

Will Women's Ordination Explode at Toronto?

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We live in a remarkable time in Adventist Church history. While the General Conference busies itself with suing Seventh-day Adventist believers, in order to stop them from being historic Seventh-day Adventists, worldly liberals in very good standing in the church are busily at work, defying General Conference rules—and they are not penalized for doing so.

There are indications that these liberals will once again bring up the women's ordination issue at the Toronto General Conference Session, which will convene in a few weeks (June 29-July 8, 2000). We hope that no explosion will occur, and that our historic beliefs will be maintained by our overseas delegates. Yet only time will tell what the outcome will be.

There is no doubt that Adventist feminists and liberals are increasingly carrying out acts of rebellion, calculated to send shock waves into Toronto—and frighten the delegates into acceding to their demands.

(It should be noted that, by early spring 2000, the women's ordination was not an active Toronto agenda item. But recent developments, discussed in this tract, may force a reconsideration of the matter by that five-year assembly of church leaders.)

It is clear that, on many issues in our denomination, there are a variety of strong, contending forces opposing one another. The various sides are unwilling to relent, and the church seems as though it will shake itself to pieces.

Yet if we would all unite in obedience to the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy writings, great peace would be restored to our midst and the final message of obedience by faith could be powerfully carried to the world.

A brief overview of certain events, spanning the last decade, will help you better understand the strong drive set in motion by the liberals among us to yet ram through their objectives at the forthcoming Session.

— SECTION ONE —

FROM INDIANAPOLIS TO TORONTO

THE BOOK PREPARED FOR INDIANAPOLIS—One of the objectives of Adventist liberals and feminists is full ministerial ordination of women in the church. By a vote of 1,173 to 377 the delegates, from the world field, assembled at the 1990 Indianapolis Session, rejected the call to ordain women as pastors. When they failed to obtain their goal at that Session, Adventist modernists set to work, devising ways to win at the 1995 Utrecht Session.

A significant part of the plan was the authorship of a book outlining their speculations and unBiblical theories

on the subject. In early 1995, it was completed, and copies were sent in advance to every world leader and all the Session delegates.

The name of the book was *The Welcome Table: Setting a Table for Ordained Women*. The “fourteen prominent SDA historians, theologians, and professionals” who contributed essays to this book included names you will be familiar with: Bert Haloviak, Kit Watts, Raymond F. Cottrell, Donna Jeane Haerich, David R. Larson, Fritz Guy, Edwin Zackrisson, Halcyon Westphal Wilson, Sheryll Prinz-McMillan, Joyce Hanscom Lorntz, V. Norskov Olsen, Ralph Neall, Ginger Hanks Harwood, and Iris M. Yob.

According to Lawrence T. Geraty's comment on the back of the book, it was widely promoted in the church as—

“. . . a definitive collection of essays for our time from respected church leaders—both women and men. Informed, balanced, mission-oriented, and thoroughly Adventist, this book—like Esther of old—has ‘come to the kingdom for such a time as this.’”

The release of *Welcome Table* was timed to influence the 1995 Utrecht General Conference Session, yet its teachings were outrageously liberal. Bible passages bearing on the subject of male-female relations in the home and church were said to be flawed by faulty logic on the part of Bible writers or erroneous ancient rabbinic interpretations. The authors of *Welcome Table* applied feminist and higher-critical theories to the Bible and muddled clear Biblical concepts.

One Adventist New Testament scholar, Keith A. Burton, gave the book careful analysis and concluded:

“The table around which we are warmly invited to sit is one that already accommodates those who have attacked the relevance of Biblical authority.”—*Unpublished Andrews University manuscript, 1995.*

THE BOOK PREPARED FOR TORONTO—When the feminists and liberals failed at Indianapolis, they set to work to win at Utrecht. But once again they failed. By a vote of 1,481 to 673, the delegates refused the North American Division request, to ordain women in its own territory. Once again, our modernists set to work, to write still another book which would be published and sent in advance to world leaders and Session delegates.

They have done just that. The book is called *Women in Ministry*. Carefully written over several years time, the target audience is the delegates to the Summer 2000 Toronto Session.

Here is the story behind this book:

VYHMEISTER TELLS WHAT HAPPENED—At the October 1998 meeting of the pro-ordination group, Association of Adventist Women (AAW), held in Loma Linda, Nancy Vyhmeister, chairwoman of the Seminary Ad Hoc Committee and editor of the book, *Women in Ministry*, provided some helpful historical background. She told them that the book was written because leaders in the North American Division territory demanded that logical arguments be devised to support their demand for women's ordination. Here are some details:

Vyhmeister said that, in the wake of the Utrecht defeat of the North American Division petition for women's ordination at Utrecht, some people blamed the Seminary at Andrews University for having sent a man, P. Gerard Damsteegt, to speak at Utrecht; he had powerfully spoken against women's ordination. But the leaders at Andrews said that Damsteegt was invited by someone else, even before they knew about it.

