# At the Eye of the Storm:

# Conflict Concerning the Ordination of Women

# Within the International Seventh-day Adventist Church

## Introduction

Early Seventh-day Adventism was highly sectarian, with high tension marking its relations with its surrounding sociocultural environment (Stark and Bainbridge 1985:23). This tension meant that it was less constrained by some prevailing social mores, especially when they would have hampered its mission. It felt a freedom to be different in certain areas. One of these was the role of women.

In an era when women leaders were rare, the early Adventist Church was guided by a woman, Ellen White (1827-1915), who was accorded the status of a prophet. She played a key role in shaping Adventism, and her writings continue to hold considerable authority. Other women also played important roles in nineteenth century Adventism--as pastors, evangelists, administrators. However, formal leadership lay in the hands of men, and women were not ordained, although a motion to proceed with this was discussed during the General Conference Session in 1881.

However, once tension between Adventism and society began to diminish, as Adventism's sectarianism moderated, Adventist leaders became increasingly concerned with its image, and adopted conformist, and indeed conservative, stances on social issues such as the position of women. Opportunities for participation by women declined sharply after the death of Ellen White in 1915 and, as in other denominations, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. Although women continued to serve on the staff of Adventist schools and hospitals, within the official church structure they were restricted almost entirely to the lowly salaried position of Bible Instructor between 1945 and 1970.

With the burgeoning of the feminist movement, and the changes begun in its wake by many of the mainline denominations, the issue of ordaining women was raised again within Adventism at the end of the 1960s. A theological conference in 1973 found no reason why they

could not be ordained to the ministry. The number of women studying theology then increased notably, and funding was made available to encourage and support them in this. Some American conferences began hiring women as pastors once again, where they usually served large congregations as associate pastors. Meanwhile, starting in 1972, women were ordained as elders within their congregations. It seemed as if a decision to ordain women to the ministry was imminent.

However, this expectation was not fulfilled, as Adventism demonstrated that the impact of its sectarian roots lingered, so that it was more conservative and slower to pursue justice on this issue as well as several other social issues. Instead, Adventism has been wracked by over 25 years of debate and acrimony, and those championing the ordination of women have endured a series of bitter defeats. Meanwhile, however, the functions of women pastors have been allowed to expand considerably, and women have recently filled a small number of administrative posts, including leadership in a new department catering specifically to the needs of women. Recently, frustration at the continuation of the two-tiered gender-based distinctions - among pastors has led to decisions to ordain several women to the ministry locally, without receiving denominational credentials. This paper explores the dynamics of this complex situation.

## Research Methods

This paper is a product of a large study of international Seventh-day Adventism. I have gathered data in 55 countries in all twelve of the Seventh-day Adventist Church's world divisions, completing well over 3,000 long, in-depth interviews with church administrators, pastors, teachers, hospital personnel, college students, and leading laypersons; I have also collected lengthy, probing questionnaires from interviewees and samples of college students and laity, gathered field notes from observation at church services and key meetings, and culled data systematically from Adventist periodicals, statistical reports, and secondary sources.

The data for this paper are drawn from interviews, participant observation, minutes of meetings, official statistics, periodicals, and the vast flow of publications on the issue of women's ordination in recent years.

## Data

*The place of women in nineteenth century Adventism:* Although the new evangelical groups spawned as a result of the First and Second Great Awakenings in the U.S. had given

women a public voice, it was still considered unusual when Ellen White rose to prominence as a speaker and writer within early Adventism, especially as she drew on her own visions and experiences with God. To deflect criticism from her prophetic ministry, male Adventist leaders often turned to the prophecy of Joel, "your daughters shall prophesy," and sometimes addressed the public role of women in general [Watts, 1995a:49].

During Adventism's early years, preaching was left to volunteers, and there was no system in place for educating preachers or supporting them financially. Men were first ordained to the ministry in 1853 as a means of distinguishing them from others whose preaching was regarded as heretical [Neall, 1995:260]. The expanding religious movement was sorely in need of pastor-evangelists, and around 1870 it established schools in order to train them, and also established a tithing system through which ministers would be paid.

At this time, acting on the urging of Ellen White, Adventism also opened its ministry to women. Between then and the end of the century more than 20 women were licensed as ministers.

> They belonged to ministerial associations, they held the Seventh-day Adventist ministerial license or the 'license to preach,' they conducted evangelistic campaigns, they visited churches doing pastoral labor, and were paid from tithe funds that Ellen White considered reserved for the official church ministry [Haloviak, 1995:30].

Some of these were extraordinarily successful pastor-evangelists: for example, Lulu Russell Wightman raised up 17 new churches in New York State in ten years [Benton, 1990:67-83]. Ellen White became increasingly supportive of the place of women in public ministry, especially after 1895 [Watts, 1995a:50; Haloviak, 1995:33-43].

However, the situation of women pastors differed from that of their male counterparts in one important respect: while the men could look forward to a natural progression from licensed minister to ordained minister, the women were not ordained. The issue of ordaining women pastors was raised at the 1881 session of the General Conference, which debated the following resolution: "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" [Haloviak, 1995:32]. The delegates, who were divided into competing "progressive" and "conservative" camps, debated the question, which was then deferred and referred to the three-man General - Conference Committee, where it died: there is no evidence in the Committee minutes that the resolution was ever discussed [Haloviak, 1995:33].

*Declining opportunities for women during the twentieth century:* By 1915--the year in which Ellen White died--scores of Adventist women had also held decision-making posts within the church administration. Three women were elected as treasurers of the General Conference in the nineteenth century; 20 of the 60 conference treasurers in 1905 were women; and in 1915 two-thirds of the education department leaders and 50 of the 60 Sabbath School department leaders were women [Watts, 1995a:50-52]. Since the church was then relatively small (a world membership of fewer than 137,000 in 1915), the presence of women was noticeable.

