

ABSTRACT

CALLED TO LEAD:
LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS AND WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES
OF WOMEN PRESIDENTS IN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST INSTITUTIONS

by

Gary Thurber

Chair: Erich W. Baumgartner, PhD

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title: CALLED TO LEAD:
LEADERSHIP JOURNEYS AND WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES
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Name of researcher: Gary Thurber

Name and degree of faculty chair: Erich W. Baumgartner, PhD

Date completed: July 2026

Problem

Although women constitute more than half of Seventh-day Adventist Church membership, they remain substantially underrepresented in senior leadership roles across North America. This disparity raises important questions about the historical, theological, organizational, and gender-related factors that shape women's access to institutional leadership within the denomination.

A growing body of scholarship has examined the life experiences of women clergy in the church; however, limited research has explored the experiences of women serving in presidential leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the experiences of women serving in presidential leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions, with particular attention to their leadership trajectories and the ways gender shaped their professional experiences. The study was guided by two research questions: “What has been the significance of participants’ work histories, educational opportunities, and spiritual formation in leading them into church leadership positions?” and “How do women who serve as presidents of institutions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church describe their workplace environments as they relate to gender?”

Method

To address these research questions, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological case study design. This methodological approach was appropriate for examining how women serving in institutional leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church described their pathways into positions of authority and interpreted their workplace environments in relation to gender. Because the study emphasized women’s lived workplace experiences in relation to gender and leadership, participants were selected because they currently serve, or had recently served, in senior leadership roles within the church.

Findings

The findings indicate that multiple factors contribute to the limited representation of women in senior leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Theological perspectives such as Headship Theology, denominational policies regarding women’s ordination, and broader social expectations concerning women’s roles all shape the

leadership environment. Among the women who became presidents of North American Adventist institutions, the study identified a recurring pattern of graciousness toward those who questioned the legitimacy of their leadership. Participants also described a strong sense of divine calling as the primary source of strength that sustained them while leading in environments that were, at times, resistant or hostile.

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A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Gary Thurber

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APPROVAL BY THE COMMITTEE:

Chair: Erich W. Baumgartner

Dean, College of Education & International
Services
Alayne Thorpe

Member: Janet Ledesma

Member: Alayne Thorpe

External: Ella Simmons

Date approved

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all...”
(Romans 1:8).

When you get to this point in your academic journey, you are compelled to stop and realize you would never be where you are if it were not for the support of important people in your life who have made it all possible.

When I began this academic journey, to say I was intimidated by the whole process would be a tremendous understatement. My desire to grow and learn was just a little bigger than my apprehensions, so I moved forward.

The members of my cohort, the “Global Express,” were some of the first individuals who came alongside me to encourage and inspire. I can’t thank them enough for all their help and encouragement.

Without Dr. Baumgartner and Dr. Ledesma, I simply would not have finished this dissertation project. The amount of patience and guidance they gave to me was unbelievable. They are both godly professors who give way above the call of duty for their students. I have been blessed to be one of them.

The Lake Union Conference of SDA and the Mid-America Union Conference of SDA, provided both encouragement and financial support that made this journey a possibility.

I am grateful for the seven women leaders who were willing to be interviewed and share their stories with me, thank you! You will never know the amount of respect I have for you and how much I admire your leadership skills.

Finally, I want to dedicate this study to my wife Diane. She has been such a source of encouragement and help throughout this whole process. She is someone who always tries to lift up everyone around her to help them become the best version of themselves they can be. I also want to acknowledge that she is one of the best leaders I have ever known. Her leadership journey is what inspired this study.

CHAPTER I

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

Background

Women have participated in leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church from its formative period. Historical accounts indicate that women served in a range of ecclesial, educational, administrative, and evangelistic roles during the early development of the denomination (Watts, 1995). Ellen G. White, in particular, occupied a central role in the emergence and theological formation of the Seventh-day Adventist movement (Tutsch, 2008). Although White was not the sole founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, she worked alongside James White, Hiram Edson, Joseph Bates, J. N. Andrews, and other early Adventist leaders in establishing the foundations of the denomination (Banks, 1992; D Elmuti, H Jia, & H Davis, 2009; Knight, 1999; Kolkmann, 2013; Tutsch, 2008; Vance, 2017).

White's leadership emerged within a nineteenth-century American context in which women occupied a markedly constrained social, legal, and public status (Habada, 1995; Tutsch, 2008; K. Watts, 1995). In an article published in *Ministry Magazine*, Kit Watts (1995) cited an 1840 statement from *Godey's Lady's Book*, one of the earliest magazines for women in the United States, in which woman was described as "the connecting link . . . between man and the inferior animals, possessing a central rank

between the mysterious instinct of the latter and the unattainable energies of the former” (Kit Watts, 1995, p. 7). Watts further noted that women in this period often held a social status comparable to that of children and enslaved persons. They could not vote, married women had limited property rights, wages earned by married women were commonly controlled by their husbands, and women were largely excluded from public office, public speaking, universities, and many professions (Knick, 2018; K. Watts, 1995; Willkomm, 2011). Although many of the formal restrictions that characterized the period in which the Seventh-day Adventist Church emerged have since been removed, women in contemporary leadership contexts, both within and beyond the church, continue to encounter gendered challenges not typically experienced by their male counterparts (Binns, 2008; D Elmuti et al., 2009; Habada, 1995; Miller, 2013).

It was within this broader social context that White understood herself to be called by God to participate in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist movement. Her public religious leadership was contested by some, including members of her own family, because of her gender. Her brother reportedly urged her not to speak publicly, writing, “I beg of you do not disgrace the family. I will do anything for you if you will not go out as a preacher” (White, 1889). White responded, “Can it disgrace the family for me to preach Christ and him crucified! If you would give me all the gold your house could hold, I would not cease giving my testimony for God” (E. G. White, 1889, p. 9).

White was not an isolated example of women’s leadership in early Adventism. During her lifetime, Sarepta Henry, Ellen Lane, Hattie Enoch, Ann Knight, and Jessie Weiss Curtis were among the women who contributed as preachers, teachers, and leaders in the late nineteenth century (Habada, 1995; Miller, 2013; Stenbakken, Williams,

Pilmoor, & Tolbert, 2001). By 1915, the year of White's death, 30 women had served as conference treasurers (Stenbakken et al., 2001), 20 as conference secretaries, three as General Conference treasurers, and many others held ministerial credentials (Kit Watts, 1995). These developments paralleled broader patterns within some Protestant and evangelical contexts. Although denominations such as the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches were slower to expand women's formal leadership opportunities, segments of the evangelical movement provided greater space for women's public religious participation (Cruea, 2005; MacHaffie, 1986; Morgan, 2019).

The expansion of women's leadership in early Adventism appears to have been driven less by broader social reform movements than by the denomination's urgent missional and eschatological commitments. The conviction that the gospel message needed to be proclaimed rapidly, together with the expectation of Christ's imminent return, created an environment in which preaching, teaching, evangelism, and organizational leadership required the participation of all available workers (Banks, 1992; Graham, 1985; Knight, 1999; Miller, 2013; Morgan, 2019; Willkomm, 2011).

After 1915, however, women's representation in formal Seventh-day Adventist leadership declined substantially (Banks, 1992; Kolkman, 2013; K. Watts, 1995). By the end of World War II, women no longer occupied conference officer roles, and the number of women holding ministerial licenses had also decreased markedly. Scholars have attributed this decline, in part, to the development of policies that linked certain leadership responsibilities to ordination, a credential not available to women. In addition, although the term was not clearly articulated until later, ideas associated with Headship

Theology began to shape Adventist understandings of ecclesial authority and gender roles (G. Chudleigh, 2014; K. Watts, 1995).

Women continue to serve in leadership within the contemporary Seventh-day Adventist Church; however, they constitute a relatively small proportion of the denomination's leaders. According to the 2025 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, North America has approximately 4,600 pastors, of whom about 85 are women. In addition, Sandra Roberts has served as a conference president in the Southeastern California Conference; a small number of women serve as conference treasurers; women hold various departmental roles at conference, union, and division levels; and several women serve as presidents of Adventist institutions ("Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook," 2025).

The substantial reduction in women's representation from the early decades of Adventism raises important historical, theological, and organizational questions. Differing theological interpretations of women's roles in church life have contributed to a more complex leadership environment for women. In particular, limited research has examined the relationship between theological frameworks and leadership opportunities for women within the denomination. Headship Theology represents one such framework that has influenced debates concerning women's access to pastoral, administrative, and institutional leadership roles.

Headship Theology

During the 1970s and 1980s, Headship Theology became more clearly defined and was adopted by some Adventists. Chudleigh (2014) traces its roots to evangelical Calvinist theologians who "developed a detailed system of patriarchy, which organizes

almost all human relationships around authority and submission—which they call the ‘headship principle’” (Gerry Chudleigh, 2014, p. 4).

The principal claims of Headship Theology are commonly grounded in two New Testament passages: 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:22-23. In 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul writes, “The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (NKJV). In Ephesians 5:22-23, Paul states, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body” (NKJV; G. Chudleigh, 2014).

From these passages, proponents of the headship principle argue that Adam’s authority over Eve was established by God prior to the Fall and that Eve was created to be in a subordinate relationship to Adam. This framework also commonly holds that Christ remains voluntarily and eternally submissive to God the Father and that Adam’s sin included a failure to exercise proper authority when Eve acted independently at the tree. Within this interpretive framework, pastors and administrators are understood as exercising ecclesial authority over the church membership, thereby leading some adherents to conclude that women should not serve as pastors or elders. Chudleigh (2014) further notes that many who hold this position regard the inclusion of women in church leadership as an act of rebellion against biblical authority.

After engaging headship arguments advanced by Calvinist and Baptist writers, Samuele Bacchiocchi, a professor of theology at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, published *Women in the Church: A Theological Study of the Role of Women in the Church* in 1987 (Bacchiocchi, 1987). Chudleigh identifies this publication as the first major appearance of Headship Theology within Adventist theological discourse and

argues that, prior to Bacchiocchi's work, the doctrine of headship was not present in Adventist literature (G. Chudleigh, 2014). Bacchiocchi's book and subsequent articles circulated widely, contributing to the broader reception of Headship Theology within Adventism. This theological perspective has become influential not only in North America but also in other regions of the world church (G. Chudleigh, 2014; Vance, 2017).

The influence of Headship Theology has shaped denominational debates regarding ordination and women's access to senior decision-making roles. The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has voted not to permit women to be ordained to pastoral ministry, a position that significantly limits women's eligibility for certain leadership offices (Vance, 2017). Under church policy, ordination is required for service as a conference, union, division, or General Conference president (Adventists, 2010).

Women leaders also encounter resistance from individuals who interpret headship principles as incompatible with women's ecclesial authority. In some instances, advocates of this position have called for women serving in leadership roles to step down or be replaced (G. Chudleigh, 2014; Vance, 2017).

Complementarianism

Complementarianism represents another theological perspective that shapes debates concerning gender and church leadership. While proponents of Headship Theology often argue that women and men are equal in value but that women should submit to male leadership, complementarianism similarly affirms the equality of women and men while maintaining that Scripture assigns distinct roles to each. Mary Kassian, a Southern Baptist theologian, defines this position as follows:

Complementarians, however, do not believe that men, as a group, rank higher than women. Men are not superior to women. Women are not the “second sex.” Men have a responsibility to exercise headship in their homes and church family, and Christ revolutionized the definition of what that means. Authority is not the right to rule—it’s the responsibility to serve. We rejected the term “hierarchicalism” because people associate it with an inherent, self-proclaimed right to rule (Kassian, 2012).

Erwin Lutzer (2011) from the Moody Institute in Chicago puts it this way,

While Scripture maintains that women and men are equal in nature and gifting, the Bible does delineate particular roles for each gender, especially concerning the church. God has ordained the church’s primary leadership to reside with male elders who meet the qualifications prescribed by Scripture (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Pastors must have the same qualifications in every respect. God has set apart women for essential roles in church life. Women are to serve as deaconesses, directors of church ministries, and teachers of women and children.” (Lutzer, 2011)

On the other end of the theological spectrum from Headship Theology and Complementarianism is Egalitarian Theology. Egalitarianism is held by some members of the church in North America as well. Egalitarians are described by Martin Nyanzu as “evangelicals who have a high view of scripture compared to those who push for equality without using the scriptures. They believe that the Bible teaches full equality of men and women, that Adam’s rule over Eve resulted from the fall and was not granted to him prior to the fall, that gender differences does not restrict male-female performative actions, especially with regards to ministry because the Holy Spirit has been given to all” (Nyanzu, 2025, pp. 4,5).

These divergent theological perspectives complicate the environment in which women seek to serve as leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. Although Headship Theology, Complementarianism, and Egalitarian Theology are not uniformly held or officially sanctioned within the denomination, members and leaders have adopted differing biblical interpretations that shape their views of women’s leadership.

Other Social Pressures

In addition to theological challenges, women leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church encounter many of the same barriers faced by women leaders in broader society. Elmuti, Jia, and Davis (2009) identified several challenges that disproportionately affect women in leadership, including social barriers, selection processes, lifestyle conflicts, internal motivation, workplace environments, globalization, and stereotyping (Dean Elmuti, Heather Jia, & Henry Davis, 2009; Schneider & Bos, 2019).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a worldwide denomination with nearly twenty-four million members (sdachurch.org). Because cultural norms concerning gender and leadership vary considerably across global contexts, this study is delimited to the leadership experiences of women within the North American Division.

Women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America have experienced periods of comparatively broad access to leadership as well as periods in which their formal leadership presence was sharply reduced. Although women's leadership appears to be increasing again in the contemporary North American context, tradition, differing interpretations of Scripture, and broader societal pressures continue to shape women's leadership journeys in ways directly related to gender (G. Chudleigh, 2014; D Elmuti et al., 2009; Habada, 1995; Miller, 2013; Vance, 2017).

Despite their historical involvement, women remain underrepresented in contemporary church leadership. This study seeks to understand more clearly the leadership journeys of current women leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the obstacles they encounter. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to understand and describe the working environment of women serving in presidential leadership roles in

Seventh-day Adventist institutions, as well as the developmental experiences that contributed to their leadership trajectories as they relate to gender.

Statement of the Problem

The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms the equality of all persons regardless of ethnicity or gender, while maintaining gender-based restrictions related to ordination (Adventists, 2025) (*Adventist Beliefs: Our 28 Fundamental Beliefs*, 2015). Because ordination within the denomination is restricted to men, the appropriate scope of women's leadership in the church remains a contested issue. According to the church manual, ordination is required for service as conference, union, division, and General Conference president (Adventists, 2025). Although formal policy does not restrict women from holding many other church offices, debate continues regarding whether women should serve as elders, pastors, teachers with authority over men, or presidents of church institutions that employ and supervise male personnel. Women have, in fact, been called to serve in these roles within the Seventh-day Adventist Church; nevertheless, ambiguity concerning women's appropriate leadership roles persists within the global denomination. Consequently, it is important to examine the perspectives of women leaders regarding their workplace environments, both within their immediate institutional contexts and in relation to the broader world church.

A growing body of scholarship has examined the experiences of women clergy within and beyond Adventism and has identified challenges associated with Headship Theology, fundamentalist theological frameworks, and contested interpretations of women's ecclesial authority. These studies indicate that women clergy have encountered

resistance from lay members, male pastors, and women within their congregations (Bumgardner, 2005; Chaves, 1999; Davis, 2019b; Sullins, 2000).

Less attention, however, has been given to women who serve as leaders of Adventist institutions outside traditional clergy roles. Although their numbers remain small, women have been appointed as presidents of Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 2026). Women have also served as presidents or senior leaders of other church institutions, including publishing houses and media ministries. According to the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, there are 89 senior presidential leadership positions in North America, fewer than 10 of which are held by women (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 2026).

One woman in recent Adventist history was elected president of the largest conference in the North American Division. Her election was particularly significant because General Conference policy requires ordination for service in that office. In order for her to assume the role, the conference and union chose to ordain her to gospel ministry despite opposition from the General Conference (Vance, 2017).

Women currently lead large Adventist organizations that employ both men and women. However, limited research has examined women serving in Seventh-day Adventist institutional presidency roles, particularly those outside traditional clergy categories. Although women in the denomination have increasingly been appointed to leadership roles beyond pastoral ministry, women who lead Adventist institutions remain substantially underrepresented. As a result, little is known about the gender-related challenges that shape their leadership experiences, institutional environments, and opportunities for advancement.

For these reasons, this study focuses on the leadership journeys of women serving as presidents of Seventh-day Adventist institutions and the ways gender shapes their experiences within the denomination. Because the leadership pool for Adventist institutions remains predominantly male, further understanding is needed regarding why relatively few women occupy institutional leadership roles. By examining the gender-related dynamics identified in this study, church leaders and members may gain insight into how Adventist institutions can more effectively support women leaders and foster collaborative leadership across gender lines.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the experiences of women serving in presidential leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions, with particular attention to their leadership trajectories and the ways gender has shaped their professional experiences. Specifically, this study examines the working conditions of women who serve as executive leaders of Seventh-day Adventist church institutions and explores how their personal, educational, professional, and spiritual journeys contributed to their development as leaders. Using a phenomenological case study design, the study sought to identify insights from these women's experiences as to inform future women called to leadership and assist the church in more effectively supporting women in senior leadership roles. Because limited research has examined women serving in non-clergy leadership positions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, this study addresses an important gap in the literature. The study is significant because it illuminates critical gender-related issues affecting women in church leadership and may contribute to a

deeper understanding of how Social Role Theory, Gender Role Theory, and relevant theological frameworks shape the leadership environments in which these women serve.

Research Questions

What has been the significance of participants' work histories, educational opportunities, and spiritual formation in leading them into church leadership positions? How do women who serve as presidents of institutions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church describe their workplace environments as they relate to gender?

Methodology

To address the research questions, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological study design. This methodological approach was appropriate for examining how women serving in institutional leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church describe their pathways into positions of authority and how they interpret their workplace environments in relation to gender. A phenomenological orientation allowed the study to attend to participants' lived experiences and provide a means of situating those experiences within the organizational and ecclesial contexts in which their leadership occurs.

Consistent with the research questions, this study sought to understand how women leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church describe their leadership journeys and the meanings they assign to those experiences. Van Manen (2017) characterizes phenomenology as an approach for examining how particular individuals, situated within specific places or institutional contexts, experience a given phenomenon. The participants in this study are similarly situated within identifiable institutional settings in the

organizational structure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Their accounts therefore provided insight not only into individual leadership development but also into the institutional conditions that shape women's leadership experiences.

The narratives of the women leaders are central to this inquiry. Narrative inquiry is therefore used as a complementary analytic approach for eliciting, organizing, and interpreting participants' accounts of their leadership experiences. Bell (2002) notes that narrative contains an inherently temporal dimension, as present experiences are interpreted in relation to past events and anticipated future possibilities. This approach was particularly suited to the present study because it enabled participants to describe how they understand the development, meaning, and implications of their leadership journeys over time. Ntinda (2019) further explains the relevance of narrative approaches in qualitative research as follows:

Narrative research or inquiry is one of the more recent qualitative methodologies that focuses on life stories as the essence of people-oriented sciences. As a research inquiry, narrative approaches endeavor to attend to the ways in which a story is constructed, for whom and why, as well as the cultural discourses that it draws upon. Narrative research is based on the premise that people understand and give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell (Ntinda, 2019).

Rationale for the Study

Examining the experiences of women serving in presidential leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions provided an opportunity to understand more fully the leadership trajectories, organizational contexts, and gender-related dynamics that shape their work. Although existing scholarship has explored the experiences of women clergy and the ways societal and ecclesial norms influence women's roles in the church (Bumgardner, 2005; Davis, 2019b), comparatively little research has focused on

women who lead church institutions outside traditional clergy categories. This study sought to address that gap by offering insights into the experiences of women institutional leaders. The women leaders' insights given will in turn inform church leaders regarding practices that may strengthen workplace culture, support women in leadership, and guide institutional governance. In addition, the findings may be useful to emerging women leaders who are in the developmental stages of their careers and vocational discernment.

This study also examined how theological frameworks, including Headship Theology and complementarianism, shaped the workplace environments of women leaders within Seventh-day Adventist institutions. In doing so, it contributes to the application of Social Role Theory, Gender Role Theory, and Expectation States Theory in an ecclesial organizational context. Social Role Theory and Gender Role Theory provide a framework for understanding how gendered social expectations influence perceptions of work, leadership, and authority. Expectation States Theory further explains how individuals, when engaged in shared organizational tasks, rely on social cues to determine appropriate behavior. Ridgeway (2001) argues that “when people come together to work on a shared goal or task, as is typical in the workplace, they look for cues as to how they should behave. Institutional roles, such as boss and employee, provide general guidelines, but within these there is still much room for variation” (p. 641). As Ridgeway notes, in mixed-gender workplace settings, such behavioral cues may be shaped by gendered expectations (Ridgeway, 2001). Accordingly, this study may contribute to a deeper understanding of how Expectation States Theory operates within church organizations led by women.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by a Transformative Feminist Leadership conceptual framework. The transformative orientation seeks to identify, interrogate, and challenge power structures that emerge through the narratives of women leaders as they describe their workplace realities. As Mertens observed, “Transformative researchers have the potential to contribute to both personal and societal transformation” (Mertens, 2017, p. 18). A transformative paradigm is therefore appropriate for this study because it provides a framework for examining the leadership experiences of women within a religious organizational context and for considering how such inquiry may contribute to more equitable institutional practices.

