

“UNIONS AND ORDINATION TO THE GOSPEL MINISTRY”

BRIEF SUMMARY AND COMPREHENSIVE WORKING POLICY EXPLANATION

GENERAL CONFERENCE SECRETARIAT

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BRIEF SUMMARY

The General Conference Secretariat document entitled “Unions and Ordination to the Gospel Ministry—Comprehensive Working Policy Explanation” is provided for clarification regarding the *General Conference Working Policy* (GC WP) B 05, no. 6 that “decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference/mission.” Some have understood it to grant absolute authority to ordain to the gospel ministry whomever a union wishes. This is a misunderstanding both of the actual wording of the *General Conference Working Policy* and its specific intent.

GC WP B 05, no. 6 is not a specific policy on ordination but rather is given as an example of church structure. The authority it references is not absolute or inherent to each union but is delegated by the General Conference itself. This means that each union’s actions regarding ordination must be in accordance with those of the General Conference since it is the source of the authority.

The authority given to the unions is not only delegated, but also limited. Unions have the power to *select* those to be ordained from among candidates proposed by conferences who meet the criteria set by the World Church. Authority to determine the criteria has *never* been delegated from the General Conference to any other organization—it does not belong to the work of the union but rather the criteria were voted by the World Church and are part of the GC Working Policy in the “L” section entitled “The Ministry and Ministerial Training.” In particular, the L 35 section outlines specifically the “Qualifications for Ordination to the Ministry” which have been voted by the World Church during Annual Council.

The church’s policies and practice *do not permit* women to be ordained, since section L, which governs ordination, is the only section in GC WP with language that is masculine

gender-specific. All other sections of GC WP use gender-neutral or inclusive language, but Section L consistently refers only to men being ordained or on track for ordination. In addition, the section in GC WP BA 60 10 (pages 118-119), which refers to the church's official position regarding discrimination, specifically states that "Neither shall these positions be limited by gender (except those requiring ordination to the gospel ministry)". Therefore, no union or any other entity can ordain women to the gospel ministry.

When the entire GC WP is viewed, the actual meaning of GC WP B 05, no. 6 is clear: it is actually only giving an example of the limited and delegated work of a union in deciding who is to be ordained from a list given the union from a local conference. GC WP L 45 05 no. 3 explains that the local conference submits names to the union for counsel and approval but it does so based on the qualifications for ordination policies of GC WP L 35 that were voted by Annual Council with world representation. Nowhere does GC WP authorize any other entity to change the qualifications already voted by the world church. *Working Policy* does not enable unions to ignore the actions of GC Sessions or of the GC Executive Committee. In selecting who should and should not be ordained to gospel ministry, each union is bound to maintain and implement the criteria for ordination found in *GC Working Policy*, and to comply with World Church practice and policies.

COMPREHENSIVE WORKING POLICY EXPLANATION

Introduction

The statement in the *General Conference Working Policy* (GC WP) B 05, no. 6, that "decisions regarding the ordination of ministers are entrusted to the union conference/mission," has been the subject of some misunderstanding resulting in confusion. Some have understood it to grant absolute authority to ordain to the gospel ministry whomever a union wishes. This, however, is a misunderstanding, which becomes clear when both the complete provisions in *Working Policy* and the church's longstanding and consistent practice regarding the authority to ordain to gospel ministry and fully understood.

The key points to a complete understanding of the subject are these:

- 1) The authority referred to in GC WP B 05, no. 6 is a delegated authority, rather than an absolute one—it was specifically granted to unions by the General Conference (GC) itself. This means that each union's actions regarding ordination must be in accordance with those of the GC, since it is the source of the authority that a union has in this area.
- 2) This authority is not only delegated, but also limited. Unions have the power to *select*, from among candidates proposed by conferences who meet the criteria set by the World Church itself, those to be ordained.

3) Finally, the church's policies and practice *do not permit* women to be ordained since the GC WP section called "Qualifications for Ordination to the Ministry" (L 35) only allows for males to be ordained.

General Conference and Unions in Church Policy

General Conference Working Policy, section B, explains Seventh-day Adventist Church structure, authority, and the relationship of its various administrative levels. The Church is organized into four primary constituent levels with each unit having a distinct authority and function. Beyond these primary building blocks, the General Conference in Session is recognized as "the highest authority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church under God."¹

Section B provides a detailed description of the organizational principles for the Church. It includes illustrations of specific responsibilities that have been delegated to each of the constituent levels, all of which have implications for other levels of the body. The decision regarding the ordination of ministers by the union conference/mission refers to the practice of ratifying names of ministers that are recommended by local conferences who meet the criteria as defined by the World Church.

This process for ordination is similar to the process of accepting a person into membership at a local church. The local church in business session decides who may or may not be a church member, but it does so based on a demonstration of a prospective member's commitment to uphold the Fundamental Beliefs that are defined only by the General Conference in Session.

Authority to determine the criteria for ordination has *never* been delegated from the General Conference to any other organization—it does not belong to the work of the division, the union or the local conference/mission but rather the criteria were voted by the World Church and are part of the GC Working Policy in the "L" section, entitled "the Ministry and Ministerial Training." In particular, the L 35 sub-section outlines specifically the "Qualifications for Ordination to the Ministry" which have been voted by the World Church during Annual Council.

