

**Church Policy, Church Unity, and Women's Ordination:
Has the General Conference Overreached?**

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During the past year, strange charges have been published in print and on the internet by independent Adventist magazines. They claim that recent efforts by General Conference officials to prevent certain union conferences from proceeding with plans to ordain persons to the gospel ministry irrespective of gender constitute an overreach of power and a usurpation of responsibility rightly belonging to other entities within the denominational structure.

That which follows shall demonstrate that such overreach has in fact not occurred, and that while specific components of the denominational system do have explicitly-defined areas of responsibility, all such components are nevertheless constrained by globally-defined church beliefs, lifestyle standards, actions, and policies to conduct themselves within certain guidelines and limits.

“Top-Down” or “Bottom-Up” Authority?

One of these articles, written by a former local Conference administrator who now heads the Christian Ministry Department at the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University, maintains correctly that authority in the Seventh-day Adventist

church structure is derived from the grassroots, not from a few leaders at the top (1). Noting our Lord's admonitions regarding those who are greatest being obligated to govern as servants (Matthew 18:1-5; 20:25-28; Mark 10:43-44; Luke 22:26; John 13:12-17) (2), the author writes:

Accountability in the Seventh-day Adventist system always takes us back to the people, for it is the church members who hold the divine gift of authority, and it is to them that all levels of the church ultimately answer (3).

Another author in this magazine, a current local Conference president in one of the Unions that has lately taken one of the actions presently under review, writes as follows:

In our representative form of governance, authority was to rest with the people and flow up through a process of delegation (4).

However, the implication that the General Conference in the present situation is overstepping its bounds by seeking to maintain a consistent worldwide pastoral ordination policy, is undercut by the former author's own argument when he asks, regarding recent actions by certain Unions on this point:

Is such an action a legitimate move by the people to address issues that impact their sense of corporate and individual integrity? Or is such an action a challenge to the General Conference, which is commissioned to implement the collective voice of the people on a global scale, and thus assure unity and in some sense ecclesiastic uniformity? (5).

The latter question in fact summarizes what is presently taking place on account of the Union actions presently under review, and the author's reference to the "collective voice of the people on a global scale" effectively demolishes any assumption

that counter-moves by the General Conference---either now or in the future---represent any dictation of policy by a few men to the larger church membership.

The fact is that the policies listing standards for ordination (which we will address in detail shortly) are developed and enacted by representatives of the entire world body of Seventh-day Adventists, assembled in the General Conference Executive Committee at its Annual Council meetings. By contrast, the actions recently taken by the Unions in question regarding ordination, constitute not only defiance of the world church's collective voice, but raise serious questions as to whether they in fact represent the will of the church's grassroots in their respective territories.

Unlike delegates to local Conference constituency meetings, delegates to the recent special sessions in the Columbia and Pacific Unions were chosen, not by local churches, but from within the various Union and local Conference offices. While this may be standard procedure for Union constituency meetings, it still raises the very serious question as to whether those presuming to represent their constituents were truly reflecting convictions held by a majority of church members in these fields.

This is particularly important because the actions taken by these Unions stood at clear variance with earnest and vocal recommendations at these gatherings by General Conference leaders. While no scientific survey data may be available to confirm or deny the claim that follows, it is most difficult for the present writer to believe that the average church member in these territories---irrespective of their particular stance on the issue of women's ordination---would favor proceeding with such an action in direct opposition to stated recommendations from church leaders at the highest level.

Questions should rightly be posed as to whether church administrators in either of these Unions made a serious effort to inquire as to whether their constituents supported such drastic actions as those they contemplated and in the end agreed to. Were any surveys conducted on this subject, among laity as well as church workers? If so, how many were polled? While all of us know that public opinion doesn't equal truth

in matters spiritual, the fact remains that if one is to invoke the voice of the grassroots as the church's ultimate authority, it makes sense to actually find out what the grassroots is thinking.

In sum, the authors in question are correct in their defense of the collective voice of the people as the ultimate authority in church governance, as distinct from the voice of a small group of powerful individuals. The problem is, they seem not to have considered that denominational policies governing pastoral ordination are the product, not of an isolated or small group of men, but of representatives of the entire worldwide Adventist body.

