

General Conference Working Policy
The Challenge of Enforcement and the Opportunity for Development
By Lowell Cooper

“...policy never matters until it matters, and then it matters a lot.”¹

Introduction

Policy is not often viewed as a glamorous topic for discussion. News, politics, weather, stock markets, and people rank much higher in conversational preference. Policy questions surface when there is tension—and then, only out of necessity. We are in one of those moments in our collective life as a worldwide Church. We can, and must, make the best of it.

This Conference is convened to consider the cross-currents that are impacting people and denominational units today with respect to ministry and leadership positions requiring ministerial ordination. That this should be called a “Unity Conference” is no accident. Throughout our worldwide Church the subject of ministerial ordination, and who is eligible for it, awakens sharply differing views and convictions.

The question has been under consideration for more than a century.² In recent decades several commissions have studied the matter of ministerial ordination. Reports and recommendations have been made to General Conference Sessions. Those Sessions have not embraced the idea of ministerial ordination being available to females, even if they have qualifications like those required of males. These decisions have not settled the matter. Instead they may have amplified it. A rather strong polarity of views persists. Some unions have already implemented inclusive ministerial ordinations (inclusive here meaning male and female). Such actions have added a new dimension, ecclesiastical authority, and considerable emotion to the whole discussion.

The official studies thus far have largely focused on the theology of ordination in the hopes that the Bible would provide clarity in the matter. The biblical text has been examined from virtually all angles and viewpoints. Rather esoteric nuances have been advanced in support of one view or the other. Yet, the result of these studies yields at least two strongly-held opinions. Each side feels that there is sufficient evidence to warrant its conclusions. Both sides concede that neither the Bible nor the writings of

Ellen White provide explicit instruction regarding the ordination of women as pastors. However, there is rather broad agreement on the theology of ordination.

Relatively less emphasis has been given to ordination policy and practice. If a conclusive answer is elusive in theology, would there be value in considering ecclesiology and its body of policies and practices? It is the assumption of this paper that a review of policy can provide important insights that may help in creating a path forward to the preservation, even enhancement, of unity in the worldwide Church.

I apologize for being unable to address this topic in a coldly detached and purely objective manner. I am a member of the Church, enthusiastic about its mission, protective of its global structure and keenly devoted to its polity and organizational ethos. I also have firm convictions about ministerial ordination. I trust that the reader will excuse the interference that my personal views may cause in the endeavor to understand the way that policy can help us in this situation.

Underlying Assumptions

Several assumptions, that need to be exposed, lurk in the background of this presentation. These include:

1. Further theological study on the question of ordination will not result in consensus regarding ordination. The Church will have to live with widely divergent views. This does not need to threaten unity since the Church already recognizes diverse practices in other matters and has agreed to varying practices regarding the election and ordination of women as local church elders.
2. The Gospel message is meant for the whole world and every culture. In its mission to reach every culture with the Gospel, the Church will need to engage increasingly with questions of unity and diversity. The process by which such questions are addressed will be as important as any decision that is reached.
3. Unity and diversity are not necessarily conflicting concepts, they can co-exist in meaningful partnership. Diversity of sound in a choir or orchestra

does not ruin the music. Any organization with the size and global presence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church must make room for differing practices even while rigorously protecting its unity.

4. Policy development is as important as policy enforcement, perhaps more so, in maintaining a sense of organizational unity and relevance in a rapidly changing world with its very diverse social environments.

The Need for Policy

Every organization requires structure and a system of authority to survive and function effectively. History underscores the importance of organizational structure. Though the church is different from other organizations (government, army, business) there is no debate about its need for policy, systems and a pattern of authority. The question will be what is the role of policy and how does authority operate in a faith-based community that considers Jesus as its head?

The Bible provides ample evidence of organizational dynamics connected with the work of God in this world. The Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy might be thought of as a policy manual for the covenant people of God. There were rules and guidelines for the community's worship as well as for its internal and external relations.

¹ Marco Rubio, USA Senator, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/11/21/marco-rubio-says-he-ll-do-hillary-clinton-s-foreign-policy-but-better>

² Bert Haloviak, "The Long Road to Mohaven," *The Adventist Woman*, Sept.-Oct. 1993, 1. The first recorded discussion on the matter of women's ordination took place at the 1881 General Conference Session. In more recent times the Northern European Division, in 1968, forwarded a request from the Finland Union to

ordain women to the gospel ministry; but that request was not followed up.

Several passages in the New Testament offer insights on how Church organization, processes and authority should function:

- Jesus spoke about the authority of His church: Keys of heaven given...whatever you bind... (Matthew 16:19, 18:18, John 20:23)

- Admonition from Jesus about how to deal with an erring brother (Matthew 18) underscores the idea of group decisions rather than one person's decision concerning the fate of another individual.

