

## The Association of Adventist Women Celebrates Its 40th Year

[Nerida Taylor Bates](#) | November 5, 2022 | Spectrum News



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The Association of Adventist Women (AAW) began as a committee of the Adventist Forum, the same organization that started *Spectrum*, around 1979. Relatively quickly, two groups organized, one in the Washington, DC, area by Viveca Black and the other in Loma Linda led by Danielle Wuchenich. The mission of AAW was for women to “reflect more fully the image of God in their relationships to each other in the home, the church, the work setting and in the community.”<sup>[1]</sup> These general goals struck a chord with women who were feeling unheard, and chapters grew throughout the US as well as Puerto Rico, Australia, and Europe. After 40 years, we remain a vibrant network that has spun off many sister organizations supporting more tailored goals.

The Forum’s women’s committee began only five years after married women in the US were allowed to open a bank account without their husbands. Merikay McLeod Silver had settled her equal pay case with the Pacific Press but the class action suit that would force the church to pay women equally with men was still pending. Many women felt the church was dragging its feet by not adhering to the law. Elder Neal C. Wilson urged the fledgling woman’s group to prepare a newsletter highlighting women leaders for distribution at the 1979 Annual Council, which became *Adventist Women’s Update*.<sup>[2]</sup>

The next year, the newsletter changed its name to *The Adventist Woman*. It quickly became popular by sharing news about prominent Adventist women often ignored by other periodicals. The first editor, Margaret McFarland, had help from 40 volunteers from all over the US. Meetings relied heavily on phone connections between regional reporters. (It took the pandemic to replace phone calls with videoconferencing.) In 1982, the Forum

committee incorporated into the Association of Adventist Women with Josephine Benton as president.

Neal C. Wilson openly discussed his desire for the development of more qualified women for church administration and more involvement of women in the task of the church.[3] AAW translated these into two practical goals, calling for the support of pastors' wives by expanding the Shepherdess Ministry and reestablishing S. M. I. Henry's Women's Ministry Department at all levels of the church. Both of these organizations have been very successful, and almost every conference employs women to support pastors' wives and encourage women's leadership in the church and community. AAW felt that by working for mutual goals, they had the respect of the church.

The issue of Adventist women pastors was widely debated in *The Adventist Woman*. In 1983, Alyce Pudwell, president from 1996–99, said, “The key to women's full participation in the church will remain ordination.”[4] In 1984, the General Conference (GC) Annual Council discussed licensing and ordination for women pastors. A group of anonymous women mailed negative opinions on employing women pastors to every committee member, claiming to speak for “the majority of Adventist women.” An anonymous letter of opposing views was also put under hotel room doors during the meetings. AAW condemned both anonymous groups' *claim* to represent the majority of Adventist women. They believed only open discussion could truly represent most women.[5] This contributed to AAW being considered less strident than other Adventist women's groups.[6]

AAW played a significant role in developing comradery between women pastors and theology students at their conferences. One woman pastor drove six hours east to the AAW conference to meet a woman pastor working two hours west of her! This role is now served by the North American Division's women clergy retreats, the Women Clergy Network of Andrews University, and the support group Adventist Female Pastors Worldwide—begun by this year's Woman of the Year awardee, Pastor Nandi Fleming of South Africa. Currently, AAW is responding to a request to connect Spanish-speaking clergy in the US to Spanish-speaking women ministering throughout the world.

AAW also began raising funds for women to study religion; this became the independent nonprofit Time for Equality in Adventist Ministry (TEAM). AAW sponsored Called and Anointed, a toolbox for women pastors in 2021 and 2022. This was organized by Pastor Nyslie Guerrier and the Mt. Rubidoux Rubi G.L.O.W women's ministry, and it contains practical advice for women pastors such as how to manage a hostile church board and whether to make a church's charity a non-profit organization.

AAW was instrumental in advocating for formal anti-abuse policies throughout the church structure. AAW president Peggy Harris spearheaded the project by writing the NAD anti-abuse policies and organizing WASH (Women and Men Against Sexual Harassment and Other Abuses). Another spinoff was CEASE!, which cultivates healing and prevention of sexual, spiritual, physical, and emotional abuse. In 2018, Lourdes Morales-Gudmundsson organized AAW's conference on preventing sexual abuse, and in 2019, Priscilla Walters organized one titled Combating Domestic Abuse. Currently, all types of abuse by

Adventist employees can be reported anonymously through the Silent Whistle program set up by the GC.

More than 20 years ago, AAW called for the establishment of a Women's Resource Center, now under the umbrella of La Sierra University. Another early concern was gender stereotyping in the children's Sabbath school lesson, which was resolved with the Gracelink series developed by Noelene Johnsson, Pat Habada, and others.[7]

AAW also called for at least one female GC vice president. We are very thankful for Dr. Ella Simmons's unique voice on the GC executive committee (and for her not retiring until another woman was appointed). Research suggests it takes 30% female committee membership for women's voices to be amplified to the same level as men, so AAW's current goal is for all nominating, executive, and leadership committees in the church to be at least 30% women of diverse backgrounds.

AAW's annual conferences were traditionally three-day events, well attended by women from across the US. Early topics included biblical justification for women's leadership and documentation of historical Adventist women. Topics then shifted to women's role in globalization and women's role in fostering diversity. More recent conferences highlight women speaking on issues pertinent to all genders: What Does God's Justice Look Like? and Reducing Authoritarianism in Our Communities. The shift mirrors women's knowledge that they are vital to the whole Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Compiling biblical information supporting women clergy has always been a major part of AAW. Early conferences began with a whole day of lectures on Women and the Word. Currently, non-English-speaking countries have requested support materials. On our website, you can find the entire Vyhmeister collection and most TOSC articles in Spanish (and English). Ruth Peeters and Dr. Nancy Vyhmeister are commended for their months of Spanish translating. We also have articles in Portuguese, French, Tagalog, Russian and Croatian and are actively looking for volunteer translators.

