

AN APPEAL FOR UNITY IN RESPECT TO MINISTERIAL ORDINATION PRACTICES

Since the beginning of 2012 several union conferences¹ have recorded actions expressing support for, or commitment to, the ministerial ordination of women. The world-wide Seventh-day Adventist Church is currently engaged in a study of the theology of ordination and its implications. This study is scheduled for completion by the 2014 Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee. At that time the Executive Committee will determine the report which will be given to the 2015 General Conference Session along with whether or not any new recommendation should be considered by delegates to the Session.

In the light of this current study and the actions of several unions, General Conference officers², including presidents of the 13 world divisions, have unanimously communicated an appeal for unity in respect to ministerial ordination practices. The appeal calls: 1) for unity in respecting a global church action (i.e. the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Session decisions on ministerial ordination); 2) for each union executive committee to carefully review the far-reaching effects of pursuing a course of action that is contrary to the decisions of the General Conference in session; and 3) for each union to participate in the current study about the theology of ordination and its implication.

1. Respecting a global decision of the Church

The world-wide Church recognizes the General Conference in Session as the highest ecclesiastical authority for Seventh-day Adventists. The 1990³ and 1995⁴ General Conference Session decisions with respect to granting ministerial ordination to women represent the current voice of the Church in this matter. The actions of certain unions indicate their desire to establish an alternative source of authority for a matter that already carries the authority of the world Church.

As currently understood in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, ordination to the gospel ministry is ordination to serve the global Church. No provision exists for a geographically

¹ At December 31, 2010 the Seventh-day Adventist Church had 60 unions with conference status and 59 unions with mission status

² The group of 40 officers involved include officers from the Presidential, Secretariat and Treasury offices of the General Conference plus the presidents of divisions who, in addition to being presidents of their divisions are vice-presidents of the General Conference.

³ The 1990 General Conference Session approved that women should be given wide participation in all church activities, including soul winning and pastoral duties, but that "in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the Church" the Session also approved the Annual Council recommendation that ordination of women to the gospel ministry not be authorized.

⁴ The 1995 General Conference Session action denied the request of the North American Division that the Session adopt provisions on ordination as outlined below: "The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize the ordination of individuals within its territory in harmony with established policies. In addition, where circumstances do not render it inadvisable, a division may authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender. In divisions where the division executive committee takes specific actions approving the ordination of women to the gospel ministry, women may be ordained to serve in those divisions."

localized ministerial ordination.⁵ Consequently the decision to change or modify ordination practices is a global one and necessitates a decision from the world body.

For any union to introduce a different ministerial ordination practice is seen, by the rest of the Church, as readiness to set aside a world Church decision and proceed in another direction. Such actions, taken at the very time when the world Church is engaged in a study and discussion of the matter, pre-empt the process and any decision that might come from it. This creates widespread confusion, misunderstanding as well as erosion of trust and also nurtures doubt about these unions acting in good faith as members of the world-wide family.

Some who would encourage unions to proceed with ministerial ordination for women draw attention to selected statements from a General Conference Executive Committee document.⁶ As used by these individuals, the statements would indicate that a union has final authority in matters relating to ministerial ordination. The intent of the document from which such statements have been taken is to emphasize the interconnectedness of Seventh-day Adventist denominational structure. The authority and responsibility entrusted to any entity of the Church is exercised within the context of beliefs, values, and policies of the entire Church. Being a part of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church obliges every organization to think and act for the good of the whole and to shun a spirit of autonomy and self-determination.

2. The effects of unilaterally pursuing a different course of action

The significance of any union proceeding in a manner contrary to a global Church decision is not limited to the specific action involved (ministerial ordination in the present instance); it touches the very heart of how this Church functions as a global family. The essence of unity in Seventh-day Adventist organizational functioning is the mutual commitment of all organizations to collective decision-making in matters affecting the whole family—and the acceptance of those decisions as the authority of the Church. The action of any union in pursuing a different course of action represents a rejection of this key value in denominational life. Unless this value (i.e. collective decision-making and the acceptance of those decisions as the authority of the Church) is maintained, all other values that contribute to unity are seriously weakened.

