

Chapter 14: Moving Forward in Unity

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The question to be addressed in this paper is straightforward. With respect to the practice of ordination for Gospel ministry, can diversity be respected and unity maintained in the Seventh-day Adventist Church so that the Church and its mission are strengthened?

The Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to respond to this question by proposing that the Church can maintain its unity and adopt a position which allows for diversity in practice with respect to ordination to the Gospel ministry without gender distinction.

The Perspective of the Paper

The paper is written with deep respect for the differing positions held on the subject of the practice of ordination in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. However, at the outset it is important to indicate that the paper does reflect a definite viewpoint and it is appropriate that a number of pre-suppositional perspectives be articulated. They are as follows:

1. Uncompromising loyalty to the message and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
2. Full commitment to the God-given gift of global unity in this Church and respect for the mosaic of diversity within the global Church family.
3. Full commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist methodology of biblical interpretation referred to as the historical-grammatical hermeneutic.

1 Some thoughts contained in this paper reflect aspects of the chapter written by the author for George Knight's Festschrift: Barry D. Oliver, "Reflections on the Church and Unity" in *Adventist Maverick: A Celebration of George R. Knight's Contribution to Adventist Thought*, eds. Gilbert M. Valentine & Woodrow Whidden II (Nampa ID: Pacific Press, 2014), 185–194.

4. An understanding and respect for the reality that in the Church that there are different perspectives on ordination.²
5. Dependence on Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White as they are applied to the needs of the Church and its mission. The pre-suppositions of, proposals advanced and conclusions made in this paper are not in any way drawn from the philosophies of feminism nor those theologies and practices which are not representative of the biblical understanding and accepted practices of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
6. A foundation in a biblical understanding of God's call to the ministry and the reaffirmation of the freedom of the Spirit to call and use whomever he chooses to minister to his Church and to be engaged in response to that call in the mission of the Church.
7. A desire to acknowledge the work of the Spirit in addressing misunderstandings of the nature of Christian ministry which have been introduced into the Christian Church over the centuries. This is a call to include in our agenda as reformers of the Christian faith the restoration of a truly Christian ministry as defined by Scripture under the leading of the Holy Spirit.
8. The assertion that this issue alone is under consideration. Any assumption of linkage between the topic under discussion and other problematic issues is not appropriate. Credence is not given to any attempt to draw conclusions about positions on other issues on the basis of discussion about this issue.
9. The recognition that because of differing religious contexts, history and experience, the meaning attached to ordination is influenced by culture. Different cultures appear to bestow a different status upon a minister at ordination.
10. A position of affirmation for the practice of ordination without reference to gender in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

2 The Theology of Ordination Study Committee Report of the North American Division has expressed it this way: "Because the Bible does not directly address the ordination of women, and because the principle-based evidence is neither complete nor irrefutable, it can be expected that differing conclusions may be drawn by equally sincere and competent students of God's Word." *Theology of Ordination Study Committee Report of the North American Division*, <http://static1.squarespace.com/static/50d0ebebe4b0ceb6af5fdd33/t/5277fd-8fe4b0c0a394822907/1383595407268/nad-ordination-01-summary.pdf>, 6.

Delimitation

This paper is written with full recognition that the purpose of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee is to give *study* to the topic of ordination and its practice in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Other ecclesiastical bodies will have the responsibility to assess and develop in more detail any recommendations which result from this study process. To that end, this paper is, in effect, a “broad brush strokes” case-study of how differing practices may be implemented in the Church.

Historical Reflections

Building on our Seventh-day Adventist History and Heritage

Whatever we do as we move forward we should ensure that we build on the foundation laid throughout our history and that we respect our Seventh-day Adventist heritage. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century, whenever we have had to make difficult decisions about matters of purpose and practice we have always asked the questions, “What does the Word of God say?” and “What is it that best serves our mission?” The same questions are to be asked as we move this discussion forward. Word and mission have been the ingredients of success for the Seventh-day Adventist Church that have distinguished the Church for the last 150 years.