- Following the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) leaders "...delivered decisions of apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey" (Acts 16:4)

- Paul advised the church in Corinth to act decisively concerning a person whose immoral behavior harmed the whole congregation: "...hand this man over to Satan" (1 Corinthians 5:5)

- Paul urged Titus to deal with divisive persons (Titus 3:10)

- Jesus prayed that His followers might demonstrate unity (John 15 and 17)

- Paul urged the Ephesian church to walk in unity (Ephesians 4)

- The whole world is the mission field of the Church (Matthew 28:18-20, Acts 1:7-8, Acts 10-11)

- The Church is to acknowledge differences and have a process for their resolution (Acts 6, 15, Galatians 3:26-29, Philippians 2)

We observe then that policy, system, structure and authority are appropriate elements in the life of an organization committed to living and proclaiming the Gospel. How then should one think about the purpose of policy?

The Purpose of Policy

Policy outlines or describes, and sometimes prescribes, a course of action designed to perpetuate the organization and facilitate accomplishment of its objectives. If the first purpose of policy is to preserve stability of the organization the second purpose is to translate an organization's vision and mission into effective action. This overarching purpose of policy contains several nuances particularly for large organizations.

1. Policy protects the organization from autocratic and erratic leadership. From time to time leaders forget the servant nature of leadership and are caught up in a mindset that resorts to the use of power for personal purposes. An abundance of anecdotes illustrates the damage inflicted on organizations by leaders who use the organization for self-serving purposes. Eugene Peterson's observation is pertinent: "Because leadership is necessarily an exercise of authority, it easily shifts into an exercise of power. But the minute it does that, it begins to inflict damage on both the leader and the led."³

2. Policy protects an organization from merely reactive decision-making. It facilitates systematic planning and the shaping of structure around collective purposes. Policy expresses the collective wisdom of the Church for the continued conduct of essential functions through successive changes in leadership.

3. Policy assists an organization in establishing similar patterns of action across a widespread geographic territory. It links separate parts together into a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Policy thus contributes to an organization's brand and reputation. It enables leaders to address organizational mission and administrative issues in a context larger than their immediate and local setting.

Policy, then, serves to maintain stability, collective focus and integrity—the same ethos and organizational culture throughout all parts of the whole. Because organizational life is dynamic, policy must also be dynamic and responsive to new realities and environments. Policy must always be the servant of organizational identity and mission. Otherwise policy risks becoming irrelevant and an impediment to the organization and its accomplishment of mission.

³ Eugene H Peterson, *The Message*, Introduction to 2 Corinthians.

The Dynamic Relationship between Policy and Organizational Mission

Policy is an instrument to enable and sustain collective energies applied to mission. This does not mean that policy is the basis for mission. Rather, the consideration of mission needs and opportunities gives rise to policy. The articulation of policy generally follows the thoughtful assessment of new opportunities, new developments (internal or external), and new perspectives in mission.

Examples from denominational structure illustrate the dynamic and complementary relationship between policy and mission. Very often the circumstances of mission informed the development of policy while in other instances policy facilitated mission.

1. The development of unions preceded the policy for unions. When church leaders began to recognize the value added that union structures brought to organizational supervision and administration they crafted policy to standardize this feature of denominational structure.
2. The structural re-organization decisions of General Conference sessions in 1901 and 1903 came as a response to developments taking place in various parts of the world as well as the realization that a revised structure would better serve the purpose of worldwide mission. In this re-organization, certain aspects of authority were dispersed while other aspects were concentrated.
3. The 1973 Annual Council received a report from the Council on the Role of Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (also known as the Camp Mohaven report). One of the main questions under consideration was whether women should function in local church offices that required ordination. No policy existed explicitly permitting or prohibiting the ordination of women as elders. As part of its response to the Camp Mohaven Report the Annual Council voted, “That continued study be given to the theological soundness of the election of women to local church offices which require ordination and that division committees exercise discretion in any special cases that may arise until a definitive position is adopted...” and “That in areas receptive to such action, there be continued recognition of the appropriateness of appointing women to pastoral-evangelistic work, and that the appropriate missionary

credentials/licenses be granted them.”⁴

4. The Annual Council of 1987 voted, “To record that if world divisions choose to select a term which applies to individuals who carry major responsibilities or who are placed in leadership roles which do not ordinarily lead to ordination as a gospel minister, the division may request the General Conference to approve the establishment of the Commissioned Minister category for denominational workers in its territory.”⁵
5. In 2001, the Annual Council adopted a policy, “Variations in Administrative Relationships.” It begins, “For the purpose of fulfilling the mission of the Church, division administrations are authorized to recommend modified organizational structures and or administrative relationships...”⁶ The policy was adopted after several organizations had already adopted some variations in administrative relationships.
6. A new policy describing Structural Flexibility was approved in 2007.⁷ This policy outlined alternative organizational patterns available under special circumstances. The alternative patterns now approved in policy, though few, were already in existence. The realization that these organizational patterns could improve mission accomplishment lead to the development of a new policy.
7. In 2009, the General Conference Annual Council adopted a “Roadmap for Mission”. This document recognized that “In some situations, Seventh-day Adventist mission may include the formation of transitional groups (usually termed Special Affinity Groups) that lead the people from a non-Christian religion into the Seventh-day Adventist Church...”⁸ Though this document is inserted prior to the Working Policy of General Conference Working Policy it functions as if it were policy. The provision for Special Affinity Groups came into being only after years of frontline experience and experimentation regarding mission among the followers of religions other than Christianity.
8. For many decades, the General Conference Annual Council approved a General Conference Wage Scale that was designed to be used worldwide. This is no longer the case. The General Conference Working Policy contains a philosophy

of remuneration and a set of guidelines which divisions are expected to follow in establishing their own wage scale, remuneration and benefit structure.

