

ELLEN G. WHITE AND THE INFLUENCE OF COLONIAL AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

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Many, but certainly not all, of the women who worked for the Seventh-day Adventist Church during the latter half of the nineteenth century were the wives of ministers. Ellen G. White writes that these women undertook “labor just as devotedly as their husbands,” and “are recognized by God as being as necessary to the work of ministry as their husbands.”¹ These words were written in 1898 while living in Australia within the context of advocating that female church workers, particularly those who were minister’s wives and undertook duties that were “necessary to the work of ministry,” should receive the wages of “two distinct workers”² rather than just the single wage of the husband.

This article will explore some of White’s statements from her Australian years regarding women in ministry. Her remarks will be considered within the larger Australian context of her time, in colonial Australia just prior to federation, a society which was greatly affected by the transportation of over 162,000 convicts, the peaking suffrage movement, and a national and global financial crisis. It will also consider the addition of another ordained profession besides that of a minister, physician, and educator, and discuss its endorsement by White as a result of her Australian experience.

Equal Pay for Equal Work

Ellen White had previously expressed the need to pay women workers appropriate wages; however, while living in Australia her feelings on the matter seemed to intensify greatly, even to the point where in April 1898 she wrote in a letter to Brothers Irwin, Evans, Smith, and Jones,³ “I will feel it my duty to create a fund from my tithing money, to pay these women who are accomplishing just as essential work as the ministers are doing and this tithing I will reserve for work in the same line as that of the ministers, hunting for

¹Ellen G. White, “Women as Workers in the Cause of God,” Ms. 43a (1898): 1.

²Ibid.

³Brother George A. Irwin was the president of the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church from February 19, 1897 to April 2, 1901; Brother I. H. Evans was the Michigan Conference president from 1891 to 1897; Brother Uriah Smith was the on-and-off-again editor of the *Review and Herald*, the primary Seventh-day Adventist Church magazine, in the periods 1855-1861, 1864-1869, 1870-1871, 1872-1873, 1877-1880, 1881-1897, and 1901-1903; and lastly, brother A. T. Jones was the editor of the *Review and Herald* (1897-1901) when White wrote her letter.

souls, fishing for souls.”⁴ In the same year she also wrote, “When self-denial is required because of a dearth of means, do not let a few hard-working women do all the sacrificing. Let all share in making the sacrifice. God declared, ‘I hate robbery for burnt offering.’”⁵ From this we can assume that the work of these women was considered “just as essential work as the ministers are doing” and achieved the same result as a minister’s role “hunting for souls, fishing for souls,” and thus a case was made for them to be remunerated by the church organization, equally to men who were paid for the work they were doing. Ellen White felt so strongly about this that she was prepared to use her own tithes to see it done, and stated that if the church organization did not have enough money to go around, then the male workers needed to “sacrifice” their wages, suggesting equality in remuneration and sacrifice as evidenced by “robbery for burnt offering.” Strong words indeed; however, when we investigate the social and economic climate in Australia in the late nineteenth century (when Ellen White wrote these words), we find some significant insight into why equal pay for equal work was so important at this juncture in not only Australian history, but also world history, and why she felt it should be the policy of the global Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Australian Context

April 1898, when Ellen White wrote these remarks, was just four years shy of when all Australian women would be granted the right to vote, in 1902. Women in South Australia had already received the right to vote in state elections in 1895, three years earlier; and one woman, Catherine Helen Spence, ran for office in 1897⁶—the first woman in the modern era to do so. Women in Western Australia received the same right a year later, in 1899. New Zealand was the first modern industrialized country to grant women the right to vote, five years earlier in 1893.⁷ Thus, Ellen White’s statements were made right in the middle of a revolution that was rethinking equality and the potential of women. (Due to her death in 1915, Ellen White never lived to see the right to vote extended to women in her home country. The United States did not give all women the right to vote until 1920.)

