

Press Release

Tears, passion and awe marked the Association of Adventist Women annual celebration of excellence banquet November 4 at the La Sierra University Church. The Woman of the Year were theologian Dr. Olive Hemmings of Washington Adventist University, Maria Silvia Neri Castrejón, long time pastor in Mexico City, Norma Nashed of Restore a Child charity, and Dr. Drene Somasundram, trailblazer in the field of religious leadership. Two men were also honored, William G. Johnsson, author and former long-time editor of the Adventist Review, and Loren Seibold, current editor of Adventist Today.

The banquet followed the Association's vespers on Adventist women evangelists from 1980-2000 (available at <https://fb.watch/o87ST4x26z/>). Many came to the banquet already inspired by hearing the stories of women who expanded the church in Zimbabwe, Ukraine, the Philippines and around the world.

The fellowship hall was transformed for the glittering sunflower-filled celebration. Harp music wafted in the warm air as people registered. The festivities were emceed by Linda Becker, AAW board member and past president, former Vice President of Union University. The special music was by La Sierra faculty and extraordinary vocalist, Raejin Lee.

Drene Somasundram, D.Min., was awarded the Woman of the Year for Scholarship and Church Leadership. She was introduced by her friend Kirsten Oster, currently a pastor in Wellington, New Zealand. She highlighted how Somasundram, the first female pastor of a church in the United Kingdom, had taken the struggling churches to which she was assigned, and turned them into vibrant Christian communities. Somasundram was then asked to move to Australia, where she began mentoring and teaching the fledgling community of women pastors there. Nurturing is a skill in which Somasundram excels, but it does not exclude academic excellence. Somasundram won the prestigious Ken Goulding Award for excellence of thesis for her Doctorate at Middlesex University in London, UK. Somasundram is currently on the faculty at Avondale University, Australia, where she specializes in chaplaincy education.

Evangelist Adly Campos, who was honored in detail at the vespers program, introduced her cousin, Pastor Maria Silvia Neri Castrejón, the first woman to retire as a pastor in Inter-America Division in 2008, after 38 years of service. Despite full pastoral training and managing multiple churches in Mexico City, including the training of intern pastors, Castrejón was always called a Bible Worker throughout her career. The most moving moment of the night came after awarding the trophy for Woman of the Year for Church Leadership. Nerida Taylor Bates, president of the Association of Adventist Women, gave Pastor Castrejón a sweater embroidered with "Women Clergy," given to women clergy at the North American Division women clergy conference. This act affirmed that the North American Women pastors recognized Castrejón as a pastor, not a Bible Worker.

Norma Nashed, founder of Restore a Child, was awarded the Woman of the Year for Humanitarian Leadership, a new category. One cannot describe Norma Nashed without the words passion and persistence. Nashed founded a charity, Restore a Child, <https://www.restoreachild.org/>, that feeds 5000 children a day, cares for 400 orphans, covers the cost of medical care for 1000 destitute children in Chad. She has paid to build 21 schools now owned

by the Adventist Church. Several of those schools in Ukraine are now housing and feeding refugees. Norma takes a very active role in visiting, caring for, gardening with and even helping build the structures that support children. Her projects include caring for orphans after the tsunami in Indonesia, building a school in Haiti after the earthquake and feeding in refugee camps in South Sudan and the Congo. After 25 years she is beginning to see her students succeed. One is now a Congolese doctor, 5 are Adventist pastors in Indonesia and another is training as a pastor in Kenya.

Nashed, whose own story is compelling, thanked William Johnsson, who wrote the biography of her transformation from Jordanian orphan girl to humanitarian. She also thanked her many donors who, like her, feel the need to support the destitute.

Kendra Haloviak Valentine, La Sierra HMS Richards Divinity School faculty introduced Olive Hemmings, PhD, the Woman of the Year for Scholarship and Spiritual Leadership. She highlighted how Hemmings has been at the forefront of theology pushing for justice and equality in the Christian church.

