

# The Study on the Question of Ordination and the Role of Women in Ministry

This month, the Lake Union Conference Executive Committee is participating in the process of studying the theology, function and practice of ordination, particularly as it relates to women in ministry, at the invitation of the North American Division. It seemed good to us for our readers to be informed, included and invited to participate in our prayerful study of this subject. The following materials have been prepared to assist you in that process. —*The Lake Union Herald* editors

## CONTEXT

At its 2010 Session in Atlanta, the General Conference initiated a process for the study of the theology, function and practice of ordination that includes participation from the entire world field.

The General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee was formed in September 2012. Its chair is Artur Stele, an Adventist world church vice president and director of the Biblical Research Institute. Stele said steps are being taken to “ensure that the process will be open, fair and transparent.”

The committee’s steering committee already has met twice, and the first full meeting convened at the world headquarters in Silver Spring, Maryland, January 15–17.

The committee’s drafts of documents for each task will be sent to local Biblical Research committees in each of the denomination’s 13 world divisions. Each local division committee will make recommendations and return their suggestions.

The committee likely will complete its work the summer of 2014, Stele said.

The denomination’s Executive Committee at the 2014 Annual Council may decide to recommend action to the 2015 General Conference Session.

“The Theology of Ordination Study Committee starts its work in total reliance on God’s guidance,” Stele said. “Please pray for the right spirit and openness for God’s leadership.” (Source: Adventist News Network, December 6, 2012)

The General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee has been assigned the task to:

1. Supervise the worldwide study of the theology of ordination and its implications, reviewing and analyzing data from the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy.
2. Review the history of the study of ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3. Develop a comprehensive agenda on the subject of theology of ordination and its implications for practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, including the subject of ordination of women to the gospel ministry.
4. Receive (not later than December 31, 2013) and discuss reports from the division Biblical Research committees concerning their division-wide studies and conclusions ensuring that division Biblical Research committees address the comprehensive study agenda.
5. Request studies or solicit papers from committee members and/or non-members when further study is deemed necessary.
6. Develop a Seventh-day Adventist theology of ordination to recommend to the 2014 Annual Council for consideration.
7. Submit to the 2014 Annual Council, through General Conference administration, the full report of the worldwide study indicating areas of consensus and areas where consensus has not been obtained with respect to the theology of ordination and its implications for practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
8. Focus on potential solutions, in areas of disagreement, that support the message, mission and unity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In response to the General Conference’s request to all divisions, the North American Division has formed its committee for this study and to submit a report to the General Conference’s Theology of Ordination Study Committee. Information regarding both committees and a list of members is available online at <http://Ordination.LakeUnion.org>.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Many may be unaware of our Church history on the role of women in the church and the question of ordination.

Following is a brief history of actions taken regarding this issue, indicating a consistent advancement of the roles women play in ministry, including the ordination of women as elders and deacons. Copies of records, documents and statements are available online and referenced by number. We trust this information will be useful to you as you participate in our quest to discover God's will for His church.

1. At the 1881 General Conference Session, a resolution was put forth. "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 eight church leaders and was subsequently referred to the General Conference Committee for consideration. There is no evidence that the resolution was addressed or acted upon.
2. In 1901, the question of the ordination of female evangelist and pastor Lulu Russell Wightman, of New York state, was addressed at the union Executive Committee. A.G. Daniels, then General Conference president, was present at the Committee and expressed his opposition "at least for now."
3. In 1968, Finland made a request to the Northern European Division to ordain women. The Division, in turn, referred it to the General Conference. This began a cycle of studies, committees and referrals.
4. The 1973 Annual Council received a report and recommendations on the role of women in the Church.
5. The 1974 Annual Council, while affirming previous actions encouraging women to serve the Church, asserted that "in the interest of the world unity of the church, no move be made in the direction of ordaining women to the gospel ministry" and called for further study.
6. The 1975 Spring Meeting of the General Conference Committee, under the title, "The Role of Women in the Church," took action that made provision for women to be ordained as elders and "on the matter of the ordination of women to the gospel ministry we believe that the world church is not yet ready to move forward. Therefore, until this question becomes clearer we recommend that every endeavor be made to use women in the numerous positions many of them are well qualified to fill." Further, they recommended that "where Bible Instructors or other women with suitable qualifications and experience are able to fill ministerial roles, they be assigned as assistant pastors, their credentials being missionary license or missionary credential."
7. In 1977, the NAD Committee on Administration adopted the term "Associates in Pastoral Care" for those not on track for ordination.
8. The 1984 Annual Council, in response to a request to grant ministerial licenses to qualified women, referred

to a plan for each division to discuss the issue, and send two representatives to a commission that would report to the 1985 Spring Meeting.

