



30 March 2010

Joint Letter to:
Pastors and First Elders in the British Union Conference

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Ministry

Re: Women in Ministry

From time to time we need to remind ourselves of our values and beliefs as a church and why we hold to them. There are a number of things in my church which I wish I could change but there are certain practices and processes in the church that I admire and feel proud to be associated with.

One is the manner in which we arrive at our doctrinal and ethical positions. Usually years are spent studying a subject from the Old and New Testament before a conclusion is reached. Whatever that conclusion is, it is usually submitted to the entire church in session for discussion and decision. This is done with a seriousness that matches the importance of the mission of our church.

The role of women in ministry is one of the many subjects that the church has spent a considerable amount of time on. Let me share with you certain developments in our church regarding women in ministry over the years that, hopefully, will prove informative:

As early as 1881 the General Conference Session 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** (*The Review and Herald, December 20, 1881, page 392*). Following the resolution, the matter was referred to the three-member General Conference Committee. There is no record of further action or implementation of the resolution. If there was, the church most likely would not be discussing it today.

The 1975 Spring Meeting of the General Conference made provision for **the ordination of deaconesses and women elders** “where the division found it applicable, or possible, or profitable in their situation.” The General Conference Session later that year affirmed “our purpose to bring qualified women into a broader participation in church leadership and into increasing responsibilities for implementation of church programs.”

Between 1977 and 1984 various study commissions were convened, one result of which was provision for **the election and ordination of women to serve as local church elders**. The 1985 General Conference Session reviewed the ordination of women and concluded that more study be done. The 1990 General Conference Session voted 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 approved the Annual Council’s recommendation that ordination of women to the gospel ministry not be authorised.

The 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht considered and rejected a request from the North American Division “that the General Conference in session adopt provisions on ordination as outlined below:

"The General Conference vests in each division the right to authorize the ordination of

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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."

Since 1995, unions that have employed women in ministerial or pastoral functions have used the policy on Commissioning, issuing commissioned minister's licenses and/or credentials to these women.

While present at the Annual Council of the church last October, the president of the Northern Asia-Pacific Division reported on the growth of the church in China, emphasizing that the work was going forward in a powerful manner and that it was women who were the primary pastoral and evangelistic leaders there. China seems to have been oblivious to the debate on women's ordination going on in other parts of the world and went ahead and ordained their female pastors. Today, the largest Seventh-day Adventist church in the world is in China and is being led by a female pastor.

At the GC Council on Evangelism and Witness in October last year, Cindy Tutsch, of the EG White Estate, presented a paper with the title "Ellen White on the Role of Women in Evangelism". In that presentation she offered the following quotations:

"The Lord desires His ministering servants to occupy a place worthy of the highest consideration. In the mind of God, the ministry of men and women existed before the world was created.' (E. White, *Manuscript Releases* 18:380).

"What is needed in the Adventist church today are women of the calibre of [early Adventist female evangelists] Lulu Wightman, Minnie Sype, or Jessie Weiss Curtis; church members who will embrace them; and administrators who will hire them and urge them to excellence." (*Douglas Tilstra, "Encounters with Adventist Women Planting Churches, Ministry, April, 2004, p. 29)*

Let me also add a couple quotes from the writings of Ellen White:

"...Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands." (*Review & Herald, July 9, 1895.*)

"All who desire an opportunity for true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the canvassing work opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future, immortal life. The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the ministry. 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." (*Testimonies, vol. 6, p. 322.*)

A sermon was preached recently on 3ABN about women in ministry that has elicited a range of emotions from incredulity to righteous indignation, not just on the part of women but also on the part of a number of men. The British Union supports the position of the world church on the subject as voted in session and does not wish to identify with that sermon. Instead, we wish to affirm all our female leaders in the church and express appreciation for the good work that they do in connection with the fulfilment of the gospel commission. Our understanding of scripture leads us to believe that what qualifies us for leadership in the church is not our gender but the gifts provided by the Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of spiritual gifts (see Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-28; Ephesians 4:8, 11-16; Acts 6:17; 1 Peter 4:10, 11) teaches that God gives gifts for service to all without respect to race or gender. Included among the gifts are those of evangelist, prophet, teacher, and pastor. Seventh-day Adventists understand ordination to be the Church's recognition and affirmation of a person's gifts for spiritual leadership. Unlike the Roman Catholic "Apostolic Succession" view of ordination, the Seventh-day Adventist view holds that ordination does not confer an added gift or infusion of grace which bestows an authority from God that is not already present before the ceremony of ordination.

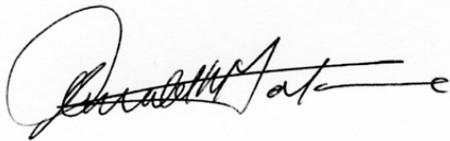
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The general position of the Church on the ordination of women is that the Bible does not encourage it or discourage it, in which case we are left as a church to apply the great principles in scripture of how God deals with His people. Our understanding is that male and female stand before God as equals, Christ having broken down the wall of separation and alienation between Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, male and female.

I am aware that some members will point to certain texts in Paul's writings that seem to exclude women from certain activities in the church. Those texts need to be understood in the same way that we understand Paul's injunction that slaves were to obey their masters. I know of no Seventh-day Adventist who believes that slavery is right. They understand the text to mean that Paul was merely addressing the common order as it existed at the time, without saying whether slavery was wrong or right. Many of the texts that appear to exclude women from a certain type of ministry in the church must be similarly understood.

Thank you for taking the time to read this long letter. I trust that it helps, even to a small degree, to explain why the church has taken the position it has on women in ministry. Please take time to affirm all women who occupy positions of leadership in your church.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don W. McFarlane". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Don W McFarlane
President

DWM:jjp