



# An Annual Council Delegate's Memoirs

## My Place at the Table

*Thoughts on being nominated to the General Conference Executive Committee*

BY SOMER GEORGE

# 2011

There was not a single person wearing jeans. Other than me. In fact, what I thought was a nice, put-together, if a bit casual outfit suddenly felt way out of place. It was as if I had shown up at a formal cocktail party in yoga pants and running shoes. The anxiety about my appearance suddenly disappeared when I heard my name shouted across the lobby of the General Conference building, "Somer!"

I looked up and saw, walking toward me, an old friend, one I had not seen for nearly 15 years, whom I had last met on another continent. Peter and I had worked at a summer day camp together in our teens and twenties, both in the United States and in his native country of Slovakia. Neither of us expected to meet the other, years later, at the General Conference Annual Council meetings. And yet this unexpected meeting with Peter made me relax a bit and decide that maybe, just maybe, I would stay, jeans and all.

In spite of the fact that I have been a Seventh-day Adventist most of my life, I had never heard of the Executive Committee of the General Conference; if it ever came up, I didn't pay any attention. So when I received a letter in the mail informing me that I was a

member of this committee, I was confused. What was this about, and how did I become a member? Did I want to be a member?

At first I set the letter aside, too busy with young children and graduate school to focus on something as random as this. But when I received another letter in the mail, this one congratulating me on my committee member status, I decided to at least investigate and determine whether this was something I wanted to be a part of.

I soon realized that the GC Executive Committee is the highest governing body of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is made up of General Conference officers, Division and Union leadership, plus a few lay people (you know, for diversity). At the committee's Annual Council meetings each October, "leaders from around the world meet to discuss the church's finances and resolve issues within the church"

**As a  
woman in  
the church,  
did I  
really have  
a voice?**



PHOTO: JARED WRIGHT

**The culmination  
of years of  
study by the  
Theology of  
Ordination Study  
Committee  
(TOSC) would be  
presented and  
voted on. So  
why wasn't my  
heart in it?**

(according to Wikipedia).

Apparently my name had been taken to the committee for delegate consideration by someone I know who was a General Conference officer. The fact that I was a woman, under 40, and active in the church surely influenced my being chosen.

And yet I felt torn. On one hand, this felt like an honor, and an unusual opportunity. On the other hand, my skepticism about my church and its leadership left me feeling reluctant. Would this bolster my sometimes shaky faith in the church, or might it feed my growing concern about the way things were being run? Did I really want to know what was going on at the highest levels of the church? Or would I be better off letting someone else take my spot, someone who could lend 100-percent support where I had mostly curiosity and doubt.

Eventually, the curiosity won out. Plus, I'd get to stay in a hotel room for free for a couple nights and eat out every day. How bad could that be?

So here I was, in 2011, at my first meeting, dramatically underdressed and feeling apprehensive amid a sea of black suits. And not only was I wearing jeans (with a nice shirt and scarf) but I was also late. I had opted to bring my husband and kids with me for the weekend, and though I had intended to check in to the hotel and change clothes before attending the Friday evening meeting, I made a last-minute decision to stop by the building instead to register and check things out while hubby and kids went to the hotel. After the picture was taken for my badge, I was handed a binder the size of a briefcase, and then Peter and I walked together into the auditorium.

I was immediately struck by how few women I saw in the crowd. My anxiety shifted slightly to irritation. Is it only men who make decisions for our church? I didn't realize at the time that many of the women present that night were wives of delegates and GC employees. Most of them would later disap-

pear when business meetings began.

On Sabbath, there was a sermon by Ted Wilson, with a generous number of lengthy Ellen G. White quotes on the screen. I worked to quietly occupy my children while he spoke of "the blueprint" and his "vision for the cities." The next few days were a blur of reports and church business. While the videos and presentations from each Division were often interesting and even inspiring, it also felt like each one was shouting, "Look at us! Look at all the wonderful things we are doing to further the work! God is blessing us so much! Yeah! Beat that!" But, of course, in much more spiritual language.