AAW has awarded 178 Women of the Year awards to people like Dr. Lyn Behrens, past president of Loma Linda University, Dr. Nancy Bassham, church ministries director in Thailand, and Dr. Phetsile Kholekile Dlamini-Nkomo, Eswatini (Swaziland) health minister. These awards strive to recognize all types of service in the Adventist Church community. This year pioneering child psychiatrist Verna Alva of Peru was honored for her work in academics, public health, church evangelism, and even politics.

Each year I am both humbled by the awardee's amazing accomplishments and reminded that thousands and thousands of other remarkable Adventist women are unrecognized. Community service leaders, the bereavement food coordinators, the children's Sabbath school leaders . . . there are so many incredible women in the church!

Fifteen men have been recognized for supporting women in ministry. Some say women pastors are agitating for ordination, but most of the impetus for women's ordination comes from male supervisors, impressed with the Holy Spirit's blessings, who ask,

“What am I supposed to do with the woman pastor who brought more people to baptism than all other pastors combined?”

AAW has counted the women pastors of the Adventist Church in 1986, 1990, and 2022. Adventist historian David Trim talks about the “golden age” of women Adventist licensed ministers peaking in 1884 at 4.6%. When you include children’s ministries on equal terms with youth ministries, today the percentage of Adventist women pastors worldwide is at least 5%, excluding China’s many, but poorly counted, women ministers. At present, at least 1,719 women are working in religious instruction, chaplaincy, or ministry, with at least 462 pastoring churches. (There are as many as 3,100 more Adventist women pastors in China). This includes women pastors/theologians in every division.

In the next decade, AAW faces three major issues.

1. Remaining Relevant. My daughters’ generation finds it so unjust that women are not ordained that they often ignore it or leave the church. This puts parents, pastors, and leadership in a difficult position. Just as equal pay for women was a deal breaker for my generation, we need to persist toward Godly change in the church before expecting significant help from the younger generations.

It is surprising how many men and women were looking for a way to express support for women’s ordination constructively. AAW designates the first Sabbath of the month for wearing purple and/or a sunflower in support of fully recognizing God’s calling to women pastors.

2. Optimal Communication. Forms of communication have also changed drastically from the days of newsprint. And today, the celebration of Adventist women’s accomplishments is common in Adventist periodicals. When I came to the AAW in 2019, we had not been printing a newsletter for a decade. Email was the best communication for a while but has now become a never-ending fight with spam blockers. AAW uses a Facebook page run by Frances Priest to post breaking news like the regional conferences moving toward women’s ordination and the count of NAD women pastors. She also shares devotionals on women leaders in history and the struggle for women’s ordination in other denominations. This year, we made 40 video devotionals called Committed to Ministering Together.

3. Mission. We are also losing to our own success, and I don’t necessarily see this as a bad thing. We have supported the creation of organizations that do large swaths of our original mission. Women can afford theological training because of TEAM, Women pastors are supported by Called & Anointed, and all women who aren’t pastors are supported by women’s ministries and Adventist women leaders. “Women’s news” has just become news reported in union papers and shared by many social media outlets. The fight to end abuse is much more prominent within the church’s own structure with the enditnow campaign. If women’s pastoral gifts become recognized equally with men’s, would an organization that develops a yearly conference and recognizes prominent women with Women of the Year awards be necessary? I am not sure.

I think one answer is that AAW must become more focused on women’s issues outside of North America, Australia, and Europe. This includes helping to write the history of women pioneer leaders in each division. This has begun in the Inter-American and

South American divisions and will be a focus of mine in the next few years. AAW needs to keep making pertinent theological arguments tailored to the issues of each location around the world. To that end, finding, counting, and communicating with women pastors becomes very important.

When each division takes seriously the need to count women pastors, we will hear the stories of the beloved women pastors in half a dozen African countries, the innovative women evangelists in Asia, and the pastoras in South America who feel accepted by their churches but not by their conference leadership. Then the task is essentially accomplished. I don't think it will take another 40 years to see formal acceptance of women's ordination.

It is incumbent on all of us to persist in our own calling in the church, to look around and uphold women near us and to learn more about women's issues in the international church. Join us at [AAW](#) to watch what has been promised in the last days; to paraphrase Joel 2 and Acts 2, the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh, leading our sons and our daughters to prophesy, and our young men to see visions, and our old men to dream dreams . . . both men and women.

#### **Notes & References:**

[1] Margaret McFarland, "The Association of Adventist Women is Born," *The Adventist Woman*. Vol 1 No 5, p1. Mission statement, p5.

[2] Viveca Black, "A Charter Message as We See It," *The Adventist Woman*, Vol 1 No 1.

[3] "An Interview with Neal Wilson," *The Adventist Woman* Vol 1 No 6, p 1.

[4] Alyce Pudwell, "Closer Cooperation Needed." *The Adventist Woman*, Vol 2, No 4.

[5] "Backstage at Annual Council". *The Adventist Woman*, Vol 3, No 5, p 4.

[6] Kris Coffin Stevenson, *Adventist Today*, Mar/Apr 1994, p 12

[7] The replacement of Gracelink was announced in 2016 but, as of yet, only samples are available.

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*Nerida Taylor Bates, MD, PhD, is the 14th president of the Association of Adventist Women. She also raised three daughters, taught medical school, and worked as a general pediatrician. She finds these disparate careers all require a sense of humor and a daily dependence on God's grace.*