

Women and Mission

by Ginger Hanks Harwood

Mission—*The Scriptures witness that in the last days, under the blessing of the latter rain, women as well as men will be empowered for service, as the gospel is taken to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people (Joel 2:28-32; Matt. 24:14; Rev. 14:6, 7).*

The issue of ordination for women in the pastoral ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is neither new nor easily resolved. Despite the prevalent impression, the question far predates the rise of feminism in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. *The Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* and records of conference proceedings document the licensing of women in ministry in the 1870s. (These records also list Ellen White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as an ordained minister, beginning in 1884, the first year records were kept, until 1911.) Before the turn of the twentieth century, women such as Sarah Hallock Lindsey, Sarapeta Irish Henry, Anna M. Johnson, Ellen Edmonds Lane, Julia Owen, and Helen May Stanton Williams found ample opportunity to preach, hold evangelistic meetings, and raise new congregations as officially recognized ministers of the Adventist Church.¹ As Willmore D. Eva has noted,

Even in the young, conservative Seventh-day Adventist

Church of the eighteen seventies and eighties, serious and widespread interest in ordaining women to the gospel ministry definitely preceded the height of the women's suffrage movement which reached its pinnacle of popularity in England and in America around the turn of the century.²

The move to establish an official policy concerning the ordination of women was first broached at the General Conference Session in 1881.³ After discussion, the issue was referred to the General Conference Committee. Church historians find no further reference to the subject until about 1960.

For the past 20 years, the church has wrestled anew with this question. Since the 1970s, we, individually and corporately, have searched the Scriptures, assigned accomplished theologians to investigate the matter, probed the issues involved, and presented and received both scholarly treatises and emotional appeals on the issue.⁴ The dialogue has been conducted among interested individuals in local churches, at constituency meetings, at several Annual Councils, and a General Conference session. We have garnered all the pertinent information available in order to make a reasoned stance that would be consistent with our identity as a Scripture-based church.

The Current Debate

Although extensive scholarly research has determined that "there is no conclusive theological argument to deny the ordination of women to the gospel ministry,"⁵ Seventh-day Adventists remain divided and uncertain on the issue. Certain groups of laity work tirelessly for women's ordination, shocked and dismayed that the church is slow to respond to the outcry for equality and justice. From their perspective, the church is called to be a transformative minority, modeling the way of peace, "kin-dom," and glory to a world of violence, oppression, and wrath. They see the church as a community appointed to demonstrate that the foundational premise of the universe is mutually giving love, and that systems or actions of domination, coercion, subjection, or repression tear the very

fabric of the Creation. As faithful disciples of Jesus, the One who was willing to die for love, the church must be in the forefront of the struggle against all forms of tyranny and violence, including that in gender relationships. These people struggle to retain their faith in God's leadership of a church that refuses to acquiesce to fundamental principles of Scripture: inclusivity, compassion, and justice.

Other committed church members have responded differently to the question. The determination that the Bible does not forbid the ordination of women, or even that this action is consonant with foundational principles, has not annulled the reservations of other segments of the church. These are the members who do not believe that, in this instance, the "could" implies a "should," or impels the church to action. They correctly assert that wherever an issue is not specifically commanded or forbidden, the church has the responsibility to discern, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which actions and paths aid in accomplishing our mandate and which are dead ends. As Paul observed, "All things are lawful,... but all things are not expedient" (1 Cor. 6:12).

There are also congeries of believers who view the proposal to ordain women with suspicion and apprehension. Fiercely loyal to the church as it was structured and formed when they received their induction and training in faith, they see themselves as defending the church against forces and individuals who would substitute human opinions for divine wisdom. They tend to be wary of changes in church order, theology, or social arrangements at this late date.

These people resist modifications that they see as compromise with temporal society. They fear that ecclesiastical innovations invalidate God's previous guidance and negate the work and prudence of the church founders who established the present order. They are concerned that such changes will alter our core identity, our understanding of who we have been as a people historically. They regard the efforts for the ordination of women as evidence of creeping secularism, stemming from the contamination of the church by contact with the world and its values. Furthermore, they find the suggestion that women "need" ordination to minister effectively as discounting the efforts of scores of dedicated women who have served the church without regard for ordination.