However, after that year the number of women administrators dwindled dramatically, and by the end of World War II they had vanished completely from such positions. With the death of Ellen White, the main advocate for women and a strong role model for them was removed, and this allowed the male leadership to abandon the previous inclusive practices. Meanwhile, the continuing increase in the wealth of the church, with more educational and medical institutions, and larger budgets, increased the power of the decision-makers. As the number of professionally trained male ministers increased steadily, the church leadership adopted a policy in 1923 which gave preference to ordained ministers--and thus to men--for such posts. Then, as budgets constricted during the Great Depression of the 1930s, ordained ministers were usually the last to lose their jobs, which made the women still holding such positions vulnerable because they lacked that credential. While women remained in lower status positions, as teachers, nurses, and Bible instructors, those with leadership ability were forced to the sidelines. That is, "during the same decades when American women were gaining legal, educational, financial, and professional recognition, women within the Seventh-day Adventist Church steadily lost leadership positions" [Dasher,1992:75-76]. The last women disappeared from administrative posts with the end of World War II, when both American society and the Adventist Church re-emphasized the place of women as mother and homemaker.

There was a similar decline in the number of women holding ministerial licenses over this same period. While a total of 28 women are listed as having held this license over the 31 years between 1884 and 1915, a total of only 25 held it during the 60 year period between 1915 and 1975, when the practice of issuing the license to women was halted. This occurred even though the number of women performing evangelistic and ministerial work had actually continued to grow--these were instead increasingly issued the inferior Bible Instructor's license [Watts, 1995a:54-55].

Different licenses for men and women meant differing wage scales for similar work and much less voice and power for women. The rise of the feminist movement in the U.S. in the 1960s made Adventist women more aware of these discrepancies. A dispute in the early 1970s at Pacific Press, one of the Church's three publishing houses in the US, brought the extent of discrimination in the church based on gender to widespread attention. This dispute, which

concerned the salary and benefits paid to Merikay Silver, a woman who worked, but was not classified, as an editor, revealed the lengths to which church leaders would go to maintain the discriminatory system. Class-action suits filed against the Press in 1973 by Silver, another woman employee, and the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission accused it of violating Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in its wage scales, fringe benefits, and promotions, since these were based on gender without regard to any standard of job performance [McLeod, 1985:117]. When the Church lost this case, it was forced to equalize its wage scales in the U.S.--but did not necessarily follow suit in the rest of the world.

One result of the outcome of this case was a sharp decline in the number of female Bible Instructors, for they were no longer cheap workers [Neall 1995:268].

*The re-emergence of the issue of women's ordination:* The Adventist Church in Finland has had, throughout its history, a number of highly successful women evangelists and an extraordinarily high proportion of women holding ministerial positions. Only one of these—in -1904-05--held a ministerial license [Watts, 1995a:55-56]. However, in 1968 the Finnish church asked permission to ordain women as pastors, a request which led the Northern European Division to seek counsel from the General Conference. The Secretary of the General Conference, in his reply, suggested that the "problem" be considered during the 1968 Biennial Council [Eva, 1968; Beach, 1968]. Thus the issue of women's ordination was raised once again.

The Council appointed a committee of three theologians to study the theology of the ordination of women. They sought information about the practice of other denominations and also background information from the Bible and the writings of Ellen White. Although the committee never met, the chair sent Robert Pierson, President of the General Conference, a short report indicating that Adventist practice was similar to that of the mainline Protestant churches and that he had found no reason why deaconesses should not be ordained as deacons are [Haloviak, 1993:1-2]. Although Pierson was pleased that "the Adventist Church isn't too far out of line with some of the other Christian faiths," when he heard that Presbyterians had begun ordaining women ministers he wrote to Gordon Hyde, director of the new Biblical Research Institute, seeking theological study of the ordination of women and their appointment to leadership positions--seemingly within their own congregations [Haloviak, 1993:2]. He was already aware that a growing number of American congregations had begun to demand the right to appoint and ordain women as elders, and that some of them had already chosen to act unilaterally on the issue. Further impetus was given when the Far Eastern Division also requested counsel about ordaining women ministers in 1972 and a Conference in Germany sought to ordain a successful woman pastor as a local elder. Meanwhile, the dispute over the pay, benefits

and opportunities afforded women at the Pacific Press had begun to fester. Willis Hackett, who was then a vice-president of the General Conference, later recalled:

> "Elder Pierson knew there were women right in the GC that we weren't treating right, weren't paying fairly. They were doing the work and men were taking the credit. We didn't want another Merikay [case]" [Watts, 1993:7].

Finally, saying that "we want to be fair to the ladies" while avoiding becoming "embroiled with women's libbers," Pierson agreed to appoint an *ad hoc* "Council on the Role of Women in the SDA Church" that would meet under the leadership of Hackett and Hyde.

This council met at Camp Mohaven in Ohio in September 1973. Hyde and Hackett had taken the unprecedented step of securing the appointment of a group where the number of women and men were equal, and 14 women and 13 men participated. The women found the meeting a remarkable experience: they got to know one another, they were included in the writing and discussion of papers that focused on an issue that was uniquely theirs, the theological papers--whether written by men or women--were positive, and the discussion culminated in enthusiastic consensus [Running, 1993; Haldeman, 1993; Benton, 1993]. For the men involved, such committee work was routine, so that their memories of the occasion are not so special [Watts, 1993:7]. Nevertheless, the papers they presented broke new ground and they too joined eagerly in endorsing the joint recommendations submitted to the Annual Council of the General Conference the next month.

Their report, which was rooted in the fact that they saw "no significant theological objection to the ordination of women for Church ministries", recommended that, as part of a pilot program, several women be given ministerial licenses and their performance and acceptance in their churches be monitored and that, based on this, the ordination of women be considered at the General Conference Session in 1975. It also recommended that women be ordained as local church elders, that pastors' wives who worked as ministers in "team ministry" with their husbands be placed on the payroll as Ellen White had suggested long before, and that "the eligibility of women...to participate with men in leadership and administrative roles at all levels, be recognized by the Church." The report also noted a statement by Ellen White admonishing both fathers and mothers to share in home and family responsibilities [Mohaven document, 1993].