The Principle of Flexibility in Practice

Further, in being true to our history and heritage we need to remember that appropriate flexibility of practice has been a significant reason for the continuing growth, development and sustainability of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church. That flexibility has been a direct consequence of our commitment to the Word of God and commitment to our mission as mandated by Christ himself. Our reading of Scripture makes it obvious that God himself used various patterns of organisation and leadership in his dealings with his people. He practised the principle of flexibility. In the era of the nation of Israel he used at various times the patriarchs, the judges, prophets, priests and kings. Then in the New Testament era (NT), while it is clear that principles of order and organisation were a part of God’s intent for his Church, he did not prescribe one inflexible form of order and organisation. There is no mention of Sabbath School, a church board or business meeting. There is no requirement that we have a church manual, or that we establish a whole range of church officers in order to facilitate the fulfilment of our mission. Indeed we believe that God has given the Church the authority to

establish such ecclesiastical practices and offices precisely because we are committed to the principles of Scripture and the fulfilment of our mission.

The words of the Apostle Paul himself are probably the most defining with respect to how we are to approach flexibility in practice:

¹⁹ For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19–23 NRSV).

Without taking the time to exegete this passage fully, two things are clear. First, our commitment to our mission determines our practice. Second, appropriate flexibility of practice is not only permissible, but in the context of mission, it is necessary.

Study of the history of the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church reveals that we have generally well understood this principle of flexibility. In particular, this was the case in matters of Church order and organisation. For example, in 1855 James White was insisting that the organisation of the Church should be patterned after what he regarded as a “perfect system of order, set forth in the New Testament.”³ Just a few years later, as he came to realise that the NT was not so specific as to prescribe a non-negotiable system of order, he argued that “we should not be afraid of that system which is not opposed by the Bible, and is approved by sound sense.”⁴ While ordination was not the specific topic under consideration in White's discussion, the principle is established that change and flexibility for the sake of mission are entirely possible. Furthermore, wherever a definitive and unchallengeable view cannot be established on the basis of Scripture alone, we are to use “sound sense” as a guide.

Ellen White herself also demonstrated these principles in the counsel she gave to the leaders of the denomination. Her counsels to them took account of context and circumstances and while remaining focused on the essential principles, she was indeed adaptable. For example, in 1892 she gave some

3 James White, “Church Order,” *Review and Herald* 6, no. 21 (January 23, 1855): 164.

4 James White, “Yearly Meetings,” *Review and Herald* 14, no. 9 (July 21, 1859): 68.

very specific counsel with regard to the shape of Church organisational structure. Writing from Australia to the General Conference in session, (her letter was read to the delegates by O. A. Olsen, President of the General Conference), she explained:

We had a hard struggle in establishing organization. Notwithstanding that the Lord gave testimony after testimony upon this point, the opposition was strong, and it had to be met again and again. But we knew that the Lord God of Israel was leading us, and guiding by his providence. We engaged in the work of organization and marked prosperity attended the advance movement... The system of organization has proved a grand success... As we have advanced our system of organization has proved effectual...

Let none entertain the thought, however, that we can dispense with organization. It has cost us much study, and many prayers for wisdom that we know God has answered, to erect this structure. It has been built up by His direction, through much sacrifice and conflict. Let none of our brethren be so deceived as to attempt to tear it down, for you will thus bring in a condition of things that you do not dream of. In the name of the Lord, I declare to you that it is to stand strengthened, established, and settled.⁵

This statement obviously gives very strong support for the need for organization and the “system of organization” operative in the Church at the time of her writing. However, the time at which this was written should be noted. Ellen White wrote these words only nine years before the major reorganization of 1901–1903 during which organizational structures underwent major reform: Union Conferences were introduced and the auxiliary organizations were brought under the umbrella of the executive committee of the General Conference as departments.⁶ Obviously she did not intend that strong approval of the principles of organization or even of the specific system and forms of organization should preclude later changes when contingencies in the context of the world mission of the Church made change desirable.

