

historical Perspectives *on* Adventist Women *and the* Ministry

BY KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE



From L to R: Helen May Stanton Williams (1868–1940), minister-evangelist in the US and South Africa; Minnie Sype (1869–1956), minister-evangelist in Oklahoma Territory, Pennsylvania and the Northwest; Anna Knight (1874–1972), first black woman missionary from America to India; Jessie Weiss Curtis (1881–1972), founder of churches in North-eastern Pennsylvania; Mary E. Walsh (1892–1997), Bible worker/popular camp meeting speaker and minister.

Editor's note: This paper was presented at the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration Conference of Adventist Forum, and some aspects of the oral delivery of this presentation have been retained.

Introduction

The year 1968 was a crucial one for Adventism. Not only was it the beginning of the Adventist Forum and *Spectrum* magazine (that is, the beginning of Adventism's independent press), it was also the year that an important statement by Ellen White was rediscovered.

Seventy-three years earlier, Ellen White, while living in Australia and witnessing the work that women were doing

throughout the then-new Australasian Union territory, had made this statement in 1895:

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart

Remember Mohaven!

A special issue commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Council on the Role of Women in the Church, Sept. 16-19, 1973



MOST OF THE MEMBERS. Fourteen women and 13 men converged at the Ohio Conference's youth camp for the Council on the Role of Women in the Church, September 16-20, 1973. Twenty-two of the council members were on hand when N. R. Dower snapped this photo. (Back row, left to right): C. E. Bradford, Raoul Dederen, Josephine Benton, Kit Watts, C. Mervyn Maxwell, Marcella Anderson, Dorothy Beltz, Hedwig Jemison, Madelynn Haldeman, W. J. Hackett, Gerhard Hazel. (Front row, left to right): Ed Zinke, Gordon Hyde, Ron Watson, Betty Ahnberg, Hazel Damazo, Betty Stirling, Norwida Marshall, Leona G. Running, Doris Schmidt, Maybelle Vandermark Goransson, Kay Dower.

to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor.... Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work.

This statement was rediscovered in 1968, at about the same time that the Northern European Division asked the General Conference for advice concerning the possibility of ordaining qualified women who were having success as pastors in their division territory (Finland). Similar requests by church leaders in China came to the General Conference in the early 1970s.

Thus it was that in 1973, the General Conference created the Council on the Role of Women in the Church (made up of fourteen women and thirteen men), which met at Camp Mohaven in Ohio to consider the issues. They were called to deal with the rediscovered 1895 statement and the recent specific requests. The council included twenty-six study papers that reflected diversity, yet there was remarkable consensus on the following:

1) women should be ordained as deaconesses and elders;

2) a program should be initiated for women to serve in pastoral and evangelistic ministry in selected areas and that they be given ministerial licenses;

3) if the responses from local congregations were positive after two years, an action should be taken to the 1975 General Conference Session to approve the ordination of women as pastors in appropriate locations;

4) no scriptural evidence precluded women from ordination as ministers.

The Annual Council of 1973 “received” the report and asked for more study. The next Annual Council, in 1974, said that the “time is not ripe,” and encouraged yet more study. Then, in the Spring (March) Meeting of 1975 it was decided that:

Women could be ordained as local church elders and deaconesses with the following stipulations: each church was to take counsel with its local conference and when it could be demonstrated that the spiritual needs of the local church were best fulfilled with women elders and that women elders would not create disharmony in the church and, when a clear majority favored the ordination of women elders, they could proceed.



Josephine Benton's history of SDA women ministers

The “church was not ready to move forward” with regard to the ordination of women pastors. But things did not stop there. At that same meeting, policy was changed so that women ministers could no longer receive ministerial licenses. They could only receive missionary credentials, which meant that they were no longer on the track toward ordination.

One could ask why there was such a disconnect between the Mohaven Commission’s recommendations and the 1975 Spring Meeting. And we will return to that question. However, Pastor Josephine Benton, a woman minister in Potomac Conference who had her ministerial license revoked due to this 1975 decision, asked a different question. How long had women ministers in the Adventist church been holding ministerial licenses?

