

History and Statistics: GC Votes on Women Ordination in the SDA Church

The Church has never, never been against "women in ministry". There were always women in our Church, making a significant contribution, spiritually filled and godly, bringing people to the feet of Jesus Christ. They lead Camp meetings, did pastoral work, were very successful evangelists, together with their husbands or alone. Fact is that the Church profited from their labour but did not give them the same pay and facilities. Ellen White was very angry with unfair dealings with women in Australia to the extent that she threatened to withhold tithes.

Our Church had its first women GC officer in 1871: **Adelia Patten Van Horn** held office from 1871-1873. She and her husband later become missionaries to the Walla Walla Valley.

Minerva Jane Loughborough Chapman was General Conference treasurer from 1877-1883. She did an excellent job, for she was elected in that position twice. The Secretary and Treasurer position were never excluded to women. Women can be in leadership positions. Even now, the TED Secretary is a woman (**Audrey Andersson**), and one of the vice presidents of the GC is a woman (**Ella Simmons**). Both second term and may be called a third time in 2020.

From 1872 to 1975 women evangelist received licensed ministerial credentials. From 1881 onwards they were even 'hand-laid' in that position, but it was altogether clear that they were not "ordained ministers". They were set apart -by laying on of hands in a special ceremony - for the "ministry" - to minister unto souls, "to minister to others who came within their sphere of influence".

In 1895 Ellen White urged to have those women set apart by a ceremonial by laying on of hands and consecrating them for the "ministry". English seemed a more straightforward language then, for everyone understood "ministry" not to mean a minister's position. When the work advanced, there was a need for more workers in the field and women made a significant contribution which was likewise acknowledged by the Church.

In the years 1900-1975, there was an on and off debate on women in ministry. Women were allowed to the theology academies and graduated with honours. Women served in faraway fields, establishing churches and ministering unto the people. Most of those were content with the official position as "evangelists" with ministerial licenses.

In the years 1950-1973, more and more world regions called for a thorough theological study on women in ministry.

I only give a summary of the official policy actions of the General Conference and its key-resolutions. There was and is still more at hand. There were and still are numerous unilateral actions by the NAD, and some local Unions and Conferences, also in other parts of the world. See the impressive list on web page URL provided hereunder. Currently, the Columbia Union, Norwegian Union, Swedish Union, Netherlands Union, North Germany Union, Italian Union, Belgian Federation, Northern California Conference, and Southeastern California Conference are openly in defiance to the World Church.

I pick up the "modern time" discussion in 1973. There were until now (Nov 2019) 23-24 official votes or otherwise official actions relating to the topic of women ordination in our Church. 14 times in an Annual Council or Spring Meeting (yearly business meetings of Union presidents together with GC and Division officers); 3 times in a General Conference Session; another 3 times by special study committees (Camp

Mohaven, Cohutta Springs and TOSC), 2 times in meetings with GC and Division officers together with members of their executive committees and as far as we can see 1 times a policy clarification statement by the GC Secretariat (August 2018).

1973: September Camp Mohaven Study Committee

Consisting of 13 men and 14 women. This women's majority committee recommended "That women to be ordained as local church elders, and those with theological training be hired as "associates in pastoral care" primarily in multi-member pastoral staffs."

1973: October Annual Council

Annual Council voted to "receive" the Camp Mohaven report. It also voted "that continued study to be given to the theological soundness of the election of women to local church offices which require ordination" and "that in areas receptive to such action; there be continued recognition of the appropriateness of appointing women to pastoral, evangelistic work."

1974: October Annual Council

Calls for "more study" and votes to continue studying the theological issues. Says, "The time is not ripe nor opportune" to ordain women to the gospel ministry, that is as ordained ministers.