In fact, on the day before the official opening of the 1901 General Conference session she declared, “God wants a change...right here...right now.”⁷

5 “Ellen G. White to Brethren of the General Conference,” December 19, 1892, Letter 32, 1892; *General Conference Bulletin*, 1893, 20–25.

6 The adoption of some of these structures became possible because there had been an earlier flexibility of approach which made their general adoption more acceptable.

7 “Talk of Mrs E. G. White, before Representative Brethren, In the College Library, April 1, 1901, 2:30 P.M.,” MS 43a, 1901. This manuscript together with MS 43, an edited edition of Ellen White’s speech, is available in Ellen G. White Research Centres.

The following day, when reiterating the concerns which she had communicated in no uncertain terms on the previous day, she added, “according to the light that has been given me—and just how it is to be accomplished I cannot say—greater strength must be brought into the managing force of the Conference.”⁸ She called for change and flexibility but did not attempt to dictate at critical times in our history the particular shape that structures were to take. She left that to due process.

It appears that for Ellen White, the bottom line with respect to practice was the facilitation of the mission of the Church. Structures which inhibited or detracted from task accomplishment, which led the Church to focus its time and attention inward rather than outward, were not at all appropriate. For example, soon after the General Conference session of 1901, Ellen White wrote to A. G. Daniells, the newly elected President of the General Conference regarding the work among the “coloured people” in the South. She admonished Daniells to be flexible in his administration because of the unique needs of the South. The Church was not to become “narrow” and confined by “regular lines.” Different methods of organization and approach were necessary in culturally diverse situations. For administration to be tied to an inflexible predetermined policy which could not adapt to diverse cultural and sociological needs was, for Ellen White, an abuse of administrative prerogative.⁹ The very same day, Ellen White wrote to her son, Edson, who was working in the southern part of the United States. Edson was inclined to be too adventurous in his innovations. Whereas Daniells the administrator had to be counselled to allow change and innovation in a different socio-cultural milieu, Edson had to be cautioned not to be too hasty. Ellen White wrote:

You need now to be able to think and judge with clear discrimination. Great care must be exercised in making changes which differ from the old-established routine. Changes are to be made, but they are not to be made in such an abrupt manner that you will not carry the people with you. You who are working in the South must labor as if in a foreign country. You must work as pioneers, seeking to save expense in every way possible. And above all, you must study to show yourselves approved unto God.¹⁰

If it was appropriate for Ellen White and the pioneers of the Church to demonstrate this level of flexibility in order to facilitate the unity and the

8 *General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, 25. By “greater strength,” Ellen White did not mean more authority. She was referring to the wider participation of other gifted people in the work of leadership in the Church.

9 See Ellen G. White to A. G. Daniells, June 30, 1901, Letter 65, 1901.

10 Ellen G. White to J. Edson White, June 30, 1901, Letter 62, 1901.

mission of the Church it is no less so today when the level of diversity and complexity in the world Church is so much greater. Yes, it is important to act together and it is important to hold dearly to those things which make Seventh-day Adventists who they are. But in the context of diversity when Scripture is not definitive, surely all can agree to act in a manner consistent with that of the Church's pioneers as we work together under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The mission of the Church is realised to the extent that we are loyal to our understanding of the teachings of Scripture and we translate those beliefs into appropriate praxis within the diversity of cultures and environments in which we share the love of God. To the extent that we continue to be successful in doing just this, to that extent we will continue to flourish and be instrumental in fulfilling the commission that Christ has given us.