For one entity to express its reasoned dissent with a global decision of the Church might appear to some as a legitimate course of action. However, the implications of acting contrary to a world Church decision are not limited to the one entity. Any organization contemplating a course of action contrary to a global Church decision must ask itself, “Is this the pattern of participation in Church life that we wish to establish and recommend for other entities to follow?” “How will we deal with the situation if an

⁵ Information that a number of women serve as ordained ministers in China has been cited as justification, for unions elsewhere to proceed in a similar manner. It has been alleged that the Northern Asia-Pacific Division recognizes these ordinations and has therefore established a precedent for granting ministerial ordination to women. However, these ordinations were not authorized or conducted according to the policies of the Church. Nor are these ordinations approved or recognized/endorsed by the Northern Asia-Pacific Division. The Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have an officially organized structure in China that is comparable to other areas of the world. Government regulations do not permit outside involvement in church affairs within China. The practice, in China, of ministerial ordination for women is acknowledged as a reality that has arisen in China and is beyond the influence of the world-wide structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

⁶ “The General Conference and Its Divisions”, General Conference Executive Committee, April 2012

organization in our territory should decide to discontinue its participation in one or more matters under which it disagrees with the larger family of organizations?" Mutually agreed upon policies benefit the entire Church and keep it from fragmenting into independent, locally-driven units. They are the reflection of the Spirit-directed will of the body and allow each entity to look beyond itself for the good of the whole body of Christ.

3. Participation in the current study of ordination and its implications

General Conference officers welcome and invite unions to participate in the global study of ordination. This study will be the most widespread and thorough study the Church has undertaken on this topic. Earlier studies have been conducted by commissions. This is the first time that a study of ministerial ordination engages the whole Church through the 13 divisions.

Biblical Research Committees in all divisions have been asked to conduct a study on the theology of ordination and its implications. In addition, during 2012, the General Conference Administrative Committee will appoint a Theology of Ordination Study Committee, with representation from all divisions, to oversee and facilitate the global discussion process and to prepare reports for presentation to the General Conference Executive Committee. The Annual Council 2014 will determine what action, if any, should be recommended to the 2015 General Conference Session. Careful thought is being given to ensure that the study and education process is conducted with fairness and thoroughness in respect to examining the theology of ordination and its practical implications.

All unions are welcome to submit their conviction as part of the global dialog on this question. Their voices, along with others, in this matter need to be heard. Now is the time for unions to share their position on ministerial ordination, and the rationale behind it. Doing so will ensure that various perspectives will be clearly understood by the world Church.

The appeal sent by the General Conference officers to certain unions also reflects this Church leadership group's message to other unions that may be considering similar steps with respect to ministerial ordination practices. The communication concludes: "We have shared with you our deep concerns about the course of action you have chosen. We realize that sharply differing convictions with respect to ministerial ordination for women exist in our global family. We also realize that the passage of time without finding satisfaction for the tensions on this question can give rise to frustration and the erosion of confidence that a timely and mutually satisfactory resolution can be found."

"We therefore earnestly appeal to you:

1. That your union continues to operate in harmony with the global decisions and global decision-making processes of the Church.
2. That until such time as the Church decides otherwise, your union refrains from taking any action to implement ministerial ordination practices that are contrary to the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Session actions.
3. That the union membership be informed concerning the implications for the entire Church in the event that one entity, for whatever reason, chooses a course of action in deliberate opposition to a decision of the whole Church.
4. That the union actively participates in the global discussion about the Church's understanding and practice of

ordination. The contributions of a union in this discussion can be forwarded to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee through the respective Ordination Study Committee set up by each division.

“Thank you for your willingness to receive and reflect on these things. We join you in diligently and prayerfully seeking to know the will, the blessing and the guidance of God in this and all other matters affecting our life together as a Church and our collective endeavor to advance His kingdom.”

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This appeal was prepared and unanimously accepted by consensus by the General Conference officers, a group of 40 senior leaders of the church, including the 13 division presidents who also serve as vice-presidents of the General Conference.

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