Gender norms shape expectations regarding leadership roles in broader society (Alice H Eagly & Wood, 2012b). These expectations become particularly salient when examining women’s leadership within ecclesial contexts (Chudleigh, 2014; Watts, 1995). Hirudayaraj and Shields (2019) argued that feminist theory provides “a valuable framework for examining issues relating to inequity and the subjugation of women” (p. 319). Accordingly, feminist theory offers an important analytic lens for understanding how gendered norms influence the leadership opportunities available to women in religious organizations.

By employing a qualitative phenomenological design, this study sought to examine structural inequities through the lived experiences of women serving in senior leadership roles.

Because the study centers on women’s leadership experiences, it was essential that participants’ voices remain primary. Each leader’s journey within a church institution

represents a distinctive narrative that can be most fully articulated by the leader herself. Although these narratives are individually situated, they are connected by the shared reality that the participants occupy senior leadership positions as women within a religious organizational structure. The study therefore attended both to common themes across participants' accounts and to the particularities that remain unique to each leader's experience. Allowing insights to emerge from participants' narratives was central to the integrity and usefulness of the study.

This study is significant because relatively little is known about the challenges, biases, working conditions, and opportunities experienced by women who serve in church leadership outside traditional clergy roles.

Given the exploratory nature of this inquiry, both inductive and categorical modes of thinking will inform the study. Saldaña (2015) stated that "inductive thinking is the stock-in-trade of the qualitative researcher" (p. 26). Inductive analysis required approaching the phenomenon of women's leadership with openness to discovery as the study unfolded. This approach called for the researcher to enter the inquiry with a limited prior agenda so that interpretations may emerge from the investigative process rather than being imposed in advance.

Saldaña (2015) described analytic induction as "the process by which answers to research questions are emergently constructed as more and more data are collected and systematically examined" (p. 26). This mode of thinking is particularly appropriate for a study in which women leaders narrate their experiences and the researcher systematically examines their responses for emergent categories and themes. These categories and

themes may provide insight into the conditions that enable women to lead effectively within church institutions.

As themes emerged and the challenges, issues, and biases encountered by these women are more fully understood, the study also seeks to identify ways in which the church may more effectively support women leaders whom it has called to serve its institutions.

For these reasons, a transformative framework was selected for this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) argued that “qualitative research, then, should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work or even the researchers’ lives” (p. 25). They further cited Mertens (2009), who explained that the “basic tenet of transformative framework is that knowledge is not neutral and it reflects the power and social relationship within society; thus the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 25).

The transformative approach was appropriate for examining a church and broader society in which understandings of women’s leadership continue to develop. Findings from this study have revealed institutional biases experienced by women leaders and may suggest constructive ways to address barriers that limit their full participation in leadership.

Significance/Importance of the Study

According to the *Pew Research Center (Religious Landscape Study - Seventh-day Adventists*, 2020), women constitute 54% of Seventh-day Adventist Church membership; however, relatively few women serve in institutional leadership roles within the

denomination. This study sought to examine this disparity by exploring more fully the workplace environments experienced by women leaders in the church.

By documenting and analyzing the workplace experiences of women in leadership, this study may provide valuable insight for male supervisors, male and female peers, employees who serve under women leaders, and future women leaders. These accounts may contribute to a deeper understanding of the leadership journeys of current women leaders and offer practical lessons for strengthening institutional support and workplace culture.

Definition of Terms

Church. For this research project, the church was defined as the Seventh-day Adventist church which was founded in 1863 as a remnant of the Millerite movement of the 1830s and 1840s and the ensuing Great Disappointment of October 22, 1844 (sdachurch.org).

Church Institutions. These are ministry organizations such as media ministries and resource centers, and educational institutions such as colleges and universities operated by the church.

Christian. A follower of Christ and has accepted Him in their life as friend, savior and king as is outlined in the New Testament in Rom 5:10, 11 (*Bible*, 2011).

Constituency Meetings. Within the SDA church structure and governance, local conferences, unions and the general conference all have their own constituencies. The North American Division does not have its own constituency because they are considered a part of the general conference. This means the local conference, union and general

conference are able to act independently of each other in terms of policies and the selection of their leadership.

Despite the ability to have autonomy from each other, nearly all constituencies voluntarily conform to the policies set forth by the general conference. Constituency meetings are when each entity comes together to select their leadership and change their constitutions and by-laws as needed.

Non-clergy. This term is used to describe someone who works for the church but is not in a position which calls for ordination. Teaching, treasury, clerical, and custodial are all examples of people who might work for the church but are not in line for ordination.

Non-pastoral. This term is used to describe someone who is in a position which may have a requirement to be ordained but is not a pastoral position. A conference president is an example of this.

Local Church. This is the lowest level of church governance in the SDA church. It is made up of membership who have joined the congregation by baptism, or transfer from another local church.

Conference. A conference is the next step up from a local church in the governance model for the SDA church. The conference is made up of local churches or congregations over a State or region.

Union. The next higher organization after a conference is a union. A union is made up of a collection of conferences over a geographical area.

North American Division (NAD). The North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists is one of 13 Divisions of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

which span the globe. This represents the GC within the territory of all of North America. This is the level of the church which is responsible for the mission and outreach for this territory and the level on which policy for the church is made. Within the NAD, there are over 5000 churches, 59 conferences, and 9 unions.

General Conference (GC). This is the highest level of the Seventh-day Adventist church in its organization. Located in Silver Spring, Maryland, the General Conference is made up of 13 Divisions which cover the globe. It is at this level of the church creates policy and the church's theological positions are articulated.

Seventh-day Adventist (SDA): A conservative Christian organization operating churches, schools, and health care facilities throughout the world. Their belief system shares many common tenets with mainline Christian churches but espouses certain unique beliefs, such as keeping the seventh-day Sabbath and expecting the literal second coming of Jesus Christ.

Workplace Environment. When the term “workplace environment” is used in this study, it will represent not only the localized area of leadership responsibility women hold, but also the working relationship with the church too.

Assumptions

A central assumption of this study was that women's leadership is perceived differently than men's leadership within both North American society and the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Chudleigh, 2014; Kassian, 2012; Knick, 2018; Watts, 1995). A further assumption was that listening to women leaders of varying ages and ethnic backgrounds who serve as institutional leaders within the Seventh-day Adventist Church

would yield meaningful insight into the organizational environments and cultural contexts in which they serve.

Through the narratives of these women leaders, this study provides first-hand accounts of the gender-related issues that arise for women serving in executive church leadership positions. Their experiences were interpreted through a phenomenological orientation and a transformative lens, thereby supporting a trustworthy and contextually grounded analysis of the data. Careful attention to participant confidentiality helped create conditions in which participants could speak with greater openness and authenticity. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to support accuracy in data collection and analysis.

Limitations of the Study

James and Murnan (2004) identified two major categories of limitations in research studies: threats to internal validity and threats to external validity. In relation to internal validity, this study may be limited by several factors, including participants' willingness to share their experiences openly, concerns that sensitive information could be revealed, the timing of the interviews in relation to participants' opportunity for reflection, and the researcher's ability to represent the essence of participants' narratives accurately.

To strengthen the authenticity and trustworthiness of the narrative and data collection process, participants were assured of confidentiality and provided an opportunity to review relevant portions of the final product. These safeguards were intended to reduce the influence of institutional politics that might otherwise limit the openness or specificity of participants' accounts.

Participants were invited to participate several months in advance and were informed of the parameters designed to promote authenticity and accuracy in their contributions. Sufficient time and scheduling flexibility were provided so that interviews could occur in a manner that was respectful of participants' responsibilities and availability.

External validity concerns the extent to which findings may be useful or transferable to the broader population of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America (James & Murnan, 2004). Transferability may be limited because women occupy relatively few leadership positions across many sectors of the North American Division.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to women serving in leadership roles within higher education institutions, media ministries, North American Division resource centers, conferences, and unions located within the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

At present, there are 89 institutional presidential positions within the North American Division. Of these positions, eight are currently held by women (*Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 2026). Seven of these women presently occupy senior leadership positions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America.

This phenomenological study intentionally focused on the seven women who currently serve in the presidential leadership roles identified above. Although other women have held comparable leadership positions in the past, the study was limited to women currently serving in these roles. This delimitation was selected to ensure that the

study reflects contemporary societal and theological dynamics that shape the gender-related challenges experienced by women leaders in the church.

Summary

From its earliest development, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has included women in significant leadership roles. Among the most influential figures in the denomination's history was Ellen G. White (1827–1915), whose leadership shaped the theological and organizational formation of the church. Over time, however, women's representation in formal leadership positions has declined. This study therefore sought to learn from women currently serving in institutional presidential leadership roles within the church by examining their experiences and perceptions of the workplace environment in relation to gender.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 presents the background, focus, and purpose of the study, along with the research questions and the methodological approach used to address them. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature and establishes the scholarly foundation for the study. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, including the procedures used for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the data from the narratives of the participants. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings through a thorough cross case analysis, presents the study's conclusions, and offers recommendations for how the Seventh-day Adventist Church may more effectively support women serving in leadership roles to which they have been called.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews literature relevant to women's leadership within and beyond the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It begins with a historical overview of women in Adventist leadership, including leadership within the denomination's educational institutions, and then considers the current status of women in denominational leadership. The chapter also examines broader scholarship on women in leadership, with particular attention to barriers faced by women leaders, strategies used to navigate those barriers, and theoretical frameworks that inform the present study.

Purpose of the Review

This literature review draws on both empirical and theoretical scholarship related to women in leadership inside and outside religious organizations. The literature is more extensive regarding women leaders in general than it is regarding women's leadership development within church structures. This gap is especially evident in relation to women serving in non-clergy leadership positions within religious communities.

The purpose of this review is to identify empirical and qualitative studies that provide a foundation for understanding women's leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Specifically, the review addresses the historical development of women's leadership in Adventism, the characteristics commonly associated with successful women

leaders inside and outside church contexts, barriers faced by women in leadership, and insights from prior studies of women in spiritual leadership roles.

The literature search focused on sources that speak directly to the research questions guiding this study. The historical section provides an overview of how women, once visibly present in Adventist leadership, became significantly less represented in formal leadership roles and examines possible reasons for that decline.

The review then examines documented accounts of successful women leaders both within and outside church settings in order to provide a broader interpretive context for the participant narratives presented later in the study.

The chapter also reviews common barriers to women's leadership and considers literature addressing how those barriers may be navigated or reduced. Finally, the review examines insights from studies of women in spiritual leadership who have encountered obstacles, as well as recent issues and trends affecting women leaders.

The literature reviewed in this chapter is intended to build the conceptual foundation for the study. Transformative Feminist Leadership serves as the primary conceptual framework.

Procedures for the Literature Review

Literature was gathered through online databases and research platforms, including ERIC, ProQuest, Google Scholar, the Andrews University Library, and Sage. Search terms included female, leader, woman, administrator, gender, spiritual leader, church, best leadership practices, and president.

The search window for identifying applicable literature was 2023–2026. Sources were selected to support understanding of the climate for women in leadership, with

particular emphasis on leadership in church settings. Literature addressing the social and theological implications of gender in leadership was especially sought.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Peer-reviewed journal articles and dissertations from accredited institutions were included in this literature review. Descriptive, nonexperimental, case study, qualitative, and quantitative research were also included. Non-scholarly opinion pieces and outdated theological or scholarly literature were excluded. Books, articles, theoretical works, and selected Seventh-day Adventist denominational publications were included when they contributed directly to the study's historical, theological, or organizational context. The primary purpose for including denominational sources was to clarify the current status of women in church leadership and to provide balance between faith-based and academic perspectives.

Historical Setting

Women's leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not a recent development. As discussed in Chapter 1, women have participated in a variety of leadership roles from the denomination's earliest period. Ellen G. White was among the most influential figures in early Adventism, serving as a prophetic and spiritual leader whose ministry helped shape the identity, theology, and organizational development of the church. Although she was not the sole founder of the denomination, her influence was central to the cohesion and direction of the early Adventist movement (Beach, 1971; Watts, 1995; Wright).

Early Women Leaders in the SDA Church

Ellen White's leadership emerged during a period in American history when women's public roles were severely restricted. Maria Michael, writing about women's lives during the late nineteenth century, observed that "the life of the typical American women in the late 1800s was strictly confined to the four walls of a house. For a wife, marriage, husband, and family were the destiny. She had no legal political right or voice in public sphere. They were not supposed to [be]involve[d] in any intellectual pursuits but only in domestic chores like cooking, sewing, cleaning etc." (Michael, 2021, p. 400).

It was within this restrictive social context that Ellen White understood herself to be called by God to help advance the Seventh-day Adventist movement. Her public leadership as a woman in a new Protestant movement created significant challenges. Some people questioned her authority because of her gender, and even members of her immediate family opposed her public religious work (Watts, 1995).

Ellen White was not an isolated example of women's leadership in early Adventism. During her lifetime, women served in a range of ecclesial and administrative roles. By 1915, the year of White's death, 30 women had served as conference treasurers, 20 as conference secretaries, three as General Conference treasurers, and many others held ministerial credentials (Watts, 1995, p. 8). This pattern reflected, in part, broader developments within some Protestant traditions. While mainstream denominations such as the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches were slower to expand women's formal leadership opportunities, some sectors of the evangelical movement created greater space for women's public voice and ministry (MacHaffie, 1986).

During roughly the same period, Quaker communities were also negotiating questions of women's spiritual authority. In some contexts, women ministers significantly outnumbered men, creating both opportunity and tension within church life. After reviewing numerous articles and testimonies from Quaker women in this era, Plant (2003) wrote that "ministering women negotiated and manipulated the relationship between spirituality and femininity, both to understand themselves as instruments of divine power and to challenge the establishment of a male hierarchy in their church" (Plant, 2003, p. 1).

The early Adventist openness to women's leadership should be understood against this broader religious and social backdrop. However, the literature suggests that the primary impetus for women's participation in Adventist leadership was not merely changing social norms. Rather, the denomination's missional urgency and theological commitment to proclaiming the gospel created space for women to participate actively in church work (Plant, 2003; Plantak, 1998; Watts, 1995).

Although women were visibly involved in early Adventist leadership, their representation declined sharply after 1915. By the end of World War II, women were no longer serving in conference officer roles, and the number of women holding ministerial licenses had decreased substantially. Watts (1995) associated this decline with the development of policies requiring ordination for certain leadership roles, even though ordination was not available to women. In addition, concepts later associated with Headship Theology began to influence the church's understanding of gender and ecclesial authority.

An early example of concern about women's public participation appears in 1857, when David Hewitt, a lay member associated with the Adventist movement in Battle Creek, Michigan, wrote about women speaking and working in the church. Although Hewitt defended women's participation, his argument was framed in relation to male authority. He wrote that "simply praying, or singing, or speaking in meeting would not be usurping the authority of the man, but edifying the man, and pleasing the Lord. . . . A sister's telling in meeting what the Lord has done for her, and what she intends to do through grace, would not be . . . usurping authority over the man" (Plantak, 1998, p. 93).

Despite these tensions, the literature repeatedly highlights the dedication of Adventist women to the mission of the church. Beach (1971), writing as a seminary student at Andrews Theological Seminary, emphasized both the breadth of women's contributions and the limited recognition they often received:

There are hundreds of women who contributed to the cause, each in her own way, down through the annals of this church's history. And yet these women for the most part have served with little recognition, lacking equality of salary, serving obediently without petitioning for newer, higher responsibilities and almost invariably working in love and devotion. They have done virtually everything, asked for nothing, and received their rewards in knowing they have done what they could (Beach, 1971, p. ii).

Current Women Leadership in the SDA Church

In the 1980s, the Seventh-day Adventist Church created more formal opportunities for women to serve as pastors. As a result, nearly 100 women are now employed as pastors in the North American Division. This number remains small in relation to the approximately 4,600 employed pastors in North America. In addition, women pastors do not hold the same ministerial credential as their male counterparts. They may receive a commissioned ministerial credential but are not granted ordination in

the same way as men. Because ordination is required for several senior leadership roles, including conference, union, division, and General Conference president, this credentialing distinction continues to limit women's access to upper-level denominational leadership. Although local church pastors clearly exercise leadership, the present study focuses on women serving in higher-level institutional leadership positions, including presidents of conferences, colleges, universities, and other church institutions.

In a survey of women serving in top leadership positions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Wright (2016) examined the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, which records denominational employees and positions across church entities. Wright concluded, "Out of 221 total leadership positions in my analysis, nine positions—4%—belong to women. Out of 850 conferences and missions, there is a grand total of one woman president (0.12% of conference/mission presidents are women)" (Wright, 2016). It should be noted that Wright's statistics included leadership positions for which ordination is required, while the denomination generally does not ordain women to pastoral ministry.

At the time of Wright's analysis, the one woman serving as a conference president did so within a context of denominational policy conflict.

During her eight-year term, the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* did not list her name on the line identifying the conference president. The entry was left blank because church policy requires ordination for service as a conference president, and the General Conference did not recognize the ordination she received from the Pacific Union Conference. This situation began in 2013, when Sandra Roberts was elected president of the Southeastern California Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

Wright also noted that women's representation appeared stronger in Seventh-day Adventist higher education than in some other denominational leadership sectors. At the time of his article, three Adventist colleges or universities had women presidents. In addition, one woman was serving as president of a North American Division institution: Diane Thurber, who has served as president of Christian Record Services for the Blind since 2015.

The pattern differs in Adventist health care. AdventHealth, the church's largest hospital system, reportedly reflects or exceeds community percentages of women in key leadership roles, including C-suite positions across its hospital network (Azevedo, 2019). The present study, however, does not include women leaders in Adventist health systems because its focus is on leadership pathways within church institutional structures where denominational policies, theological assumptions, and ecclesial governance more directly shape opportunities for women.

Barriers for Women in Leadership

This section examines literature related to barriers women encounter in leadership. The discussion begins with scholarship on women's leadership in broader organizational contexts and then turns to the additional challenges faced by women who lead within church settings, particularly within organizations shaped by restrictive policies, theological disagreement, and gendered assumptions.

Workplace Challenges and Opposition

Leadership can be both meaningful and demanding. Many of the complexities associated with leadership affect women and men alike; however, women leaders

frequently encounter additional challenges rooted in gender bias, social expectations, and organizational norms. Bias against women in leadership is not new, nor has it disappeared in contemporary society. The United Nations Development Programme's Gender Social Norms Index reported that "despite decades of progress closing the equality gap between men and women, close to 90 percent of men and women hold some sort of bias against women" (Programme, 2020). The report further noted that "gender disparities are a persistent form of inequality in every country. Despite remarkable progress in some areas, no country in the world—rich or poor—has achieved gender equality" (Programme, 2020). These findings suggest that gender bias remains a significant global factor shaping women's experiences in leadership.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined the challenges women encounter in leadership. The following discussion first considers literature from broader organizational and secular leadership contexts and then turns to literature addressing women's leadership within church and faith-based settings.

Worldview

Worldview is an important factor in shaping whether individuals and communities accept women in positions of authority. Every society develops expectations regarding the roles, behaviors, and responsibilities considered appropriate for women and men. These expectations influence how leadership is understood and who is perceived as legitimate within leadership roles. In their study, *Worldviews on Women's Leadership*, McLean and Beigi (2016) drew on the theory of planned behavior and observed that "individuals' attitudes lead to their behavioral intentions" (McLean & Beigi, 2016, p. 261).

In this sense, worldview functions as a framework through which people interpret social roles and evaluate leadership behavior. Individuals and communities often prefer familiar patterns and may resist changes that disrupt established norms. Consequently, assumptions about the appropriate place and role of women in society can shape the barriers encountered by women who aspire to leadership or who understand themselves to be called to leadership. McLean and Beigi found that although they expected substantial differences between men's and women's worldviews, the differences were not as large as anticipated (Elmuti, Jia, & Davis, 2009; McLean & Beigi, 2016).

This finding helps explain why gender bias persists even in settings where formal commitments to equality are present. In societies where the dominant worldview places men primarily in leadership roles, women leaders are often less visible and may encounter stronger resistance (Li, 2016). Although the specific reasons for resistance vary across cultural and organizational contexts, McLean and Beigi (2016) found that a worldview positioning women in subordinate roles is a strong predictor of opposition to women in positions of authority.