Hemmings was such a good scholar that she began teaching when she was still a college student. Her scholarly work on justice and the year of jubilee speak to social and racial justice. Her book, *Sacred Texts and Social Conflict*, brings her extensive knowledge of Biblical languages, ethics and culture (doctorate from Claremont Graduate University) to the issue of Biblical meaning. She has had an extensive teaching career at North Caribbean College and for the last two decades at Washington Adventist University.

The Association of Adventist Women recognizes men who have helped to specifically promote women's leadership and ministry in the Adventist church with Champion of Justice awards. They chose to honor Willam G Johnsson prior to his death in March. Not only was Johnsson a theologian and statesman, he also firmly supported women in ministry, appearing in the video "From the Heart: It's Time" and in his books guiding the future of Adventism. Dr. Larry Geraty talked about Johnsson's scholarship and his ability to find common ground in tough situations. Geraty also mentioned that the Johnssons' pastor, Tim Gillespie, was unable to attend because of travel. Johnsson's lifelong companion and wife, Noelene Johnsson, accepted the award.

Loren Seibold has, under his 5-year editorship of *Adventist Today*, written over 50 articles in support of women and women's ordination. He was introduced by his friend Jim Walters, former editor of *AToday*. Loren stated that having pastored in North Dakota, Palo Alto, California and Worthington, Ohio, has given him a pastoral approach to writing for *AToday* readers. He has a D.Min. from the Theological Seminary of San Francisco. He is married to the ordained minister and chaplain, Carmen Ajo Seibold.

There were two short talks. Hemmings stressed how important it is that we be spirit led, and that includes allowing women to respond to their own calling to ministry. Loren Seibold proposed that if the church believes in delaying women's full acceptance as pastors, the church doesn't really believe that Christ is coming soon. He fears young people aren't waiting: they are leaving the church over perceived inequities in the treatment of women in the church.

In her closing remarks, President Nerida Taylor Bates shared stories of several women pastors who are represented by sequins on her dress, made of a global map. She highlighted AAW's translation projects of the 2014 Theology of Ordination Study Committee, and books, which make theological information supporting women in ministry, available on the AAW website (www.associationofadventistwome.com) in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Tagalog, French, Russian, and Croatian.

A new AAW project is connecting Spanish speaking pastors, chaplains and theologians from around the world for support and fellowship.

AAW is also beginning a long-term project to document the history of women in the church outside of the North American Division and are requesting information and financial support from all who can contribute to this project.

The Association of Adventist Women is a lay organization that seeks to advance the leadership of women at every level of the church and particularly supports women's role in pastoral care. It is actively seeking new members and can be joined in any country. AAW has student membership rates.

Nominations for Women of the Year and Champion of Justice can be made using the form on their website, headline on April 1, each year. www.associationofadventistwome.com

it was inspiring, celebrating women and men who have done great things. Everyone left determined to work to make their church a welcoming and loving environment.

More detailed biographies for press to add as appropriate:

Somasundram Awarded Woman of the Year.

Dr. Drene Somasundram, D.Min, was awarded Woman of the Year in Scholastic and Church Leadership by the Association of Adventist Women November 4, at their annual awards banquet at Riverside, California.

She is a distinguished theologian and trailblazer in the field of religious leadership, known for her pioneering efforts in pastoral ministry, and contributions to theological education. A former Born in London, UK, she exhibited an early passion for theology, which laid the foundation for her remarkable journey.

She completed her Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Master of Arts in Education at Newbold College, England. Subsequently, she enhanced her understanding of theology at King's College, London, and completed her Doctorate at Middlesex University London, solidifying her academic expertise. In her quest to contribute significantly to the theological landscape, she authored a groundbreaking thesis: "Gender Inclusive Theological Education." This work achieved widespread recognition and earned her the esteemed Ken Goulding Award for excellence of her thesis.

She made history by becoming the first female pastor in the Seventh-Day Adventist church in England. Her dedication to pastoral ministry led her to serve in various churches across the UK, including the prestigious New Gallery Church in London, Cambridge and Peterborough. The South Pacific Division invited her to mentor and guide their aspiring female pastors. Her influence extended to the academic sphere as she taught Theology at Avondale University, Australia, further impacting the theological education of future leaders.

