

The Decline of Leadership Positions for SDA Women

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Introduction:

In 1890 approximately 15% of the administrative positions within the North American conferences were held by SDA women. After the 1901 reorganization the percentage was 11% (1905) and remained consistent until the mid-1920s when it dropped to 7.8% (1928). By the mid-1930s, the figure was 4.5%. This presentation suggests the reason for that decline.

The key involves the relationship between women, the local church, the issue of "pastoring" vs evangelism and fundraising.

The Evangelistic Focus:

The SDA church, in its post-shut-door view of ministry, focused entirely upon the newly-discovered third angel's message and effectively evangelized midwestern America during the 1850s and 1860s.

The duty of the minister was "to preach the word, to teach faithfully the plain declarations of the word of God" and then to move on.

As James White said: "Should you enter into all the particulars of the duty of your brethren, you would be sure to get in the way of ministering angels, and take their work out of their hands."

If evangelists became "pastors" and settled down in the churches, they would also emulate the fallen churches because "the church would look to you instead of the Lord."

The Millerite experience, where many believers had been disfellowshipped, reminded Adventists of church authoritarianism and was a major factor moving SDAs away from stationary pastorates. Instead, Adventists developed a "departmental" concept within the church where laymen and women assumed local responsibilities.

Within the early evangelistic perspective, there were attempts to incorporate a nurturing ministry. Women as members of husband-wife evangelistic teams often performed such roles. A number of teams functioned during the 1860s and '70s.

After a body of believers was raised up, the husband went on to new territory, while the wife remained for awhile to more fully establish the new believers in the message.

James White considered the ministry of the woman important to this extent:

My views and feelings are that the minister's wife stands in so close a relation to the work of God, a relation which so affects him for better or worse, that she should, in the ordination prayer, be set apart as his helper.

With evangelism as the central focus, the woman as "pastor" was seen as the "helper" of the evangelist-debater.

Interestingly, even while evangelism was the key to "proof" of ministry, over 20 SDA women received the ministerial license in 19th century Adventism.

Home Missionaries:

In early 1879, Ellen White focused upon a phase of ministry that would attain ever increasing prominence in the SDA church for the remainder of the 19th century:

We are lacking in deeds of sympathy and benevolence, in sacred and social ministering to the needy, the oppressed, and the suffering. Women who can work are needed now, women who are not self-important, but meek and lowly of heart, who will work with the meekness of Christ wherever they can find work to do for the salvation of souls.

She wrote to Haskell, "there must be more visiting the churches and caring for those already raised up." She redefined ministry: "There are needed not only ministers, but those who can act as missionaries." This is the concept of home missionaries.

As Mrs White focused upon the potential of the local churches for developing its laity and as she related to the absence of stationary pastors, she called for a force of workers "to go into the churches, large and small, to instruct the members how to labor for the upbuilding of the church, and also for unbelievers." The local church needed to be educated in such matters as "personal piety and home religion," understanding the ministry of Christ, how to give Bible readings and do missionary work. That worker-training force, according to Ellen White, should include both men and women and performed the functions we today usually assign the trained ministry.

Ellen White's perspective of a "ministry of compassion" resolved the pastoral-evangelistic dilemma of the 19th

century and brought to the church a methodology for dealing with 20th century urban realities.

Women, by the 1890s, had risen to conference leadership positions in those areas that most directly related to the work of the local church. Often women were the tract and missionary society secretaries, Sabbath school Association secretaries, health/temperance society officers.

The International Tract and Missionary Society was the effective missionary arm of the church. Those local societies became the fulcrum for the local and national work of the church. When societies began weekly missionary meetings, the spiritual tone of the church as well as its membership greatly increased.

Lines of work included: circulation of SDA literature, conducting of Bible readings, circulating petitions concerning religious liberty issues, foreign and domestic correspondence ministry, home visitation, pastoral encouragement of isolated believers and discouraged church members, searching for homes for the destitute and orphans, encouragement of tithe-paying and fundraising.

