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# Ellen White, Women in Ministry and the Ordination of Women

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1 Theology of Ordination Study Committee

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4 Ellen White, *Women in Ministry and the Ordination of Women*

5 Denis Fortin

6 (revised, November 10, 2013)

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8  
9 That Ellen White supported the involvement of women in various forms of  
10 ministry is well known and is not something that is debated among Seventh-day  
11 Adventists. Many publications, in particular *Daughters of God* and some sections of  
12 *Evangelism*,<sup>1</sup> have helped Adventists be more conscious of her thoughts on this  
13 subject. And today women *are* involved in all forms of ministry in the Seventh-day  
14 Adventist church. Questions arise, however, as to the level of affirmation and  
15 recognition the church should give to these women in ministry. Should it be the  
16 same recognition as given to men involved in the same forms of ministry?

17  
18 There are not many passages to turn to in Ellen White’s writings to build a case  
19 for or against the ordination of women in the Seventh-day Adventist church—there  
20 is no precise “proof text” that says a woman can be ordained to become the senior  
21 pastor of a church or a conference president. Hence, many other issues and  
22 concepts are brought in, discussed and argued over to support the various  
23 perspectives on this issue. Furthermore, so many publications have been written on  
24 this subject during the last 40 years that I’m not sure any new thought or argument  
25 is now possible. But for the sake of those on this Study Committee who may not  
26 have read all the books and articles for and against women’s ordination I offer the  
27 following thoughts and ideas.

28  
29 What I would like to offer in this paper is that a careful consideration of Ellen  
30 White’s thought on the role of women in the church, taken in its nineteenth-century  
31 context, her understanding of the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist church, her  
32 counsels regarding ministry and its many functions taken in historical context, and  
33 her non-sacramental understanding of ordination and early Seventh-day Adventist  
34 practice of ordination, can support the case for allowing the ordination of women  
35 today. Ellen White supported the involvement of women in ministry but what is less  
36 known is the historical and social contexts in which she made these comments and  
37 why. Read in context, what she advocated takes on a new perspective that helps us  
38 understand that she was ahead of her time in many ways but also in sync with other  
39 movements that advocated giving women a more prominent role in society and in  
40 the church. The perspective I draw from Ellen White’s writings encourages us to  
41 move ahead and stretch out the boundaries of our understanding of ministry and  
42 ordination, to step out in faith and to respond to God’s leading in the involvement of  
43 women in ministry because we have a mission to finish.

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<sup>1</sup> *Evangelism*, 456-495.

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## 1. Ellen White's Support for Women in Ministry

### The Social Context

During her prophetic ministry, Ellen White not only addressed issues of doctrines and behavior to help prepare God's people for Jesus' second coming, she also addressed issues of intrinsic evil in society. In her own ways she was an advocate of reforms, a social reformer, and at times she became insistent on these reforms. She readily espoused abolitionism and even advocated social disobedience in response to the federal government's *Fugitive Slave Act* of 1850.<sup>2</sup> She advocated temperance, the closing of saloons and taverns, and urged women to take a strong stand against the evils of alcohol in their homes and towns.<sup>3</sup> She advocated for health reform<sup>4</sup> and education reform.<sup>5</sup> Today, we benefit greatly from these reforms and we seldom think about the influence women like Ellen White had in making our society and church what it has become. To a large extent we have forgotten the social conditions in which our ancestors lived.

Early Adventists understood Paul's prophetic words in Galatians 3:28 that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ" as the seed of many reforms that led to the abolition of social evils like slavery, class distinctions based on birth rights, and gender exclusion in society and church. Early Adventists were thus abolitionists, social democrats and republicans in government. Given this historical and social context, we can say that to a large extent Ellen White was ahead of her time in advocating some of these reforms. But on the other hand, she was in step

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<sup>2</sup> This act created much division among the population and set the stage for civil disobedience among abolitionists and Sabbatarian Adventists. The Fugitive Slave Act imposed heavy penalties on those who refused to help government slave catchers or who obstructed the recapture of a fugitive slave. Northerners were held directly responsible for helping recapture slaves who fled to the north. Ellen White stood firmly against slavery and saw it as a moral evil. She straightforwardly advocated civil disobedience in regard to the Fugitive Slave Act. "I was shown that we have men placed over us for rulers, and laws to govern the people. Were it not for these laws, the world would be in a worse condition than it is now. Some of these laws are good, and some bad. The bad have been increasing, and we are yet to be brought into straight places. But God will sustain his people in being firm, and living up to the principles of his word. Where the laws of men conflict with God's word and law, we are to obey the word and law of God, whatever the consequences may be. The laws of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey, and we must abide the consequences of the violation of this law. This slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful Master, and man has no right to take God's workmanship into his hands, and claim his as his own" (*Testimonies for the Church*, 1:201-202).

<sup>3</sup> See *Gospel Workers*, 384-388 and her book *Temperance*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, her books *Ministry of Healing* and *Counsels on Health*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, her books *Education* and *Counsels to Parents, Teachers and Students*.

1 with her time and advocated reforms that many other Christian groups also  
2 advocated.

3  
4 Also in this context is the role of women in society. In general, women had  
5 little influence in American society in the nineteenth century. Women could not  
6 vote. In many places they could not own property and their wellbeing often  
7 depended on a faithful husband or family relations. Few received an education  
8 beyond elementary school, and a very small number had a lifelong professional  
9 career. Social evils were particularly hard on women. Physical and sexual abuse  
10 was rampant, particularly in homes where alcoholism was a factor. Lack of  
11 adequate healthcare and poor hygiene deprived women of a good life and frequently  
12 caused the death of the mother and/or child in childbirth.

13  
14 On the other hand, Ellen White was fortunate and blessed to have been  
15 raised in a good Christian home, with a devoted believing father who did not drink  
16 alcohol, and a mother who cared deeply for her family's spiritual and physical needs  
17 and provided them with an education. She knew first-hand the blessings to the  
18 parents, children, and by extension to the community, that such a home brings. In  
19 her own home, she replicated what she saw her parents do when she was a little  
20 girl. Ellen White understood the important role a godly woman could have in the  
21 home, in the community, and in the church.

22  
23 Knowing the context of Ellen White's statements regarding the roles of  
24 women in society and in the church helps us also to define a clearer portrait of Ellen  
25 White and her influence, and why she advocated these ideas. Today we have  
26 become familiar with many aspects of the roles of women in society and in the  
27 church, and we don't think about what life was like a hundred and fifty years ago.  
28 We read Ellen White's statements about women in ministry and we give an  
29 affirmative nod not realizing that when she stated these ideas she was perceived as  
30 pushing the boundaries of normalcy and even the boundaries of decency and  
31 propriety. Many men were not happy with her promotion of these ideas and many  
32 turned to the Bible to find arguments against the involvement of women. If today  
33 we have women in ministry as teachers, evangelists, pastors, administrators,  
34 treasurers, and chaplains, it is in part because Ellen White advocated for these roles  
35 in the church. And as a church we have followed her lead for over 130 years. Shall  
36 we go back on that history and undo this encouragement to women in ministry?

### 37 38 39 Women Speaking in Religious Meetings

40  
41 As I've mentioned, a century ago women were not as involved in social or  
42 religious public life as they are today. In fact, it was sometimes an inappropriate  
43 novelty to see a woman speak in an assembly. Let's remember that Ellen White's  
44 first attempts in 1845 and 1846 at communicating the content of her first visions to  
45 groups of former Millerites were met with worrisome displeasure from her family.  
46 A single woman was not supposed to travel in those years, and even less speak in

1 religious assemblies, unless she was accompanied by a family relation. It was felt  
2 unbecoming of her to do this and her behavior caused her family to be concerned  
3 about her reputation.<sup>6</sup>

4  
5 Later in her life, Ellen White became very involved in the temperance  
6 movement in the United States. She became known as a good speaker at  
7 temperance rallies and drew large crowds of curious people who, in part, wanted to  
8 hear a woman speak. By the end of the nineteenth century it was still a novelty to  
9 hear a woman speak in public.<sup>7</sup> Many people objected to see women speak at  
10 religious meetings on the basis of Paul's two admonitions in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35  
11 and 1 Timothy 2:12.

12  
13 Two interesting anecdotes from Ellen White's ministry illustrate a few  
14 aspects of this context of women speaking in public and how she personally  
15 surmounted the resistance to her public ministry. In October 1870, during a tour of  
16 churches in the Midwest, James and Ellen White stopped at a gathering in Tipton,  
17 Indiana. In letters to her sons, Willie and Edson, she recounted her meeting with  
18 two Methodist women who came to hear her.

19  
20 Tuesday afternoon [October 11] we left the encampment at Tipton. At  
21 the depot we were accosted by two ladies, members of the Methodist church,  
22 who had come for the purpose of speaking with me. One had been brought  
23 up a Friend, and still retained her "thee" and "thou." Both seemed to have  
24 had an experience in the things of religion. They were much pleased with my  
25 discourse Sunday afternoon. They, with other Christian women in the place,  
26 believed that woman can exert a powerful influence by public labor in the  
27 cause of God; but a large class, including the ministers of the several  
28 denominations, held that she was entirely out of her place in the desk.

29 On learning that I was to speak at the campground, both parties  
30 determined to go and hear me, agreeing that if I proved myself able to  
31 expound the Scriptures to the edification of my hearers, the ministers should  
32 cease their opposition to woman's speaking, and, on the other hand, if my  
33 remarks failed to be edifying, the ladies would accept the ministers' views  
34 upon the point.

35 These two ladies came to the meeting feeling that much was at stake.  
36 Said they, "We prayed earnestly that God would give you freedom and the  
37 power of His grace; and our expectations were more than realized. God  
38 helped you to speak. Such an impression was made on this community as  
39 was never known before. You have told us truths of which many were  
40 ignorant. All will have matter for serious thought. Prejudice against  
41 woman's speaking is gone. If the people had known that you would speak to

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<sup>6</sup> *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:39; "Looking for that Blessed Hope," *Signs of the Times*, June 24, 1889.