9. The 1985 Spring Meeting made a recommendation to the 1985 General Conference Session "to take no definitive action at this time regarding the ordination of women to the gospel ministry"; "to maintain the church's present position"; and assign topics for further study.
10. The 1985 General Conference voted the recommendations of the Spring Meeting.
11. The 1989 Annual Council took action that female Associates in Pastoral Care be allowed to perform essentially the same functions as an ordained minister in churches where they were assigned, provided they met certain qualifications. This action became final with immediate effect. In addition, the Annual Council referred its recommendation not to ordain women to the gospel ministry to the 1990 General Conference Session.
12. The 1990 General Conference Session accepted the report of the 1989 Annual Council and affirmed "a significant, wide-ranging, and continuing ministry for women." In addition, it decided not to approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry on the grounds that there was "widespread lack of support" and to avoid "the possible risk of disunity, dissension and diversion from the mission of the church." At the same session, approval was given for women pastors to conduct baptism and wedding ceremonies.
13. The 1995 General Conference Session considered the North American Division request (referred to it by the 1994 Annual Council) to allow each division the right to authorize qualified individuals to the gospel ministry without regard to gender. The motion failed: 1,481 to 673.
14. The 2000 NAD Year-End Meeting revised the policies pertaining to ministers to provide a path from licensed to commissioned minister for women.
15. The 2010 General Conference Session provided for the ordination of deaconesses and initiated a process for the study of the theology, function and practice of ordination as the Seventh-day Adventist Church had not yet formed a theology of its own.
16. On March 8, 2012, the Mid-America Union Executive Committee voted "to support the ordination of women in the Mid-America Union," in principle, but no action to ordain women was taken.
17. On March 22, 2012, the Southeastern California Conference Executive Committee voted "to remove the term 'Ordained-Commissioned' on all ministerial credentials, regardless of the gender of the credential holder." This was effective immediately.

18. On March 29, 2012, the Southern Union Executive Committee voted to continue their commitment to support women in ministry “in harmony with the Seventh-day Adventist World Church as expressed by actions taken during the General Conference in business session.”
19. On May 15, 2012, the Atlantic Union Conference Executive Committee, while stating their commitment to act in harmony with the decisions taken by the General Conference in business session, voted “that the Atlantic Union Conference, in harmony with scriptural mandates of the priesthood of all believers, is committed to supporting, empowering and celebrating women in ministry.”
20. On July 29, 2012, Columbia Union Conference delegates from its eight conferences voted to approve a recommendation from the union Executive Committee authorizing ordination without regard to gender at a specially-called constituency session. Subsequent to the session, 15 women were approved for ordination.
21. On August 19, 2012, the Pacific Union Conference delegates from its seven conferences voted to “approve ordinations to the gospel ministry without regard to gender,” at a specially-called constituency session. Subsequent to the session, 14 women were approved for ordination.
22. On October 10, 2012, at its regularly-scheduled meeting, the Lake Union Conference Executive Committee voted “to affirm its unity with the World Church and its commitment to the General Conference process of examining the theology of ordination, including a study on the issue of women’s ordination.”
23. On November 14, 2012, the North Pacific Union Conference Executive Committee, at its regularly-scheduled November 14 meeting, voted to engage Northwest members in a discussion on gender-inclusiveness in gospel ministry.

The various actions denying requests for ordination carry with them language that sites issues of readiness,

acceptance, unity, discomfort or no explanation at all. Many of the actions, especially the more recent ones, were a response to a recommendation or request from a committee or office in the field, and were voted after lengthy debates from the floor citing Scripture, both for and against.

Arguments against the ordination of women to pastoral ministry have typically drawn on the New Testament male-only references of authority and leadership and the idea of spiritual headship as described in the first publication on the subject in the April 22, 1862, edition of the *Review & Herald*.

“The husband is the head of the family, as Christ is the head of the church, and any course which the wife may pursue to lessen his influence and lead him to come down from the dignified, responsible position God would have him occupy, displeases God. It is the duty of the wife to yield her wishes and will to her husband. Both should be yielding, but preference is given in the word of God to the judgment of the husband. And it will not detract from the dignity of the wife to yield to him who she has chosen to be her counselor, adviser, and protector. The husband should maintain his position in his family with all meekness, yet with decision.” (Full article is available at <http://Ordination.LakeUnion.org>.)

Arguments for the ordination of women to pastoral ministry have typically referenced examples of women in authority and leadership in the Old Testament, along with the New Testament concepts of the priesthood of all believers and the “new order” of all-inclusiveness, i.e., Galatians 3:28, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus* (KJV).

This inclusive language appears in the January 15, 1901, edition of the *Review & Herald*. “It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God. As they cherish the thought that Christ is their Companion, a holy awe, a sacred joy, will be felt by them amid all their trying experiences and all their tests. (Full article is available at <http://Ordination.LakeUnion.org>.)