It seemed to those involved that an official decision to ordain women to the ministry was imminent. However, this was not to be the case. The supporters of women's ordination instead faced a long, debilitating struggle.

*Delays and defeats, yet progress for women:* When the Biblical Research Institute presented the Camp Mohaven report to the Annual Council of the Church in the Fall of 1973, the church leaders were taken aback: C.E. Bradford, a Mohaven participant, remembered that their - reaction was that those appointed to study the issues had moved too rapidly for their liking and had gone much further than expected. Consequently, rather than voting to adopt or approve the report, they voted to "receive" it. Arguing that women could not be ordained until the entire world church was ready to move on it together, they called for further study of the report by the various geographic Divisions of the world church, and especially of the "theological soundness" of the proposal to ordain women elders in local churches. Moreover, in asserting "the primacy of the married woman's role in the home and family," they reversed the emphasis in the Mohaven report that this was a joint responsibility of husband and wife [Annual Council, 1973].When the discussion was resumed at the Annual Council the next year, it was stated that "the time is not ripe nor opportune" to ordain women to the ministry and voted to continue study of the theological issues involved [Watts, 1995b:341]. The strategy of delaying action on ordaining women by asking for further study became the standard response to the issue.

In 1975 the General Conference Committee, declaring again that "the world church is not yet ready to move forward" with ordination and in an apparent effort to defuse the issue, ceased granting women pastors a ministerial license, thus reversing a practice that had been in place for a century. Although General Conference President Pierson announced in the Spring of 1977 that the issue would be on the agenda of the Annual Council that year, it was deleted from the proposed agenda after a poll of the leaders of the various geographic divisions of the world church showed a negative response. Instead, the Council that year designated a new title for - women employed on pastoral staffs but ineligible for ordination, "associates in pastoral care." Women pastors were now placed on what was clearly a different track from their male counterparts [Watts, 1995b:342].

In 1979 licensed male ministers in North America who had not yet been ordained but were serving not only in pastoral positions but also in such non-pastoral roles as conference treasurers, officers of departments, and academy principals, were allowed to baptize and solemnize marriages in order that they might be recognized as ministers by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, and therefore qualify for tax benefits (Haloviak 1996). However, this privilege was not extended to women seminary graduates who were employed as pastors. This decision was regarded by many as discriminatory, not only because it gave ministerial credentials to men who were not really clergy--men who were then ultimately often ordained in spite of their functions--while denying them to women serving in pastoral roles, but also because the women were consequently denied the same IRS benefits as men. When those among the Church leadership who supported the ordination of women critiqued the unfairness of these policies they were able to build a coalition that led ultimately to a decision to eliminate the category of

associate in pastoral care and to replace it with a separate credential, "commissioned minister," which, like that available to men had two levels, which in this case were labeled "licensed" and "credentialed." The nomenclature "commissioned minister" was chosen because this was a category recognized by the IRS because it is used by some denominations which reject the concept of ordination. It was designed to be granted not only to women pastors but also to persons serving in non-pastoral roles such as treasurer. However, within the Adventist ministry there was still a clear two-tiered system, with male pastors being ordained and women pastors commissioned.

The fact that women pastors were still not permitted to perform such pastoral functions as baptism, even though they often prepared candidates for the rite, continued to fester. When, in 1984, the Potomac Conference, which is centered on Washington, D.C., allowed such women to baptize, the General Conference intervened to reverse this decision, but promised to renew the study of the ordination issue. The Annual Council that year established a Commission on the Role of Women in the Church, on which all of the geographic Divisions of the church were to be represented, and vowed to settle the issue definitively at the General Conference Session scheduled for 1985. Although the Commission members from all divisions were supposed to include women, the precedent of equal representation established by the Mohaven commission was not followed, so that fewer than a quarter of the members were women; indeed, some delegations contained no women at all.

When the Commission met in March 1985 it was unable to come to a consensus, and instead recommended further study of the issue. The Annual Council that year rejected a recommendation from the North American Division that the disparity between male and female pastors concerning the right to baptize and solemnize marriages be removed. A second meeting of the Commission, in March 1988, again failed to reach consensus and again recommended further study of the issue.

A third meeting of the Commission, in June 1989, finally took a vote, which recommended against the ordination of women. This decision was endorsed by the Annual Council that year and by the 1990 Session of the General Conference. The vote against ordination at that Session was 1,173 to 377 (76% to 24%). In a global church where fewer than 10% of the membership was located in North America and the vast majority of members were in the Developing World, opposition to the proposal was especially high among the delegates from the Developing World. However, a ceremony recognizing women pastors and parallel to the ordination service but carefully differentiated from it was introduced: while men were ordained after four or five years of pastoral service, women were to be “commissioned." Adventism had established a two-tiered credentialing system.

The 1990 vote was taken in spite of a growing chorus of support for ordaining women, especially from within the North American Division of the church. Most vocal there were the West Coast Bible Teachers and the SDA Healthcare Chaplains associations, both of which twice voted strongly in favor of the change. Surveys of Bible teachers, first in North America and then in the world church, showed strong majorities for the change among both groups. As the vote neared, administrators of the North American Division and its component unions also issued supporting recommendations, and two conferences announced that they were ready to ordain women pastors as soon as a positive decision was made.

Shortly after the negative vote at the 1990 General Conference Session, representatives of Adventist women's organizations, believing that the vote had failed because it applied to Adventism globally, and therefore could have opened the way for the ordination of women in countries of the Developing World where the culture would have found such a practice an affront, sought to salvage the situation by raising the possibility of a decision that was limited geographically in its scope--and especially, initially, to North America, where the demand for ordination of women was especially strong.

