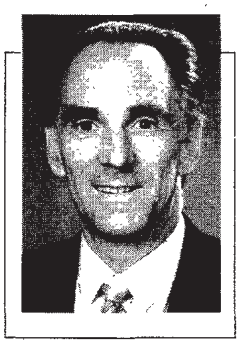
The Adventist pastor and the ordination of women

Arthur N. Patrick

An Australian Seventh-day Adventist gives his perspectives on a matter that has worldwide significance.



Arthur N. Patrick is the registrar of Avondale College, Cooranbong, New South Wales, Australia.

Among other denominations a vote on the ordination of women generally has been accompanied by a loss in membership—whether that vote was pro or con. Irrespective of the conclusion our church reaches at its 1990 General Conference session, we want our congregations to remain unified and committed to their supreme objective. Hence Seventh-day Adventist ministers must employ this year well.

The representative form of government our church espouses is an effective basis for responsible decision-making. At the next General Conference session more than 2,000 delegates from almost 200 countries will represent more than 5 million members. Hence most cultural variations and shades of opinion will have their representatives.

But the General Conference session does not relieve the church at large from a precise and demanding responsibility: "It is the first and highest duty of every rational being to learn from the Scriptures what is truth." [1] This dictum is as true of the ordination of women as clergy as it is of any other facet of faith and practice. The individual member needs a trustful, dialogic relationship with the church's decision-making processes.

The seven-point agenda

Regarding the ordination of women, we must answer no less than seven packages of subquestions before we can reach a conclusion having any degree of certainty.

First, great importance attaches to the interpretation given to the early chapters of Genesis. There is broad agreement that Genesis 1 indicates that male and female together form the image of God, but the order of creation in Genesis 2 and especially the effects of the Fall in the third chapter are variously understood. Some see no special significance in the sequence of the divine acts of creation recounted in Genesis; others affirm that since man was created first, he is preeminent; and still others declare that woman is the ultimate expression of God's creative purpose and activity. Some assert that the Creator's statement that Adam would rule over Eve is prescriptive, whereas others declare that rather than being a statement of God's ideal, it forms a sad declaration of one of the consequences of sin.

Second in terms of the order of the biblical sequence but dominant in importance is the life and ministry of Christ. Jesus dispensed with many cultural and religious practices of His day, accepting women as persons, ministering to them, accepting their ministry, and rebuking those objecting to His radical stance. *The Australian Evangelical* expressed well the significance of the Gospel records in this regard: "Twentieth-century women are not the first to have encountered strong opposition from men seeking to preserve what they see as 'the truth.' Jesus, who said 'I am . . . the truth,' must surely be our supreme example in these matters." [2] Over against this it is argued that since Jesus chose only men as apostles, women must be excluded from the Christian ministry.

A third focus of attention relating to the ordination of women arises from Pau-

Does the nature of God require male representation only, or are the functions of ministry best fulfilled by both male and female?

line statements. Three passages are often interpreted as in effect denying ordination. [3] Another text yields an opposite conclusion when interpreted in terms of a Paul who "practiced what he preached," not only stating "the equal status of man and woman as a Christian principle" but working alongside women and referring to them as "fellow workers, deacons, and possibly in one case as an apostle." [4]

This view acknowledges that "progressive as Paul was in his thinking and in his behavior, he was sensitive to his culture and suggested certain restraints appropriate to particular settings." [5] And it claims to employ sound exegetical principles as it probes the actual meaning of the New Testament documents. While both camps use lexical, syntactic, contextual, and historical data, the use of these data is more evident among the supporters of female ordination.

A fourth aspect of this discussion focuses upon the history of Christian thought concerning the roles of male and female in the church. While this dimension is closely related to the exegesis of Genesis and the New Testament, it gives major attention to the Church Fathers and to Roman Catholic and Protestant thinkers. Here, those involved in the discussion either blame or honor Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Wesley, and many more for positions currently advocated by Christians. [6]

Fifth, this ongoing discussion places emphasis upon ecclesiological matters, particularly polity and liturgy. In Roman Catholicism this may mean addressing the authority of tradition and the papacy; in Anglicanism it may involve examining the nature of the church, the roles of its various clerical orders, and the authority of the archbishop or bishop over against that of the clergy and laity.

This discussion may also address matters relating to worship, including the advocacy of either traditionalist or nonsexist language and the authority required for a person to celebrate Communion. And the focus may include the practical issues that accompany the ordination of women, like equal pay and their ability to transfer to other congregations or duties.

