

The Institute of Church Ministry

WOMEN IN THE SEVENTH-DAY
ADVENTIST CHURCH

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WOMEN IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

From its inception, women have played important and prominent roles in the life and ministry of the Christian Church. The Bible records the names of some outstanding women like Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, Lydia, Dorcas, and Priscilla, to name a few. They were given such titles as "helpers in Christ" and "servant of the church". They were proven to be dependable and faithful, some even to the point of being willing to lay down their lives (Rom. 16:4).

This paper seeks to point out some of the roles that women have played in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and some of the responsible positions they have occupied. This is beyond their traditional roles of Bible worker, teacher, and office secretary.

Since the early 1970's the Seventh-day Adventist Church has shown renewed concern for the role of women in the church. Through actions voted at its Annual Councils (1973 and 1974) and at General Conference executive committee meetings subsequent to those dates, it appears to have shown a willingness and a desire to open up to women some areas that for some time seemed to have been reserved for men. One of the areas of special concern was that of leadership. The church felt that the precedent had been set through certain actions and activities in the past, for leadership positions in the

church to be filled by women (G.C. minutes, April 3, 1975).

Another area of real concern was that of women in relationship to pastoral care of congregations, and whether or not women should be ordained to the gospel ministry. In the 70's it was felt "that the world church is not yet ready to move forward" on the ordination of women (G.C. minutes, April 3, 1975). Subsequently, it was approved that women could be employed on pastoral staffs, and the term "associates in pastoral care" be applied to them. Those women employed in this line of work would be granted missionary license with the view to eventually granting them missionary credentials.

In October 1981, ten of the church's North American institutions of higher learning were surveyed by the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University to ascertain how many women were trained and placed in associate pastoral care positions and whether there were any being trained at that time (see appendix). The survey revealed that during the last five years (1976-1981) thirty-three women took the necessary training and graduated, hoping for appointment. Of the total, only eight were placed in ministerial-type positions. Twenty women were in training at that time; and at least at one college, other women were interested but were counseled to pursue training along other lines (It is assumed that this was done since there appeared to be few prospects of employment).

Conferences in the North American Division were also asked to complete a questionnaire concerning women who were employed or who served in various pastoral and leadership positions within the

Division. Forty-one conferences responded. A complete report is included in the appendix.

But in the past women have filled ministerial positions in the church both at home and overseas and were granted ministerial license. A check of the Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook reveals this fact. Mrs. M. Atteberry-Spye (later appearing as Mrs. Minnie Spye Atteberry) held ministerial license in the 1930's and 1940's. The more interesting fact is that she worked both at home-in Washington, Tennessee, and Florida-and overseas, in Nassau Bahamas. The name of her husband does not appear, so it appears that she stood on her own. In the 1940's Mrs. Jessie W. Curtis pastored three churches in Pennsylvania. The yearbook shows that she also held ministerial license. She is remembered to have held revival services in at least one other church in that state.

The name Anna Lo also appears as one carrying ministerial license in the mid-1940's. She was connected with the Kwangsi Mission in China. Mrs. E.B. Lane, the wife of Elder E.B. Lane, was highly acclaimed as a preacher, and carried ministerial license.

It is therefore evident that on occasion the church did grant ministerial license to women. Writing in the summer 1972 issue of Spectrum on "The Status and Role of Women in the Adventist Church", the author stated that up to that time women were still carrying ministerial responsibilities in the church overseas.

At the twentieth Annual General Conference Session which opened on December 1, 1881 at Battle Creek, Michigan,

an interesting resolution was voted by the delegates, to be passed on to the General Conference committee for study. The following is quoted from the Review and Herald, December 20, 1881, page 392.

In a published report of the General Conference proceedings, the events that transpired in the fifth meeting of the business proceedings held December 10, 1881 at 10:00 a.m. was given. Among the actions taken was the following: "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." This was discussed by J.O. Corliss, A.C. Bourdeau, E.R. Jones, D.H. Lamson, W.H. Littlejohn, A.S. Hutchings, D.M. Canright, and J.J. Loughborough, and referred to the General Conference committee.

The discussion that followed on this subject and upon the above resolution was probably sparked by the ordination of some women into the gospel ministry by the Seventh-day Baptist Church. No record as to what the General Conference committee did with the resolution appears in the Review and Herald. It would be helpful to see whether there is any information in the minutes of the General Conference Committee Meetings held subsequent to that session. However, such have not come within the reach of the writer.

Women figured prominently in the early days of the Advent Movement. Mrs. John Couch introduced S.S. Snow to the Exeter campmeeting. Mrs. Rachel Oakes introduced the Sabbath to the Adventists in Washington, New Hampshire. Minerva Jane Chapman, sister of J.W. Loughborough, was elected treasurer of the General Conference in 1877. While carrying that office she was also treasurer of the Tract and Missionary Society,

editor of the Youth Instructor, and secretary of the publishing association. At one time she also held the position of treasurer of the Review and Herald. She retired in 1893.

The Foreign Mission Board of the Church was set up in 1879. Nine members were appointed to it, and three of the nine were women. They were Minerva Jane Chapman, Maud Sisley, and Maria L. Huntley. Maud Sisley had been one of the first Adventists to return a full tithe. Maria L. Huntley was made the secretary of the General Tract and Missionary Society when it was founded in 1874. She held the position until her death. She was progressive in having the laity trained, and at the General Conference session of 1888, advanced some bold plans that were accepted and implemented.

Mrs. Helen Rankin Druillard rose to position of trust in the early part of this century. She was elected treasurer of the Nebraska Conference, and served in that capacity. In 1901 she became treasurer of Emmanuel Missionary College. She later funded the purchase of land for Madison Sanitarium and Madison College, and then founded Riverside Sanitarium.

Also in the early part of this century, Ida Riggels Burden was Sabbath School secretary of the Oregon Conference. She was known to be a sought after speaker for the Sabbath worship service. Flora Plummer, from 1913 to 1936 served as secretary of the Sabbath School Department of the General Conference. Anna Knight who was the first black missionary to India, served in the Youth, Sabbath School, Education, and Home Missionary departments of the Southern and Southeastern Unions, all at the same time. She was secretary of each of

them. Later Carol Hetzel served as secretary of the Department of Communication, and Ethel Young served as associate director of the General Conference Education Department.

Overseas, Mrs. A.T. King served as secretary-treasurer and Book and Bible House Manager of the Guiana Conference in 1930. At that same time, Mrs. C.E. Knight was serving as Sabbath School, Youth, and Lay Activities Director of that same conference. Mrs. L.V. Cleaves served as secretary-treasurer and Book and Bible House Manager of the Venezuela Mission in the 1930's, while Mrs. G.C. Nickle was serving as secretary-treasurer of the Pacific Columbia Mission.

These are some of the exploits of women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is felt that more and more will be done to assist them in making a fuller contribution. These are examples from our history that can assist us as we seek to make right decisions. We must not forget our past experiences.