9. It would be misleading to conclude from the above illustrations that practice always precedes policy or that policy only responds to, rather than facilitates, mission. The resource-sharing policies of the Church (tithes, offerings and international service employees—often described as ‘missionaries’) were created to advance mission.

Perhaps it is best to see ‘policy’ and ‘mission’ as having a symbiotic relationship. The relationship is essential and beneficial though without continued monitoring to adjust policy in response to circumstances encountered in mission the relationship can become less than beneficial. Policy can function as facilitator and controller—but both functions need to be exercised in the interest of mission.

Policy Expressed in Governance and Authority Documents of the Church

Despite the anti-organizational bias of our founding fathers, the Church has developed a broad framework of policy or governance documents. These include:

1. Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs: These statements, and their periodic revisions, expressing Seventh-day Adventist beliefs have been approved by the General Conference Session—the highest organizational authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Proposals for additions or amendments to the Fundamental Beliefs must go through a lengthy and rigorous period of study involving the worldwide Church before maturing as a recommendation to a General Conference Session.
2. The Church Manual: The development of the Church Manual represents the first effort of Seventh-day Adventists to codify policy for the organization. In the early years of the Church, General Conference Sessions met annually and adopted various decisions affecting church order and church life. But these were not necessarily compiled and circulated as policy. The General Conference Session of 1882 reflected a growing realization that effective and harmonious functioning of a growing organization required a common

understanding of procedures. Thus, the Session voted to have prepared “instructions to church officers, to be printed in the Review and Herald or in tract form.”⁹ However, the 1883 General Conference Session rejected the idea of creating a permanent form for these articles and instructions.

Although the Church resisted the idea of adopting a formal document of instructions (policies) various leaders took the initiative from time to time to assemble in booklet form the generally accepted rules for church life and operation. A notable case is the 184- page book published in 1907 by J N Loughborough entitled *The Church, Its Organization, Order and Discipline*.¹⁰

The growth of the church worldwide increased the sense of need for a manual to guide pastors and laymembers. In 1931, the General Conference Committee voted to establish a church manual which was published in 1932. The preface of the first edition stated, “it has become increasingly evident that a manual on church government is needed to set forth and preserve our denominational practices and polity.”¹¹

The Church Manual “describes the operation and functions of local churches and their relationship to denominational structures in which they hold membership. The Church Manual also expresses the Church’s understanding of Christian life and church governance and discipline based on biblical principles and the authority of duly assembled General Conference Sessions.”¹²

⁴1973 Annual Council of the General Conference Committee, October 18, Role of Women in the Church (emphasis supplied)

⁵ 1987 Annual Council of the General Conference Committee, action 326-87G

⁶ General Conference Working Policy (2016-2017) p. 70, B 10 30 Variations in Administrative Relationships. First appeared in GCWP in 2001 as B 05 35.

⁷ General Conference Working Policy (2016-2017) p. 51, B 10 27 and B 10 28. First appeared in GCWP in 2007.

⁸ General Conference Working Policy (2016-2017) p. 59, A 20 15 Fulfilling the Mission, 5.

⁹ Review and Herald, December 26, 1882

¹⁰ See Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 19th Edition, Revised 2015, p. 15

¹¹ Ibid, p. 16

¹² Ibid p. 16

As time passed the Church Manual has experienced numerous changes reflecting the need for order in the worldwide work of the Church. The 1946 General Conference Session voted that “all changes or revisions of policy that are to be made in the Manual shall be authorized by the General Conference Session.”¹³ Consequently, a new edition of the Church Manual is published following each General Conference Session. It is essential that the most recent edition of the Church Manual be used when one desires to know current policies and procedures that apply to the local church.

1. General Conference Working Policy (and corresponding Division Working Policy):

General Conference Working Policy is the compilation of policy decisions adopted by the General Conference Executive Committee. The first compilation of General Conference working policies was published in 1926 and contained a digest of decisions by the General Conference Executive Committee and General Conference Sessions.

In connection with the ongoing debate about ministerial ordination there have been some voices claiming that the General Conference Session has no role or right in making policy decisions. These voices assert that the General Conference Session has delegated policy-making authority to the General Conference Executive Committee and thus the Session must refrain from determining any matters of policy. While the delegation of responsibility is true¹⁴ this does not mean that the General Conference Session is thereby deprived of any right to make or influence policy decisions. The General Conference Session is regarded as the highest authority in the Church. It is therefore contrary to reason to claim that the authority of the General Conference Executive Committee supersedes or can thwart the authority of a General Conference Session.