Organizational Barriers

Organizational barriers are frequently discussed in relation to the "glass ceiling," a metaphor used to describe invisible but persistent obstacles that limit women's advancement into senior leadership. Some scholars interpret the glass ceiling primarily as a societal problem, while others locate its causes more directly within organizational cultures and leadership systems (Elmuti, Jia, & Davis, 2009). These barriers are often reinforced through male-dominated selection processes, informal networks, and assumptions about who appears to fit established leadership norms. Hoobler, Masterson,

Nkomo, and Michel (2016) noted that selection processes are frequently shaped by existing organizational patterns, which can advantage candidates who resemble those already in leadership. Because senior leaders are often men, selection practices may unintentionally reproduce male-dominated leadership structures.

Informal workplace relationships also contribute to organizational barriers. Important decisions, mentoring conversations, and relationship-building opportunities may occur in informal settings such as meals, sporting events, golf outings, or other social contexts where women are less likely to be included in the same way as men. These informal networks can become “inner circles” through which information, sponsorship, and advancement opportunities are distributed (Chakraborty & Serra, 2019). When women are excluded from such networks, they may have fewer opportunities to build the relationships that often support promotion into senior leadership.

The lack of mentoring and sponsorship opportunities represents another significant organizational barrier for women professionals (Hoobler et al., 2016). Although many organizations formally accept applicants of any gender into entry-level programs, mentoring often occurs most readily for individuals already identified as having leadership potential. If women are less likely to be perceived as future leaders, they may receive fewer developmental opportunities than similarly qualified men. Globalization may also intensify barriers for women leaders. International travel, family responsibilities, and culturally diverse attitudes toward women in authority can create additional complexity for women seeking or holding leadership positions (Elmuti et al., 2009). Finally, some organizational leaders suggest that women are less represented in senior leadership because they do not aspire to such roles. Fisk and Overton (2019),

however, found that women's leadership ambitions may be reduced by their awareness of gender discrimination and by their anticipation of unequal consequences in leadership.

This issue is addressed further in the next section.

Gender Differences Among Qualified Candidates

Research suggests that qualified women and men do not differ substantially in their interest in leadership roles (Staley, 1984). However, women may evaluate the anticipated costs of leadership differently because they are aware of the obstacles, biases, and unequal consequences that frequently accompany leadership as a woman. Fisk and Overton (2019) observed that “the gender gap in leadership is one of the starkest and most intractable gender inequalities in contemporary U.S. society” (p. 328). Their empirical study examined women's interest in leadership and found that women's aspirations may be reduced not because they lack leadership ambition, but because they recognize the discrimination and additional burdens associated with leadership. As Fisk and Overton concluded, “Our findings provide evidence that women are aware of gender discrimination against women leaders and that this knowledge depresses their leadership ambitions” (p. 331). Their study further indicated that women were particularly concerned about unequal consequences for women and men who occupy similar leadership roles and follow similar leadership pathways.

Appearance-based evaluation represents another factor that may discourage women from aspiring to leadership. Women leaders often face forms of scrutiny regarding dress, body size, hairstyle, and overall appearance that are not applied with the same intensity to men. Mavin and Grandy (2016) developed the theory of object appearance to describe how elite women leaders manage the ambiguity of being

simultaneously visible, scrutinized, and positioned as “in-between” established gender and leadership norms. They wrote that “The theory of Abject Appearance illuminates a dynamic and dialectical process whereby women elite leaders ‘manage’ the ambiguities of their ‘in-between’ and ‘abject’ status” (Mavin & Grandy, 2016, p. 1096). In this framework, women leaders may experience their appearance as a site of judgment that can overshadow their competence, accomplishments, and leadership effectiveness.

Right, this is a really, really sad, sad comment about the whole way that women have progressed because—I actually still really believe that success is measured by what you look like. And I think that is still critical. If you’re overweight, or you’re not particularly attractive, you’re not taken as seriously and you’re not seen as successful. And I think that other women do it to other women. And I do think that is really, really sad and I think that is really true. When you go to a room full of [women leaders] I think that’s the first thing . . . They look around and they will say, “Oh, her hair looks awful . . . She’s put on weight, hasn’t she?” (Mavin & Grandy, 2016, p. 1107)

This literature suggests that appearance-based scrutiny functions as an additional gendered burden for women leaders. While men are not entirely free from appearance expectations, women often experience such judgments as more frequent, more personal, and more consequential for perceptions of competence and legitimacy. Consequently, the anticipated burden of being evaluated through both leadership performance and appearance may discourage some qualified women from seeking or accepting senior leadership roles.

Challenges for Women in Church Leadership

Women are drawn to leadership within faith communities, just as they are drawn to leadership in broader society (Staley, 1984). However, women who respond to a call to church leadership encounter not only the barriers commonly experienced by women leaders in other sectors, but also additional obstacles shaped by ecclesial culture,

theological interpretation, and longstanding institutional traditions. This study focuses primarily on the leadership journeys of women in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, including women serving in higher education institutions and women leading other church-related ministries. Although these contexts differ organizationally, women in Adventist higher education and women in other church institutional roles often face similar gender-related challenges because both operate within denominational structures and theological cultures that shape perceptions of authority.

Dahlvig and Longman (2014), writing in the *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, identified three primary motivators that encouraged women to advance into leadership roles in Christian higher education: “(a) a sense of relational responsibility; (b) awareness of calling and giftedness for leadership, and (c) a mentoring relationship or role model” (J. Dahlvig & Longman, 2014, p. 5). These motivators closely parallel the reasons women enter leadership in other areas of church life. Dahlvig and Longman further observed that emerging women leaders often experienced both validation and resistance during their leadership development. Validation contributed to increased self-efficacy and motivation to pursue broader leadership, while resistance and devaluation sometimes complicated their development (J. Dahlvig & Longman, 2014, p. 5).

Christian higher education, like many ecclesial leadership contexts, has historically been shaped by male-dominated leadership structures. Longman and Anderson (2016) observed that “for women working within the context of Christian higher education, the culture created by a predominantly male senior leadership team—with women clustered in junior-level positions and support roles—can be accepted simply as the status quo” (Longman & Anderson, 2016, p. 27). This observation is

relevant to the present study because women who lead Adventist educational institutions often navigate the same assumptions about gender, authority, and leadership that affect women in other sectors of church life.

Although the Adventist context includes distinctive theological and organizational features, the experiences of Adventist women leaders also overlap with the experiences of women leaders in other Christian traditions. The following subsections therefore examine evangelical worldview, Headship Theology, common challenges in church leadership, and the influence of tradition as key factors shaping the leadership environment for women in the church.

Evangelical Worldview

One area of commonality between Adventist women leaders and women leaders in other Christian traditions concerns worldview. As noted earlier, societal worldviews can shape whether women are accepted in positions of authority. This dynamic is especially relevant within evangelical contexts, where theological and cultural assumptions about gender may influence perceptions of women's leadership. Dahlvig and Longman (2016), citing a study funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, described the dominant evangelical view of gender relations as one organized by "the principles of hierarchy and subordination" (Dahlvig & Longman, 2016, p. 244). Such assumptions can create significant barriers for women who seek to exercise leadership within Christian organizations. Davis (2019), in her study of women in ministry leadership, similarly observed that churches may fail to recognize the same skills that helped women succeed in the marketplace as God-given qualifications for ministry leadership. She wrote, "Consequently, churches, in particular, do not accept or recognize the same skills that

made women prosper in the marketplace as God-given qualifications and in some cases viewed them unsuitable for teaching and leading in church even if they feel the ‘call’ to do so” (Davis, 2019, p. 1). Dzubinski (2010) further illustrated the contrast between broader societal gender-role stereotypes and evangelical gender roles in a comparative table (see Table 1).

This comparison illustrates the difficulty women may experience when seeking to function as leaders in contexts where femininity is associated primarily with submission, support, and responsiveness. If women are not perceived as initiators, decision makers, or originators, they may face resistance in the very areas most closely associated with strategic planning and organizational leadership.

Headship Theology

Because this study focuses on women leaders within the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, Headship Theology is a particularly important framework to examine. As discussed earlier, the decline of women’s formal leadership after 1915 cannot be attributed to a single factor; however, later theological developments helped reinforce gendered limitations on ecclesial authority. Among the most significant of these developments was the emergence and spread of Headship Theology among some Adventists during the 1970s and 1980s. Chudleigh (2014) traced the roots of this interpretation of Scripture to several evangelical Calvinist theologians who “developed a detailed system of patriarchy, which organizes almost all human relationships around authority and submission—which they call the ‘headship principle’” (p. 5).

As noted previously, Headship Theology has not been formally voted as an official tenet of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (Chudleigh, 2014). Nevertheless, it

has influenced debates about women's ordination, women's pastoral authority, and women's eligibility for senior leadership roles.

Table 1

Comparison of Social Gender-role Stereotypes with Evangelical Gender Roles

<u>Social Gender-role Stereotypes</u>		<u>Evangelical Gender Roles</u>	
Men	Women	Man's Role	Woman's Role
Assertive	Affectionate	Lead	Submit
Controlling	Nurturing	Spiritual Authority	Caretaker
Confident	Kind	Make Decisions	Supportive
Task-oriented	Relational	Get Things Done	Relational
Independent	Dependent	Independent	Dependent
Initiators	Followers/Supporters	Initiator	Responder
Agentic	Communal	Agentic	Communal

(Dzubinski, 2016, p. 283)

The influence of Headship Theology has been especially visible in denominational discussions regarding women's ordination. The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has voted on multiple occasions not to create a pathway for women to be ordained as pastors. Because church policy requires ordination for service as a conference, union, division, or General Conference president, this policy structure significantly restricts women's access to upper-level denominational decision-making roles.

In addition, some members and leaders who affirm headship or complementarian assumptions view women's ecclesial leadership with suspicion, even when the position does not formally require ordination. Some have called for women serving in leadership roles to step down or be replaced. Advocates of these perspectives often affirm the equal value of women and men while maintaining that Scripture assigns distinct leadership roles to each. Erwin Lutzer, writing from a complementarian perspective, summarized

this position by stating, “While Scripture maintains that women and men are equal in nature and gifting, the Bible does delineate particular roles for each gender, especially concerning the church. God has ordained the church’s primary leadership to reside with male elders who meet the qualifications prescribed by Scripture (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Pastors must have the same qualifications in every respect. God has set apart women for essential roles in church life. Women are to serve as deaconesses, directors of church ministries, and teachers of women and children” (E. W. Lutzer, 2011).

Common Challenges Women in Church Leadership Face

Women in church leadership may encounter opposition from both men and women who question or resist their authority. In many ecclesial settings, women are entering leadership contexts in which women have historically been absent from senior decision-making roles. Consequently, they may be required to demonstrate that effective leadership can occur within patterns of leadership that do not simply reproduce traditional masculine models.

Within the evangelical worldview described above, one challenge women face is that leadership roles may remain structured according to male-dominated assumptions even when women are formally appointed to those roles. In such contexts, women may be granted titles or responsibilities while still being pressured toward subordinate or supportive functions. Dzubinski’s (2016) study of women in mission organizations provides an illustrative example. She described two women who were asked to assume leadership positions previously held by men, yet the organizational response created conditions that limited their authority. Dzubinski wrote, “The end results for the women were situations or events created by the men and designed to limit the women’s power.

The women described blatant strategies of demotion, placing them back in support roles, as well as more subtle strategies of ignoring, marginalizing, stereotyping, and labeling” (Dzubinski, 2016, p. 291).

This pattern appears repeatedly in the literature on women’s church leadership. Formal appointment to a position of authority does not necessarily ensure that women are received as legitimate leaders, particularly when their role involves supervising men or exercising authority in ecclesial contexts. In some evangelical and complementarian environments, women’s authority is viewed with suspicion even when they possess the requisite qualifications, experience, and calling.

Complementarian Theology represents another challenge for women in church leadership. This theological perspective typically affirms the equal value of women and men while assigning distinct roles to each. In practice, such distinctions often place men in primary leadership positions and women in supportive roles. When applied to church governance, this framework can exclude women from decision-making tables or restrict the contexts in which their leadership is considered appropriate (Surratt, 2018). Surratt argued that protective boundaries intended to preserve moral propriety can become harmful when they limit women’s access to leadership networks, collaboration, and advancement. He concluded, “What these walls are very effective at is limiting the leadership of women. Limiting access to other leaders is death to collaboration, growth, and advancement” (Surratt, 2018, p. 3).

The Tyranny of Tradition

Much of the literature on challenges faced by women church leaders suggests that resistance is often grounded not only in differing interpretations of Scripture but also in

tradition. In many contexts, tradition exerts a powerful influence on assumptions about who should lead, how leadership should be exercised, and which roles women may occupy. Because ordained spiritual leadership has historically been associated with men, some individuals and institutions resist change simply because male leadership has been the established pattern. Składanowski (2016) argued that debates over women's leadership are often rooted in differing understandings of human dignity, particularly in relation to church tradition and contemporary social realities. He wrote that "the controversy is rooted in a different understanding of human dignity, especially when it comes to its connection to church tradition and to contemporary social phenomena" (Składanowski, 2016, p. 275).

Surratt (2018) challenged churches to examine whether tradition has become a barrier to women's leadership by asking, "Does our church encourage and develop women leaders? What is the most challenging part of being a woman and leading on our team? What do we need to change to improve our culture for women leaders?" (p. 4). These questions shift the discussion from abstract theological debate to institutional culture and practice. They suggest that churches must evaluate not only what they claim to believe about women's giftedness but also whether their structures, habits, and leadership pathways actually create space for women to lead.

The historical record also demonstrates that women who crossed traditional boundaries in Christian leadership were often viewed with suspicion. MacHaffie (1986) noted that communities that first incorporated women as preachers and elders were frequently labeled as "cultists, heretics, Gnostics, and others who were strongly rejected by the true church" (p. 12). Such responses reveal the extent to which appeals to tradition

can function as mechanisms of exclusion. Even when women's leadership bears evidence of spiritual giftedness and institutional effectiveness, longstanding assumptions about appropriate gender roles may continue to shape how their leadership is received.

For the purposes of this study, tradition is therefore understood as an important social and institutional force that interacts with differing interpretations of Scripture, organizational culture, and gender expectations. The challenge for women leaders in church settings is not simply that some positions have historically been held by men, but that history itself can become a rationale for continuing exclusion. Recognizing the role of tradition is essential for understanding the barriers women encounter and for identifying opportunities for more intentional leadership development.

Growth Opportunities for Women in Church Leadership

Although women in church leadership encounter substantial barriers, the literature also identifies areas in which meaningful progress and growth are possible. These opportunities are especially evident in Christian and Adventist higher education, where women have increasingly been mentored, developed, and called into administrative leadership. Examining these growth opportunities is important because it shifts the discussion from barriers alone to the practices and conditions that may help women flourish in church-related leadership roles.

The following section reviews literature related to opportunities for women's leadership development in church contexts, with particular attention to mentoring, role reframing, and intentional support structures.

Mentoring

Mentoring represents one of the most significant growth opportunities for women who sense a call to leadership in the church. Cannon (2019), in a dissertation on women's servant leadership and mentorship in Christian churches, concluded that the lack of intentional mentoring "suggests that church leadership had been less effective in engaging disenfranchised women" (p. 18). Her research supports the importance of intentional mentoring structures, particularly when women have historically lacked access to the informal networks and leadership-development pathways more readily available to men. When mentoring is implemented with intentionality, it can strengthen women's confidence, expand their leadership capacity, and create healthier pathways into positions of influence.

Dahlvig and Longman (2010), in their qualitative study of successful women leaders in Christian contexts, identified several defining experiences that contributed to women's leadership development. These included:

1. Someone naming or affirming leadership potential, sometimes through a single statement that reframed the woman's self-perception.
2. An encounter with a person or situation that enabled the participant to understand leadership differently and begin seeing herself as a leader.
3. An experience that compelled the participant to stand for a conviction or deeply held belief (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010).

Such mentoring moments can have a profound influence on both women and men; however, they are especially significant for women who have had fewer mentors willing to identify, encourage, and challenge their leadership potential (Cannon, 2019).

Mentoring has long been associated with leadership retention and professional growth across gender lines (Cannon, 2019; Dahlvig & Longman, 2016). Because women remain underrepresented in senior church leadership, mentoring should be regarded as an essential strategy for developing women leaders for church institutions.

Role Congruity Theory helps explain why mentoring is particularly important for women leaders. Diekmann and Goodfriend (2006) explained that “rewards accrue when the presumed characteristics of group members align with the demands of relevant social roles. In contrast, devaluation results when characteristics misalign with role demands” (p. 370). Because leadership has historically been associated with masculine traits, women may be less likely to be perceived as natural candidates for leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly, Karau, Miner, & Johnson, 1994; Keohane & Richardson, 2018). Against this backdrop, even one person who identifies a woman’s leadership potential can become crucial to her development. Dahlvig and Longman summarized this dynamic by observing that “when asked to describe the most defining moment over the span of their lives, many respondents described the power of one individual’s influence, often distilled into a single comment that articulated confidence in the interviewee’s potential” (Dahlvig & Longman, 2010, p. 246).

Framework for Growth

A framework for growth in women’s church leadership must attend both to spiritual formation and to the organizational conditions that support leadership development. Glanz (2019), in her research on women in church leadership, found that women leaders thrive when they are rooted in Christ and when the practices that nurture that relationship are integrated into team leadership. She concluded that “being rooted in

Christ and the practices that nurture that relationship brought into team leadership practices are essential learning” (Glanz, 2019, p. 364). For the women in her study, spiritual rootedness was foundational to growth in positions of authority.

Gender Role and Social Role Theory

Gender Role Theory and Social Role Theory provide important conceptual lenses for understanding the barriers and growth opportunities experienced by women leaders. Social Role Theory extends Gender Role Theory by explaining how behavioral expectations are shaped by the social roles commonly occupied by women and men. Eagly and Wood argued that “sex differences and similarities in behavior reflect gender role beliefs that in turn represent people’s perceptions of men’s and women’s social roles in the society in which they live” (Alice H. Eagly & Wood, 2012). From the earliest years of Seventh-day Adventist history to the present, gendered social expectations have influenced perceptions of women who serve in roles traditionally occupied by men within the church.

Glanz (2019) also examined the ways Gender Role Theory and Social Role Theory may impede women’s growth as leaders. These theories help explain why women are often associated with subordination, dependency, and communal behavior, even though such traits are not typically associated with traditional understandings of leadership (Alice H. Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992; Alice H. Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). In church contexts, these assumptions can be intensified when parishioners or church leaders struggle to receive women as legitimate authorities, particularly when women exercise leadership over men.

Glanz (2019) identified four strategies that may help women leaders thrive despite the constraints created by gendered role expectations. First, consistent with Cannon's (2019) findings, mentoring is essential. Second, supportive supervisors play a critical role in the development and success of women leaders. Third, a collaborative team culture strengthens the workplace conditions in which women leaders can flourish. Fourth, women benefit from support networks outside their immediate leadership context. These strategies suggest that women's leadership growth is shaped not only by individual resilience but also by the quality of relational and institutional support surrounding them.

Table 2 summarizes how Gender Role Theory and Social Role Theory may influence institutional bias and women's leadership experiences.

Table 2

Gender Role Theory and Social Role Theory Bias

Theory Focus	Impact on Institutional Bias	Impact on Leadership Experience
Gender Role Theory	Reinforces a “ think manager–think male ” bias. Institutional norms often associate leadership with agentic, masculine traits, disadvantaging women whose gender roles are associated with communal and nurturing behaviors.	Women leaders face the “ double bind ”: they risk backlash from being too assertive yet are perceived as ineffective if they appear too compliant or communal. Men face stress to conform to rigid, hyper-competitive leadership norms.

Social Role Theory	Creates role congruity prejudice . Organizations may unconsciously favor men because the stereotypical behavior expected of men aligns with traits traditionally associated with top-level, authority-based leadership roles.	Leaders are judged by whether their gender appears to match the expected workplace role. Women often rely on collaborative and relational leadership routes, while male managers are more routinely assigned larger teams and greater baseline authority than female peers.
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Understanding these theories is important for interpreting the experiences of women leaders in this study. Gender Role Theory and Social Role Theory provide a foundation for examining how institutional expectations, implicit bias, and assumptions about authority may shape the workplace environments described by participants.

Women and Interpersonal Emotion Management (IEM)

Another area in which the literature identifies growth opportunities for women leaders is interpersonal emotion management (IEM), particularly in contexts of crisis leadership. Studies suggest that women leaders are often rated highly in relation to trust, relational responsiveness, and satisfaction during periods of uncertainty or organizational

crisis (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015). These findings are relevant because many descriptions of effective leadership increasingly emphasize relational intelligence, collaboration, trust-building, and attention to employee well-being. Such qualities are also central to IEM.

The literature has frequently associated women's leadership with relational leadership practices, including listening, collaboration, empathy, and the ability to attend to the emotional dimensions of organizational life (Binns, 2008; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003). Although these traits should not be essentialized as inherently female, they are often cultivated and expected within women's leadership experiences. In organizational settings where relational leadership is increasingly valued, these capacities may become significant strengths for women leaders.