One of the authors in question rightly notes that the Fundamental Beliefs of the church, the Seventh-day Adventist *Church Manual*, and the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws are voted upon at the quinquennial global sessions of the General Conference, while changes to the General Conference Working Policy are voted at Annual Council (6). But whether at a General Conference session or an Annual Council meeting, the collective voice of global Adventism is heard, though the level of authority invested in each body is of course different. In neither case, however, are actions dictated by a single man or a small, unrepresentative group of men.

Yes, the Seventh-day Adventist Church believes in "bottom-up" authority. But this "bottom" includes the whole church, not just a part of it.

We will address the substance of church policies relative to pastoral ordination in a moment.

Distributed Authority

The authors in question make much of what they call the "distributed authority" that characterizes Adventist church government. They note, for example, that only local churches are authorized to address issues of church membership or who should or should not serve in local church office (7), and that only Unions are authorized to

approve candidates for pastoral ordination (8). In light of this principle of distributed authority, one of these authors observes:

Whenever one level (of church authority) extends its reach to exert its authority over another, or usurps the authority that belongs to another, it leads to dysfunction in the organization and confusion among its people (9).

What is not apparently recognized, however, is that while individual entities within the church do indeed possess specifically defined provinces of authority, it is still true that each of these entities are to be governed in harmony with global church policy.

While, for example, only the local church has the authority to censure or remove a person from church membership, the guidelines whereby this is done are contained in the Seventh-day Adventist *Church Manual* (10), which is voted upon by the world church in general session. What is more, the *Manual* explicitly forbids anyone but the General Conference to establish tests of church fellowship (11). In the event a local congregation presumes to establish its own guidelines in this respect, in addition (and perhaps in contradiction) to the policies found in the *Manual*, it would then be fully within the purview of local Conference leadership to intervene in such a situation and take steps to bring such a congregation back into harmony with General Conference policy.

By the same token, even though Unions are the body specifically authorized by church policy to bestow upon pastors the investiture of ordination, they are still obligated to grant this investiture in harmony with world church guidelines, just as local congregations are obligated to administer church discipline in harmony with the *Church Manual*. To say, as one of the articles under review says, that church policy “does not allow for interference by either the division or General Conference levels in the action of the union conferences” (12), is to grasp at technicalities in a manner we

will address shortly. Merely because the policy does not spell out those circumstances under which interference by a higher level of church organization might occur, does not mean such interference is disallowed, any more than it is disallowed in cases where local churches might disregard provisions in the *Church Manual*.

General Conference Policy On Pastoral Ordination

The authors in the magazine in question give evidence, in some cases, of simply not knowing what denominational policy actually says with regard to standards for pastoral ordination, while in other cases they make statements of outright contradiction. One author writes as follows:

Certainly we have guidelines for ordination, but do those guidelines explicitly prohibit the ecclesiastical affirmation of women? Or do they simply describe the process of ordination? Maybe the legal experts will be able to uncover restrictive ordination policies that I have failed to discover, but I find no policy that is being defied by those seeking to establish parity for male and female pastors (13).

The above author indulges a bit of carelessness in his choice of words when he uses the term “ecclesiastical affirmation” with regard to women. Affirmation is most assuredly not the same as ordination. Many in the church of all ages and both genders are “affirmed” so far as the contribution they make to the Lord’s work is concerned. That is not the issue here. But ordination to the gospel ministry only applies to those who meet specific criteria of standards and guidelines.

Another author writes:

There are no policies that limit ministerial ordination to a certain gender or prohibit ordination of a certain gender. Will the Columbia Union be violating any North American Division or General Conference policy by voting to authorize ordination without regard to gender? The answer is 'no' (14).

However, another author in this magazine says something quite different. Quoting one section of the General Conference Working Policy regarding the submission of ordination candidates to a Union by local Conferences, he insists: "There is no gender reference in this policy whatsoever" (15). Yet he frankly acknowledges, a scant few lines later, that in fact the Working Policy does establish what the author calls a "discriminatory" policy concerning ordination. Though the author's reference to the General Conference Working Policy comes from an unspecified edition, the most recent edition of the policy contains the following wording of the clause noted by the above author:

The appointment of individuals to serve as Bible instructors or chaplains, or in departmental or pastoral responsibilities, shall not be limited by race or color. Neither shall these positions be limited by gender (except those requiring ordination to the gospel ministry) (16).