<sup>7</sup> George R. Knight, *Ellen White's World: A Fascinating Look at the Times in Which She Lived* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1998), 105-109.

1 the public, any of the churches in the place would gladly have opened their  
2 doors to you." These Christian women then urged us to stay and speak again,  
3 but we told them it was impossible. They also invited us to come to the  
4 Methodist camp meeting next year, promising us a good hearing. They then  
5 bade me Godspeed, and we parted.<sup>8</sup>

6

7 Ten years later, in a letter to her husband James, Ellen White recounted some  
8 of the activities she and other colleagues had been involved in near Oakland,  
9 California. Among many things, she told James the following.

10

11 Elder Haskell talked in the afternoon and his labors were well received. I had  
12 in the evening, it was stated, the largest congregation that had ever  
13 assembled at Arbuckle. The house was full. Many came from five to ten and  
14 twelve miles. The Lord gave me special power in speaking. The  
15 congregation listened as if spell-bound. Not one left the house although I  
16 talked above one hour. Before I commenced talking, Elder Haskell had a bit  
17 [piece] of paper that was handed (him) in quoting [a] certain text prohibiting  
18 women speaking in public. He took up the matter in a brief manner and very  
19 clearly expressed the meaning of the apostle's words. I understand it was a  
20 Cambelite [sic] who wrote the objection and it had been well circulated  
21 [among the audience] before it reached the desk; but Elder Haskell made it  
22 all plain before the people.<sup>9</sup>

23

24 These anecdotes illustrate a few important concepts for our discussion of  
25 women in ministry. First, it was a novelty in both Indiana and California to see a  
26 woman speak on religious matters and many people felt it was inappropriate. Yet,  
27 Ellen White noted that the attendance at both meetings was good, and in California  
28 the house was full and no one left the meeting even though she spoke for a long  
29 time. We should note as well that she did not see it as her task to argue with people  
30 who felt otherwise. She left the responsibility of defending her public ministry to  
31 others.

32

33 In both anecdotes, Ellen White refers to the opposition against having a  
34 woman speak and suggests that this opposition was at times biblically based. At the  
35 California meeting, she referred to a note being circulated in the congregation from  
36 a "Cambelite," that is a member from the Church of Christ of the restorationist  
37 Stone-Campbell movement, who quoted a certain text of scripture about women  
38 being prohibited from speaking in public. We are not told what that text was but we  
39 can guess that it was either 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 or 1 Timothy 2:12. Christians in  
40 the Stone-Campbell movement viewed these two texts as straightforward facts  
41 about women, without any need to interpret or understand Paul's context. They  
42 viewed Paul's admonition "let your women be silent" as a fact to be obeyed at all

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen G. White to Edson and Emma White, October 17 (Letter 16a), 1870; Ellen G. White to W. C. White, October 17 (Letter 16), 1870.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen G. White to James White, April 1 (Letter 17a), 1880.

1 times and in all places. Two basic rules of interpretation that guided their study of  
2 the Bible — doing only what is specifically commanded or practiced in the New  
3 Testament, and paying attention to concrete words, not abstract principles or ideas  
4 — prevented the founder of their movement, Alexander Campbell, from  
5 condemning slavery during the American Civil War (because the New Testament  
6 says nothing against slavery), but caused him to condemn women preachers  
7 (because the New Testament says women should be silent). In contrast, Adventists  
8 condemned slavery and encouraged women preachers.<sup>10</sup>

9  
10 Ellen White mentioned to James that Stephen Haskell responded briefly to  
11 this “Cambelite” objection before she spoke and “very clearly expressed the meaning  
12 of the apostle’s words.” And it is obvious from the context that Ellen White  
13 concurred with this explanation.

14  
15 What did Stephen Haskell say to this audience? What was his belief on this  
16 subject of women speaking in church or in public, of women doing ministry? What  
17 was his explanation that Ellen White agreed with? Through the 1860s and 1870s, a  
18 number of articles appeared in Adventist church publications, the *Review and Herald*  
19 and *Signs of the Times*, on this topic of women speaking in religious meetings.  
20 Having a woman prophet who spoke regularly in church assemblies and in public  
21 meetings was bound to raise some questions in regards to these two key texts of the  
22 New Testament, particularly also in the context that the Adventist and Stone-  
23 Campbell movements were in constant interactions in the Midwest in the  
24 nineteenth century. Three articles on this subject were published in 1879, during  
25 the year before this anecdote took place in Ellen White’s ministry.

26  
27 In January 1879, J. N. Andrews published a short article on women speaking  
28 in church in the *Review and Herald*. In this article, Andrews seeks to explain the two  
29 main texts used to prohibit women from speaking in church. His purpose is to show  
30 that a careful study of these texts cannot support this conclusion. In reference to 1  
31 Corinthians 14:34-35, he explained that Paul’s intent was to avoid confusion in the  
32 church and to urge women to stop chatting between themselves during the worship  
33 service. Hence, “what the apostle says to women in such a church as this, and in  
34 such a state of things, *is not to be taken as directions to all Christian women in other*  
35 *churches and in other times, when and where such disorders do not exist.”* In  
36 regards to 1 Timothy 2:12, Andrews understands “this text to give Paul’s general  
37 rule with regard to women as public teachers. But there are some exceptions to this  
38 general rule to be drawn even from Paul’s writings, and from other scriptures.” In

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<sup>10</sup> See Gerry Chudleigh, “The Campbellite and Mrs. White,” *Pacific Union Recorder*, (112:7) July 2012, 6. One of my doctoral students, Wendy Jackson, professor at Avondale College in Australia, is completing a dissertation comparing Alexander Campbell and Ellen White’s views of church unity. Her study is a fascinating comparison of their biblical hermeneutics and doctrine of the church.

1 fact, the evidence Andrews goes on to give indicates that this general rule is rather  
2 the exception and that women are free to labor in ministry.<sup>11</sup>

3  
4 A few months later that same year, Andrews again published a brief article  
5 on this subject, this time in *Signs of the Times*. In response to an article he had read  
6 in another paper, which stated that women were not allowed to speak in early  
7 Christian churches, he explained that such a position did not concur with the  
8 testimony of the Old and New Testaments, and that Paul's remark in Galatians 3:28  
9 was responsible for the "diffusive benevolence of Christianity" to counter the  
10 degradation that women had been subjected to in non-Christian societies. "The  
11 number of women of whom honorable mention is made for their labors in the  
12 gospel is not small. Now, in view of these facts, how can any man in this age of Bibles  
13 say that the Bible does not notice women, or give them a place in the work of God?  
14 The Lord chooses his own workers, and he does not judge as man judges. Man looks  
15 at the appearance; God judges the heart, and he never makes mistakes."<sup>12</sup>

16  
17 One other article published before Ellen White's anecdotal event in California  
18 is an article published by her husband in the *Review and Herald*. While explaining  
19 the text in 1 Corinthians 14, James White conceded that Paul may have referred to  
20 women participating in church business meetings but he took the firm position that  
21 this text did not refer to a prohibition for women to participate in worship services.  
22 Rather "Paul ... places men and women side by side in the position and work of  
23 teaching and praying in the church of Christ." White also gave numerous examples  
24 of women who ministered for God in the Old and New Testaments to show that  
25 there is no such prohibition for women to labor for the gospel or to speak in church  
26 assemblies.<sup>13</sup>

27  
28 The articles published in Adventist papers in this period took the position  
29 that what Paul referred to in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 had to do with  
30 particular situations in the local churches of his time. Paul's counsel regarding these  
31 situations was not applicable to all church congregations. Adventist pioneers did  
32 not understand Paul to be enouncing a general and universal ban on women  
33 speaking in religious meetings. Many of these articles also referred to many of  
34 Paul's female co-workers to state the obvious conclusion that Paul was therefore not  
35 speaking against women in ministry. Furthermore, none of these articles used the  
36 argument that a woman prophet (i.e. Ellen White) has a special dispensation from  
37 God to speak in church – an argument that is repeatedly used today to circumvent  
38 the misunderstood prohibition and to argue that women without a prophetic call  
39 from God should not be engaged in public speaking in religious meetings.

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11 J. N. Andrews, "May Women Speak in Meeting?" *Review and Herald*, January 2, 1879, p. 324 (emphasis added).

12 J. N. Andrews, "Women in the Bible," *Signs of the Times*, October 30, 1879, p. 324.

13 James White, "Women in the Church," *Review and Herald*, May 29, 1879, p. 172.



1 reference to women it refers to other kinds of supportive ministry, like personal  
2 evangelism, visiting homes of the poor, teaching the Bible, or canvassing. I  
3 personally don't think such a clear distinction is entirely justified because the  
4 meaning of ministry changed in the first decades of the Adventist church and so did  
5 the practice of ordination and who received ordination. In the early decades of  
6 Adventist work, only the itinerant preacher, or evangelist, was ordained, and he was  
7 referred to as an ordained minister or "gospel minister." Ministry in that time  
8 period was focused on the work of the evangelist. With time, however, other kinds  
9 of tasks or functions became part of what ministry consists of. The work of Bible  
10 workers, literature evangelists, educators, publishing house editors and workers,  
11 and other administrators began to be included in the work of ministry for the  
12 church. And men in these functions, who at first were not ordained, started to be  
13 ordained. These changes and developments need to be part of our understanding of  
14 the context in which Ellen White wrote her words of encouragement to women in  
15 ministry.<sup>16</sup> Her encouragements to women help us see this change in the Adventist  
16 understanding of ministry, from a narrow meaning to a broad inclusion of many  
17 functions, and she consistently encourages women to join in all aspects of ministry.  
18 Her encouragements are inclusive and broad.

