

Response to the MAUC Decision to Recognize Women’s Ordination

On September 12, 2021, the Mid-America Union Conference (MAUC) Constituency Session voted to approve and recognize the ordination of women to the gospel ministry (WO) within its territory. In doing so, it effectively made profound changes to (a) the organizational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, (b) the baptismal vows, and (c) the rights given to local churches, changes it lacked authority to make. For this reason, the Crookston Seventh-day Adventist Church voted this response on October 27, 2021, and requests that it be added to the agenda of the upcoming Minnesota Conference constituency meeting.

If any of the requests contained herein are deemed unacceptable or inadvisable by any entity that considers them, we ask that these requests be considered separately. This would prevent the rejection of all the requests because one or more are deemed objectionable.

Relevant Facts

Three of the MAUC’s Reasons

1. The MAUC Constituency Session’s vote affirmed the reasons of the MAUC Executive Committee for approving and recognizing WO. These reasons included (a) “approximately 2/3 of the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s Theology of Ordination Study Committee determined that such ordinations are not a biblical issue but rather one of policy,” (b) “the General Conference and its divisions were established to support and serve union conferences,” and (c) “the Seventh-day Adventist beliefs that speak of the value and priesthood of all believers” (“Mid-America Union Delegates Focus on Mission,” *Outlook*, October 2021, p. 11)¹.

Two-thirds of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee

2. The final report (*Final Report*) of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) presented three different positions, each taken by roughly one-third of the committee.² Position #1 was against WO and stated, “[This document] gives the fundamental reason why we understand from Scripture that only certain qualified men may occupy those offices” (p. 26). Position #2 was for WO. Position #3 was somewhat of a compromise between the first two positions, allowing for regional WO as a variation from the biblical norm, a norm that was summarized in part by these words: “We believe that there is a biblical model of male ecclesiological *leadership* that has validity across time and culture.” “We believe that Paul’s statements about a preferred role for a male in the office of elder (the equivalent of our ordained minister) are a functional, ecclesiastical norm meant to further church order, discipline, and mission” (pp. 100, 101). Therefore, the MAUC seriously mischaracterized the TOSC’s final report since two-thirds of the members of the TOSC made clear they thought it was indeed a “biblical issue.” There are at least two other ways that the MAUC ignored the clearly expressed stance of position #3, which we shall bring out below.

3. From the 1850s till at least 1901, Adventist journals published similar views to that of two-thirds of the TOSC regarding the biblical norm. The position of these writers was that Paul’s counsel permitted women to preach and teach in the church but not to rule. This representative 1878 quote concerns 1 Timothy 2:12: “A woman may pray, prophesy, exhort, and comfort the church, but she cannot occupy the position of a pastor or a ruling elder. This would be looked upon

1 This article can be found at <https://outlookmag.org/mid-america-union-delegates-focus-on-mission/> and https://issuu.com/outlookmag/docs/oct_2021_online.

2 *Final Report* can be found at <https://www.adventistarchives.org/final-tosc-report.pdf>.

as usurping authority over the man, which is here prohibited” (“Woman’s Place in the Gospel,” *Signs of the Times*, December 19, 1878, p. 380).³

When and Why the General Conference Was Organized

4. The General Conference was organized in 1863, 31 years before the first union conference was organized in 1894 in Australia. Union conferences did not become the norm until 1901. Therefore, the MAUC is incorrect in its assertion that the General Conference was established to support and serve union conferences.

5. Why was this rewriting of history given as a reason for the MAUC’s decision? The MAUC Executive Committee voted a statement on November 17, 2016, that stated in part, “We, as a Protestant organization, believe the true authority of our church lies with the local members comprising our churches. Furthermore, we recognize our working policies delegate authority to our constituencies as voted by our church members. We believe all members and entities in the church should be held accountable when needed by the constituencies to which they are responsible, as has been outlined by our church’s working policies” (“MAUC Executive Committee Votes Two Statements,” December 15, 2016, <https://outlookmag.org/mauc-executive-committee-votes-two-statements/>). The apparent purpose of this statement was to establish that Adventist entities are only accountable to their constituencies and not to higher entities. This must also have been the purpose of the rewritten history given as a reason for the MAUC’s decision since it says only that the General Conference was established “to serve and support” union conferences, and omits any reference to the fact that union conferences are also accountable to the General Conference.