This proposal gradually gathered support within North America. The ministerial leaders of the various entities in North America added their voice to this demand in 1993, and the North American Division then embraced the position officially. When the Southeastern California Conference, the largest and wealthiest conference in North America, which had been hiring large numbers of women pastors and pushing for their ordination since 1987, threatened to ordain women pastors unilaterally, the president of the world church, Robert Folkenberg, prevailed on them to delay on the grounds that he would arrange to take the new proposal to the 1995 Session of the General Conference. However, Folkenberg prevented a discussion of the proposal at the 1993 Annual Council, postponing it instead until the next year, saying that he hoped then to assemble a consensus around it. The Council in 1994 proved willing to endorse sending a proposal that decisions to allow the ordination of women should be made at the level of geographic Divisions rather than globally to the Session of the General Conference in 1995, although many of those supporting this decision made it clear that this did not mean that they would then vote in favor of it.

This proposal was considered by the General Conference Session in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in July 1995. Once again the proponents of women's ordination experienced defeat by a substantial margin--1481 to 673 (69% to 31%). The broad support for the proposal from North American, Western European, and Australian delegates had been overwhelmed by opposition from Latin American, African, and many Asian and Eastern European delegates. Although the actual issue at stake in the vote was whether one of the divisions of the world church should be granted the freedom to decide such an issue for itself within its territory,

because both of the official pro and con speeches and the discussion from the floor focused on women's ordination, the result was interpreted as another defeat for it.

Meanwhile, however, Adventist women had also made some progress during the debate that culminated in these two votes by General Conference Sessions. Increasing numbers of women had been appointed to pastoral positions, especially in North America and Western Europe, and the number of women theology students had increased. In 1982, as a result of a decision taken at the Annual Council in 1979, special internships were made available to women students in North America, which encouraged local conferences to sponsor them to study for a Master of Divinity degree at the Adventist seminary and thus to promise them employment after graduation. Women theology students often shone academically, and were generally reported by college and seminary professors to be of "much higher quality" than the available male students [interviews]. As time passed, a few women appeared in pastoral or departmental roles in Asia, the South Pacific, the Caribbean, and even in Latin America and Africa [interviews]. When news of the long-isolated but resurgent Adventist church in China became available, it was found that women pastors there had been ordained and that one had baptized over 200 people - [Watts, 1995b:351]. The first Adventist women were certified as hospital chaplains during this period, and their numbers increased strongly. The members of the Seventh-day Adventist Healthcare Chaplains Association elected their first woman president in 1993.

A survey of the world church completed in 1989 found that 1,872 women were working as administrators, departmental directors and associate directors, pastors, chaplains, and Bible instructors. Only 40% of these were in North America. The study found that equal pay for equal work was often not practiced outside the North American Division, that there was considerable concern about the demeaning treatment of women, and that many believed that what they thought or said did not matter. A majority of the respondents, both in North America and worldwide, thought it appropriate for women to serve as church elders and (at least) associate pastors [Kilcher, 1995:19-20; Flowers, 1989:16].

It was noted above that the issue of appointing women as elders of local churches was already an issue in some congregations, to the point where some were acting unilaterally, when the Annual Council in 1973 voted to give "continued study" to the "theological soundness of the election of women to local church offices which require ordination..." Although the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Committee in 1975 voted "that the greatest discretion be exercised in the ordination of women as local church elders," in 1984 the Annual Council voted to "advise each division that it is free to make provision as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders" [Wilson, 1988: 6]. This latter decision opened up the possibility of appointing women as elders outside of North America.

Nevertheless, in 1988 allowing a woman to be a church elder was still perceived officially as an exception, necessary when there was no pool of qualified males, when no man was willing to serve, or when there were no male members [Kilcher, 1995: 17]. However, in that year, a survey mailed by the Institute of Church Ministry to all 4,444 churches in North America, drawing 3,036 responses (73%), found that 960 women were serving as elders in 457 churches; 66 of these served as first elders. Many of these women elders served in churches where there were also qualified males: indeed, the larger the church, the greater the likelihood that it would elect women elders. The total number of women elders was still small compared to the 14,495 males--they made up only 6.2% of the elders in the churches reporting. "The study showed that female elders were distributed among churches of every size, each of the four major ethnic classifications, and within each union conference" [Kilcher, 1995:18; Watts, 1995b:351; Kilcher and Ng, 1989:16].The women elders were appreciated in the churches where they served, especially as time passed.

On the other hand, 85% of the churches did not have a woman elder, and many pastors and first elders reported not being even able to discuss the topic of ordaining a woman with their church board or congregations for fear of reprisal or splits in the church. In churches with no women elders, both men and women were often equally opposed to the concept of ordaining a woman as elder.

The debate over the ordination of women stimulated the formation of several organizations--both unofficial and official--representing the interests of Adventist women. The unofficial groups included the Association of Adventist Women, founded in 1982, and the Adventist Women's Institute and Time for Equality in Adventist Ministry (TEAM), both founded in 1988. The official groups included the North American Women's Commission in 1983, the South American Division Women's Commission in 1985, the Southeastern California Conference Gender Inclusiveness Taskforce in 1989, and the General Conference Office of Women's Ministries in 1990. The emergence of these organizations allowed the voice of women to be heard much more than in earlier years.

When the Commission on the Role of Women in the Church voted against ordaining women in 1989, the women members of the Commission caucused and then submitted several recommendations calling for positive actions towards Adventist women. These included improved career opportunities for women, affirmative action bringing women into positions of leadership that do not require ordination, that the positions of women's ministries coordinator at the various administrative levels should be made full-time posts, and that inclusive language should be used in church documents. When these recommendations were taken to Annual Council that year, it voted to "encourage" each organizational entity to study the concerns so that their spirit and purpose could be achieved [Watts, 1995b:352-53].

The failure of the Commission on the Role of Women in the Church to come to the promised consensus on women's ordination in 1985 had brought the issue of the discrimination against women pastors, when compared with unordained men, in preventing them from performing baptisms and marriages, to the fore once again. In 1986 the Southeastern California Conference voted to allow women pastors these functions--and this time the decision did not draw fire from leaders of the General Conference. In 1988 the leaders of the North American Division called for an end to these differential policies. Consequently, when the Commission finally voted against the ordination of women in 1989, it then accepted a recommendation brought by the Division presidents and General Conference officers present to authorize qualified women to perform these functions. The *Church Manual* was changed to allow this at the 1990 General Conference Session.