Accordingly, the first publication of General Conference Working Policy included General Conference Session decisions. Subsequent iterations of the publication have reflected directly or indirectly the decisions of a General Conference Session as well as those of the General Conference Executive Committee.¹⁵

¹³ General Conference Report, No. 8, p. 197 (June 14, 1946).

¹⁴ See General Conference Bylaws, Article XIII, General Conference Executive Committee

¹⁵ See for example General Conference Working Policy (2016-2017), D 05 “The 54th General Conference Session, in its

In practical terms, General Conference Working Policy represents a collective decision-making process. It is the ‘family code of conduct.’ Policy is the result of the collective pursuit for unity, not the cause of it.

Policy-making must be a continuing exercise in light of a growing organization and the rapidly changing/diversifying environments in which the Church carries on its work. When tension exists on the interpretation or application of policy the family must come together to forge new understandings of mission-sensitive policies.

1. Constitution and Bylaws (for conferences and institutions) and Operating Policy (for units with ‘mission’ status). These documents, adopted by organizational units and based upon model documents in General Conference Working Policy define an entity’s purpose and its relationship to other parts of denominational structure. In addition, the operational procedures outlined are designed to ensure that leadership is accountable to a constituency session.

These four internally-developed policy documents address the ethos, polity, and administrative or supervisory functions of denominational structure. However, there is yet another governance authority that has not been established by the Church—the Law of the Land. It is easy to overlook the authority of government and its relation to church life. Freedom of religion is highly valued by the Church and sometimes this idea translates into the perception that local government can have no role whatsoever that affects the Church.

General Conference Working Policy clearly acknowledges the domain of earthly government: “...In the event laws/changes in the laws governing a country seem to render compliance with denominational policies a violation of the law, the organization shall act in harmony with the law, provided the following:

- a. Counsel has been sought from the General Conference officers (president, secretary, and treasurer/chief financial officer) and it is established that denominational policies do indeed violate the law.
- b. Compliance with the law does not constitute a violation of scriptural principles.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, the Church has experienced some painful moments in its relation to local laws. In some instances where compliance with law was not voluntarily expressed, court

decisions have obligated the Church to change policies and practices and to repair past errors. It may be helpful to review a situation that developed out of the United States Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII of that Act speaks about equal pay for equal work.

It had been a long-standing practice for the Church and its institutions to provide consideration of the Role and Function of Denominational Organizations, pointed out that the constitutions, bylaws and operating policies of all denominational organizations should be consistent with the Seventh-day Adventist concept of the church, its organization, and governance.”

Differing remuneration to men and women. Men, generally classed as ‘head of household’ would receive a higher salary/wage than women doing the same work. This situation was challenged by two female employees of Pacific Press Publishing Association in the 1970s.¹⁷ When rebuffed by administration on the request for equal pay the matter escalated to court. The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission became involved as a plaintiff against Pacific Press.

Church leaders presented arguments to the court that all employees were, in a sense, ministers; therefore, the matter of remuneration should be an ecclesiastical decision—and thus beyond the reach of government legislation. The court disagreed. One of four cases settled out of court. The plaintiff (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) prevailed against Pacific Press in the other three. The ripple effects lead to substantial changes in remuneration policy.

The Administration of Policy: Compliance, Enforcement, and Development

What is the use of having a policy if there is no way to enforce it? The question sounds very pertinent. Sanctions and penalties for lack of compliance are a normal part of any regulatory environment.

The Church has a rather comprehensive policy structure as evidenced in the Fundament Beliefs, the Church Manual, General Conference Working Policy, and Constitutions and Bylaws. What about sanctions and penalties? What are the disincentives to non-compliance?

¹⁶ Excerpt from General Conference Working Policy (2014-2015) B 15 10 “Adherence to Policy Required”

The concept of enforcement, though present, is not a prominent part of denominational life. The process of policy creation is designed to involve broad consensus and thus minimize the need for enforcement measures. However, policy is not silent about compliance and enforcement.

A local church has two disciplinary or enforcement options available: placing an individual under censure (designed for remedial purposes), and removing a person from membership. Either one requires a decision of the church family in a formal church business meeting.

With respect to employees, including leaders, employing units must follow the employment laws of the jurisdiction in which they operate. Some areas of the world function within an ‘employment-at-will’ doctrine. This refers to the presumption that employment is for an indefinite period and may be terminated either by the employer or the employee. In other parts of the world the discharge of an employee can be a very difficult and complex matter.

Employees who hold elective office can be removed from office under disciplinary proceedings documented in the employment policies of their unit. Further, the governance model in the Seventh-day Adventist Church stipulates that election to office is not indefinite. Persons may hold office from the time of their election up to the time of the next constituency meeting.

Leaders are accountable to a constituency and the prospect of not being re-elected to a subsequent term can be a powerful incentive to appropriate behavior.

The ethos of Seventh-day Adventist members, their relation to the Church, and the relations among denominational entities is so heavily mission-centered and weighted towards collaboration that non-compliance, discipline, sanctions and penalties are often viewed as peripheral matters. Policy expects compliance because policy decisions come out of a collective process of deliberation.

