

# Exhibits Relating to the Ordination of Women

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## From the Lifetime and Experience of Ellen G. White

A paper presented at the ministerial meeting at the 1990 General Conference session. Prepared by the White Estate staff.

1. *A resolution to ordain women was discussed at the General Conference of 1881. No action was taken. The minutes include the following lines:*

“Resolved, That females possessing the necessary qualifications to fill that position may, with perfect propriety, be set apart by ordination to the work of the Christian ministry.

“This was discussed by J.O. Corliss, A. C. Bourdeau, E. R. Jones, D. H. Lamson, W. H. Littlejohn, A. S. Hutchins, D. M. Canright, and J. N. Loughborough, and referred to the General Conference Committee.”—RH, Dec. 20, 1881.

Ellen White did not attend the General Conference of 1881. Her husband died on August 6 of that year. Two weeks after his death she left Battle Creek, bound for California. She did not return to Michigan until August of 1883.

2. *For many years Ellen White was voted ministerial credentials by the Michigan Conference (see e.g. RH, Sept. 10, 1872), and then later by the General Conference. However, she was never ordained by human hands, nor did she ever perform a wedding, organize a church, or conduct a baptism.*

- Ministerial credentials of Ellen G. White, Michigan Conference, October 1, 1883. Signed by J. Fargo, President, and A. H. Mason, Secretary.
- Ministerial credentials of Ellen G. White, General Conference, December 1, 1885. Signed by G. I. Butler, President, and Uriah Smith, Secretary.
- Ministerial credentials of Ellen G. White, General Conference, November 1, 1887. Signed by G. I. Butler, President, and Uriah Smith, Secretary.
- Ministerial credentials of Ellen G. White, General Conference, March 7, 1899. Signed by L. A. Hoopes, Secretary.
- June 12, 1913. Signed by A. G. Daniells, President, and W.A. Spicer, Secretary.

3. *In 1895 Ellen White recommended the ordination of women who would give themselves to a deaconess-type of work:*

“Women who are willing to consecrate some of their time to the service of the Lord should be appointed to visit the sick, look after the young, and minister to the necessities of the poor. They should be set apart to this work by prayer and laying on of hands. In some cases they will need to counsel with the church officers or the minister; but if they are devoted women, maintaining a vital connection with God, they will be a power for good in the church. This is another means of strengthening and building up the church.”—RH, July 9, 1895.

A number of women were ordained as deaconesses during Ellen White's Australian ministry. On August 10, 1895, the nominating committee at the Ashfield church in Sydney rendered its report, which was approved. The clerk's minutes for that date state:

"Immediately following the election, the officers were called to the front where Pastors Corliss and McCullagh set apart the elder, deacons, [and] deaconesses by prayer and the laying on of hands."

Several years later, in the same church, W. C. White officiated at the ordination of the church officers. The minutes of the Ashfield church for January 7, 1900, state:

"The previous Sabbath officers had been nominated and accepted for the current year, and today Elder White ordained and laid hands on the elders, deacon, and deaconesses"—*Adventist Review*, Jan. 16, 1986.

4. *Women "Licensed to Preach" by the Seventh-day Adventist Church during Ellen White's lifetime included the following:* Some of the women listed above were employed by the church. Others, such as Margaret Caro, who was a dentist, were self-supporting.

5. *Ellen White made three statements which are sometimes construed as evidence that she supported the concept of women as ordained gospel ministers.*

In 1898 she declared that "there are women who should labor in the gospel ministry" (Ev 472). The context of this statement seems to indicate that she is speaking of ministers' wives.

She wrote:

"Letters have come to me from several, asking my advice upon the question, Should ministers' wives adopt infant children? Would I advise them to do this kind of work? To some who were regarding this matter favorably, I answered, No; God would have you help your husband in his work. The Lord has not given you children of your own; His wisdom is not to be questioned. He knows what is best. Consecrate your powers to God as a Christian worker. You can help your husband in many ways....

"There are women who should labor in the gospel ministry. In many respects they would do more good than the ministers who neglect to visit the flock of God. Husband and wife may unite in this work, and when it is possible, they should. The way is open for consecrated women. But the enemy would be pleased to have the women whom God could use to help hundreds binding up their time and strength on one helpless little mortal that requires constant care and attention."—5MR 325, 326.

In the year 1900 Ellen White published *Testimonies*, volume 6, which includes a section titled "The Canvasser a Gospel Worker." Here the author states:

"All who desire an opportunity for true ministry, and who will give themselves unreservedly to God, will find in the canvassing work opportunities to speak upon many things pertaining to the future, immortal life. The experience thus gained will be of the greatest value to those who are fitting themselves for the ministry. It is the accompaniment of the Holy Spirit of God that prepares workers, both men and women, to become pastors to the flock of God."—6T 322.

Finally, in September 1903, Ellen White wrote:

“The Lord calls upon those connected with our sanitariums, publishing houses, and schools to teach the youth to do evangelistic work. Our time and energy must not be so largely employed in establishing sanitariums, food stores, and restaurants that other lines of work will be neglected. Young men and young women who should be engaged in the ministry, in Bible work, and in the canvassing work should not be bound down to mechanical employment.

“The youth should be encouraged to attend our training schools for Christian workers, which should become more and more like the schools of the prophets. These institutions have been established by the Lord, and if they are conducted in harmony with His purpose, the youth sent to them will quickly be prepared to engage in various lines of missionary work. Some will be trained to enter the field as missionary nurses, some as canvassers, and some as gospel ministers.”—8T 229, 230.