Within the city missions women were the successful canvassers and Bible readers. Indeed, Willie White considered the women workers as "our leading workers in city missions" City missions were the closest thing to a stationary pastorate that SDAs had in the 1890s.

Women served as editors of Home Missionary, as instructors of home missionary methods in SDA colleges [to ministers and workers], as secretaries of local state societies and as local church missionary leaders.

The 1920s--A Conservative Reaction:

Now let's jump from the 1890s to the 1920s. The church had finally heeded the Ellen White counsel and entered the big cities, but a problem arose. Many were uneasy about the big city churches and the local pastors that seemed to be "hovering" over them.

The Church Officers' Gazette, edited by GC corresponding secretary, Tyler Bowen, became the organ for the argument against establishment of local pastorates. All the EGW statements were carefully selected to endorse that position. [Misuse or selective use of EGW in 1920s] Bowen consistently argued against "pastorizing."

He argued: "Surely unless a forward movement...to carry forward an aggressive evangelistic effort constantly in our large centers of population, is undertaken, instead of consuming so much tithe in simply looking after the city

churches already established, we may well despair of reaching these masses with the message in this generation. It is a question also for the churches themselves to ponder. Why should they demand conference-paid workers to spend most of their time and effort for them continuously?" [Gazette, Jan 1923]

J W Christian, president of the Chicago Conference, wrote this [June, 1926, COG]: "It must always be held as a fundamental truth that the paid ministry of this denomination is to push out into new fields, both in house-to-house work and in public efforts, leaving the local problems of the organized church, as far as possible, in all its activities to be carried largely by the local leadership. This tried and proved plan will extend the bounds of the dominion of our King in pressing the gospel of the kingdom, into new and opening fields both near and far."

Another problem was the raising of funds for foreign mission work. Besides the 60c a week fund, there was Big Week, the week of sacrifice, missions extension and the annual Harvest Ingathering campaign. The conference departmental leaders sometimes seemed less than enthusiastic in their fundraising.

Tyler Bowen wrote to W H Branson, Africa Division president about one decision to emerge from the 1923 Fall Council: "Beginning early in 1924, GC men, men will sort of take on a burden for a particular section [of the country] with a view of helping with their presence and counsel through the year in the hope of greatly increasing the mission funds in a steady income flow from the beginning of the year. This is now the real point of emphasis being given the work here in North America for next year. Even Departmental men, like the Sabbath school field secretary, the home missionary secretary, the missionary volunteer secretary, are thus given a territory to make first this point of helping the union president, visiting conferences in the union and meetings where workers are gathered, and secondarily promoting the interests of his department."

Fundraising became so strongly identified with the home missionary department that Leroy Froom of the Ministerial Association wrote this in 1927: "The Home Missionary Department was originally founded to lead the laity into service, but it has so far been absorbed by the financial endeavors of the movement that it has become really an adjunct to the treasury. We must emphasize anew the call of God upon consecrated men and women to witness for Him."

When financial considerations assumed vital importance, that fact that the official clergy could obtain the railroad discounts was not lost to administrators.

Resolving the Problem--The Ordination Question:

Administrators sought to resolve the issues in 1923. Four days before the Autumn Council were spent by the GCC, and union and NAD conference presidents.

Evangelism and economy in administration became the focus of the President's Council and the Autumn Council that followed. Stressed was the "minimizing of office expenditures in General, union, and local conferences; careful planning to save railway and automobile expense; economy in buildings erected, in furnishings supplied, in office and institutional staffs,--in fact, in every way that can be devised to save, so that the more means may be devoted to preaching the message to those who have never heard," said W A Spicer, GC president.