Presently Dr. Drene Somasundram holds a prominent position as lecturer and chaplain at the School of Nursing and Health, Avondale University. In this role she continues to educate and inspire students, combining her theological expertise with her passion for caring for individuals in a holistic manner.

She is happily married to Martin, and they have a son, Daniel. Dr. Drene Somasundram remains a shining example of perseverance, dedication, and a pioneering spirit in the realm of theology and female leadership within the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.

Silvia Castrejón Neri Awarded Woman of the Year

Silvia Castrejon Neri received the Association of Adventist Women's Woman of the Year Award in Church Leadership on November 4, Riverside, California.

She was born in Puebla, Mexico, where she spent her childhood and part of her youth. In 1966 she attended Linda Vista School in Chiapas for two years of high school. At the end of the school year her uncle Pastor Jose Castrejón gave the week of prayer in which he called the youth to serve the Lord in the ministry. She decided to serve the Lord as a bible worker because of his call.

In 1968 she studied two years at the Theology Department, Montemorelos. After her graduation in 1970, she was invited to go to Mexico City to attend to the interests of the "Voz de la Esperanza" (Voice of Prophecy). She worked as a Bible worker in many churches of this great city.

When her mother, who was living in Montemorelos, developed cancer, Castrejón requested permission to take care of her mother, and while close to the University, finish her degree in religion. The theology faculty granted her permission to do this. She spent two years studying and at the same time taking care of her mother.

After her graduation she returned to Mexico City and asked to be a district pastor. In total, she worked for 38 years in this capacity. She is the first female pastor to retire from the Inter-American Division, in December 2008.

She is very happy because God has kept his eyes on her. She has served God in many ways that she never could have imagined. She feels blessed to be honored by the Association of Adventist Women and gives this word of encouragement to "Praise God, to Him be the glory, united we will finish God's work."

Nashed Awarded Woman of Year

Norma Nashed, Founder and President of Restore a Child, received the Woman of the Year Award for Humanitarian Leadership at Association of Adventist Women's Awards Banquet November 4, Riverside, California.

Her non-profit organization is dedicated to transforming the lives of orphans and destitute children around the world. By raising money in resource-rich nations and passing it on to vetted orphanages, schools and feeding projects throughout the world, Restore a Child can change the trajectory of children in dire need.

Nashed's early years were not easy. Abandoned by her father at an early age, she grew up with 9 people in a one-room home in Amman, Jordan. She was able to break the cycle of poverty thanks to the American missionary couple, Dr. and Mrs. Robert Darnell, who informally adopted her and gave her an education for a better future.

After school she landed a plush job working for a personal friend of the Late King Hussein of Jordan. During that time, she attended the Private Pilot Training Club, passing her ground school but the war interrupted her flight training.

Even a bout with cancer spurred her on to greater opportunities. Determined to find her mission in life, she started helping needy children in the neighborhoods of Washington, D.C.

From that humble beginning 25 years ago, Restore a Child was born and has grown into a global force, today feeding over five thousand children in 13 countries and building 21 schools. Also included in her efforts are basic needs, quality education, healthcare and shelter.

In spite of its successes, Restore a Child continues to face challenges in raising money to fulfill the needs of children during war, political strife, food scarcity and natural disasters.

Her life today is a testament of the difference that one person can make in the world. Because of her steady devotion to nutrition, shelter, education and healthcare, thousands of children now have a better life and future.

Hemmings Awarded Woman of the Year

Dr. Olive Hemmings Ph.D. was awarded Association of Adventist Women's Woman of the Year in Scholarship and Spiritual Leadership at their awards banquet November 4, Riverside, California.

She is Chairwoman of the Henry and Sharon Fordham Department of Religion at Washington Adventist University, where she has taught for more than 20 years. She began teaching in 1982 at West Indies College (now Northern Caribbean University), when she was still a student there!

She received her M.A. in New Testament and Biblical Languages, Andrews University, studied at Fuller Theological Seminary, and received her Ph.D. in Theology, Ethics and Culture, from Claremont Graduate University.

She is an ordained minister of Columbia Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, and is a much sought after guest preacher and lecturer. She has a passion for examining texts in their rich cultural/historical contexts and how they apply to social struggles then and now. She enjoys mentoring undergraduate and graduate students and teaching New Testament, Ethics and World Religions.