Only 30 years earlier, the final shipment of convicts had been transported to Australia, bringing the total number of transported persons to over

⁴Ellen G. White to Brothers Irwin, Evans, Smith, and Jones, Letter 137, Apr. 21, 1898. Some church leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church may find this statement regarding tithes rather disturbing and would wish to explain it away. Be that as it may, her letter does demonstrate how strongly White felt about this issue of equal pay. It could even be argued that she viewed it as a moral and ethical issue that women should be paid for the valuable work they do.

⁵Ellen G. White, Ms. 47, 1898.

⁶Government of South Australia, “Catherine Helen Spence: A Bibliography,” accessed Apr. 15, 2013, <http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/spence/>.

⁷Australian Government, “Australian Suffragettes,” accessed Apr. 15, 2013, <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-suffragettes>

162,000.⁸ Because of the transportation of female convicts for 80 years, and because many people were descendants of these women, colonial Australians were very accustomed to seeing a woman work hard. Even wealthy free women were not exempt from hard labor, as:

The reality of life in colonial Australia often meant that upper class women had to perform physical labor and hard work for which they were little prepared. Women of social standing found themselves in the harsh, often brutal surrounds of outback Australia where they frequently struggled to build lives for themselves and their families.⁹

From 1871 to 1891, the burgeoning manufacturing industry catering to an isolated Australian population of over three million people¹⁰ saw demand for female workers in Melbourne rise so significantly that wages increased by half in real terms.¹¹ From 1879 through to 1881, universities in Melbourne, Adelaide, and Sydney began to allow women to undertake degrees and pursue professions as doctors and university professors, with many others entering professions such as nursing, teaching, administration, and farming.¹² At this time, too, 84.2 percent of the Australian population could read and write, and a further 2.2 percent claimed they could read but not write.¹³

In the early 1890's, however, Australia experienced a catastrophic change in economic climate. In 1891, many small banks in Melbourne (the main financial center) collapsed, and in 1892 hundreds of companies went out of business as economic depression loomed. Unemployment soared. In 1893 there was an international economic depression which resulted in the financial collapse of the Australian Federal Bank and many other major banks.¹⁴ Ellen White described the situation all around her in Australia saying,

The poor are everywhere. The banks have ruined the country. They invested the people's deposits in various speculations, exceeded their funds, and as the result some have failed, and others have closed, so that the people are poor and helpless. Thousands are destitute of money; they are thrown out of work, and distress is everywhere. The country is in financial ruin. We

⁸Australian Government, "Convicts and the British Colonies in Australia," accessed Apr. 15, 2013, <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/convicts-and-the-british-colonies>.

⁹Australian Government, "Women in Colonial Times," accessed Apr. 15, 2013, <http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/women-in-colonial-times>.

¹⁰Australian Bureau of Statistics, "1901 Census," accessed Apr. 15, 2013, <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3110124.nsf/24e5997b9bf2ef35ca2567fb00299c59/c4abd1fac53e3df5ca256bd8001883ec!OpenDocument>.

¹¹W. A. Sinclair, "Women and Economic Change in Melbourne 1871-1921," *Historical Studies* 20, no.79 (1982): *passim*.

¹²Susan Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001), 127.

¹³Australian Bureau of Statistics, "1901 Census."

¹⁴C. R. Hickson and J. D. Turner, "Free Banking Gone Awry: The Australian Banking Crisis of 1893," *Financial History Review* 9 (2002): 147-167.

need not have felt the pressure we are now under if the books could be sold, but not much can now be done in this line. People are so poor that canvassing is not a success.¹⁵

By 1895 the crisis started to ease, and the Australian economy endeavored to rebuild itself and its financially depleted society, but this took years to accomplish.

