMONS: Well, while Dr. Paulsen has not completed his assignment to our various portfolios yet, he has spoken with me about education particularly, and I think he spoke with the body about the fact that he wanted me to join the team because of my varied experiences in education.

Conference

I suspect there will be a few other departments added to my portfolio, and probably that these will be departments that have a natural match to education.

Session

BEARDSLEY: *Did you ever think that you would see this day come—not just for you, but in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?*

by surprise.

SIMMONS: I had hoped that it would come in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I never thought I would be involved in this way. You know how it is when we desire something that we believe is right, when we understand the nature of tradition and the nature of progress coming together as Christ works in and through us to bring about certain transformations.

Woman Elected to Church Vice Presidency and Other Surprises from the Nominating Committee

By Bonnie Dwyer

Ella Simmons, an African American woman and the former provost of La Sierra University, was nominated and elected to be a vice president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church on Sunday, July 3. She is the first woman to be elected to a vice-presidential position within the General Conference. Included in Dr. Paulsen's announcement of Dr. Simmons's move was a comment that delegates should read nothing into her nomination about the ordination of women.

Reportedly, even the members of the Nominating Committee were surprised when newly reelected president Jan Paulsen suggested her name. But his intention to name a woman as a vice president has been rumored for several weeks. At his first press conference after his election on Friday, July 1, he was asked if women would ever ascend to the top levels of leadership within the Church. He said "Yes." To the follow-up question of "when," he replied with a smile: "the session is not over."

Even as he spoke, the Nominating Committee wrestled with his proposal, made when African-American members of the committee had suggested that their community has not been adequately represented at the General Conference since the retirement of former vice president Calvin Rock. The response from Paulsen was to suggest Dr. Simmons, an African American woman. Simmons was not the candidate they had expected or promoted. So there was extended debate on the appropriate African American woman.

Internal debates such as the one over Dr. Simmons made the drama within the 196-member Nominating Committee fascinating—that and the fact that the arguing was done out of the sight of the rest of the two thousand delegates, without any press presence, even from internal reporters. This year, the committee offered several surprises.

The first came from the at-large delegates, a group made up primarily of General Conference employees. When five retirees were included in their list of fourteen appointees to the committee there was a question about whether these people should be considered lay

delegates, and thus members of the North American Division delegation, where their membership exists, or as part of the at-large delegation as employees.

A careful constitutional reading was required before the five were seated with the at-large delegation to the committee, just in time for the discussion and vote on the president. As retirees, these individuals were vocal in the discussion of Dr. Paulsen's age—seventy—given the fact that some of them had retired at that age.

The second surprise came at noon on Friday. It was expected that the election of the president would have taken place by that time. However, the nominating committee had not come to a decision on the name to be brought before the delegates. While the committee debated the merits of four candidates, in the main auditorium the delegates listened to the reports of the secretary, archivist, and treasurer.

In the second round of committee voting, the field of four candidates—Jere Patzer, Lowell Cooper, Ted Wilson, and Jan Paulsen—narrowed to Wilson and Paulsen. The final vote was 98 to 91 (with seven people absent or abstaining). With this vote, Paulsen's name went to the floor, where it received unanimous approval.

Each division determines the people who represent it on the Nominating Committee. The numbers of spots for each division are determined by its church membership. The size of the at-large delegation from the General Conference is fourteen—which makes it larger than seven of the small divisions, such as the South Pacific Division.

Jere Patzer, president of the North Pacific Union Conference, was chosen to chair the Nominating Committee during its first meeting on Thursday night, when some members objected to the nomination of Niels-Erik Andreasen, who had chaired the committee in Toronto in 2000. Andreasen was then appointed associate chair. Delbert Baker, president of Oakwood College, was the committee's secretary, and Harold Lee was the associate secretary.

We believe it, we have faith, but sometimes we are still surprised when it happens, and it happened so quickly. Yes, I have to say I'm surprised

BEARDSLEY: *You're a mother, a grandmother, a wife. What does your family think about this?*

SIMMONS: Well, my family usually just takes all of these kinds of things in stride. I have been on the forefront of pioneering in other areas before, and they just sort of take it as: this is what she does.

My husband is a very special man—strong man—who supports me in all kinds of ways. And because he's an educator, he understands my work. He is a devout Seventh-day Adventist, as well, and so he has had certain aspirations for our Church. As we looked at this journey, as we thought about the possibility when the information first came to me, we thought, well it's a nice thought perhaps that this could happen—that a woman could be considered here.

But at one point after much prayer, my husband came to me and said, "If this comes to you, know that it is from the Lord, and you must do it." We had already decided a long time ago that whatever the Lord called us to do we would do. So he is just a very special man.

I have to mention our granddaughter. (We have a grandson, we have sons, and a daughter-in-law.) Our granddaughter called, and I heard some excitement in her voice that I usually don't hear. She's a teenager and teenagers don't get excited about things. But she said, "I heard!"

And she was just excited about it. The fact that she was excited indicates to me that she, as a developing young woman in our Church, sees hope for whatever it is that she might want to do. She wants to be physician, but I think there are many ways in which a physician can serve the Church, so this opens more doors for her.

BEARDSLEY: *Not only are you the first female general vice president of the General Conference, you are also African American. What does this mean for the African American community?*

SIMMONS: I think always the African American population of the United States seeks to move forward in our progress toward not just inclusion, but equal bearing of responsibilities. And I think in our Church the African American population is very concerned about making its fair share of contribution, and, yes, being represented at all levels of this Church.

African Americans have a very rich and long-standing heritage with this Church. We've been there all

along. Because of certain societal situations in this country, we have not always been represented, as you as a woman understand clearly. Because of this, while we appreciate the Church, love the Church, support the Church, we are ever ready to move the Church forward in its progress toward full inclusion. That means not only talking about that; it means stepping up and being willing to move into positions when invited to do so.

So for that reason, as many women have said to me, and many men of the African American community, this is a major step forward. I hasten to say that what I'm hearing is that there is no us-or-them mentality among African Americans; it's just if we are together, then we must be together through all things.

BEARDSLEY: *It means fuller participation by many members, women and people of color, as well.*

SIMMONS: That's right.

BEARDSLEY: *Ella, you get the last word. What would you like to tell our viewers?*

SIMMONS: Well, several people have made statements over the last two days that my appointment has brought hope to women and youth all over the world. They have been going on to ask me: What can you tell women and young people? What advice can you give?

My advice is to focus completely on the Lord. Develop and maintain, always seek to enhance the personal relationship with the Lord.

I would say from my own perspective that we do not set our sights on any given position or any title, anything like that. That's the Lord's work. We are simply to be responsible for the work which the Lord gives us at each step along the way. And all things will come.

I guess my final word, after that final word, is: Never think that the Lord has finished with you. There's always more for you to learn and more for your growth. But there's always more for your contribution as well.

BEARDSLEY: *Never think that the Lord has finished with you. There you have the last word from Dr. Ella Smith Simmons, general vice president of the General Conference.*

Lisa Beardsley is vice chancellor of Academic Affairs at Loma Linda University and co-host of the Loma Linda Broadcasting Network program "Faith at Work," for which this interview was videotaped.