Women Ministers in Nineteenth-Century Adventism

Benton began researching at the General Conference Archives with the help of a young research assistant, Bert Haloviak. In her research she learned that Adventist women ministers had been receiving ministerial licenses for over 100 years, since at least the early 1870s (and within a decade of the founding of the denomination).¹

Since, by 1881, women ministers had been holding ministerial licenses for over a decade with successful ministries but

had not been ordained (and therefore were unable to conduct baptisms and other ordinances), the following General Conference session resolutions are not surprising:

RESOLVED, That all candidates for license and ordination should be examined with reference to their intellectual and spiritual fitness for the successful discharge of the duties which will devolve upon them as licentiates and ordained ministers.

RESOLVED, That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.²

While the first resolution was adopted, the second was not mentioned again. Church historians and administrators argue as to what the silence means. But, given this 100-year history and the Mohaven recommendations, why the regressive actions of 1975? Rather than move forward carefully but purposefully, the church actually went backwards and took away the ministerial licenses of women pastors after 100 years of granting them. Why? What was going on?

KEY DATES: ADVENTIST WOMEN IN THE MINISTRY

1968

Statement in 1895 by Elen White regarding ordination of women discovered: “. . . They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands.”

September 16–19, 1973

Mohaven Council on the Role of Women in the Church

March 1975 Spring Meeting

It was decided that women could be ordained as local church elders and deaconesses.

December 1975

Neal Wilson writes to the IRS stating that “the role of the licensed minister has been re-defined by the SDA Church.”

October 20, 1976

Vote to allow divisions flexibility when it came to defining the duties of the Adventist ministers.

1990 General Conference in New Orleans

A change in the *Church Manual* policy was approved, giving commissioned ministers, without regard to gender, the ability to perform most of the ministerial functions of an ordained minister. In a separate vote, ordination of women ministers was turned down “at this time.”

1995 General Conference in Utrecht

NAD proposal to allow each division to decide the ordination matter was denied (673–1,481).

September 23, 1995

Sligo SDA Church ordains Norma Osborn, Penny Shell, and Kendra Haloviak. Also in 1995, Madelyn Haldeman (La Sierra University Church), Hallie Wilson (La Sierra University Church), and Sheryl Prinz-McMillan (Loma Linda Victoria Church) are ordained.

1996

Margo Pitrone is ordained at Garden Grove SDA Church.

2012

Columbia Union and Pacific Union constituencies vote to ordain qualified ministers without regard to gender.

2013

Southeastern California Conference elects Sandy Roberts as president. Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) begins two-year study process.

2015 General Conference in San Antonio

Delegates vote down proposal for divisions to be allowed to decide on ordination. “No” vote interpreted by union constituencies as maintaining status quo, but General Conference leadership understood the vote as declaring union constituencies no longer able to make this decision.

2017 Annual Council

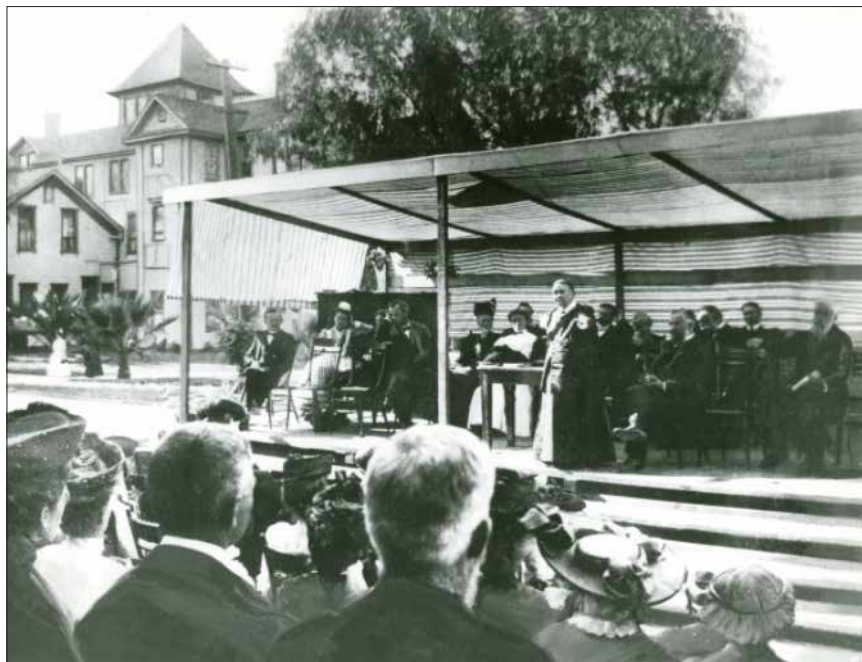
“Unity” document discussed, considering discipline for “non-compliance” by unions.