The Necessity of Paying Women

Considering the factors mentioned above, combined with the prevailing stigma of unpaid labor being associated with being a convict¹⁶—particularly female convicts, who were also regarded as morally degenerate, unskilled, illiterate prostitutes from a crime class¹⁷—it becomes understandable why women working for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia needed to be paid. Also, according to the 1901 Australian census, 41,235 females worked as professionals (not far behind the 69,899 males), 150,701 females worked as domestic servants, 34,514 females worked in commercial industry, 3,429 females worked in transport and communication, 75,570 females worked in industry, and 38,944 females worked as primary producers. The median age for women was 21 years, suggesting a very large child population, which indicates that a significant portion of the adult female population of Australia at the turn of the twentieth century was employed outside of the home.¹⁸ Add to this that these women lived in a society that was about to give them a political vote (or had already), women were mostly literate, and that for over 100 years a woman working hard, for wages, was not out of the ordinary. The larger financial climate also required that one wage was insufficient for many families hit by the financial crisis to rebuild their lives. All this considered, it becomes clear why Ellen White became a strong advocate for the equal remuneration

¹⁵Ellen G. White to Walter Harper, Letter 30a, July 8, 1894.

¹⁶This attitude is very different today, when Australians can wear convict heritage as a humorous badge of honor that has given rise to organizations such as the “Fellowship of First Fleeters” for descendants of convicts and soldiers transported on the First Fleet in 1788. “Claim a Convict” is a Web-based networking site where descendants can claim their convict ancestors and link up with other descendants.

¹⁷Gay Hendrickson reported that, contrary to this stereotype, 65.3% of female convicts had no prior convictions and 28% had one prior conviction. Only 7.9% had multiple convictions, suggesting that the majority were not from a crime class. Regarding transportation crimes, 91.2% were theft-related, often of small inexpensive items that could be sold easily, suggesting immediate need was their motivation for crime, not criminality or violent crime. These female convicts identified with over 180 trades, and 75% could read and write. Prostitution in England was also not a transportable offense. Thus, the stereotype held of convict women was not entirely accurate. See Gay Hendrickson, “Women Transported: Myth and Reality,” accessed Apr. 15, 2015, <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/publications/papers-and-podcasts/social-history/women-transported.aspx>.

¹⁸Australian Bureau of Statistics, “1901 Census.”

of women who worked for the church and achieved the same results as their male counterparts, most particularly during her time in Australia.

In order to avoid paying equal wages, it is often tempting to belittle the work that women do or give it a title that bears little resemblance to the duties performed or the results and outcomes they are expected to produce. It is also tempting to pay wives of church employees a lower wage because their husbands are also receiving a wage. However, Ellen White writes,

As the devoted minister and his wife engage in the work, they should be paid wages proportionate to the wages of two distinct workers, that they may have means to use as they shall see fit in the cause of God. If the husband should die, and leave his wife, she is fitted to continue her work in the cause of God and receive wages for the labor she performs. Seventh-day Adventists are not in any way to belittle women's work. If a woman puts her housework in the hands of a faithful, prudent helper, and leaves her children in good care, while she engages in the work, the conference should have the wisdom to understand the justice of her receiving wages.¹⁹

The first part of this quote is very important, since it shows that Ellen White's principle of equal pay does not just apply to a married couple, but also to a single wage earner like a single woman.

Another Church-endorsed Profession

The previous section emphasized the importance of equal pay for a particular type of work undertaken by Seventh-day Adventist women in Australia at the turn of the twentieth century. But this leads us to the question, what "work" did these women actually do, and why was it so vital?

Given the financial and social climate of Australia in that period, the early Seventh-day Adventist Church was surrounded and challenged by the serious consequential social problems such catastrophic national issues present. Ellen White writes of one family's struggle,

Brother A has a consumptive wife and seven children. They have a comfortable house, nicely located on a beautiful spot of ground, but the house is [only] partially furnished, and everything bespeaks pressure and want. The purchase was made before they accepted the truth. Brother A is an intelligent man, and his children are well behaved. They will soon be left motherless. In building their house Brother A incurred a debt, and now he cannot obtain work. He is a stone mason by trade. His brother, who has money in the bank, promised to loan him money if necessary, but in the financial pressure the bank closed, and the brother cannot obtain a pound. He must wait until better times for his money. Brother A is in debt to the same bank, and he is in daily expectation of receiving a summons either to repay the money loaned him or to lose all that he has. He said, "For many months we have not lived, only existed."