Contemporary leadership literature also reflects a broader movement toward more relational and human-centered models of organizational life (Hamel & Zanini, 2020; Marquet, 2020; Vongas & Al Hajj, 2015). These models emphasize trust, participation, psychological safety, and the development of people rather than reliance on authority alone. In this context, women leaders' relational strengths may contribute to workplace climates marked by increased trust and a stronger sense of well-being among employees (Eagly & Carli, 2003).

For women leaders in church settings, IEM may be especially relevant because leadership often involves navigating conflict, caring for people, sustaining trust, and communicating hope during difficult seasons. The literature suggests that women leaders' relational approaches can be particularly effective during crises, when followers often look for both direction and emotional steadiness (O'Neil et al., 2015). Thus, IEM

represents not merely a personal leadership trait but a potential organizational resource that can support institutional health and mission effectiveness.

Key Characteristics of Successful Women Church Leaders

As noted in Glanz's (2019) study, being "rooted in Christ" is foundational for leadership in Christian contexts (p. 364). Spiritual rootedness provides the theological and vocational grounding from which other leadership characteristics may develop. Building on this foundation, the literature identifies several characteristics commonly associated with successful women church leaders, including respectful leadership, leadership presence, self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity.

Respectful Leadership

Respectful leadership is defined as a "manifestation of the belief that the other person (i.e. the follower) has dignity and value in his or her own right" (Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010). This form of leadership is especially relevant in organizational contexts shaped by gendered assumptions about authority. Role Theory and Social Role Theory have often been used to explain how leadership is associated with masculine norms and how those assumptions can disadvantage women leaders (Alice H. Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Keohane & Richardson, 2018). Research on respectful leadership suggests that it may help counteract some of the performance challenges created by leader-role incongruence and gender dissimilarity (Gils, Quaquebeke, Borkowske, & Knippenberg, 2018). By communicating dignity, value, and belonging, respectful leadership helps followers move beyond merely fulfilling assigned duties and toward a deeper sense of contribution to the organization (Gils et al., 2018; Van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2010).

The literature also suggests that many women leaders demonstrate particular strength in relational dimensions of leadership, including listening, collaboration, and attention to workplace relationships (Alice H. Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003; Glanz, 2019; O’Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015). These relational strengths should not be understood as universal qualities possessed by all women or absent from men. Rather, they represent leadership capacities frequently associated with successful women leaders in the literature. In church institutions, where mission, trust, and community are central to organizational life, respectful leadership may make an especially important contribution to workplace health and effectiveness.

Leadership Presence

Leadership presence is another characteristic identified in the literature as important for women serving in male-dominated organizational contexts. O’Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria (2015) argued that women’s leadership development must be understood within environments where role expectations and social assumptions often continue to privilege masculine leadership norms. In such contexts, leadership presence becomes critical because women may need to establish credibility, authority, and influence in settings where their legitimacy is not always presumed. O’Neil et al. identified four interrelated characteristics that contribute to effective leadership presence for women: self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity. These characteristics are discussed in the following subsections.

Self-confidence

Research suggests that men often overestimate their leadership abilities more than women do, while women are more likely to underestimate their competence or interpret

leadership challenges as evidence of personal inadequacy (Furnham, Hosoe, & Tang, 2001). Kay and Shipman (2014) observed that men frequently attribute leadership difficulties to external factors, such as market conditions or deficiencies among coworkers, whereas women are more likely to internalize challenges and attribute setbacks to insufficient skill, preparation, or effort. This pattern can affect women's willingness to pursue or remain in leadership roles, particularly in environments where their legitimacy is already contested.

The persistent association between leadership and masculinity is a significant factor in women's lower confidence in some leadership contexts. Vinnicombe, Deyton, and Walleser (2014) argued that the "think male" assumption remains a powerful influence in perceptions of leadership. Because Role Theory and Social Role Theory continue to associate leadership with masculine traits, women may experience themselves as out of place or unwelcome in leadership settings (Kay & Shipman, 2014). O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria (2015) further noted that women leaders may feel pressure to outperform male counterparts simply to be perceived as equally competent. Self-confidence is strengthened through experience, success, and sustained opportunity. Therefore, as women are given meaningful and supported leadership opportunities, the confidence necessary for effective leadership presence is more likely to develop and deepen.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is related to, but distinct from, self-confidence. Whereas self-confidence may refer broadly to one's general assurance in a situation, self-efficacy concerns a person's belief in her capacity to perform specific tasks successfully. Bandura

defined perceived self-efficacy as the belief in one's "agentive capabilities" and in one's ability to "produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 2010, p. 1). Although some studies suggest that men tend to report stronger beliefs in their abilities than women do (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000), research on successful women leaders indicates that women who persist in senior leadership often develop a strong sense of self-efficacy (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015). Self-efficacy is strengthened through preparation, experience, successful performance, and the accumulation of credibility over time. For women entering leadership settings where their authority may be questioned, self-efficacy becomes especially important because it enables them to act with competence and persistence even when external affirmation is uneven or delayed.

Influence

Influence is a central characteristic of effective leadership. It may be understood as the capacity to shape the character, development, behavior, or direction of individuals, groups, or organizations (Dictionary, 2002). For women leaders, influence can be complicated by the role expectations described earlier in this chapter. Role Theory and Social Role Theory suggest that women leaders may face a double bind: when they use direct and assertive influence tactics commonly associated with masculine leadership, they may be perceived as less likable or less socially appropriate; yet when they use more communal or relational approaches, their authority may be undervalued (Eagly, Karau, & Johnson, 1992).

Research indicates that relational and politically skilled approaches may be especially important for women's influence in organizational settings. Barbuto, Fritz, Matkin, and Marx (2007) found that perceptions of influence may be shaped by gendered

expectations, while Shaughnessy, Treadway, Breland, Williams, and Brouer (2011) emphasized the importance of political skill for women's promotability and leadership effectiveness. This literature does not suggest that women should be limited to indirect forms of influence. Rather, it indicates that women leaders often must navigate expectations carefully while developing approaches to influence that are both effective and consistent with their leadership identity. Within church settings, relational influence may be particularly significant because trust, collaboration, mission commitment, and moral credibility are central to organizational life. When women leaders build influence through relational strength, strategic communication, and demonstrated competence, they can contribute meaningfully to the health and direction of their institutions (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015).

Authenticity

Authenticity is another characteristic associated with effective leadership presence. An authentic leader is one whose daily actions are consistent with deeply held values, beliefs, and commitments (Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). Authentic leadership theory identifies four foundational dimensions: self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced processing, and an internalized moral perspective. These dimensions are especially relevant for women leaders who must navigate gendered expectations while remaining grounded in their own values and leadership identity.

Research suggests that several strengths associated with women's leadership align closely with authentic leadership theory. O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilimoria (2015) identified authenticity as particularly important in four developmental situations: when women reconnect with underdeveloped goals and dreams, when changing contexts bring

values and behaviors into tension, when women attempt to fit within male-dominated organizational cultures, and when they face major life events (p. 261). Their findings suggest that authenticity is not simply a personal trait but a leadership capacity that enables women to remain integrated, values-driven, and credible in complex organizational settings.

Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) similarly found that women were more likely than men to consider whether career opportunities aligned with their desired life patterns rather than focusing solely on advancement. This finding further supports the importance of authenticity for women leaders. For many women, leadership effectiveness is strengthened when professional responsibility is integrated with personal values, relational commitments, and vocational purpose.

The characteristics discussed in this section—respectful leadership, self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity—are well documented in the literature on successful leadership. O’Neil et al. (2015) argued that the latter four characteristics contribute to the development of leadership presence among women. Their framework also emphasizes the role of professional coaching in helping women leaders strengthen these capacities and apply them effectively in the workplace. Coaching, therefore, may serve as an important developmental strategy for women leaders, particularly in contexts where they are navigating gendered expectations or seeking to establish credibility in male-dominated environments (Vinnicombe & Singh, 2003).

O’Neil et al. (2015) developed a framework illustrating how self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity interact in the development of women’s leadership presence (see Figure 1). The framework suggests that a positive leadership presence

enables women leaders to foster interactive and collaborative workplace environments, communicate confidence in themselves and others, embody values-based leadership, and provide trustworthy direction for the organizations and employees they serve.

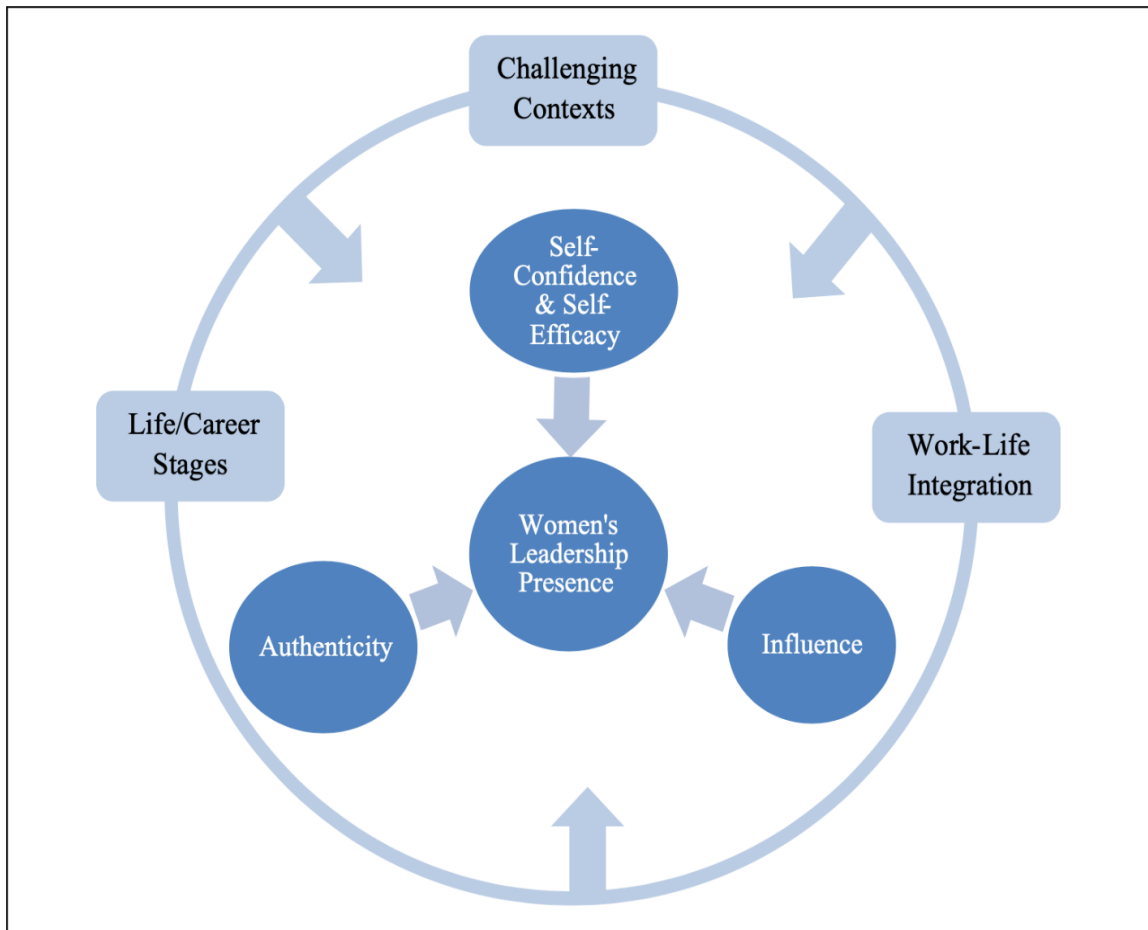


Figure 1. Framework for women's leadership development (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015, p. 263)

Summary

This review of the literature demonstrates that women's leadership within both broader society and church contexts has often been shaped by resistance, gendered expectations, and organizational barriers (Dzubinski, 2016; Elliott, 2002; MacHaffie, 1986; Surratt, 2018). Although women have historically contributed in significant ways

to the life and mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, their representation in formal leadership roles has declined and remains limited in many areas of denominational structure.

The literature indicates that women leaders encounter many of the challenges experienced by leaders generally; however, they also face additional obstacles related to gender bias, role expectations, organizational structures, and theological interpretation. In church contexts, these challenges may be intensified by Headship Theology, complementarian assumptions, and traditions that have historically associated spiritual authority with men (Beach, 1971; Chudleigh, 2014; Eagly, Karau, Miner, & Johnson, 1994; Surratt, 2018).

At the same time, the literature identifies significant opportunities for strengthening women's leadership in the church. Studies highlight the importance of mentoring, supportive supervisors, collaborative team cultures, spiritual rootedness, leadership presence, respectful leadership, self-confidence, self-efficacy, influence, and authenticity (Glanz, 2019; O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015; Surratt, 2018). These practices and characteristics suggest that women's leadership development can be supported intentionally through both spiritual formation and organizational action.

The review also suggests that some barriers cannot be overcome by individual women acting alone. Male-dominated systems, restrictive theological interpretations, and entrenched institutional traditions require the participation of allies, mentors, sponsors, supervisors, and organizational leaders who are willing to create conditions in which women can exercise their gifts and fulfill their callings. As Glanz (2019) and Surratt

(2018) indicate, women leaders benefit from people and structures that come alongside them and help create space for their leadership to be recognized and sustained.

Overall, the literature supports the need for further examination of women's leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly among women who serve as presidents or directors of church institutions. The studies reviewed in this chapter affirm both the effectiveness of women leaders and the need for more intentional pathways that support women called to leadership (Dzubinski, 2016; Eagly & Carli, 2003; Glanz, 2019; Grant, 2007; Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, & Bilimoria, 2008). The next chapter describes the methodology used to examine the leadership journeys and workplace experiences of women serving in senior leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand and describe the work experiences of women serving in presidential leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions. Specifically, the study examines the institutional work environments in which these women lead and explores how gender shapes their relationship with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A phenomenological approach is employed in order to examine the lived experiences of these women leaders. This inquiry is significant because limited scholarship has addressed women's leadership in non-clergy church institutional contexts.

This chapter presents the research design, primary mode of thinking, and interpretive framework that guide the study. It then describes the purposive sample and addresses the role of the researcher as the primary research instrument. The chapter subsequently outlines the data collection and analysis procedures and concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and the application of findings.

Research Design

This study examines the experiences of seven women who have accepted calls to leadership positions in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, roles that for many decades

were occupied primarily by men. By focusing on these seven leaders, the study seeks to understand and describe the experiences of women serving in presidential leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions. Careful data collection and systematic coding was used to identify patterns within each case and to examine themes that emerge across cases.

To align closely with the purpose of the study, phenomenology serves as the primary research design. This approach is appropriate because the study sought to examine lived experience and to explore the meaning and essence of a shared phenomenon among participants (J. Creswell & C. Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The data are intended to capture participants' perceptions, emotions, and meanings related to leadership and gender. The identification of themes that reflect participants' experiences constituted an important analytic step. These themes were then examined carefully in order to articulate the essence of the phenomenon under investigation, consistent with phenomenological inquiry.

Primary Mode of Thinking

Inductive thinking guided this study. Induction has long been regarded as foundational to qualitative research (Owens, Lovell, Brown, & Bee, 2022; Saldaña, 2015, p. 26). This mode of thinking requires the researcher to approach the phenomenon of women's leadership with openness to discovery as the inquiry unfolds. Accordingly, the interviews were conducted with limited presupposition so that participants' accounts informed the development of meaning, categories, and interpretation.

Saldaña (2015) describes analytic induction as "the process by which answers to research questions are emergently constructed as more and more data are collected and

systematically examined” (Saldaña, 2015, p. 26). This mode of thinking is particularly appropriate as participants shared their leadership experiences. It also supported the systematic examination of their responses for emerging categories and themes. In addition to identifying these categories and themes, the phenomenological orientation emphasized the derivation of the essence of participants’ lived experiences through sustained inductive reflection.

Interpretive Framework

A transformative framework was selected for this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that “qualitative research, then, should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work or even the researchers’ lives” (John Creswell & Cheryl Poth, 2018, p. 25). They further cite Mertens, who explains that the “basic tenet of a transformative framework is that knowledge is not neutral, and it reflects the power and social relationship within society; thus the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society” (John Creswell & Cheryl Poth, 2018, p. 25). This framework was chosen because the study sought to contribute to changes in practice and attitudes within the Seventh-day Adventist Church and, ultimately, to support healthier workplace environments for women leaders.

A transformative framework is not merely a methodological choice; it is a paradigm that informs each stage of the research process, from design through interpretation (J. Creswell & C. Poth, 2018). This framework guided the formation of the research questions, the researcher’s collaboration with women presidents, and the ethical procedures used in data collection. Data collection was conducted with respect for participants, including attention to confidentiality and other ethical considerations prior to

the interviews. The transformative framework also guided interpretation by foregrounding actionable insights and by examining underlying power structures and barriers that affect women in leadership.

The transformative paradigm emphasizes power, equity, and voice, making it well suited to the critical orientation of this study. Whether shaped by cultural norms, prejudice, or theological interpretation, boundaries exist for women serving within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The narratives developed in this study emerged from engagement with participants as informed collaborators, thereby supporting both empowerment and credibility.

Purposive Sample

Purposive sampling permits the intentional selection of participants who have direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Campbell describes the value of purposive sampling by noting that “the reason for purposive sampling is the better matching of the sample to the aims and objectives of the research, thus improving the rigor of the study and trustworthiness of the data and results” (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 653).

Because this phenomenological study emphasized women’s lived workplace experiences in relation to gender and leadership, participants were selected because they currently serve, or have recently served, in senior leadership roles within the church. The participant group includes a former conference president, several college and university presidents, the president of a church institution, and the director of a major media ministry.

Self as the Research Instrument

My professional background as the research instrument includes experience as an elementary and secondary teacher, associate pastor, senior pastor, youth director, assistant to the president of a large conference, and president of a conference or union for 23 years within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These experiences provide me with an understanding of both the challenges and the satisfactions associated with leadership in this denominational context.

As a leader within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, my familiarity with denominational structures and organizational culture may influence how I interpret participants' experiences. Therefore, I engaged in reflexive journaling to monitor potential bias. Malacrida describes reflexive journaling as a process in which "an understanding of the self in relation to the research and an accounting for one's research choices are recommended" (Malacrida, 2007, p. 1329).

Because I serve within the same denomination as the participants, I approached this study as an insider researcher. This position provided access to participants' workplace contexts that might otherwise be difficult to obtain and allowed me to empathize with aspects of their organizational experience. At the same time, I guarded against assuming that shared denominational experience means I already understood their perspectives. Ongoing reflexivity was therefore necessary so that I could listen carefully to participants' accounts and attend to the distinctiveness of their leadership journeys.

Because this is a phenomenological study, I intentionally maintained openness as I listened to participants' stories and identified themes that emerged from their accounts. My prior knowledge of these women's leadership effectiveness and giftedness assisted in

contextualizing the data; however, it was important for this knowledge not to predetermine interpretation. Instead, the themes were developed through careful examination of the data. The following questions were used to begin the dialogue about each participant's leadership journey.

1. Please describe the personal, educational, professional, and spiritual journey that led you into a leadership role within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

2. At what point did you first become aware that your gender might generate opposition to your leadership? Have you experienced opposition from both men and women? Based on your professional experience, what do you perceive to be the most significant challenges facing women leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

3. In what ways have you experienced support from the church, colleagues, mentors, or institutional leaders throughout your leadership journey?

4. What specific practices or structural changes would enable the church to provide stronger support for women serving in leadership?

5. What counsel would you offer to women who may be called to leadership within the church?

Data Collection

This section describes the procedures used to collect data for this phenomenological study.

Interviews With Leaders

To promote participant comfort and reduce the time burden associated with participation, interviews were conducted through Zoom. With participants' permission,

each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, detailed notes were maintained regarding the interview process, scheduling logistics, and contextual factors relevant to data collection. The open-ended interviews were guided by the five interview questions identified above, which served as initial prompts rather than rigid constraints. This approach allowed the participants' narratives to unfold naturally while also permitting follow-up questions that probed emerging meanings, patterns, and themes in greater depth.

In many qualitative studies, researchers must identify and negotiate access through organizational gatekeepers. In this study, however, the participants themselves hold senior leadership authority within their respective institutions and therefore were able to determine whether they will participate. Because I already had established a rapport with each participant, the interview process proceeded with openness and mutual trust.

Participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Participants were given the opportunity to review and edit material drawn from their interviews before it was submitted to the dissertation committee, thereby supporting accuracy, confidentiality, and participant agency.

Observations

Because this study is phenomenological in orientation, interviews served as the primary source of data. However, observational data was also collected when appropriate. I observed participants in selected leadership activities, such as preaching, teaching, chairing board meetings, and engaging with their institutional communities. These

observations provided contextual insight into the leadership environments participants described. Detailed field notes were recorded to document relevant features of these settings and to support later interpretation of the interview data.

Field Notes and Journaling

Documents related to participants' leadership journeys was also reviewed when access was available and permission is granted. These materials included committee actions, constituency meeting records, educational accomplishments, evaluations, short- and long-range planning documents, blogs, journals, diaries, and relevant social media entries by participants or others. These documents were used to provide contextual background and to enrich the interpretation of participants' lived experiences.