2018 Annual Council

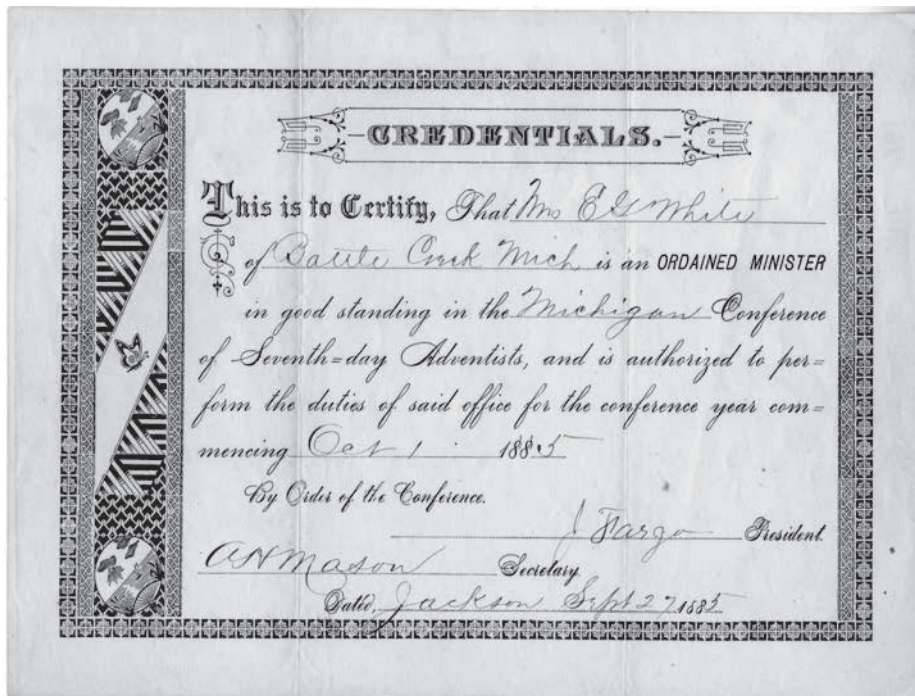
Compliance Committees approved.



Ellen White addressing the 1901 General Conference Session in the Battle Creek Tabernacle.



Ellen White giving the dedicatory address at the opening of Loma Linda Sanitarium, April 15, 1906.



This is the first known ordination credential issued to Ellen G. White by the Michigan Conference in 1883. The Ellen G. White Estate possesses seven credentials for Mrs. White, including five from the General Conference.

At least part of the answer to the question lies in our ignorance about Adventist history—a sad ignorance about the many women who, during the previous century, had served the church as licensed ministers. But there is another important aspect to the answer about what was going on in the church in 1975. This part of the answer involves money. There was a colliding back-story unfolding in the North American Division.

Until 1975, the Adventist church had one common understanding of the role and function of the minister. S/he received ministerial training (the same for men and women), and during a “testing time” received a ministerial license. If the minister demonstrated the fruit of achieving baptisms and there were no particular problems, then, after several years, a minister would be ordained and receive ordination credentials giving authority to baptize and to perform communion, marriages, burial services, and to organize

churches. Although there is no evidence that the “testing time” of women ministers ever came to an end, we do have evidence that Mrs. White received ordination credentials.

I am not suggesting that Ellen White participated in a service where male ministers laid hands on her. But I am suggesting that people raised their hands in voting her ordination credentials year after year. As far as published church policy was concerned and as evidenced in many church documents, women pastors as early as 1870 were trained the same as men pastors. They were paid by tithes and carried ministerial licenses, and at least one woman held ordination credentials during multiple years.