This change meant that women pastors could perform almost the same list of functions as ordained males. In earlier years, ordination had "meant that the ordainee had taken the required course of training, given proof of his call to the ministry, and was now trusted by the church to preach the gospel, baptize people, organize churches, perform weddings, and officiate at the Lord's Supper" [Neall, 1995:261]. However, the extension of these functions to women and other unordained pastors rendered the significance of ordination unclear. Since ordination continued to be a prerequisite for elections to positions of power and for most positions on committees, the most obvious function of preventing women from being ordained was to keep power in the hands of men.

The votes against ordaining women at the General Conference Sessions of 1990 and 1995 have left the Adventist system full of contradictions which are rooted in the fact that it treats women differently from men. For example, while active laymen without theological education are often assigned to churches and ultimately ordained as ministers, women graduating from seminary often have difficulty finding a call to join the pastoral staff of a church--and those few who are called to pastor have no prospect of ever being ordained [Kilcher, 1995:15-16].

*The Aftermath of the 1995 Defeat:* The 1995 vote by the General Conference Session to refuse the North American Church permission to go its own way with ordination seemed to remove any prospect of the church hierarchy creating opportunities for women to be ordained in the foreseeable future. President McClure of the North American Division, stung by the defeat, appointed a Commission on Women in Ministry which was charged with finding the best ways to support and encourage women in pastoral ministry short of full ordination. It recommended that the local conferences be prompted to make sure that whenever a woman was promoted from licensed to credentialed commissioned minister there be a service of

dedication, acknowledgment and celebration paralleling the ordination service for men. Such services had been possible for several years, but had been practiced erratically. The Commission noted that the status of a commissioned minister was devalued by a casual attitude towards the commissioning service. This move had the effect of dividing the women pastors: while some chose to participate in such services, others rejected the concept of celebrating the confirmation of what they saw as a second-class status.

Some of the advocates of women's ordination hoped that the North American unions, all nine of which had voted to support the concept, or at least those conferences which had previously threatened to go ahead on their own initiative, would now proceed and so create a situation which would force or allow for broader change in this regard. However, this did not occur. Their male leaders seemed reluctant to risk bucking the system.

However, within weeks of the refusal of the 1995 General Conference Session to grant North America permission to ordain women, Sligo Church in suburban Maryland, a congregation with 3,000 members and an annual tithe income of $2.5 million, chose to act on its own initiative, staging its own ordination service where, with great pomp and emotion and a packed congregation that included large numbers of college students, it ordained three women to ministry. Two other congregations in the Southeastern California Conference (SECC) quickly followed suit. Although such ordinations were recognized only within the ordaining congregations, those supporting these actions hoped that many others would follow, and that the momentum would then place pressure on the Church leaders. However, only two other ordinations followed in 1996 and 1997, each of a single woman and both in the SECC, bringing the total number of women ordained by congregations to eight. These included five pastors, two theology professors, and one hospital chaplain. All are Caucasians.

Two of the pastors and one of the professors ordained in congregational ceremonies had already retired or were then at the point of retirement. That is, they were risking little in choosing to participate in the ceremonies. Moreover, two of the younger pastors to be ordained have since resigned from the ministry. Both found that the tensions they experienced resulted in burnout. Only one of the locally ordained women is currently serving as a pastor. Two others--a professor and the chaplain--continue to serve in those positions.

Several other women pastors, some of whom were African-American, Hispanic, and Asian, have told me that they would like to be ordained similarly, but their congregations have not been willing to take a step defying a vote of a General Conference Session. The strategy has clearly not gained momentum.

Meanwhile, tensions emerged between the North American Division and two conferences (Arizona and Potomac), whose presidents supported women's ordination and were

determined to press the Division's policy to its limits. The tensions were caused by the decisions of the two conferences to carry out commissionings and ordinations in the same service, with little more than a footnote in the program indicating that the men were being ordained and the women commissioned. The Division felt that this muddied the waters, and that there should be a clear distinction between the two ceremonies in order to follow the policy voted by the General Conference Sessions and to avoid creating confusion in the minds of the laity. Symbols are of great significance in cultural battles.

There was no attempt to place the issue of women's ordination on the agenda of the General Conference Session scheduled for the year 2000: women and their supporters had no stomach for another wrenching defeat. However, early in that year the initiative was seized by the SECC, whose Gender Inclusiveness Taskforce had kept the issue near the top of their agenda, pressed now by Loma Linda University Church, the largest and wealthiest congregation in North America, located on the campus of the Adventist Medical School, which had worked out an elaborate process when it had ordained its first woman pastor in 1997 and was preparing to ordain a second.

Because it had long embraced a proactive policy towards hiring women pastors, the SECC had many more of them on staff than any other conference in North America. It had encouraged them to participate in the internship process that normally culminates in recommendation for ordination since 1987 and had acted positively on the names of 14 women, only to find that when these were sent to the Pacific Union for approval they were not even placed on the agenda of its meetings. In March 2000 the SECC executive committee voted unanimously to issue all ministers, male and female, the same credentials, joining the previously separating titles: "ordained-commissioned." Although it thereby claimed to be within the votes taken at the General Conference Sessions, the negative response of Jan Paulson, the President of the World Church, who issued a statement that he "regretted" the vote, proved that he did not agree: "Moving together until we have agreed to give room to differ on specific issues is the price we pay for unity" (Hodgkin 2000:29).

The SECC saw itself as imposing order on a chaotic system of local initiatives, where some local congregations had chosen to ordain women but had used differing criteria, while other equally qualified women had not been ordained because their congregations had not taken the initiative. It established a system where the local congregation and the conference cooperate in establishing criteria for ordination, initiating the process, evaluating the pastors nominated, and carrying out the service. The document noted that although one of the chief arguments used against ordaining women was the fact that any ordained pastor was supposedly then qualified to serve anywhere in the world church, credentials were in fact issued by the employing conference to those serving in a specific area (Southeastern California Conference 2000:32-34).