6. Taken as they read, these sentiments would mean that every local church in business session could vote its own title policy without any potential repercussions. However, only the naïve would believe this to be true since: (a) “On dissolution or expulsion of a church for loss of members or for disciplinary reasons, all offerings, financial accounts, and all property real or personal, *whether held in the name of the local church or the conference or other denominational legal association, are held in trust for the conference*” (*Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual (Church Manual)*, pp. 41, 42, italics supplied).⁴ (b) “In Seventh-day Adventist Church structure, no organization determines its own status, nor does it function as if it had no obligations to the Church family beyond its boundaries” (*Ibid.*, p. 27). (c) Authority and organizational status are “granted” and “entrusted” to each denominational entity and its constituency from “higher levels of denominational organization” (B 05.3-6 in both General Conference (GC) and North American Division (NAD) Working Policy (WP)).⁵ Thus, the sentiment affirmed by the MAUC Constituency Session constitutes a major change to multiple authoritative documents that must first be approved by a General Conference Session (*Church Manual*, p. 17), or in the case of GC or NAD WP, the body authorized to make those changes.

“Independence of the Churches” vs. Church Organization

7. This sentiment, that churches are not accountable to higher entities, was known as “independence of the churches” in the mid-1800s, and was promoted by B. F. Snook and W. H. Brinkerhoff, Iowa Conference president and secretary respectively, in their 1865 rebellion (“Independent congregations or worldwide organized church?” *Ministry*, December 2019, pp. 12-

3 This article can be found at <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/ST/ST18781219-V04-48.pdf>.

4 The 2015 edition of the *Church Manual* can be found at <https://www.adventist.org/resources/church-manual/>.

5 GC WP (2019-2020 edition) can be found at <https://www.casd.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2019-2020-GCWP-Electronic.pdf>. NAD WP (2018-2019 edition) can be found at http://www.pcsda.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/2018-2019-NAD-Working-Policy_CD_Links.pdf.

15).⁶ Out of their movement came the Church of God (Seventh Day), the Worldwide Church of God, and a myriad other splinter groups. These many groups have repeatedly struggled with disunity and division, at the very time God has called His remnant people to work together to reach the entire world with the three angels' messages. The global success of Seventh-day Adventist mission work can be attributed in part to this denomination's rejection of the idea of "independence of the churches."⁷

8. The adoption of Snook and Brinkerhoff's ideas of independence from higher oversight is in effect a rejection of "church organization" as understood in 1863, and thus constitutes a substantive change to baptismal vow #9, "Do you believe in Church organization?" (*Church Manual*, pp. 46, 48). Such a change would require approval by a General Conference Session before taking effect (*Ibid.*, p. 17).

9. But more than this, the adoption of Snook and Brinkerhoff's ideas is a rejection of the underlying biblical foundation for church organization, such as the principles found in Acts 15. "In the church at Antioch the consideration of the question of circumcision resulted in much discussion and contention. Finally, the members of the church, fearing that a division among them would be the outcome of continued discussion, decided to send Paul and Barnabas, with some responsible men from the church, to Jerusalem to lay the matter before the apostles and elders. There they were to meet delegates from the different churches and those who had come to Jerusalem to attend the approaching festivals. Meanwhile all controversy was to cease until a final decision should be given in general council. This decision was then to be universally accepted by the different churches throughout the country" (Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 190). Furthermore, after that general council: "The four servants of God were sent to Antioch with the epistle and message that was to put an end to all controversy; for it was the voice of the highest authority upon the earth" (*Ibid.*, p. 196).