A sixth area of discussion concerns a cluster of more strictly theological matters. The questions are many. Does the nature of God require male representation only, or are the functions of ministry best fulfilled by both male and female? Will according historical influences to the Bible erode the doctrine of revelation/inspiration and consequently the authority of Scripture? Do only males bear the spiritual gifts of ministry? Does a mature pastoral theology imply that only one sex should address the needs of the people who are the object of ministry? [7] What, after all, is the theological meaning of ordination?

A seventh focus of attention addresses what H. Richard Niebuhr calls "the enduring problem," that is, the question of how Christians should relate to their society. Should they isolate themselves from its struggles, immerse themselves within its currents, or in some way negotiate their responses in terms of Scripture and Christian values? Various individual Christians and denominations practice the two opposite answers, withdrawal from society and immersion within it. But Niebuhr's suggestion seems to be accurate: the Christians of the middle position, those who attempt a creative tension between Christ and culture, are in the majority. [8]

Currently, about three quarters of the Australian population identify themselves as Christians, and it is evident that an increasing number of both the churched and the unchurched are accepting of the ordination of women as clergy. If this majority opinion is correct in terms of Scripture and Christian heritage, the dissenters need to develop cogent arguments on other grounds. If the masses are incorrect, the dissenters need to improve the communication of their stance, or otherwise their position will be eroded entirely.

Eventhe listing of such agenda items as those just given is enough to cause us to cry out, "Who is sufficient for these things?" But help is available.

A movement of our times

Seventh-day Adventist evangelists often emphasize the valuable contributions that other denominations have made to Christian thought. Yet we also see ourselves as called to consummate the work of reform needed in these last days. [9] George Vandeman has expressed these twin ideas powerfully in his recent book, *What I Like About . . .* [10] He reminds us of what we have learned from the Baptists, the Methodists, the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, and others. By examining the experience of other Christians, we can discover a number of useful facts about the ordination of women, as well.

An understanding of the cluster of forces that created the Protestant Reformation illuminates the issue. Among those forces were a determination to make Scripture the sole rule of faith and practice (for many, a biblical concern motivates the move to the ordination of women); a willingness to discard tradition (through history the church has generally opposed this practice); and the affirmation of the priesthood of all believers (strong hierarchical control often goes hand in glove with a male-only ministry).

Hence Baptist radicalism, Wesley-inspired revivalism, and Salvation Army pragmatism have frequently been marked by the acceptance of female ministry. Further, a number of sectarian movements aptly illustrate one result of the break from established ecclesiastical controls—the acceptance of women as spiritual leaders. [11]

Nor can we understand the issue of the ordination of women in isolation from the spirit of the age. In his seminal volume, *Jesus Through the Centuries,* Jaroslav Pelikan argues that "it has been characteristic of each age of history to depict Jesus in accordance with its own character." Pelikan finds his seventeenth "image" of Jesus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when "the first-century Prophet who had preached the justice of God as it was directed against all oppressors of humanity became Jesus the liberator." [12]

From the seventeenth century onward, both sides of the debate over slavery appealed to the biblical text in "the most persistent test case for the complicated dilemma of the relevance of Jesus the liberator to the social order." Since

the resolution of that issue, Pelikan notes, other related matters have assumed importance for Christians, including justice for those "denied opportunity and fulfillment," and the necessity for power to be moderated by love. [13] Within this context, the radical stance of Jesus has become a paradigm for those who are committed to male/female equality in ministry.

Additionally, some patterns evident within Australia may have relevance for readers in other parts of the world. The Congregationalists and the Churches of Christ in this country yield two illustrations of the viability of allowing particular congregations to assess their readiness to accept female ministry. Conscious of precedents established in the United States, Australian Congregationalists began ordaining women in 1927. These female clergy demonstrated their ability to carry on a sustained parish ministry and to move to new locations.

More recently, while aware that other Church of Christ parishes are not yet ready for this step, congregations of that denomination in several states have ordained 15 women. Further, several other denominations have proved the concepts of team ministry and cominstry effective. These approaches allow congregations to learn to relate to a woman as an associate minister, thus preparing them to receive female clergy as parish leaders.

Again, it is evident that allowing women to serve in paraministerial roles delays only briefly the discussion of female ordination. Anglicans appointed deaconesses, expanded their role, and finally ordained some women as deacons —that is, into the first of their three orders of ministry. These well-intentioned steps have not, in the long run, freed their church to pursue its mission in peace and harmony. The essential question remains in sharp focus: On what grounds does the church continue to forbid women to serve as priests and bishops?

