Commissioned Minister Crisis 1: What is a Commissioned Minister?
Council of Adventist Pastors
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INTRODUCTION TO SERIES
Since the July 8, 2015 General Conference vote in which delegates gathered from around the world and rejected the proposal to let division executive committees determine for themselves whether or not to ordain women to the gospel ministry, some entities have shown open disregard toward the world church. For example, Washington, Oregon, and Upper Columbia Conference executive committees have voted unilaterally to expand the commissioned minister credential in those conferences granting to bearers authorities nearly identical to the ordained minister credential.

The Council of Adventist Pastors (CAP) has prepared a series of articles outlining how these voted actions place these conferences in conflict with their world church. We will show how actions taken by conference executive committees in some cases exactly contradict the Church Manual and the Working Policies of the Church. We will share responses by church members to the incorrect actions of conference executive committees. Most of the articles will focus on the Upper Columbia Conference as providing a concrete case, but much will be applicable in Oregon, Washington, and other conferences where similar policies and practices are surfacing.

We recognize that there is a general lack of understanding in the church concerning the roles of ordained and of commissioned ministers. We begin the series by answering, What is a commissioned minister?

NO DIFFERENCE?
Some conference leaders are telling members that there is little difference between ordained and commissioned minister credentials. Well may we ask, then what was decided at the General Conference session held in San Antonio, Texas in 2015? Why then the July 8 vote in which delegates explicitly denied to division executive committees the authority to ordain women to the gospel ministry? If conferences could just give to women a credential practically equivalent to the ordained credential, why the fuss?

Most church members may know that the ordained minister credential is a commission carrying certain authorities. These authorities include officiating at weddings (pronouncing vows and declaring the official marriage union), baptizing, ordaining elders, organizing churches, uniting churches, disbanding churches, officiating at communion, and other sundry duties. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, ordination vests the one ordained with “full ecclesiastical authority” (Acts of the Apostles, p. 161). The ordained minister leads a congregation/congregations and his commission authorizes him to serve anywhere globally.

But let's turn our attention to the commissioned credential. Is it almost identical to the ordained minister?
**ACTUAL POLICY**

It is not. The following citations demonstrate that the credentials discussed are quite distinct from each other. Consider General Conference Working Policy citations E 05 05 and 10 in their entirety:

"E 05 Credentials and Licenses

"E 05 05 Types: Denominational employees shall be classified and accredited by the employing organization (see E 10) according to the categories listed below. No person shall be included in more than one category at the same time. Any division that wishes to issue credentials other than those categorized below, may do so with prior approval of the General Conference Executive Committee at Annual Council.

"E 05 10 Employees in Ministerial/Pastoral Roles: 1.a. Ministerial Credential---Issued to ministerial employees who have demonstrated a divine call to ministry and have been ordained to the gospel ministry.

"b. Ministerial License---Issued to ministerial employees who have demonstrated a divine call to ministry which is recognized by a conference/mission/field with an assignment as a spiritual leader, pastor, chaplain, or evangelist.

"2.a. Commissioned Minister Credential---Issued to the following unless they hold ministerial credentials and except as provided in E 05 15; associates in pastoral care; Bible instructors; General Conference, division, union, and local conference/mission treasurers/chief financial officers and departmental directors including associate and assistant directors; institutional chaplains; presidents and vice-presidents of major institutions; auditors (General Conference director, associates, area and district directors), and field directors of the Christian Record Services, Inc. These individuals should have significant experience in denominational service (usually five years or more) and demonstrate proficiency in the responsibilities assigned to them. It is recommended that an appropriate commissioning service be conducted when an employee is granted a Commissioned Minister Credential.

"b. Commissioned Minister License---When applicable, issued to employees listed in paragraph 2.a. above with less than five years in denominational service.