10. Of course, there were some in Paul's day, like the MAUC today, who refused to submit to the general council's decision, and these caused Paul no small amount of grief.

The Priesthood of All Believers

11. The priesthood of all believers concept, taught in Exodus 19:6, was never meant to mean that all could function as priests. Korah and his company and King Uzziah found this out the hard way (Num. 16:16-18, 35; 2 Chr. 26:18-21). "In the earliest times every man was the priest of his own household. In the days of Abraham the priesthood was regarded as the birthright of the eldest son. Now, instead of the first-born of all Israel, the Lord accepted the tribe of Levi for the work of the sanctuary. . . . The priesthood, however, was restricted to the family of Aaron" (Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 350). Furthermore, in the New Testament, Paul explicitly denied that all could be apostles, prophets, and teachers (1 Cor. 12:29).

12. The MAUC never intended the priesthood of believers concept to mean that all believers should be ordained to the gospel ministry, because then the whole question would be moot. No conference would need to appoint any minister to any church, for each church would already have the same number of ordained ministers as its members. Neither did the MAUC intend "priesthood of all believers" to mean that every believer may be paid from the tithe.

6 This article can be found at <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2019/12/A-look-at-Snook-and-Brinkerhoff> and <https://cdn.ministrymagazine.org/issues/2019/issues/MIN2019-12.pdf>.

7 See the final five paragraphs of "First conversation between Adventists, Mennonites focuses on living Christian life," Adventist News Network, July 11, 2011, <https://adventist.news/news/first-conversation-between-adventists-mennonites-focuses-on-living-christian-life>.

The Highest Authority on Earth Under God

13. Just like the general council in Acts 15, a General Conference Session is “the highest ecclesiastical authority, under God” within the Seventh-day Adventist Church (*Church Manual*, p. 29). That being so, the percentage of the TOSC holding any position is irrelevant, because General Conference Sessions composed of delegates from the entire world church, over 2,000 delegates in 2015, have already voted against permitting WO three times, in 1990, 1995, and 2015.

14. Only a General Conference Session “has authority to establish tests of fellowship” (*Ibid.*, p. 64), which is why a local church can apply the criteria decided by a General Conference Session to questions about church membership, but cannot modify those criteria. Similarly, a union conference can apply the criteria for ordination decided by the world church, but cannot modify those criteria. For that reason, the question of whether to ordain women to the gospel ministry came before the General Conference Sessions of 1990, 1995, and 2015.

15. The 1990 General Conference Session voted 1,173 to 377 to accept the report and recommendations of the Role of Women Commission, which stated in part, “... we do not approve ordination of women to the gospel ministry” (“Session Actions,” *Adventist Review*, July 13, 1990, p. 15).⁸ The 1995 General Conference Session voted 1,481 to 673 against permitting each division to decide whether to ordain women to the gospel ministry within its territory (“Thirteenth Business Meeting,” *Adventist Review*, July 7, 1995, pp. 23, 31).⁹ The 2015 General Conference Session voted on the same basic question, 1,381 to 977 against (“Delegates Vote ‘No’ on Issue of Women’s Ordination,” Adventist News Network, July 8, 2015, <https://adventist.news/news/delegates-vote-no-on-issue-of-womens-ordination>).

16. Besides falsely claiming that TOSC position #3 said that WO was not a biblical issue, the MAUC also ignored what position #3 explicitly stated: “It would take a collective decision by the worldwide church to authorize the principle of regional diversity of practice (15MR 130),” where WO is permitted in some regions and not in others (*Final Report*, p. 123). Thus, according to position #3, the MAUC’s vote to move forward without that collective decision was wrong.

17. The General Conference Session being the highest authority “under God” means that the Bible is a higher authority yet. Thus, if the Bible mandates WO, then the MAUC is clear to move forward, since the Bible is a higher authority than a General Conference Session. But the MAUC declared that the one-third of the TOSC that was pro-WO took the position that it is not “a biblical issue,” which is an admission that there is no such Bible mandate to defy General Conference Session decisions against WO.