There are other members whose opposition to women's ordination is a function of their single-minded commitment to global mission. For them, every proposal that is brought before the church must be weighed in terms of its potential consequences for world evangelism. They are unwilling to pursue issues that may create internal tensions or lessen our credibility to groups with strong cultural prejudices concerning the "appropriate" sphere of women. They are distressed that many are devoting time and energy to this issue at the expense of our primary responsibility: spreading the good news of God's love and the imminent return of Christ. They speculate that this whole issue may be a diversionary tactic devised to distract us from our mission.

These members are troubled also by the phenomenon of women pursuing their rights, which they perceive as proof that these individuals are more interested in recognition and status than in opportunity to minister. They contrast this attitude to a genuine devotion to God as evidenced by indifference to anything except "finishing the work." Holding church unity to be more important than individual "rights," they see the call for justice for women as an example of narrow self-interest placed above the good of the church. Their reluctance to act on this issue is predicated on an assumption that the ordination of women might negatively impact the realization of church mandate; they are unwilling to compromise mission for justice.

Yet another group contests ordination for women—members who believe there are distinct and separate legitimate spheres of ministry for men and women. They perceive a rigid biblical ranking of the genders, a view that they base on the cumulative evidence of Adam's precedence in Creation, the "curse" pronounced after the Fall, the all-male Levitical priesthood, and the maleness of Jesus and the 12 disciples.⁶ To these apparent demonstrations of divine intention for a separate and secondary role for women, they add the statements of Paul that appear to establish the authority of men in the home and limit the participation of women in the church (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3-10; 14:33-40; 1 Tim. 2:11). They also regard the fact that Ellen White was not ordained as further confirmation that ordination is reserved by God for men.

Viewed from this point, ordination appears to place women in

roles and positions outside of God's intention for them. Thus, for individuals convicted of the importance and impermeability of gender roles, the question of ordination for women becomes a test of loyalty to God's design for the ordering of men and women. The choice to ordain women is seen as a rejection of God's master plan, while opposition establishes a defiance that embraces secular models of relationship. Beneath their various arguments against women's ordination lurk the twin questions that remain unanswered for many: Is it right for a woman to stand before the congregation representing God, since Jesus was a male and addressed God as "Father"? and, Can a woman really represent God?

Four things emerge clearly when the conversations conducted within the church on this topic are reviewed and analyzed. First, according to our very best scholarship, Scripture does not provide a definitive "Thus saith the Lord," on this question. *The Bible is not going to relieve us of our responsibility to wrestle with the issues involved in efforts to discern an appropriate response. If we are going to utilize Scripture to resolve this dispute, we will have to be content with the application of its principles rather than reliance on law or overt instruction.*

Second, the potential ramifications of this issue for the fulfillment of the mission of the church need to be appraised with care. Every argument related to the issue touches on how it affects church mission. This assessment includes grappling with our understanding of the essence of the gospel we proclaim and closely considering the message carried by church structure and praxis.

Third, we need more clarity about the significance and function of ordination. While we officially embrace belief in the priesthood of all believers and emphatically reject the Roman Catholic model of a radical split between laity and clergy, lay understandings of the topic vary markedly.

Fourth, the issue of ordination for women transcends the rational or logical elements of consideration: People who engage in this discussion have very strong feelings. We can be certain, therefore, that the question will not be decided by a marshalling of facts. Unless the affective dimension of the issue is thoroughly recognized and addressed, no genuine consensus will be reached.

The Church and Mission Considered

Adventists understand the church to be the earthly body of Christ, commissioned to continue the proclamation and demonstration of the good news of God's expansive love. All parts are enlivened by the Holy Spirit; each part given gifts necessary to the health and functioning of the body. As each person is part of the body of Christ, a genuine reverence must be displayed toward every member. Every part of the body must be treasured as part of the revelation of Christ. In this symbiotic community, none can claim privileged status with God or superiority based on church responsibility, spiritual gifts, or characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, intelligence, or economic privilege. For within the body there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28, NIV). It is our mutual respect and deep affection that become the very seal of our community: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13-35 NSRV)