According to Vyhmeister, the initial request for the book came from "several union presidents of the North American Division" who, before and during the 1995 Utrecht Session, had urged the North American Division president that there be "no turning back" in their campaign for women's ordination.

When, therefore, less than a month after Utrecht "several" North American leaders met with the Seminary faculty and told them, "You let us down [at Utrecht]; you're against women's ordination,"—every representative of the Seminary who was at the meeting insisted that they were not against women's ordination. In fact, Nancy said, about 90% of the Seminary faculty favor women's ordination. "Then do something about it!" one union president demanded. They asked for "a clarification of the Adventist theology of ordination, culminating in the ordination of women."

Dr. Werner Vyhmeister, dean of the Seminary and Nancy's husband, also present at that meeting, told the presidents that the Dean's Council would initiate a solution. Shortly afterward, that council appointed a fifteen-person committee "to study the subject of hermeneutics and ordination." ("Hermeneutics" is the interpretation of ancient writings, thought to contain the truth, in order to understand their inner meaning. In other words, the committee was formed to explain away the clear passages of Scripture which oppose the idea of women ministers.)

The committee was given the name, "Ad Hoc Committee" ("ad hoc" means "for this one purpose"). The 15 persons on the committee were Nancy Vyhmeister and 14 teachers from the six departments of the Seminary: Jo Ann Davidson, Richard Davidson, Walter Douglas, Jacques Doukhan, Roger Dudley, Jon Dybdahl, Denis Fortin, Robert Johnston, George Knight, Jerry Moon, Larry Richards, Russell Staples, Peter van Bemmelen, and Randal Wisbey. Five others also wrote for the book; these included two Andrews students (Michael Bernoi and Alicia Worley), two retired Seminar professors (Daniel Augsburg and Raoul Dederen), and one undergraduate professor (Keith Mattingly). Only committed pro-ordination liberals were permitted to have a part in producing the book.

SEVERAL UNION PRESIDENTS—In the prologue of the book, Nancy Vyhmeister tells more about the concern of

those union presidents:

"Less than one month after the Utrecht vote [rejecting autonomy for Divisions regarding women's ordination], several union presidents of the North American Division met with the faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, still asking the same question: May a woman legitimately be ordained to pastoral ministry? If so, on what basis? If not, why not? What are the issues involved—hermeneutics? Bible and theology? custom and culture? history and tradition? pragmatism and missiological [world evangelization] needs? And furthermore, how could all these facets of the issue be presented in a logical, coherent manner? Would the Seminary faculty please address these questions and provide answers?"—Vyhmeister, "Prologue," *Women in Ministry*, p. 1.

When we delved into the writing, promotion, and distribution of this heavily slanted book, we learned that a number of very influential groups in the denomination are backing it:

THE ADVENTIST SEMINARY—Significantly, in early 1999, Roger L. Dudley, the author of one of the chapters in the book, said this:

"It is important to note that *Women in Ministry* represents the official view of the Seminary and the position of virtually all of its faculty. Whatever the book may accomplish in the church at large, it is the hope of the [Seminary Ad Hoc] committee that it will demonstrate that the Seminary faculty stands for sound Biblical and historical scholarship on this contemporary and controversial issue."—Roger Dudley, *Adventist Today*, January-February 1999, p. 6.

The Adventist Seminary is on the campus of Andrews University; both are General Conference (not Lake Union) institutions. What is the position of Andrews University regarding this controversy?

ANDREWS UNIVERSITY—At the above-mentioned October 1998 Loma Linda meeting of the Association of Adventist Women, Vyhmeister said this: "With the total support of the University and Seminary administration, and with the support of about 90% of the Seminary faculty, the book came out." Do not forget that the book itself (*Women in Ministry*) was published by Andrews University!

SOME OTHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS—In addition to the official introduction of the book at a special Seminary chapel assembly on October 7, 1998, and a press release by the public relations office of Andrews University,—the book is also being used as a textbook and required reading material in several other Adventist colleges and universities (*Prove All Things*, p. 42.)

NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION—It is clear that the North American Division fully stands behind this book. We know this because of its October 7-10, 1997, Year-end Meeting decision to publish a major paper, calling for full inclusion of women in the ministry on all levels of the church as soon as possible (see *NAD Women Pastors' Document [WM-888-890]*).

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ADVENTIST BOOK CENTERS—Pacific Press is distributing *Women in Ministry* in Adventist Book Centers throughout the world field!

