

Questions & Answers Regarding Current Issues of Unity Facing the Church

The following document addresses issues raised regarding the unity of the church, the authority of the General Conference, and its relationship to other levels and entities of the world church in connection with the current discussion on ordination to the gospel ministry. This document does not address whether ordaining women is appropriate but rather clarifies and corrects arguments that have been used throughout the discussion.

1. Does the General Conference have authority to determine the criteria for ministerial ordination at the union level and below, or does the union conference have the delegated authority within its territory to establish such criteria, including gender?

Decisions of the General Conference Sessions profoundly impact the church at all levels, including General Conference/division, union conference/mission, conference, and local church. While it is true that local churches approve candidates for baptism, and local conferences recommend to unions for approval all requests for ordination, none of these levels establish the criteria for baptism or ordination. A local church board determines who is going to be baptized; it does not determine the criteria for baptism. The 28 Fundamental Beliefs and the baptismal vows have been mutually agreed upon by the world church. This keeps the church unified internationally. In the same way a union conference has the delegated authority to approve candidates for ordination based on their satisfying the criteria for ordination established by the world church; it does not have the authority to ignore this mutually agreed-upon criteria. That is why the unions are not authorized to move forward unilaterally with ordination without regard to gender. If the church were to accept such a premise, there would be varying standards of ordination and criteria for ministry. Such a path would not likely end there. It would open the door to varying standards for baptism, church membership, etc. The issue here is not women's ordination per se; it is which level of church organization has the constitutionally given authority to determine what qualifies a person for ordination. This can only be done by the General Conference in Session, or the General Conference Executive Committee, which acts between General Conference Sessions (General Conference *Working Policy* L 35).

Notice how the *Church Manual* describes the relationship between the various levels of church organization:

In the Church today the General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, is the highest ecclesiastical authority in the administration of the Church. The General Conference Executive Committee is authorized by its Constitution to create subordinate organizations with authority to carry out their roles. Therefore all subordinate organizations and institutions throughout the Church will

recognize the General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, as the highest ecclesiastical authority, under God, among Seventh-day Adventists.¹

The requirement for all church entities, including conferences and unions, to follow existing policies is made clear in the Bylaws of the General Conference: “Administrations of all organizations and institutions within a division’s territory shall be responsible to their respective executive committees/boards and operate in harmony with [the] division and General Conference Executive Committee actions and policies.”² For the above reasons, the recent action taken by the Columbia Union Conference Constituency Session to approve ordination without respect to gender represents a violation of these policies.

2. Is the worldwide Theology of Ordination Study Committee, requested at the 2010 General Conference Session and established at the 2011 Annual Council, also studying the issue of the pastoral ordination of women?

Yes. The process for studying the theology of ordination voted by the General Conference Administrative Committee was handed out and reviewed by the 2011 Annual Council. As the document explains, “each division is asked to request their biblical research committee [BRC] to make a study of the theology of ordination and its implications for church practices.”³ As has been consistently explained verbally and in writing, these practical implications involve many questions related to ordination, including the ordination of women. For example, in a letter from the Biblical Research Institute to all the division presidents and BRC directors sent on May 1, 2012, numerous issues and questions were listed that could be considered by the division study committees. A number of these items relate directly to the question of ordaining women as pastors, including “Does the Bible teach leadership role distinctions between male and female in ministry?”

The Biblical Research Institute has provided the necessary materials for the divisions to establish biblical research committees, and all 13 world divisions are in various stages of the study process. In addition, the General Conference Administrative Committee will be appointing a Theology of Ordination Study Committee, to which each division is invited to send representatives who will be able to represent the study done by their division on this larger, worldwide committee. A report of the worldwide study committee will be presented to the General Conference

¹ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 18th ed., rev. 2010, p. 31.

² Section I.4 of the Bylaws of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, rev. 2011, p. 11. The yearbook in PDF is available at: <http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/YB/YB2011.pdf>.

³ Minutes of the General Conference Executive Committee, GCC 11-105.

administration, which will report the findings to the 2014 Annual Council. This would allow any agreed-upon resolutions to be placed on the agenda of the 2015 General Conference Session.

Further details of this process are available through the Adventist News Network:

<http://news.adventist.org/en/archive/articles/2011/10/10/process-timetable-unveiled-for-review-of-theology-of-ordination>.

3. Was it constitutionally appropriate for the General Conference Sessions of 1990 and 1995 to discuss and vote on the issue of ordaining women to ministry?

Yes. “The General Conference Session, and the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, is the highest ecclesiastical authority in the administration of the Church.”⁴ The General Conference in Session can deal with matters of global importance to the Church as well as matters referred to it from the General Conference Executive Committee. The General Conference in Session is the final place of appeal in matters of difference among organizations.

“When differences arise in or between churches and conferences or institutions, appeal to the next higher constituent level is proper until it reaches an Annual Council of the General Conference Executive Committee or the General Conference Session. Between these meetings, the General Conference Executive Committee constitutes the body of final authority on all questions. The committee’s decision may be reviewed at a General Conference Session or an Annual Council.”⁵

The 1990 General Conference Session addressed a report and recommendations that were referred to it by the General Conference Executive Committee.