We believe that the church comprises individuals who have responded to the voice of the Holy Spirit and chosen to follow the instructions and example of Jesus of Nazareth. We confess that the natural state for human beings since the Fall is one of alienation from ourselves, our neighbors, and God. Therefore, entrance into the new community entails a rebirth in which our former ways of perceiving and behaving are replaced with another perspective: Membership involves the acceptance of new relationships toward other people, the state, and God."⁷ We acknowledge that following Jesus requires a willingness to lay aside previous habits of self-indulgence, self-seeking, wrath, and arrogance so that we may assume the yoke of humility and perform the works of peace and reconciliation. We voluntarily assemble together for exhortation, for mutual encouragement, and to combine our varied gifts and resources to build up the whole.

Mission is a particularly critical topic for Seventh-day Adventists because we view the raising up of our church in the nineteenth century as a continuation of the reformation of Christian faith and practice in preparation for the return of Christ. Appointed to be God's "loyal witnesses in the last days before Christ's second

coming,”⁸ Adventists testify to the enduring nature of God's love and law. We attest the verity of Scripture and preach the gospel, asserting that "This gospel is the same good news of God's infinite love that the ancient prophets and apostles proclaimed."⁹

Although diverse in social, economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, church members are unified by their faith. "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called into one hope when you were called" (Eph. 4:4, NIV). This hope provides us with the motivation for witnessing to the world. Therefore, we labor together cooperatively, because:

The visible church is God's church organized for service. It fulfills Christ's great commission to carry the gospel to the world (Matt. 28:18-20), and prepares people for his glorious return (1 Thess. 5:23; Eph. 5:27). Christ's specially chosen witness, it illumines the world and ministers as He did, preaching the gospel to the poor, healing the brokenhearted, preaching deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed, preaching the acceptable year of the Lord.¹⁰

The question that looms before the church today concerns how we are going to accomplish the task of spreading the gospel in an age of expanding populations and tightening economics. The church increasingly finds itself challenged to fund enough pastors to provide basic coverage in established churches, yet the task of evangelizing the world is going to require more workers. The completion of our mission depends on both our careful stewardship of monies returned to the church and the full utilization of all of our human resources. In relating this need to the role of women in ministry, Ellen White wrote:

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands.... This is another means

of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor. Not a hand should be bound, not a soul discouraged, not a voice should be hushed; let every individual labor, privately or publicly, to help forward this grand work.¹¹

Although the church is committed to the continuation of evangelistic series and Revelation Seminars for individuals who have identified their need and desire of spiritual growth and knowledge these methods are not going to be sufficient to finish the task. We need to pursue every avenue for the spread of the Gospel, utilizing innovative means to reach the unchurched. This task may include an outreach ministry that utilizes situations where pastoral positions are funded by institutions other than the church such as chaplaincy positions in hospitals, psychiatric units, prisons, police departments, and universities. Some of these positions will be open only to women, women with standard professional qualifications; that is, theological education and ordination. Either we will have women who are trained and fully certified as ministers ready to accept placement as the posts open or the chance to fill many of these positions will be forfeited, and incalculable opportunities to witness will be lost. The church “militant and triumphant” can scarce afford to squander such providential opportunities and resources.

The Medium and the Message

From the beginning of Christ's ministry, the good news has been spread through people; its earliest carriers were individual who had been touched and transformed by it. It was the change in their lives, the freedom from former bondage of one kind or another, that was offered as proof of the reality of the Gospel "He who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:6. RSV). The transformation of actual human relationships and behavior was (and still is) cited as evidence God's grace and power at work. The news of physical and spiritual healing was made believable by changed lives of those who proclaimed it. In short, the medium was the message.

Two thousand years later, the church still toils to reach individuals with the invitation to participate in the community of God, the new creation. The commission to take the gospel into all the world is fulfilled in two ways. One is the proclamation of the kingdom of God through preaching and teaching; the other is the modeling of the new reality in everyday actions. As Ellen G. White noted, "The world will be convinced not so much by what the pulpit teaches as by what the church lives. The preacher announces the theory of the gospel, but the practical piety of the church demonstrates its power."¹²

The church serves as a demonstration of who God is and what He intends for the world. Acting as the earthly "body" of Christ, the church makes tangible the love of God for all through its continual ministry to the broken and suffering. Church members work together to accomplish God's will in the world: the reconciliation and redemption of humanity.