The Way Forward

The principle of flexibility in the pursuit of mission as it was experienced in the time of Ellen White's leadership has served the Church well during the decades that have followed. Subsequent to an earlier discussion in 1975 on the role of women in the Church, and following careful study of Scripture, the General Conference Executive Committee at its Annual Council in 1984 took action with respect to the appropriateness of ordaining women as local church elders. While a number of guidelines for the implementation of the decision were included, the substance of the action is stated in the minutes as follows:

To advise each division that it is free to make provision as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders.¹¹

This action has served the global Church well. There have been no deep schisms. Indeed, it has promoted the preservation of unity of the Church and enabled mission to flourish by encouraging appropriate flexibility in practice. Time has shown that it was a wise decision in the face of the diversity of the Church on the issue of the role of men and women in the local church. It has not fractured the unity of the Church and neither has it damaged the message and mission of the Church. It is my observation that in the places where it was possible to implement the decision the Church has been blessed.

Given the ongoing nature of the global discussion and the deliberations of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee the challenge again faces

11 General Conference Committee Annual Council, October 14, 1984.

us as to how to preserve unity while accommodating differences. In order to do that it is here recommended that the global Church take an enabling action which gives a similar flexibility to global Church practice with reference to the ordination of Gospel ministers. Such an action could be worded something like this:

That each division be given the prerogative to determine and make provision as it may deem appropriate within its territory for the ordination of men and women to the gospel ministry.

How would this work in practice? Subsequent to an enabling action, the primary operational documents of the Church (*The Church Manual* and *General Conference Working Policy*) would need to be adjusted and appropriate wording found in order to express the principle of flexibility and permit freedom for the relevant various organizational entities of the Church to exercise their conscientious conviction on this matter. For the sake of the unity of the Church it is important for us to find the means of expression which bring the Church together—especially when there is difference such as is the case in this instance.

As an example of how this wording might be adjusted, it could be stated that while all ordination as such is for the world Church (deacons, elders and pastors), the scope of authority to perform the functions of an ordained person is determined by the appropriate authority-granting entity. For example, a person who is ordained as a deacon or an elder is authorised to function in those capacities only when elected to do so by a local church, for a specified period of time. If such an ordained person were to move to another local church anywhere in the world, they would only be granted the authority to function as an elder or deacon in that local church if elected through due process to do so. They would not need to be ordained again. On the other hand, if they were not authorised to function in those capacities by a local church, they would not function, even though ordained. The same would apply to pastors. Although the ordination of a pastor is a form of recognition for ministry in the global Church, authorisation to exercise the functions of an ordained pastor would be granted by the body authorised to issue the ministerial credentials to individuals, whether male or female, within the territory in which they reside or are employed.

In fact there is a sense in which this principle is already at work. Ordination does not automatically enable a male pastor to minister in any part of the world. A process of careful selection still needs to occur to prevent a person from being appointed to a place or responsibility for which he or she is totally unsuited. It is always appropriate to ensure that the most appropriate

person, ordained or otherwise, is appointed to fill any vacancy. Credential-granting entities should always exercise their prerogative to meet the needs of their constituents in the best way for them and the Church.

On the basis of the changes made to documentation, each Division would then have the prerogative to determine how the issue would be handled within its own territory. Some Divisions would continue to do as they do at present and ordain only men. Some will determine that they are going to ordain both men and women. It could be that some Divisions will determine that each Union or employing entity within the Division may make the decision and make provision as each may deem appropriate within its territory for the ordination of men and women. It would be important that assurance be given in each circumstance that there would be mutual respect and recognition of the actions of each other and that within a Division, an employing entity's decision on the matter will not be overridden by the senior entity. There will be differences in practice just as there are right now with respect to ordination of local church elders.

These differences should not be seen as insurmountable problems. Ministerial credentials are issued by an employing entity (usually a Conference or a Mission) upon the endorsement by the relevant Union. The credential grants authority to perform the functions of an ordained minister within the territory of the issuing authority. Even now, while we say that ordination is for the world Church this does not mean that ordained ministers can organise or disband churches within a specific territory, for example, without the approval of the local Conference or Mission. We expect that every ordained minister will function within the parameters of formally expressed approval by the supervisory entity for that territory.