As the days went by, I had the strong feeling that I had become invisible. No one was unfriendly, but no one was very welcoming either; no eye contact, no smiles, no small talk. Men of all nations treated me as if I were not even there. They were about the important business of the church; I was only a layperson, a "young person," not to mention a woman.

I suppose I was part of the problem. I knew no one but Peter, and I didn't take much initiative to make connections with anyone but the few other women laypeople. I felt a sort of kinship with these women from New Zealand, Argentina, Michigan, South Africa, Zimbabwe. We might have different views on ordination or church policy, but we were connected because of our gender, and our scarcity. By the end of the session, I knew I had made new friends.

When the General Conference archivist mentioned that nearly 60 percent of the church membership is women, I looked around me and wondered, Where are the women? Why are there so few of us present here? How is it that a room full of men in their sixties is making the decisions that impact our church? I'm glad there is diversity in culture, but how about diversity in age? Diversity in gender? Suddenly, I began to feel angry. Maybe this was the way of worldly government, but we are the church, the body of Christ. Our entire church is based at least

partly on the writings of a woman whom we constantly quote as authoritative. How could the numbers be so unbalanced?

Soon there was more fuel added to the fire. A motion was brought to the floor to allow “commissioned” (and not just ordained) individuals to become Conference presidents. Although it was argued that this would open up opportunities of leadership for both men and women who are not ordained, the conversation (of course) focused on the “women” aspect. The discussion began. And quite a discussion it was. Although Ted Wilson was the chair, he began by giving his opinion on the motion. Of course, the president’s opinion carries a great deal of weight, particularly within certain cultures, and few seemed willing to speak against him. The highlight for me was when Ella Simmons, one of the general vice presidents of the General Conference, stood and spoke. Her words were strong, laced with emotion, and I felt myself cry out a silent “AMEN!” as she spoke of the (now overused) term, “unity in diversity.” Finally, the vote was tallied: 117, yes, 167, no. The body had spoken. And women were denied entry once again.

I suddenly realized why this elected group was almost entirely men. With the exception of a few lay members, Division and Union secretaries, and General Conference employees, everyone was male because of the requirement that to be a president, one must be ordained. Women could not be ordained, and therefore they could not become Conference, Union, or Division presidents. Since Conference, Union, and Division presidents make up the majority of this governing body, women would continue to be under-represented.

I left the meetings with a sour taste in my mouth, and were it not for friends I had made, I would have said that I’d have a hard time returning. When I got home, very few seemed to care much about the issue anyway; only my close friends even knew I had been a delegate. The people from my small church knew nothing of the GC Executive Committee or Annual

Council meetings; only a few even knew the name of the GC president. I quickly put the meetings behind me.

Yet sometimes the questions would return. As a woman in the church, did I really have a voice? Was I just a token member on this committee? Would my opinions be heard? I had always been a supporter of cultural diversity, but I found myself fighting back resentment toward my brothers in Africa and South America whom I felt looked at me as less able than they to lead. Was I prideful? Probably. In my mind I critiqued their logic and concluded what seemed to me to be their unfair discrimination.

Over the course of that next year, Unions began to take action. I followed along in *Spectrum* and *Adventist Today*, which seemed to be the only places I could get honest news on what was happening. I quietly supported these “rogue” conferences as they made a move that validated the work that many women had been doing for years, and finally made a public recognition of their calling. And there was much talk, which I followed with interest, about what would happen at the next Annual Council. Would the conferences that appointed or ordained women be rebuked? Disfellowshipped? Could they disfellowship an entire Union? Would these actions be accepted? Would it break the church? I was secretly proud to be a part of one of these unions that moved forward according to conscience rather than just playing by the rules.

**I stayed.**

**I am here.**

**Sometimes**

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**that is.**

**Other times**

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**a clue.**



**Michael L. Ryan, a General Conference vice president and chair of the ordination session, waits as delegates vote on Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2014.**

VIVIENNE MARTINELLI / ANN

# 2012

This year the anticipation was high. My heart was warmed as I sat in on the meeting of North American Division delegates and listened to the Pacific Union president share his experience of his wish to stay out of the fray, and the Lord clearly compelling him to stand up for the women of the church. It was one of those moments when I felt like, I can stay. I am welcome. There are good men here who will not limit whatever God may call me (or anyone else) to do.