1975: March Spring Meeting

Approves women's ordination for deaconesses. Also permits women to be ordained as elders IF "the greatest discretion and caution" is exercised not to wreck the local church over this issue. Urges women to become Bible workers or even assistant ministers but notes that the church will grant them only a missionary license. The Tax-Exempt accreditation "commissioned ministers" did not exist then. One was either a minister (male) or an evangelist (male or female).

1977: March Spring Meeting

Discussion on women's ordination dropped. General Conference president Robert H. Pierson tells Spring Meeting that the role of women is under continuing study and a report will be given at the 1977 Annual Council. However, when a poll of the world field is taken and shows a negative response, women's ordination is deleted from the Annual Council agenda. **Note:** Jan Paulssen did the same in AC2009 going to GC2010.

1977: Annual Council votes for Associates in Pastoral Care

The AC introduces the accreditation term "Associates in Pastoral Care" to identify persons who are employed on pastoral staffs, but who are not in line for ordination (women). At GC 1990 this position is changed into the "Commissioned ministers" status to provide for tax benefits for the evangelists as were they "ministers".

1984: October Annual Council

Women elders' ordination policy of 1975 Spring Meeting reaffirmed: 'Women may be ordained as local elders.' This was to be brought to the GC Session of 1985. The body also voted "to advise the GC in Session to grant each division permission to be free to make provisions as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders."

The Church administrators vow to settle the issue "definitively" at the 1985 GC session. However, this was not done. The World Church in Session denied the wish.

So actually, this proposal of the ordination of women elders was never made formal. During the following years, fields struggled with this loose end, until it became "natural law" that women were ordained as elders.

This political administrative mistake paved the way for more controversy in the Church, for it set a precedent of action that one can take matters in his own hands when he holds the opinion that the Church is slow to act.

1989: July Division's Committee in Colhutta Springs

Vote:

No ordination for women, but some pastoral privileges - 56 against (84%)- 11 in favour.

Recommends:

- (a) Women not to be ordained to the gospel ministry, and
- (b) that divisions may authorize qualified women in ministry to perform baptisms and marriages.

The committee had representatives from every world division and including 17 women. (Three divisions declined to send women: Inter-America, South America, and Eastern Africa.)

1989: October GC Annual Council

187 favour (66%) - 97 against accepting the two recommendations from the Commission on the Role of Women in the Church, which met in Colhutta Springs, and rejecting women's ordination, but permitting qualified women to baptize and perform marriages.

1990: GC in Session

A motion to allow for women's ordination voted down by world delegates with 1,173 against (76%) - 377 in favour -

Note:

1994: SDA Theological Seminary professor publishes a book on ordination. Raymond Holmes, retired seminary professor, publishes the Tip of an Iceberg, [sic] in which he argues that the authority of the Bible, and all of Adventist's unique beliefs, are threatened if Scripture is interpreted to allow women's ordination. Here is an authorized digital abstract of the book:

<http://www.andrews.edu/library/car/cardigital/digitized/documents/b17270947.pdf>

1995: GC in Session

A call for variance by NAD: 1,481 against (69%) - 673 in favour.

2011 October GC Annual

A call for variance by NAD, TED and NUC fails 167 against (59%) - 117 in favour.

2012: June GC and Division Administration Top

In the light of the ongoing TOSC study and unilateral actions of several impatient unions and conferences, General Conference officers, including presidents of the 13 world divisions, and 40 former high-ranking administrators have unanimously communicated an appeal for unity in respect to ministerial ordination practices. The appeal, aimed at Union and Conference administrations as well at individual church members, calls for:

- for unity in respecting a global church action (i.e. the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Session decisions on ministerial ordination);
- for each union executive committee to carefully review the far-reaching effects of pursuing a course of action that is contrary to the decisions of the General Conference in session; and
- for each union to participate in the current study about the theology of ordination and its implication.

The appeal further stated that: "For one entity to express its reasoned dissent with a global decision of the Church might appear to some as a legitimate course of action. However, the implications of acting contrary to a world Church decision are not limited to the one entity. Any organization contemplating a course of action contrary to a global Church decision must ask itself, "Is this the pattern of participation in Church life that we wish to establish and recommend for other entities to follow?"

