

Columbia Union Constituents Overwhelmingly Affirm Women Pastors Through Ordination

Story by Taashi Rowe; photos by Al Peasley
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Delegates fill in their secret ballots.

Silver Spring, Md.—After two hours of presentations from multiple levels of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as well as 90 minutes of discussion, delegates to the Columbia Union Conference Special Constituency Meeting today voted an historic motion—“That the Columbia Union Conference authorize ordination to the gospel ministry without regard to gender.”

According to a statement released by the union it means that the union executive committee will no longer deny requests from conferences to ordain proven female ministers to the gospel ministry but that their calling will be fully recognized on par with their male counterparts.

Using secret ballots, delegates from the eight conferences within the union’s Mid-Atlantic United States territory voted 4 to 1 in favor of the motion. The actual vote was 209 in favor and 51 opposed, with nine abstentions.

“This is not a surprise to those of us listening carefully around this union,” said Dave Weigley, Columbia Union president, following the vote. “This is not an easy time for the church but it is *the* time for the church. We are part of the worldwide church and we are united in the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I don’t know how God will use this as part of the revival, but I want my sisters,

mothers and daughters to stand with me. We want young girls who hear the call to go forward. As I've said throughout the last few months, Who are we to silence God's calling? It's time for us to go forward together."

The meeting, convened at 10 a.m. with a season of prayer led by Rob Vandeman, union executive secretary: "We pray that what we do today will not displease You and that the church may move on to see more victory, more expansion, more growth and more impact in a world that desperately needs You."

The presentations reflected counsel from General Conference and North American Division (NAD) officials. Among them was Dan Jackson, NAD president, who reminded attendees that the church is the apple of God's eye. He also cautioned, "What we are doing here today not only will impact us personally and as a union but will also impact our world church. I want to say that our primary accountability is to God."

In extended remarks, Ted N.C. Wilson, president of the General Conference, appealed to delegates not to move forward with the motion but to wait for a new church study scheduled to be completed in 2014.

"I come to you today because I care about matters of conscience," he said. "I come to you because I care about the unity of the church at large. There are many grave consequences that [will] result if you vote positively. I'm not threatening you in anyway. I'm just presenting the facts that when an organization makes moves unilaterally, it will lead to fragmentation and collegial disunity. Do not vote the recommended action before you ... stay in harmony ... and do not branch out independently."

Three representatives of the union executive committee offered delegates a different appeal. Bill Miller, president of the Potomac Conference and chair of the ad hoc committee tasked with studying this issue, started his presentation of the committee's report by reiterating that he was a "loyal member of God's remnant church." He then recounted the church's historical struggle with the issue of fully affirming women ministers through ordination.

"The world church at various General Conference Sessions has aptly demonstrated its inability to act decisively," Miller said. "Gender-based discrimination must not continue. The right time to do the right thing is right now."

Raj Attiken, president of the Ohio Conference, followed by addressing concerns about unity. "We have to ask ourselves will the action that we are proposing in anyway jeopardize or compromise the unity of the church? Our unity has been primarily based on unity in Christ who is head of the church who said, He will

build the church and that the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. As a church we have made a sacred covenant to be united around a common set of beliefs: mission, hope and faith in the Lord.”

Finally Brenda L. Billings, senior pastor of Allegheny East Conference’s 1,100-member **Metropolitan church** in Hyattsville, Md., shared a compelling testimony of how God called her more than 10 years ago. “I found myself as a well-groomed financial aid director hearing a call from God, not knowing what to do with it but fearing God more than man. I knew I had to be obedient to the call and accountable to God,” she said likening her ministry to an educational journey that culminates with graduation. “The cap is God’s calling, anointing and producing, the gown is God’s grace. But no graduation is complete without a diploma,” she concluded.

Just after noon, when Chairman Weigley opened the floor for constituent input, delegates quickly formed three long lines at the microphones. Many agreed that all whom the Holy Spirit has clearly called to ministry should be ordained without regard to gender, however several admitted to being conflicted.