Then came Mark Finley's sermon about unity in the church. It was well delivered, as usual, and spoke to the way that these issues were resolved by the apostles in the early Christian church. It was clearly intended to guide and form the following conversation. But what was difficult were the strong statements that others made afterward about how clearly the Holy Spirit had guided the committee that drafted the statement of rebuke to the rebel conferences. Can one dare argue with the decision of the Holy Spirit? When the president says, "The Holy Spirit was clearly present and led us to this," how difficult it must be to choose to vote in opposition. And of course, very few did. Fortunately, while the document did not accept the actions of the unions, it also did little more than offer a rebuke and deny recognition to the women who had already been ordained. Several delegates stood up calling on the unions to repent, but most spoke in support of the document. I was disappointed that neither the president of the Columbia Union or that of the Pacific Union was given time to speak and explain why they had made the decision that they did to allow women as Conference leaders.

I continued to feel somewhat invisible throughout the week, but I enjoyed seeing the friends I had made the previous year. I loved the fact that some had their babies or young children with them and were still able to participate. My only real conversation with any delegate who was not a layperson was over lunch with Clinton Wahlen from the Biblical Research Institute. While I disagreed strongly

with his opinion regarding male headship, he took the time to inquire about my opinion, and he listened. I appreciated his willingness to speak and his gentle spirit, even as I felt constrained and boxed in by his perspective.

As I drove home that year, I could not shake the feeling of oppression that hung over me. I wanted to leave. I wanted to feel freedom. These did not feel like my people. I knew that God was bigger than all of this. How could it be that all of these people were as prayerful and godly as they seemed, and yet there could be this much spiritual pressure to conform? These questions lingered with me over the next year.

# 2013

The 2013 meetings were much more low-key. Nothing highly contentious, just business as usual. There was that chance meeting with Ella Simmons in the women's restroom where I expressed my appreciation for her leadership. She embraced me, and after a short conversation, where I know I saw tears in her eyes, and I felt them in mine as well, she said with conviction, "There is still room for us here. Don't give up." And while I do not personally feel called to become a pastor or to be ordained, I pass on those words to all the women out there who have heard that call from God that they cannot ignore, and for whom the church's recognition would mean so much more than just a pay raise.

This year I spent even more time with the friends I had met the years before. We had lunch together in the General Conference cafeteria and talked about our families, our lives back home, and the things that we shared in common. One evening, a group of us went out to dinner together, and as we talked and laughed, I looked around and marveled. Here we were, a group of women from four different continents, enjoying an experience that few people ever get to have. We are connected by our shared womanhood, motherhood, and faith, and the fact that we are part of the same church that in many ways bridges language and culture.

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presentation  
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# 2014

By the time 2014 rolled around, I found myself feeling increasingly apathetic about the meetings. This was supposed to be a big one, the last before the GC Session in San Antonio in 2015. The culmination of years of study by the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) would be presented and voted on. So why wasn't my heart in it?

Maybe it was because I was feeling maxed out on life with two kids, a career, and an adult daughter moving back home with her two children. With continued wars in the Middle East, the crisis on our border, children starving all over the world, I just couldn't muster up the energy for Annual Council. I had also come to terms (sort of) with the fact that my church didn't feel so much like mine anymore. I loved my church for the friends it gave me, the emphasis on Jesus, health, and the Sabbath. But whether it was the "remnant" church and had the absolute truth was less important. I didn't feel the drive to reform it or change it, but instead to simply live my life with as much integrity as I could.

I still loved worshiping with my friends and the fact that we had shared values; I still loved my local Adventist school with its safe environment and feeling of community for my kids; I still loved God and believed that he loved me. Whether we all agreed on topics like women's ordination, homosexuality, or creation timelines didn't matter. And yet that didn't mean I didn't care about the issues. I cared a lot, and maybe that was the problem. My caring made it difficult at times to want to stick around. I felt less earnest and yet more honest this time. I wasn't worried about my clothes or fitting in. I wasn't offended by men who walked right past me without noticing I was there. Honestly, what I wanted most was to take a nap in my hotel room, read some books, and write about what I was experiencing.