"How will we deal with the situation if an organization in our territory should decide to discontinue its participation in one or more matters under which it disagrees with the larger family of organizations?"

"Mutually agreed upon policies benefit the entire Church and keep it from fragmenting into independent, locally driven units. They are the reflection of the Spirit-directed will of the body and allow each entity to look beyond itself for the good of the whole body of Christ." ...

"We therefore earnestly appeal to you:

1. That your union continues to operate in harmony with the global decisions and global decision-making processes of the Church.
2. That until such time as the Church decides otherwise, your union refrains from taking any action to implement ministerial ordination practices that are contrary to the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Session actions.
3. That the union membership to be informed concerning the implications for the entire Church in the event that one entity, for whatever reason, chooses a course of action in deliberate opposition to a decision of the whole Church.
4. That the union actively participates in the global discussion about the Church's understanding and practice of ordination.

2012: August Special Session of GC Administration

Response to Unilateral actions of Pacific Union Conference and Columbia Union Conference:

"Unilateral actions contrary to the voted decisions of the global church seriously threaten the unity of the church; pre-empts the study of ordination theology and practices by committing the unions to a particular outcome before the study-and-discussion process is completed; expresses a lack of trust in the integrity of the general process accepted and voted by General Conference in Sessions; is contrary to General Conference Working Policy and sets aside the 1990 and 1995 decisions of the General Conference in Session respecting the practice of ordination; represents a serious threat to the unity of the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church".

Adventist Church President Ted N. C. Wilson addressed the Special Constituency Session in the Pacific Union Conference on August 19. His plea was not heard, and he was scoffed at.

2012: October GC Annual Council

An urgent plea to wait for GC 2015 and a moratorium on unilateral actions: 264 in favour (91%) - 25 against

The statement is about Church structures and procedures. It is not necessarily about ordination, but it clearly states: "The World Church cannot legitimize exercises that go against the understanding of the General Conference in session. Therefore, the World Church does not acknowledge actions that authorize ordination without discrimination

to gender. Before the decision was made, the Union presidents had a day of prayerful study and discussion, prayed with one another for the guidance of God's Spirit. ..."

Still, less than two weeks after that AC action, a hostile motion was put on the table in the Netherlands and voted on, which went entirely against it.

2014: October Annual Council

Delegates agreed to ask the General Conference session 2015 whether each division may decide for itself whether to ordain women, voting 243 (84%) in favour and 44 against. Many expressed hopes that 2015 will bring a final decision on the matter, that the Church will be able to focus more fully on its mission of proclaiming Jesus' soon coming.

2015: GC in Session

Motion to allow Divisions to make policy provisions to ordain women in their fields fails by 1,381 against (58%) - 977 in favour

2015: 18 August GC Secretariat Document

Because of ongoing dissident actions of unions and conferences, GC Secretariat issues a comprehensive explanation of the Working Policy relating to the authority of Unions and ordination to the gospel ministry. As a result, Pacific Union Conference cancels its special constituency meeting on August 19. But on the 9th of September, it's EC unilaterally decides to ordain women, without consulting constituency.

2015: 11 October Annual Council

Unanimous urgent appeal for Unity to Entities and all church members, read at the Council.

2016: 12 October Annual Council

The General Conference (GC) Annual Council voted to accept a document entitled "Unity in Mission: Procedures in Church Reconciliation" by a margin of 169 in favor and votes to 122 against. The main question being considered was how to respond to church entities that are non-compliant to Fundamental Beliefs and voted actions and policies of the GC.

"The discussion and vote ... was very focused," said South Pacific Division president Pastor Glenn Townend. "It outlined a biblical and Christian process of prayer and discussion aimed at bringing entities who are non-adherent to Fundamental Beliefs, voted GC actions and policies back into compliance."