The first ceremony carried out under these guidelines occurred at the Loma Linda University Church in April 2000. The word "commissioned" was not heard during the ordination of a woman associate pastor there. The conference announced that it would issue the new credential to all ministers in October.

In June 2000 the Arizona Conference, having adopted the SECC guidelines, ordained two women and a man at a conference-wide camp meeting, where, with strong symbolism, the preacher was the woman theologian who had been ordained at the first local ordination service in 1995. The words used were "ordained to ministry and commissioned to service," and all three were given the same ordained/commissioned credential. The conference is offering that credential to all its ministers, although, with deference to its Hispanic pastors, who are often more conservative, it is not insisting that they take it (interview).

Both these conferences are part of the Pacific Union, which has also voted to accept and register all these ordinations/commissionings, thus giving them greater legitimacy. However, both the North American Division and the General Conference continue to regard the women as merely commissioned (interviews).

These events have had the effect of further muddying the water, which has in turn created an arena for change. "Muddying the water on commissioning-ordination is a good tactic for eventually getting to a single credential for all ministers. The mixed commissioning/ordination services are really a unifying tactic that allows both sides to have it their own way concurrently. Those at such events favoring gender equality can see them as 'really, spiritually, truly' ordinations, while the more conservative ones there can interpret them as 'really two different levels of ministry'" (interview). However, as laypersons become increasingly accustomed to women pastors leading out in Communion and conducting baptisms and marriages, they will inevitably come to regard them as ordained pastors no matter what legalistic differences the bureaucrats at the General Conference see separating them out. "When the anti-women's ordination forces attack these ceremonies as an illegitimate 'back door' to ordination, they actually help the cause of women's ordination: most of the laity just see them as sore losers and legalists" (interview).

Meanwhile, since it has been declared that unordained persons may hold all but the presidential posts at the various levels of the Church structure, both the North American Division and the General Conference have been opening up administrative positions to women. The North American Division now has two woman vice-presidents, and the General Conference and most of the Divisions of the world church have appointed full-time directors of Women's Ministry. Many of the lower levels of the church structure--union conferences and conferences--

have also appointed such directors, although these are more often part-time and in some parts of the Developing World the positions are held by men. A small but growing number of women have also been appointed to other administrative positions, for example as treasurers or more often associate treasurers and as directors or, much more frequently, associate directors of departments. Although many of these are token appointments, they are nevertheless important symbolically. However, most of those chosen for these positions have not been pastors or seminary graduates, but were plucked from other positions, often in education. Consequently, they are less threatening to the careers of their male colleagues. It seems that the women pastors are being consistently bypassed for such positions because they are seen as more prepared to graduate to non-token positions. While these women are given commissioned credentials, these are not usually conferred in commissioning ceremonies (interview).

The division with the second-largest number of women pastors is the small Trans-European Division, which stretches across Northern Europe: 18 women pastors there attended professional development meetings in 1999. The first woman was authorized to baptize in Britain only in 1997, and the Netherlands held a commissioning service in 1999. That is, developments there are several years behind those in North America.

However, even in North America the large churches which chose to show their commitment to justice and gender equality by ordaining women pastors in local ceremonies have not appointed women as senior pastors when vacancies occurred. This is so even though the more conservative, predominantly white Campus Hill church at Loma Linda, California, received a shot in the arm after a long period of slow decline when it made the bold move of calling a charismatic black woman to be its senior pastor. The excuse given to me by the ordaining churches is that there are few if any women with the necessary experience to be their senior pastor. This may be because of the widespread turnover among women pastors, many of whom have, in frustration, left the ministry, while those who have remained have discovered that, like the Episcopalian and Unitarian Universalist women clergy (Nesbitt 1997), they have encountered a "glass ceiling" under which they typically rotate from one associate pastor position to another or may be placed in small, often problematic, congregations.

## Interpretation:

In recent decades international Adventism has grown rapidly and become extremely diverse: only 8.4% of its 11 million members are now located in North America. It is also going through major changes associated with its evolution from sect towards denomination. As a result of these factors, it is wracked by internal tensions and uncertainty. The bitter debate over the -ordination of women both symbolizes and highlights these tensions.

*The dynamics of the ordination debate:* My analysis highlights four strands.

1) There are tensions over Adventism's traditional social conservatism, one aspect of which has been to place women in subservient roles. Although women make up a solid majority of church members--they are estimated today as 62% of members in North America and 64% worldwide--they have been subservient economically, socially and politically. This is illustrated by the separate pay-scales that existed until the Pacific Press case, the portrayal of the sexes in earlier editions of the textbooks used in Adventist schools, where women typically needed help and men provided it, and in the imbalance among the delegates at General Conference Sessions--an imbalance which continued in 2000, when only 15.5% of the delegates were women and the powerful nominating contained only 8.6% women.[1]

People comfortable with this traditional mind-set are dismayed by the changing position of women in society and its impact on the church. They interpret the entry of women into professions as a threat to the family, and the prospect of women pastors makes them very uneasy. They are likely to see the social progressives within the Adventist Church--those concerned with fairness for women, who believe that the church will benefit if its women have greater opportunities for service, input, and leadership--as enemies. The most vocal proponents of the traditional position of women have been some well organized theological and social conservatives led by a few retired American theologians, strongly backed by wives of older pastors and retired administrators. In contrast, the champions of change have typically been younger, better educated women and men.

The tensions here are real, and often bitter. For example, when the SECC first announced that it intended to ordain its women clergy, its president had bricks thrown through windows of both his car and his home with notes attached proclaiming "no lady pastors."