John K Jones, New York Conference president, hit the issue that was most sensitive. In alluding to the fears of many as local church pastorates were springing up, Jones wanted to "impress upon every department both by voice and pen, that our departments have only one excuse for existing, namely, that of being soul winning agencies." He stressed that "only men who have as their objective the saving of souls" should be chosen as leaders.

Jones's conference had been the most successful in mission fund-raising and he was taken seriously. In fact, the treasury department wanted him as a field secretary.

Key note address was by C K Meyers, acting GC secretary, who saw the remedy being that "conference presidents should...hold up the evangelical work as the first and greatest in importance."

The GC officers and union and conference presidents and later the Autumn Council approved the following:

"Departmental Work--Unity and Cooperation": We Recommend....3. That in the future the selection of educational secretaries or superintendents be made from those who have had practical experience in teaching and in soul-winning work, the desirability of normal training being also recognized.

"4. That in the future home missionary and missionary volunteer secretaries be selected who have had successful experience in evangelistic work, preferably ordained ministers."

Women were thus inadvertently "recommended" to be eliminated from the three departments they had been most identified with.

At the same time, a document entitled "The Work of the Minister" was approved. One of its provisions said that: "Recommended that every minister, whether a resident pastor or a departmental secretary, make it his objective to engage in aggressive effort to win new members to the faith."

The provision was consistent since ordination effectively became a requirement for departmental leadership. Such leaders were now explicitly defined as ministers.

Another resolution concerned the Missionary Volunteer department: "Inasmuch as it is our earnest purpose to make the Missionary Volunteer Department evangelistic and soul-winning in all its aims and activities,--We Recommend, That when a Missionary Volunteer leader is chosen in harmony with the qualifications described in resolution 4, under 'Departmental Work,' [evangelist and ordination] and is doing successful soul-winning work, he be designated by the committee as young people's evangelist."

Another action that would soon pass was to make the church elder the 'missionary leader' of the local church. Note the irony of this 1924 article by J A Stevens, Home Missionary Secretary:

"The ideal church missionary secretary will be a most helpful assistant to the church elder in the discharge of his duties as the missionary leader of the church. He [speaking of the church missionary secretary] (although in the majority of cases some faithful sister is elected to fill this responsible place) will keep in close touch with the opportunities, as well as the needs of the church, along missionary lines, and be able to present to the church the best missionary material for the successful accomplishment of the work to be done. He will be intelligent concerning the latest plans of the General Conference Home Missionary Department for the various lines of missionary endeavor, and will be foremost in every effort to carry them out."

At the local church level, women were still eligible to hold the position of church missionary secretary, even though it became an ordained position at the conference and GC level.

Economics impacted further on the position of women at the 1932 Autumn Council: "Because of the exigencies of the present economic conditions...We recommend, That our employing organizations spread their power of employment as far as possible among our members, and that the list of employees be so adjusted that both husband and wife shall not be remuneratively employed. Where, to maintain the efficiency of the work, or for special reasons, it seems necessary to vary from this rule by the employment of a man

and his wife, the wife be paid on the basis of a greatly reduced wage."

Mrs Grace Mace Analyzes the Issue:

The best analysis I have found of the issues I have outlined was written by Mrs Grace Mace. She had served as secretary to Dr Kellogg, Uriah Smith, G C Tenney and Mrs S M I Henry. She had worked for years with the International Tract Society. She resigned from her position as office secretary of the Home Missionary Department after the 1923 Autumn Council.

Mrs Mace bemoaned that "union and local conference home missionary secretaries" were kept so busy with Harvest Ingathering, Big Week, and other well organized campaigns" that they had little opportunity to do the work "for the blind, helping the sick, the lepers, women in prisons, maintaining model Dorcas societies, strengthening the family prayer circle and dispensing the gospel of good cheer in many ways."

Mrs Mace left the Home Missionary Department to become an assistant in the Ministerial Association. Read her articles in Ministry sometime if you want real inspiration. She did much to move the church back to its "ministry of compassion" that Ellen White so strongly espoused.