I had once thought of studying theology, of becoming a pastor. I had been in leadership roles in some earlier times. I was deeply inter-

ested in the Bible and in people. I had been affirmed by some, and yet I had this feeling that there might not be room for me. And honestly, I don't regret that. Knowing myself as I do now, the pastoral calling would have been a difficult choice.

And I love my career. I am a counselor. I work with adoptive and foster families, doing assessments of attachment relationships and providing help to parents who are struggling to meet their children's needs. My boss is a man. I work with men and women. I am never made to feel that I cannot play a leadership role or that I am limited by my gender. When at work, I am me. I have freedom. I am not placed in a box and expected to stay there.

I showed up at Annual Council Monday morning, having opted to stay home over the weekend with my husband and kids. I spent the morning listening to financial reports and some debate over wording of the church's fundamental beliefs. While I like the idea of using gender-inclusive language, other changes seem to narrow the meaning of fundamental doctrines and leave less room for question. For some, this is important to do; to me it feels a bit too tight.

After lunch I meet a friend, and we're off to downtown Washington DC for an early dinner and concert. I wonder briefly what I am missing at the meetings, with a twinge of guilt, but finally I feel relaxed and free to be myself for a while. At the concert the mood is uplifting and even worshipful at times, an interesting experience for a secular concert. In this room I feel alive and welcomed. People are smiling and joyful. I am not stifled or confined. Here I could be a drummer, or a pastor, or even a president. Here I can stand by men who see me not only as a woman but also as a person. Why does this feel more like church?

That night I stay up too late talking with my friend, analyzing the personalities of Ted Wilson, Mark Finley, Jan Paulsen, and even Ellen White (yes, we have a strange way of having fun). I wake up early the next day and make it to the meetings ten minutes early.

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**Pastor Brenda Billings speaking for women's ordination at the 2014 Annual Council meeting**

Today is the big day. Today is the day that we decide whether or not women can be ordained.

As I walk toward the door, my heart is beating to the words, "Why I stayed." You may remember when stories and videos of domestic violence were in our news feed, and the Twitter campaign that encouraged women to explain why they stayed in these relationships where they were being mistreated. (Do not get me wrong: I am not comparing the church to a violent spouse.) The phrase repeated itself over and over in my mind as I walked to the front door. Why have I stayed? Why am I still here? The questions seemed almost more important than the answers. Because the questions say something: I stayed. I am here. Sometimes I know why that is. Other times I don't have a clue. But, nonetheless, I stayed. And I continue to stay. Maybe, for now, that is enough.

In the first session, Artur Stele, chair of TOSC, stated that the one thing he learned from the experience of being on the study committee is that people do not change their minds; and I knew that he was right. The statement on the theology of ordination was agreed upon, by TOSC and by us. That was the easy part. It was this troublesome question of women that was so contentious. We prayed and prayed and prayed some more, as though, if we pleaded enough with God, he would hear our prayers and make us all agree. He declined.

Three differing positions were presented. When Clinton Wahlen got up, I began feeling anxious. As he spoke, I had to consciously keep from fidgeting; I looked around, trying to determine the reactions of others. He presents so nicely, so clearly; I began to fear that everyone would believe him. But, please, Lord, let him not be right. I can't stay if he's right.

And then he's done and we are on to position number two. This one is more like a sermon, less like a lecture. No slideshow. His arguments are compelling. But he places less emphasis on ordination itself and more on refuting headship theology and advocating the freedom of women to teach and preach. Come on, now. I'm going a little off track here, but are we really still debating this one? Whether women can teach and preach or not? If not, then let's stop arguing about it and all go home and put on our head coverings. The prophet of this church taught and preached and had authority over men (and still does). Maybe it was given to her by God, rather than by a document from the church, but is that any less significant? We have women teaching and preaching all over the world. What exactly is it that we're considering here? Are we really wondering whether women should be made to stop?