"3. Licensed ministers are on the path toward ordination to the gospel ministry (see L 25). It is not the normal practice to ordain an individual who has not been classified as a licensed minister. (See L 25 30 and L 35). Commissioned ministers holding licenses or credentials are not normally on the path toward ordination to the gospel ministry"


Conference, union, and division presidents are drawn from the ranks of ordained ministers, which is fitting. For example, in a local conference such a worker guides the pastoral staff and stands “at the head of the gospel ministry in the conference and is the chief elder, or overseer, of all the churches” (Church Manual, p. 31, 2015 ed.). These receive the Ministerial credential, and are identified as ordained ministers. Pastors who lead congregations also receive this credential.

But consider the kinds of workers for which the commissioned credential is used. “Associates in pastoral care” are by definition not head pastors but co-workers and helpers in multi-staff congregations. Bible instructors are exactly that—persons tasked with giving Bible studies and helping people prepare for baptism; they are not persons placed in chief leadership over a congregation. Neither do treasurers and departmental directors have an independent pastoral leadership role or lead a congregation, but these work on a departmental basis with committees. Chaplains are part of an institutional staff, another team effort, not serving in a role of primary congregational leadership.
There are presidential and vice-presidential roles which are institutional rather than leading a congregation or congregations. Auditors also have an important and specific work, but that is not a work of leading a congregation as its pastor. All of these roles as listed above differ decidedly from the role of a primary leader of a congregation—the role the church sees as proper for the ordained minister.

The General Conference Working Policy helps us understand:

== The authorities granted in a specific commission are carefully delineated. Some authorities go with one kind of credential, other authorities with another.

== Different combinations of authorities can be granted in a commission and the General Conference has the authority to remix said authorities and create new credentials. However, a division may not issue such a credential unless it has been previously approved by the General Conference.

== The roles specified for the commissioned minister credential are clear and specific. This kind of credential is for associates in pastoral care, Bible instructors, auditors, and so on.

== licensed ministers are on the path to ordination; commissioned ministers are not. (Provision is made for unusual cases).

**MISUSING THE CREDENTIAL**

Some conferences now seeking to add female workers to their pastoral staff have begun to explain the commissioned minister credential as being practically equivalent to the ordained minister. Some, favoring women's ordination, seem determined to recreate the commissioned minister credential. Their actions demonstrate an intent to reshape the credential until it is almost identical to the ordained minister. (Some presently overlapping responsibilities and privileges not discussed in this article will be pointed out in our second article.)

The callings of nurse and of medical doctor (MD) offer illustration. As relating to the Medical Doctor, the role and work of a nurse is complimentary, supportive. A person studying to be a nurse is not awarded the MD's credential. The role of a nurse never eclipses or replaces that of the Medical Doctor. None are scandalized by these category distinctions.

First Corinthians 12:22-25 reminds us, “The parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor. . . . But God has so adjusted the body, giving the greater honor to the humbler part that there be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.” Given the Bible's definition of an “elder” being “the husband of one wife,” a woman can never become “the husband” and the husband can never become the “wife.” Husband and wife roles are non-interchangeable. This will always be true. Likewise, a supporting ministry will always be distinct from a ministry of primary leadership. There are Moseses and there are Aarons, but things go badly for God's people when these roles are swapped. Conferences are not granted authority to recreate credentials or make them interchangeable.
SUMMARY

Each kind of credential is distinct. The reception of an ordained minister credential is a grant of worldwide authority. The granting of a commissioned minister credential extends the individual’s authority only in the local church or churches in which he/she has been voted by members in those churches to serve. While the world church grants conferences certain authorities within the geographical territory assigned them, this authority does not extend to redefining credentials. Even unions cannot redefine the criteria for ordination. The world church alone defines credentials and their criteria.

The two tracks (licensed minister culminating in ordained minister, and commissioned licensed minister culminating in commissioned minister) are different tracks of tithe-supported ministry and have different purposes. The first track is designed to develop workers who are ordained pastors leading congregations; the second track is a broader category including paid workers who carry out specific duties in support of various denominational institutions. In cases where a female serves as an associate in pastoral care, she can fill important needs in a congregation without serving as an elder or being a primary leader of a congregation. God calls every member to contend for the faith He has delivered to His people (Jude 3).

NEXT: Commissioned Minister Crisis 2: UCC Commissioned Minister Policy Compared to World Church Practice