Data Analysis Procedures

Participant narratives were read carefully, coded systematically, and analyzed to identify themes that emerge within individual cases and across the full set of cases.

Values Coding was selected as the first-cycle coding strategy for this study. Saldaña (2016) identifies In Vivo Coding, Process Coding, and Values Coding as useful approaches for analyzing interview transcripts. In Vivo Coding emphasizes participants' own words, while Process Coding attends to observable and conceptual actions in the data (J. Saldaña, 2016, p. 296). Values Coding focuses on participants' "values, attitudes, and beliefs," thereby illuminating their perspectives and worldviews (J. Saldaña, 2016, p. 298). Saldaña notes that these approaches help attune the researcher to participants' perspectives.

Within phenomenological inquiry, coding is used to identify significant statements, meaning units, and themes that reveal the essence of participants' lived experiences. Because interviews constituted the primary data source for this study, the coding process focused on the meanings participants assigned to their leadership experiences within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly in a context where Headship Theology is influential among many members. Saldaña (2016) explains that Values Coding is appropriate for studies that "explore cultural values and belief systems, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions in case studies" (Johnny Saldaña, 2016, p. 132). Because phenomenological research sought to understand participants' perceived meanings, and because those meanings were often embedded in values, beliefs, and attitudes, Values Coding was well aligned with the interpretive aims of this study.

Values Coding was also selected because it can be applied across multiple forms of qualitative data. Field notes, observations, blogs, and relevant social media entries corroborated patterns identified in the interviews and thereby "enhance the trustworthiness of the findings" (Johnny Saldaña, 2016, p. 132). Examining multiple data sources strengthened the credibility of the study by allowing emerging themes to be considered in relation to participants' narratives, observed interactions, and contextual documents. In this way, Values Coding supported an integrated interpretation of participants' values, beliefs, and leadership experiences.

Trustworthiness

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that "it is not enough to gain perspectives and terms; ultimately, these ideas are translated into practice as strategies or techniques"

(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 259). In light of this goal, the study incorporated safeguards designed to strengthen the usefulness, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation was pursued through the use of multiple data sources generated by and about the women leaders who participated in the study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide a framework for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Their framework identifies four criteria—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—that support the legitimacy and rigor of qualitative findings.

Credibility parallels internal validity in quantitative research and concerns whether the findings are believable and accurately represent participants' perspectives. Transferability is analogous to external validity and refers to the extent to which findings may be applicable in other contexts. Dependability corresponds to reliability and addresses the consistency and stability of the research process over time and across conditions. Confirmability parallels objectivity and seeks to ensure that findings are grounded in participants' responses rather than in researcher bias or personal interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A further validation strategy involved participant review of narrative interpretations. Participants were given the opportunity to read how their accounts had been represented and provided edits as needed to ensure accuracy and protect confidentiality. This process contributed to a prolonged engagement and sustained collaboration with participants throughout the research process.

Application of Findings

The purpose of this study was not statistical generalization but contextual depth and detailed description. By providing rich, thick description, the study enables readers to determine the extent to which the findings may be transferable to their own contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Several steps were taken to strengthen rich, thick description and support transferability. First, each case and its relevant context was described. The issues addressed by the study were then presented. The transformative framework, together with Values Coding, guided the identification and interpretation of the core themes that emerged from the data.

These themes were then examined further through careful analysis. Both confirming and disconfirming evidence was considered so a balanced and credible interpretation of the findings could be presented.

The final portion of the analysis presents assertions derived from the data, categories, and themes. Participants' narratives were used to portray the leadership environments in which these women serve and to illuminate the gender-related dynamics that shape their daily work within the church.

Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations are central to this phenomenological study. Because each participant serves as a president, director, or chief executive of her respective institution, institutional permission to conduct the interviews was not required in the same way it might be in studies involving subordinate employees. Each participant was able to determine independently whether she wished to participate in the study.

As part of the Institutional Review Board approval process at Andrews University, several procedures were implemented to protect participants and support ethical research practice. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before interviews were conducted. Confidentiality measures were established to protect participant privacy, and a secure data-storage plan was developed to safeguard interview materials. These procedures were reviewed and approved through the IRB process and communicated to participants.

Another ethical consideration concerns my personal context as the researcher, particularly because my wife has served as a leader of a church institution. Although I maintained a neutral stance in data collection, coding, and interpretation, this personal connection must be disclosed as part of the reflexive process and as a potential source of researcher positionality.

Some readers may question whether my support for women in leadership could influence the questions asked, the data collected, or the interpretation of findings. For transparency, I acknowledge that I am supportive of women serving in leadership, in part because I have observed firsthand the positive contributions of women leaders. Reflexive journaling and participant review was used to help monitor and address potential bias throughout the research process.

Institutional Review Board

This study followed all protocols required by the Institutional Review Board at Andrews University. The IRB review process is designed to ensure participant protection, ethical compliance, and research integrity.

Before data collection began, the Application for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects was submitted to the IRB. In addition, the study's purpose, design, and methodology were submitted as part of the research protocol documentation required for review.

Participants were asked to sign an agreement addressing confidentiality and the presentation of data in the study narrative. This agreement was intended to ensure that each interview would be handled with respect, care, and integrity. Because there are relatively few women in senior leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and because some interview topics may be sensitive, preserving participant anonymity was a central ethical priority. To support this goal, identifying details were removed, and each participant was given the opportunity to review and edit her narrative as needed.

All research data has been stored securely in password-protected files and will not be shared outside the approved research process.

Summary

This chapter has described the methodology used to collect, analyze, and report data for this study. A qualitative phenomenological case study approach was selected in order to examine the leadership journeys and workplace experiences of women serving as leaders of Seventh-day Adventist institutions. Seven women serving in such roles within the North American Division were selected for participation. In addition to interviews, observations were conducted in selected leadership contexts, with detailed field notes documenting participants' leadership activities and the ways colleagues and subordinates interact with them.

The central focus of the study was to understand how these women describe their leadership journeys within the Seventh-day Adventist Church and how they perceive their workplace environments in relation to gender.

Data analysis began during data collection and continued throughout the study. Appropriate qualitative procedures were used to identify, code, and interpret relevant data. Throughout the process, careful attention was given to listening to participants' narratives, understanding their experiences in context, and developing conclusions that speak to the significance of the study.

CHAPTER IV

VOICES OF WOMEN LEADERS IN THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICA

Introduction

Seven women serving in senior leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America participated in this study. Their narratives offered rich insight into the pathways by which women come into leadership and the gendered dynamics they encounter within Adventist organizational culture. Across the interviews, participants described both affirmation and resistance. Some obstacles reflected broader patterns commonly experienced by women in leadership, while others were shaped by theological perspectives, including Headship Theology, held by some members and leaders within the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

A recurring feature across the interviews was the participants' understanding of leadership as a calling. Each woman described accepting her role not primarily as an act of personal ambition, but as a response to what she understood to be God's direction in her life. This sense of calling appeared to provide grounding, resilience, and spiritual meaning as participants navigated opposition, institutional expectations, and the complexity of leading within the church. One participant stated, "Since I knew the Lord was calling me, I knew He would help me and protect me" (Leader, 2025).

Because participants shared sensitive information about their institutions, colleagues, and leadership experiences, their identities are kept confidential. The narratives that follow preserve the substance of their leadership journeys while withholding identifying details.

The Entrepreneurial Leader

This participant began her leadership journey in an entrepreneurial setting, where she and her husband built a successful business. Within that context, she assumed primary responsibility for personnel and payroll matters and supervised employees, many of whom were men. She recalled that some male employees did not initially take her leadership seriously; however, she observed that her role in issuing paychecks gave her practical authority. Over time, she learned the importance of cultivating healthy working relationships, a practice that became central to her leadership approach in later institutional settings.

While helping to develop the business, she returned to school at her husband's encouragement. She excelled academically and later completed graduate studies. A Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher education invited her to join its faculty, where she began a teaching career. She described this period as deeply meaningful, noting that she was affirmed by students and respected by colleagues for her teaching abilities.

The university president later invited her into administration, eventually appointing her as Special Assistant to the President. Although she initially hesitated because of her commitment to teaching, encouragement from several individuals helped her accept the role. In administration, she discovered a strong aptitude for organizational

leadership and developed a desire to strengthen the institution as both a workplace and learning environment. As she assumed greater responsibility, trust in her leadership grew among faculty, staff, and students.

A pivotal moment occurred when the university president accepted a call to another institution. Before leaving, he informed her that he had recommended to the Board of Trustees that she serve as interim president while a national search was conducted. The board accepted the recommendation and appointed her to the interim role.

Because she was not directly involved in the presidential search process, she had limited knowledge of its progress. Although her name was included among more than 30 candidates, she did not expect to be selected. As the committee narrowed the list and informed her that she remained a strong candidate, she still doubted that the institution would depart from its history of male presidents.

She recalled being invited to speak with the board after the search committee had completed its work. When she returned to her staff, they were eager to learn the outcome. Her response was, “It’s a girl.”

The next day, her administrative assistant brought balloons that read, “It’s a Girl,” marking the significance of her becoming the first woman president in the institution’s history.

As her presidency unfolded, she quickly recognized that leading a church institution differed substantially from leading a private business. The church’s governance structure included multiple layers of stakeholders, each with distinct expectations, histories, and sources of influence.

Among these stakeholders were the conference presidents who served on the board from each conference in the union. This group, composed of men, carried significant influence because they represented their respective fields of ministry. She recognized that not all had extensive experience working with women in ministry or institutional leadership. Nevertheless, she considered productive relationships with this group essential because of their influence on the board and the institution's dependence on conference subsidies.

Another stakeholder group included pastors from across the union. She viewed them as important not only because of their board roles but also because of their relationships with the student body and local constituencies. Along with lay board members, many of whom were alumni, these pastors had direct connections to students and institutional supporters. For this reason, she prioritized listening carefully and developing constructive communication with them. She acknowledged that some needed time to adjust to a woman serving as president of the institution.

Perhaps the most influential group within the church governance structure consisted of the union officers: the president, executive secretary, and treasurer. The union president chaired the board, the executive secretary served as vice-chair, and the treasurer chaired the finance committee. She understood that clear communication and mutual understanding with these leaders would be essential to the success of her presidency.

Early in her presidency, she encountered a seemingly ordinary but symbolically significant moment. A campus event traditionally included cookies baked by the president's wife for the student body. The planning committee approached her to ask

whether she would continue the tradition. She responded that although she would enjoy baking for the campus, she did not have time to do so. The exchange revealed how gendered assumptions surrounding presidential life had been embedded in institutional traditions.

She used this moment to help her team recognize that a transition from a male president to a female president would inevitably involve some changes. She noted that although she might not lead in the same way as a male predecessor, she also brought strengths and perspectives that could benefit the institution in distinctive ways.

One area in which she believed women leaders often contribute significant value was listening and empathy. She noted that research often identifies women leaders as strong listeners and relationally attentive. In her own experience, colleagues sometimes expressed surprise at her ability to resolve difficult conflicts involving parents, faculty, or long-standing institutional tensions.

At the same time, she emphasized that women leaders should not be confined to a single expected leadership style. She stated that “it was important to let a woman leader develop her own leadership style that will ultimately play to her strengths.”

A non-negotiable expectation in her leadership was respectful interaction among team members, particularly during difficult decision-making processes. Some interpreted this expectation as reluctance to confront problems directly and viewed it as weakness associated with her gender. She interpreted it differently: respect was not optional but essential to institutional health and effective leadership.

Although she sometimes felt her voice was less readily heard in predominantly male leadership spaces, she also described meaningful support from male leaders. Early

in her presidency, the union president introduced a motto for the conferences and university in the union: “We are six for one and one for all six.” She experienced this statement as a public affirmation of her institution’s place within the broader union structure and as a source of encouragement.

Another affirming moment occurred at a conference convocation, where a newly elected conference president invited her and another woman leader from AdventHealth as special guests. During the event, he presented both women with a community impact award and later explained that he wanted his pastors to know he supported them. She experienced this recognition as both personally meaningful and institutionally significant.

Her presidency began during a period of leadership transition across the union. A new union president and two new conference presidents were elected around the same time. Although these changes required adjustment, she also experienced them as an opportunity to learn and grow alongside other leaders navigating new responsibilities.

Despite these supportive relationships, she also encountered resistance from individuals who objected to a woman leading a church-owned institution. One situation involved an employee whose employment was ending. He framed the issue around her gender and attempted to gather support from a local church by sharing his version of events with members and deacons. When she learned of this, she spoke with the senior pastor, who intervened and addressed the rumors. She described his support as significant during a difficult moment.

Another challenge arose when she learned that a theology professor had reportedly discouraged a female student from studying theology. Although addressing the situation was difficult, she met with the department and affirmed the institution’s support

for women who felt called to ministry. She emphasized that women and men pursuing theology should receive equitable treatment. She later observed that the department as a whole was supportive of women in ministry and that the conversation helped clarify institutional expectations.

Her husband emerged as one of the most important sources of support in her leadership journey. During a period when she chose to be a stay-at-home mother, he encouraged her to continue her academic development. As she later moved into leadership, he supported her both personally and practically, including helping to shield their children from negative responses she might receive because of her role.

She valued being able to process leadership experiences with him. Through these conversations, she became more aware of moments when she had been patronized or disrespected because of her gender. At times, after hearing her describe an interaction, he would say, “They would have never said that to me as a man.” His observation helped her recognize gendered dynamics that she might otherwise have minimized. She also recalled occasions when people assumed he was the president and reached out to greet him first. He would respond, “She is the one you need to be greeting; she is the president.”

As she reflected on gender in her presidential role, she identified several dynamics that surprised her. One involved hiring cabinet members. She noted that search firms would not typically ask a candidate how they felt about working for a male president. However, because she was a woman, candidates were asked, “How do you feel about working for a woman?”

She also observed that people often saw her gender before they saw her qualifications, accomplishments, or leadership gifts. In contrast, she noted that male

leaders are typically evaluated first by their credentials and experience rather than by their gender.

She further explained that when difficulties arose, critics were more likely to interpret the problem through the lens of gender. She anticipated comments such as, “This would not have happened if you had brought in a male leader.” She contrasted this with the experience of male leaders, whose gender is rarely invoked as an explanation for institutional challenges.

For this participant, strong support from the board chair was essential. She explained that a board chair must help buffer a woman president from critics who object to women in leadership. Without such support, she believed it would be exceedingly difficult for a woman leader to function effectively.

She Didn’t Know She Was a Leader

The second participant was the first woman to serve as president in her institution’s 134-year history. As president of one of the Seventh-day Adventist colleges or universities in North America, she occupied a role held by only a small number of women within Adventist higher education.

This participant did not initially identify herself as being on a leadership pathway. Much of her professional career was spent in Seventh-day Adventist higher education. She excelled academically, earning a bachelor’s degree in communication, an MBA, and eventually a doctorate in leadership.

She did not grow up in an Adventist home but was baptized with her family at the age of 15. When asked whether Headship Theology influenced her early formation, she reflected, “Because I didn’t become an Adventist until I was 15, I think this helped me

because I didn't grow up in the church with a view against women leaders." She described the women in her family as strong and independent, noting that several had crossed gendered boundaries in their own lives. Her grandmother immigrated from Germany and eventually purchased and managed two hotels. She also described an aunt who became a helicopter pilot despite significant opposition.

Her professional work in higher education began in public relations and marketing for several universities. Although she recognized that her skills aligned well with this work, she did not sense that it represented her ultimate vocation. During this period, an elderly statesman of the institution approached her and stated that public relations leadership was acceptable for a woman, but serving as a vice president or president was not. His comment reflected the gendered assumptions that would later shape several important decisions in her leadership journey.

After completing her MBA, she taught business courses for six years, raised funds for a new computer lab, and participated in the institution's renaming process. Through these campus initiatives, the university president recognized leadership capacities that she had not yet fully identified in herself. He repeatedly invited her to move into administration, but she remained hesitant, in part because of the earlier warning she had received about women in senior leadership. Eventually, she accepted the position of Associate Vice President for Academics. Looking back, she stated, "I realized after starting my new assignment, I was now working in my calling: administration."

When a new president arrived, he also recognized her leadership gifts. Because he appeared receptive to hearing from women leaders, she shared several ideas for strengthening the institution's marketing, enrollment, and student financial aid functions.

She believed these areas were not sufficiently coordinated and that stronger integration would contribute to institutional growth. In response, the president placed her in charge of marketing, enrollment, and student aid.

The institution had not previously had a woman vice president. Nevertheless, the president believed her gifts were needed on the cabinet. Her appointment generated visible reaction among some members of the campus community. Although not everyone was comfortable with the decision, she moved forward because she believed the Lord was guiding her into the role.

Her early years in the vice-presidential role were difficult. As the first woman to serve in senior administration at the university, she encountered resistance, particularly as she initiated changes in student recruitment. In one situation, a male colleague who objected to her leadership reportedly went out of his way to physically bump into her in the hallway. He also convened private meetings in an effort to undermine her position. During this period, the president's advocacy provided essential protection and support.

Eventually, the men who most strongly opposed her appointment left their positions. She then selected new leaders who understood the institutional vision and were supportive collaborators. She identified this period as one of the most challenging moments in her leadership journey. Her reliance on the Lord and her assurance of calling sustained her through the difficulty.

Serving as vice president was initially uncomfortable, especially when the president convened the cabinet and, for the first time, a woman was seated at the table. She quickly recognized that her voice was not always heard. She described offering ideas that received little response, only to hear a male colleague make the same suggestion

moments later and receive broad support. Rather than focusing on personal credit, she developed a pragmatic approach: advancing the idea mattered more to her than being recognized as its source. She noted that this dynamic continued occasionally after she became president, although it was less frequent because of the formal authority of the presidential role.

During her tenure as vice president, the denominational task force on women's ordination was active in advance of the General Conference Session vote. Around this time, two theology professors at the institution prepared a paper addressing women's leadership and identifying positions they believed women should not hold. The paper was especially critical of women serving as college or university presidents because such roles would place women in administrative authority over religion departments, a structure the authors viewed as biblically inappropriate.

Over time, she sensed that even some of her early detractors came to accept that she belonged in the role. She served as the institution's only woman vice president for 17 years, during which enrollment more than doubled. By the end of that period, she felt broadly supported and encouraged.

When a sister institution needed new leadership, her president submitted her name for consideration. Although he did not want to lose her from his own institution, he also wanted her leadership gifts to be used at a higher level.

After a lengthy search process, the sister institution identified her as its top candidate. She described feeling both honored and surprised. After prayer and consultation with trusted people in her life, she accepted the invitation.

As noted above, she became the first woman president in the institution's history. Most members of the campus community welcomed her appointment, though not all did. Early in her tenure, a retired religion professor came to her office and stated, "You are a woman and the leader of this school. We have a problem and how can we move forward." She responded by asking, "Doesn't the Bible tell us sometimes the Lord strengthens the weaker vessel to do the work He needs done?" After reflecting, he replied, "Yes, He does. Why, I see you know your Bible." She was willing to allow him to frame her as the "weaker vessel" if doing so created a path for mutual cooperation. Although such a response could be interpreted as accommodating a gendered assumption, for her the priority was finding a way to work constructively with him.

While serving as president, she reported that most people were accepting and that her gender did not significantly interfere with her work with her cabinet. She was pleased to find several highly competent women vice presidents at the institution. She also described strong working relationships with union officers and support from the North American Division Education Department.

During her presidency, several other Seventh-day Adventist universities also appointed women presidents. In private conversations, these women discussed the difficulties associated with leadership "presence" and "voice." They observed that men were often assumed to possess a certain presidential presence, while women were not always granted the same presumption. Female leaders may lead, act, and communicate differently from men, yet the male pattern of leadership often remains the assumed standard. Knowing that other women presidents experienced similar challenges gave her

encouragement to continue leading through uncomfortable moments and to do the work faithfully with the Lord's help.

Some of her most difficult gender-related experiences occurred with external organizations that were not accustomed to working with women executives. In one situation involving a critical legal matter, a senior attorney asked her to leave the room while the legal team discussed a settlement. She interpreted this as a clear example of gender-based discomfort and exclusion. A younger attorney later called to apologize and told her that the incident would not have occurred had she been a man. Although she experienced direct discrimination in this and other situations, she again identified her sense of calling and her commitment to effective leadership as the factors that enabled her to continue.

The issue of leadership presence became an area of sustained interest for her. She read extensively on the subject, though she never felt she fully achieved the kind of presence she desired. Nevertheless, she became committed to helping women leaders develop the voice and presence needed for senior leadership, particularly those who would follow after her.

She found that even individuals who accepted women in leadership did not always extend to women the same level of trust given to male counterparts. At times, well-intentioned people still patronized her because they unconsciously compartmentalized leadership strengths by gender. She was determined, however, not to allow such dynamics to distract her from fulfilling what she understood to be the Lord's calling on her life.

