



And Now We are One...But Wait! | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

The leadership of the General Conference has learned that you can put your shoulder against Tomorrow, but you can't guarantee that Today will last forever.

With moral support from some entities in other parts of the world, North American Adventism has reached two new milestones. Despite the opposition of General Conference executive officers, a woman has become the president of a conference here. And despite similar opposition, the Division's leadership has voted overwhelming support for the full equality of men and women in ordained Adventist ministry. (On November 12, as I was completing these comments, word came that leaders of the Inter-European Division [EUD] had voted to throw their division's support behind the ordination of women.)

Sandra K. Roberts became the president of the Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists on Sunday, October 27. The first woman ever elected to such a responsibility, she won her job despite a warning from GC president Ted Wilson that her election would not be recognized by world Adventism. Days later, on October 31, members of the North American Division Executive Committee, meeting in Silver Spring, MD, welcomed her into their circle. The NAD secretary explained that Roberts had been "duly elected" by a proper Adventist entity; the Pacific Union Conference president said her constituency had appointed the person "best qualified" for the job.

North America, at least, would recognize

her presidency.

Wilson's objection reflected his belief that Roberts' ordination—a prerequisite for the office of conference president—was invalid. Policies voted in the Pacific Union and the Southeastern California Conference undergirded her ordination, but General Conference leaders do not accept the legitimacy of these policies.

On this point, too, North America has weighed in. In the NAD Executive Committee deliberation on November 4, members listened to a report from their division's Theology of Ordination Study Committee. The committee's chair, Gordon Bietz, president of Southern Adventist University, reviewed the context—long years of official conversation, a nearly two-foot-high pile of accumulated official documents—and said the Committee majority was now convinced that ordination to gospel ministry should be conferred on men and women alike.

Two members of the committee, one of them from the General Conference Biblical Research Institute, gave a minority perspective, arguing that scripture supports "male headship" for both home and church. Later, speaking from the floor, the president of the Michigan Conference made a similar case for "male headship." But several committee members representing the majority position spoke after the minority report, and remarks by Richard Davidson of the Adventist Seminary at Andrews University had addressed the "headship" argument persuasively. When the time came for NAD Executive Committee

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members to respond to the report, 182 voted in favor of ordaining women. Only thirty-one opposed the idea. Three persons abstained.

Before bringing Bietz to the podium, Dan Jackson, NAD president, had said that Ted Wilson wanted members not to take a vote on the report. But with Jackson's backing, the vote did take place. Jackson clarified its significance, once in the meeting itself and once in a later statement issued with a view to a misunderstanding he had noticed in online responses to Monday's vote. NAD Executive Committee members had approved a *recommendation*. This was, as he put it in his statement, "an indication to the World Church where we as a division stand."

Jackson was alluding to the plan whereby all divisions of the world church will express themselves on the question of women's ordination. In the end, delegates to the 2015 General Conference session will, according to this plan, make a policy for the entire church.

So North American Adventism believes world policy *should* change. But the ever widening sphere in which women here can achieve full recognition as ordained ministers may continue to stand athwart the will of the General Conference.

A second recommendation from the North American Division Theology of Ordination Study Committee addressed the potential for ongoing disharmony. Members recommended support for authorizing each church division "to consider, through prayer and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, its most appropriate approach to the ordination of women to gospel ministry." The point was to disavow the idea of a one-size-fits-all policy on a matter that remains controversial in many, or perhaps most, parts of the world church. Local nuance should be taken into account. With their vote, Executive Committee members were supporting this recommendation as well as the first one.

There is much still to decide. But with the passing of two milestones—Sandra Roberts now leading her conference, and the division now officially endorsing gender equality in ordained ministry—women are standing taller. And so are (many) men, who come into a better version of themselves when they forswear the arrogance of "headship," the male assertion of power over wives and other women.

Some who defend the assertion of male power over women say in effect, "Headship then, headship now,

headship forever." Jesus himself offered useful perspective concerning this argument. When he was asked about the Deuteronomic warrant for easy, male-initiated divorce, he took issue with it. Appealing to the creation story in Genesis 2, he said that when God brings man and woman together they become "one flesh." So a man's whim should not "separate" what God has brought together—"from the beginning," Jesus declared, "it was not so" (Matthew 19:6, 8).

What *was*—even if it be enshrined in Holy Writ—does not foreclose on change toward what *can be*, change toward something better, something more aligned with God's will from the beginning. This argument from Jesus counts, in itself, against the idea that men were ever *meant* to put women at a disadvantage to themselves. Later, he bridled when he saw the disciples angling for status in his circle. The rulers of the Gentiles "lord it over" people, he said, but among you the truly great are the ones who serve. "I myself," Jesus said to bolster the point, "came not to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:24–28).

This surely clinches it: ruling "over" was never meant to be the Christian way. And that is why Paul could famously announce that life in Christ dissolves all distinctions of status: as there can no longer be Jew or Greek, slave or free, there can no longer be male and female, "for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

We can say now that the North American church bureaucracy gets it. But the second recommendation embraced in Silver Spring tells us the NAD may get something else as well. The Letter to the Ephesians says lives "worthy" of the Christian "calling" proceed "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:1–3).

Encouraging the General Conference to permit world divisions to think longer about the ordination of women, and to consider local nuance, seems to exemplify what Ephesians is talking about. Unity is not unison. The bond of peace is not a straitjacket. ■

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