6. *Ellen White made two statements about her own call to serve the Lord as His messenger.* She declared:

“At the age of 78 I am still toiling. We are all in the hands of the Lord. I trust in Him, for I know that He will never leave nor forsake those who put their trust in Him. I have committed myself to His keeping.

“And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry.”—RH, July 26, 1906.

“In the city of Portland the Lord ordained me as His messenger, and here my first labors were given to the cause of present truth.”—RH, May 18, 1911.

It will be recalled that Ellen White was given her first vision in December 1844, in Portland, Maine. Shortly thereafter she was prompted by the Lord to tell others what she had seen.

7. *Ellen White did not concern herself with women’s rights movements.* When she was urged to join others in the crusade for women’s suffrage, she declined the invitation. She wrote to her husband:

“I called upon Mrs. Graves. She had a burden upon her mind and ever since she knew I was at home she desired to see me. She said she felt that she must talk out her feelings to me. She is desirous that women’s suffrage should be looked into by me. She says women ought to vote, and she related many things of a startling character which were legalized in France and St. Louis, and an effort was made to carry them out in Chicago this year, but [the effort] failed. Houses of ill fame are legalized. Women who travel alone through those cities, if they are the least suspicious of them, are taken up by the authorities and their cases are investigated. If they are diseased they are placed in the care of the doctors and cured. Then they are fit for the visits of men and are placed in the legalized home for men to satisfy their lusts upon. No examination is made of the men, and where this law is carried into effect the crime and immorality resemble the condition of the world which existed previous to the Flood.

“Mrs. Graves viewed the matter as I do in regard to the increase of crime and demoralization of society. She says women must vote if this law is [to be] withstood. We had a long talk in regard to temperance. I told her that my mind was unprepared for any such matter as women voting. She had been thinking and dwelling upon these things and her mind was ripe upon them, while my work was of another character. We were doing upon the point of

temperance what no other class of people in the world were. We were as much in favor of a pledge against tobacco as liquor.”—10MR 69.

8. *It is likely that Ellen White did not suggest at any time that the Seventh-day Adventist Church should commence the practice of ordaining women to the gospel ministry.* Her secretary, C. C. Crisler, says that she was very cautious on this point. Here is the correspondence relating to this question:

“March 12, 1916

“Mr. Clarence Crisler, Sanitarium [California]

“Dear Brother: Will you please inform me in regard to the setting apart of women who can give some time to missionary work, by laying on hands in prayer, found in *Review and Herald*, back in the early part of the nineties, probably back in about 1892 or 1893, from the pen of Sister White.

“The reason I ask for this, I was in a recent meeting where Elder Andross set aside women by the laying on of hands, and when I asked him for the authority for so doing, he referred me to you, and as I have been a Bible worker for a number of years and have recently been granted a ministerial license, I want this information.

“Please answer at once, as I want to hear from you before I go to the Southwestern Union Conference, which convenes April 7. Please send me two or three copies of her statement, as the president of our conference wants one.”—Mrs. L. E. Cox, 134 Agarita Avenue, San Antonio, Texas.

“March 22, 1916

“Mrs. L. E. Cox, San Antonio, Texas

“Dear Sister: I have your letter of the twelfth, making inquiry regarding the ordination of women who give some time to missionary work—particularly to some statement which you believe to be found in a *Review* early in the nineties, from the pen of Mrs. Ellen G. White.

“As this query will require some study on my part, and searching, and as I must go to Mountain View in the morning for a few days, I am under the necessity of asking that you excuse me from answering for a few days. Upon my return, early next week, I will endeavor to send you a reply, accompanying same, if possible, with the extracts called for. However, I might say that I have not understood these extracts as teaching positively the ordination of women as ministers of the gospel. I have supposed, rather, that they refer primarily to the ordination of God-fearing women as deaconesses in local churches. But of this I will speak more fully when I write again.

“I hope to write you about the twenty-eighth, and will address you as above. If you are leaving San Antonio for other parts, it would be well for you to leave a forwarding order, so mail addressed as above will reach you in due time at the union Conference.”—Clarence Crisler.

“June 16, 1916

“Mrs. L. E. Cox

“Dear Sister: In my answer under date of March 22, I was unable to forward you copy of the *Review* article called for, but ventured to say, ‘I have not understood these extracts as teaching positively the ordination of women as ministers of the gospel. I have supposed, rather,

that they refer primarily to the ordination of God-fearing women as deaconesses in local churches.’

“Since writing the above, I have found the article in question and have had same copied. Enclosed find a copy of this article. [RH, July 9, 1895.] I am also forwarding a copy to your local conference president, Elder E. L. Neff, and to the president of your union, Elder J. W. Christian, that they may know what I am sending to you.

“While I do not make it a part of my work to presume to interpret that which has been written, yet I may be pardoned for expressing as my conviction the thought that this article published in the *Review* does not refer to the ordination of women as ministers of the gospel, but rather touches upon the question of setting apart, for special duties in local churches, God-fearing women in such churches where circumstances call for such action.

“And may I add that Sister White, personally, was very careful about expressing herself in any wise as to the advisability of ordaining women as gospel ministers. She has often spoken of the perils that such general practice would expose the church to by a gainsaying world; but as yet I have never seen from her pen any statement that would seem to encourage the formal and official ordination of women to the gospel ministry, to public labor such as is ordinarily expected of an ordained minister.

“This is not suggesting, much less saying, that no women are fitted for such public labor, and that none should ever be ordained; it is simply saying that so far as my knowledge extends, Sister White never encouraged church officials to depart from the general customs of the church in those matters.”—C. C. Crisler.

## **Conclusion**

The question of women’s ordination was not high on Ellen White’s agenda during her lifetime. Her best energies were directed toward achieving a greater unity and a deeper spirituality in the church.