¹⁷ The plaintiffs against PPPA were two female employees, Merikay Silver and Lorna Tobler, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This ten-year long and sad chapter in institutional history offers many lessons about how a religious institution relates to employees, to fairness in policy and to legislation.

We have recognized disciplinary provisions for church members, employees and elected officials. What about organizational units? Policy is rather sparse in this regard. It provides for one disciplinary measure—dissolution or dismissal of an organization from the Seventh-day Adventist family of organizations. There are no intermediate sanctions. Compliance is assumed by virtue of belonging to the family.¹⁸

The negative connotations of enforcement measures in an organization based on voluntary participation can be catastrophic. There are other reasons that make policy enforcement a very difficult challenge. One of those reasons is that authority in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is widely dispersed throughout denominational structure. One cannot find a location in denominational structure that has final authority in everything. Final authority, of one type or another, exists at every level of church structure: local church; the executive committees and constituencies of local conference, union, division, the General Conference; and the General Conference in Session. These differing types of final authority are all interdependent. No one unit can exist by itself because it depends for its very existence on the proper functioning of all other units.

Further, when a member unit is accepted into the family it is assumed that the relationship is permanent. There is no periodic review or reaffirmation of membership. Perhaps there is great wisdom in the Church never adopting a schedule of intermediate sanctions for denominational units. The shared authority structure of the Church renders policy enforcement decisions against a member unit a double-edged sword.

It is not surprising then that the Annual Council 2016 should have such conflicted views about a proposal to exercise enforcement authority. This is uncharted territory and threatens to awaken many unintended consequences.

¹⁸ General Conference Working Policy B 10 25 Structural Stability—Local churches, local conferences/missions/regions/field stations, 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.

Policy enforcement is a legitimate tool in organizational structure. How and when it should be employed are very perplexing questions bound to raise sharply differing views. Certainly it would be expected that all other means of resolution/reconciliation would be exhausted first.

Finding a Pathway Forward

This presentation takes the view that policy documents of an organization must always be dynamic. An organization's mission, vision and values may remain unchanged and anchor an entity in turbulent times. Policies are the instruments that enable an organization to pursue its mission in a stated environment. When that environment changes, fixed and immovable policies become redundant and possibly obstructive. It is for this reason that policy enforcement needs to be balanced with policy development.

The remainder of this presentation looks at the question of ministerial ordination from the perspective of policy and practice. The Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) addressed theological considerations about ordination and produced a very helpful Consensus Statement on the Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Ordination.¹⁹ However, TOSC did not address denominational policy and practices in light of the theology of ordination statement.

We shall explore several aspects of policy in relation to ordination practice:

1. Policy safeguards unity while allowing for diversity.
2. Policy permits ordination of men and women.
3. Policy functions reserved to an ordained minister are not inherently gender-specific.
4. Policy protects against the abuse of privilege granted by ordination.

Policy Safeguards Unity while Allowing for Diversity

From its earliest days, the idea of unity has been a high priority to the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It was a desire for unity that prompted the development of the Church Manual, the General Conference Working Policy and the Fundamental Beliefs. Unity however, did not require uniformity as acknowledged by W. A. Spicer, "The details of organization may vary according to conditions and work, but ever as God has called his church together there has appeared in it the spiritual gift of order and of government, the spirit that rules in heaven."²⁰

Policy decisions of the Church have addressed both issues of unity and diversity. The

following illustrations reveal the importance of preserving unity as well as recognizing the need for flexibility.

In the interest of ensuring unity the General Conference Executive Committee, April 4, 1995, voted “To approve the proposal that those sections of the Model Constitutions and Operating Policies that are essential to the unity of the Church worldwide be printed in bold print, and to request unions, conferences and missions to include these sections in Constitutions and Bylaws, and Operating Policies as adopted by their organizations.”²¹

As described earlier, the General Conference Executive Committee has also adopted policies that permit diversity in structure—Special Affinity Groups in A 20 Roadmap for Mission, B 10 27 Structural Flexibility in B 10 27, and Alternatives in Organizational Structure in B 10 28.

Another instance of recognizing the need for diversity comes from a 1984 Annual Council action that voted, in part, “To advise each division that it is free to make provision as it may deem necessary for the election and ordination of women as local church elders.”²²

Also in 1984, the General Conference Committee received and approved a report from the Commission on the Role and Function of Denominational Organizations. The report has a section on Preserving the Unity of Church and Message. Eleven points are listed on how the Church preserves unity. Point #8 provides an important nuance concerning unity: “Proper decentralization on various levels and within each level, thus making unity and belonging to the whole more desirable and functional by relating working leadership as closely as possible to local circumstances and to a responsible constituency. Remote control easily becomes a source of frustration and division.”²³

¹⁹ <https://www.adventistarchives.org/consensus-statement-on-a-seventh-day-adventist-theology-of-ordination.pdf>

²⁰ W. A. Spicer, "The Divine Principle of Organization," Review and Herald, 25 March 1909, 5

²¹ General Conference Executive Committee, Spring Meeting, April 4, 1995, item 189-95Ga (emphasis supplied)