After 10 years as president, she retired with the conviction that she had lived faithfully into God's calling. She expressed satisfaction with the accomplishments of her 40 years of service to the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

She Has Always Been a Leader

This participant grew up in a minister's home and developed a love for Christ and the Seventh-day Adventist Church at an early age. As the daughter of a pastor, she became aware that her life was closely connected to the ministry life of the local church. She was frequently invited to lead youth activities, Sabbath School classes, and outreach ministries. Others expected her to lead, and she responded to those opportunities. In retrospect, she identified these early experiences as formative in both her leadership development and her sense of calling.

She currently serves as president of a Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher education in North America. Although her path to this position was not linear, she described it as a journey in which God prepared her for each new responsibility.

She credited both of her parents with helping to establish the foundation for her leadership development. Her father intentionally encouraged women called to leadership within his congregation, and that commitment made a lasting impression on her. She also identified education as a significant influence in her development. Her parents worked diligently to support her Adventist education, and she viewed that educational experience as formative in shaping her identity and deepening her sense of service.

As she continued to discern the gifts God had given her, she chose to major in elementary education. She taught elementary school for several years and described deep affection for her students. Watching them grow academically and spiritually brought her

significant joy. Over time, however, she became concerned that many students lost their connection to the church during or after their high school years. This concern moved her to organize youth events and rallies with academies across the conference, where she taught students how to share their faith. These efforts eventually propelled her and her husband into a distinctive ministry journey together.

Early in their marriage, she and her husband decided to step out in faith by traveling across the country to conduct weeks of prayer and revival weekends at Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions. This decision required significant trust, as they had no formal sponsor and depended on donations and freewill offerings for financial support.

After selling their belongings, they purchased a motor home and began their ministry on the road. She described that year as a period in which she learned to depend deeply on God. At times, they did not know where they would go next, only to receive a call from a school seeking someone to provide a spiritual program. Through these experiences, she and her husband sought to “fill the gap” for young people during their high school years and to help them remain connected to Christ and their church communities.

Their itinerant ministry connected them with students throughout the Seventh-day Adventist school system in North America. She did most of the speaking and programming, while her husband handled finances and travel logistics. Their time on the road ended when she became pregnant, and they returned to the conference where she had previously taught.

When they returned, she expected to resume teaching. The conference president, however, envisioned another form of ministry for her. He asked her to conduct weeks of prayer and youth weekends across the conference, effectively continuing the ministry she had begun nationally but within the conference context. He also invited her to join the conference youth department and placed her on a track that could lead toward ordination. This marked the formal beginning of her youth ministry work and gave her an opportunity to observe how conference leadership functioned in advancing ministry priorities.

She took advantage of educational opportunities while continuing her ministry responsibilities with young adults in the conference. Later, she received an invitation to serve as a vice president at one of the largest Seventh-day Adventist universities in North America. Both the university and her conference president encouraged her to pursue doctoral studies, and both organizations supported her through the doctoral program. Her responsibilities at the university expanded as the president recognized the leadership gifts she brought to the campus.

She later received an invitation to serve as an associate dean at one of the flagship universities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. She valued this work and took particular interest in helping students achieve their goals. She often went beyond formal expectations in order to provide students with the strongest possible support for success.

Working in higher education became a significant period of growth for her. Her passion for Adventist education and young adult development aligned closely with the responsibilities of her new role, and she soon felt at home in higher education leadership.

Many people believed she would eventually have the opportunity to serve as president of an institution of higher education. Her energy, drive, and ability to connect with students, faculty, and staff made her a strong candidate for senior leadership. That opportunity came sooner than she expected when a Seventh-day Adventist university in North America invited her to serve as president. After prayerful deliberation with her family, she accepted the responsibility.

She quickly discovered that serving as president of a higher education institution required significant resilience. Early in her presidency, she faced financial pressures, the need for stronger mission alignment, and insufficient data for major institutional decisions. At the same time, the Board of Trustees consistently expected clarity regarding the path forward. Despite the difficulty of these responsibilities, she stated that the assurance of God's call sustained her and gave meaning to the work. She also described the community of faith that had surrounded her from childhood into adulthood as a significant gift in shaping who she had become.

Throughout her faith journey, she experienced what she described as “the good, the bad, and the ugly.” In each season, she believed God provided mentors who helped her interpret events and respond constructively. As president, she made working effectively with the Board of Trustees a priority. To support that work, she brought in a consultant who led both her and the board through a retreat designed to provide tools for collaboration and institutional progress.

The board retreat, several months of campus listening, and administrative retreats with the consultant contributed to the development of a renewed vision and strategic plan. This process strengthened communication with both internal and external constituents.

One key practice that emerged was the establishment of a one-hour executive session at the beginning of each duly called board meeting. During that hour, she shared critical information with the board so members could better understand the plans she and her team were developing to move the university toward greater sustainability and vitality. She recognized that some trustees were dissatisfied with the institution's direction and that addressing those concerns would be challenging for any president, particularly because many of the problems predated her tenure.

During difficult periods with dissatisfied constituents, she again identified her childhood experiences within her family and faith community as part of the preparation God had given her for leadership.

Within her extended family and faith community, some important people in her life opposed women serving in church leadership. Although those differences were difficult, she later viewed the honest conversations around the family table as formative experiences that helped her understand the complexity of her leadership journey. She again emphasized the unwavering support of both her father and mother as she navigated difficult conversations within the home and the broader faith community.

Interestingly, she did not recall significant gender-based resistance during her educational journey. As an elementary school teacher, some even viewed her gender as an asset. The most pronounced resistance emerged when she moved into church ministry. As a conference youth leader, she encountered some churches that welcomed her ministry and others that refused to work with her. In one instance, a week before she was scheduled to give a graduation address at a conference school, a pastor learned that the conference youth leader was a woman and refused to allow her to speak.

At another youth rally, the senior pastor did not realize until the day of the event that the conference youth leader was a woman. When he saw her, he stated, “As a woman, you are not allowed in the Most Holy Place.” He then directed her to sit on a bench, and when it was time for her to speak, he brought a microphone to the floor level of the sanctuary so that she could speak from there.

She stated that the support of her parents and husband, along with a healthy family life, helped her mature as a Christian disciple and enabled her to work through these moments of resistance without becoming deeply discouraged.

She also identified several women in ministry who supported and mentored her. One lesson she drew from these experiences was that resistance at the beginning of an event did not always determine its outcome. When she remained patient and allowed God to work, difficult situations sometimes became moments of spiritual blessing. She described occasions when people were initially troubled by her gender as a leader, yet by the end of the day recognized that God had worked through her and through the program.

Taken together, her family experiences and early work in education and ministry prepared her to lead a capable and demanding Board of Trustees that needed clear leadership, institutional focus, and decisive action.

When asked whether women, as well as men, had opposed her leadership, she shared that such opposition was more evident in higher education than in her ministry journey. Although women in higher education were often supportive of women leaders, she also observed that elitism, competition, and jealousy sometimes hindered the healthy relationships necessary for effective teamwork. Even during some of the most difficult

challenges involving other women educational leaders, she also found female colleagues who mentored and supported her growth.

She especially remembered an adult female mentor from her early ministry years who gently drew her into a community of women leaders. The mentor would say, “There is a group of women meeting next week. We are coming together to have some tea and pray. Want to come?” At other times, she would say, “There is this event you need to attend, and I have paid your way to go.”

Before her higher education leadership journey, she drew strength and wisdom from women who had preceded her and invested in her success. These pioneer women were among the first to enter ministry roles as women in the church. She experienced them not as competitive or jealous, but as deeply committed to helping her grow and broaden her influence.

When asked what she viewed as the greatest challenge facing women in leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, her first response was opportunity. In ministry, she saw very few women given the opportunity to serve as district pastors. Because few churches were willing to call a woman as lead pastor, women were often denied the opportunity to gain local leadership experience that could later qualify them for broader leadership responsibilities.

In some cases, male leaders in her conference were not supportive of women serving as pastors. The problem was compounded when incoming pastors were vetted to ensure alignment with those leaders’ views on selected issues, including the belief that women did not belong in ministry.

Over time, she observed different conference presidents come and go, each bringing different views regarding women as pastors and leaders. The leader's position set the tone for the conference office and the field. Over a 10- to 15-year period, she witnessed at least seven women leave ministry for various reasons. In her view, the women who remained were those who had a strong sense of calling and whose work was centered in Christ. For them, ministry was not primarily about pushing the boundaries of what women had traditionally been permitted to do; it was about faithfully fulfilling the call of God on their lives.

She also described the complexity of serving under conference officers who opposed women leading or pastoring, while many members and workers had personally witnessed God working through women leaders and pastors. This tension created a significant divide within the workforce and, at times, produced a hostile working environment.

Another challenge she identified was the lack of structured support and resources for women in leadership. She experienced this need in her own journey and viewed it as an area where the church could make meaningful progress if it recognized the importance of intentional support.

Women leaders, she explained, face the ordinary challenges associated with leadership as well as additional challenges related to gender. She recalled one young woman in a growing leadership role asking, "Where can we go to learn to talk to men?" At first, the question seemed surprising; however, in that context, relating to men as subordinates was a new experience for her.

To address these challenges, she emphasized the need for a formal coaching program for women emerging as leaders in the church. She believed coaching could be especially useful for practical matters such as learning how to have one's voice heard at the table.

She also identified other areas where coaching could be helpful, including balancing work and home life, navigating expectations regarding dress and appearance, and carrying the pressure many women feel not to fail or disappoint other women. She viewed this burden as a distinctive weight often carried by women in leadership.

At the same time, she emphasized that beyond practical skill development, coaching for women in church leadership should remain grounded in calling and Christ-centered service. She believed women leaders need support in learning to lead in their own armor rather than feeling compelled to adopt the armor of male counterparts. In her view, coaching could play an important role in helping emerging women leaders navigate the path into leadership with greater confidence and effectiveness.

She continues to serve as president of a Seventh-day Adventist institution of higher education and looks forward to seeing how God will lead the school and work in the lives of its young adults in the years ahead.

A Preacher of the Gospel in a Contested Environment

This participant grew up in South America. Although she did not see women serving as pastors in that context, she recalled sensing a call to preach the gospel from a very young age. As early as age three, she remembered lining up dolls in her room and preaching to them as though they were parishioners. She later interpreted this childhood memory as one of her earliest experiences of calling.

She now serves as the first and only woman leading a multimedia ministry for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. In this role, she provides leadership for a team engaged in print, radio, television, and internet ministries with a global reach.

Her pathway into ministry, however, was not immediate. She understood God to have guided her through experiences that later prepared her for leadership in media ministry.

After completing college and moving to the United States, she did not enter full-time ministry immediately. Instead, she worked in the corporate sector for 15 years, eventually serving as controller for two major companies. During this period, she earned a master's degree in business psychology, learned to navigate organizational politics, and, in her words, "found her voice."

Although her corporate career was successful and financially rewarding, she did not lose the sense of calling she had carried since childhood. She remained deeply involved in her local church, serving as organist, choir director, and youth leader over a period of many years.

Church leaders eventually began to recognize her gifts and encouraged her to consider full-time ministry. Several churches invited her to serve as pastor, but for personal reasons the timing was not yet right. Even so, these invitations were significant because they confirmed that others perceived God's call on her life. She was not seeking employment in ministry; she already had work in which she was succeeding and which she enjoyed.

Later, the conference ministerial director contacted her about joining the pastoral team of a large church in the conference. He told her, "The Lord would not let us stop

thinking about how you should be in full-time ministry.” She accepted the invitation and began a ministry pathway that eventually led to broader church leadership.

Her senior pastor was a well-known and seasoned leader. Initially, the working relationship was difficult. When asked whether she believed the difficulty was related to her being a woman pastor, she was uncertain. She considered that it may also have been connected to the confidence and voice she had developed in the business world, where she was accustomed to bringing ideas to the table and expecting them to be heard.

For approximately two years, the senior pastor struggled to receive her as a ministry partner. He resisted several strategic initiatives she proposed for young people in the church, apparently concerned that these initiatives might diminish his own ministry. Over time, however, he came to understand that she was not a competitor but a partner in ministry. She assured him that she was not seeking his position; rather, she wanted and needed his mentorship in order to become the best pastor she could become.

The second two years of their work together were, in her words, “precious.” Their relationship became deeply meaningful, and she later identified this senior pastor as the most significant mentor in her ministerial journey.

Eventually, another church in the conference began requesting that she serve as its senior pastor. She accepted the conference’s invitation, even though she knew the head elder, whom she described as sincere and honest, strongly opposed women in ministry. Her approach was to respect him and the convictions he held while continuing to lead faithfully in the role to which she believed God had called her.

After several months, this relationship shifted significantly. During a church board meeting, the head elder stood and stated, “I have officially changed my mind on

women in ministry. All of you know I preached a sermon against women ministers, but I have seen the Holy Spirit working in our pastor and am now going to be her number one supporter.”

This affirmation brought her deep joy. She noted that she had never used the pulpit or any other platform to defend women in ministry. She did not understand that to be her responsibility. Rather, she believed the Holy Spirit would convict others regarding the authenticity of her calling.

Across her work as a preacher, evangelist, and media leader, she found great fulfillment in opening Scripture with others and exploring the central themes of the gospel. She observed that when biblical truth is taught with conviction, “people no longer care whether the presenter is wearing pants or a skirt.” In those moments, she believed the Bible became the focus, and that focus was what mattered most.

She later earned a PhD in New Testament Theology, which deepened her understanding and strengthened her preaching ministry. This degree also opened additional opportunities, and she became a sought-after speaker for camp meetings, weeks of prayer, and revival meetings in churches and institutions. She also became a prolific author whose books sought to bring the gospel to life for readers of various ages.

Her speaking gifts became evident to those who heard her present. Over time, she became known as a champion of the gospel, a respected scholar, and a leader. Eventually, she was invited to join a major Seventh-day Adventist media ministry as an associate speaker. This ministry was a long-established denominational ministry with a significant legacy in the church.

Her role as associate speaker expanded her visibility within the wider church. Through this platform, she ministered in places she had not expected to reach. Although she loved the local church context, she also felt at home in this new role and worked diligently to serve the Lord through the broader ministry opportunities it provided.

The broader platform also brought increased opposition to her ministry as a woman preacher. At times, when invited to speak at camp meetings, she received comments such as, “You are the devil” and “You shouldn’t be preaching, who do you think you are!” She also experienced gendered criticism that male leaders in comparable roles would likely not encounter, including comments about her clothing, a flower she wore, or a hat.

When asked what helped her respond to opposition, she recalled counsel from the senior pastor who had mentored her early in ministry: whatever one gives energy to, one empowers. She concluded that she could not give sustained attention to those who opposed her calling. She remained willing to engage sincere questions and substantive concerns, but she chose not to devote energy to criticisms about her appearance.

Leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America recognized her gifts and invited her to launch a new multimedia ministry. The president asked whether she would be willing to serve as director and speaker for this outreach, and she accepted. As expected, the decision generated resistance from some who objected to a woman leading a division-level multimedia platform. The role increased her exposure across the church and, with it, the intensity of opposition from those who did not wish her ministry to succeed.

At times, she received death threats when invited to speak at camp meetings, and police were occasionally brought in for her protection. Websites appeared that condemned her preaching and ministry. Throughout these experiences, she reported that the Seventh-day Adventist administration in North America stood firmly with her. She emphasized that such support was essential for her and would be essential for any woman serving in a leadership role.

On one occasion, individuals traveled to the North American headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to urge the president to shut down her ministry immediately. Rather than yielding to their demands, the president affirmed that the ministry would continue and stated that it was being used powerfully by the Lord.

The period following the 2015 General Conference Session was especially difficult. At that session, delegates voted on whether each of the 13 world divisions should be permitted to decide how to address women's ordination within its territory. The motion failed, and she experienced the aftermath as a period of backlash against women pastors more broadly. The intensity of the reaction was such that the General Conference president later clarified that the vote was not intended as a rejection of women pastors or preachers but concerned the credential they could hold.

Although opposition to her ministry continued, the certainty of her calling functioned as an anchor. She stated, "The Holy Spirit always supersedes policy." In her view, God can empower and strengthen whomever He chooses to preach the gospel, regardless of human policy constraints.

When asked how the church could better support women who feel called to preach or serve in ministry, she offered three distinct recommendations. First, she said,

“Give women with ideas a chance.” She emphasized that women’s creative ideas should not be dismissed or ignored but should be given space to develop into new ministries.

Second, she stated that the church needs to provide tangible financial support for women in ministry. She described the initial stipend provided by Seventh-day Adventist leadership in North America as a significant blessing because it helped meet the practical needs required to launch and sustain the ministry.

Third, she emphasized the importance of training. In her view, many women have not been given opportunities to succeed partly because they have not been given adequate training in how denominational systems, structures, and processes function.

She believes that young women beginning in ministry need to remember that God has many ways to “part the Red Sea” when needed. She encouraged women who sense God’s calling to sustain courage and faith, trusting that God will provide safe passage in decisive moments. Her counsel was for women to enter their calling with their whole heart and with deep passion.

In her media ministry, she brought together a team that developed resources for local churches to use in outreach. These resources included programs for children as well as materials with a special focus on young adults in the church.

Near the end of the interview, I asked, “What question did I not ask you that I should have?” Her answer was unexpected.

She replied, “Ask me if it was worth it.” After describing criticism, opposition, and significant challenges, she wanted to speak directly to whether answering God’s call had been worth the cost.

Her answer was unequivocal: “It was absolutely worth it!” She explained that the satisfaction of fulfilling her lifelong calling had been priceless. She continued, “So no opposition, no comments against the flower in my hair, not even the threats on my life for speaking at camp meetings come close to the satisfaction of having been called to be a minister, to be a leader, with all that it entails.”

She estimated that the positive dimensions of her journey represented 99% of her experience, while the opposition represented only 1%. She stated, “Knowing why you are here and doing what you are doing makes all of the difference.” Her awareness of God’s calling functioned as her “North Star.” She understood her life as a divinely guided journey that included music, administration, accounting, psychology, and ministry, each of which contributed to the preparation she needed for her current work.

When asked how she felt about God leading her into forms of service in which women had rarely been used in the church, she responded, “It’s a privilege. And let me tell you this, I’m always aware that my journey has not been perfect and that I don’t deserve it. I’m always aware that God’s grace is greater than my failures.” For this reason, she said she never took ownership of success as though it were hers alone; instead, she understood her ministry as evidence of what God was doing.

She remains the only woman director and speaker of a major Seventh-day Adventist multimedia ministry in North America.

A Gifted Scholar Asked to Become a Leader

For this participant, leadership was first identified by others rather than by herself. She earned undergraduate and master’s degrees in English and was also serving as co-leader of the women’s ministries program for her local conference. While she was

participating in a planning session for a women's ministries event, she received a phone call from her mother, who said, "My prayers have been answered!" Her mother had been praying that a faculty member at the university in their union would retire so that her daughter might have the opportunity to teach there. After reading in the union magazine that an English professor position had opened, her mother urged her to apply.

She stated that there was little use arguing with her mother, particularly since her mother believed the matter had been shaped by prayer. She applied for the position and was selected to join the faculty.

Only a few months into the academic year, the vice president for academics approached her and said that institutional leaders saw significant promise in her work. They offered to sponsor her doctoral studies, explaining that they wanted her to complete the program quickly because they anticipated future leadership possibilities for her at the institution.

She accepted the institution's offer and began doctoral studies the following year. Before she completed the program, the dean of arts became seriously ill. From her hospital bed, the dean reportedly told the administration that this participant should be appointed to the role. The dean had been observing her work and believed she had substantial leadership capacity. The administration appointed her interim dean of arts, marking the formal beginning of her leadership journey.

She described investing herself deeply in the role of dean of the division of arts and coming to love the work. A few years later, both the president and the vice president for academics accepted calls to other institutions. Before leaving, they encouraged her to

apply for the academic dean position, explaining that they had observed her work and believed she possessed the qualifications needed for the role.

A significant moment of clarity occurred shortly after she became academic dean. During a meeting, the topic of succession planning arose, and she stated, “We don’t have a plan.” At that moment, the other vice presidents leaned forward and asked, “What do you mean? How do you think you got here?” They explained that she had been identified much earlier as someone with leadership potential and had been intentionally developed for the position.

After serving as academic dean for approximately five years, a colleague asked whether she would ever consider leaving her institution and moving elsewhere. Her initial thought was that she might consider such a move if it brought her closer to family.

At that time, she and her husband had recently sold their home and were discerning their next step. She wondered whether she should remain at the school until retirement or pursue a new direction. She was also considering leaving administration and returning to the classroom, which she loved deeply. On the day their home sold, she and her husband were having lunch when she received a call from the president of another university inviting her to serve as associate provost. Because she had family near that institution, the invitation carried personal significance. After prayerful consideration, she accepted the role.

Another important moment in discerning God’s call to leadership occurred during a conversation with a senior leader in Seventh-day Adventist higher education. The leader asked her, “Do you realize how rare you are?”

