

10-2022

## "Constant Kindness, Constant Gracefulness:" Leading in Conflict

Ella Simons

Petr Cincala

*Andrews University*, [cincala@andrews.edu](mailto:cincala@andrews.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Simons, Ella and Cincala, Petr (2022) ""Constant Kindness, Constant Gracefulness:" Leading in Conflict," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 16: No. 2, 20-27.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol16/iss2/4>

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## INTERVIEW WITH ELLA SIMMONS “CONSTANT KINDNESS, CONSTANT GRACEFULNESS:” LEADING IN CONFLICT

**Petr Činčala, on behalf of the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*:**

Today I am speaking with Dr. Ella Simmons, the recently retired vice president of the General Conference—the highest denominational position to which a woman has ever been elected.

**Dr. Ella Simmons:** It's been quite a journey. But I don't think a lot about positions, in general. I think about the ministry and the service to which God has called me. And yet as a woman—and for a woman of color—I am sensitive to that. I have to recognize the significance of that for Adventist women. Truthfully, I am still stunned that God has chosen to use me in such a way.

I started in education sort of serendipitously. When I was a child, my goal was to become a research scientist. I love science; that's where my mind always was. At the same time, I loved school and education in any form. When I was a young mom with two little boys living in Louisville, Kentucky, I stayed at home. At that time, the woman who directed our local church daycare center was involved in an accident; because the pastor and others knew that I was at home, they invited me to come and fill in for her for a few weeks.

Petr Činčala, PhD, is director of the Institute of Church Ministry, Andrews University, associate professor of World Mission, director of Natural Church Development (NCD) America, and managing editor of the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*.

Ella Louise Smith Simmons, EdD (University of Louisville); Honoris Causa Doctor of Pedagogy (Andrews University); MA, (Andrews University), was the first woman elected as a general vice president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, completing three full terms and a two-year extension. She chaired the International Board of Education, the Board of Trustees of the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, and the University Council (Board) of the Adventist University of Africa. She served as vice chairperson to the International Board of Ministerial and Theological Education, the Adventist Accrediting Association, and the Adventist Development and Relief Agency. Prior service included university professor, department chairperson, assistant dean, academic vice president, and provost.

Little did I know that that would extend into about five years in that position, and I completed my first degree in education along the way.

From there, I went on to teach and serve as principal. Next, I went into higher education and worked in secular institutions. Then, I was called back into church work to serve: first at Oakwood University, then at La Sierra University. After those positions, I thought I was going to come home, rest, and settle down a bit—but God called me to the General Conference, and I have served worldwide since then.

**JACL:** I know you have worked with mainly men as administrators and in other positions of power. How was it for you?

**ES:** It was really not different for me. I didn't know it at the time, but God prepared me from a very young age for this context. You see, I am one of six children in our family. I am the oldest and the only girl! When my parents kept bringing these baby boys home, I kept wondering why, protesting, "I want a sister, and here's another boy, and another boy." When I got married, I had two sons, so I have always been surrounded by men—strong-willed men!

When I started to work at the General Conference, it was a little awkward for the men at first because they had never worked with a woman in that capacity. I just told them, "You will not intimidate me. I have been with men—brothers, cousins, my husband, and my sons—all my life, and they are tough guys. There's nothing you can say or do to intimidate me—even if you were to chase me with caterpillars as my brothers used to do." This gave us all a great laugh. The male vice presidents and I bonded, and we were great friends.

**JACL:** What role did relationships play in your professional role, and why is interpersonal health so important for leadership?

**ES:** Interpersonal health is for me defined as an internal peace, both personally as well as in the context of organizational dynamics. This peace is not the absence of turmoil, stress, or tension. Peace is a sense of well-being—and probably a sense of security and self-value. Particularly for women and people of color, having that inner sense of self-value is very important. But this is also very important for every leader—regardless of the individual's background, ethnicity, or gender.

When negative stimuli come toward you, frustrations bombard you, and so you must maintain a steadiness that is important for leadership. That peace is related to the physical, the mental, and the emotional. It emanates from the relationship with Christ; it is spiritually based. For leaders, it is this sense of well-being, stability, and the sense of value. When everything around you tells you that you are of no value, that you are not successful, a Christ-centered confidence is needed to best lead and serve others. Leaders have to be able to take whatever comes without being overwhelmed by crises.