2) The conflicting opinions regarding ordination are rooted in bitter theological divisions, and at the core of these are differing hermeneutics. Those adopting a literalistic view of the Scriptures have argued against ordaining women on the grounds that Adam was created ahead of Eve (the "order of creation" argument) and that it would contravene the Apostle Paul's statement that women should be subject to men and not exercise authority over them or have a teaching role in the church (the "headship" argument). They point to the fact that the priests in Old Testament times and all the apostles were men, and that Eve's sin resulted in a curse on

[1] These were nevertheless an improvement on the gender ratios at the 1995 Session, when less than 10% of the delegates and fewer than 4% of Nominating Committee members were women.

women and God's proclamation that men must rule over them (Bacchiocchi 1987; Holmes 1994; Korenteng-Pipim 1995). The ordination of women would be "the tip of the iceberg" that would result in rampant heresy (Holmes, 1994).

In contrast, their theological opponents weigh the historical and cultural background of a biblical passage before making their interpretation and applying it to current issues, they focus on what they regard as the principles that emerge from the Scriptures, such as "...there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," and they look for evidence of the Holy Spirit leading the people of God to greater understandings in the post-biblical period. Moreover, they point out that Adventists have never taken the passages emphasized by the biblical literalists literally: women teach in Adventist schools and Sabbath Schools all over the world, and such an interpretation would negate the calling of Ellen White. The Adventist biblical scholars showed, in a number of votes and surveys, that the vast majority of them held this non-literalistic view of the Scriptures, and therefore supported extending ordination to women.

This rift was highlighted at the 1995 General Conference Session, when two opposing officially sponsored presentations by professors at the Adventist Seminary were made immediately before the vote on whether the ordination of women should be allowed in North America. These focused not on the issue at hand but on the issue of women's ordination, and were based overtly on the opposing hermeneutics.

While the most prominent proponents of the conservative view were two retired biblical scholars and a Ghanaian graduate student at the Adventist Seminary, most of their supporters were laypersons, some of whom are wealthy and were anxious to use their wealth to prevail politically. Independent conservative groups financed by these members orchestrated the wide distribution of two books opposing the ordination of women throughout the global church--and especially in the Developing World--in advance of the 1995 General Conference Session (Holmes 1994; Korenteng-Pipim 1995). This was done at a time when church leaders in North America were forbidden to distribute material on the grounds that the church should not be distracted and polarized by a lengthy debate.

3) The Adventist Church has grown rapidly over the past two decades, and has been doubling its membership every 12 years. Most of this growth has taken place in the Developing World, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. As a result of this growth, and the relatively slow growth in North America, the proportion of the world membership in North America has dropped precipitously, and stood at a mere 9.25% at the end of 1994. These changes impacted the distribution of delegates at General Conference Sessions.

Such a culturally diverse international church inevitably contains segments with very different attitudes towards the role of women. This was revealed dramatically when the leaders of the Latin American and African divisions announced at the Annual Council in 1989 that they would fight against the ordination of women at the General Conference Session the next year and their delegates there voted against it almost *en bloc*. In 1989 three of the four Latin and African divisions omitted women from their delegations to the Commission on the Role of Women. It was reported that all four of these divisions had been receptive to the publications from independent biblically literalist groups in the US opposing women's ordination. Although the vote at the 1995 General Conference Session was by secret ballot, the composition of the speakers against the resolution to permit the ordination of women in North America indicated that the delegates from these divisions were again strongly against the proposition.

The 1995 vote brought out the expression of anti-American feelings, and the result was accompanied by rejoicing at the defeat of the American church. While these sentiments were undoubtedly shaped by anti-American political attitudes in their home countries, they were also a reaction to the long decades of political and financial dominance of the church by Americans—a dominance that was often heavy handed.

4) The final key strand in the dynamics of the decision of the General Conference Session against permitting the ordination of women in North America was the failure of the leadership of the world church, throughout the debate of more than two decades, to take the lead in promoting the issue. None of the three presidents of the General Conference between 1966 and 1999 ever took a public position that this was right, it was the will of God, that the church needed to take this action. Neither did they set out to educate the church concerning the issue. Instead, they insisted on remaining publicly neutral during the debate--a highly unusual stance for these men. Behind this stance lay their own personal biases and those of most of the male leadership of the church, which were socially and biblically conservative, their desperate concern to maintain unity--which they typically identified with uniformity--within the new high diversity and increasing fractiousness that now marks the international church, and their bureaucratic eagerness to avoid problems.

The personal biases of church leaders were revealed during the Pacific Press dispute and case, which formed the backdrop to the Mohaven Commission. They stonewalled and politicked for years, and the future world president ultimately lied blatantly on the stand, in order to maintain a status quo that was terribly unjust to the women employed by the church. It was naive to expect church leaders to champion the recommendations of the Mohaven Commission when they were behaving in this manner in this crucial case. Their posture during the years of debate that followed can be seen as more stonewalling and politicking to maintain the status

quo to the extent possible. On several occasions the proponents of ordination were told to back off, to allow time for healing, during which the leaders would work quietly to bring about the change--but there is no evidence that they used such opportunities to press ahead with the issue. For long periods Adventist presses and journals were ordered not to publish anything related to women's ordination, and the officially sponsored women's organizations were told not to discuss the issue. On those occasions when the discrimination against women became more obvious and pressures for change mounted, church leaders appointed commissions and asked conferences to wait until they had dealt with the matter rather than to ordain unilaterally--all to buy time, to let the heat subside. When votes rejecting the ordination of women were followed by bitterness, they issued calming promises of affirmative action to place women in high positions and on key committees which have resulted so far in little more than token changes, they designed elaborate commissioning ceremonies for women that mimicked ordination ceremonies but kept the two genders on separate tracks, and they allowed women to perform almost all the functions of ordained pastors without ordaining them and thus giving them access to power.

C.E. Bradford, a participant at Mohaven who became the first African-American to rise high in the church hierarchy and stood out as a supporter of women's ordination, summed up this dynamic in these words: Ordination, he said, had become "an emblem of male chauvinism" among Adventists; the ordination of women was resisted "because it means we have to *share* power".