19  
20 In 1879, Ellen White addressed a difficult situation at the South Lancaster  
21 church in Massachusetts. She felt the ministers working in that church or in the area  
22 had not been good leaders. One pastor had "a disposition to dictate and control  
23 matters." Knowing there were "humble, devoted women" in that congregation who  
24 had been sneered at by these ministers, she made this comment: "It is not always  
25 men who are best adapted to *the successful management of a church*. If faithful  
26 women have more deep piety and true devotion than men, *they could indeed by their*  
27 *prayers and their labors do more than men who are unconsecrated in heart and in*  
28 *life.*"<sup>17</sup> In this early statement the ministry ordained ministers do includes  
29 management of a church and, in her opinion, women can have that ministry and be  
30 just as effective at it as men. Obviously, this statement does not call for the  
31 ordination of women but it is the beginning of a pattern in Ellen White's writings  
32 where we see her responding to some situations by inviting the leaders of the  
33 church to consider asking women do the work, or part of it, that ordained men do.  
34 This division of labor is for Ellen White conducive to facilitating the mission of the  
35 church.  
36

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<sup>16</sup> I am grateful for insights I received from Denis Kaiser, a doctoral student at Andrews University, who has done recently a study of the development of rite of ordination and concept of ministry in the Seventh-day Adventist church from 1850 to 1920. His study was commissioned by the Inter-European Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Denis Kaiser, "Setting Apart for the Ministry: Theory and Practices in Seventh-day Adventism (1850–1920)," paper prepared for the Biblical Research Committee of the Inter-European Division, March 18, 2013; slightly revised May 13, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Ellen G. White to Brother Johnson, n.d. (Letter 33), 1879, in *Manuscript Releases*, 19:56 (emphasis added).

1 Always close to Ellen White’s heart was the work of literature evangelists,  
2 selling books filled with truth to those who were not acquainted with the three  
3 angels’ messages. In 1880 she stated that literature evangelism was a good  
4 preparation for the work of ministers. “If there is one work more important than  
5 another, it is that of getting our publications before the public, thus leading them to  
6 search the Scriptures. Missionary work—introducing our publications into families,  
7 conversing, and praying with and for them—is a good work and one which will  
8 *educate men and women to do pastoral labor.*”<sup>18</sup> In this context, she refers to  
9 ministry as “pastoral labor” and both men and women can prepare for it through  
10 literature evangelism.

11  
12 Another similar inclusive encouragement to prepare for ministry through  
13 literature evangelism comes twenty years later. “All who desire an opportunity for  
14 true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the  
15 canvassing work opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future,  
16 immortal life. The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who  
17 are fitting themselves for the *ministry*. It is the accompaniment of *the Holy Spirit of*  
18 *God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of*  
19 *God.*”<sup>19</sup> This statement encourages both men and women to prepare themselves for  
20 ministry as pastors of churches.

21  
22 One more statement from 1903.

23  
24 The Lord calls upon those connected with our sanitariums, publishing  
25 houses, and schools to teach the youth to do evangelistic work. ... Young men  
26 and young women who should be engaged in the *ministry*, in Bible work, and  
27 in the canvassing work should not be bound down to mechanical  
28 employment. ... Some will be trained to enter the field as missionary nurses,  
29 some as canvassers, and *some as gospel ministers.*<sup>20</sup>

30  
31 In the last three statements, Ellen White particularly encourages young  
32 people to prepare themselves for ministry. Although she may have been aware that  
33 there would be limitations to what young women could do or be employed for by  
34 the church, she did not limit the options available to them. If somehow Ellen White  
35 believed that the concept of male headship restricts the ministry positions available  
36 for women, she had plenty of opportunities to clarify her thought. She never did.  
37 Instead, her encouragements to young women are consistently open-ended and  
38 inclusive as in this next statement in 1887.

39  
40 While discussing the need to provide good, solid education to Adventist  
41 youth in our schools, she exhorted ministers, Sabbath School teachers and college

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<sup>18</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, 4:390 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:322 (emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, 8:229-230 (emphasis added).

1 teachers to do their best to “unite heart and soul and purpose in the work of saving  
2 our youth from ruin.” The standard of education should not be lowered because  
3 “when suitable men are wanted to fill various positions of trust, they are rare; when  
4 women are wanted with well-balanced minds, with not a cheap style of education,  
5 but with an education fitting them *for any position of trust*, they are not easily  
6 found.”<sup>21</sup>

7 A careful reflection of Ellen White’s writings reveals another pattern in her  
8 counsels regarding the involvement of women in ministry: her counsels are also  
9 directed at women of all age groups over an entire lifespan. As we have just seen  
10 some of her counsels are addressed to young women and invite them to prepare  
11 themselves for ministry through good education and practical experience as in  
12 literature evangelism. Some counsels are addressed to mothers and earnestly  
13 entreats them to regard their homes as the greatest missionary field.<sup>22</sup> Other  
14 counsels are addressed to older men and women inviting them to even consider  
15 doing missionary work in areas where the gospel has not been preached.<sup>23</sup> And  
16 some counsels are directed at married women and spouses of ordained ministers.<sup>24</sup>  
17 While the home of a married couple can be blessed with children, sometimes the  
18 arrival of children may not be what is most desirable for that couple or for their  
19 ministry.<sup>25</sup> For some women, Ellen White went so far as to recommend they  
20 postpone having children in order to allow them many years of useful gospel  
21 ministry as she favored ministerial and missionary teams of husband and wife. We  
22 will see the example of one such couple below in the last section of this paper.  
23

24 In October 1899, Ellen White restated her conviction that women engaged in  
25 ministry should be paid adequately for their work. In this document it is not clear  
26 whether she is referring also to the spouses of ordained men, as she did in 1898, but  
27 her statement is nonetheless emphatic.  
28

29 Women, as well as men, are needed in the work that must be done. Those  
30 women who give themselves to the service of the Lord, who labor for the

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<sup>21</sup> *Review and Herald*, June 21, 1887, in *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 117-118 (emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> *Adventist Home*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> *Retirement Years*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> “The Laborer Is Worthy of His Hire,” Manuscript 43a, 1898, in *Manuscript Releases*, 5:324-327.

<sup>25</sup> In 1898, Ellen White had this to say regarding the adoption of children by ministers’ families. “Letters have come to me from several, asking my advice upon the question, Should ministers’ wives adopt infant children? Would I advise them to do this kind of work. To some who were regarding this matter favorably, I answered, No; God would have you help your husband in his work. The Lord has not given you children of your own; His wisdom is not to be questioned. He knows what is best. Consecrate your powers to God as a Christian worker. You can help your husband in many ways. You can support him in his work by working for him, by keeping your intellect improved. By using the ability God has given you, you can be a home-keeper. And more than this, you can help to give the message” (Manuscript 43a, 1898, in *Manuscript Releases*, 5:325).



1 grounded upon her beliefs that the dual purpose of the church is to spread the  
 2 gospel and to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ; therefore, forms of  
 3 Christian ministry should be adaptable to the current needs, while remaining  
 4 grounded on biblical principles, and include all Christians in active service.  
 5 Understanding what Ellen White identified to be the purpose for the church and the  
 6 meaning of the rite of laying on of hands is important for our discussion.

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### The Mission of the Church

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One of Ellen White's basic ideas regarding the church is that it is the representative of God on earth.<sup>28</sup> Within the context of the great controversy theme, she believed that Christians are the instruments that God uses to witness to the universe that He is a God of love, mercy, and justice.<sup>29</sup> "God has made His church on the earth a channel of light, and through it He communicates His purposes and His will."<sup>30</sup> In this context, her comments about the church emphasize the pragmatic functions of the church, its role and purpose. Although ordained ministers, as servants of God and of the church, are no doubt to act as God's representatives on earth,<sup>31</sup> they are not the only ones. Every Christian has a role to play within the great controversy at the end of time and is a representative of Christ.<sup>32</sup> Indicative of her thoughts on this is the following passage written in 1904:

Brethren and sisters, how much work have you done for God during the past year? Do you think that it is those men only who have been ordained as gospel ministers that are to work for the uplifting of humanity? — No, no! Every one who names the name of Christ is expected by God to engage in this work. *The hands of ordination may not have been laid upon you, but you are none the less God's messengers.* If you have tasted that the Lord is gracious, if you know his saving power, you can no more keep from telling this to some one else than you can keep the wind from blowing. You will have a word in season for him that is weary. You will guide the feet of the straying back to the fold. Your efforts to help others will be untiring, because God's Spirit is working in you.

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<sup>28</sup> *The Desire of Ages*, 290.

<sup>29</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:12.

<sup>30</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles*, 163. Two chapters, in particular, clearly present her understanding of the purpose of the church: "God's Purpose in the Church," *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:9-13, and "God's purpose for His Church," *The Acts of the Apostles*, 9-16.

<sup>31</sup> One good example of this is the chapter "A Consecrated Ministry" in *The Acts of the Apostles*, 359-371.

<sup>32</sup> "A Preparation for the Coming of the Lord," *Review and Herald*, November 24, 1904 (emphasis added).

