

Regional Ecclesial Agency and Global Authority: Women's Ordination Practices in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

Zainal Sibagariang^{1*}, Rogate Artaida Tiarasi Gultom², Arip Surpi Sitompul³
Theology Department, Institusi Agama Kristen Negeri Tarutung, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: Zainal Sibagariang

zainal.sibagariang@suryanusantara.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

The ordination of women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church remains a contested issue that reveals a deeper tension between global ecclesial authority and regional or local expressions of mission. While the General Conference has not adopted women's ordination as a universal policy, several Adventist unions and local congregations have taken independent or semi-independent actions to ordain women or to adopt gender-inclusive ministerial recognition. This article analyzes selected cases of women's ordination practices within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, including Columbia Union Conference, Pacific Union Conference, North German Union Conference, Norwegian Union of Churches, Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Victoria Church, and La Sierra University Church. Using a qualitative historical-theological approach, the study argues that these cases cannot be interpreted merely as administrative irregularities or isolated acts of dissent. Rather, they reveal a structural and theological tension within global Adventism concerning the meaning of ordination, the limits of regional authority, the nature of church unity, and the relationship between biblical interpretation and contextual mission. The findings suggest that the women's ordination debate functions as a test case for Adventist ecclesiology: whether unity is to be understood primarily as global policy uniformity or as shared doctrinal and missional identity that may allow limited contextual diversity

INTRODUCTION

The ordination of women has become one of the most enduring and divisive questions in the modern history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The debate is not merely about whether women may serve in ministry, because Adventist women have long participated in mission, education, evangelism, pastoral care, and institutional leadership. The more specific and contested question is whether women may be ordained to the gospel ministry in the same ecclesial sense as male pastors. This question has generated sustained theological, hermeneutical, administrative, and ecclesiological disagreement within the global Adventist communion.

The issue becomes particularly complex because the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not organized as a loose federation of independent congregations. It operates as a worldwide denomination with a representative structure that includes local churches, conferences, unions, divisions, and the General Conference. This structure is designed to maintain doctrinal coherence, organizational order, and global mission unity. Therefore, women's ordination does not function only as a local employment or ministry issue. It also raises the question of who has authority to define ministerial legitimacy for the world church.

Despite the absence of global approval for women's ordination, several Adventist entities have taken significant actions in favor of gender-inclusive ordination or equivalent ministerial recognition. Columbia Union Conference held a special constituency meeting on July 29, 2012, and approved ordination to gospel ministry without regard to gender. Pacific Union Conference made a similar decision on August 19, 2012, with 79 percent of delegates voting in favor of gender-inclusive ordination. North German Union Conference also moved toward ordaining women equally with men in 2012, while the Norwegian Union of Churches adopted a more radical approach by replacing the category of ordination with commissioning for both men and women. Earlier local actions also occurred, such as the 1995 ordinations at Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Victoria Church, and La Sierra University Church.

These cases reveal that the women's ordination debate in Adventism is not simply theoretical. It has moved from theological discussion into concrete ecclesial practice. Some unions and congregations have acted according to their understanding of mission, justice, pastoral need, and the recognition of spiritual gifts, even when those actions created tension with global denominational policy. This reality raises a central research problem: how should these regional and local ordination initiatives be interpreted within Adventist ecclesiology?

This article argues that the actions of these unions and congregations should not be reduced either to rebellion against church authority or to simple progress toward gender equality. Rather, they should be understood as manifestations of a deeper unresolved tension within global Adventism: the tension between global policy unity and contextual ecclesial agency. The article examines selected cases of women's ordination or gender-inclusive ministerial recognition and evaluates their theological and ecclesiological significance. It

asks how these cases illuminate Adventist debates over ordination, authority, mission, and unity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the absence of global approval for women's ordination, several Adventist entities have taken significant actions in favor of gender-inclusive ordination or equivalent ministerial recognition. Columbia Union Conference held a special constituency meeting on July 29, 2012, and approved ordination to gospel ministry without regard to gender. Pacific Union Conference made a similar decision on August 19, 2012, with 79 percent of delegates voting in favor of gender-inclusive ordination. North German Union Conference also moved toward ordaining women equally with men in 2012, while the Norwegian Union of Churches adopted a more radical approach by replacing the category of ordination with commissioning for both men and women. Earlier local actions also occurred, such as the 1995 ordinations at Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Victoria Church, and La Sierra University Church.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical-theological method. The historical component examines selected institutional actions taken by Adventist unions and local congregations regarding women's ordination. The theological component interprets these actions in relation to Adventist ecclesiology, the theology of ordination, church authority, and contextual mission.