The Bible the Only Rule of Faith and Practice

18. Appeals to “conscience” when there is no Bible mandate to defy the General Conference Session decision means that the Bible is not the basis for that conviction of conscience. If this is the case, then the Bible is no longer our only rule of faith and practice. Such appeals to “conscience” therefore constitute a de facto change of baptismal vow #5, “Do you believe that the Bible is ... the only rule of faith and practice for the Christian?” (*Church Manual*, pp. 45, 47). A General Conference Session must first approve such a change (*Ibid.*, p. 17).

LGBTQ+

19. TOSC position #1 stated, “Using ‘freedom of conscience’ to shape the Church’s beliefs

8 This article can be found at <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19900713-V167-33.pdf>.

9 This article can be found at <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Periodicals/RH/RH19950707-V172-32.pdf>.

and practices, as seen in other churches, can pave the way for the promotion of homosexuality, academic freedom to teach evolution in Adventist schools, etc. These things, it will be rightly claimed, are for many just as much a matter of conscience as is the ordination of women” (*Final Report*, p. 59). TOSC position #3 stated, “We believe that the hermeneutical methods that some who support women’s ordination use to exegete the New Testament gender texts could create problems in dealing with passages regarding sexual standards” (*Ibid.*, p. 101).

20. Such concerns are well warranted. The *Adventist Today* email newsletter of October 8, 2021, announcing the upcoming “ordination” of the first woman pastor in the MAUC also contained the headline, “A Gay Man’s Journey Through the Adventist Church.”¹⁰ That article’s first sentence thanked *Adventist Today* for another article entitled, “On Complete LGBTQ+ Acceptance in the Church.”¹¹ This second article, written by a prominent Adventist pastor, describes anti-LGBTQ ideas found in a book promoted by the General Conference youth director, and complains, “This excreta is being pushed from the very top of our denomination.” Over the years, *Adventist Today* has also promoted evolution over long ages as fact.

21. The underlying hermeneutical concerns of two-thirds of the members of the TOSC and many faithful members and churches, to our knowledge, have not been resolved, namely, how to keep some of the hermeneutical arguments being used for WO from being used to lobby for the acceptance of sexual perversions and evolution.

Recognition of Ordination

22. The MAUC president at the MAUC Constituency Session “clearly stated that because of the vote from the General Conference on this matter, the female pastor’s ordination credential would not be recognized by the world church, but would only be valid in Mid-America territory or any other conference in the NAD that has chosen to ordain its women pastors” (“Mid-America Union Delegates Focus on Mission,” op. cit.). Nevertheless, the *Church Manual* unequivocally states, “This form of governance recognizes also that ordination to the ministry is recognized by the Church worldwide” (p. 27). Therefore, this would constitute a de facto change to the *Church Manual* that must first be approved by a General Conference Session (*Ibid.*, p. 17) before becoming valid in any territory. “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40).

The Status Quo

23. The status quo permits women elders in churches that believe that such a practice is biblical, and permits women ministers to be commissioned. Whether right or wrong, this status quo does not force upon any church a particular view regarding WO, but permits all churches to work together in peace. Commissioned women ministers may function the same as ordained ministers within their districts, provided they are elected as elders by the churches they serve. The only exceptions are that they cannot organize and unite churches, ordain elders and deacons, and serve as conference presidents. They may conduct baptisms and weddings outside their districts if authorized (NAD WP L 32 10; GC and NAD WP E 60). Thus, churches that see no biblical impediment against the election of women elders may elect them, while churches that do see a clear biblical impediment are not forced to recognize the choices of other churches as being biblically valid, and are not forced to elect a commissioned minister as a local elder.

