

PRE/PREXAD/GCDO12AC/12AC to TNCW

132-12G STATEMENT ON CHURCH POLITY, PROCEDURES,
AND RESOLUTION OF DISAGREEMENTS IN THE
LIGHT OF RECENT UNION ACTIONS ON
MINISTERIAL ORDINATION

VOTED, 1. To adopt the following Statement on Church Polity, Procedures, and Resolution of Disagreements in the Light of Recent Union Actions on Ministerial Ordination and

2. To request that division administrations engage with field unit administrators in reviewing this statement and its implications for Church structure, identity, operations, and mission:

STATEMENT ON CHURCH POLITY, PROCEDURES,
AND THE RESOLUTION OF DISAGREEMENTS IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT
UNION ACTIONS ON MINISTERIAL ORDINATION

Foundational principles for Seventh-day Adventist Church structure and operations are rooted in the Bible and draw heavily from the teachings of Jesus, the apostles and the experience of the early Church. In the New Testament the people of God are urged to demonstrate unity (John 15 and 17, Ephesians 4); to engage in worldwide mission (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:7-8, Acts 10-11); to acknowledge differences/disagreements and to have a process for their resolution (Acts 6, 15, Galatians 3:26-29, Philippians 2); and to live as a transformed and transforming community in a fractured and sin-burdened world (Ephesians 2-4).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church seeks to preserve its identity as a united global family while addressing mission opportunities and challenges in widely differing cultural, political and economic environments. The desire to hold two objectives, global unity¹, and global mission, in creative and dynamic balance has led to an organizational structure that shares and delegates responsibility for mission within a framework of participation in and respect for collective decision-making processes. Within this organizational structure, decisions of a General Conference Session represent the highest authority²—the voice of the whole Church in respect to beliefs, procedures and relationships.

It is natural to expect that in response to diverse and ever-changing circumstances differences will arise in determining the most appropriate ways of accomplishing mission while also preserving Church structure and relationships. The articulation of different viewpoints and the expression of disagreement are important ways by which the Church gains new insights and more fully understands the global impact of decisions. Speaking and listening, when done respectfully, are essential to the operational health of the whole body and its

continuing effectiveness in mission. The process adopted by the Church for the resolution of disagreements involves forums where all those affected by a decision are represented in the exploration and adoption of decisions.

The call, by both individuals and organizations, for change in ministerial ordination practices illustrates one expression of disagreement. This subject has been on the global agenda of the Church at General Conference Sessions for several decades. Thus far the General Conference Session (by actions in 1990³ and 1995⁴) has chosen the pathway of uniform practice worldwide—ministerial ordination for males only. A recurring question is whether or not the authority to grant ministerial ordination without regard to gender could be granted to divisions without making the provision mandatory everywhere. Several unions in various parts of the world have voiced support for this kind of change in ministerial ordination practices. Three union constituency sessions have authorized their executive committees to approve ministerial ordination without regard to gender. Of these, two have recently chosen to proceed according to the constituency decision.

Decisions to pursue a course of action not in harmony with the 1990 and 1995 General Conference Session decisions (with respect to ministerial ordination) represent not only an expression of dissent but also a demonstration of self-determination in a matter previously decided by the collective Church. The General Conference Executive Committee regards these actions as serious mistakes. They directly challenge two world Church decisions on the matter of ordination. They create doubts about the importance of collective decision-making as a basic feature of denominational life. They weaken the fabric of Church life and operations by giving opportunity for other entities to follow this example in order to justify independence and autonomy in other matters rather than maintaining a mutual commitment to collective decision-making.

The world Church cannot legitimize practices that clearly contradict the intent of General Conference Session actions. This applies to ordination decisions as well as to other matters in which a local organization may feel constrained not just to voice its disagreement with the world Church but to proceed along a pathway that directly conflicts with the expressed will of the worldwide Church. Accordingly, the world Church does not recognize actions authorizing or implementing ministerial ordination without regard to gender.

This statement deals with Church structure and procedures. It does not address the question of ministerial ordination practices per se. The central issue is one of Church polity—how the Church defines its organization, governance and operations. Historically, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has developed on the principle of interdependence rather than independence. A course of action contrary to the will of the whole places the organization at risk.

Discussion and debate about ministerial ordination practice is a separate matter

and is under global study and review. General Conference Session decisions (1990 and 1995) did not authorize ministerial ordination without regard to gender, either globally or regionally. Any change in this practice requires action by a General Conference Session. Every Church organization in the world has been given the opportunity of participating in the current global study. This can be accomplished through interaction with the respective division-appointed Biblical Research Committee. Division Biblical Research Committees will interface with the General Conference-appointed Theology of Ordination Study Committee. The study is to be completed by 2014 with a report from the Theology of Ordination Study Committee presented to the General Conference Executive Committee at its 2014 Annual Council, which will decide what to refer to the General Conference Session in 2015.