## The Impact of the Extended Debate and Negative Decision on Adventism

I will discuss five factors:

1) The lack of affirmation of women pastors, and the discrimination and long period of tension and uncertainty that the women pastors have faced has taken a severe toll on them, resulting in considerable turnover among their numbers. Although according to my most recent count there are 34 women serving in pastoral roles in North America and a total of 109 as pastors, chaplains, and religion teachers, while 26 of the 116 students in the Adventist Seminary in Michigan are women, the average length of their survival as pastors is about five years. Every time the two conferences most favorable to ordaining women have prepared lists of women on their staffs eligible for ordination the persons listed have differed greatly from the previous list. For example, all three women who were at the eye of the storm when they baptized in 1984 exited from the ministry soon after. Qualified women have much more difficulty finding pastorates than men, and they experience great stress because the outcome of their first parish can make or break their careers. They lack mobility, facing difficulty finding a new position when they feel it is time to move. Because most of them are placed in large churches as associate pastors, they have the problem of having to relate to a senior pastor who may well not want

them or be threatened by their ability; they are under high scrutiny because of their pioneer status. Many of them face greater uncertainty because they are not on the regular ministerial payroll and they lack the job security that comes with ordination. Moreover, they feel especially unsupported by the higher administrative levels of the church--for example, when conference presidents have changed, some have then found that they lost their jobs. Indeed, as was noted above, two of the three active pastors who have achieved the recognition of ordination by their congregation in ground-breaking ceremonies have since resigned their ministerial positions.

2) In 1990 the Adventist Church extended the programs that have fostered growth in recent decades by adopting the most ambitious program of all: "Global Mission" seeks to establish Adventist churches among every "people group" of about a million people where Adventists currently do not have a presence, the majority of which are located in the "10-40 degrees north latitude window" that stretches from northwest Africa to Japan. However, in many cultures, especially in the Developing World, it takes women to reach women. Although many laywomen have been drawn into this program, the failure of the church to give women full encouragement and training and to place them in leadership positions is inevitably reducing the impact of this mission.

3) The Adventist Church in North America and other countries of the Developed World is already noticeably graying, much as the mainline Protestant churches are: the youth who grow up in Adventist families often do not see the relevance of Adventism to them, and about 75% of them are exiting the church (interviews). The leaders of the North American church fear, with good reason, that the decision to reject the ordination of women has further disillusioned this crucial age-cohort. The president of the North American Division, Alfred. C. McClure, wrote shortly after the 1995 General Conference Session:

> "Let me tell you what I fear. Many, particularly our younger generation, are sensitized to anything that suggests racism or sexism. The civil rights struggle has made us aware of discrimination in any of its ugly forms. Many are now looking to the church to see if the inclusiveness and fairness Jesus taught are practiced here" [1995].

4) This disillusionment is not limited to the youth. It is also rampant among many of the more educated, liberal members of the church in North America, and here it focuses on the church structure. Both groups are diverting their giving from the usual channels, which funnel funds upwards through the hierarchical structure of the church and then disburse them where

they are deemed to be needed--a system which transfers large sums from North America to the Developing World. In their disillusionment with the church structure, these members have increasingly diverted their tithes and offerings into projects associated with their local congregations. Since many of these are professionals with substantial tithes, this practice has been impacting the income of the General Conference negatively, to the great consternation of the church leaders, who have labeled it as the heresy of "congregationalism." This practice is doubly worrying to church leaders because it parallels a similar disillusionment among many conservative members, who have in turn been diverting their funds to independent ministries.

Although the local ordinations did not gain momentum, the fact that those pioneering them included some of the largest and wealthiest congregations indicates that the anger in the US over the refusal of two General Conferences sessions to allow the ordination of women has added impetus to the tendency towards Adventist "congregationalism." The latter trend will ultimately reduce the power of the General Conference in the Developing World also, as it has less largess to disburse there.

5) The debate over the ordination of women, and especially the publicity of the literalist groups and the two contrasting speeches preceding the 1995 vote, has highlighted the deep rift within Adventism over Biblical hermeneutics. The leadership of the North American Church, having experienced the ignominy of a major defeat at a General Conference Session--where it was used to being dominant for so long--became acutely aware that both speakers and all three of the major literalist books opposing women's ordination were written by persons associated, or previously associated, with the Adventist Seminary. At a meeting there after the General Conference Session, the union presidents from North America demanded to know why this was so, why the Seminary had issued nothing in support of ordination. Since most of the biblical scholars support a much more open hermeneutic, the American leaders were at last trying to harness and support that rather than avoiding the issue, as they had in past years. The outcome was the publication in 1998 of a book edited by a professor who is the wife of the then dean of the Adventist Seminary (Vyhmeister, 1998). This examined biblical and historical perspectives concerning women in ministry, and was strongly pro-ordination in tone. The contributors included 18 seminary professors and two seminary students.

It is possible, then, that the extended debate over the ordination of women will have considerable impact on the theological direction taken by the Adventist church.

## Conclusion: Future Trends?

Given the representative political structure of the Adventist Church, the prevailing attitude towards women's ordination in much of the Developing World, and the numerical predominance within Adventism of members from that sector and their consequent majority among delegates to Sessions of the General Conference, a reversal of the votes against permitting the ordination of women cannot be expected soon. However, the recent moves by the Southeastern California and Arizona conferences, the backing this has received from the Pacific Union, and the consequent muddying of the water, has opened new possibilities. Much will depend on the extent to which other conferences and unions choose to follow their example.

Another new ingredient was the appointment of Dr. Jan Paulson as president of the General Conference in 1999, when it was necessary to fill an unexpected vacancy, and his election to a full term at the Session in 2000. He is a new kind of president: the first from Europe and, as a former theology professor and college president, the first with an earned doctorate. Although it seems that his first concern is to retain unity within the extremely diverse and increasingly fractious world church, he also personally supports the ordination of women. It is yet to be seen whether he will be willing to use the moral authority and political influence of his office to pursue change in this area.

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