The article uses documentary analysis as its primary method. The main data are drawn from reports and secondary documentation concerning Adventist organizations that acted in favor of women's ordination or gender-inclusive ministerial recognition. These include union-level decisions in North America and Europe, as well as local church actions in the United States. The cases are treated not as exhaustive evidence of the entire Adventist debate, but as representative examples of regional and local ecclesial agency within a global denominational structure.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the article reconstructs the selected cases historically. Second, it identifies the theological and ecclesiological issues implied by these actions. Third, it synthesizes the findings into a broader argument about the unresolved relationship between global authority and contextual mission in Adventism.

Women's Ordination as an Ecclesiological Problem in Adventism

Within Adventism, ordination is not merely a ceremonial action. It functions as an ecclesial recognition of calling, ministerial authority, and representative service. Although Adventists do not generally understand ordination as a sacrament in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox sense, ordination still carries significant theological, symbolic, and administrative weight. It identifies a person as officially recognized for gospel ministry and authorizes that person to function as a representative minister of the church.

The complexity emerges because Adventism also maintains a strong Protestant emphasis on the priesthood of all believers and the distribution of

spiritual gifts. If ministry is grounded in divine calling and spiritual gifting, then the exclusion of women from full ministerial recognition becomes difficult for some Adventists to justify, especially in contexts where women already perform pastoral functions. On the other hand, if ordination is understood as involving ecclesial headship or representative authority patterned after male leadership in Scripture, then restricting ordination to men appears theologically necessary to others.

This theological ambiguity has made the women's ordination debate especially difficult to resolve. The issue is not merely whether women are capable of ministry. Most Adventists would affirm that women have made essential contributions to the church's mission. The more contested issue is whether ordination itself is a gendered ecclesial act. Because Adventists have not reached consensus on the theological nature of ordination, disagreement about who may be ordained remains persistent.

The debate also exposes different understandings of church unity. One view defines unity primarily through shared global policy and uniform practice. From this perspective, if the General Conference has not approved women's ordination, then unions and local churches should not act independently. Another view defines unity through shared faith, mission, and fundamental doctrinal commitments, while allowing some contextual diversity in administrative practice. From this perspective, regional actions may be legitimate when they respond to local mission needs and do not alter core doctrine.

Thus, women's ordination functions as a test case for Adventist ecclesiology. It asks whether the church's global unity requires universal uniformity in ministerial recognition, or whether a worldwide church may preserve unity while allowing contextual variation in non-fundamental areas of practice.

Union-Level Actions and the Question of Regional Authority

1. Columbia Union Conference

Columbia Union Conference represents one of the most significant union-level actions in the Adventist women's ordination debate. On July 29, 2012, the union held a special constituency meeting and approved ordination to the gospel ministry without regard to gender. This action was later reaffirmed during a Leadership Summit in March 2016.

The significance of this decision lies in its institutional character. It was not merely a symbolic protest by a local congregation or an informal statement of opinion. It was a formal action taken by a union conference through a constituency process. Therefore, it directly raised the question of whether a union has the authority to recognize candidates for ordination without gender restriction when the global church has not adopted such a policy.

From one perspective, Columbia Union's action can be interpreted as an assertion of regional ecclesial responsibility. The union acted on the conviction that women who were already fulfilling pastoral and ministerial roles should be recognized equally. From another perspective, the action can be interpreted as a challenge to global ecclesial order, because it effectively implemented a practice not approved by the world church.

This case demonstrates that the ordination debate is inseparable from the question of distributed authority in Adventism. If unions are responsible for credentialing and ministerial recognition within their territory, to what extent may they act according to regional conviction? If the General Conference represents the final authority of the world church in session, to what extent must regional bodies subordinate local mission concerns to global policy? Columbia Union's action placed these questions at the center of the debate.

Pacific Union Conference

Pacific Union Conference followed a similar path. On August 19, 2012, its constituency voted 79 percent in favor and 21 percent against approving ordination without regard to gender. After this vote, the union's executive committee approved ordination for several women, including fourteen female pastors in the initial stage.

The Pacific Union case is important because of the overwhelming majority in favor of gender-inclusive ordination. The 79 percent approval suggests that, in this regional context, support for women's ordination was not marginal. It reflected a broad constituency-level conviction that women should be eligible for the same ministerial recognition as men.

Theologically, this decision implies a functional and missional understanding of ordination. If women are called, trained, employed, and entrusted with pastoral responsibility, then ordination is viewed as the church's recognition of a ministry already taking place. The decision also suggests that regional bodies may perceive global restriction as pastorally and missionally inadequate in contexts where women's leadership is widely accepted.