**JACL:** What are some challenges you have faced in this area?

**ES:** There are so many specific incidents. The greatest challenge is working to maintain inner peace when external surroundings are not peaceful, respectful, accepting, or acceptable. I want to use every occasion for educating others and myself. Therefore, it is important that I approach it in the right way so that people can hear me. And when this happens, it can only be because God has done it. I often think of one of my favorite verses in Scripture, Isaiah 26:3: "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you" (NIV). Also, Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (ESV). "Supplication with thanksgiving" means that we have that self-confidence.

When I was employed with a secular university as a chairperson in the education department, I befriended a female colleague who was the chair of another department. She was treated as an outsider, as often was I, because she was from Northern Europe and was Hispanic. It was an interesting combination for both of us, and we were often treated as less than equal to some of the other male faculty. One time, something occurred that made her very upset—to the point she could barely speak. She asked me: "What is wrong with you? Aren't you angry about this?" I answered, "Well, yes, I am angry and feel the same, but I have chosen not to give my energy or my time to these people and this issue. I will deal with it, but not in the way that they have dealt with me." At that moment, she came very close to calling me a liar. She felt that that was not possible, and from then on, she did not trust me as before.

It would be impossible for me to count all the insults and aggressions that I've experienced in my lifetime. What hurts most, Petr, is when these kinds of things occur within church structures and church organization. I was

not born into the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and even that has been an impediment for me. When I was invited to serve in the position of vice president of the General Conference, some were asking: “Who are you?”—almost like you have to be connected somewhere. Being the first generation in my family to be Adventist, some have never completely accepted me as truly Adventist worthy. Fortunately, that is not the majority of those with whom I interact.

Anything that is considered the “norm” for the majority in the United States often overflows into the church, perhaps because the church was founded in this country. Often, in a committee or board meeting where we were to contribute an idea or a thought, I have been looked at as though I was speaking a foreign language, as though what I said made no sense at all. Later on, a man would come back with the same idea, using roughly the same language often, and the idea was welcomed with applause.

**JACL:** When we talk about the issue of discrimination, is it just about race and/or gender, or is it also about power?

**ES:** I would say that racism is often about power and control. Yes, there has been a steady indoctrination of people to disdain, to think less of certain people groups based on ethnicity, color, or socio-economic status and prescribed social class or caste. Often, we tend to limit this to an understanding (or the lack thereof) of theological truths. But it is about the day-to-day interaction of one person or group seeking control and having inappropriate authority over another person or group.

Racism is real, and we need to face it as people of God. Sexism is real. Ageism is real. In many places there is prejudice against older people, and in other places there is prejudice against younger people. These prejudices play out in how we engage with each other in the church. Classism is real. Casteism is real. It is a real challenge for Christian leaders. If we, who are God’s people of love and truth, do not make a difference in the world in regard to these issues, who will step up to make a difference? We are here to make that difference, and somehow in the church over the years it hasn’t always been this way. Over the years we have pushed ourselves further and further into a vacuum on this topic.

We were called by Jesus to be light and salt to the broader social context. We are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world. However, sometimes we act as though we somehow live in a different space. These issues are real. When

it comes to power and control, somehow some of us have come to believe that it is our manifest destiny to exercise power over all others. Some just because it feels good, perhaps, but many because they believe they have been destined for that, created and put in this world for that purpose—that it is they who must make decisions for others whom they consider to be less worthy of contribution. Somehow some seem to believe that God speaks only to them or others like them.

Some may argue that there is a tendency to see racism and sexism where there is none. That may be true on some occasions, but in other instances, leaders do not even see racism or sexism just because they feel that what they do and say are their God-given rights. They feel the rest of us are not seeing things as they really are, that we are being overly sensitive, and that kind of thing. But if we were to recognize Jesus Christ as the Lord of our church and Lord of each of our lives, as the Head of our organizations, the only One who has power and the authority to control, we would be a lot better off.

**JACL:** What I hear you say is that while we adhere to specific biblical beliefs, they do not always translate into how we behave or how we feel; at times, we may not even be aware of how we feel. Do you have any advice for how we can grow to become more Christlike as we deal with the types of difficult situations that you have personally overcome?

**ES:** First of all, we are all overcomers, or in the process of overcoming, as long as we are in this world as human beings. We have not reached perfection. We must recognize that even we, as God's chosen people within the church, have problems with these kinds of issues we've been discussing. They function like a cancer in the church, silently tearing us down and eating at us. We must recognize that we have sinned, then confess and repent.

In some ways, perhaps subconsciously, we abuse prophecy in the way we live. Sometimes, we live as though God has already separated the wheat from the tares, as though some have already been declared unworthy. We must relate to all people as fellow creations of God.

