

**SPECTRUM** (Sept. 1995) vol. 25, no. 1, pages 20-24  
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### **Conference Within A Conference**

Stella Ramirez Greig reports on the best of times and the worst of times for women at the 56th General Conference Session

by Stella Ramirez Greig

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For women, the 1995 General Conference Session was the best of times and the worst of times. The juxtaposition of these "best of times/worst of times" created cognitive dissonance and tension for Adventist women, and for the church in general. Women were certainly an integral part of the GC Session. Some, like Millie Kurtz, head of food Services, worked behind the scenes, making things happen. A few were delegates, speaking to and voting on policy changes.

Women were also on the main platform: Carol Rasmussen, taking minutes of the business sessions; Andrea Luxton, giving an early morning worship; Lyn Behrens, delivering nominating committee reports; and Rose Otis, presenting one of the Bible study hours.

And yet, every morning, it was a "bad time" for Adventist women. At the entrance to the convention grounds, women had to pass a large banner of a woman (doing a Hitler-like salute) in a circle with a line drawn through it, declaring "No new Gods," "No new leaders," "Vote no on women's ordination." By the sign, two young men with bullhorns proclaimed, "Vote No on women's ordination," as they distributed booklets. Though not an officially sanctioned display, it was public, persistent, unavoidable, and degrading. God only knows what the Utrecht cyclists, riding past on their way to and from work, thought.

### **Ordination Debate**

The worst of times for Adventist women was July 5, sitting through the afternoon business session regarding the North American Division's request that divisions be allowed to ordain individuals without regard to gender. I personally know many women (not delegates, of course) who stayed away from the session because they did not want to subject themselves to the negative, anti-women rhetoric they knew was sure to emerge in the session. [21]

And emerge it did: from the formal presentation of the anti-ordination speaker to the delegates lined up at the microphone for individuals speaking against the motion. It was especially painful for bilinguals because we heard the original Spanish of the speaker and then an English translation of many of the negative comments, ranging from "women belong in the kitchen and at home," to women seeking ordination are similar to "the third of the angels who fell with Lucifer."

The formal presentation by P. Gerard Damsteegt against women's ordination was both painful and confusing. Damsteegt emphasized headship theology, hierarchy, leadership authority, and power, but these are in such vivid contrast with the gospel presentation of the life and ministry of Christ as that of servanthood, service, and caring. And while Damsteegt spoke against women having "authority" over men, it is a fact that women, and some women pastors, are already in positions of leadership. Both in the U.S. and Scandinavia, some churches have a woman as the senior pastor. Some unions and conferences in the North American Division and Trans-European Division already have women as officers, such as youth directors and education directors. Furthermore, from its founding, Ellen White has had authority within the church.

The greatest cognitive dissonance resulted from the contrast between the refusal of the church to officially recognize, through ordination, the work of the Spirit accomplished by women and the fruit of the Spirit produced through the work of women pastors, evangelists, teachers, Dorcas leaders. We glimpsed their work in several venues. One place was the main hall during the evening division pageants and reports. Another venue was at the July 4 GC president's luncheon meeting with women organized by the General Conference Office of Women's Ministries (now a department). While we ate from elegant purple sack lunches, we heard plaques read out honoring two women pastors from China. Zhou Hui-Ying and Wu Lan-Ying have each raised up churches of more than 1,000 members. Interestingly, the first question posed to Elder Folkenberg during the question and answer period was, "Do you support the ordination of women?" He replied, "That's a very good question; come tomorrow afternoon [July 5 business session] and find out."

### **Morning Sessions**

Rose Otis, director of the Office of Women's Ministries and chair of a planning committee, and Ardis Stenbakken, the assistant chair, along with a hard-working committee, \* had organized parallel events for the five weekdays of the session: plenary sessions in the morning, myriad simultaneous workshops in the afternoon. Since the morning meetings were held during the morning business session for delegates, and the afternoon sessions were held during the afternoon business session, female (or male) delegates could not attend any of the women's meetings. This was disappointing, not only because the topics covered during these meetings are very important, but because delegates were not as able as others to network, extending fellowship into the future.

According to Otis, there was a strong commitment to bringing an international aspect to the programs. To this end, key speakers from countries (Brazil, Kenya, Norway, and South Korea) representing four non-North American divisions were financially sponsored jointly by the Office of Women's Ministries and the relevant divisions. Indeed, each day at least five divisions were represented.