She responded, “No, I don’t know what you are talking about.”

The senior leader explained that many faculty members do excellent work within their disciplines, but comparatively few are able to think beyond their own area and see the institution within the larger mission of the church. He emphasized the importance of understanding where the university fits within the work of the church and how the school contributes to the church's global mission. She never forgot that conversation as her leadership journey continued.

The timing at her new institution resembled her earlier experience. Within her first six months, the provost announced his retirement. Both the provost and the university president viewed her as well suited for the role. After the search committee completed its process, she was offered the position of provost.

After several years in this position, the president announced his retirement. A search committee was formed to identify candidates from across the North American Division. Following reference checks and interviews, the committee invited her to serve as president of the university. By that time, she had begun to understand that she had been given gifts needed for institutional leadership. She increasingly recognized that she was working in the area to which she had been called, and accepting this path became easier.

Along the way, she encountered both men and women who supported her leadership and others who did not. She worked with courageous men who helped open pathways for women to lead in the church. She also encountered women who, for various reasons, were less supportive of her journey. At one point, she was criticized for being "too organized" for board meetings and other activities. She believed her predecessor

would not have been scrutinized for the same quality, suggesting that the critique reflected gendered expectations rather than a substantive leadership concern.

Although many capable and supportive women contributed to her journey, some women were not easily won over because of her gender. As she became more comfortable identifying herself as a leader, she developed a theory about why women were not always supportive of other women in leadership. In her view, women in many church communities had not always been socialized toward collaboration with one another. Instead, they were often shaped by competitive gender expectations, particularly around marriage and family roles. She believed this socialization could affect how women related to other women in positions of authority.

She believed that current trends, such as women's competitive sports, may help future generations of women develop stronger patterns of teamwork, mutual support, and shared goal setting.

One difficult issue in her administrative journey was the sense that institutions of higher education were sometimes viewed with suspicion by church leaders. She felt that church administrators did not always understand or appreciate the work of the university, and that being a woman leader sometimes deepened those suspicions. This was painful for her because she viewed the university's contribution to church life as essential. She described the relationship between students and faculty as "pure magic," noting that the good emerging from those relationships was difficult to measure.

She loved teaching and valued the relationships formed in the classroom. She also came to value administration because it allowed her to foster more of those formative interactions between students and faculty. Being misunderstood by church leaders,

particularly when her calling and ability to lead were questioned, was difficult. She understood her position as a sacred trust, with the central goal of creating a space in which God could work in students' lives.

Looking forward, she emphasized the importance of stronger training opportunities for women in leadership. She believed the church should examine this need more intentionally. Women leaders, in her experience, must navigate issues such as hate mail and other forms of gendered criticism; therefore, structured conversations and preparation for such challenges would be valuable.

Her narrative also underscored the importance of awareness among male leaders in the church and in higher education. She believed male colleagues, supervisors, and board chairs need to understand what women leaders experience and identify ways to provide meaningful support. In her view, a woman leader with an unsupportive male board chair would face an exceedingly difficult leadership environment.

Although the university where she served as president was openly supportive of women in leadership, she still encountered subtle forms of pushback. During her early months as president, she received informal feedback following meetings with senior leaders and board members. In one instance, after a formal gathering, a colleague told her that she “smiled too much” in leadership settings. On another occasion, she was told she was “not motherly enough” in her interactions with people on campus. She interpreted these comments as reflections of gendered expectations about the kind of “armor” others believed she should wear as a woman leader.

She found these comments difficult to interpret. On one hand, they appeared contradictory: she was described as both too warm and not nurturing enough. On the

other hand, the nature of the feedback itself stood out to her. She reflected that these were not critiques she believed her male predecessors would have received.

When asked what counsel she would offer to a young woman who senses a call to leadership, she first said that she would want to think carefully before fully answering. Nevertheless, she had come to believe that lasting and meaningful change for women in leadership will not occur unless women continue to step into leadership roles. In her view, the more women are given opportunities to lead, the more the church will be able to see women's leadership expressed in its varied forms. She also emphasized that, just as male leaders do not all lead in the same "armor," women leaders should not be expected to lead in identical ways.

The one conviction she stated with certainty was that when God calls a person to leadership, God will provide the support, strength, and courage needed for the journey.

She Was Just Meant to Be a Ministry Leader

This participant was raised in the home of a church-affiliated hospital administrator and was exposed to leadership from an early age. Through observing her father's work in various healthcare institutions, she became familiar with organizational responsibility and executive decision-making. During her teenage years, she also worked at summer camp, where she developed a deep love for ministry. She first sensed a call to ministry during her academy years. Reflecting on her leadership journey, she stated, "Leadership wasn't something I pursued; it is more like it pursued me."

While in college, she entered the theology program in response to her sense of calling. At that time, however, there were few, if any, women serving in recognized ministry roles within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She did not have women role

models who had already opened a pathway into ministry. Although she continued to feel drawn to ministry and believed she was called to it, the absence of visible models and the challenges facing women in ministry contributed to her decision to change majors and pursue dietetics.

During this period, she also experienced turmoil within the theology program. She described significant controversy surrounding one professor whose views were perceived by some as inconsistent with traditional Seventh-day Adventist theology. The tension surrounding this and related issues contributed to her decision to step away from formal theological preparation, at least temporarily. As she later reflected, the conflict “wasn’t what she signed up for.”

After shifting to dietetics, she was advised to attend Loma Linda University. While studying there, she worked for the medical center chaplain, who became an important mentor. He invited her into patient visitation and helped her gain practical ministry experience in a healthcare setting. Both the chaplain and his wife recognized gifts in her that she had not yet fully recognized in herself. She described his investment in her formation by saying that “he poured himself” into mentoring her. He encouraged her to pursue additional education so that future ministry opportunities would remain open. After graduating, and with her heart still oriented toward ministry, she accepted a position as a girls’ dean at a boarding academy. This role also allowed her to continue working at summer camps during the summer months. Her next transition occurred when a youth director with whom she had worked at camp invited her to serve as an intern in the youth department at the union level. She accepted the invitation and found meaningful work in youth ministry.

The youth director had connections with the Seventh-day Adventist youth leadership team in North America and introduced her to those leaders. They recognized her potential for youth ministry and arranged for her to attend Andrews University to pursue a Master of Divinity degree, with the expectation that she would join the youth department after completing the program. When the department leader determined that she was needed sooner, she shifted to a Master of Arts degree in religion, which she could complete in one year. However, as she was finishing the program, significant organizational changes were taking place both in the church in North America and at the General Conference. As a result, the funding needed to support her position was eliminated, and the anticipated job was no longer available.

At that point, she held a graduate degree in religion but had no ministry position. She returned to California, where her father was serving as chief executive officer of an Adventist hospital. Because she also had training as a dietitian, she accepted a hospital position in that field while continuing to look for a ministry opportunity.

No ministry position opened immediately, but she was eventually invited to teach Bible at an academy in Central California. She served in that role for two years. During the summers, she directed a day camp program for a large institutional church, which allowed her to continue working with young people in a ministry setting.

After two years of teaching Bible and directing the summer day camp, she was invited by another conference to direct a large summer camp program. When the camp season ended, she became chaplain for elementary through junior high students at a school connected to a major Seventh-day Adventist center. Additional opportunities then opened, including a pastoral ministry position. She served for four years on a pastoral

team before being called back to the conference office to join the youth ministry department with responsibility for senior youth. In that role, she led a team that oversaw both the conference camp operation and youth ministry across the field. She later described those years as the “glory days of ministry.”

She was among the first women to lead a Seventh-day Adventist summer camp in North America. The scope of this leadership role was substantial. Camp leadership required maintaining the facility, preparing it for safe use, hiring and supervising as many as 100 young adult employees, and ensuring that the camp met state and local requirements. Because she wanted the camp to meet the highest standards, she also led the process of seeking accreditation through the American Camp Association. This work required administrative skills, personnel leadership, risk management, and a sustained commitment to ministry with young people.

During this period, she also sought to strengthen her preparation for leadership. While continuing to work in the youth department, she began a Doctor of Ministry program. She later completed the degree while serving in another role in the conference office.

Her conference increasingly recognized her leadership capacity through her work in youth ministry. When the next conference constituency session approached, the chair of the nominating committee invited her to consider serving as executive secretary of the conference. Initially, the possibility did not seem to fit her self-understanding. She viewed herself as a “rogue youth director,” not as a conference administrator.

What stood out to her, however, was the way the nominating committee chair and others approached the conversation. Gender was not presented as the central issue, nor

did she experience the invitation as an attempt merely to break a glass ceiling. Rather, they identified in her a set of skills and leadership capacities that made her a viable candidate for the position. Ultimately, she was invited to become executive secretary of the conference, making her the only woman in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America serving in that role at the time.

She described her leadership path as “very zig-zaggy.” Yet, in retrospect, she understood each stage as part of God’s formation of her life and leadership. Through varied roles in healthcare, education, camp ministry, youth ministry, pastoral ministry, and conference administration, she believed God had been developing the skill set she would need for responsibilities she could not have imagined as an academy student first sensing a call to ministry.

She also reflected with humor on the unexpected nature of her journey. During her years at camp and in youth ministry, she had often said she would never want to spend her days dressed in business attire working in an office. Yet the path that unfolded eventually led her into precisely that kind of administrative setting.

As the conference president approached retirement, many within the field wondered what would happen next. By that time, she had earned the confidence of the conference and was widely regarded as ready to step into the presidential role. Pastors, teachers, and office staff respected her leadership gifts. The primary barrier was denominational policy: within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, women were not permitted to receive ordination to gospel ministry, and ordination was required for service as a conference president.

During this period, the church was again grappling with questions regarding how women in ministry should be credentialed. In her conference, this issue was not viewed as a major obstacle. Conference leaders were more concerned with the ways God had gifted individuals for ministry than with the particular credential they were permitted to hold. Across the worldwide church, however, many leaders and members could not imagine a woman leading the gospel work of a conference.

At that time, a woman in ministry could be commissioned but not ordained as a pastor. The church manual was clear that commissioned ministers could not serve as conference presidents. A proposal was brought to the Annual Council of the General Conference that would have allowed commissioned ministers to serve as conference presidents. Annual Council is the yearly meeting in which representatives from the global church, including all 13 divisions, gather for mission, governance, and organizational planning. It is also one setting in which policy and church manual changes may be considered.

The General Conference president did not support the proposed change and spoke against the motion. Ultimately, the proposal failed, leaving women unable to serve as conference presidents under existing denominational policy.

The union in which she served responded by voting to ordain women clergy within its territory when requested by their conferences. Within the Seventh-day Adventist organizational structure, unions vote ordination credentials for clergy and ministry personnel within their territories. This action made it possible for her to serve as president within her region; however, the General Conference did not recognize her ordination and therefore did not recognize her as a conference president.

Her conference loved, respected, and trusted her. Therefore, when the presidency became vacant, the delegates at the constituency session elected her by a large margin. This occurred despite a letter from the General Conference president to the constituency delegates stating that they could not elect a woman as president and that doing so would place them in rebellion and outside policy.

One aspect of the constituency session that stood out to her was the graciousness of many who voted against her election. Although they did not support her becoming president, they treated her and her leadership with respect. One pastor who spoke during the session said, “I love her, but don’t want to be in rebellion with the world church.” She described the spirit in which the vote took place as a blessing.

Although the constituency meeting itself was marked by graciousness, her reception from the highest levels of the church was less affirming. No one from the General Conference spoke with her after she was elected. In addition, for every year she served, the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* left blank the line identifying the president of her conference. She emphasized that she had not intended to cause trouble or create division in the church she loved. Rather, she understood herself to be following the leadership path God had placed before her and to which she believed she had been called.

The implications of this non-recognition became visible in specific organizational practices. Certain General Conference meetings included invitations to conference presidents, yet she did not receive invitations. Among the 59 conferences in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, she was the only conference president excluded in this way. When she attempted to attend, General Conference security had reportedly been alerted to prevent her entry. The president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in

North America intervened and brought her into the meeting as a guest of the division.

Although this action enabled her to enter the room, her badge identified her as a “Special Guest,” while other conference presidents’ badges named their presidential role and territory. She was not permitted to be identified as a president, nor was she granted voice or vote during the meetings. Her exclusion was tied directly to denominational policy, which did not recognize her as eligible to serve as a conference president because she was a woman.

She emphasized that attending these meetings was not intended as an act of provocation or disrespect. Rather, she understood attendance as part of her responsibility to represent her territory and to remain informed about decisions affecting the wider church. In order to report accurately to her field, she believed she needed to be present where discussions and actions were taking place. When asked whether these experiences discouraged her, she responded, “no.” She explained that many kind people at the General Conference attempted to help her during this difficult period. Even some security personnel, she recalled, worked quietly and respectfully to help her enter meetings through back entrances.

The General Conference president was frequently present in her territory because a General Conference institution was located there; however, he did not initiate conversation with her. When concerns arose regarding matters within her conference, she reported that he did not contact her or her union president directly. Instead, he communicated through other individuals in an attempt to address the issues. She experienced this indirect communication as dysfunctional and as adding unnecessary difficulty to her work.

At the next constituency meeting of her conference, she was reelected to a second term. Despite the difficult relationship with the General Conference, which at times complicated her ability to carry out her responsibilities, she stated that the experience “made me more determined to just keep going.”

When the next union constituency meeting convened, her leadership gifts were again recognized, and she was elected executive secretary of the union. She is currently the only woman serving in that role within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. Because ordination is not required for the office of executive secretary at any level of the church, her election to this position no longer placed her or the union in direct conflict with General Conference policy.

In her new role, she served on boards of several General Conference institutions. She observed that the General Conference president and other officers were generally friendly and willing to speak with her once her position no longer conflicted with policy regarding gender and ordination. Since becoming union secretary, she reported only one notably difficult encounter. While traveling with other union secretaries from North America to another division, she was introduced by North American leadership as an elder. Some men objected to this introduction and reprimanded the officials. Apart from that experience, she described her travels across North America and around the world as marked largely by kindness and graciousness. Many people, she said, expressed hope when they saw how God had led in her leadership journey.

When asked how she responded to those who opposed her leadership, she stated, “I have always tried to be kind.” She believed that harshness or vitriol toward those who oppose women leaders can set women back rather than move the conversation forward.

At times, she found that women were among those who struggled most with women's leadership. This was especially evident when placing women pastors in districts that had little prior experience with women in pastoral leadership. Her counsel to those women pastors was to get to know the matriarchs of the church personally and allow them to see their hearts. She believed this relational approach often helped bring along women who were initially skeptical of having a woman pastor.

When asked whether particular men had been especially helpful as she navigated the challenges of being a woman leader, several came immediately to mind: her conference president, her union president, and the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America. Each supported her and, at different moments, helped “run interference” on her behalf. On one occasion, while she was attending a General Conference meeting she was not expected to enter, the North American president gave her a bag containing a custom-made baseball cap and a uniform bearing Jackie Robinson's jersey number. The symbolism was clear to her. She understood herself to be, for women leaders in the church, what Jackie Robinson had been for African Americans in Major League Baseball.

What brought her the greatest satisfaction was not her own story, but seeing more opportunities open for women in leadership across her territory. She remained aware of women who continued to struggle with prejudice as they sought to do the work to which they believed God had called them. In her view, the most hopeful contribution she could make for future women leaders was to lead missionally while remaining gracious and kind, even in the face of opposition.

When asked what the church could do to better support women currently serving in leadership, she identified the use of gender-inclusive language as one important area for growth. She recalled attending a meeting at the North American Division as a union secretary. After worship, an announcement was made: “The women can now leave the room.” The statement was intended for female spouses who had attended worship but were not part of the business meeting. As a woman leader who was supposed to remain for the meeting, however, she experienced the wording as insensitive. Over time, she had seen her union become more attentive to inclusive language, though she believed higher levels of church organization still had room to grow.

When asked what counsel she would offer to young women who believe they are called to leadership or ministry, she identified three priorities. “First,” she said, “I tell them there are opportunities out there for them. Secondly, I encourage them to get educated.” She believed education opens doors that might otherwise remain closed. Finally, she encouraged young women to network intentionally and find women who could mentor them. She herself has mentored a number of women who sense a call to ministry or leadership in the church.

Despite critics and opposition, she described her leadership journey as one she has both enjoyed and welcomed. The challenges did not unsettle her sense of vocation because she remained certain of her calling. She did not experience her leadership path as something she had planned for herself. Rather, she understood it as God’s particular calling on her life.

The Barrier Reef President

This participant began her academic journey by majoring in both English and theology. During that period, opportunities for women in pastoral leadership were limited. A mentor advised her that if she wanted to work for the church, she should not pursue the ministry route but should instead consider education. In retrospect, she viewed this counsel as appropriate for that time and context.

She initially pursued secondary education. Desiring to strengthen her academic preparation, she enrolled in an Adventist university in the United States to complete a master's degree in English. Her original plan was to finish the degree and return to secondary teaching. While at the university, however, several mentors encouraged her to continue into doctoral study, explaining that a PhD would open doors in England that might otherwise remain closed. Although she listened to their counsel, she returned to England and continued her work in secondary education.

Not long afterward, her mother was appointed to serve in the Sabbath School Department of the General Conference. This appointment created an opportunity for the participant to return to the United States and pursue doctoral studies while living with her mother. She was admitted to the Catholic University of America. Three months after she arrived, however, her mother became terminally ill and died a few weeks later. Many church leaders, both at the General Conference and in her home union, assumed she would return to England and discontinue the doctoral program. She believed, however, that her mother would have wanted her to remain and complete what she had begun. She therefore stayed and finished the degree.

After completing her PhD, she accepted a call to return to England and serve in higher education. Although she was still in her 30s, she became head of the English department. During this period, she also opened her home to several students, reflecting the relational and pastoral dimensions of her educational leadership.

After a period of service, the president of the school accepted a call to another part of the world, creating a leadership vacancy. Some students began advocating for her to become the next president, and several even appeared before the board to state that she was the students' preferred candidate.

Although the board chair and trustees admired her leadership, they concluded that the timing was not yet right and selected another candidate. Looking back, she believed the board made the appropriate decision. Nevertheless, the board chair remained supportive of her leadership journey and affirmed that he saw significant leadership potential in her.

She believed that this exposure contributed to a call she received a few months later from her home union to serve as Director of Education and head of the Sabbath School Department. After one year in that role, the principal of the secondary school left, and she assumed that responsibility in addition to her union duties. She described the six years she spent in these roles as a formative period that taught her more about church leadership than any position she had previously held.

During this period, she often preached in a different church each Sabbath. Not all congregations were prepared to have a woman in the pulpit, which created complex dynamics for her to navigate. In one instance, a church refused to allow her to preach because an elder threatened to leave if a woman occupied the pulpit.

On another occasion, the parent of a prospective student called the union office and asked to speak with the academy principal. After first speaking with an administrative assistant, the caller was placed on hold and transferred to the participant's office. When she answered, she said, "I am Dr. _____, how can I help you?" The caller responded, "There must be some mistake; you are a woman." Although the setting was a secondary school rather than a church pulpit, the exchange illustrated how difficult it remained for some constituents to imagine a woman serving as an educational leader within the union. The student ultimately enrolled in the school.

During her six years serving in both the union and the secondary school, she learned to work with people who held diverse philosophies, backgrounds, and expectations. She became increasingly skilled at maintaining constructive relationships across difference, particularly as a woman leader in a setting where not everyone was accustomed to women exercising authority. Notably, students at the higher education institution where she had taught were among the first to recognize her leadership qualities, but over time many others came to see those gifts as well.

She was later offered her first presidency at an institution of higher education. She described the opportunity as both exciting and challenging. Because the institution served an international constituency, attitudes toward women in leadership varied considerably. Some cultural groups were accustomed to women in leadership, while others were divided on the issue. As she interacted at division meetings with conference and union presidents from contexts where women were rarely visible in senior leadership, she sometimes sensed an unspoken tension surrounding both her position and her gender.

A significant source of encouragement during this period was the dedicated support she received from division officers. She experienced them as consistently supportive of her leadership. She also described strong support from her own administrative team and from students. In addition, she interpreted this period as part of a divinely guided journey, believing that God was directing the course of her leadership development.

Later, she received an invitation from overseas to serve as vice president at a Seventh-day Adventist university in North America. After prayerful reflection and believing she had completed an important leadership cycle at her current institution, she accepted the call. Following her service as vice president, she accepted an invitation to work in the General Conference education department.

In her role at the General Conference, she traveled internationally to visit Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions in numerous countries. Again, she found that her leadership as a woman was more readily accepted in some contexts than in others. She sensed that representing the General Conference sometimes gave her access and legitimacy that she might not otherwise have received as a woman leader. In settings where women were rarely seen in senior leadership, some individuals were willing to work with her because she represented the world church. She later identified this global experience as another important dimension of her leadership formation because it taught her to work across many cultures, nationalities, and theological perspectives.