However, the decision also intensified the question of ecclesial consistency. If one union ordains women and another does not, then the meaning of Adventist ordination may vary across regions. This creates a practical and theological problem: does ordination represent a universal ministerial status recognized by the whole church, or can it function differently according to regional policy? Pacific Union's action therefore exposes the unresolved relationship between ordination as global ecclesial recognition and ordination as regional ministerial authorization.

North German Union Conference

North German Union Conference took action on April 23, 2012, to ordain female pastors equally with male pastors.² This case shows that the movement toward women's ordination was not confined to North America. European Adventist contexts also produced formal institutional support for gender-inclusive ministry recognition.

The North German case is especially significant because it reflects the influence of a European ecclesial and social context in which gender equality in public and religious leadership has often been more widely accepted than in other parts of the world church. In such settings, withholding ordination from women may be perceived not as biblical fidelity but as an inconsistency between the church's proclaimed theology of spiritual gifts and its actual ministerial practice.

Yet the North German action also highlights one of the central problems in global Adventism: different regions experience the same issue differently. In some territories, women's ordination is seen as necessary for mission credibility. In others, it is seen as cultural accommodation and a threat to biblical order. The North German Union case therefore demonstrates the difficulty of applying a single global policy across diverse cultural and ecclesial settings.

Norwegian Union of Churches

The Norwegian Union of Churches adopted one of the most distinctive responses by abolishing the category of ordination and replacing it with commissioning for both men and women.³ Rather than simply ordaining women into an existing category, the Norwegian Union reframed the category itself.

This approach is theologically significant because it questions whether the inherited distinction between ordination and commissioning is necessary or coherent within Adventist theology. If ordination is not sacramental, and if ministry is grounded in calling, gifting, and ecclesial appointment, then the distinction between ordained and commissioned ministers becomes open to theological reassessment. By applying commissioning to both men and women, the Norwegian Union attempted to avoid gender hierarchy while also avoiding direct use of the contested term "ordination."

However, this solution raises further questions. Does replacing ordination with commissioning solve the theological problem, or does it merely change terminology? If commissioning performs the same ecclesial function as ordination, then it may be interpreted as ordination under another name. If it does not perform the same function, then it may create ambiguity about ministerial authority. The Norwegian case therefore reveals how deeply the controversy is tied to the meaning of ordination itself.

Local Church Actions and the Limits of Congregational Agency

1. Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church

Local church actions preceded several union-level decisions. On September 23, 1995, Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church held a service in which three women—Kendra Haloviak, Penny Shell, and Norma Osborne—were ordained to full gospel ministry. This action occurred in the same year as the General Conference Session in Utrecht, where the proposal for division-level authorization of women's ordination was rejected.

The Sligo case is important because it represents local ecclesial initiative in direct response to an unresolved global debate. Unlike union-level actions, a local congregation does not normally possess broad authority to determine ministerial ordination policy for the denomination. Therefore, Sligo's action was more symbolically confrontational than administratively normative. It functioned as a theological and ecclesial statement: a local congregation publicly recognized women as fully called and qualified for gospel ministry.

This action illustrates how unresolved global issues can generate local acts of protest, conscience, or contextual witness. For supporters, Sligo's action embodied fidelity to the Spirit's gifting and the church's mission. For opponents, it represented disorder and disregard for the world church. The same event can

therefore be interpreted either as prophetic witness or ecclesial disobedience, depending on one's theology of authority.

Victoria Church and La Sierra University Church

In December 1995, Victoria Church in Loma Linda, California, ordained women to pastoral ministry.⁵ In the same month, La Sierra University Church in Riverside, California, also held a service ordaining female pastors to serve the congregation.⁶ These actions show that Sligo was not an isolated local event. Rather, several congregations in academic and progressive Adventist environments moved toward gender-inclusive recognition shortly after the 1995 global decision.

The location of these congregations is significant. Both Victoria Church and La Sierra University Church were situated in Southern California, an environment shaped by higher education, professional culture, and a broader social acceptance of women's leadership. This does not mean that their actions were simply products of culture, but it does suggest that local context influenced how the ordination issue was perceived. In these contexts, the exclusion of women from ordination may have appeared increasingly difficult to defend both pastorally and intellectually.

These local actions also show that women's ordination became a matter of ecclesial identity for some Adventist communities. By ordaining women, these congregations were not merely addressing staffing needs. They were making a statement about the nature of ministry, gender, and the church's recognition of divine calling. The fact that such actions occurred at the local level reveals the depth of conviction among some Adventist communities and the limits of global policy in suppressing local theological conscience.