The role of women in ministry and leadership has been a long-standing question. It is one that attracts strong yet differing convictions and can readily divide families, congregations and constituencies. The process toward finding acceptable solutions must not obscure the contribution that women have made and continue to make in many areas of Church life and leadership.

The General Conference Executive Committee specifically affirms the important roles that women fill in the life of the Church. Their giftedness and commitment is a blessing to the whole Church and a necessary part of its work in mission.

Moments of tension in denominational life can be opportunities for both learning and enhancing relationships. The presence of conflict and the expression of difference can help make the Church stronger. In such moments the commitment of all to informed and collective decision-making processes is the best way to resolve matters while keeping the Church together as a world family.

The General Conference Executive Committee appeals to all organizations—local churches, local conferences/missions, unions, institutions and divisions—to consider thoughtfully the impact and implications of decisions beyond the boundaries of each entity's territory of operations. General Conference *Working Policy*, the *Church Manual*, and General Conference Session decisions are designed to assist the Church in demonstrating the unity for which Jesus prayed and at the same time to provide a structure that advances the gospel commission in every part of the world.

This appeal is also addressed to individual Church members everywhere. Drawing upon Paul's analogy of the Church as a body (1 Corinthians 12) it is a call for all parts of the body to perform their individual service, to express their unique giftedness with the realization that each is part of something much larger—a worldwide family that seeks to do all things in the name of Jesus (Colossians 3:17).

¹ In the New Testament Church, unity does not always require uniformity (See Acts 15). Instead, unity is based upon mutual commitment to Jesus Christ, to His Word, to His mission, and to the community of believers. One of the ways by which unity is demonstrated is seen in the process of making decisions that affect the whole community—a process of deciding together. The resulting decisions may recognize the legitimacy of practices that do not always reflect uniformity.

² A General Conference Session is affirmed as the highest authority in the Church in the following ways:

a. **From the writings of Ellen G White:** “I have often been instructed by the Lord that no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any other man. Never should the mind of one man or the minds of a few men be regarded as sufficient in wisdom and power to control the work and to say what plans shall be followed. But when, in a General Conference, the judgment of the brethren assembled from all parts of the field is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be stubbornly maintained, but surrendered. Never should a laborer regard as a virtue the persistent maintenance of his position of independence, contrary to the decision of the general body.

At times, when a small group of men entrusted with the general management of the work have, in the name of the General Conference, sought to carry out unwise plans and to restrict God’s work, I have said that I can no longer regard the voice of the General Conference, represented by these few men, as the voice of God. But this is not saying that the decisions of a General Conference composed of an assembly of duly appointed, representative men from all parts of the field should not be respected. 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 a small group of men, the full measure of authority and influence that God has vested in His church in the judgment and voice of the General Conference assembled to plan for the prosperity and advancement of His work.”—9T 260

b. **From the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (18th Edition)*:** “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.”—p. 31

c. **From *General Conference Working Policy B 10 22*:** “All organizations and institutions throughout the world will recognize the authority of the General Conference Session as the highest authority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church under God.”

³ **Fifty-fifth General Conference Session, July 11, 1990**—Excerpts from Session Bulletin #7, p. 15, dealing with the action and report of the Role of Women Commission: “Voted, To accept the following report and recommendations of the Role of Women Commission as recommended by the

1989 Annual Council: ...The commission having listened to the arguments and presentations for and against the ordination of women; having sensed the needs and concerns of the world field; having carefully considered what is probably best and the least disruptive for the world church at this time; and recognizing the importance of our eschatological mission, the witness and image of our spiritual family, and the need for oneness of and unity in the church, reports to the 1990 General Conference session upon the recommendation of the 1989 Annual Council the following results of its deliberation: 1. While the commission does not have a consensus as to whether or not the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen G White explicitly advocate or deny the ordination of women to pastoral ministry, concludes unanimously that these sources affirm a significant, wide-ranging, and continuing ministry for women, which is being expressed and will be evidenced in the varied and expanding gifts according to the infilling of the Holy Spirit. 2. Further, in view of the widespread lack of support for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in the world church and in view of the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church, we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry.” (The vote was 1,173 in favor, 377 opposed.)

⁴ **Fifty-Sixth General Conference Session, July 5, 1995**—Excerpts from Session Bulletin #8, p. 30: [Discussion was held on a General Conference Executive Committee action] “To refer to the 1995 General Conference Session the North American Division request 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 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.’...In favor of the recommendation: 673. In opposition to the recommendation: 1,481. Total number of votes: 2,154. By this vote, the request of the North American Division was denied.”