24. WO would change this status quo, such that churches that believe being a male is one of the Bible’s requirements for being an elder would be forced to accept an ordained woman pastor if

10 This article can be found at <https://atoday.org/a-gay-mans-journey-through-the-adventist-church/>.

11 This article can be found at <https://atoday.org/on-complete-lgbtq-acceptance-in-the-church/>.

one is appointed by the conference, and would be forced to accept a woman conference president if one is elected. They would thus lose the freedom to associate and worship without infringement of their Bible-based convictions. Ironically, this loss of freedom runs contrary to TOSC position #3 where it stated, “Also based on principles of Christian freedom, no pastor, church employee, organizational unit, or local church shall be required or compelled to support such diversity,” where WO is permitted in one region but not in another (*Final Report*, p. 123).

A Refusal to Rebel Could Be Misconstrued As Rebellion

25. The *Church Manual* allows for the dissolution of churches for “rebellion against the conference” (p. 40). This section is worded in such a way that refusal to rebel against the Seventh-day Adventist Church could be misconstrued as rebellion against the conference if a loyal church refuses to recognize WO or a woman conference president before a General Conference Session votes to do so. Thus, a church that remains loyal to the Seventh-day Adventist Church during a rebellion could find itself dissolved, and its church building and bank accounts seized by the conference that is in rebellion.

The Reason for the Discussion of WO Since 2011

26. This whole current debate began in 2011 when the NAD requested a variance to permit commissioned ministers (i.e. women ministers) to serve as conference presidents (“2011 AC Update 5 ‘Variance’ for NAD, TED Constitutions Fails AC Vote,” October 16, 2011, <https://www.adventistreview.org/archive-4799>). That request was voted down, after which the NAD voted to do it anyway at their year-end meeting (“30 CN: NAD Reaffirm Commissioned Ministers — NAD Update 4,” November 3, 2011, <https://www.adventistreview.org/archive-4858>). Thus this time-consuming, divisive debate has been over women ministers serving as conference presidents, as well as forcing churches with Bible-based convictions against women elders to accept women elders anyway in the form of ordained women ministers.

The MAUC President’s Assurance in 2012

27. The MAUC president assured the 2012 Minnesota Conference Constituency Session that the MAUC would not move forward with WO until the General Conference approved it. That promise has now been violated.

The NAD Could Use Help

28. Despite a decade thus far, the NAD has not been able to bring renegade, rebellious union conferences into line. The MAUC Executive Committee declared that “the true authority of our church” is “the local members comprising our churches” (“MAUC Executive Committee Votes Two Statements,” op. cit.). Therefore, a way should be found for that “true authority” to assist the NAD in its work.

Current Policy

29. When a member returns tithes directly to an entity “for purposes of anonymity,” so that the local church will not know what that member has given, GC and NAD WP V 09 05 5.c requires that it be returned anonymously to the local conference where the member holds membership.

Societal Trends

30. Too many men think religion is just for women and children. We need more godly male role models for our sons, especially in families where the father is absent. Societal trends are exacerbating this problem.

Actions and Requests Based on the Above Facts

1. Shall Not Recognize—The Crookston Seventh-day Adventist Church shall not recognize the ordination of women to the gospel ministry nor recognize a woman conference president before a General Conference Session decides to do so, regardless of whatever any lower entity votes. We request the Minnesota Conference to take the same or similar action.

2. Perplexing Questions—We call upon church leaders to address these questions that perplex us: (a) If lesser entities are free to do as they please, regardless of what higher entities decide, why cannot the constituency of each local church determine its own tithe policy, without repercussions? (b) At what point does membership in a conference or union that is in active rebellion against the Seventh-day Adventist Church constitute grounds for church discipline by qualifying as “Adherence to or taking part in a divisive or disloyal movement or organization” (*Church Manual*, p. 62)? (c) At what point would an organization in open rebellion become a de facto independent ministry, and the return of tithe to such an organization become an impermissible return of tithe to an independent ministry? (d) How do credentials show local churches that the bearer is in harmony with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and thus able to stand behind the pulpit, if those credentials are issued by an entity that has intentionally chosen to be out of harmony with the Seventh-day Adventist Church? (e) What accommodations will be made for members and churches that choose not to participate in the rebellion against General Conference Session decisions? We ask the Minnesota Conference to echo this call.

