

Personal Account of My Ministry
Presented to the Committee on the Role of Women in the Church
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GREETINGS

Elder Wilson,
Members of the Study Commission,

Thank you for inviting me here.

Had they had the opportunity, I believe each of the women serving as chaplains and church pastors would have sent you their greetings.

I wish each of them could be here. Those whom I have met, listened to, and heard about are such a special group of people:

—Some of these women have felt called to ministry from childhood.

—Many of them have traveled circuitous detours into the ministry, often from careers in nursing, teaching, or social work. Others have come from more surprising areas—such as careers in government.

—Some have followed a vision of Christian evangelism into primitive conditions in undeveloped areas of the world.

—Some have started churches.

—Some have brought dozens, others hundreds, to Christ and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

My own story is a very simple one. But because it is my story, it is precious to me. And it is to share it that you have invited me here.

EARLY INFLUENCES AND LEADINGS

I came into my ministry mid-life, and it is only in retrospect that I realize some of the early influences toward that calling.

1) One early influence in my life was my grandfather who helped me learn the good feeling that comes from doing things for others.

He was a patient man who took me with him to help make repairs around the house. We went up ladders to replace screens. We went up on the roof to check shingles. We crawled into the attic to add pads of insulation. I think I was the grandson he didn't have.

It was a wonderful feeling to make things better and

people happier. I made the profound decision that when I grew up, what I wanted to do was --"help people."

This early calling, this early decision grew out of my own experience, but our Adventist church has a wonderful way of recognizing and supporting children's desire to help. We invest in children's talents and their service through a program called "investiture."

So in grade four, my calling to help people was affirmed and recognized by my church. I was "ordained" a Helping Hand. I received a little blue card that made it official. Not only in my experience but in the testing and affirmation of my church, I was a Helper.

2) As I grew up, I began to be influenced strongly by church leadership. I heard the calls of church leaders as the call of God:

a) So, when the conference youth director asked me to be a junior camp counselor, I became a junior camp counselor. Never mind that I had never been a camper in my life.

b) And when the union director of literature evangelism told us college students that God wanted us to sell truth-filled literature, I became a student colporteur, walking dutifully from house to house with Triumph of God's Love and Golden Treasury of Bible Stories.

c) After college I had no other thought than that I would work for the church. I followed the calls of church leaders from school to school around the United States and to three years of teaching overseas in Singapore.

CALL TO CHAPLAINCY

But it was no human voice that gave me the most powerful call I have ever had, the call into ministry. It was the still, small voice of God in the events of my life and the meditations of my heart.

It was like the call Ellen White describes in Patriarches and Prophets, in the chapter on the call of Abraham:

She says, "Many . . . do not hear the voice of God speaking directly from the heavens, but He calls them by the teaching of His word and the events of His providence."

I want to tell you two events in my life through which the Providence of God called me to Chaplaincy:

1) The first was the illness and the death from cancer of both of my parents. They died only one year apart. During their illnesses, there were two summers that I left my

teaching to stay with them.

I saw up close what it was for them to deal with cancer:

—I watched the interplay of hope and suffering as they tried powerful treatments that slowed their cancer, but sapped their strength.

—As people came to visit, I noticed who was helpful and who was not. Those people who suggested there was some evil in their lives that needed changing, or that their faith wasn't strong enough, used their illness like a club to force them to greater righteousness. But others assured them of God's caring. They radiated God's presence more by listening than by preaching.

I learned first hand what it is to have a loved one suffer. I felt the shock, the helplessness, the deep feelings of sadness and loss.

—Giving pain shots every four hours around the clock, day after day, week after week, and being the primary caretaker, I learned how exhaustion creeps over you. I learned how helpful it is to talk to someone^{or} to cry.

I firmly believe that in that experience was the beginning of a call I would only later recognize.

"Many," said Ellen White, are called by events of God's providence.

2) A second life event that led me into my ministry was hearing a chaplain talk about the calling and work of a chaplain. And that chaplain happened to be a woman.