The Money Problem

During the 1960s, church leadership faced an escalating money problem with regard to its ministry. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) had notified the denomination

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The ordination of Norma Osborn, Penny Shell, and the author (center) at Sligo SDA Church, September 23, 1995.

in North America that licensed ministers must be permitted and able to do virtually everything an ordained minister could do if such ministers were to be granted parsonage allowance and other tax benefits. If those holding licenses but not yet ordained were not quite the same as ordained ministers then they could not receive the tax benefits. In fact, the denomination would have to pay back taxes if they continued giving tax benefits to unordained pastors after being notified by the IRS. This would have been a very costly possibility... in the millions of dollars. Already some conferences had received demands from the IRS threatening the seizure of their property.

In 1966, when Robert Pierson became General Conference president and Neal Wilson became president of the North American Division, they inherited the IRS problem. The issue was, how could the church define those with ministerial licenses but not yet ordained in a way that met IRS standards? This problem took over a decade to resolve. But the need to resolve the problem came at a crucial moment—the same time as the Mohaven recommendations.

Just as the 1895 Ellen White statement was being rediscovered and just as Mohaven was recommending that nothing in Scripture or Ellen White prohibited women from being ordained (in fact, the 1895 statement encouraged the ordination of women as at least deacons), and

just as the Mohaven Commission suggested that the church move carefully forward with women pastors with the plan for their eventual ordination as gospel ministers, elders Pierson and Wilson were feeling great pressure to fix the IRS problem.

If the duties of the licensed pastor and ordained pastor were collapsed, the IRS would be satisfied; but then licensed women pastors could perform the same duties as ordained pastors. That proved to be a problem. Recall that

Just like that, after holding ministerial licenses for over 100 years, women ministers could no longer have ministerial licenses. They were no longer on the track toward ordination.

at the 1975 Spring Meeting, the revoking of women pastors' ministerial licenses was deemed necessary because the licensed ministers' duties were expanded. It was resolved at that meeting that where women "with suitable qualifications and

experience are able to fill ministerial roles, they be assigned as assistant pastors, their credentials being missionary license or missionary credential."

Just like that, after holding ministerial licenses for over 100 years, women ministers could no longer have ministerial licenses. They were no longer on the track toward ordination. At the same time men with ministerial licenses on their way to ordination, could perform communion services, baptisms and funerals—as long as they were local church elders.

North American Division President Neal Wilson wrote to the IRS in December 1975 stating that: "the role of the



An ordination service in the Columbia Union, which voted in 2012 with an 80 percent majority, to ordain qualified ministers without regard to gender.

licensed minister has been re-defined by the SDA Church.” What he could have added was that women ministers had also been re-defined by the church. When this change in the definition of a licensed minister needed to be ratified by the Annual Council in 1976, Elder Wilson’s proposal read: “A licensed minister is authorized by the Conference Executive Committee to perform all the functions of the ordained minister in the church or churches where he is assigned.” But the union presidents and division officers from the world field beyond the United States would not agree and they referred the proposal back “for additional study.” Later, when the report came back, it did so with the provision that Division Committees could assign duties to licensed ministers when “special circumstances” demand “special consideration.” This was voted on October 20, 1976 allowing divisions flexibility when it came to defining the duties of Adventist ministers.

At an evening session of the North American Division Annual Council delegates that same day, they (just the North American Division, meeting as part of their annual meeting) voted “yes” to Elder Wilson’s proposal. The definition of minister would be different in the North American Division than anywhere else within the world church. This action was not mentioned in the report on the General Conference Annual Council published in the *Review*.³ In a later article in the *Review*,⁴ however, Elder Wilson explained that “with the view of preserving the unity and strength of the church,” the Annual Council had “voted to amend the policy governing licensed ministers to provide for appropriate latitude and flexibility within each division of the General Conference.” Apparently, the world church would have to live with a diversity of policies when it came to defining the minister, at least where so much money was involved. The tax benefits issue had been resolved for male pastors, at the



In 2000, the Southeastern California Conference voted to issue the same “ordination-commissioning” credentials to all pastors. In 2005, Pastors Chris Oberg and Devo Kritzing received identical credentials in a service at La Sierra University Church.

expense of the women pastors. Our theology of ministry and practice of ordination was determined by economics not by scripture.