The first speaker, Bonnie Heath, a member of the Allegheny East Conference, said she found Wilson’s counsel touching. “I’ve been a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for 26 years,” she said. “I want to make a call for unity ... [but] I would like some reassurance that [the world church] hears our pain and our embarrassment that we are treating our people differentially. We are deeply upset and ashamed, and we want to be also given equal say.”

Others were clear that unity trumps all other concerns. Larry Boggess, president of the Mountain View Conference, whose executive committee released a statement opposing the motion, said, “Lest it be misunderstand, I love you, too, even though I disagree with you. If we say we are the body of Christ, then we would act in unity. What we do today will not generate thousands of new members. I’m sorry but that will only happen when the rank and file in the pews go out and do Bible studies. I believe we should adhere to what the General Conference president and 13 division presidents said [in their June 29 appeal].”

Ron Christman, executive secretary of the Pennsylvania Conference agreed. “I support women in ministry but I believe we’ve taken the wrong approach to ordination,” he said. “It will set a precedent for dissention and rebellion that I really don’t like to see.”

Chris Holland, senior pastor of Chesapeake Conference’s Hagerstown (Md.) church, said, “To be in favor of this as a union we are telling the world church that we are smarter, wiser and more spiritually endowed than rest of the world church. That’s why I’m against this.”

However for Joyce Greene, associate treasurer for the New Jersey Conference,

the matter was simple. “I feel compelled to say something when I am asked that I should vote for unity over my conscience,” she said responding to the General Conference appeal for unity. “We are not here just to vote yes or no; everyone should vote their conscience.”

Sharon Cress, Potomac Conference’s Women’s Ministries director, agreed. “The General Conference calls for unity in the face of unfairness and this wounds deeply the women who serve this church,” she said. “Some have appealed for unity today to justify continuation of unfairness. I tell you there is no unity today, and there can be no unity as long as we practice unfairness.”

Yuliyana Filipov, senior pastor of the Worthington (Ohio) church, testified that he used to oppose women’s ordination. “For two years I have been praying 7-7-7 for an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our church. Are we here to give the Holy Spirit permission to work? It sounds like we’re only asking the Spirit to work for men and not women.”

Jimmy Ferguson, senior pastor of **Allegheny East Conference’s** [AEC] Dupont Park church in Washington, D.C., said, “Anytime there is a moral imperative, we hear that there will be grave consequences, opposition and spiritual disunity.” He then listed several historical figures who challenged the status quo such as Martin Luther during the Reformation, Martin Luther King Jr. during the fight for civil rights, Ellen G. White, who questioned the church’s duty to people of color, and Jesus Christ, who challenged the status quo of His day. “They also heard that their actions would result in grave consequences, opposition and spiritual disunity. The current policy flies in the face of the priesthood of all believers,” he continued during his allotted two minutes. “If liberalism, culturalism, racism, and secularism have not divided the church, neither will this.”

Oluchi Ukomadu, a member of AEC’s Marantha Adventist Fellowship in Bowie, Md., said she was compelled to stand up and speak after another delegate suggested that only men are chosen by God to head the church. “We are all equal in front of God. He has called us to be equal disciples. Why dampen the spirit of women?” she asked. “We all say that when the Spirit calls, we will answer. I was called to be a lead elder but the discrimination was too much for me to handle. My family was affected by how I was treated.” Noting her Nigerian roots, she then urged her fellow delegates to set an example for the rest of the world church to follow.

Following the vote, Rick Remmers, president of the **Chesapeake Conference**, commented, “I appreciated greatly the spiritual tone set today and sensed the love and loyalty for our church.”

“I am so proud to be part of an historical day in the Columbia Union,” said Deborah Hill, a member of Allegheny West Conference. “We voted on the right side of history and will work very hard to unify not only our union but to work

more closely with the General Conference. God was part of this decision and this has been a wonderful day for women to move forward in faith and in the Word of the Lord.”

When asked how this vote will impact the work in the Potomac Conference where he is president, Bill Miller said, “We already have a motion from our executive committee authorizing us to issue new credentials with one word on it for everybody—ordination.”