I was surprised! I didn't know that there was such a thing, could be such a thing as a woman chaplain! Valerie Phillips, then chaplain at Battle Creek San, shared experiences of ministry that touched my heart, still tender with my own losses. With good humor she shared some of the problems of being accepted as a woman chaplain.

For example, she told of a secretary greeting her by saying, "Well what do we call you?!" "Valerie"? "Miss Phillips"? "What do you call the other chaplain?" Valerie responded. "Well, we call HIM 'Chaplain Yeagley'!" "Just call me Chaplain Phillips then," Valerie said.

Until I heard Valerie, I had never thought of being a chaplain. But as she spoke I felt a growing excitement, an attraction. Her talents were my talents. Her interests were my interests. Her concerns were my concerns. A still, small Voice began speaking in the back of my mind.

Valerie's role modeling was an important part of my call.

I am a product of my culture and my church. I just didn't think of women as ministers. Valerie's talk opened a whole new awareness of possibility for me. It opened doors of service where I didn't know doors existed.

It was an on-going struggle, however, to think of myself, a woman, as a minister. My theological and clinical pastoral education helped me recognize and deal with this mindset as they taught me the importance of something called, "Pastoral Identification." Often it was my male colleagues and teachers who helped me claim my calling boldly. They challenged and supported me:

"Are you a minister or not?" they would ask me. I would picture a minister in my mind. It was always a man. I squirmed.

"Well, I would prefer to say I do ministry," I replied. This seemed more modest, more appropriate.

Not good enough: "What do you do in your ministry?" they would continue.

"Well, this and this and this."

"What does a minister do?"

"Well, I guess he does this and this and this, too."

"Therefore?" they would ask.

"Therefore I am a minister." It was hard to get the words out at that time. It has only been as I ^{have} experienced my work as a chaplain, and ~~saw~~ the effects of my ministry, that I could say from my heart, as well as my head, "Yes, I am a minister."

Teaching had been a good career with many rewards. But for me chaplaincy is a VERY good career. It is a better fit. It uses my education, my experiences in living in many places with many different cultures. It even uses my sorrows and losses and turns them into a strong base from which to reach out to others. It is who I am.

I have been a chaplain for four and a half years now. I minister to patients and staff at a lovely little inner-city Adventist hospital in Chicago where I enjoy the richness of people with many different cultures and ethnic origins. (When I recently visited an almost all white church, I found myself a bit uncomfortable. It looked a little pale and anemic compared with my hospital.)

CONFIRMATION

It is important to any man or woman in ministry to have confirmation of one's gifts and calling. I'm thankful for the support and affirmation that have come to me in formal and informal ways.

1) I believe I received such official confirmation when I was certified a Fellow in the College of Chaplains. It was a long process over a number of months. First certain training and church approval was necessary. Then I had to write a number of essays on my theological and clinical understanding of my chaplaincy, and finally I faced a very rigorous committee of my peers who examined me on my understandings and evidence of my gifts. So from professional circles by nonAdventist ministers, I was affirmed. That was a very special moment and gave joy and energy to my work.

Yet it is a sadness to me that my own church withholds full approval from me. We will certify both boys and girls as Helping Hands, but only men will be affirmed through ordination at this time.

There I am not a ministr to be ordained. I am a woman.

I do believe Jesus understands this experience. It did not stop His ministry, but I know it made His work harder to be rejected in Nazareth. "A prophet is without honor in his own country," He observed. In some deep and meaningful ways, an Adventist woman is without honor in her own church.

2) But there is an unofficial source of confirmation to my calling that brings me great joy. It is the response of the people I serve.

When six year old Thea's mother lay, brain dead, in our Intensive Care Unit, Thea sat with me on the floor of the waiting room, and we played games to pass the time. One game was a guessing game. One of us would think of a sentence and put down blanks for the letters. The other would guess letters until the sentence was clear.

Thea thought of a sentence, and after checking with her grandmother for some help with spelling, had me guess letters. Her sentence turned out to be, "Penny is very nice."

I tell you, the excitement of receiving my doctorate, or the challenging ordeal culminating in being certified a Fellow in the College of Chaplains were no more meaningful to me than when Thea proclaimed, "Penny is very nice."