The fact is that when speaking of ordination candidates, the Working Policy is very gender-specific. References abound to "the setting apart of men" (17), "the proofs of a man's divine call" (18), "a man must indeed be called of God and give clear evidence of his call" (19). "the candidate should plan to have his wife present" (20). Lest some be inclined to assume such male references to be generic, it should be noted that when speaking of the discipline of ministers, the policy uses such language as "he/she" and "his/her" (21), since disciplinary guidelines cover the conduct of both ordained and commissioned ministers---the latter obviously including women. In fact, the disciplinary clause in the current North American Division Working Policy not only uses such terms as "he/she" and "his/her," but specifically speaks of the "ordained/commissioned ministry" as being covered by disciplinary guidelines (22).

So it is clear that the Working Policy for both the General Conference and North America are well aware of the fact that women are to be found in the ministry of the

Seventh-day Adventist Church. This is why, when both ordained and commissioned ministers are in focus, the language is gender-inclusive. By contrast, when candidates for ministerial ordination are described, the language is gender-specific.

It should also be noted that the same gender-specific language found in the General Conference Working Policy with regard to ordination candidates, is used in the NAD Working Policy with regard to the same (23).

The author quoted above (who in a recent online discussion appeared to have been surprised when the present writer pointed out the gender exception to the non-discrimination clause in the GC Working Policy with regard to pastoral ordination), expresses indignation in his article that the church would dare to be openly discriminatory in its approach to this issue. Writing with obvious disapproval, he declares:

The policy establishes that the position it takes is discriminatory. The issues of gender, race, and color are delineated as being covered by this policy, but then it selects one of these---gender, to be specific---as an exception to the policy, thus indicating that discrimination is acceptable in this instance. One can imagine the justifiable outcry if either race or color were selected as a valid reason for discrimination, which brings up the question as to why gender discrimination is acceptable and the others are not (24).

The author seems not to have considered that the church in no way adheres---nor should it adhere---to an unqualified policy of non-discrimination. After all, for obvious reasons, the church does not commit itself to a policy of non-discrimination on the basis of religion in its employment practices, since we clearly reserve the right to exclusively employ members of the church when it comes to any number of positions in the denominational structure. Those who believe on the basis of Scripture that women should not be ordained to the gospel ministry, believe that Scripture specifies different roles for the two genders in a way it does not for persons of varying ethnic or racial

backgrounds. Regardless of the stance one takes on the issue of Women's Ordination, it should be accepted as a given that the written counsel of God is the sole measure by which the church defines human relationships, and that the church's morality in this respect is not subject to judgment by some uninspired non-discrimination standard.

At the bottom line, what should be clear is that both the General Conference and the North American Division Working Policy contain gender-specific language with regard to pastoral ordination, with the GC Working Policy specifically declaring the church's ordination standard to be exempt from an otherwise gender-inclusive employment model (25). This gender-specific model for ordination becomes clearer still when one considers the gender-inclusive language employed when matters affecting all ministers---ordained and commissioned, the latter including women---are addressed, as in the area of ministerial discipline (26). When all ministers are being addressed, the language is gender-inclusive. When candidates for ministerial ordination are being addressed, the language is gender-specific.

Allegations of Inconsistency

Few challenges to church standards evoke more ire than claims of alleged inconsistency directed at those seeking to uphold such standards. One of the articles under review, like so many similar arguments concerning many other issues, raises the issue of inconsistency with regard to the permission granted to various world Divisions to ordain women as local elders if they so wish:

A major point in the argument against union conferences moving ahead with what is, by policy, their official domain of decision is the need for unity in the world church. However, this policy indicates that the desired unity has already been officially breached among the divisions in the matter of the ordination of women as elders. As it states, this issue is to be decided by "where the division executive committees have given their approval." Thus, in the context of the ordination of women, the divisions have already gone their separate ways by

authority of the General Conference Committee action. The need for perfect unity in the world church thus becomes an invalid argument, given that such unity already does not exist, by official sanction, in the very area of the ordination of women as elders (27).

For purposes of clarity, the reference in this quotation to the official permission granted for women to serve as local church elders is taken from a footnote at the bottom of the page in the GC Working Policy which explicitly authorizes a gender-specific approach to pastoral ordination. The footnote reads as follows:

The exception clause, and any other statement above, shall not be used to reinterpret the action already taken by the world Church authorizing the ordination of women as local church elders in divisions where the division executive committees have given their approval (28).