1           While in the Old Testament only certain men ordained to the priesthood  
 2 could minister within the earthly sanctuary,<sup>33</sup> Ellen White believed that no one is  
 3 ever restricted from serving God even though one is not an ordained minister. All  
 4 Christians, regardless of their vocations, are servants of God and in a very broad  
 5 sense all Christians have a ministry. Even though she never mentioned it as such,  
 6 she nonetheless affirmed the Protestant concept of the priesthood of all believers.  
 7 Two passages of Scripture are foremost in her understanding of this concept. The  
 8 first is 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,  
 9 God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you  
 10 out of darkness into his marvelous light” (RSV).<sup>34</sup> The second is John 15:16, “Ye  
 11 have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and  
 12 bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of  
 13 the Father in My name, He may give it you.” Many times she referred to or quoted  
 14 parts of these passages in support of dedicated Christian service and to insist that all  
 15 Christians are called, commissioned or ordained by God to serve Him.<sup>35</sup>

16  
 17           This concept of the priesthood of all believers underlies her understanding of  
 18 both Christian service and ordination. Throughout her ministry, Ellen White made  
 19 repeated appeals to church members to engage in wholehearted Christian service.  
 20 According to her, it is a fatal mistake to believe that only ordained ministers are  
 21 workers for God and to rely solely on them to accomplish the mission of the  
 22 church.<sup>36</sup> “All who are ordained [i.e. baptized] unto the life of Christ are ordained  
 23 [i.e. called] to work for the salvation of their fellow-men.”<sup>37</sup> “Those who stand as  
 24 leaders in the church of God are to realize that the Saviour’s commission is given to  
 25 all who believe in His name. God will send forth into His vineyard many who have  
 26 not been dedicated to the ministry by the laying on of hands.”<sup>38</sup> In a very real sense,  
 27 every Christian is thus a minister for God.<sup>39</sup>

28  
 29           Consequently, Christ calls and spiritually ordains every Christian for  
 30 ministry. Emphatically, Ellen White asked, “Have you tasted of the powers of the

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<sup>33</sup> See Ellen White’s comments in connection with the rebellion of Korah in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 398-399.

<sup>34</sup> Three centuries before Ellen White, Martin Luther also appealed to 1 Peter 2:9 to express his belief that every Christian is a priest for God. In a 1520 treatise, in which he invited the German princes to reform the church, he wrote, “The fact is that our baptism consecrates us all without exception, and makes us all priests” (*An appeal to the ruling class of German nationality as to the amelioration of the state of Christendom* in John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from his writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 408).

<sup>35</sup> Concerning 1 Peter 2:9 see, for example, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 422, 441; *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:169; 6:123, 274. For John 15:16 see, *Testimonies to Ministers*, 212-213.

<sup>36</sup> “The Great Commission; a Call to Service,” *Review and Herald*, March 24, 1910.

<sup>37</sup> “Our Work,” *Signs of the Times*, August 25, 1898.

<sup>38</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles*, 110.

<sup>39</sup> “A Preparation for the Coming of the Lord,” *Review and Herald*, November 24, 1904.

1 world to come? Have you been eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of  
 2 God? Then, although ministerial hands may not have been laid upon you in  
 3 ordination, Christ has laid His hands upon you and has said: ‘Ye are My  
 4 witnesses.’”<sup>40</sup> Thus, she could state, “many souls will be saved through the labors of  
 5 men who have looked to Jesus for their ordination and orders.”<sup>41</sup> Church  
 6 ordination, therefore, is not a prerequisite to serve God because it is first the Holy  
 7 Spirit who gives fitness for service to Christians who in faith are willing to serve.<sup>42</sup>

8  
 9 I believe this is how she also understood her own call to ministry. Although  
 10 she was never ordained as a minister by the Seventh-day Adventist church, she  
 11 believed that God himself had ordained her to her prophetic ministry, a spiritual  
 12 ordination that was by far superior to any forms of human ordination. In her later  
 13 years, while recalling her experience in the Millerite movement and her first vision,  
 14 she stated, “In the city of Portland, the Lord ordained me as His messenger, and here  
 15 my first labors were given to the cause of present truth.”<sup>43</sup>

16  
 17 From these passages we can draw two initial conclusions concerning Ellen  
 18 White’s underlying thoughts on ordination. First, Ellen White’s concept of the  
 19 priesthood of all believers is the fundamental qualification for Christian service;  
 20 every Christian is intrinsically a servant of God. Second, in a spiritual sense, God  
 21 ordains every Christian to service.

#### 22 23 24 The Ordination of Paul and Barnabas

25  
 26 A number of passages in Ellen White’s writings give us significant thoughts  
 27 on the meaning of ordination and in all of them the primary focus of the discussion  
 28 is the role ordination plays in furthering the evangelistic mission of the church.  
 29 These passages include her commentary on the ordination of Paul and Barnabas in  
 30 Acts 13.

31  
 32 God foresaw the difficulties that His servants would be called to meet, and, in  
 33 order that their work should be above challenge, He instructed the church by  
 34 revelation to set them apart publicly to the work of the ministry. Their  
 35 ordination was *a public recognition of their divine appointment* to bear to the  
 36 Gentiles the glad tidings of the gospel.

37 Both Paul and Barnabas had already received their commission from God  
 38 Himself, and the ceremony of the laying on of hands *added no new grace or*  
 39 *virtual qualification. It was an acknowledged form of designation to an*

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<sup>40</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, 6:444 (emphasis added).

<sup>41</sup> “Words to Our Workers,” *Review and Herald*, April 21, 1903.

<sup>42</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles*, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Ellen G. White to “Dear Brethren and Sisters,” October 19 (Letter 138), 1909, quoted in Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Later Elmshaven Years, 1905-1915*, 211 (emphasis added).

1           *appointed office and a recognition of one's authority in that office. By it the*  
2           *seal of the church was set upon the work of God.*

3           To the Jew this form was a significant one. When a Jewish father blessed  
4           his children, he laid his hands reverently upon their heads. When an animal  
5           was devoted to sacrifice, the hand of the one invested with priestly authority  
6           was laid upon the head of the victim. And when the ministers of the church  
7           of believers in Antioch laid their hands upon Paul and Barnabas, they, by that  
8           action, asked *God to bestow His blessing upon the chosen apostles in their*  
9           *devotion to the specific work to which they had been appointed.*

10          At a later date the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly  
11          abused; unwarrantable importance was attached to the act, as if a power  
12          came at once upon those who received such ordination, *which immediately*  
13          *qualified them for any and all ministerial work.* But in the setting apart of  
14          these two apostles, there is no record indicating that any virtue was imparted  
15          by the mere act of laying on of hands. There is only the simple record of their  
16          ordination and of the bearing that it had on their future work.<sup>44</sup>

17  
18          Some significant insights about ordination appear in this story. First, Ellen  
19          White acknowledged that there is a calling and spiritual appointment before the  
20          church ordains someone, and ordination is a public recognition of this prior divine  
21          appointment. This, we have already seen, concurs with her understanding of the  
22          spiritual ordination of all believers. Second, she also stated that the rite of  
23          ordination does not in itself qualify someone for an office or task, this qualifying has  
24          already happened through the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life and ministry;  
25          rather, ordination is to be understood as a form of appointment to an office and a  
26          recognition that this person is given the authority to perform that office. Third,  
27          ordination is also a rite during which the congregation asks "God to bestow *His*  
28          *blessing upon the chosen apostles*". Fourth, ordination is for a *specific work* and is  
29          not meant to "immediately" qualify someone "for any and all ministerial work."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *The Acts of the Apostles*, 161-162 (emphasis added).

<sup>45</sup> There is much confusion regarding the meaning of an office in Scripture and the writings of Ellen White. This passage indicates that an office, like that of the apostles Paul and Barnabas, is related to a function, task or work. The office of apostle is for a specific work in the church, and in the case of Paul and Barnabas it was to preach the gospel to Gentiles. Her comment, "At a later date the rite of ordination by the laying on of hands was greatly abused; unwarrantable importance was attached to the act, as if a power came at once upon those who received such ordination, which immediately qualified them for any and all ministerial work", seems to indicate again that someone's ordination should not be understood as necessarily qualifying this person for other future tasks he may be asked to perform. Rather, ordination is for a *specific* task. This comment invites some reflection on the Seventh-day Adventist practice of ordaining someone for life for any and all ministerial functions someone may be asked to perform thereafter. Traditionally, one's ordination to Seventh-day Adventist ministry has served as an initiation rite that qualifies one to perform all future tasks of ministry, including pastoral ministry, evangelism, teaching, leadership and administration. This ordination also remains valid in retirement even if the minister no longer functions in a ministry role.

1 This implies there is room for various kinds of laying on of hands, for various kinds  
2 of work, ministry, functions or offices, each with specific responsibilities and,  
3 therefore, attending authority.

4  
5 In this context, as we will see below, it is now possible to understand why  
6 Ellen White allowed for the church to decide whether some people, other than  
7 gospel ministers or itinerant preachers, could be ordained by the laying on of hands  
8 for other ministries. If one allows for a missionary understanding of the role of the  
9 church, then ordination is also a functional rite to affirm and commission individuals  
10 for various ministries and responsibilities that further the mission of the church.  
11 There is a world to be warned and a people to be prepared for the second coming of  
12 Christ, and those who are thus spiritually qualified should be entrusted with their  
13 mission, affirmed and blessed by the church's laying on of hands.

#### 14 15 16 Ordination of Early Adventist Ministers

17  
18 Very early in Seventh-day Adventist history, the leading pioneers of the  
19 movement felt concerned about the confusion and false teachings that were  
20 manifested sometimes among the small group of Sabbatarian Adventist believers.  
21 Following the example of New Testament apostles who had set apart elders to  
22 oversee local congregations against false teachings and to administer the ordinances  
23 of baptism and the Lord's Supper, these early Adventist leaders selected promising  
24 men and set them apart with prayer and laying on of hands. The criterion for their  
25 ordination was the "full proof" evidence "that they have received their commission  
26 from God". By ordaining them the group of believers "would show the sanction of  
27 the church to their going forth as messengers to carry the most solemn message  
28 ever given to men."<sup>46</sup> The ordination of these early Adventist itinerant preachers  
29 served as a rite to authorize them to speak on behalf of the church and to preserve  
30 order in the emerging church.

#### 31 32 33 Ordination to Other Forms of Ministry

34  
35 Ellen White earnestly believed that the ordained pastoral ministry alone was  
36 not sufficient to fulfill God's commission, that God is calling Christians of all  
37 professions to dedicate their lives to his service.<sup>47</sup> Since the church can acknowledge  
38 different kinds of spiritual gifts and ministries beyond those of pastor, elder and  
39 deacon to meet the needs of the people, she favored the setting apart of trained  
40 professionals, including medical missionaries and those who today would be  
41 referred to as chaplains and social workers, by the laying on of hands. Among these

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<sup>46</sup> *Early Writings*, 100-101. It is interesting to note that in this passage Ellen White does not use the word ordination, but rather refers to this rite as a setting apart and a commission. This indicates that she uses these words and concepts synonymously.