3. Clarify Language of *Church Manual*, p. 40—We request that p. 40 of the *Church Manual*, and GC and NAD WP where necessary, be clarified such that a refusal to participate in the rebellion of a conference shall not be misconstrued as rebellion against that conference. We ask the Minnesota Conference to endorse this request.

4. Our Right to Appeal—If the Minnesota Conference votes to rebel against the General Conference Session decisions, we shall exercise the right afforded us on p. 29 of the *Church Manual*: “When differences arise in or between churches and conferences ..., matters that are not mutually resolved may be appealed to the next higher organization. If the matter does not get resolved at this level, the aggrieved entity may appeal to successively higher levels of organization. An organization to which an appeal is forwarded may choose not to hear the matter, in which case the decision of the highest organization involved in the dispute shall be final.”

5. GC and NAD WP V 09 05 5.c—We request that V 09 05 5.c either be waived in instances where members choose not to financially support entities in rebellion against General Conference Session decisions, or that it be recognized that such tithe is not being returned to loyal entities “for purposes of anonymity.” Doing so might (a) assist the NAD in bringing renegade unions into line, (b) avoid potential issues of returning such tithe to a different local church in a different conference, and (c) avoid the treating of tithe as non-tithe funds if such tithe is instead marked “World Budget,” thus ensuring that tithe funds are not used in impermissible ways. We ask the Minnesota Conference to endorse this request.

6. Organization of Conferences and Union Conferences—We request that conferences and union conferences be organized in which churches and conferences loyal to the Seventh-day Adventist Church may hold membership. This would ensure that no church or member is forced to participate in any rebellion against the Seventh-day Adventist Church, under threat of dissolution or

confiscation of local church assets. It has long been shown that more than one conference can occupy the same state or territory in peace. We ask the Minnesota Conference to endorse this request.

7. Reconsideration—We request the MAUC Executive Committee and constituency to reconsider their decisions on this matter due to the reasons raised heretofore. Since the proponents of WO have no problem reconsidering as often as possible previous decisions to the contrary, they ought to expect and appreciate requests at least as frequent to reconsider pro-WO decisions, from now till Jesus comes. However, in this instance, this is a request to reconsider and rescind their decision to rebel against the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a decision based on indisputably false information. We ask the Minnesota Conference to endorse this request.

8. WP B 15 15—We call upon the church to determine what officers and administrators are fomenting or encouraging this rebellion, and to remove them from office in compliance with GC and NAD WP B 15 15: “Those who show inability or unwillingness to administer their work in harmony with policy should not be continued in executive leadership by their respective constituencies or governing boards/committees.” We ask the Minnesota Conference to echo this call.

9. Unsolicited Propaganda Material—We request that issues of publications promoting rebellion against General Conference Session decisions or attacking church organization as historically understood (including that the General Conference Session is the highest authority on earth under God), without a dissenting voice or voices in the same issues, not be sent to our members and attendees who have not requested such issues.

10. Are the Old Views Still Acceptable?—We request that the world church affirm as not being incompatible with church membership the interpretation of the relevant Bible passages published in Seventh-day Adventist journals from the 1850s till at least 1901, that Paul’s counsel permitted women to preach and teach in the church but not to rule. We ask the Minnesota Conference to endorse this request.

11. The Underlying Hermeneutical Concerns—We request that the world church resolve the underlying hermeneutical concerns so that the pro-WO position cannot be used as an entering wedge for knowingly hiring and employing ministers engaged in sexual perversions or teachers promoting evolution, or for the acceptance by our churches of sexual perversions. We ask the Minnesota Conference to endorse this request.