In truth, it is difficult not to find a serious inconsistency here in the application of church policy on this point. This is not the place, to be sure, for an in-depth discussion of the issue of women serving as local church elders, nor of the question of how the roles of local elders and local pastors differ---if at all---so far as the Bible is concerned. The real issue here is whether the church wishes to add another inconsistency to its policies by permitting a gender-inclusive pastoral ordination model in certain fields while permitting a gender-specific model elsewhere. There is more than one available answer to an inconsistency problem. We can either choose to perpetuate the inconsistency, or we can choose one or another way of correcting the inconsistency.

It is a matter of fervent hope and prayer on the part of many church members that the developing theology of ordination, scheduled to be crafted in the coming three years by the worldwide Adventist body, will address this inconsistency and offer once and for all a clarified, Bible-based Seventh-day Adventist posture on the issue of gender roles and servant-leadership within the body of Christ.

Prohibition and Withheld Permission—Is There Truly a Difference?

One of the authors in question, like others in the present controversy, claims that the action of the General Conference of 1990 with regard to Women's Ordination was simply a failure to proceed on the matter, rather than disapproval thereof. In his words:

It is important to understand the action taken in this matter at the Indianapolis meeting. It was not, as has been often represented, a vote forbidding such ordination, but rather the failure of an action to proceed with ordination (29).

Most ordinary folks will have a difficult time telling the difference between the two. Such talk as the above carries the flavor of lawyerlike distinctions which would likely shock the majority of delegates who voted as they did in Indianapolis. For the average person, withholding permission is the same thing as prohibition. When, for example, a child asks a parent permission to do something, and that permission is denied, most parents wouldn't take kindly to the child going ahead with the proposed action on the grounds that "you didn't forbid me to do it."

With regard to the 1995 General Conference session at Utrecht, the following is stated by the above author:

At this meeting it was officially recognized that there was no biblical or theological evidence to support a position of forbidding such ordination, and the vote again did not forbid it, but rather stated that to avoid division in the world church, the request (by North America) was denied 'at this time' (30).

Once again, the delegates who voted this action would likely find this explanation strange. The fact is that while the key issue in Utrecht was whether to permit the North American Division to go ahead with its own ordination policy in contrast with a majority of the world field, the two presentations delivered on the subject prior to the vote addressed in depth the question of whether gender-inclusive

ordination is sustainable on the basis of Scripture. This was clearly how the issue was presented before the delegates, who then proceeded to vote overwhelmingly against the North American request. Again, it would likely be difficult to find many delegates who voted with the majority who did not see the question before them as very much a matter of Biblical faithfulness.

Ellen White on General Conference Authority

Like others, including those in the conservative camp who cherish contempt for the worldwide denominational structure, one of the authors in question seeks to demonstrate an evolving stance on Ellen White's part with regard to the role and authority of the General Conference. Tracing Ellen White's statements on this subject from one in 1875, in which she declared the General Conference to be "the highest authority that God has upon the earth" to which individual judgment must be surrendered (31), he cites a number of statements in the years that followed which---on the surface---give evidence of a change in Ellen White's thinking (32). He then quotes her last known statement on this subject, delivered before the General Conference of 1909 and published in volume 9 of the *Testimonies*, which reads:

God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference (session), shall have authority (33).

The author then goes on to say:

Perhaps it is significant that she chose to leave out the notion of 'highest authority' and the analogy of the "voice of God" (34).

But if this author had cited the context of the 1909 statement, it would have demonstrated exactly what Ellen White meant at various times when she spoke of the General Conference no longer being the voice of God, and how in fact---even without such language as “the highest authority that God has upon the earth”---the content of her 1875 statement and that of her 1909 statement is in fact the same. Both statements are reproduced below, including the explanation in the latter statement regarding apparent contradictions in Ellen White’s views regarding General Conference authority:

I have been shown that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man. But when the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered (35).

I have often been instructed by the Lord that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any other one man. Never should the mind of one mind or the minds of a few men be regarded as sufficient in wisdom and power to control the work, and to say what plans should be followed. But when, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body.

At times, when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God’s work, I have said that I could no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field, should not be respected. God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing, is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church, in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work (36).