<sup>47</sup> *Medical Ministry*, 248-249.

1 groups of ministers, and given a broader definition of what ministry is, would be  
2 women who are engaged in personal evangelism. Strictly speaking, these two  
3 recommendations do not have biblical precedents but they are possible given her  
4 understanding of ministry and ordination.

5  
6 In 1908, in a manuscript to encourage the mission of Adventist medical  
7 institutions, Ellen White wrote about the need for cooperation between gospel  
8 workers and medical doctors in Adventist medical institutions. Her desire was to  
9 see the medical work of the church as the right arm of the church's evangelistic  
10 efforts, and she understood that pastors and medical workers were both essential to  
11 this work. She considered the work of the medical profession as a great means for  
12 proclaiming the gospel and, for this reason she believed medical missionaries ought  
13 to be set apart for God's service. In respect to this, she wrote:

14  
15 The work of the true medical missionary is largely a spiritual work. It  
16 includes prayer and the laying on of hands; he therefore should be as  
17 sacredly set apart for his work *as is the minister of the gospel*. Those who are  
18 selected to act the part of missionary physicians, are to be set apart as such.  
19 This will strengthen them against the temptation to withdraw from the  
20 sanitarium work to engage in private practice.<sup>48</sup>

21  
22 Ellen White believed that the work of the medical profession is a ministry for  
23 proclaiming the gospel. She saw a correlation between the setting apart of the  
24 medical missionary and the minister of the gospel and viewed the ceremony of the  
25 laying on of hands upon medical missionaries to be a form of ordination. In this  
26 ceremony, as with ordination to the more traditional offices of the church, the  
27 church acknowledges the blessings of God upon the medical profession and its  
28 practitioners, and this recognition by the church serves to strengthen the dedication  
29 of the worker in his or her service for God.

30  
31 In a similar context, in 1895, Ellen White wrote a long article about the work  
32 of lay people in local churches. She urged ministers to let lay people work for the  
33 church and train them to do so. And she favored that women serving in local  
34 ministry also be set apart for the evangelism they do, a work that today would be  
35 identified with Bible workers, chaplains and social workers. She counseled:

36  
37 Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the  
38 Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister  
39 to the necessities of the poor. *They should be set apart to this work by prayer*  
40 *and laying on of hands*. In some cases they will need to counsel with the  
41 church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a  
42 vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. *This is*

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<sup>48</sup> Manuscript 5, 1908, in *Evangelism*, 546 (emphasis added).

1            *another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to*  
2            *branch out more in our methods of labor.*<sup>49</sup>

3  
4            Here Ellen White counseled that God is leading the church in setting apart  
5 women for these various forms of ministry. It is God’s will for the church to branch  
6 out, be strengthened and built up by ordaining women and men to serve in the  
7 various forms of gospel ministry and to provide care for the mental, physical and  
8 spiritual needs of others. Her understanding of ministry is broad as is her  
9 understanding of ordination. Ordination in this context is both asking God’s  
10 blessing on the individuals and affirming their ministry for the church.

11  
12            Some have argued that since Ellen White does not use the word ordination in  
13 these two examples it should not be implied that she is referring to ordination to  
14 ministry, but that she refers only to a kind of spiritual affirmation of some lower  
15 types of ministry, like the work of deaconesses in local churches. While this may  
16 have been the case in her day, today in most Adventist churches these three types of  
17 ministry she mentions are usually done by ordained male pastors or elders,  
18 depending on the size of the congregation.

19  
20            In both examples, Ellen White uses the same words Luke used in Acts 13 to  
21 describe Paul and Barnabas’ ordination: they were set apart with prayer and laying  
22 on of hands. (By the way, Luke does not use the word ordination either.) In her  
23 reflection on the ordination of the first Sabbatarian Adventist ministers, she does  
24 not use the word ordination but refers to setting apart and commission; yet, we  
25 naturally accept that she is referring to ordination. If Ellen White can describe these  
26 events as ordinations, we can certainly say her reference to medical missionaries  
27 and women being set apart with prayer and laying on of hands are also referring to  
28 ordination. What matters here is not whether one event is an ordination and the  
29 other is not, on the basis of the presence or absence of the word ordination in her  
30 writings; they all refer to the same rite of laying on of hands. Instead of limiting our  
31 understanding of what ordination is and for whom it is valid, we need to broaden  
32 our understanding to include a variety of meanings and circumstances as Ellen  
33 White invited us to do. And, furthermore, her comment regarding the ordination of  
34 medical missionaries is obviously stating that in her mind there is only one kind of  
35 laying on of hands: “he [the medical missionary] therefore should be as sacredly set  
36 apart for his work *as is the minister of the gospel.*” All these comments give us the  
37 picture that Ellen White that her non-sacramental and functional use of the word  
38 ordination is better described by the words affirmation and commissioning than by  
39 the sacramentally loaded word ordination. Thus, with this context and meaning in  
40 mind, her view of the laying on of hands can be and is gender inclusive.

41  
42            These two statements also support what we saw earlier, that for Ellen White  
43 ministry is to be understood in broad terms and cannot be limited only to the work

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<sup>49</sup> “The Duty of the Minister and the People,” *Review and Herald*, July 9, 1895, (emphasis added).

1 of an itinerant preacher or church pastor. Earlier, in our discussion of her  
2 comments about the need to have more women join ministry with their husbands  
3 and her invitation to women to be educated for ministry, her statements are clear  
4 that whether one is preaching a series of evangelistic meetings or giving a sermon  
5 on Sabbath morning, giving Bible studies in homes, or visiting families in need, all  
6 these activities are qualified as gospel or pastoral ministry. She invited and urged  
7 both men and women to be involved in ministry. She understood that these women  
8 “are recognized by God as being as necessary to the work of ministry as their  
9 husbands.”<sup>50</sup> Consequently, she approved of their labor in the gospel ministry,  
10 noting: “Again and again the Lord has shown me that women teachers are just as  
11 greatly needed to do the work to which He has appointed them as are men.”<sup>51</sup> Ellen  
12 White urged the church to recognize God’s call to women by the laying on of hands  
13 so that the ministry of the church might be more diversified and complete in both its  
14 message and its mission. This picture is also framed in the context of mission. She  
15 was passionate about the salvation of the lost and she felt strongly that all Adventist  
16 men and women be active in all facets of ministry. While her concern was  
17 missiological (accomplishing the mission of the church), ours has become  
18 ecclesiological (determining who has authority in the church).

19  
20 Some may consider these thoughts somewhat radical and a rupture with the  
21 New Testament teaching on the ordination of deacons, elders, and pastors.  
22 However, what allowed Ellen White to see the laying on of hands in this broader  
23 sense is her non-sacramental, functional view of ordination. Although it symbolizes  
24 the giving of church authority, ordination is not primarily for the purpose of  
25 granting authority—in our denomination, church assemblies, committees, and  
26 boards do this. Ordination affirms the spiritual gifts God has given to a person and  
27 invites God’s blessings on this person’s ministry. Such an affirmation is in her view  
28 inclusive of males and females and is not to be limited to the ministries of deacons,  
29 elders, and pastors. The organization of the church is to be adaptable to the needs  
30 of the church wherever it is located in the world so that all may hear the message of  
31 God’s salvation in his or her own language and culture. Ordination and the laying on  
32 of hands is a means to bless people in ministry and to encourage them to do their  
33 ministry with the church’s affirmation. She did not view ordination as a sacrament  
34 to be given to only to a few men in the church, who form a cohort or caste of  
35 spiritually endowed ministers, and who have sole authority to lead the church.

36  
37 One more anecdote further illustrates Ellen White’s non-sacramental view of  
38 ordination. In 1873, John Tay joined the Seventh-day Adventist church and soon felt  
39 called by God to volunteer his time as a missionary in the South Pacific. In 1886, he  
40 landed on the island of Pitcairn and succeeded by God’s grace in converting the  
41 entire population. But not being an ordained minister, he was not authorized to

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<sup>50</sup> Manuscript 43a, 1898, in *Manuscript Releases*, 5:323.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:325.

1 baptize the people on the island who accepted the three angels' messages.<sup>52</sup> Ten  
2 years later, Ellen White commented on this event and had this to say.

3  
4 Another thing I want to tell you that I know from the light as given me: it has  
5 been a great mistake that men go out, knowing they are children of God, like  
6 Brother Tay, [who] went to Pitcairn as a missionary to do work, [but] that  
7 man did not feel at liberty to baptize because he had not been ordained. *That*  
8 *is not any of God's arrangements; it is man's fixing.* When men go out with the  
9 burden of the work and to bring souls into the truth, those men are ordained  
10 of God, [even] if [they] never have a touch of ceremony of ordination. To say  
11 [they] shall not baptize when there is nobody else, [is wrong]. If there is a  
12 minister in reach, all right, then they should seek for the ordained minister to  
13 do the baptizing, but when the Lord works with a man to bring out a soul  
14 here and there, and they know not when the opportunity will come that these  
15 precious souls can be baptized, why he should not question about the matter,  
16 he should baptize these souls.<sup>53</sup>

17  
18 It is an interesting comment for Ellen White to say that the idea that only an  
19 ordained minister can perform baptism, even in special circumstances, "is not any of  
20 God's arrangement; it is man's fixing." Perhaps she overstated her response to what  
21 happened. But nonetheless, there is something in her understanding of ministry  
22 and ordination that leads her to say this. In this case, ministry is viewed as non-  
23 hierarchical and ordination is viewed as an affirmation of God's prior spiritual  
24 ordination. Her passion for saving the lost is strong and human church limitations  
25 on what a layperson can do should not hinder the salvation of souls. If there are  
26 such limitations, even as to prevent baptism in the absence of an ordained minister,  
27 they are "man's fixing."