Sunday morning, July 2, Carla Gober, from Loma Linda University, spoke on mental and emotional health issues for women, including self-esteem, and Irene Eide Elisenberg, a Norwegian pastor, spoke of the importance of "Living God's Love in My Personal Life," by [22] sharing personal experiences of how this can be both difficult and possible.

Monday morning, July 3, Chun-Ok Im was so animated, so full of humor and transparent body language, that though she spoke in Korean, the audience laughed and reacted appropriately even before the translation. She recounted her joining the church through roadside evangelistic activities and experiences from her own evangelistic activities, which have resulted in hundreds of baptisms.

In her devotional, "Living God's Love in My Intentional Witness," speaker Jerusyha Muga, from Nairobi, Kenya, demonstrated the fiery, evangelistic style that has brought many to Christ in her evangelistic campaigns and revival meetings.

Tuesday morning, July 4, Marit Balk spoke of the need to have "balcony people" in our lives, who support us when we can't see beyond today, when there seems to be no way out of our present circumstances. Her voice broke with emotion when she confessed that some of her balcony people were present in [23] the room. Sharon Cress, director of Shepherdess International, focused on abuse in her devotional, "Living God's Love in My Family." "If someone came into your church and tipped the furniture over and violated the sanctuary, what would you think? What would you do? What about people who violate the temple of the living God?"

Wednesday morning, July 5, Ullanda Innocent, who has sung in Carnegie Hall, Radio City Music Hall, and the Lincoln Center, traced her path to singing the Lord's praises as a crusade team member with the *Breath of Life* telecast. Carole Ferch-Johnson, in "Living God's Love Through Difficulty," talked about living God's love when bad times come: a husband's untimely death, a son's rejection, trouble with eyesight.

Thursday morning, July 6, Daise Bezerra Dos Reis testified how God had taken her from a shy daughter of a pastoral family and given her the courage to become a leader of women in one of the world's largest cities--Sao Paulo, Brazil. Daise's learning to speak English in seven months, so that at Utrecht she could

make her presentation in English, was proof that God enables us to reach our potential.

In the devotional for the final women's meeting, Rose Otis chose as her topic, "Living God's Love in My Church Family." Her presentation centered around the challenge of being all we can be in our local congregations and church communities. Since her appointment in 1990 as the director of the Office of Women's Ministries for the General Conference, Otis has seen the growth of women's ministries programs in eight of the 11 divisions.

### **Afternoon Seminars**

In the afternoon (Sunday through Wednesday) one could select from 10 different seminars, organized by the Office of Women's Ministries, for a total of 40 seminars (see box, p. 22). Six seminars, discussing specific areas of women's health, were marked *Women Only*. The seminars were intended to be practical: issues such as literacy, poverty, abuse, risks to health, length of women's workday. In addition, there was a focus on training and mentoring for involvement in the church's mission. The 43 talented presenters represented all walks of Adventist women's lives. They included Barbara Folkenberg, mother of the president of the General Conference, 12 doctors from Loma Linda, and a quartet of men. On Thursday afternoon, July 6, the Women's Ministries group joined with Family Life, Children's Ministries, and Risk Management in leading out in a meeting discussing the important topic of family violence. At the end of the afternoon the group shaped recommendations regarding the issue to present to the Administrative Committee.

The Office of Women's Ministries is to be commended for tackling some "hard issues" during this Year of the Adventist Woman. While a business session debated the wording of the church manual statement on divorce, the women's seminars examined the issues of [24] sexual ethics, spouse abuse, and violence toward women. In addition, whereas the business session debated the issue of the ordination of women, the women's meetings presented "women ministers" sharing the stories of the work and fruits of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

For women, the 1995 General Conference Session was the best of times; it was the worst of times. In the final analysis, whether many of us will ultimately remember Utrecht as the best of times or the worst of times still depends to a large extent on what the church now does about ordination of women; what the church--its international, divisional, and local leadership, as well as its men and women in the pew--does to come up with satisfactory and creative ways to fully recognize through ordination the Holy Spirit's endowment of women with ministerial, pastoral gifts.

\* Rosa Banks, Sharon Cress, Celia Cruz, Linda DeLeon, Karen Flowers, Anita Folkenberg, Ramona Perez Greek, Frances McC1ure, Barbara Mittleider, Julia Norcott, Elizabeth Sterndale, and Nancy Vasquez.