What is clear in the above statement is that when, in earlier statements, Ellen White appeared to have lost faith in the General Conference functioning as the voice of God, she in fact was speaking, not of the world church in full session assembled, but rather, of a single man or small group of men presuming illegitimately to speak for the General Conference. It would be difficult to find any Ellen White statement indicating that Ellen White ever lost faith in the collective voice of the worldwide Adventist body in General Conference assembled.

(Some might wonder whether her comments on the Minneapolis General Conference in 1888 might indicate such a loss of faith on Ellen White's part, but it is important to bear in mind that none of the great issues debated at that gathering were subjected to a formal vote. There is a definite difference, in any governing body, between the expression of opinions and the taking of formal action.)

Conclusion

In short, no credible evidence exists from official church policy that the General Conference has in any way overstepped the limits of its authority in seeking to forestall recent actions by various Unions with regard to gender-inclusive pastoral ordination. Should further action be deemed necessary to curtail and forestall the present course of these or similar bodies, such actions by the General Conference would likewise be fully within its rightful jurisdiction.

Issues of Biblical authority and faithfulness, which the question of pastoral ordination and gender roles in church life ultimately involves, are not the province of any body within the church structure except the General Conference. To permit the sovereignty of local or regional authority in this matter makes no more sense than to permit local or regional articulation of doctrines such as the Sabbath, the state of man in death, or the investigative judgment. What is Biblically correct or incorrect in one part of the world is Biblically correct or incorrect throughout the world. Most assuredly the

Seventh-day Adventist movement derives its authority from its people, not from a few men at the top. But those people from whom its authority is derived must be those from throughout the Adventist world, not from regions or territories acting independently of the church's global voice.

Within the Seventh-day Adventist structure, specific entities are authorized to address and adjudicate certain issues. Local churches, for example, are the bodies empowered to administer discipline to individual members, while union Conferences are authorized to consider candidates for ministerial ordination. But in both cases, as well as others, global church policy must be the guide. Any other course places the church on the inevitable path to congregationalism and multiplied fracturing of the global work committed by God to the great Advent movement.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Kevin D. Paulson lives in Berrien Springs MI. He has served a pastor in the Greater New York Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Paulson also serves on the General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee.

NOTES

1. Stanley E. Patterson, "Kingly Power: Is It Finding a Place in the Adventist Church?" *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, pp. 4-9.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Raj Attiken, "Unity and Authority in the Church," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 15.
5. Stanley Patterson, "Kingly Power: Is It Finding a Place in the Adventist Church?" *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 9.
6. Gary Patterson, "Six Points on the Issue of Ordination of Women," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 10.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11; Attiken, "Unity and Authority in the Church," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 15.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Attiken, "Unity and Authority in the Church," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 15.
10. Seventh-day Adventist *Church Manual* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 2010), pp. 56-67.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
12. Gary Patterson, "Six Points on the Issue of Ordination of Women," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 12.
13. Stanley Patterson, "Kingly Power: Is it Finding a Place in the Adventist Church?" *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 6.
14. Attiken, "Unity and Authority in the Church," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 15 (emphasis in original).
15. Gary Patterson, "Six Points on the Issue of Ordination of Women," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 12.

16. General Conference Working Policy, 2011-2012 edition, p. 113.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 397.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 398.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 399.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 407.
22. GC Working Policy, 2011-2012 edition, pp. 406, 407; North American Division Working Policy, 2011-2012 edition, p. L-39.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. L-27 - L-30.
24. Gary Patterson, "Six Points on the Issue of Ordination of Women," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 13.
25. GC Working Policy, 2011-2012 edition, p. 113.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 407; NAD Working Policy, 2011-2012 edition, p. L-39.
27. Gary Patterson, "Six Points on the Issue of Ordination of Women," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 13 (emphasis in original).
28. GC Working Policy, 2011-2012, edition, p. 113.
29. Gary Patterson, "Six Points on the Issue of Ordination of Women," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 11.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 492, quoted by Attiken, "Unity and Authority in the Church," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 15.

32. _____, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 17, pp. 185, 216; *Sermons and Talks*, vol. 2, p. 159, quoted by Attiken, "Unity and Authority in the Church," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 15.
33. _____, *Testimonies*, vol. 9, p. 261.
34. Attiken, "Unity and Authority in the Church," *Adventist Today*, Sept.-Oct. 2012, p. 15.
35. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 492.
36. *Ibid.*, vol. 9, pp. 260, 261.