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Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

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Union committee calls special constituency session to authorize ordinations without regard to gender

By Gerry Chudleigh

At their March meeting, the Pacific Union executive committee voted to table until May 9 a motion that would immediately approve the ordination of ministers without regard to gender. They also set up an Ordination Study Committee to outline the steps necessary to make gender-neutral ordinations a reality as soon as possible.

Today at the La Sierra University Alumni Center, that committee delivered their report to the full executive committee. The committee replaced the original motion with a new one and voted overwhelmingly to call a special constituency meeting, tentatively scheduled for August 19.

The committee voted separately on the main motion, including the preamble. The preamble and main motion were approved by a vote of 42-2. The process, which includes calling a special constituency session, was approved unanimously.

Voted (preamble):

- Whereas Scripture is clear that the end-time Church is blessed precisely because men *and* women preach God’s message (Joel 2:28-29 and Fundamental Belief 17);
- Whereas we are commanded to “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8);
- Whereas “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28);
- Whereas “differences between male and female must not be divisive among us” and “we are to serve and be served without partiality or reservation” (Fundamental Belief 14);
- Whereas the Seventh-day Adventist Church is co-founded by a woman, Ellen G. White, who remains an authoritative and guiding voice;
- Whereas the Pacific Union is enriched by Spirit-filled women who are responding to God’s call in our schools, churches and conferences;
- Whereas the Seventh-day Adventist Church assigns Unions the final decision-making authority and responsibility with respect to ordination (NAD Working Policy L45 05 3, Spring Council 2012 116-12G Report);
- Whereas the Pacific Union Conference voted its full commitment to Women’s Ordination, August 30, 1995 (reaffirmed May 12, 2010 and March 15, 2012);

Therefore, [main action]

- The Pacific Union Conference Executive Committee will approve or disapprove candidates for ordination without regard to gender, effective when the Union Bylaws are amended.

The Process

Voted, approval for the following process:

- Because the Pacific Union Conference Executive Committee is committed to following denominational procedures and processes, and to facilitate the involvement of the entire Union constituency, a special constituency session will be called to consider amendments to the Pacific Union Conference Bylaws to clearly authorize the ordination of ministers without regard to gender.
- The Pacific Union Conference Bylaws Committee will examine the Union bylaws and suggest amendments to clearly authorize the ordination of ministers without regard to gender.
- The Pacific Union Conference will provide an informational packet for the delegates, pertinent to the issues to be discussed in the special constituency session.

Both the study committee and the executive committee made it clear that they are committed to following established church processes and procedures. Their recommendations and actions were guided in large part by a summary of church structure prepared earlier this year by the General Conference and distributed at GC spring meetings. The full name of the document is The General Conference and Its Divisions — a Description of Roles and Relationships in Light of Organizational Structure Development, Current Governance Documents, and Practices. That documents makes clear that:

Authority and responsibility in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not centralized in a hierarchical structure. Instead authority and

responsibility is distributed throughout the Seventh-day Adventist Church structure

The distribution of authority and responsibility in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is illustrated by the following examples of how and where final decision-making authority and responsibility are located

The document goes on to explain that the “final authority and responsibility” for deciding who will be a church member is located at the local church; the “final authority and responsibility” for the employment/assigning of pastors and other workers resides at the local conference; and the “final authority and responsibility” for deciding who will be ordained is officially located at the unions.

The committee also considered that the same paragraphs that declare ordination decisions are to be made by the unions, not by the divisions or the General Conference, include this counsel:

It is to be understood that the exercise of authority and responsibility is done within the context of the belief, values, and policies of the entire church. No entity is authorized to exercise its authority and responsibility in a manner that is contrary to the interests of the whole church and its activities in fulfilling its mission.

Obviously the distribution of authority found in the Seventh-day Adventist Church can result in tension between world-wide policy and the “final authority and responsibility” which has been assigned to the congregations, conferences and unions. The GC document has much to say about balancing those centers of authority, especially in the final Conclusions and Recommendations:

The following paragraphs and sentences are chosen from the Conclusion to the GC Spring Document. The full document will be made available

in the next few days.

The distribution of authority and responsibility in the Church along with the recognition that “authority rests in membership” presents significant challenges in finding a balance between centralized authority (actions of the global church) and the more localized authority (actions of the constituency) in churches, conferences and unions.

At the same time the church has worked to preserve unity, the effect of church growth has enlarged the understanding of diversity and its rightful place in a worldwide community. To expect that every entity in the world church will look and function exactly like every other entity of its type may in itself become an impediment to mission. The development of structural designs in the history of the church indicates that unity must be built on a stronger foundation than uniformity.

There must be room to recognize the need for a legitimacy of local adaptation of policies and procedures that facilitate mission while not diminishing the worldwide identity, harmony and unity of the Church.

The relationship among the entities of the church is more than a matter of law and policy. Therefore attempts to codify that relationship will always be inadequate. The primary strength of the Church comes not from its structure but from its collective desire to live out a commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Such a commitment embraces a call to community.

Pacific Union executive committee members made it clear during discussions this week that they are committed to taking seriously the “final” authority and responsibility that the Seventh-day Adventist church has assigned to unions. And they made it clear that their call for a special constituency session is not to be interpreted as a way to delay the

ordination of all whom God has called to ministry. It is rather, the result of a commitment to follow church procedures and to make sure the final action, whatever it is, is backed by the full authority that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has assigned to the Pacific Union Conference.