GENERAL CONFERENCE MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION—This is the department which oversees pastors throughout the world and publishes *Ministry* magazine. At Loma Linda, Vyhmeister said that the book has the “total support” of Andrews University, the Seminary, and the Ministerial Department of the General Conference.

REVIEW AND MINISTRY MAGAZINES—There have also been one-sided book reviews, heavily praising the book, *Women in Ministry*, in the *Adventist Review* (April 15, 1999, p. 29) and *Ministry* magazines (January 1999). Yet both are General Conference—not North American Division—journals, and the world church has twice rejected that which they are giving their approval to.

Calvin Rock, a General Conference vice-president, wrote this in the April 15, 1999, issue of the *Review*:

“The Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the broader Christian community, are indebted to the 20 authors of *Women in Ministry* for producing such a thoughtful, thorough treatment of the major aspects of the question ‘Should Women be ordained as pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?’ . . . [The book employs] skillful exegesis of Scripture and careful examination of relevant E. G. White materials,’ showing why ‘liberating knowledge of contextual and linguistic backgrounds is absolutely necessarily vital in ecclesiastical debate . . . [and] offers a sterling challenge to those who see Scripture as forbidding women’s ordination. And it provides welcome data for those who support women’s ordination but who lack professional materials to bolster their belief and convincing insights for those who have not known quite how or what to decide . . . [The book is a] deeply spiritual, highly reasoned, consistently logical approach to the issue of women’s ordination.”—*Calvin Rock, “Review of Women in Ministry,” Adventist Review, April 15, 1999, p. 29.*

THE GOAL IS A CHANGED VOTE AT TORONTO—After two years’ work on the book, *Women in Ministry* was published in September 1998. Immediately, copies were placed in Adventist Book Centers throughout the world field, as well as being mailed to church leaders everywhere. Prior to the Toronto Session, a copy was sent to every delegate.

It is not often that a book is written by demand of union conference presidents. But *Women in Ministry* had this unusual backing. Eighteen months before the book was completed and printed, its radical content and objectives were stated in a pro-feminist journal:

“The Adventist Church structure, however legitimate, has not been, historically, an exact replica of biblical patterns of ministry. While accepting the decision of the Adventist Church not to ordain women *at this time*, as voted at the 1995 General Conference Session in Utrecht, the book will attempt to provide data *on which to base future decisions.*”—*Adventist Today, March-April 1997 [all emphasis in quotations are ours].*

After the book was published, an official press release from the Public Relations Office of Andrews University included this warning comment:

“Whether the book will signal a shift in the worldwide Adventist Church remains to be seen. In Utrecht, conservative factions from Latin America and Africa voted down the women’s ordination question. The next General Conference Session, to be held in Toronto, Canada, in the year 2000, *could be the site of another theological firestorm if the North American Church pushes the issue.*”—*Jack Stenger, “Andrews Professors Address Women’s Ordination” Andrews University Press Release, October 22, 1998.*

Calvin Rock, a strong advocate of women’s ordination and the General Conference vice-president who chaired the women’s ordination business session at Utrecht, wrote this:

“Though unfortunately too late to inform prior [Utrecht] debate, my opinion is that *Women in Ministry has the potential to be determinative in future [General Conference Session] discussion.*”—*Calvin Rock, “Review of Women in the Ministry,” Adventist Review, April 15, 1999, p. 29.*

The real reason for the book is “doing something about Utrecht.”

And what is it that is going to be done? Either the delegates at Toronto will back down, under these continual threats or various parts of the North American Division may take the law into their own hands—and the women’s ordination rebellion may intensify.

But this book is only part of a several-pronged effort to prod the forthcoming Toronto Session into changing its vote. Here are four other developments:

UNION LEADERS DEMANDED CHANGE AT 1995 NAD MEETING—At the October 13, 1995 Year-end Meeting of the North American Division, which was attended by every union conference leader, a commission was appointed to “expand the role of women in ministry” and “affirm women in pastoral and other spiritual ministries” (Introduction to “President’s Commission on Women in Ministry: Report”).

At that same Year-end Meeting, a majority of NAD presidents adopted a *Statement of Commitment to Women in Gospel Ministry*, in which they reaffirmed their belief “in the biblical rightness of women’s ordination” and pledged their support for a clarification of the church’s theology of ordination.

That occurred some three months before January 1996, when the Seminary appointed its Ad Hoc Committee to write the book. Why was there a need for the Seminary to write a book on the subject after the leaders had already made up their minds about the matter?

We see here evidence, not merely of a pattern of events, but of a determined ongoing campaign.

REBELLIOUS CHURCH ORDINATIONS OCCUR—We have already written in detail on these various church ordinations of women pastors at the Sligo Church in Maryland (the home church of many General Conference workers), at the La Sierra University Church, and elsewhere. These incidents were carried out as a warning to Toronto, that worse rebellions would occur if the delegates did not cave in on this issue.