All employing entities would continue to exercise their prerogative to issue ministerial credentials to those they appoint. They will continue to be able to choose whom they transfer into their territories and to issue credentials accordingly. They will also continue to have the prerogative through the service request process to grant appropriate authority to guests from other places who are invited to visit within their territory.

Consideration would need to be given to the situation that might arise should a female ordained person be called to serve in the General Conference or even in a Division in which not all entities held the same position. The question to be faced in such a circumstance is whether holding a Ministerial Credential as compared to holding a Commissioned Minister Credential imposes any different or additional burden on any entity where ordination without gender-distinction is not accepted. This paper contends

that such should not be seen as an imposition because the functions unique to ministerial ordination (organising/disbanding churches; functioning as a president, etc.), can only be performed with the express consent of the supervising entity and the local membership group involved. A person from the General Conference and/or a Division cannot simply travel around undertaking those tasks indiscriminately. Ministerial ordination, while it is for the global Church, does not give authority for uncontrolled or unsupervised activity which is out of harmony with the wishes and convictions of the local entity. There are parameters in place at present which moderate the scope of activity of an ordained minister and such would continue to be the case. Furthermore, it should be noted that the widespread ministry and leadership of women who hold Commissioned Minister Credentials has not become a divisive issue in the Church. If some of these women or others holding similar positions were to receive ministerial ordination their functions with respect to their role in the global Church would really be unchanged.

The Outcome for the Church

It is important that it be made clear that any motion to be brought before the world Church will affect only those Divisions that are ready to proceed with the ordination of women. No entity which is opposed to ordaining women need be affected in its practice. But those entities which conscientiously believe it is imperative to include women in the ordained ministry could do so.

Unity does not mean uniformity. The essence of unity is not uniform action. The lessons of the Jerusalem Council make that abundantly clear. The Jerusalem Council did not consider uniformity to be the same as unity. It did not vote on the one hand that all members should be circumcised and on the other that all should be uncircumcised. The Jewish members could continue to practise circumcision while the Gentile members need not (Acts 15:19–35). Unity was obtained without uniformity.

No matter which position you or I personally take with reference to the discussion of ordination, as Seventh-day Adventists we have a responsibility to guard the unity and promote the mission of the Church. At this moment we are at a watershed. We have the opportunity to maintain unity. In fact we all have the responsibility to maintain the unity of the Church and promote its mission. Even though it may come at what some may consider a cost, to do nothing will come at a greater cost—a deep schism in the Church. I do not believe that is what any of us wants.

Conclusion

Finding a solution is the task to which the global Church must remain committed—if we are to remain a global Church family. Such a solution can maintain the integrity of our belief structure. The practice of ordination with or without gender distinction is not included within our statement of 28 fundamental beliefs. We can agree that the practice does not impinge on the content of our end-time message or on the fulfilment of our global mission, nor on our global unity. We can surely agree to modify our essential operational documents in order to reflect our mutual decision. Whenever in our history we have faced a situation such as this we have taken the decision which will best fulfil our mission. Our unity has always been a function of our commitment to the Word of God and the mission he has given to us.

The situation we face now is a threat to the unity of the Church, but I am confident that we will be able to avoid that outcome. Why? Because of our love and respect for God and one another—and our shared commitment to the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These complementary allegiances are the two things which are an antidote to schism in this Church. They are twin sisters, foundational to unity. Both must be present. One without the other will not do it. Allegiance without involvement is pointless. Involvement without allegiance is aimless and most likely dangerous. In both instances unity is the casualty.

This Church exists because there are people who have given their allegiance to God and the Church, and they act on it. They come from “every nation, kindred, tongue and people” and they go to “every nation, kindred, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14: 6). They are one but they are different. Difference requires adaptation. Unity is ultimately dependent on the recognition that diversity exists. We pray that the Holy Spirit leads us to love and respect one another and to find a solution which works.