She is engaged in an active writing/publication ministry on topics of current ethical concerns in church and society, with the prophetic origins of the gospel as foundation. Her publication, *Sacred Texts and Social Conflict*, is a case study of the debate over women's ordination in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. It details the way sacred texts are used and abused. She is past president of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies - a major professional society of Adventist Religion/Theology scholars.

In 2022, she joined the Georgetown University ACPE chaplaincy program in order to develop pastoral/spiritual care competence and has found it to be a deeply spiritually transforming journey. She is married to Charles Kuuku Paintsil and they have three adult children.

Her scholarship and commitment to see God's justice roll down like mighty waters, inspire all to truly seek justice.

Johnsson Honored as Champion of Justice Posthumously

William G. Johnsson, Ph.D., was awarded the Association of Adventist Women's Champion of Justice Award posthumously, at their Awards Banquet, November 4, Riverside, California.

He truly was a champion of justice and his writings, lectures, and work on various church committees. A prolific author, respected scholar, and long-time editor of the Adventist Review, he is most remembered for biblical fairness for women pastors and others, and his passion for truth and grace.

Bill, as he was known, was born in South Australia. He studied to be a chemical engineer, but an inner voice compelled him to the ministry. Following his graduation from Avondale College and marrying the love of his life, Noelene Taylor, they sailed for India in 1960. Johnsson served fifteen years teaching at Vincent Hill School and then Spicer Memorial College.

Johnsson received a master's degree in systematic theology from Andrews University, a bachelor of divinity degree from the University of London, and a doctor of philosophy degree in Biblical studies from Vanderbilt University.

From 1975 to 1980 Johnsson taught at Andrews Theological Seminary, where he became associate dean and was elected as the first president of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies.

In 1980 Johnsson joined the Adventist Review as editor for 24 years. His editorials shaped the understanding of many Adventist doctrines, especially grace. He used this position to champion women, hiring them as writers and editors.

After “retirement,” he became an ambassador for interfaith dialog with Christians and Muslims. He was one of the statesmen in “From the Heart: It’s Time” video in support of women’s ordination. He wrote and spoke strongly for full equality of women ministers.

Johnsson authored more than 40 books, hundreds of Adventist Review editorials, and thousands of articles — all of them handwritten, many calling for justice in human relations.

He is survived by his wife, Noelene, two grown children, Julie, and Terry. He is remembered for his passion for justice, endless optimism, gentle humor, and indomitable spirit. His love in action and belief in God’s grace live on.

Loren Seibold Awarded Champion of Justice

Loren Seibold, D.Min., was awarded Champion of Justice by the Association of Adventist Women, November 4, 2023, Riverside, California. Most recently under his editorship of *Adventist Today*, over 50 articles on women’s ordination and fairness to women have been published.

He grew up on a North Dakota farm, in a multi-generational Adventist family. He attended Sheyenne River Academy and Walla Walla College, where he met Carmen Ajo, registered nurse. They married in 1978 and began parish ministry in the Dakota Conference. He earned a Master of Divinity degree at Andrews University, and in 1986 took the pulpit of the Palo Alto Church, California.

He completed his doctorate at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian seminary. At the same time, Carmen graduated with a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena. When in 1999 he took the pastorate of a congregation in Worthington, Ohio, Carmen completed Clinical Pastoral Education there, and ministered as an ordained healthcare chaplain.

He believes that God is gracious and good, so he promotes conversation about justice in the church through writing and speaking. He’s written hundreds of essays on faith, church, doctrine and social issues. He’s been a regular writer for *Signs of the Times*, *Ministry* and other magazines, and for ten years was a monthly columnist for *Spectrum*. In 2015 he became the editor of *Adventist Today*, which grew into another full-time job after he retired from ministry in 2019. His family still has their farm in North Dakota. He loves gardening and flowers, at their Ohio home, traveling, music, and art museums.

Seibold not only encourages women in ministry and leadership, he has created a safe place for conversations about this challenging issue within Adventism through his work with *Adventist Today*, Adventist Today Sabbath School class on Zoom, and *Spectrum*.