Of course, the majority of the church did not know this backstory; most do not even today. But as local churches gradually learned of the change in policy to allow women to be ordained as deaconesses and elders, that issue soon became the focus, especially as local congregations worked at getting a “clear majority” of their members to favor women elders. Those on the front lines of these congregational discussions have many stories they could tell about the first woman elder ordained and how the congregation celebrated, or took time to accept it. Perhaps you remember when a woman first held the position of head elder of your congregation. By the late 1980s, 960 women in North America would be ordained as elders and serve their local churches.

Women Pastors in the Baptistry

In the mid-'80s, the focus shifted once again to women pastors. On February 11, 1984, the Executive Committee of the Potomac Conference authorized eight ordained local elders—including three women—to perform baptisms at their local churches. I have not found anything suggesting that the five men who performed baptisms at this time created any controversy. However, in the 1980s, women pastors baptizing caused quite a stir. There is a long, complex story behind the summer events of 1984, and it can be read in *Spectrum*, which has followed this issue over the decades.

That fall the Annual Council voted to call a Commission on the broad question of the “Role of Women in the Church.” The first meeting of this new Commission took place in March 1985, concluding again that more study was needed. Elder Wilson is on record at this Commission as stating that his views had shifted on this issue. Where he looked favorably on the ordination of women immediately after Mohaven, he had now shifted in his views. I find this curious because it was some time in the mid-80s that I was asked to give a week of worships at the General Conference for the employees. I was attending the local day academy and held the position of pastor of the student association. (I

was around seventeen years old.) I remember sharing stories from the gospels that week at morning worship. I also recall Elder Wilson talking with me one of those mornings after giving the worship talk. He encouraged me not to give up. Changes were taking place, he said, and it would not be long now. Certainly by the time I finished college, he assured me.

In 1988, the Second Commission on the Role of Women took place, and then in 1989, the Third Commission on the Role of Women. While the Southeastern California Conference was beginning the work of its Gender Inclusiveness Task Force, the Third Commission was recommending an interesting combination of suggestions

for the next General Conference Session: “no” to ordaining women pastors. However, in discussing the *Church Manual* at the General Conference Session in New Orleans in 1990, a change in policy from the Annual Council of 1989 was included: “Those who have, without regard to gender, been recognized as commissioned ministers or licensed ministers may perform essentially the ministerial functions of an ordained minister of the gospel in the churches to which they are assigned.”

I had finished college in 1989 and accepted an invitation to join the pastoral staff at the Seventh-day Adventist Church at Kettering (Ohio Conference) in May of that year. This meant that by the end of the next summer, for the first time, I could baptize someone I had prepared for baptism.

Voting to Allow Divisions to Decide

At the next General Conference Session in Utrecht (1995), the North American Division asked the world church to allow each division to decide the matter. It was denied (673 – 1,481; 31 percent to 69 percent). The following Sabbath in the Roy Branson Sabbath School class at the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church (Takoma Park, Maryland), I heard a panel of delegates who had just returned from Utrecht. They reported on what they had witnessed at the session. During the course of the class discussion, church members began to be convinced that, for our local congregation, “it was time.” Many conversations and prayer sessions followed, including a business session that voted overwhelmingly in favor of going forward with a local ordination service. This congregation had embraced women pastors since 1973. It was time!

Changes were taking place, [Neal Wilson] said, and it would not be long now. Certainly by the time I finished college, he assured me.

On September 23, 1995, the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church ordained three women to gospel ministry in a local church worship service on Sabbath afternoon. Norma Osborn, Penny Shell, and I were ordained. This did not receive official affirmation from the Potomac Conference nor from the Columbia Union. Later that year, the three of us flew to Southern California to participate in the ordination services of Madelyn Haldeman and Hallie Wilson (La Sierra University Church) and Sheryl Prinz-McMillan (Loma Linda Victoria Church). In 1996, Margo Pitrone was ordained at the Garden Grove Seventh-day Adventist Church. In two years, seven women were ordained as ministers in the context of their local congregations.

There was a price to pay for this initiative. Some of the men involved in these early ordination services were reprimanded and pressured in various ways. Of course, the women paid in various ways too. But the majority of the conversations were celebratory and hopeful, not negative.

Not long afterwards, the Southeastern California Conference, whose Gender Justice Commission had been working for years, began issuing the same credentials for all pastors, regardless of gender. These credentials carried the wording “ordained-commissioned.” The action authorizing this

was voted in 2000. In 2005, I witnessed my first ordination-commissioning service at the La Sierra University Church when Pastors Chris Oberg and Devo Kritzingler participated together in a service that gave them identical credentials.