Unions do not have the right to set their own criteria for ordination and are operating outside the parameters of Church structure if they do, just as if a local church decided to establish its own set of beliefs then it would no longer be a Seventh-day Adventist church. Organizational status at each level is granted as a trust "to entities that meet certain qualifications, including . . . compliance with denominational practices and policies," with the provision that, "membership and status can be reviewed, revised, amended, or withdrawn by the level of organization that granted it."²

Historical practice

These points are clarified by historical practice when it comes to ordination. Ever since the eighteenth General Conference Session in 1879, the church *as a whole* has set criteria for ordained ministers. The 1879 Session created “proper qualifications of ministers,” providing that “all candidates for the ministry should be thoroughly examined” on them.³ The “qualifications” adopted in 1879 were Adventism’s first official criteria for ministry. Their establishment was underscored by an action taken by the twentieth (1881) Session action calling for formal examination of “candidates for license and ordination.”⁴ Evaluating candidates for ordination thereafter became standard practice.

In 1925 the GC published the *Manual for Ministers*.⁵ The GC Executive Committee in 1930 referred to the *Manual*’s “long-established” guidelines on ordination.⁶ Therefore, the *Manual* can be taken as summarizing Adventist attitudes to ordination at least for the first quarter of the twentieth century, if not earlier. The *Manual* established criteria for ordination, including a series of protocols for selecting those who would be ordained. The authority to make this selection was vested in the conference, and was to be taken “at a regular conference session.”⁷

In 1926 *Working Policy* was inaugurated. It was a “careful digest” of “General Conference actions voted in former sessions and Councils,” which was to “constitute a working policy.”⁸ The 3rd (1930) edition of WP was the first to introduce policies on ordination. Its section “Ordination to the ministry” essentially endorsed the model in the *Minster’s Manual*, **except** that the primary role in final approval of candidates to ordain was now shifted to the union. WP now provided that “the local conference committee submits the names of the candidates with their findings and convictions to the union conference committee.”⁹ The authority of unions over the selection and approval of candidates for ordination derives, in sum, from an action of the GC Executive Committee,¹⁰ which was contained in *General Conference Working Policy*.

The 1930 edition also sets out a vital criterion for ordination in a statement that opens the section: “ordination of the ministry is the setting apart of the man to a sacred calling, not for one local field alone, but for the entire church.”¹¹ Thus, any person ordained had to be able to serve worldwide, rather than only locally. This concept is present from the very first official GC WP on ordination—**this is the oldest criterion for ordination in denominational policy**.

In 1944 the General Conference Executive Committee made explicit the assertion: “That we, the General Conference Executive Committee, [are] the highest authority governing ordination of ministers in the religious denomination known as Seventh-day Adventists.”¹²

In the 21st (1977) edition of GC WP, policies on ordination were significantly modified for the first time in many years. Among the revisions was this change of language in what became section L 40: “Workers who are ordained to the gospel ministry are set apart to serve the world church.” This continued the emphasis, present since 1930, of the universal nature

of ordained ministry, but the language became that “of the world church” rather than “the entire church.” However, an entirely new section was added (L 45) that begins: “Ordination to the ministry is the setting apart of the worker to a sacred calling, not for one local field alone, but for the entire church.” This preserved the language of “entire church” from the 1930 edition—indeed, the addition of this statement, on top of the statement in L 40, only emphasized that ordination must take the whole church into account. Although in the 30th (1987–88) edition, “entire church” was replaced with “world church” (L 45), nevertheless, the provisions of GC WP over the last four decades have continued to stress that ordination is global in its impact and implications and must therefore take the world into account.

The lessons of history

One of the purposes for establishing the General Conference in 1863 was “securing unity and efficiency in labor.”¹³ From 1863 to 1879, the authority to ordain ministers was delegated entirely to the conferences. From 1879, however, it was reserved to the General Conference. Since the 1890s, the actual choice whom to ordain has been made by “the body of believers among whom the worker has labored.”¹⁴ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that meant the conference; but in 1930 that changed to the union.

However, as will be clear from this brief survey, the authority exercised previously by the conference and now by the union is a limited one: to select candidates based on “qualifications” that have been established since 1879 by General Conference Sessions and have been supplemented, since 1930, by the General Conference Executive Committee. Furthermore, the most fundamental of those qualifications, or criteria, in that it is the longest standing, is that ordination is “not for one local field alone, but for the entire church.” This underscores the unity of the body of Christ, and stipulates, very explicitly, that ministry to the body of Christ must both express and undergird that unity. Since its inception, denominational policy has not allowed the possibility of unilateral action in choosing whom to ordain.

The claim that unions have authority over ordination by virtue of GC WP B 05 not only ignores the clear intent of Section B as whole; it also derives from the 1930 decision by the GC Executive Committee, embodied in that year’s edition of GC WP, that unions, rather than conferences, should henceforth determine which candidates for ordination should be ordained.¹⁵ Such authority as unions claim in this area thus actually stems from the GC Executive Committee. The very act of delegation, especially when prescribed in a formal policy, is itself an expression of where overall authority lies which is in the process of the World Church making decisions for the entire church.