## OUR COMMITMENT TO SCRIPTURE

The 28 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church begin with our commitment to the authority and reliability of the Bible. We also have included those fundamental beliefs that may be particularly helpful in our study.

### Fundamental Belief #1 Holy Scriptures

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by Divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were

moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 30:5, 6; Isaiah 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 4:12)

### Fundamental Belief #6 Creation

God is Creator of all things, and has revealed in Scripture the authentic account of His creative activity. In six days the Lord made the heaven and the earth and all living things upon the earth, and rested on the seventh day of that first week. Thus He established the Sabbath as a perpetual memorial of His completed creative work. The first man and woman were made in the image of God as the crowning work of Creation, given dominion over the world, and charged with responsibility to care for it. When the world was finished it was very good, declaring the glory of God. (*Genesis 1; 2; Exodus 20:8-11; Psalm 19:1-6; 33:6, 9; 104; Hebrews 11:3*)

### Fundamental Belief #14 Unity in the Body of Christ

The church is one body with many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. In Christ we are a new creation; distinctions of race, culture, learning, and nationality, and differences between high and low, rich and poor, male and female, must not be divisive among us. We are all equal in Christ, who by one Spirit has bonded us into one fellowship with Him and with one another; we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation. Through the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures we share the same faith and hope, and reach out in one witness to all. This unity has its source in the oneness of the triune God, who has adopted us as His children. (*Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14; Matthew 28:19, 20; Psalm 133:1; 2 Corinthians 5:16, 17; Acts 17:26, 27; Galatians 3:27, 29; Colossians 3:10-15; Ephesians 4:14-16; 4:1-6; John 17:20-23*)

### Fundamental Belief #17 Spiritual Gifts and Ministries

God bestows upon all members of His church in every age spiritual gifts which each member is to employ in loving ministry for the common good of the church and of humanity. Given by the agency of the Holy Spirit, who apportions to each member as He wills, the gifts provide all abilities and ministries needed by the church to fulfill its divinely ordained functions. According to the Scriptures, these gifts include such ministries as faith, healing, prophecy, proclamation, teaching, administration, reconciliation, compassion, and self-sacrificing service and charity for the help and encouragement of people. Some members are called of God and endowed by the Spirit for functions recognized by the church in pastoral, evangelistic, apostolic, and teaching ministries particularly needed to equip the members for service, to build up the church to spiritual maturity, and to foster unity of the faith and knowledge of God. When members employ these spiritual gifts as faithful stewards of God's varied grace, the church is protected from the destructive influence of false doctrine, grows

with a growth that is from God, and is built up in faith and love. (*Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:9-11, 27, 28; Ephesians 4:8, 11-16; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 1 Peter 4:10, 11*)

### Fundamental Belief #23 Marriage and the Family

Marriage was divinely established in Eden and affirmed by Jesus to be a lifelong union between a man and a woman in loving companionship. For the Christian a marriage commitment is to God as well as to the spouse, and should be entered into only between partners who share a common faith. Mutual love, honor, respect, and responsibility are the fabric of this relationship, which is to reflect the love, sanctity, closeness, and permanence of the relationship between Christ and His church. Regarding divorce, Jesus taught that the person who divorces a spouse, except for fornication, and marries another, commits adultery. Although some family relationships may fall short of the ideal, marriage partners who fully commit themselves to each other in Christ may achieve loving unity through the guidance of the Spirit and the nurture of the church. God blesses the family and intends that its members shall assist each other toward complete maturity. Parents are to bring up their children to love and obey the Lord. By their example and their words they are to teach them that Christ is a loving disciplinarian, ever tender and caring, who wants them to become members of His body, the family of God. Increasing family closeness is one of the earmarks of the final gospel message. (*Genesis 2:18-25; Matthew 19:3-9; John 2:1-11; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 5:21-33; Matthew 5:31, 32; Mark 10:11, 12; Luke 16:18; 1 Corinthians 7:10, 11; Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-4; Deuteronomy 6:5-9; Proverbs 22:6; Malachi 4:5, 6*)

### KEY TEXTS FOR STUDY

- Genesis 2:15-24
- Genesis 3:8-24
- Galatians 3:26-29
- 1 Timothy 2:8-15
- 1 Timothy 3:1-13
- Titus 1:5-9
- 1 Corinthians 14:34, 35

A full bibliography of published books, documents and additional resources are available at <http://Ordination.LakeUnion.org> and will be updated periodically. In addition, we invite the submission of responsible papers for inclusion on the website. Papers can be submitted via email to: [ordination@lucsd.org](mailto:ordination@lucsd.org).

The *Lake Union Herald* editors