Union Constituency Meetings in 2012

Then in 2012, two union constituencies voted to ordain qualified ministers without regard to gender. In the Columbia Union a majority of 80 percent voted for this recommendation. In the Pacific Union a majority of 79 percent voted for this recommendation. Then, in these two unions, ordination services began taking place. And in the Pacific Union, those already commissioned or those who had asked for commissioned licenses in solidarity with their women colleagues received ordination credentials.

In 2013, Southeastern California Conference elected Sandy Roberts as their president (72 percent in favor). That same year, the international Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) met for the first time in Laurel, Maryland. The 106 delegates were told that this was the first study committee of its kind—with an intentional international representative delegation. By the end of the two-year study, in an apparent reversal of opinion

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Thirty-nine women in ministry in Australia.



Women pastors serving in the Southeastern California Conference.



Women pastors serving in the Pacific Union Conference.

seemingly designed to diminish its influence, we were told that even this group was disproportionately made up of North American Division delegates.

What is often not understood about TOSC is that simultaneously each division had Biblical Research Committees (BRCs) meeting regularly to discuss the question of women's ordination. The plan was that each division would share papers with the international committee, which would present a consensus statement to Annual Council in 2014, and then perhaps to the General Conference in 2015. The reports from divisions included six divisions who said "yes" to the ordination of qualified women pastors in their territories. Six divisions said "no," but were open to other divisions

doing so. And one division said "no" for any territory. The discussion at the General Conference Session in July 2015 in San Antonio did not reflect the overall emphasis of the division reports that had come in to TOSC.

What has become clear is that since San Antonio, some of the papers from TOSC have allowed for aberrant theology to be embraced by segments of the church, including headship theology with its heightened hierarchical focus and anti-Trinitarian tendencies. In the last six months, officers from two different unions have expressed their concern that so many of their pastors are now dealing with members who are embracing anti-Trinitarian views.

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From left to right: Kelera Rokeva (Suva, Fiji), Charissa Fong (Adventist Media, Australia), Jacinta Epok (Western Highlands Mission, Papua New Guinea)

Questions of Governance and Discipline

In 2016, the conversation shifted from the ordination question to one of governance and discipline, as union constituencies saw the “no” vote at San Antonio as maintaining the status quo—that is, ordination remains decided at the union level (which was the actual wording of the vote), but General Conference leadership understood the “no” vote as declaring union constituencies as no longer able to make this decision.

A “unity” document was discussed at Annual Council 2017 considering discipline for “non-compliance” by unions. The key underlying question is: who can set apart ministers? The Annual Council delegation sent back the unity document last year. What will happen with the revised version this year?

Will the oversight committees be allowed to further centralize power? Will discipline of non-compliance become the focus of our General Conference? Will Adventism become more authoritarian rather than adventurous in its search for present truth?

This weekend we celebrate the past fifty years of Adventism. In 1968, an Ellen White statement about ordaining women was rediscovered. She wrote the statement after witnessing the work of women ministers. In some ways, we have been wrestling with the statement’s meaning for the last 50 years. Meanwhile, women ministers are ministering... in Southeastern California Conference, in the Pacific Union, in the Australian Union, throughout the South Pacific Division and all around the globe.

May our independent press keep finding ways to stay engaged with a church that needs to continue to wrestle with its history.

Community through conversation.

Further Readings

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End Notes

1. In addition to Benton, see Brian Strayer, “Sarah A. Hallock Lindsey: Advent Preacher on the Southern Tier,” *Adventist Heritage* 11:2 (Fall, 1986): 16-23; and Gilbert M. Valentine, “Finding Their Voice: The Expanding Role of Women—Early Adventism in Context (1865–1875),” *Spectrum* 44:4 (2016): 53-64.

2. *Review and Herald* (December 20, 1881): 392.

3. *Review and Herald* (November 11, 1976).

4. *Review and Herald* (December 30, 1976).



KENDRA HALOVIK VALENTINE is professor of New Testament Studies in the H. M. S. Richards Divinity School at La Sierra University (California, USA). She has served as a pastor and taught at Adventist colleges and universities in the United States and Australia.