²² 1984 Autumn Council of the General Conference Committee, action 274-84GN (emphasis supplied)

²³ Ibid., action 208-84GN

Continued theological study on the question of ministerial ordination only confirms the earlier view, expressed in 1990, that there is no “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...”²⁴ The Session went on to express the reason for its decision: “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.”²⁵

The 1990 General Conference Session decision has been rightfully described as a decision against ministerial ordination for women. What is often left out, intentionally or otherwise, is that the basis of the decision was “the lack of widespread support” and “the possible risk of disunity, dissension, and diversion from the mission of the church...” The reason that prompted the decision should indicate that any further discussion of the matter must consider the issues of support and unity/disunity. The Church has spent its energies on looking for a theological answer that might ensure unity. That answer has proved elusive. The Church must now determine how it will address unity in the presence of continuing theological differences.

This is where policy development comes to the fore. Numerous illustrations have been given above to demonstrate that, while seeking to preserve unity, policy has made room for diversity in structure, in administration, in licensing/credentialing of employees, and in local church leadership (the ordination of women elders). The development of these policies has not been hostile to unity. Instead, unity has been maintained in the presence of growing diversity.

²⁴ Fifty-Fifth General Conference Session, 1990, Session Bulletin #7, p. 15

²⁵ Ibid. (emphasis supplied)

Policy Permits Ordination of Men and Women

The Seventh-day Adventist Church practices ordination for two offices in the local church structure, deacons/deaconesses and elders, and for selected ministers/pastors. Ordination confirms the faith community's recognition of gifts appropriate for spiritual leadership and the faith community's desire for the person to serve in a leadership role requiring ordination. There is a hierarchy of service roles but not a hierarchy of ordination. Ordination does not confer new mystical or spiritual power and authority.²⁶ Both men and women are already being ordained as deacons/deaconesses/elders. So, the question is not one of female eligibility for ordination. It is a question of female eligibility for certain roles. Denominational policy, by General Conference Session actions, has already resolved the question of female eligibility for ordination even though the ordination of deaconesses and female elders is not practiced worldwide.

We must then turn our attention to female eligibility for office—particularly any office requiring ministerial ordination as currently practiced. The responsibilities of a church elder, male or female, include many of the responsibilities borne by a local church pastor. “In the absence of a pastor, elders are the spiritual leaders of the church and by precept and example must seek to lead the church into a deeper and fuller Christian experience. Elders should be able to conduct the services of the church and minister in both word and doctrine when the assigned pastor is unavailable.”²⁷ However, an elder functions only in the local church where he/she has been elected as an elder for the current term. Policy recognizes that a man or woman, ordained as an elder, can perform these local church functions that are also the responsibilities of an ordained pastor.

I am indebted to Kevin Burton whose unpublished paper cites information provided by the General Conference in 1906, 1916 and 1926 to the United States Bureau of the Census. The following statement appeared under the information about Seventh-day Adventists:

“Membership in the conferences or the ministry is open to both sexes although there are very few female ministers.”²⁸ In the context of the document “membership” does not refer to church membership but to leadership roles both in administration and in the ministry. It would appear from this that there were no leadership or ministry roles for which women were ineligible.

Functions Reserved to an Ordained Minister are not Inherently Gender-Specific

Certain local church functions however, can only be performed by an ordained minister or by a licensed minister who is also elected as an elder and authorized by the employing conference or mission to perform certain roles ordinarily reserved to an ordained minister.²⁹

The roles reserved to an ordained minister are:

1. Organizing a church,
2. Uniting churches,
3. Presiding over a church business meeting in which the business of the meeting involves a matter of church member discipline,
4. Ordaining elders and deacons.³⁰

In addition, the president of a local mission/conference, union mission/conference, or the General Conference must be an ordained minister.³¹ “Inasmuch as the conference/mission/field president stands at the head of the gospel ministry in the conference/mission/field and is the chief elder or overseer of all the churches, a conference/mission/field president shall be an ordained minister.”³²

²⁶ Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Consensus Statement on a Seventh-day Adventist Theology of Ordination. The document includes the following statement: “While ordination contributes to Church order, it neither conveys special qualities to the persons ordained nor introduces a kingly hierarchy within the faith community.”

²⁷ Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (2015 edition), p. 73

²⁸ United States Bureau of the Census, Religious Bodies: 1906, vol. 2, 23.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 33

³⁰ Ibid., p. 36, 39, 64, 73

³¹ See the respective Model Constitution and Bylaws or Model Operating Policies in General Conference Working Policy. The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual indicates only that the conference president should be an ordained pastor of experience (p. 31). No mention is made of this requirement for a Division President since divisions do not operate under a Constitution and Bylaws. Division presidents are elected at a General Conference Session, or by the General Conference Executive Committee between Sessions, and it will be the case that the qualifications for a president at other levels of organization will also be applied to the selection of a division president.