28  
29 Admittedly, and to be fair, she did support the broader principle of unity and  
30 church order and agreed that ordination functions as a rite to show that ministers  
31 receive authority to work for the church. But if ordination is seen as a way to  
32 establish some hierarchy to keep lay people in their lower places, it is obvious here  
33 that she did not support such a view. She objected to the idea that *only* ordained  
34 ministers can represent the church as their exclusive rights and function. Clearly, in  
35 her mind, the link between ordination and granting church authority is somewhat  
36 fluid and ordination is more akin to a commissioning to do God's service for the  
37 church.

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<sup>52</sup> In 1879, the General Conference voted that "none but those who are Scripturally ordained are properly qualified to administer baptism and the other ordinances." G. I. Butler, "Eighteenth Annual Session, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists: Twelfth Meeting, November 24, 1879, 7 p.m.," Battle Creek, Mich., General Conferences Archives.

<sup>53</sup> "Remarks Concerning the Foreign Mission Work," Manuscript 75, 1896 (emphasis added).

#### 4. Context and Hermeneutics

The question of the ordination of women is also a question of hermeneutics and how we understand the relevance and authoritative nature of the writings of Ellen White on this issue. I have attempted so far to present her broad understanding of ministry with multi-faceted functions and tasks, and her broad understanding of ordination as a function of the church to affirm and commission men and women to various forms of ministries and responsibilities. These views of ministry and ordination open avenues that the traditional Catholic sacrament of ordination cannot allow.

It is true that Ellen White did not specifically say that women could be ordained to become senior pastors of churches or conference presidents. But the interpretation of her writings must be done within the circumstances and times she wrote. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women in general did not occupy leadership functions in churches and society. However, she encouraged women to be active in a multitude of functions and ministries, and believed that with the proper education, women could occupy “any position of trust”.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, to limit our current practices to only what the church allowed in her day is not automatically in agreement with her thought.

The interpretation of Ellen White’s testimonies and writings cannot be static because we must understand the times and circumstances that led her to say what she did, and learn from them principles to guide our thinking and actions today. A statement written many years ago may not necessarily have the same force and relevance today as it did then. Attempting to explain how to use her writings, she stated in 1911 that the context of her thought is very important: “Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered.”<sup>55</sup>

An example of this is the question of the proper age for school entrance—an idea debated among Adventists a hundred years ago. In 1872, Ellen White had written that “parents should be the only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age.”<sup>56</sup> Many Adventists took this statement as an unvarying rule for the age of entrance into Seventh-day Adventist schools and when in 1904, upon their return to the United States, her son W. C. White and his wife Ethel wished to enter their young children in the newly established school in St. Helena, California, the school administration refused to take their children on the basis of Ellen White’s statement. When she was asked about this, however, she explained that when this counsel was given there were no Adventist schools yet and her counsel had specific reference to the “common” [public] schools. Children younger than 9 or 10 were not prepared to discern and resist the temptations they

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<sup>54</sup> *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, 117, 118.

<sup>55</sup> “Regarding the Testimonies,” Manuscript 23, 1911, in *Selected Messages*, 1:57.

<sup>56</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, 3:137.

1 would meet in the public schools. As the Adventist school system became more  
2 extensive, she advised students of all ages to attend Adventist schools wherever  
3 they were available.<sup>57</sup> She advised using “common sense” in this regard and not to  
4 make her comments on entrance age an unbending rule and thus miss the  
5 underlying principle.<sup>58</sup>

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#### 8 The Ordination of Some of Our Pioneers

9

10 This anecdote illustrates that we must take carefully into consideration the  
11 historical context of Ellen White’s writings before coming to any conclusions. One  
12 very human tendency is to superimpose our current understanding of issues on  
13 prior statements in the writings of Ellen White. Let me illustrate one major problem  
14 I see happening today: through the years we have changed our practice regarding  
15 the ordination of men but we have not been willing to do the same for women.

16  
17 George I. Butler became president of the Iowa Conference in June 1865 even  
18 though he had “no experience as a preacher.” It was not until June 1867, that he  
19 received a ministerial license, and then ordained later that year in September.  
20 “Interestingly,” notes Denis Kaiser, “even after he had been elected conference  
21 president, the church saw no need to hurry his ordination, as they apparently did  
22 not see it as necessary prior to him beginning his service as president.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly,  
23 Uriah Smith became editor of the *Review and Herald* in 1855, secretary of the  
24 General Conference in 1863, and president of the Michigan Conference also in 1863,  
25 a position he served in intermittently until 1872. He was not ordained until 1874.

26  
27 Early Seventh-day Adventists ordained only the ministers among them who  
28 had given evidence that they were good evangelists or itinerant preachers.  
29 Ordination was a recognition of their gifts and that the church authorized them to be  
30 spokesmen for the truth. Those who were not itinerant preachers were not  
31 ordained even if they served the church in some capacity. As we grew in numbers  
32 and diversified our ministries, the role of ministers changed and those who had  
33 responsibilities in the church were also ordained, irrespective of whether they had  
34 been itinerant preachers. So our practice of male ordination has evolved since the  
35 time of Ellen White to be more inclusive of other male forms of ministry.

36  
37 The ordination of W. W. Prescott in 1889 is an illustration of that  
38 development. Prescott had never worked as a pastor or evangelist, yet during his  
39 service as president of Battle Creek College and education secretary of the General  
40 Conference, church leaders noticed the fruits of his educational work and his  
41 powerful preaching abilities. They were convinced of his divine calling and decided

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<sup>57</sup> *Medical Ministry*, 57, 58.

<sup>58</sup> An interview with Ellen White, “Counsel on Age of School Entrance,” Manuscript 7, 1904, in *Selected Messages*, 3:214-226.

<sup>59</sup> Kaiser, 33.

1 to ordain him in 1889. He counseled with Ellen White about his doubts and whether  
2 he should accept ordination. “If he could serve the cause of God any better in  
3 receiving ordination and credentials,” she surmised, “it would be best” for him to be  
4 ordained.<sup>60</sup>

5  
6 We should note that the elections of Butler and Smith to their functions  
7 would likely not be allowed today with our current church policies. But, in all  
8 honesty, that is not an entirely fair historical judgment or interpretation. If Elders  
9 Butler and Smith were working for the church today, they would have been  
10 ordained by the time they were asked to serve in their functions or would be  
11 ordained immediately upon being voted into a function. Our times and practices are  
12 different from those of our pioneers and we cannot make direct comparisons and  
13 links. We can learn from the past but our present is different. Who receives  
14 ordination today is based on our current understanding of ministry and it is  
15 different from what our pioneers understood ministry to be and thus who can be  
16 ordained. This also indicates that as we age we are following in the footsteps of  
17 many other denominations, and we are giving more and more attention to church  
18 structures and ecclesiastical roles, to who has authority within a hierarchy. Our  
19 pioneers did not have this preoccupation at first.

20  
21 If this is what has happened with the development of the practice of  
22 ordination for men in ministry, how about the development of the practice of  
23 ordination for women in ministry? Why should such a development remain  
24 stagnant? In 1895, Ellen White recommended the ordination of women who were  
25 involved in visiting the sick, looking after the young, and ministering to the  
26 necessities of the poor. Even though some have argued that this ordination referred  
27 to the limited role of a deaconess in Ellen White’s day, men who do the same  
28 functions today are now ordained as ministers or elders. In the 1860s and 1870s,  
29 men who did these same activities in local churches would also have been ordained  
30 as deacons. But now they are ordained as elders and ministers. Should we not  
31 ordain women as ministers or elders as well if they do the same functions as their  
32 male counterparts? If it is possible to allow for the development of the practice of  
33 ordination for men, why not allow the same for women? These are serious  
34 questions that must take into consideration the historical context of Ellen White’s  
35 writings and our own current context.

36  
37 If Ellen White was so willing to encourage women in various forms of  
38 ministry in the 1890s and 1900s, in a society and context in which women were not  
39 encouraged to do so, it is because she believed in a broad gender inclusive ministry  
40 to warn a dying world of Christ’s soon coming. While she was not concerned with  
41 the women’s rights movement of her day, she was concerned about all Seventh-day  
42 Adventists joining together to spread the gospel. And today to limit what women

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<sup>60</sup> Manuscript 23, 1889, in *Manuscript Releases*, 12:57; Gilbert M. Valentine, *W.W. Prescott: Forgotten Giant of Adventism's Second Generation*, Adventist Pioneer Series (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2005), 80-81.

1 can do in the church on the basis of only what the church allowed women to do in  
2 her day or on the basis of the limited options for ministry she offered women in  
3 those years is taking her comments out of context, a context in which she  
4 encouraged progressive and innovative approaches to ministry. Rather than  
5 limiting ordination to men only, her comments open the door to women being  
6 ordained as well.

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### C. C. Crisler's Interpretation

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In March 1916, a few months after Ellen White died, her secretary C. C. Crisler received a letter from a sister Cox in Texas asking him for Ellen White's opinion and counsel regarding the ordination of women as referred to in the *Review and Herald* article of July 1895.<sup>61</sup> Although he did not presume to interpret what Ellen White meant, he ventured to say that "this article published in the *Review* does not refer to the ordination of women as ministers of the gospel, but rather touches upon the question of setting apart, for special duties in local churches, God-fearing women [as deaconesses] in such churches where circumstances call for such action." He added that "Sister White, personally, was very careful about expressing herself in any wise as to the advisability of ordaining women as gospel ministers. She has often spoken of the perils that such general practice would expose the church to by a gainsaying world; ... This is not suggesting, much less saying, that no women are fitted for such public labor, and that none should ever be ordained; it is simply saying that so far as my knowledge extends, Sister White never encouraged church officials to depart from the general customs of the church in those matters."<sup>62</sup>

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Crisler's comments are interesting in a number of ways. First, he refrains from using the word ordination to refer to this action, calling it simply, as Ellen White did, a setting apart and thus attributes much to the absence of the word ordination in this counsel. He also describes these women as doing the work of deaconesses in some local churches where they would be set apart. This in itself would show that these women were undertaking a new kind of ministry not performed heretofore by the average deaconess. Another comment that stands out is Crisler's opinion that Ellen White did not encourage church officials to depart from the church's general customs on this practice and that she was concerned about what people would say regarding such an uncommon practice. Ellen White was careful that the church not expose itself to "a gainsaying world." Although he may have been privy to some information we no longer have, there is no evidence that Ellen White counseled church leaders not to ordain women ministers. Also Crisler believed that the ordination of women to ministry had not been on Ellen White's agenda because she was afraid of what the world would say or that some churches would use this new practice as a way of disparaging the Seventh-day Adventist message.