THE NAD COMMISSION REPORT—This was the most far-reaching challenge to the world church on women's ordination. During the October 7-10, 1997 Year-end Meeting of the North American church leaders, the "President's Commission on Women in Ministry: Report" was approved by a majority of those in attendance. We published this astounding document earlier. (See *NAD Women Pastors' Document* [WM-888-890]).

SOUTHEASTERN CALIFORNIA CONFERENCE ISSUES CREDENTIALS—Carefully timed as a warning to the delegates of the June 29-July 8 Toronto Session: On March 16, the SECC Executive Committee voted to immediately begin issuing "ordained-commissioned" ministerial credentials equally to both men and women pastors. That was done less than a month before more than 100 members of the world church gathered at Silver Spring for the Spring Council! The timing could not have been better!

The liberals have wanted four things for women: (1) Their right to be elders and pastors and conduct weddings, communion services, and baptisms. (2) Their reception of ministerial ordination. (3) The issuing to them of ordination ministerial credentials (not merely a license or commissioning papers). (4) Lastly, the right to ordain elders and deacons, something that commissioned ministers cannot do.

By that second, sneak vote at the 1990 Indianapolis Session, the liberals gained the first. (2) Beginning on September 23, 1995, certain local churches and the SECC have defiantly done the second. (3) Now SECC will regularly be doing the third! (4) All SECC women ministers will now be able to ordain elders and deacons.

This March 16 SECC action is a shot across the bow of the forthcoming Session. The delegates are, by this, told that worse will come if they do not yield to liberal demands. What might that "worse" be? Perhaps a withholding of funds for the overseas work.

While the faithful are being persecuted for clinging to historic Adventism, the petted liberals are increasingly in full rebellion against church leaders.

In response, on April 13, North American Division President, A. C. McClure, announced that the NAD did not approve of the SECC action. —Yet its October 7-10, 1997, *NAD Commission Report* called for exactly that which SECC did—and far more!

At the April 19-20 Spring Council, McClure reiterated the NAD position, that the SECC had acted without its approval. But it was obvious that church leaders, gathered from around the world, were worried about what might happen next.

— SECTION TWO —

THE ERRORS IN WOMEN IN THE MINISTRY

WHAT IS IN THIS GREAT BOOK?—Doug Jones, editor of *Focus*, the Andrews University Alumni Journal, wrote

this:

"The faculty in the Seminary are to be commended for their earnest and critical exploration of women and Christian ministry . . . I encourage *Focus* readers to read *Women in Ministry* with care as an important step in achieving balance."—Doug Jones, *Focus*, Spring 1999, p. 5.

Just what is in this book, *Women in Ministry*, which a General Conference vice-president says provides such "skillful exegesis of Scripture," "liberating knowledge . . . [and] professional materials," and "a deeply spiritual, highly reasoned, consistently logical approach to the issue of women's ordination"?

Women in Ministry contains some of the most creative fables ever printed in an Adventist Church-sponsored publication. *Here are a few examples:*

1 - God ordained Eve as a priest in the Garden of Eden, when He clothed her with animal skins; therefore converted women in our day should always be able to function as priests or pastors.

2 - God made man and woman totally equal; therefore women can have the headship over men on every level of the Adventist Church.

3 - New Testament passages which seem to preclude women from headship in the home as husbands and fathers and in the church as elders or pastors are temporary restrictions that applied only to New Testament situations.

4 - "It is morally reprehensible to hold back from women the one thing that formally recognizes their work within the church." "It is imperative that the church act with justice, with mercy, and with courage on behalf of its women."

5 - If this is not done, it will make God "look bad," and we surely do not want that to happen. The church's rejection of women's ordination will be an affront to the character of God, even as slavery was in the nineteenth century.

6 - We must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit who is calling us today to change our patterns of ministry to agree with the needs of our modern, growing church.

7 - If the church does not do this, it will be discredited in countries where it is wrong to "discriminate" against women.

8 - The failure of the church to act in this matter will cause "the forces of history" to take action [a veiled threat].

The book, *Women in Ministry*, is a combination of ambiguity; straw-man arguments; substantial leaps of logic; arguments from silence; heavy speculation; questionable interpretations of the Bible; distorted Biblical reasoning; misleading and erroneous claims regarding Adventist history; a flawed concept of "moral imperative"; and a peculiar view that the Holy Spirit leads the ongoing progression of contemporary modernism.

It is likely that the women's ordination problem may be introduced at the Toronto Session, which will convene in a few weeks. But that which the liberals do afterward may be even more significant. We will try to faithfully report on developments.

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