The 1995 General Conference Session addressed a matter that originated as a request from the North American Division (NAD) officers and the NAD union presidents. This request was processed through the General Conference Executive Committee and placed on the agenda for the General Conference Session.

4. Did the 1881 General Conference Session vote to authorize the ordination of women to the gospel ministry?

No. However, a surface reading of the minutes of the session could leave a wrong impression. It was common to introduce motions at GC Sessions of the time with “Resolved.” In our day, it sounds as if it has been decided, but in fact it was merely the accepted way to place a motion

⁴ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 18th ed., rev. 2010, p. 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*

up for consideration. Then it would be discussed by the delegates and put to a vote. The resolutions voted on and passed at the 1881 General Conference Session are clearly listed in the minutes as “adopted.” With regard to the ordination of women, the following resolution was presented for discussion: “*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.” Eight individuals are listed as speaking to this resolution prior to it being “referred to the General Conference Committee.”⁶ It is never listed as having been adopted, nor is there any evidence it was ever taken up again, either at this Session or at any subsequent GC Session.⁷

5. If female pastors have already been ordained by some organizations in China, why not allow the ordination of women to the ministry in other regions of the world?

Women have and are doing a powerful work for God in ministry in China. They are serving as pastors and church planters. Of more than 6,000 pastors in China, approximately 4,000, or 70 percent, of them are women. While a few (currently, 20 women) have been ordained, we need to understand the complexity of the situation in China and the reality of life there. In China, the Seventh-day Adventist Church does not have a formal church organization. There are no conferences or unions. There is no official Adventist Theological Seminary in China. There is no standardized ministerial training. Pastors typically are chosen from the members of a local congregation as they demonstrate a calling for ministry by teaching Sabbath school, lay preaching, and church planting. Chinese pastors, male or female, are usually ordained in one of two ways: either by the local congregation with the participation of Adventist senior pastors from their region, or by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement operates under the China Christian Council and is a nondenominational entity approved by the Chinese government.

Female Adventist leaders in China are not in agreement among themselves about the appropriateness of ordination: there is no uniform approach to the issue among the women who pastor Adventist churches in China. Some allow themselves to be ordained, some do not; while the large majority has not engaged in the discussion because women’s ordination has never been an issue among women pastors in China. While the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church

⁶ Minutes of the 1881 General Conference Session, 197 GCS 63-88, published in *The Review and Herald*, vol. 58, no. 25 (Dec. 20, 1881), p. 392.

⁷A short outline of General Conference and North American Division decisions relating to women and ordination, including this item, together with images of the original supporting documents, may be found at: [GC and NAD Actions Related to Women's Ordination](#).

acknowledges the fact of women's ordination in China, it neither recognizes it nor endorses it. It doesn't seek to initiate, guide, or control the process. The church in China functions in the context of its environment and with the limitations imposed upon it by the government where it exists. However, because of this anomalous situation, its practices with respect to the ordination of female pastors cannot be cited as a model for the world church.

6. Is the ordination of female pastors in China recognized by the world church?

No. Ordination in China is not officially recognized by any entity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church outside of China. The document, "An Appeal for Unity in Respect to Ministerial Ordination Practices," written and approved by all General Conference officers (25 persons) and division presidents (13 persons) worldwide, makes this clear:

... 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.⁸

7. How is General Conference policy determined, and how is it related to practice? What is the connection between decisions voted by the General Conference Executive Committee, the General Conference Session, and policy?

Policy is thoughtfully developed, based on sometimes lengthy deliberations over issues both theological and practical, and recommendations made for consideration by duly appointed and elected representatives at these sessions and meetings of the world church. It is not accurate to assert that policy *follows* practice. It is more accurate to say that practice *informs* policy but that policy itself is based on Seventh-day Adventist principles found in Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White. A recent example of how this process works in practice is the use of tithe. For several years, a committee at the General Conference has studied principles of tithing found in the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White. Based on this study and discussion, the committee has formulated recommendations for General Conference administration that have been refined,

⁸ "An Appeal for Unity in Respect to Ministerial Ordination Practices," June 29, 2012 (p. 2, n. 5; the full document is available at the Adventist News Network: <http://news.adventist.org/images/uploads/documents/An-Appeal-for-Unity.docx>).

adopted at the Annual Council, and then included in the *Working Policy*.

However, certain policies cannot be acted upon at Annual Councils but only at a General Conference Session. These sessions, held every five years, address matters of global importance that impact the entire world Church, such as the election of world leaders (officers and department directors serving from the General Conference office and officers of divisions), revision and approval of Fundamental Beliefs, amendments to the Church Manual, amendments to the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws, appointment of the General Conference Auditing Service leaders and board, etc.