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<sup>61</sup> See our discussion of this article on pp. 18-19 above.

<sup>62</sup> C. C. Crisler to Mrs. L. E. Cox, March 12 and 22, 1916, in *Daughters of God*, 253-255.

1  
2           Crisler’s depiction of Ellen White’s hesitant role or soft advocacy in some  
3 issues is accurate. While she was an uncompromising reformer on some social  
4 issues (e.g. temperance and education), in some other areas, she was soft spoken,  
5 not willing to raise opposition for the sake of it. When advocating a particular style  
6 of reform dress in the 1850s, she encountered some opposition and ridicule that  
7 made her back away from her advocacy. On this issue she was careful and  
8 measured, and did not wish the health reform message be hijacked by a  
9 secondary issue. Her funny-looking reform dress was finally discarded not because  
10 it was not a good idea, but because it was too radical for some people. People made  
11 fun of it and discarded her counsels. What mattered was for women to be better  
12 dressed; the style and shape of the dress was secondary. The same can be said of  
13 her advocacy for the involvement of women in ministry. She was not interested in  
14 displacing men from the traditional roles they have had in the family, church and  
15 society. Her thought naturally implies that because of their family and social roles,  
16 husbands/fathers will tend predominantly to work outside the home and will be  
17 more numerous in leadership roles, while wives/mothers will tend to care for the  
18 home and children, and have less involvement in church and society. However, this  
19 traditional arrangement did not prevent some women from occupying various  
20 positions of ministry, even administrative positions, during Ellen White’s time.<sup>63</sup>

21  
22           Given the social and family constraints of her time, it is still remarkable that  
23 Ellen White was able to recommend that more women be involved in active ministry  
24 and in spreading the gospel. If there was ever an ideal social and family structure it  
25 is likely the one we see in her writings. But times have changed tremendously.  
26 Today, in the United States, the ideal family model of a father working outside the  
27 home to supply his family’s needs while the mother stays home to care for the  
28 children is becoming very rare. One-income families have a hard time to survive in  
29 our economic conditions and lifestyle expectations. What we find instead in our  
30 churches are more and more family units of single parents, multi-generational  
31 families, and blended families. Single women (never married, divorced or widowed)  
32 form a large segment of our congregations. In our context, Ellen White’s appeals for  
33 the involvement of more women in all forms of ministry are even more relevant and  
34 significant. Our context begs for more women in ministry.

35  
36           The fact that Ellen White was able to recommend the setting apart of medical  
37 missionaries and women involved in ministry indicates that the church should be  
38 open to more women in ministry. The ordination of women in the Adventist church  
39 is thus possible because she understood ordination as a prayer of divine blessing, as  
40 a form of affirmation of one’s spiritual gifts, and as a commissioning. In fact, we  
41 have already been ordaining women to ministry: we call it commissioning. Based on

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<sup>63</sup> Many studies have shown the involvement of women in various forms of ministry during Ellen White’s time. Beverly Beem and Ginger Hanks Harwood, “Your Daughters Shall Prophesy”: James White, Uriah Smith, and the “Triumphant Vindication of the Right of the Sisters to Preach,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 43:1 (2005), 41-58.

1 Ellen White’s understanding of ordination we can conclude there is no difference  
2 between the two rites, they are one and the same. The setting apart by laying on of  
3 hands and prayer is a means to commission someone to ministry. The church  
4 decides what authority comes along with that ministry, what the ministry is, and the  
5 person’s qualification to perform it. It is not the rite of ordination that determines  
6 these factors.

## 9 5. Allowance for Diversity

10  
11 One last area of theological reflection on Ellen White’s writings I’d like to  
12 offer is regarding the allowance for diversity of thoughts, opinions and practices she  
13 advocated in her life and ministry. We have a history of allowance for diversity  
14 within the Seventh-day Adventist church.

15  
16 This year marks the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1888 General Conference  
17 session in Minneapolis, Minnesota. What we remember most about this session is  
18 the acrimonious debates before and during this session. Two “major” issues were  
19 argued over: the identity of the law Paul referred to in Galatians 3:24 and the  
20 identity of the ten northern European tribes that fulfilled the end of the prophecy of  
21 Daniel 7. Some leaders and pioneers of our church felt the Seventh-day Adventist  
22 church could not change its teachings on these. Others felt it behooved Adventists  
23 to be faithful to Scripture and history and provide more accurate interpretations of  
24 these two passages.

25  
26 Both sides of these controversies wished for Ellen White to provide the  
27 definitive interpretation and thus close the debates. But she refused to do so and  
28 she objected to such a use of her writings. Instead she pleaded with the delegates to  
29 study their Bibles and to come to some conclusions by themselves. In the end she  
30 commented that these two issues were not key, “landmark” doctrines of the  
31 Seventh-day Adventist church and diversity of opinions was possible. What  
32 mattered most for her was the exhibition of a proper, cordial and gentle spirit  
33 among the delegates and unity in the mission of the church.<sup>64</sup>

34 Another such argument occurred around 1910 regarding the interpretation  
35 of the word “daily” in the prophecy of Daniel 8:11-13. Again, people appealed to  
36 Ellen White’s writings to settle the issue and again she refused to do so. She did not  
37 believe this issue was a “test question” and did not think her writings provided an  
38 exegetical interpretation of the passage. Like the other controversies in 1888, her

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<sup>64</sup> Ellen G. White to “Brethren,” August 5 (Letter 20), 1888, in *1888 Materials*, 38-46. A short summary of the issues discussed at the session is A. V. Wallenkampf, *What Every Adventist Should Know About 1888* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1988)

1 main concern was directed toward the disunity, the rancor, the time spent in debate,  
2 and the distraction from evangelism.<sup>65</sup>

3 I find these two controversies give us a paradigm for the use of Ellen White's  
4 writings in the interpretation of Scripture and they also show that her concern was  
5 primarily with church unity and mission rather than focusing on dividing, secondary  
6 issues. I cannot but muse about what she would say today regarding our use of her  
7 writings to muster support for one or the other side of our ordination debate. In the  
8 end, I learn also from these discussions that Ellen White allowed for diversity of  
9 thought for questions that she felt were secondary and not key doctrinal beliefs of  
10 our church.

11  
12 Many other examples of allowance for diversity could be given. We could  
13 reflect on the church's teaching on vegetarianism and the importance Ellen White  
14 gave it, even that eating of meat must ultimately be discarded at the end of time, yet  
15 allowed for flexibility and personal choices.<sup>66</sup> I have already alluded to the age of  
16 school entrance and who can perform baptisms in special circumstances. We could  
17 talk about the crucial role of a mother in the home in raising and caring for her  
18 children,<sup>67</sup> yet she herself allowed for exceptions and, for five years, gave the  
19 responsibility of raising her first son Henry to a trusted family while she and her  
20 husband preached the three angels' messages. She did not feel good about this, but  
21 understood God called her to make this sacrifice.<sup>68</sup> To some extent, personal  
22 circumstances and contexts allowed for exceptions and differences of opinions and  
23 practices.

24  
25 I understand that allowing for exceptions may not be considered a good thing  
26 because there's a strong tendency among Adventists to call for uniformity of beliefs  
27 and practices. Sometimes we tend to do this when it comes to secondary issues and  
28 beliefs. At the same time it is difficult to pigeonhole Ellen White when it comes to  
29 the behavior of others. There seems to be exceptions to hard-core rules: goals,  
30 values, and ideals are taught, but often displaced by or accommodated to the  
31 realities of life.

32  
33 When it comes to the assigned ideal role of women in family, church and  
34 society, there are ideals that she taught, and then sometimes there is the reality of a  
35 particular circumstance and context. One of Ellen White's most prominent  
36 teachings, as we have seen, is her insistence that both men and women be involved  
37 in evangelistic ministry, but children in the home can interfere with the woman's  
38 ministry. One such example is the case of Isaac and Adelia Van Horn who were  
39 married by James White in 1865. Soon after their marriage they went as a pioneer

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<sup>65</sup> Ellen G. White to "My Brethren in the Ministry," August 3 (Letter 62), 1910, in *Paulson Collection*, 42-44.

<sup>66</sup> *Counsels on Diet and Foods*, 380-381. See the entire chapter, 373-416

<sup>67</sup> *Child Guidance*, 21-22.

<sup>68</sup> *Spiritual Gifts*, 2:iii.

1 missionary couple to Washington and Oregon. Ellen White was disappointed when  
 2 they began to have children for this interfered with their joint ministry.<sup>69</sup> Many  
 3 years later, she reminded them of James's words at their wedding:

4  
 5 I remember the words of my husband when you were sent into this  
 6 new field. They were these: "Isaac and Adelia, God would have you  
 7 enter this new field together unitedly in the work. I would not trust  
 8 you, Isaac, alone where you might lack in the financial working of the  
 9 cause. Adelia will help you out with her business tact where you  
 10 would be more inclined to be easy and not thorough in the work.  
 11 Adelia will be your good [partner] to spur you up to energy. Both of  
 12 you will make a perfect whole. God would have Adelia in the field. He  
 13 would have you work side by side together, for this, the Lord has  
 14 shown, was His will. We can afford to pay you better wages, with  
 15 Adelia to help you, than for your labors alone. The Lord will bless you  
 16 together."<sup>70</sup>

17  
 18 Ellen White then continued, writing to Isaac, "God did not ordain that you should  
 19 take Adelia out of the field. God did not ordain that you should accumulate family  
 20 cares to take yourself out of the field." However we interpret this situation, Ellen  
 21 White desired for both Isaac and Adelia to be involved in ministry, and Adelia's  
 22 talents were particularly needed in this missionary context. Ellen White felt the Van  
 23 Horns had not been true to their calling by having children so soon after they  
 24 entered ministry together. Exceptions to the ideals of a family home are sometimes  
 25 needed.