2017: 10 October Annual Council

Following nearly six hours of discussion and debate, a majority of members of the Executive Committee of the General Conference (GC) of Seventh-day Adventists voted by secret ballot, carrying 184 in favor to 114 against to send a document entitled *Procedures for Reconciliation and Adherence in Church Governance: Phase II*, back to the Unity in Mission Oversight Committee for further review.

Pastor Lemon introduced the Phase II document, emphasizing that it came through the Unity in Mission Oversight Committee, was then discussed by the Administrative Committee of the General Conference (ADCOM), and was finally referred to General Conference and Division Officers (GCDO) before coming to the Annual Council Executive Committee.

The document outlines the second phase of a process of reconciliation voted during last year's Annual Council that sought to initiate standard procedures for maintaining Church unity in matters involving non-compliance.

While recognizing that “the policies of the Church are not infallible”, the document explains that policies offer “the best judgement of a representative group of Church leaders at a given time on how denominational entities live and work together”. The *General Conference Working Policy* is the result of votes taken by representatives from around the world during either the General Conference in session every five years, or during the annual meeting of the Executive Committee.

The Phase II document is built on existing voted policies such as B 15 05, which clarifies “the authoritative voice” of *General Conference Working Policy* and B 15 10, which requires global adherence to *Working Policy*.

2018: 15 October Annual Council

Following more than five hours of presentations and discussion, delegates to the Church’s annual meeting of its full Executive Committee voted 185 in favor to 124 against, with two abstaining, of the steps recommended by the Church’s Unity Oversight Committee for addressing matters of non-compliance within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Myths were running rampant on social media about the significance of the document, [“Regard for and Practice of General Conference Session and General Conference Executive Committee Actions”](#). Some claimed the General Conference desires to control what happens even on the local church level and no one is safe from its tentacles of control. The document has been called “papal”, “anti-protestant”, and “unbiblical”. [Here is Mark Finley’s analysis](#), issued on October 24th. In the final paragraph he stated, “Policies are not unchangeable biblical teachings and should never be elevated above biblical truth. They are operating principles that delegates to a General Conference Session or Executive Committee can change and at times have changed. If change to any policy passed by the General Conference in Session or to Executive Committee actions is made, it should be made by the same body where it was voted.” This is a common practice, even in worldly organizations.

2019: 16 October Annual Council

The much-anticipated discussion of possible discipline for church entities deemed not compliant with ordination votes and policies witnessed surprising turns as delegates to the Annual Council wrestled with competing values.

The compliance trajectory voted at the AC 2018 to solve non-compliance in entities who have been seizing the World Church for many years, implied: Illegal decisions to be withdrawn and the non-compliant entity to come into harmony again with the structure of the Church, or

- a) The entity shall receive a public (symbolic) warning as a Union;
- b) The president of Unions that are deemed “in persistent non-compliance” shall receive a public (symbolic) reprimand;
- c) The President will no longer be a delegate to the meetings of the EXCOM of the GC.

During the discussion it apparently became clear that option c could not be executed before the Working Policy stated this in the ‘for cause’- clause. This motion carried and will be ratified at GC 2020.

The Danish Union of Churches Conference, the North German Union Conference, the Norwegian Union Conference and the Swedish Union of Churches Conference were recommended for option a, and two NAD Union presidents (Columbia Union Conference president Dave Weigley and Pacific Union Conference president Ricardo Graham) for option b. The motion of option a carried by a margin of 164 in favor to

124 against. The motion to warn the two union presidents was amended to option a addressed to the union (constituency), and passed by a clean two-third margin of 190 in favor to 94 against.

And now? What will July 2020 bring us?

This debate will then have been brought 24 times (at least) to the floor in the highest administrative level of our Church.

When is enough, enough?

additional source: <http://www.sdanet.org/atissue/wo/appendix5.htm>

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