³² General Conference Working Policy (2016/2017), E 60

The roles restricted to an ordained minister have nothing inherently requiring male gender. Neither are these activities such that a woman is incapable of performing them. Nor can these restricted actions can be performed solely under the ordained minister's individual capacity. Organizing and uniting churches require Local Mission/Conference Executive Committee authorization. Disciplining members requires the participation of the local church membership. Ordaining deacons/deaconesses and elders requires first that they be elected to the respective positions by their local church. All these actions involve a group process rather than independent decision-making.

The only reason for limiting roles 1, 2 and 4 to an ordained pastor is that only an ordained pastor is authorized to conduct the ordination of deacons/deaconesses and elders. Such ordinations may be required in organizing churches or uniting churches. The restriction on the leadership functions in these matters is not one of male or female gender. The restriction is that ministerial ordination is required. Since, now, the Church does not approve of ministerial ordination for women it is not permissible for a woman to perform these tasks. It is not a matter of a woman being incapable of such group leadership tasks. The reason is that the Church has not consented to women being eligible for ministerial ordination even though they are eligible for ordination to other offices.

Activity #3 reserved for an ordained minister ensures that a person of considerable experience, and one who is not elected/appointed by the congregation, leads the meeting. The pastor is thus at least some distance removed from the internal political processes that may be present in a business meeting where discipline matters will be decided.

The situation is compounded when one brings credentials and licenses into the picture. As early as 1975 the General Conference Executive Committee considered implementing a Commissioned Minister Credential.³³ By 1981 the General Conference Executive Committee was issuing Commissioned Minister Credentials to senior leaders who were not ordained to ministry.³⁴ However the Commissioned Minister Credential does not appear in General Conference Working Policy until 1992. The North American Division³⁵, as early as 1980, adopted a policy for Commissioned Minister Credentials—intended for persons serving in spiritual leadership positions (administrative, departmental, and institutional).

In 1987, the Annual Council voted that “if world divisions choose to select a term which applies to individuals who carry major responsibilities or who are placed in leadership

roles which do not ordinarily lead to ordination as a gospel minister, the division may request the General Conference to approve the establishment of the Commissioned Minister category for denominational workers in its territory.”³⁶

The 1989 Annual Council approved that “commissioned ministers or licensed ministers may perform essentially the ministerial functions of an ordained minister of the gospel in the churches to which they are assigned...”³⁷

The Commissioned Minister License and Credential was made available “to associates in pastoral care; Bible instructors; General Conference, division, union and local conference treasurers and department directors including associate and assistant directors; institutional chaplains; presidents and vice-presidents of major institutions; auditors (General Conference director, associates, area and district directors); and field directors of the Christian Record Services, Inc.”³⁸

Not all divisions use this policy. However, several divisions have adopted this policy and grant Commissioned Ministerial Credentials to women who serve as pastors/associate pastors in local churches as well as in officer/departmental roles. The anomaly is that women with Commissioned Minister Credentials may perform essentially the ministerial functions of an ordained minister of the gospel in the churches to which they are assigned. The only functions they cannot perform are those identified above. It has been shown that there is no reason, other than the ineligibility for ministerial ordination, for the denial of these roles to women. Except for the ordination of deacons/deaconesses and elders, the roles reserved to an ordained minister are not primary functions in pastoral ministry.

³³ General Conference Executive Committee Spring Meeting, April 2, 1975 “VOTED, To refer to the available members of the General Conference Committee, the item concerning Commissioned Ministerial Credentials.”

³⁴ General Conference Executive Committee Minutes, January 29, 1981 p. 81-25

³⁵ The North American Division did not begin functioning as an entity entirely distinct from the General Conference until 1985. Therefore in 1980 its policies reflected the involvement of many General Conference officers.

³⁶ Annual Council Minutes 1987, 326-87G COMMISSIONED MINISTERS—WORLD DIVISIONS

³⁷ Annual Council Minutes 1989, pages 35 and 36. See also GCWP L 25 on the functions of licensed ministers. (emphasis supplied)

³⁸ General Conference Working Policy (1993-1994) D 05 10. The listing is essentially the same in GCWP 2016-2017 E 05 10

Policy Protects Against the Abuse of Privileges Granted by Ordination

This section is important because some who object to women being ordained as pastors are under the impression that ordaining women as pastors in one area of the world imposes the practice elsewhere. It must be admitted that any variation from normal/standard practice may be cited as precedent-setting and used to pressure widespread adoption of similar practices. Such issues are not unique to the subject of ordination policy and must be addressed through normal decision-making processes of the Church. The essential message in what follows is that ordination to any office does not constitute license to function independently. The Church has instituted safeguards for the privilege of ordination.

Ordination for local church office (deacon/deaconess, elder) authorizes a person to function as such in the local church in which he/she holds membership and has been elected for the current term of service. The fact of being ordained as a deacon/deaconess or church elder does not give a person the authority to function in this office outside of the local church in which membership is held. However, if an ordained deacon/deaconess, elder transfers membership to another local church he/she may function in the role if elected to do so by that local church. A new ordination is not necessary. “Once ordained, elders need not be ordained again if reelected, or upon election as elders of other churches, provided they have maintained regular membership status. They are also qualified to serve as deacons.”³⁹ In other words, their ordination is valid worldwide while their functioning in such a role is dependent upon their being members in the local church that elected them to serve the current term.