26  
 27 Some people build intricate schemes of interpretation of the writings of Ellen  
 28 White to categorize the goals, ideals and values that she espoused regarding women  
 29 in general and to impose a limit on what women can do in the church today. There  
 30 are those who advocate that families, church life and society today should be  
 31 following the same arrangements that Ellen White experienced in her day, or  
 32 witnessed in her visions and wrote about in her writings. This grand scheme and  
 33 ideal is sometimes based on an understanding of the relationship between the  
 34 persons of the Godhead, that Jesus was submitted to the Father and thus implying  
 35 there is an intrinsic value for some people in church and society to be submitted to  
 36 others. The same goes with the ranking and hierarchy of angels in heaven.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ellen G. White to Isaac and Adelia Van Horn, (Letter 48) 1876, in *Daughters of God*, 138-140.

<sup>70</sup> Ellen G. White to Isaac Van Horn, February 26 (Letter 8), 1884.

<sup>71</sup> Such a scheme leads most readily to an Arian view of the divinity of Christ. Ellen White believed in the eternal equality of all three persons of the Godhead. Here's a sample of her thoughts: "This Saviour was the brightness of His Father's glory and the express image of His person. He possessed divine majesty, perfection, and excellence. He was equal with God" (1869; *Testimonies for the Church*, 2:200). "Before the entrance of evil, there was peace and joy throughout the universe. . . . Christ the Word, the only begotten of God, was

1  
2 Ellen White saw all these beautiful and inspiring scenes of angels in her  
3 visions. She wrote about the order and harmony she saw in heaven which gave her  
4 reasons for advocating order and harmony in the early Seventh-day Adventist  
5 church organization.<sup>72</sup> Yet she urged the involvement of all people in church life,  
6 rebuked those elected and ordained to work for the church who used a form of  
7 kingly power to get what they wanted and to displace others from participating in  
8 the life of the church. She decried the use of power and authority on the basis of  
9 one's hierarchical standing in the church; no one has an intrinsic rank or importance  
10 that positions him as superior to others. While she affirmed leadership positions to  
11 facilitate the good and proper operations of the church, and to avoid anarchy,  
12 confusion, and false teachings, a form of hierarchicalism that displaces, supplants or  
13 controls others is not condoned in her writings. And she never used any of these  
14 concepts to limit what women can do in the church.

15  
16 In any social organization, including churches, there is a conservative  
17 element that prevents developments that appear to remove traditional ways of  
18 doing things. For many, it is fine to leave things as they are. But there is also a  
19 progressive element that wishes to see things change in order to see progress when  
20 things begin to stagnate. So there's a tension between traditionalist tendencies and  
21 progressive tendencies. Neither is bad. But an organization must look carefully at  
22 its past and not idolize it or fossilize it if the organization is to continue to be  
23 relevant in its constantly-changing context.

24  
25 As I see it, the mission of our church has been for over 150 years to preach  
26 the three angels' message to the world and to prepare a people for Christ's soon  
27 return. To that end and for that purpose, Ellen White understood that all Seventh-  
28 day Adventists must be involved in this mission, both men and women, lay people  
29 and ordained pastors, young and old – all have a role to play in this grand mission.  
30 Throughout her ministry she encouraged and urged men and women to be involved.

31  
32 As I see it also, the inclusion of women in ministry will only facilitate the  
33 completion of our mission. To think that only ordained men can do some of this  
34 work, or that only men can have a place or role to play in the accomplishment of  
35 some parts of this mission, is to me a traditionalist approach to our mission that will

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one with the eternal Father,--one in nature, in character, and in purpose,--the only being in all the universe that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God. By Christ, the Father wrought in the creation of all heavenly beings. . . . and to Christ, equally with the Father, all Heaven gave allegiance" (1888; *The Great Controversy*, 1888 ed., 493). "He [Christ] was with God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore. The Lord Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, existed from eternity, a distinct person, yet one with the Father. He was the surpassing glory of heaven. He was the commander of the heavenly intelligences, and the adoring homage of the angels was received by Him as His right" (1906; *Review and Herald*, April 5, 1906).

<sup>72</sup> *Early Writings*, 97.

1 only hinder what we are about. I don't think Ellen White would approve of this in  
2 this day and age in many parts of the world. Maybe she would say we are hindering  
3 the role and ministry of women by refusing them to be ordained, and that it is unfair  
4 to have them do all the work and not have the blessing of the church to do so. She  
5 said the same thing about the unfairness of the pay scale for women while she lived  
6 in Australia. Her own life and ministry allowed for diversity of opinions on many  
7 questions and issues. She allowed for exceptions to some rules or ideals when the  
8 context demanded them.

9  
10 In 1892, she stated, "We cannot then take a position that the unity of the  
11 church consists in viewing every text of Scripture in the very same light. The church  
12 may pass resolution upon resolution to put down all disagreement of opinions, but  
13 we cannot force the mind and will, and thus root out disagreement. These  
14 resolutions may conceal the discord, but they cannot quench it and establish perfect  
15 agreement."<sup>73</sup>

## 16 17 18 Conclusion

19  
20 In this paper I have attempted to build from Ellen White's writings and her  
21 context a theological framework to understand first what ministry and ordination  
22 are and then how it can allow for the ordination of women. This framework is built  
23 on what she believed to be the role and mission of the church, that all Christians  
24 have a role to play in fulfilling this mission, and that women have an essential role in  
25 the church.

26  
27 We find many insights in her writings regarding what she understood  
28 ordination to mean. First, all believers are spiritually ordained by God to participate  
29 in the mission of the church. This is the fundamental qualification for Christian  
30 service; every Christian is intrinsically a servant of God. This does not supersede  
31 the specific roles of church officers and pastors, but it indicates that ministry is  
32 inclusive. This spiritual ordination goes so far as to allow any Christian to baptize  
33 someone when special circumstances demand it.

34  
35 Significant insights about ordination appear in Ellen White's commentary on  
36 the story of the ordination of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13. First, she acknowledged  
37 that there is a calling and spiritual appointment before the church ordains someone,  
38 and ordination is a public recognition of this prior divine appointment. Second, she  
39 also stated that the rite of ordination does not in itself qualify someone for an office  
40 or task, this qualifying has already happened through the work of the Holy Spirit in  
41 one's life and ministry, and through a good education; rather, ordination is to be  
42 understood as a form of appointment to an office or a task and a recognition that  
43 this person has the authority to perform that task. Third, ordination is also a rite

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<sup>73</sup> "Love, the Need of the Church," Manuscript 24, 1892, in *Manuscript Releases*, 11:266.

1 during which the congregation asks God to bestow His blessing upon the chosen  
2 person. Fourth, ordination is for a specific work and is not meant to “immediately”  
3 qualify someone “for any and all ministerial work.” This implies there is room for  
4 various kinds of laying on of hands, for various kinds of work, ministry, functions or  
5 offices, each with specific responsibilities and, therefore, attending authority.

6  
7 Ellen White’s recommendation that there be an ordination for medical  
8 missionaries and women in ministry is based on her understanding that gospel  
9 ministry is a broad activity and not limited to what pastors do for the church. In  
10 these recommendations, which do not find their precedent in Scripture, she invites  
11 the church to broaden its understanding of ministry and compares the ordination of  
12 medical missionaries to that of a pastor. In this context, Ellen White understood  
13 ordination as a form of affirmation or commissioning. Thus, with this context and  
14 meaning in mind, her view of the laying on of hands can be and is gender inclusive.  
15 All these insights lead us to see that Ellen White understood ordination as an  
16 ordinance at the service of the church to commission people in various kinds of  
17 ministry and responsibilities, and to ask God’s blessing on their ministry. There is  
18 no indication in her writings that the rite of ordination should be limited only to  
19 men or that it should be used to establish some kind of church hierarchy. She never  
20 referred to some key texts like 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 or 1 Timothy 2:12 to limit the  
21 ministry of women in the church. Theological concepts like male headship in the  
22 church, the subordination of Jesus to the Father or the hierarchy of angels in heaven  
23 are never used in her writings to prevent women from some forms of ministry that  
24 would be only accessible for men. She emphatically encouraged the involvement of  
25 women in all forms of ministry.

26  
27 Ellen White allowed for diversity of thought and practice in many areas of  
28 personal and church life, in beliefs and behavior. I think we are all in agreement  
29 that ordination is not a key, fundamental belief of the Seventh-day Adventist church.  
30 In that case, we can allow for differences of opinions and practices. Instead of  
31 dividing ourselves over this issue, we should go forward with the mission of our  
32 church.

33  
34 It seems to me that the core of our current discussion is whether women in  
35 ministry should have the same authority as men have. In many functions, they  
36 already do and we commission (ordain) them to do so. Based on Ellen White’s  
37 writings, interpreted within her context, we have followed her lead and, according  
38 to our various cultural and national circumstances, have given women the  
39 opportunities to serve in a multitude of ministry functions. The question now is  
40 whether these women could be given the authority to perform a few more tasks  
41 (ordain church elders, organize or disband churches, serve as conference  
42 presidents). My reading of Ellen White’s writings leads me to ask a simple question:  
43 why not? Why should we not give women in ministry the authority to do these  
44 other tasks? Why can we not trust women to be as competent in these other  
45 functions? I think Ellen White would still say that competent women can be given  
46 “any position of trust” and be set apart for them.