The General Conference *Church Manual* and General Conference *Working Policy* contain the decisions that define the operating procedures and relationships among the various levels of church organization (churches, local conferences, unions, and the General Conference with its divisions). The policies of the *Church Manual* are determined by General Conference Sessions and those of the *Working Policy* are determined by the General Conference Executive Committee at Annual Councils. Between General Conference sessions the General Conference Executive Committee is delegated to act on behalf of the General Conference Session. A General Conference Session is not prevented from establishing policy by virtue of having given to the Executive Committee that prerogative between Sessions. Membership on the Executive Committee includes General Conference and division officers; presidents of all the unions worldwide; as well as representation, recommended by divisions, from laity, pastors and frontline employees within each division.

8. Is it obligatory for all entities of the world church to be in full agreement with the General Conference model constitution and working policies, or are they permitted to be only in “general” agreement?

The model constitutions and bylaws contain basic templates of language and concepts to be included in the constitution and bylaws of an organization such as a union or local conference. Some of the material in the model documents is optional. Other material, represented by bold lettering, is obligatory. The obligation for organizations to operate in harmony with General Conference Session and Executive Committee decisions is also shown elsewhere in the *Working Policy*. No organization is able to claim an exemption from such obligation merely because it has not adopted such language in its constitution and bylaws:

Local churches, local conferences/missions/fields, union conferences/missions, unions of churches, and institutions are, by vote of the appropriate constituency, and by actions of properly authorized executive committees, a part of the worldwide organization

of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Whereas each has accepted the privilege and responsibility of representing the Church in its part of the world, each is therefore required to operate and minister in harmony with the teachings and policies of the Church, and the actions of the world Church in the General Conference Executive Committee or in General Conference Session. While individual units of the Church are given freedom to function in ways appropriate to their role and culture, no part of the worldwide organization of the Church has a unilateral right to secede.⁹

9. What did Ellen White say about the authority of the General Conference?

In the years preceding the reorganization of the church in 1901, Ellen White made several statements about the General Conference no longer being the voice of God because the General Conference president and his advisors were not willing to heed the messages from the Lord. An example of this is a statement in 1898: “It has been some years since I have considered the General Conference as the voice of God.”¹⁰ With the rapid growth of the church during these years, it was also clear that three or four leaders at the General Conference office in Battle Creek should not be making day-to-day decisions for fields half a world away. However, after the reorganization at the 1901 General Conference Session, Ellen White’s attitude was very different:

1909—“God has ordained that the representatives of His church from all parts of the earth, when assembled in a General Conference, shall have authority. The error that some are in danger of committing is in giving to the mind and judgment of one man, or of a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has invested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.”¹¹

1911—“God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for he who does this despises the voice of God.”¹²

10. What is the difference between unity and uniformity?

The difference between “unity” and “uniformity” is in how these words end. They both start with “uni”—a Latin prefix meaning “one,” but it is what comes after that “one” that explains the

⁹ From General Conference *Working Policy*, B 10 25 Structural Stability, p. 57.

¹⁰ 17MR 216; this and similar statements can be found in LDE 50, 51.

¹¹ 9T 260, 261; this and similar statements can found in LDE 55, 56.

¹² AA 164; also in LDE 56. For further reading, see George E. Rice, “The church: voice of God?” *Ministry*, December 1987, pp. 4-6, available at the Ellen G. White Estate: <http://drc.whiteestate.org/files/4483.pdf>.

oneness. Unity is “the state of being one, being *united*, as of the parts of a whole,”¹³ but uniformity is “the state or quality of being *uniform*,”¹⁴ that is, in *form* being one, but not in heart, mind, and soul.

As evidenced from the Creation account to the story of the Earth made new, God is clearly a God of diversity. He did not make only one kind of animal, plant, flower—or even human. Instead, He created the diversity that we see in the world around us.

But God is not the author of confusion, nor did He intend the world to be fragmented and divided. The purpose of Creation was to give Him glory, and the purpose of the Church is to point people toward God as revealed in His Word.

When Jesus prayed, “That they all may be one” (John 17:21, NKJV), it was in the context of purpose and mission for those who believed (and would believe) in Him. He pleaded with His Father to “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (vs. 17). Regarding mission, He prayed, “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (vs. 18). Summing up the unity Jesus desires for His followers, He prayed, “And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as you have loved Me” (vss. 22, 23).

Our goal is to work unitedly toward the realization of the kingdom of God. This is accomplished as a worldwide body of believers by coming together in belief and practice.

Nowhere is this more evidenced than during every quinquennium when the worldwide church comes together in a General Conference Session to pray, worship, fellowship, and conduct the business of the church. It is here, with the input from a wide diversity of representatives from every part of the globe, that the voice of the entire church is heard. It is here where our statements of belief and practice are voted. It is these beliefs—based on the truth of God’s Word and the practices that outline how best to accomplish our mission—that guide us and keep us united as we move together in mission.

¹³ From dictionary.com at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/unity>.

¹⁴ From dictionary.com at <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/uniformity?s=t&ld=1089>.