As we announce that God has reconciled humanity to Himself and torn down the walls of separation, this must be present and demonstrated in the individuals, families, and community gathered in God's name. As we claim to be "repairers of the breach, restorers of paths to dwell in" (Isa. 58:12), the ongoing work of reconstruction must be visible.¹³ Our activities and structure must show that we have been faithful to identify the relational gaps and have begun closing them. As Elder Charles E. Bradford, former president of the North American Division, described the functioning of the church:

*Those who are being saved are brought together in a community which could be termed a colony of the kingdom of heaven where His will is done. The worshipping, witnessing community on earth is a branch of the worshipping community in heaven, and is a witness to the world, a theater, a showcase of the ideal community. There is no doubt about it. God intends to do a marvelous thing in and through His church.*¹⁴

In this community of the "called-out," church members are encouraged to see themselves, one another, and the world through the new eyes and new hearts given to them at conversion, under-

standing that "the only thing that matters is new creation" (Gal 6:15, NEB). This requires individuals to abandon their former customs and comfortable traditions to follow the example of Jesus who asserted that He could do "only what he sees his Father [in heaven] doing" (John 5:19, NIV). Jesus was quite clear that God's blessings were distributed like sunshine and rain, falling on everyone without regard to personal qualities or even merit (Matt 5:45) Likewise, He compared the Holy Spirit to the wind, blowing where it would, uncontrolled by human expectations, unrestricted by human definitions of merit or status, for "God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34).

Jesus of Nazareth claimed that a new community was in the process of forming; a kingdom that would overthrow the old like new wine destroys old wineskins (see Luke 5:32) He also explained that this community of compassion and service does not arrive without conscious decisions to conform our relationships to the model He proclaimed. While we might desire that unbelievers respond to the gospel on the merit of its inherent truth, Christ and His message are appraised in terms of what we live individually and corporately. If the living out of just, compassionate, and grace-filled relationships does not happen within the church, nonbelievers have every reason to doubt that they could be realized elsewhere Ultimately, if we do not strive to live the new reality within the church community, we make the gospel appear to be a cunningly devised fable, an empty philosophy, a lie.

With the rapid and constant incorporation of individuals who were socialized and shaped initially in traditions that are contrary to God's community, the Christian church has faced a constant challenge to maintain the attitudes and practices of Jesus. Individuals who have fulfilled the basic requirements of knowledge faith and experience become members of the new covenant community.¹⁵ These new members, much like children, learn by watching and participating in the dynamics of the church family Like children, they learn what they live. Unless they experience the good news of inclusivity and compassion in their relationships at church they cannot be expected to incorporate this standard into other spheres of activity.

While some among us are convinced that the ordination of

women is incompatible with church mission, reasons exist for believing that there may be a positive correlation between the two. First, the work of women who have been set aside for gospel ministry is essential to the overall effort. We simply cannot exclude or limit the sphere of ministry for more than 60 percent of our membership, thus creating a caste system within the church. Second, the spread of the good news about who God is and the divine invitation to participate in the new creation may be effected most convincingly by men and women living in new relationship with one another, working toward church goals as equals in Christ. Because of this, women's ordination is not peripheral to our work, but an important step toward realizing the gospel and experiencing God's community. Both our understanding of the gospel, which is derived at least in part from our lived experience of it, and our credibility among the unchurched may be fundamentally altered by the inclusion or exclusion of women in the ordained pastoral ministry.