Secondly, I would take us back to our beliefs as Adventists. Our professions are on target. We are Christlike in our speech, and many, perhaps even most, are Christlike in day-to-day life. We all have been created by God; we all have the common ancestry of Adam and Eve. Yet, many have gone to great lengths to build up walls between themselves and other people. Sometimes

we are ahead of God, which is never safe and always wrong. We are ahead of God when we leap to the end of the prophecies and live as though all of the things that *will* come upon us have *already* come—that we have been deemed righteous and others have been deemed unrighteous.

In these areas, my prayer is that our Adventist Church leaders will continue to move in the right direction. I've seen some positive movement in my time in the Church, though it has been painfully slow for people of the Book, God's remnant people.

Also, we believe that men and women were made in God's image—we are equally of God.

The church derives its authority from Christ and is God's family. Its members live on the basis of the covenant of love to which Jesus called us, and that is the only symbol of our having truth.

We are the body of Christ, and true unity in the body of Christ speaks so eloquently, powerfully, and so directly, that it makes it impossible for anyone to misunderstand the words. The church is one body of many members, called from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. We are new creatures in Christ. The distinctions of race, culture, learning, nationality, and all kinds of other differences should serve only as positive personal points of distinction. The Bible tells us very clearly that we are equal, whether rich or poor, whether male or female. All of these kinds of things must never be divisive among us.

People have used Scripture to justify slavery, to justify physical, emotional, mental abuse of women and children or men of so-called lower social class status. We have done an injustice to God and His Word in this way.

**JACL:** Can you share with us some more specific advice that you have for leaders regarding interpersonal or racial reconciliation?

**ES:** We must learn how to talk and listen to each other. We also have to listen to God and be more realistic in applying His Word to everyday life in the area of racial reconciliation, harmony, and unity. We need to be more intentional in how we perceive those from different national and cultural contexts. It takes honesty, courage, and openness with people.

When facing tribal conflicts, caste systems, or any other form of bigotry that has caused suffering to millions of people, it is our responsibility to make a commitment to align our words and deeds with the teachings of Scripture. In God, we are all given an immutable equality of all persons, in all times, places, and circumstances as descendants of Adam and Eve. If

we maintain our allegiance to Biblical principles, we are committed to the equality and dignity of all human beings in the face of historic and continuing attempts to use skin color, place of origin, caste, or perceive lineage as a pretext for an oppressive and domineering behavior. We must live these out when we go into the nominating and other committees.

Many members of our worldwide church fail to uphold this Biblical truth. Many believers in church organizations have absorbed sinful and dehumanizing ideas about race, tribal, caste, and ethnic valuing that have led to practices that injure and wound members of the human family. These ideas and practices often have resulted from power grabbing, attempts at seizing control over others, and in so doing have undermined the truths of Scripture.

We must also acknowledge our failure to do so and exercise the love of God in response to it as agents of reconciliation in society—as bearers of peace that comes from God and passes all understanding. The love of Christ must compel us to live as ambassadors in this divided world for the sake of reconciliation. We are to support and nurture those who are marginalized and mistreated because of their color, caste, tribe, or ethnicity.

God's truth about human origins and equality as taught in the Bible is the wisest foundation for all human relationships. As Christians, we have a special responsibility to demonstrate our commitment to equality, fairness, and accountability in all human relationships. We must accept and embrace our Christian commitment to live through the power of the Holy Spirit as a Church that is just, caring, and loving—grounded in biblical principle.

Let me illustrate with an example. When we go into a nominating committee at General Conference session or at the division, union, local conference, or the local church, we state that we're going to allow God to lead us. We must really mean it, though, and go in there without any prescribed structures that will maneuver and manipulate anyone into office. If we could do that, God could use us more effectively. But when we stand and pray with all piety that God may lead the process, but then we already have planted individuals in the nominating committee to bring a certain name, a certain motion, in a certain way, we do more than deny that Christ is head and leading. We do more than abuse Jesus in this context; we do more than deny that God is our God.

**JACL:** Thank you for that example. As we close, how can we apply the wisdom you shared in our day-to-day practice? How can we apply Jesus's example of acceptance and openness in today's society?



**ES:** John 13:35 tells us: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (ESV). This text also applies to organizational context, it applies to leaders. It means we take the time to look at our Church and the members in our churches as all being equal. Jesus’ parable of laborers in the vineyard in Matthew 20:1–16 relates well to this issue—those who started at the beginning of the journey and those who came in at the last hour were found equal in Christ’s eyes. Jesus gave us such examples to help us to understand how to love and live with Christ in us.