This depression of finances has brought several families who believe the truth into destitution because of foreclosures. Brother A was in great discouragement as he looked upon his dependent family. He was in danger of giving up everything. We had a most precious season in praying and

¹⁹White, "Women as Workers in the Cause of God," 2.

conversing with them. They had not attended meetings for months. The Lord blessed us, and comforted the hearts of this dear family, and although they live twelve miles from Parramatta church, and ten miles from Kellyville church, of which they are members, they have been out every Sabbath since, and now instead of talking unbelief and discouragement, they are talking faith and hope and courage.²⁰

Debt, threat of foreclosure of the family home, serious illness of a loved one, and prolonged unemployment and poverty can result in a whole range of issues, such as suicide, abuse, domestic violence, anger, extreme financial stress, starvation, anxiety, abandonment, and divorce, but most of all, a feeling of helplessness and depression.²¹ And, from the statement above, these issues were not automatically alleviated by accepting salvation. In fact, the continuing stress of unemployment, the ongoing threat of losing the family home, and the approaching death of one of the parents had led the family above to abandon their church. However, it is claimed that visitation, prayer, and conversation had renewed these individuals with faith, hope, and courage. The Australian financial crisis quickly revealed that traditional ministerial methodologies for gaining and retaining converts, such as public evangelism and canvassing, had limitations.

Working with individuals who are suffering from issues for which there is no immediate solution is often challenging, and it takes an enormous emotional toll on individuals who work with distressed people. Thus, the emotional toll and a prevailing sense of helplessness can make many avoid this type of work altogether. Ellen White writes,

If women do the work that is not the most agreeable to many of those who labor in word and doctrine, and if their works testify that they are accomplishing a work that has been manifestly neglected, should not such labor be looked upon as being as rich in results as the work of the ordained ministers? Should it not command the hire of the laborers? Would not such workers be defrauded if they were not paid? This question is not for men to settle. The Lord has settled it. You are to do your duty to the women who labor in the gospel, whose work testifies that they are essential to carry the truth into families. Their work is just the work that must be done. In many respects a woman can impart knowledge to her sisters that a man cannot. The cause would suffer great loss without this kind of labor.²²

What we would now call chaplaincy, social work, or counseling, is a vital part of church work with church personnel visiting people, listening and talking with them, and addressing the immediate material and mental health needs of the people in the community. Today, this type of work has come a very long way, much like the training and practice of ministers, physicians, and educators. Chaplains, social workers, and counselors are now highly trained

²⁰Ellen G. White to Harmon Lindsay, Letter 50, June 14, 1894, 1-4.

²¹Peter Saunders, *Down and Out: Poverty and Exclusion in Australia*, Studies in Poverty, Inequality and Social Exclusion Series (Bristol, UK: The Policy Press, University of Bristol, 2011), passim.

²²White, "Women as Workers in the Cause of God," 2-3.

professionals often requiring professional licensure and ongoing professional development. They are not mere Bible workers who possess little training in mental health practice or rehabilitative counseling. In Ellen White's time, however, this type of work fell mostly to women, as male ministers were not often stationed at a single church but, rather, moved around undertaking evangelism and canvassing. Ellen White also writes,

They can enter families to which ministers could find no access. They can listen to the sorrows of their depressed and oppressed. They can shed rays of light into discouraged souls. They can pray with them. They can open the scriptures and enlighten them from a "Thus saith the Lord."²³

According to Ellen White, this new method of reaching people had efficacy, leading her to propose a whole new model for church work. She writes in 1895:

Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church. We need to branch out more in our methods of labor.²⁴

Some would suggest this passage is evidence of women being called to mainstream ministry, such as that of a church pastor, or ordination of women to the same. The context, however, does not seem to support this hypothesis. It clearly states, "We need to branch out more in our methods of labor." This passage appears to focus on a church profession, entirely separate to that of the minister, but still as vitally important, which Ellen White suggests will be a "power for good in the church." So much "good" that it required that they be set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands as a symbol of full endorsement from the Seventh-day Adventist Church for the work they were about to undertake.