Women and Mission

The mandate of the church is to find a way to bring the gospel to those who live along the highways and hedges as well as to those who are emotionally, economically, and socially privileged. This fiat requires that we maximize every opportunity to provide laborers who can reach the diverse segments of the human community. No one is to be deprived of the invitation to come, and thus we cannot afford to deprive anyone of the invitation to serve:

God wants workers who can carry the truth to all classes, high and low, rich and poor. In this work women may act an important part. God grant that those who read these words may put forth earnest efforts to present an open door for consecrated women to enter the field.¹⁶

Whether one focuses on the pastoral ministry within the context of an established church or the work of evangelism, there is need for women devoted to the ministry. It is as true today as it was when Ellen White observed that, "In many respects a woman

can impart knowledge to her sisters that a man cannot."¹⁷

Many women who are not open to ministry performed by a male because of traumatic or negative experiences with men will be receptive to a woman. Women frequently discuss with other women topics that are uncomfortable when broached between genders or that are more distinctly a function of women's experience than men's. Further, women are better equipped to explore the application and challenge of Christian principles and spiritual growth to the cycles of women's lives. Finally, women model for women the meaning of the Christian life as it translates into the daily experience of those who mother and assume the roles identified with female being. Women are examples for other women of the freedom and joy that comes with commitment to a life of service to Christ. Women are waiting not only to hear the gospel message, but also to see the fruit it bears in the lives of Christians.

The significance of preparing and separating women for pastoral ministry becomes more apparent when the task of spreading the gospel is considered on a global level. The world is a mosaic of cultures, customs, traditions, and castes. In numerous places around the world, the spheres of men and women are quite separate. In these cultures, interaction between men and women is extremely limited, or altogether forbidden outside of the family context. Even men who are dedicated ministers are not permitted to work freely with women. Males who attempt to engage in conversations with local women are viewed with suspicion and hostility, as competitors who may harbor ulterior motives. If they persist despite the clear taboos, they could very well lose their ability to work among the male population.

The usefulness of the printed word may be limited because, regrettably, illiteracy is too often common among women in these situations. In societies based on an oral tradition, the gospel is primarily transmitted by word-of-mouth, and only women will have access to the private sphere in which the majority of the women live their lives. These women deserve to be evangelized and ministered to by Christian women who are fully trained, authorized, and empowered representatives of God and the church. They deserve to be served by women who can introduce them to the gospel, welcome them into the body of Christ, and nurture their

spiritual growth. They deserve to hear the liberating news of God's great reconciling activity and invitation to the community of God, where every individual is respected as a special work of the Creator. They need to know that their bodies are temples "of the Holy Spirit." Without a host of women sent to minister to the women in such places, the progress of the church will continue to be painfully slow. As Ellen White contended in 1879,

*Women can be the instruments of righteousness, rendering holy service. It was Mary that first preached a risen Jesus. . . . If there were twenty women where now there is one, who would make this holy mission their cherished work, we should see many more converted to the truth.*¹⁸

But Why Ordain Women?

The actions of Jesus, the Great Commission, the Scriptures describing the nature of the church and the meaning of Christian life, and various statements from the Spirit of Prophecy, identify women as an integral part of the body of Christ. Women are converted, received into community, commissioned, and held responsible to the same standards as are men. It is not a question of *whether* women should minister. Within the church, "each church member has a responsibility to minister to others in the name of God."¹⁹ The call to ministry is inherent in the call to be a participant in the new community, a community of joy through service. As Ellen White noted, "All are alike called to be missionaries for God."²⁰ The question is, Should women who are called to pastoral ministry be ordained?

This question can be answered only by reviewing what ordination means in a group where everyone is recognized as a priest. "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9, NKJV). Seventh-day Adventists assert that "this priesthood makes no qualitative distinction between clergy and laity, although it leaves room for a difference in function between these roles."²¹

The founders of this church, committed as they were to the principles of independent Bible study and the leading of the Holy Spirit, determined that the licensing and credentialing of ministers was an appropriate and necessary function of the organization. What, then, is an Adventist understanding of the nature and function of ordination?