According to the statement we agreed on, ordination is the church "publicly recognizing those whom the Lord has called and equipped for local and global Church ministry" ("Consensus Statement on a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Ordination," p. 21). It seems that the sticking point must be the statement that says that ordination also "confers representative authority upon individuals for the specific work of ministry to which they are appointed" (p. 21). This does not "convey special qualities" or introduce "kingly hierarchy" (pp. 21, 22). It does not give the one who is ordained authority over the male and female membership, but it does give representational authority. And this representational authority and public recognition, it seems, is what women cannot have.

But back to the presentation. Smoothly delivered, refuting the points made by the previous speaker concerning headship theology. Women can be called, can do whatever work God gives them to do; and as a church we should recognize that without getting hung up on gender.

We break for lunch. I decide to skip the crowd and the long wait for lunch and return to my hotel room for a quick nap. Then back to the meetings. I drive back ten minutes early, but the parking lot is completely full. By the time I find parking and get to the auditorium I am ten minutes late. I take my seat and watch another Division's presentation on evangelism. Time for presentation number three.

This one is pleasantly presented as well, and sounds so reasonable and moderate. Except for one thing—women are a second choice, to be utilized in case of "emergency," but not God's ideal. Really? While it may not be more

offensive than choice number one, it's still difficult to accept. It's not a case of "men are the head over women, period," but God would like men to be over women because that's best. If that doesn't happen, God will concede to let women fill positions of leadership.

With very little discussion, the three reports are accepted by vote.

Then comes the part we've all been waiting for . . . time to discuss the reports and put it to a vote. Elder Wilson stands up to the microphone. He explains that all the GC officers along with the Division presidents have gotten together and drafted a document that will be sent to the GC Session for a vote. Copies of this document are passed around, and I read through it. It sounds reasonable. Wait, though. At the end it says that the Executive Committee refers the question of whether women can be ordained by division or not to the GC Session in San Antonio.

What? Weren't we assured last year that there would be a decision here? A recommendation from us to take to the GC Session? That after all these years, this question would be resolved once and for all? And weren't we at least going to discuss the three positions that had been presented?

Apparently this was not the case. According to Ted Wilson, the agreement among the members of General Conference and Division Officers (GCDO) committee was unanimous. There had been a "sweet spirit" among them, and with much prayer it was clear that the Holy Spirit had led them to this decision. The only question left was to decide if the Holy Spirit was correct (my words, not his!). A motion was made to accept the document containing the question (of whether to allow Divisions to choose to ordain women) being sent to the GC Session where it belongs. It was seconded, and discussion ensued.

But not discussion about the three positions on women's ordination. Instead, it was discussion on whether we should decide this question now or pass the buck forward (once again). While there were many who supported the document, others encouraged the group to

"take the leadership," "get this thing done—we've been debating this for years." Discussion was cordial and contained. There were brief moments of passion, but most seemed resigned.

I considered going to the mic. But my arguments were about the topic of ordination itself, not over whether to vote that day or to wait until 2015. In the moment I wasn't sure what made more sense concerning the actual motion and did not feel prepared to speak to that issue. Finally the vote was taken, and the document was endorsed. The entire question would be sent to the next GC Session and not decided at Annual Council.

And it was a good thing, because it was 6:00 p.m., and no more time had been allotted for discussion. What if, after all of those hours of debate, we decided not to vote yes, not to pass it on to San Antonio? What if we wanted to discuss the issue itself and send on a recommendation? Then what? How did they know which way the decision would go and plan the time accordingly?

And so the saga continues. The debate will continue in San Antonio next year with a much bigger group. And unless they decide to let divisions decide on the issue themselves, the struggle will not end.

And me? I'm still here. The issues come and they go. I get mad, I feel resigned. I am joyful and connected. I feel alone and out of place. I speak up. I stay quiet. Whatever happens here, life will continue on. And this is my church, like it or not. ■

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**Somer George** lives on a farm with her husband and two young children in New Market, Virginia. She works with foster and adoptive families, providing parent-child



evaluations and teaching parents how to form healthy attachment relationships with their children. She is co-leader of a house church, which is part of a larger network in the Potomac Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

See Somer's poem, "My Church," on the back cover.

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