

# The State of the Ordination Conversation

| BY BONNIE DWYER

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—Randy Roberts

In January 2013, when the Theology of Ordination Study Committee met in Laurel, Maryland, the setting of the proceedings, just outside of Washington, DC, inspired a couple of comments that seemed to help change the tone of the conversation from sharp disagreements to more thoughtful reflection. Describing that committee's proceedings at the annual meeting of West Coast university and college religion professors, April 5–7, were committee members Kendra Haloviak Valentine, John Brunt, Chris Oberg, and Randy Roberts. Their accounts of the meeting provided some background on a process that has been mentioned frequently in the church press sans details about the session papers and conversation.

Kendra Haloviak Valentine, chair of the department of biblical studies in the HMS Richards Divinity School at La Sierra University, began the overview with the basic structure of the three days of sessions. Each began with extensive prayers and a devotional before the presentation of papers—seventeen in all. On the last evening during the January meeting, the TOSC chair, Artur Stele, suggested spending time in small groups (organized alphabetically). Kendra Haloviak Valentine said one of the most meaningful moments for her came on the last morning of the session. As Stele opened the meeting, he reflected on the committee's work and said it had also led him to think about the Washington, DC, area where so many people are starving for the bread of life, and yet “here we are spending all our ener-

gy discussing who gets to distribute the bread.”

John Brunt, senior pastor of the Southern California-based Azure Hills church, said committee members represented both ends of the theological spectrum, and that they were told over and over that their goal was to reach consensus. On the first day, there were many speeches about the need to be nice to each other, and he wondered why so much time was spent on that. By the second day, he understood. He told of a moving response given by Denis Fortin, outgoing dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Seminary at Andrews University, to a paper that suggested any hermeneutic that included movement toward change was just plain wrong. As a new American citizen, Fortin stood to object. In this place where the Emancipation Proclamation has just been celebrated, he said, if the paper's theory was correct, slaves would still be slaves.

Another significant moment for Brunt came following the devotional that was given by Kendra Haloviak Valentine, the only presentation by a woman during the three days of meetings. She had spoken about the woman at the well in the book of John, and the next day one of the committee members said that he had been moved by her presentation and wished he could participate in the ordination of a Kendra, but if he were to do so, his whole biblical world would fall.

Loma Linda University Church Senior Pastor Randy Roberts told of the questions that came to his mind during the committee's session. First, he said, given the sheer size of the group (over a

hundred people), how is anything going to happen? Then, he wondered how the group had been constituted. He said he overheard some of the committee members saying they wondered why they were on the committee, because they had no special training or background pertaining to the issue. Given that some of the most strident voices in the church are on the committee, Roberts worries that a consensus will be difficult to reach. After a paper was presented on a theology of ordination, he said one participant said that the paper needed to include three Old Testament references to when ordinations were undone. "There is a component that not only wants to block ordination of women ministers, but to also undo ordination of women elders. And they are pretty energetic," Roberts said. However, Roberts, added, this is the way the church does business, and it is an important process. All the people have come with a passion and conviction, wanting to do as God would have us to do.

Chris Oberg, the senior pastor of the La Sierra University Church, said that an appeal had been made to come to the meeting with a sense of openness. She said she wrestled with that challenge, noting that of course we all want those on the other side to be willing to change their minds, rather than changing our own.

It was also reported that several world division presidents went to the microphones to ask for clarification about how the work of their study committees would be integrated into what the General Conference committee is doing. It is not yet clear exactly how that is going to work. The leaders of the committee said it was important to have the members of TOSC get started with their work and become acquainted with each other. Waiting until after the division committees have completed their papers would have made that difficult. Oberg said that she had a sense that the divisions are doing really good work, and she is looking forward to hearing their reports.

Jon Paulien, dean of the Loma Linda University School of Religion, moderated the panel,

and he mentioned what he had heard about the process at a meeting of the Biblical Research Institute. He said that people who felt passionately about the topic were chosen deliberately for the TOSC. The divisions were asked to study the topic because it was felt that the work that had been done in the past, such as at Camp Mohaven in the 1970s and later by biblical scholars from the United States, and that the world field needed to get involved. He said that his understanding was that multiple reports were likely.

Haloviak Valentine said that at the TOSC there was no sense that work done in the past is informing what is being written now. "We are not understanding our own history," she lamented. She did note however, that the General Conference Department of Archives, Statistics, and Research has posted the papers from the '70s and '80s on their website.

Angel Rodriguez presented a paper on the theology of ordination in which he noted that the word *ordination* is not even used in the original language in the New Testament. There was sharp disagreement by someone who suggested that if he would use an Adventist hermeneutic, he would see that it is in the King James Version of the New Testament. Committee members said that Rodriguez, the former director of the Biblical Research Institute, was quite taken aback by the suggestion that he was not using an Adventist hermeneutic.

The next meeting of the TOSC is in July 2013. Oberg predicted that it will be the significant meeting as the topic moves from simply a theology of ordination to a discussion of women's ordination. ■

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Bonnie Dwyer is the editor of *Spectrum*.

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