While the Seventh-day Adventist Church may decide to confer ordination for mainstream ministry on women,²⁵ and in the modern age this may be necessary in certain cultures to arrest denominational decline, this passage however, would seem to indicate that Ellen White's concern was much bigger than that. More completely, it emerges as a calling to a whole new role of ministry and healing separate to that of the minister, educator, and medical professional: someone who could work exclusively with the community and church members to ensure their emotional well-being, and someone who could work collaboratively with church officials and the minister and seek

²³Ibid., 5.

²⁴Ellen G. White, "The Duty of the Minister and the People," *Review and Herald* 72, no. 28 (July 9, 1895): 433-434.

²⁵The authors would like to take this opportunity to disclose that they would fully endorse such a decision, allowing women and men to have a choice between the two separate ordained professions as presented in this article.

their counsel as partners in ministry. The phrase “in some cases they will need to counsel with the church officer or the minister” could equally suggest that “this counsel” is a two-way street. This church professional then becomes someone who can provide counsel to church officers and even the minister, making it a role of confidant, to whom ministers and church officers can provide what is currently referred to in the counseling and human-service professions as supervision. Supervision is a process in which one professional meets with another on a regular basis to debrief, and in doing so, address countertransference, the heavy emotional issues that clients/patients possess, and the toll it takes on the professional personally. It is an essential tool for human-service professionals in minimizing burnout and seeking second opinions from learned colleagues.²⁶

Even when Ellen White returned to the United States, she was still a strong advocate of women being paid and of this new particular role that they could fulfill in meeting the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s goals:

Select women who will act an earnest part. The Lord will use intelligent women in the work of teaching. And let none feel that these women, who understand the Word, and who have ability to teach, should not receive remuneration for their labors. They should be paid as verily as are their husbands. There is a great work for women to do in the cause of present truth. Through the exercise of womanly tact and a wise use of their knowledge of Bible truth, they can remove difficulties that our brethren cannot meet. We need women workers to labor in connection with their husbands, and should encourage those who wish to engage in this line of missionary effort.²⁷

Concluding Remarks

For over 130 years the Seventh-day Adventist Church has been debating whether to ordain female clergy, an issue which was placed on the General Conference agenda for the first time in 1881.²⁸ Although the reports regarding the final outcome of this agenda item by the General Conference Committee is unknown, Ellen White seems to take a neutral position regarding this

²⁶Mary McMahon, “Some Supervision Practicalities,” in *Supervision for the Helping Professions: A Practical Approach*, ed. M. McMahon and W. Patton (French’s Forrest, NSW: Pearson Education Australia, 2002), 17-26.

²⁷Ellen G. White to A. G. Daniels, Letter 142, October 27, 1909.

²⁸The wording of the proposed resolution was: “Resolved, that females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position, may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry. This was discussed by J. O. Corliss, A. C. Bourdeau, E. R. Jones, D. H. Larson, W. H. Littlejohn, A. S. Hutchins, D. M. Canright, and J. N. Loughborough, and referred to the General Conference Committee.” The final ruling of the General Conference Committee is unknown. S. N. Haskell, “General Conference: Business Proceedings,” *Review and Herald* 58, no. 25 (Dec. 20, 1881): 392.

issue.²⁹ Instead, while she was in Australia, she both promoted equal pay for equal work and advocated the introduction of another church-endorsed profession, other than the pastoral one and similar to what we would now consider chaplaincy, social work, or counseling. This branching out in their methods of ministry specifically addressed the physical and emotional needs of the people and, by doing so, also paved the way for their spiritual needs to be met.

²⁹Ellen White does not address this resolution at all; thus, some people would take her silence as an indication that she did not believe that women should be ordained. However, others would argue that since she did not speak against it, this is evidence that she supported it; otherwise she would have spoken up. Both these positions are based on an argument of silence.