I believe God spoke to me through this little girl as He would love to speak to his women in ministry through the institution of ordination. But He doesn't force us. When

church leaders are silent, He uses children. If children were silent, perhaps the rocks would cry out.

I believe ordination does not make ministry possible. I know too much about the great contributions being made by women in ministry. But I believe ordination would support them and strengthen their hands the same way it does men in ministry.

Ordination does make a difference in ministry. But my experience is more with Lack of Ordination. Let me close by sharing with you the difference that Lack of Ordination makes:

1) Recently I was talking with an Adventist chaplain stationed at Great Lakes Naval Training Center near Chicago. He said that the military services were very interested in hiring women clergy as chaplains at this time. That it would be a wonderful opportunity for the Adventist church if they had women who could apply. But they cannot. Ordination is required. No exceptions. It is a lost opportunity. Men are available, but it is women they are looking for.

2) But what Adventist woman would want to minister in the military services anyway? I know one. A very dedicated young woman who felt called to minister to young people in the military, as many Adventist men do so well. But she quickly learned that to be a chaplain in the US military, the applicant MUST be ordained. No exceptions.

3) There ARE exceptions in hospital settings, and in hospitals a number of Adventist women have found a place for their ministry. But even then, the lack of ordination presents problems:

I discovered this first hand while I was looking for a hospital to hire me after I finished my training. One large nonAdventist community hospital was very much interested in me, and I in them. But when they learned that I was not ordained, they ended our discussions. "We are sorry," they said, "but this requirement is very important to us, and we will not change it. Fortunately for us, many ordained men and women are also applying for this job." It didn't matter what other credentials my church had given me. I was not ordained. End of discussion. The position would go to someone else.

4) Lack of ordination became a barricade to my being hired even in an Adventist Hospital. "It is very important to me," the Adventist chaplain of a large SDA Hospital told me, "to have a fully qualified and credentialed staff. I already have one woman on my staff, and one unordained chaplain is enough."

5) Lack of ordination makes a salary difference to

ministers. In many cases, the ordained minister is paid more than the unordained minister. And the ordained minister has more job security.

6) Ordination, I have discovered, is important to more than the people who hire me. It is important to the people I minister to. To my surprise a question I meet now and then from hospital patients is, "Are you ordained?" To them it is the difference between a friendly hospital visitor, or a "real" minister, trained, qualified, and approved.

7) One last observation on the difference between having ordination, or lacking it, is more difficult to share—here. It is very personal kind of information, easily misunderstood, quickly criticised.

Ordination symbolizes a kind of church support and approval not given to those who are not ordained. The card that I carry from my Union Conference is very much like the one that my male colleagues in Pastoral Care carry. It has the same important signatures on it. But theirs is blue and mine is pink. Theirs say, "ordained minister" and mine says "Licensed Commissioned Minister." They are not the same.

A dear friend from California recently gave me a beautiful golden orange, picked just hours ago from the top of his own orange tree. I have seen other oranges just as beautiful that looked almost identical. But they were plastic imitations, only made to look like the real oranges.

These subtle differences imply a second class affirmation. I am being very open and vulnerable with you. I have several dear friends, women in ministry, who will admit the pain of being treated differently only in the most confidential of settings. In public they make no complaints. Indeed, we are too busy to spend our energies worrying about the differences. But somewhere, in the quiet of our hearts, it takes a toll.

Ordination is important. It does make a difference:

- It affirms.
- It supports.
- It validates.
- It authorizes.

I believe the men and women who use their time and energy to speak out for the ordination of women in ministry know this.

Some of you may see the request for ordination of women as a threat to God's appointed order. But those who ask are not

the enemy.

It is the people who love the church who call it to account.

It is the people who love the church who invest such energy. Many simply shake their heads at the church's lack of ordination for women, and quietly go elsewhere.

But those who call to you for ordination wrestle with the church as Jacob wrestled with the angel. Their cry is NOT an impetuous demand to give women power, but the TRUSTING cry of Jacob, saying,

"I will not let you go until you bless me."