Theological Implications of Regional and Local Ordination Initiatives

The selected cases reveal at least four major theological implications. First, they expose the unresolved nature of Adventist theology of ordination. If ordination is understood as sacramental or as the conferral of hierarchical authority, then gender-inclusive ordination becomes more difficult to justify within complementarian frameworks. If ordination is understood as ecclesial recognition of divine calling and spiritual gifting, then excluding women appears inconsistent when women already perform ministerial functions. The regional and local actions analyzed in this article show that many Adventists in certain contexts operate with the second understanding.

Second, these cases reveal competing interpretations of biblical authority. Opponents of women's ordination often argue from creation order, male headship, apostolic precedent, and Pauline restrictions. Supporters often argue from the image of God in male and female, the redemptive equality of Galatians 3:28, the priesthood of all believers, and the evidence of women's ministry in Scripture and Adventist history. Both sides claim biblical faithfulness, which means the conflict is not between Scripture and culture in any simple sense. It is a conflict between different hermeneutical models within the same biblical tradition.

Third, these actions challenge the assumption that global unity must always require uniform practice. Columbia, Pacific, North German, and Norwegian actions suggest that some Adventist regions understand unity as compatible with contextual variation. They do not necessarily reject Adventist identity or mission. Instead, they claim that mission in their context requires gender-inclusive recognition. This raises the ecclesiological question of whether Adventism can distinguish between doctrinal unity and administrative uniformity.

Fourth, these cases reveal the importance of regional conscience. When unions and congregations act contrary to global policy, such actions may be viewed as disobedience. Yet they may also indicate that the existing policy no longer adequately accounts for the lived ministerial realities of certain regions. The persistence of such actions suggests that the issue cannot be resolved only through administrative discipline. It requires theological clarification.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Global Authority, Contextual Mission, and Ecclesial Unity

The women's ordination debate in Adventism is often framed as a conflict between biblical faithfulness and cultural accommodation. While this framing captures part of the issue, it is insufficient. The cases discussed in this article show that the debate also concerns the structure of authority in a global denomination.

The General Conference represents global ecclesial authority and is intended to protect unity. For many Adventists, independent ordination actions threaten the integrity of representative governance. If each region acts independently on a globally contested issue, the church may risk fragmentation.

This concern is real and should not be dismissed. However, the concern for unity must also be balanced against the reality of contextual mission. Adventism is a global movement operating in diverse cultural environments. A policy perceived as faithful and necessary in one region may be perceived as restrictive and missionally damaging in another. The actions of Columbia Union, Pacific Union, North German Union, Norwegian Union, and several local congregations reveal that some regions experience the exclusion of women from ordination as an obstacle to mission and as a contradiction of the church's theology of spiritual gifts.

The deeper problem is that Adventism has not fully clarified whether women's ordination is a doctrinal issue, an ecclesiological issue, a policy issue, or a contextual mission issue. If it is doctrinal, then regional variation is unacceptable. If it is policy-based, then contextual adaptation may be possible. If it is ecclesiological, then the church must clarify who has the authority to recognize ministry. If it is missional, then local contexts must be taken seriously. The ongoing conflict persists because different Adventists classify the issue differently.

This article suggests that the most constructive path forward requires a clearer distinction between three categories: essential doctrine, global policy, and contextual practice. Not every policy difference constitutes doctrinal disunity. At the same time, not every contextual practice can be adopted without consequences for global identity. The challenge for Adventism is to develop an

ecclesiology capable of preserving global unity while responsibly addressing legitimate regional mission concerns.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The cases of Columbia Union Conference, Pacific Union Conference, North German Union Conference, Norwegian Union of Churches, Sligo Seventh-day Adventist Church, Victoria Church, and La Sierra University Church show that the women's ordination debate in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not merely a theoretical controversy. It has produced concrete regional and local ecclesial action. These actions reveal a deeper unresolved tension between global authority and contextual mission.

This article has argued that women's ordination functions as a test case for Adventist ecclesiology. The central issue is not only whether women may be ordained, but how the world church understands ordination, authority, unity, and contextual responsibility. Union-level actions demonstrate the assertion of regional ecclesial agency. Local church ordinations demonstrate the force of congregational conscience and mission conviction. Both types of action reveal that the global church's official position has not eliminated theological disagreement.

The persistence of these initiatives suggests that administrative votes alone cannot resolve the issue. What is needed is a more coherent Adventist theology of ordination and a more nuanced theology of global unity. Such a theology must address whether ordination is primarily sacramental, hierarchical, functional, representative, or missional. It must also clarify whether unity requires identical practice in all regions or whether shared doctrine and mission can coexist with limited contextual diversity.

The women's ordination debate therefore remains one of the most significant ecclesiological challenges facing global Adventism. Its resolution will depend not only on future policy decisions but on the church's ability to articulate a historically grounded, biblically responsible, and missionally sensitive understanding of ministry and authority.

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