According to the 1992 *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Manual*, "While all Christians render spiritual service, the New Testament portrays an organized church, administered and nurtured by persons who are especially called by God, set apart by the laying on of hands to a particular service."²² The purpose of ordination is the public recognition of divine appointment to pastoral ministry. The act of ordination, the laying on of hands and prayer for God's blessing on the ministry of an individual, is not perceived as a transfer of Christ's authority or the channel of special priestly powers to the individual. It simply recognizes an individual's call from God and authorizes his or her specific ministry. As the manual explains:

*Ordination, an act of commission, acknowledges God's call, sets the person apart, and appoints that individual to serve the church in a special capacity. Ordination endorses the individuals thus set apart as authorized representatives of the church. By this act, the church delegates it authority to its ministers to proclaim the gospel publicly, to administer its ordinances, to organize new congregations, and, within the parameters established within God's word, to give direction to the believers.*²³

Further, "ministerial ordination is a public sign of the church's acceptance of the ordinand's ministry."²⁴ This acceptance is appropriately sought and valued by individuals who wish to function within the parameters of the organized pastoral ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The preparation for ordination signals individual willingness to submit to the rigors of theological education and the authority of recognized church leadership. It evidences a willing acceptance of examination of one's spiritual,

moral, and theological mastery by appointed representatives of the church. This process allows individuals who have felt God's call either to have that calling confirmed by the church or their perceptions of God's call reviewed and guided into alternative avenues of service by sincere counsel. Since ordination is the rite by which the church expresses approval of an individual's ministry, the *Minister's Manual* concludes that "Licensed ministers and their families should not be blamed for being deeply concerned about whether or not their work is approved."²⁵

A second, but no less important, reason for the practice of ordination concerns the well-being and safety of the congregation. Unless pastors are carefully prepared and examined as to their readiness to minister, inappropriate and unfit individuals may be assigned to positions of authority to the detriment of the church. Ellen White, at a time when the ordination process was far less regularized, lamented that,

*There has been too little done in examining ministers; and for this very reason churches have had the labors of unconverted, inefficient men, who have lulled the members to sleep, instead of awakening them to greater zeal and earnestness for God.*²⁶

Church members need to know that the person who occupies the prominent position of pastoral trust, who stands in the pulpit representing God and the church, has been deemed responsible. Anyone who walks into an Adventist church or receives a pastoral visit has the right to know that the individual purporting to open the Scriptures, to teach, to lead, to counsel, or minister, has been tested by individuals who are knowledgeable and discerning. This is absolutely essential so that the innocent, the vulnerable, and the religious novice are not misled in the name of Christ. When earnest and devout Christians submit themselves to the teachings of individuals who have not been screened for fitness, they inhabit a region outside of the circle of spiritual safety. Recent events in Waco, Texas, certainly underscore the dangerous possibilities for tragic abuses of faith located in charismatic leadership.

The whole process of ordination, as it has evolved in this

church, is aimed at ensuring that Adventist pastors are thoroughly grounded in truth and are competent in the skills associated with ministry. The necessity for comprehensive training and examination is just as critical for women as it is for men. Even during the lifetime of the original apostles, women as well as men taught human traditions and heresies as truth and claimed to be representing God (Rev. 2:20). Paul was often fearful that individuals whom he had nurtured in the gospel would be confused or misled by irregular teachers (Gal. 3:1; Eph. 4:14; Phil. 3:2). Similarly the authority retained by the church officers to revoke a ministerial license holds individuals who have been ordained accountable to the larger church structure. Numerous examples within Adventist history demonstrate the wisdom, significance, and necessity of this prerogative.

The issue of ordination for women is not going to be settled unless we reaffirm the importance of ordination for church order and discipline. Only when we are clear that ordination is not a reward for special holiness or a step to status in the community will we be able to ask how we want to utilize this symbol of recognition of God's call to the pastoral ministry. When we achieve that we will be ready to consider whether we discern it appropriate to ask that women in pastoral ministry conform to the same process of preparation and submit to the same structures of accountability to the larger organization as are required of male ministers.

Conclusion: The Challenge to the Church

The decision whether to ordain women must be based on the needs of the church and our willingness to let the gospel inform every aspect of our individual and communal lives. This means that our fervor for the gospel and the mission of the church will have to eclipse considerations of tradition and personal comfort As observed by a writer addressing this issue in the Adventist Review:

A church that accepts the gospel commission as a serious challenge and has a vision of a worldwide field of labor can no longer afford to limit its recognition of particular

gifts and ordination to ministry to only half of its membership. ... There is a field of need waiting for [women]. We can best affirm them for this work by using the time-honored Christian act of ordination.²⁷

Ordination for women is not a question of personal vanity or pride, or even of equal rights. It is a question of how we will finish the work of the church and whether the church is going to continue to formally recognize certain individuals as bona fide representatives of the gospel and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Our ability to move forward on this issue will test whether our commitment to the gospel of Christ and the mission of the church is stronger than our commitment to our comfortable customs and traditions. It is a test of the efficacy of the gospel to transform human beings into a constructive, creative, cooperative community.