Methodists turned from the real question for three decades, establishing an order of deaconesses, first "set apart" but finally ordained to their role. But the Methodists also were brought face-to-face again with the issue of ordaining women as clergy. Presbyterians by ordaining women as elders effectively paved the way for their ordination to the ministry of the Word and the sacraments. The Roman Catholic "Women in the Australian Church" project, which aims to raise the consciousness of women in this country, presses the question upon that church. Such enhancement of the role of women will augment the voices of Catholic biblical scholars, theologians, sociologists, and others already calling for the ordination of women. [14]

Others' experiences reassure

The experiences of the churches that have ordained women—the Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, the Uniting Church, Baptists, and Churches of Christ—make it clear that doing so does not immediately change the character of a church by inducting large numbers of women into its clergy. Several factors tend to preserve the status quo. First, women move slowly into any new vocational opportunity. Second, it takes time to train candidates for ministry. Third, only a few of the women serving a denomination in paraministerial roles are likely to have both the desire and the qualifications to move into full-time ministerial responsibilities. Hence churches can be confident of having time to make in a coherent manner the numerous adjustments that ordaining women may entail.

While there is no way either to prevent change or to facilitate it without some pain, the history of this issue abounds with examples of both inept and effective leadership. The experience of those churches that have ordained women implies that it is crucial that those guiding a church through this change employ every gift and grace of Christian leadership.

The questions such a change raises are emotional ones. There are biblical, historical, ecclesiological, theological, sociological, and pragmatic issues to be solved. Dealing with only one or two of these issues often severs relationships within a religious group. Definitive pronouncements that disregard the convictions of others also create division, as do political manipulations and the undue exercise of ecclesiastical authority.

Christian history further indicates that while the movement toward ordaining women has been fitful and slow, it has been consistent. There have been few steps in the other direction. One informed observer suggested that in the Anglican communion within Australia, the ordination of women to the priesthood is as certain as death and taxes, the only question being when it will occur. [15] Probably this prediction is true of Australian Christianity in general, given the trends of the past century.

While the movement toward ordaining women has been fitful and slow, it has been consistent.

It is evident that, like many of the churches in other parts of the world, those of this continent still face some uncertainties regarding the matter of female ordination. But their uncertainties only accentuate the fact that it is time for the lantern of history to be placed where it will shine on the waves before us.

Christianity is a historical religion, but its eyes are ever focused on the future. It holds deep within its psyche the vision of a redemptive plan consummated, an Eden restored, an earth made new. To fulfill its mission it must believe that future into being; it must effectuate its eschatology while awaiting the ultimate fulfillment of its hope. The restoration of relationships plays so central a role in our mission that we cannot ignore the ordination of women to the Christian ministry. The ordination of women represents a small but significant part of this restoration. So Christians must either ordain women or present compelling reasons why this cannot be done in good conscience.

Most of the religious groups closest to Seventh-day Adventists have worked through the issues and decided to ordain women. It is the Anglo-Catholic, the Roman Catholic, and the Eastern Orthodox churches that have difficulties doing so—and, in the main, their reasons differ quite widely from those that make us hesitate to implement this practice.

As a denomination, Adventists are seriously addressing the issue four centuries

In the final analysis, ordination is the church's recognition of what God has entrusted to the individual.

from the roots that nourished the discussion in its modern form. We need to use intelligently the wealth of information available to us, uniting the church we love on the things that are sure, and exploring new territory in a constructive manner.

Adventist answers

As pastors within the Adventist community of faith, we ought to remember a number of important truths during this discussion. First of all, we are Protestants who believe in the priesthood of all believers. Both the Old and the New Testaments make clear that all of us—irrespective of gender—are as responsible for presenting the truth as for learning it. During Bible times Deborah, Huldah, Anna, Philip's daughters, and many other women spoke for God.

Second, we Adventists are rooted in the great Second Advent movement that William Miller initiated—and Millerite Adventism incorporated women preachers.

Third, during its formative years Adventism gave a higher profile to the ministry of women than it does now. We need to assess why this was the case, and how such events as the death of Ellen White and the onset of the Great Depression altered this pattern. [16]

Fourth, we believe in the doctrine of spiritual gifts—it is one of our 27 fundamental beliefs. The ministry of Ellen White testified publicly among us that God intends both our sons and our daughters to prophesy. The implications of this doctrine strike us with new force as we consider the ordination of women as ministers.