It is clear that the authority of unions regarding ordination is to apply criteria that are set by the World Church through the actions of General Conference Sessions and/or the General Conference Executive Committee. Neither Unions nor any other body have the right to set criteria for ordination since this is reserved for the World Church through the actions of the GC Executive Committee.

A brief review of GC WP shows the importance of adhering to church policy shown in GC WP B 15 05 which indicates that the GC is the authoritative administrative voice; GC WP B 15 10 indicates that adherence to policy is required; and GC WP B 15 15 indicates that officers and administrators are to work in harmony with policies.

Ordination in current Policy

Once authority is granted, some have argued that there is nothing in the criteria established by the World Church that prevents unions from choosing to ordain women to gospel ministry. Some cite the provision in GC WP (BA 60 10) on “nondiscrimination in employment practices and policies” as a mandate for ordaining women. However, the same section goes on to twice explicitly exclude positions “requiring ordination to the gospel ministry” from the general provision against gender discrimination (BA 60 10, nos. 2 and 6). Thus, rather than mandating the ordination of women to gospel ministry, it actually assumes that women will not become ordained ministers.

Section L, which governs ordination, refers exclusively to men being ordained or on track for ordination. In particular, the sub-section entitled “Qualifications for Ordination to the Ministry” (L 35) uses only “men,” “man,” and male pronouns. This cannot be disregarded, since L is the only section in GC WP with language that is masculine gender-specific. All other sections of GC WP use gender-neutral or inclusive language. Therefore, no union or any other entity can ordain women to the gospel ministry.

Finally, the claim that nothing prevents women from being ordained disregards the fact that in Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiastical policy, “the General Conference Session” is recognized “as the highest authority of the Seventh-day Adventist Church under God.”¹⁶ The 1990 GC Session debated whether or not to expand the criteria for ordination to include women and decided against. A 1995 Session action on gender and ordination was limited to denying a request from the North American Division to allow “a division [to] authorize the ordination of qualified individuals without regard to gender” and thus could perhaps be construed as not being generally applicable.¹⁷ But this was not the case five years earlier. The 1990 Session considered a recommendation, concerning “ordination . . . in the world church” that “we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry.” This was carried.¹⁸

Our concept of policy has always been that it is the sum of “General Conference actions voted in former sessions and Councils.”¹⁹ Until a Session takes an action permitting the ordination of women, the standing prohibition, formalized in 1990, still stands. It also continues to bind unions. There was, of course, an attempt at the most recent 2015 GC Session to reverse the 1990 action, but it did not succeed. The 1990 vote is still operative. Currently, women cannot be ordained.

Conclusion

Seen in the light of the GC WP as a whole and of our consistent and longstanding practice, the actual meaning of GC WP B 05, no. 6 is clear: it is actually only giving an example of the limited and delegated work of a union in deciding who is to be ordained from a list given the union from a local conference. GC WP L 45 05 No. 3 explains that the local conference submits names to the union for counsel and approval, but today, as throughout our history, all candidates must meet the qualifications for ordination voted by Annual Councils or General Conference Sessions. Nowhere does GC WP indicate that any other entity has the authority to change the qualifications already voted by the World Church.

In sum, there is nothing in GC WP that enables unions to ignore the actions of GC Sessions or of the GC Executive Committee. In selecting who should and should not be ordained to gospel ministry, each union is bound to maintain and implement the criteria for ordination found in *GC Working Policy*, and to comply with World Church practice and policies.

NOTES

¹ WP (2014-15), B 10 22.

² Ibid, B 05, no. 3. Cf. *ibid.*, B 10 25.

³ Nov. 25, 1879, GC Archives, Box 6873, minute-book: "Seventh-day Adventist General Conference Records", vol. 2, 1879-1886, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵ It went into a second edition in 1942 but thereafter was discontinued until eventually replaced by the *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's Handbook*.

⁶ GCC [General Conference Committee], Apr. 3, 1930, Minutes, vol. XIII, p. 1122.

⁷ *Manual for Ministers*, pp. 4-5.

⁸ Annual Council, Oct. 5, 1926, GCC Minutes, vol. XIII, p. 128.

⁹ WP (1930), p. 71 [lettered sections with numbered sub-sections were only introduced in the 21st (1977) edition of WP].

¹⁰ GCC, Apr. 3, 1930, Minutes, vol. XIII, pp. 1121-22

¹¹ WP (1930), p. 71.

¹² GCC, June 5, 1944, Minutes, vol. XV, p. 1439.

¹³ Preamble to the first Constitution (1863).

¹⁴ *Manual for Ministers*, p. 5

¹⁵ WP (1930), p. 71.

¹⁶ WP (2014-15), B 10 22.

¹⁷ July 5, 1995, *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, July 11, 1995, p. 30

¹⁸ July 11, 1990, GC Session Minutes in GCC Minutes, 1990: pp. 1039-40

¹⁹ See n. 8, above. Cf. WP (2014-2015), B 15 05.