Denominational policy, under the heading “Ordained to the World Church”, describes ministerial ordination in slightly different, and possibly confusing, terms. “Workers who are ordained to the gospel ministry are set apart to serve the world Church, primarily as pastors and preachers of the Word, and are subject to the direction of the Church in regard to the type of ministry and their place of service.”⁴⁰

What does it mean to be ordained to the world church? There have been some ordained ministers who took this to mean that they could go anywhere in the world, present themselves as ordained ministers and perform any ministerial function without any other permission from anyone.

Several of these situations have resulted in serious damage to the church in the areas

where these ministers traveled. Ordination to the world church does not mean license to go anywhere and do anything one chooses. But it does mean that, like ordination for deacons/deaconesses and elders, a minister's ordination is valid worldwide.

The functioning of deacons/deaconesses and elders is controlled by the requirement of election to office in a local church. The functioning of an ordained minister is controlled by the issuance of appropriate credentials by an employing organization. The possession of ministerial credentials indicates that one is employed and therefore accountable to some unit of organization. Ministerial credentials issued by one organization are accepted elsewhere by denominational entities around the world.

Ministerial ordination does not authorize one to travel the world and conduct ministerial functions independently. Credentials are required. The Church has apportioned the world territory to the supervision of divisions, unions and local conferences/missions. Christian courtesy demands that I knock on your door and await your invitation before entering your home. A similar mindset needs to prevail in the activities of persons who have been ordained.

A minister who has been ordained but does not have current credentials is not eligible to function as a minister. "Possession of an expired credential or license gives the person no authority whatsoever."⁴¹

How then can Policy Development Resolve the Present Tension over Ordination?

In what follows I present an illustration of policy development with respect to ministerial ordination. This is only an example. There may be other paths of policy development on this subject that lead the Church towards resolution and away from conflict. The objective is to illustrate that policy development can be an effective conflict resolution methodology in the present circumstances.

³⁹ Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (2015 edition), p. 73

⁴⁰ General Conference Working Policy (2016-2017), L 40 Ordained to the World Church

⁴¹ Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (2015 edition), p. 35

1. Discontinue the practice of ordination altogether. Replace the current ordination service practices with a commissioning service for ministers, elders, deacons and deaconesses. Doing this would be fully consistent with the theology of ordination while avoiding the unbiblical connotations that have become attached to the term 'ordination'.
2. Suspend the issuance of ministerial licenses and credentials. In their place use the Commissioned Minister License and Commissioned Minister Credential. Revise policy language concerning the role and authority of individuals holding Commissioned Minister Credentials.
3. Amend gender-specific language in General Conference Working Policy, section L, The Ministry and Ministerial Training
4. Clarify the territorial authorization associated with Commissioned Minister Credentials. Approve the world-wide validity of the commissioning service for deacons/deaconesses/elders and those holding Commissioned Minister Licenses/Credentials while re-emphasizing the safeguards that protect the world Church from individual abuse of privilege.
5. Revise Church Manual and General Conference Working Policy credential requirements for a local mission/local conference president. In a similar manner, revise the General Conference Constitution and Bylaws, Model Constitutions and Bylaws, and Model Operating Policies to indicate that the president shall be a 'Commissioned Minister of experience'.
6. Amend other policies whose language limits ministerial duties to males.
7. Recognize that permission for women to serve without restriction in ministerial roles does not constitute obligation to do so. The normal selection processes for any employee give discretion to the employing unit. The permissive stance for the ordination of women as local church elders can serve as a pattern for the commissioning of women as pastors.

Some Conclusions

A study of policy and its development through time leads me to the following conclusions:

1. Mission-sensitive practice has generally preceded the development of policy. The Church should not be surprised if this situation continues. The opportunities of mission in diverse

settings will require creativity which may not yet be embraced in policy. Therefore, policy development must be an on-going priority for the Church.

2. Permissive rather than prescriptive policies have enabled the Church to address complex situations in the past where differing circumstances required differing practices. Church policy must allow some room for diversity of practice if the Church is to function effectively in all the cultures of the world. Diversity that is mission-sensitive need not be a threat to unity.
3. The gradual development of decisions respecting the role of women in Church leadership has been complicated by uncertainty about the meaning of ordination and the culturally-accepted roles of women in society. The theology of ordination, though unchanged, has been more effectively communicated. There is no hierarchy of ordination. The ordination of a deacon/deaconess/elder is not qualitatively different in nature from the ordination of a pastor. There is however, a hierarchy of office.
4. The Church's decision to include women as elders, to consent to their ordination, to issue to women Commissioned Minister Credentials with authority to perform virtually all functions of an ordained minister has not inflicted injury to Church unity.
5. Historically, the Church has demonstrated a preference for policy development rather than policy enforcement. Emerging circumstances have been addressed by allowing for creative initiatives even in advance of policy creation. Continuing this kind of approach offers the best opportunity for the Church to maintain its unity and resolve the tensions that exist in the matter of ministerial ordination.