As one poet observed,

Concerning the why and how and what and who of ministry,
One image keeps surfacing:
A table that is round.

It will take some sawing
to be roundtabled,
some redefining
and redesigning.

Such redoing and rebirthing
of narrowlong Churching
can painful be
for people and tables,

But so was the cross,
a painful too table
of giving and yes,
dying.

And from such death comes life,
from such dying comes rising,
in search of roundtabling.

And what would roundtable Churching mean?...

Roundtabling means
No preferred seating,
no first and last,
no better, and no comers
for "the least of these."

Roundtabling means
being with,
a part of,
together and one.

It means
room for the Spirit
and gifts
and disturbing profound peace for all.. .

And it is we in the present
who are mixing and kneading
the dough for the future.

*We can no longer prepare for the past. . . .*²⁸

Only time will tell whether the gospel is stronger than cultural traditions. Only time will tell whether our dedication to world evangelism is stronger than our desire to maintain the comfort and security of old structures of order. Only time will tell if we are ready to unbind every hand and make reality Ellen White's proclamation that, in the gospel ministry, "The way is open for ... consecrated women."²⁹

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1. Josephine Benton, *Called by God: Stories of Adventist Women Ministers* (Smithsburg, MD: Blackberry Hill Publishers, 1990).
2. Willmore D. Eva, "A Biblical Position Paper: The Role and Standing of Women in the Church." Unpublished paper, January 1985.
3. Minutes of the 1881 General Conference session read in part as follows:
 - Fifth meeting. Dec. 5, 10 A.M. ...
 - Resolved, that all candidates for license and ordination should be examined with reference to their intellectual and spiritual fitness for the successful discharge of the duties which will devolve upon them as licentiates and ordained ministers.
 - This was spoken to by ...
 - Resolved that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.
 - This was discussed by J. O. Corliss, A. C. Bourdeau, E. R. Jones, D. H. Lamson, W. H. Littlejohn, A. S. Hutchins, D. M. Canright, and J. N. Loughborough, and referred to the General Conference Committee.
4. For further information about the work on this issue, see the 1973 collection of 13 of the Mohaven Papers, *Symposium on the Role of Women*, reprinted by Pacific Press, 1995, available from your local Adventist Book Center.
5. Raoul Dederen, "A Theology of Ordination," from the 1973 Mohaven Papers, *Symposium on the Role of Women*.
6. A representative example of this approach is found in the statement, "the biblical arguments put forth for women's ordination are not as persuasive as the fact that no women were ordained in the priesthood or to apostleship in the Old or New Testament." Eugene F. Durand, "The Other Side," *Adventist Review*, April 5, 1990.
7. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe ...* (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, General Conference of SDA, 1988), p. 143.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
11. Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895.

12. ———, *Testimonies for the Church*, (Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948) vol. 6, p.260.
13. See Isaiah 58 for a more complete picture of the task of God's community.
14. Charles E. Bradford, "To the North American Division Members Role of Women Commission: Women in Pastoral Ministries and Ordination," pp. 5, 6. Unpublished paper, 1989.
15. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, p. 143.
16. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 43a, 1898, published in *Manuscript Releases* vol. 5, p. 162.
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18. White, *Review and Herald*, Jan. 2, 1879.
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20. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, (Mt. View, CA: Pacific Press 1909), p. 395.
21. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .*, p. 143.
22. *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Manual* (Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 1992) p. 75.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
26. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald 1948), p.437.
27. Mary Gordon, pseudonym, "The Church Faces an Important Issue." *Adventist Review*, March 7, 1985, p. 12.
28. Chuck Lathrop, "In Search of a Roundtable," in *A Gentle Presence* (Washington, D.C.: ADOC, 1977), pp. 5-8.
29. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 285.