Fifth, the only General Conference session that discussed this matter voted "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." [17] Did that General Conference session fail to explore the matter fully? Has the evidence changed since our pioneers took their "substantially unanimous" vote? If we disagree with their vote, we will need persuasive reasons to convince an increasingly well-informed constituency.

Sixth, for more than a decade we have proved how effectively women can serve as ordained elders. We began this process cautiously in the United States, and now it is being established in Australia. The role of ordained minister involves only a few functions not included within that of elder. Now we are seeking to determine whether God has given these responsibilities to women as well as to men.

In the final analysis, ordination is the church's recognition of what God has entrusted to the individual. Determining His will is an awesome responsibility, for how we interpret it has profound implications for the church. At one time committed Christians saw no need of questioning the institution of slavery, but now most Christians would consider that attitude unthinkable. Has the time come for us to address a further dimension of human relationships, gender equality, in terms of Scripture?

A unifying response

How, then, shall we proceed? We must listen attentively to those best able to help us assemble all of the relevant evidence. No one person is competent in all the important areas of research: Old Testament, New Testament, Christian history, Adventist heritage, pastoral ministry, human dynamics, and more. But together we are the church, charged by God with the responsibility of discerning and fulfilling our mission.

As shepherds of local congregations, pastors ought to ensure that their people have access to all of the relevant data. Both international and intradivisional church periodicals aid us in this endeavor. [18] In due course the Biblical Research Institute at world headquarters and its counterparts in the church's divisions will aid us all with study materials. The Ellen G. White/Seventh-day Adventist Research Centers in strategic geographical areas provide the world church with the primary sources for understanding this issue in terms of its heritage.

However, it is the sensitivity with which ministers lead their congregations that will determine the church's future. God has given us gifts and resources, but we must use them wisely if we are to deal with this issue as responsible Christians.

Let us accept the challenge implicit in these words of Coleridge: "If men could learn from history, what lessons it might teach us! But passion and party blind our eyes, and the light which experience gives is a lantern on the stern, which shines only on the waves behind us!" [19] Let's use the lamp of history to light the waves before us. ■

---

[1] Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 598.

[2] Sheila Pritchard. "The Ministry of Women: Some Guiding Principles," *The Australian Evangelical*, September-October 1986.

[3] 1 Cor. 11:3-15; 14:33-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-14. Note also the use of Ephesians 5, especially by evangelical Anglicans.

[4] Observe the way Pritchard interprets Galations 3:28, and compare the editorial "Woman's Relation to the Cause of Christ," *The Bible Echo*, Mar. 15, 1892. During the 1890s in Australia, Protestants used the same arguments now employed against the ordination of women to discredit Ellen White and Adventism. In turn, *The Bible Echo* employed in its defense many of the arguments now used by those proposing the ordination of women.

[5] *Bible Echo*, Mar. 15, 1892.

[6] Rosemary Radford Ruether is one of many authors favoring ordination, whose books explore this dimension.

[7] The contents and references in two recent books explore these issues. See Margaret Ann Franklin, ed., *The Force of the Feminine: Women, Men and the Church* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986); Margaret Ann Franklin and Ruth Sturmey Jones, eds., *Opening the Cage: Stories of Church and Gender* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

[8] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), pp. 1-44.

[9] Six of LeRoy Edwin Froom's monumental volumes have this as their theme.

[10] George E. Vandeman, *What I Like About . . .* (Warburton: Signs Pub. Co., 1986).

[11] Note the bibliography in Ronald D. Graybill, "The Power of Prophecy: Ellen G. White and the Religious Founders of the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1983).

[12] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 2, 206-219.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] I have explored these and related issues in a paper, "The Ordination of Women in Australia: An 'Enduring Problem' in Historical Perspective." In its September 1988 issue, the Uniting Church journal *Church Heritage* carries an article based on this paper.

[15] Newcastle *Herald*. Apr. 11, 1987.

[16] Bertha Dasher, "Leadership Positions: A Declining Opportunity?" *Spectrum* 15 (December 1984): 35-37; Patrick Allen, "The Depression and the Role of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," *Adventist Heritage: A Journal of Adventist History* 11 (Fall 1986): 48-54.

[17] *Review and Herald*, Dec. 20, 1881.

[18] See the many significant articles in *Ministry* and *Adventist Review*—especially since December 1984—some of which have been carried over into other denominational periodicals.

[19] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1978).