One lesson she drew from these experiences was that women leaders in the church are often perceived as women first and leaders second. This dynamic became visible in multiple ways. In some countries, individuals questioned her authority. In other

settings, people looked to a male member of her traveling group as the assumed leader, even though she was the senior person present. Some churches would not permit her to preach on Sabbath but allowed her to speak during the week. These experiences, though difficult, became a significant source of learning as she worked with educational institutions and encountered varied perspectives on women in leadership across the world church.

After her General Conference service, she was invited to serve as president of the university where she had previously been vice president. Following that assignment, she was called to serve as provost at one of the flagship universities in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. After several years in that role, the president retired and a search committee began the process of identifying the next president. To her surprise, the search committee recommended her for the position.

What she remembered most about objections to her candidacy was that some individuals said she did not “look presidential enough.” In her interpretation, some constituents held an internalized image of what a president should look like, and she did not fit that profile.

She observed that such objections often reflected a misplaced understanding of leadership. In her view, those who equated leadership with maleness failed to attend to the qualities and gifts required for effective presidential leadership. She also believed that even some men who advocated for women in leadership sometimes framed the issue too narrowly. For her, the central question was not whether a leader was male or female, but whether the person possessed the character, competence, vision, and gifts necessary to lead well.

When asked whether she ever felt unheard in male-majority committees, she said this occurred frequently, beginning as early as her service on church committees in her 30s. In response, she learned to observe committee dynamics carefully and developed strategies for ensuring that her voice and ideas were heard.

One early example involved a conference committee nearing the end of its three-year term. As the committee considered how to advise the nominating committee in selecting the next conference executive, it used a diversity formula that included one White woman and one Black woman. She questioned why there was room for only two women on the committee. She was told that because representation was needed from multiple constituencies, only two positions remained available for women. She suggested that the bylaws committee examine whether the committee size could be expanded to include two additional women. The request moved through the bylaws committee and the constituency meeting, and two additional seats were eventually added. However, both seats were assigned to men. As a result, the committee became larger, but women's representation remained limited to the original two positions.

She identified this as one of the first experiences in which her voice was not accurately heard as a woman among male leaders. A related challenge emerged during her work at the General Conference, where committees were frequently formed with an effort to include women. Although representation was valued, she observed that women were sometimes added primarily to meet numerical expectations rather than because of their expertise in the subject under discussion. She noted that she knew this from experience, because she herself had been placed on committees for which she did not have relevant expertise. This form of "tokenism," as she described it, often harmed

women more than it helped them. When women were appointed to committees without sufficient connection to the work, they had little to contribute; when they remained quiet, others sometimes concluded that women were ineffective committee members.

While serving as president of a General Conference institution, she maintained a cordial relationship with General Conference leadership and felt generally supported by the president and the other two officers. Nevertheless, some individuals objected to her presidency because the university included a significant seminary. In their view, a woman president would exercise authority over faculty members who were clergy and who taught future pastors. For those who held Headship Theology, this arrangement crossed a theological boundary. Despite this resistance, she continued to experience meaningful support from General Conference leadership.

Reflecting on her three presidential appointments, she noted that challenges sometimes came from faculty and staff within the institutions she led. Some colleagues were patronizing on particular matters, and others seemed uncertain about how to relate to a woman in executive leadership. Some women, in particular, were initially uncomfortable having a female supervisor. She observed that such dynamics made leadership more complex because the underlying issue—gender—was often not stated openly. In her view, advocating for oneself as a woman leader could be difficult, and advocating for women more broadly could also be complicated. When people made assumptions about her knowledge or competence because of gender, she found it difficult to change their perceptions directly. She concluded that individuals who were determined to view her as lesser because she was a woman were unlikely to become strong team

members. At the same time, she emphasized that the support of the vast majority of her colleagues helped counter these attitudes and enabled her to lead effectively.

She stated that one of the most important things a leader must learn is where the “landmines” are and how to avoid stepping on them. If a leader is not attentive to these sensitive areas, she said, they can hinder good work and “keep you from doing what you want to do.”

Ultimately, she believed that a woman leader should focus less on those who oppose her and more on “doing a good job.” In her view, God gives gifts and talents to each person and expects those gifts to be used for good. She understood her responsibility as using her gifts wherever God called her. She believed that a woman leading effectively would speak more persuasively than any theological argument in favor of women’s leadership.

During one presidency, she was required to address deep racial divisions on campus. Although these issues were difficult for any leader to confront, many told her that being a woman gave her a particular advantage in navigating them. She believed her own experiences with discrimination may have strengthened her empathy and listening skills. These qualities helped her contribute to a more settled and gracious campus environment.

For this participant, success was measured by seeing “students and her employees grow, improve, have potential, and be successful.” One of the most meaningful compliments she received came from a close member of her leadership team. He said she was “like a barrier reef,” explaining that she protected what was inside the reef: her colleagues, employees, students, and the university. She resonated with this description

because she understood part of her leadership role as protecting the people and mission entrusted to her so that teaching, learning, and growth could flourish.

She believed that some of her leadership strengths were connected to her experience as a woman. Listening, nurturing, and protecting others came naturally to her, and she saw these qualities as part of how she served those entrusted to her leadership.

In leadership, she found a vocational home. She had not planned to become a leader when she began her higher education journey by completing a master's degree and then a PhD in English. Others, however, recognized leadership capacity in her, and more importantly, she became convinced that God was leading her life. She found joy in problem-solving and in using the creativity God had given her to help institutions function more effectively. Finding her own voice as a woman leader in the church became one of the most important dimensions of her leadership journey.

When asked what the church could do to create a stronger pathway for women whom God is calling to leadership, she offered three recommendations. First, she said the church needs to address and eliminate tokenism. Representation matters, but she believed it has limited value if it stops at symbolic inclusion. Second, she urged the church to distinguish more clearly between women's ordination and women's leadership. She recognized that current policy prevents women from holding certain positions, but she believed the church could still have constructive conversations about the leadership opportunities available to women and intentionally develop pathways into those roles. Such efforts, in her view, could strengthen the pipeline for future women leaders. Finally, her counsel to women who sense a call to leadership was direct: "Go for it!" She wanted emerging women leaders to know that, in her experience, far more men in church

leadership walked alongside her and encouraged her than discouraged her. She believed many women called to leadership would find similar support.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter I will briefly restate the problem, purpose, research questions, and methodological approach that guided the study. It also reviews the criteria used to select participants. The chapter then presents a cross-case analysis of the seven participant narratives. The major themes that emerged from the data are interpreted in relation to the literature and to relevant leadership and gender theories.

Following the discussion of findings, the chapter presents implications and recommendations for church leaders, institutional boards, and women called to leadership. It then addresses the limitations of the study and offers recommendations for future research.

The chapter concludes by summarizing the study's contributions and identifies final insights regarding women's leadership within Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America.

Summary

Women have participated in leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church from its earliest development. Ellen G. White was one of the denomination's founding figures and played a significant role in shaping the theological and organizational identity of the movement (Tutsch, 2008; Watts, 1995). Her work as a church leader and as one

who understood herself to be a “messenger from God” contributed to the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a worldwide Christian community distinguished by Sabbath observance and belief in the imminent return of Christ (sdachurch.org; White, 1889).

Although Ellen White was central to the formation of Adventism, she was not the only leader involved in the establishment of the denomination. James White, Joseph Bates, Hiram Edson, J. N. Andrews, and other early Adventist pioneers also contributed to the development of the church (Banks, 1992; Elmuti et al., 2009; Knight, 1999). During this early period, women commonly served in a variety of administrative, educational, and ministry roles.

Sarepta Henry, Ellen Lane, Hattie Enoch, Ann Knight, and Jessie Weiss Curtis were among the women who served as teachers, preachers, and leaders in the late nineteenth century (Habada, 1995; Miller, 2013; Stenbakken, Williams, Pilmoor, & Tolbert, 2001). By the time of Ellen White’s death in 1915, 30 women had served as conference treasurers, 20 as conference secretaries, three as General Conference treasurers, and many others held ministerial credentials (Stenbakken et al., 2001; Watts, 1995).

While mainstream denominations such as the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches were slower to expand women’s formal leadership opportunities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, segments of the evangelical movement created greater space for women’s public participation in ministry and leadership (Cruea, 2005; MacHaffie, 1986; Morgan, 2019).

The early inclusion of women in Adventist leadership appears to have been shaped less by broader social reform movements than by the denomination's urgent missional and eschatological commitments. The conviction that Christ's return was near produced an "all hands on deck" approach to preaching, teaching, evangelism, and organizational leadership (Banks, 1992; Graham, 1985; Knight, 1999; Miller, 2013; Morgan, 2019; Willkomm, 2011).

After 1915, however, women's representation in Adventist leadership declined substantially. By the mid-1940s, women had largely disappeared from conference and union leadership positions, and the number of women serving in ministry roles had also decreased markedly (Banks, 1992; Kolkman, 2013; Watts, 1995).

Scholars have identified several factors that contributed to this decline, including denominational policies related to ordination and the later emergence of Headship Theology. Because women have not been granted access to ordination in the same way as men, their eligibility for certain leadership positions has been restricted. Headship Theology, embraced by some within the world church, further reinforces gendered role distinctions by positioning men as spiritual authorities and women as subordinate to male leadership (Chudleigh, 2014; Watts, 1995).

Women continue to serve in leadership within the contemporary Seventh-day Adventist Church, but they remain a small proportion of denominational leaders. According to the 2025 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, North America has approximately 4,600 pastors, of whom about 85 are women. Women also serve as conference treasurers, departmental directors at conference, union, and division levels,

and presidents or directors of selected Adventist institutions ("Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook," 2025).

Women in leadership, both within and beyond the church, continue to encounter barriers and opposition related to gender. Given these broader social pressures and the influence of headship perspectives held by some Seventh-day Adventists, this study examined how women develop into senior leaders in the church and how gender shapes their executive work environments.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms the equality of persons regardless of ethnicity or gender, while maintaining gender-based restrictions related to ordination (Adventists, 2025; *Adventist Beliefs: Our 28 Fundamental Beliefs*, 2015). Because ordination is not available to women in the same way it is available to men, the scope of women's leadership within the denomination remains contested. According to the church manual, ordination is required for service as conference, union, division, or General Conference president (Adventists, 2025). Although formal policy does not restrict women from holding many other church offices, disagreement persists regarding whether women should serve as elders, pastors, teachers with authority over men, or presidents of church institutions that supervise male employees. Women have been called to and have served in these positions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church; nevertheless, debate remains regarding the appropriateness of such leadership. This study therefore listened to women leaders' descriptions of their workplace environments, both within their immediate areas of responsibility and in relation to the broader world church.

A growing body of research has examined women clergy and has identified specific challenges associated with Headship Theology, fundamentalist assumptions, and

contested interpretations of women's proper role in the church. These studies indicate that women pastors have experienced resistance from lay members, male pastors, and women within their congregations (Bumgardner, 2005; Chaves, 1999; N. L. Davis, 2019b; Sullins, 2000).

Less research, however, has focused on women who serve as leaders of Adventist institutions outside traditional clergy categories. Although their numbers remain small, women have been called to serve as presidents of Seventh-day Adventist institutions of higher education and as leaders of other church institutions, including publishing houses and media ministries.

One woman in recent Adventist history was elected president of a conference, placing her role in direct tension with General Conference policy requiring ordination for service in that position (sdachurch.org; Vance, 2017).

Today, women lead large Seventh-day Adventist organizations and institutions that employ both men and women. Yet little research has examined this particular category of women leaders or the complexity of their leadership pathways. The issue is further complicated because many of these women exercise administrative responsibility over areas that include clergy, pastoral functions, theology faculty, or ministerial preparation. For those who hold theological perspectives such as Headship Theology or complementarianism, these arrangements may raise questions about women's leadership legitimacy (Chudleigh, 2014; Knight, 1999; Watts, 1995).

For these reasons, this study focused on the leadership journeys of women serving as presidential or comparable senior leaders of Seventh-day Adventist institutions and on the ways they described their workplace environments in relation to gender. Because the

leadership pool for Adventist institutions remains predominantly male, the church would benefit from a clearer understanding of why relatively few women occupy institutional leadership roles ("Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook," 2025). By examining gender-related dynamics in these leadership settings, this study seeks to provide insight that may help church leaders and lay members work together more constructively and support leadership without regard to gender.

The purpose of the study was to understand and describe the experiences of women serving in presidential or comparable senior leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions, with particular attention to their pathways into leadership and their workplace environments as shaped by gender. The study examined how the personal, educational, professional, and spiritual journeys of women executive leaders contributed to their development and how their experiences may inform future women called to leadership. It also sought to identify ways the church might more effectively support women serving in senior institutional roles. Because limited scholarship has addressed women in Seventh-day Adventist leadership outside clergy roles, this inquiry addresses an important gap in the literature.

The study was guided by two research questions: What are the significant work history, educational experiences, and spiritual formation experiences that led these women into church leadership positions? How do women who serve as presidents of institutions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church describe their workplace environments as they relate to gender?

This qualitative phenomenological study examined the leadership journeys of seven women serving in senior leadership positions within the Seventh-day Adventist

Church. A phenomenological approach was selected because it allowed participants to describe, in their own voices, the meaning of their leadership experiences and the ways gender shaped those experiences. Chalmers described phenomenology as closely related to “experience” and “what-it-is-likeness” (Chalmers, 1996, p. 6). In this study, participants’ accounts illuminated what it is like to serve as women leaders within Seventh-day Adventist institutional contexts.

The seven participants were selected because they served as presidents or directors of major institutions or ministries within the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists. Their responsibilities included leadership over organizations or programs connected to ministerial functions, including direct ministry, theology faculty, or the preparation of women and men for ministry.

Because some Adventists hold Headship Theology, they believe women’s leadership should be limited to organizational settings that do not include ordained ministry functions. From this perspective, if an institutional leadership role includes responsibility over clergy, pastoral work, theology faculty, or ministerial formation, a woman’s authority in that role may be viewed as inappropriate.

Nevertheless, several institutions and organizations within the North American Division have called women into leadership roles that include responsibility for ministerial functions. These appointments create challenges that their male counterparts typically do not encounter. Women leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church must navigate both broader societal prejudices and theological barriers while carrying out their responsibilities. Understanding how these leaders interpreted and navigated those challenges provided the central context for this study.

Cross-Case Findings

The women who participated in this study spoke with clarity, candor, and depth about their leadership journeys within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Across their narratives, their love for Christ, commitment to the church, and dedication to mission were consistently evident. Although each participant possessed gifts and capacities that would likely have enabled success in many professional contexts, they understood their leadership in the church not merely as career advancement but as participation in work to which they believed God had called them.

A cross-case analysis of the seven participant narratives was conducted to identify themes that extended across individual stories. These themes illuminate both the challenges women encounter as senior leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the gifts they bring to institutional leadership. The findings also suggest ways the church may more intentionally support women whose leadership is understood by participants as a response to divine calling.

The major themes that emerged from the analysis are presented below.

Legitimacy Had to Be Earned Repeatedly

A prominent theme across the narratives was that participants often had to establish their legitimacy repeatedly. Many described situations in which their voices were not fully heard or in which they sensed an ongoing need to demonstrate competence and credibility to constituents, colleagues, board members, or other church leaders. This finding is consistent with Watson's observation that women, from corporate settings to government contexts, are frequently "interrupted, talked over, misheard or misperceived when they speak" (Watson, 2019, p. 46).

Several participants first noticed this dynamic early in their careers. They described offering an idea in a male-majority committee and receiving little response, only to hear a male colleague restate the same idea moments later and receive affirmation. Rather than allowing this pattern to silence them, some participants learned to use organizational dynamics strategically so that important ideas could still reach the table and contribute to institutional decision-making.

Watson (2019) suggested that one factor affecting whether women are heard may be vocal delivery, including tone, volume, and intensity. She proposed that women may address this challenge, in part, through more assertive language and adjustments in vocal tone and intensity (Watson, 2019, p. 45).

The data from this study, however, suggest that the issue is not merely a matter of vocal intonation. The problem appears to be embedded more deeply in gendered assumptions about authority, leadership, and voice. Martin, Lord, and Warren-Smith (2018), in their study of women managers and organizational learning, argued that women may become organizationally invisible because leadership and voice are often coded in masculine terms. Similarly, Coates (2015) suggested that women's voices are frequently treated as the "other" in relation to the presumed norm of male speech and authority.

The experience of Terry Shaw, former president of AdventHealth, provides a practical example of how organizational leaders may intervene in this pattern. Shaw observed that women serving on his cabinet were sometimes not fully heard when they spoke. In response, he would interrupt the flow of conversation after a woman leader contributed and ask the cabinet, "Did you hear what she just said, and how do you think

we should respond?” (Shaw, 2015). This practice intentionally redirected attention to the content of women’s contributions and helped create space for their voices to shape decision-making.

Such intervention is important because women leaders often carry organizational knowledge essential to mission, strategy, and institutional health. Martin et al. (2018) concluded that gendered organizations may inhibit effective organizational learning because those who are rendered invisible are more likely to be excluded from knowledge sharing. Their findings are relevant to this study because participants wanted their voices to be heard not primarily for personal recognition, but because they believed their insights could strengthen the institutions they served.

For the participants, being heard was closely connected to institutional mission. Their desire was not simply to gain personal authority, but to contribute meaningfully to the growth, health, and mission fulfillment of the organizations they led. Nevertheless, their narratives suggest that holding an official leadership position did not always result in immediate acceptance. At times, the legitimacy of their leadership was questioned through silence, marginalization, patronizing assumptions, or expectations that they prove knowledge and competence beyond what would ordinarily be required of male counterparts.

Role Congruity Theory helps explain this dynamic. Eagly and Karau (2002) argued that prejudice toward women leaders emerges when social expectations associated with women are perceived as incongruent with expectations associated with leadership. One consequence is that attitudes toward female leaders and potential leaders are often less favorable than attitudes toward male leaders. Another consequence is that women

may experience greater difficulty both entering leadership and being evaluated as successful in leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Social Role Theory similarly suggests that the traits culturally associated with women are often not the traits historically associated with leadership (Eagly & Wood, 2012b; Eagly et al., 2000).

These findings are significant for church institutions because the appointment of a woman to a senior leadership role does not automatically create acceptance of her leadership. Boards, administrators, and institutional stakeholders must recognize that women leaders may face social and theological barriers that their male counterparts do not encounter. If these barriers are not acknowledged, they may undermine trust, reduce organizational influence, and hinder the leader's effectiveness. Therefore, institutions that call women to senior leadership must also take responsibility for publicly affirming their legitimacy, supporting their authority, and creating conditions in which their leadership can be received and sustained.

Sponsorship and Mentoring Opened Doors

A second theme that emerged across the participant narratives was the significance of sponsorship and mentoring in opening pathways to leadership. Participants repeatedly described influential individuals who recognized their gifts, affirmed their potential, created opportunities, or provided protection when their leadership was contested. In many cases, these sponsors and mentors were men who held formal authority within the church or its institutions. Their support was central not only to participants' advancement into leadership but also to their ability to persevere and lead effectively in environments where detractors sometimes challenged their legitimacy.

Advancement into senior leadership rarely occurred through individual merit alone. Although participants were highly capable and well prepared, their narratives indicate that leadership opportunities often became possible when people with positional authority advocated for them. Each participant identified male mentors or sponsors who opened doors, spoke on their behalf, invited them into new roles, or publicly affirmed their leadership. Several participants also described women mentors whose encouragement and guidance shaped their development. These accounts suggest that sponsorship and mentoring functioned as forms of social capital that enabled women to access leadership opportunities that might otherwise have remained closed.

Leavitt (2011) emphasized the organizational importance of mentoring, describing it as an orienting and integration process for new employees, a means of acclimation and socialization, and a tool for developing managers and leaders. In the present study, mentoring served these functions but also carried additional importance because participants were often navigating leadership contexts in which women had historically been absent or contested.

For some participants, a supervisor or institutional leader was the first person to name leadership capacity that the participant had not yet fully recognized in herself. Several women described initially questioning whether they possessed the skills needed for senior leadership, even while others were actively preparing them for expanded responsibility. In other cases, mentors helped participants interpret resistance, develop confidence, or remain focused on mission when opposition emerged. These relationships were especially significant when participants encountered individuals whose theological

convictions, including commitments associated with Headship Theology, led them to reject women's leadership (Chudleigh, 2014).

For many participants, the support of male sponsors and mentors made their leadership possible in practical terms. They emphasized the importance of leaders, board chairs, supervisors, and peers who were willing to stand with them publicly, defend their authority, and, when necessary, "run interference" on their behalf. In a denominational context where some members and leaders believe women should not hold certain leadership roles, such support was not merely encouraging; it was structurally necessary for participants to function effectively.

Participants also described periods when such support was absent or inconsistent. The difficulty created by unsupportive leaders or board chairs was substantial, even if not easily quantifiable. Because Seventh-day Adventist leadership structures remain predominantly male, the willingness of male leaders to support women in leadership becomes especially consequential. Leavitt's (2011) discussion of mentoring suggests that organizations benefit when leaders intentionally develop others; this study indicates that intentional sponsorship may be even more critical in church contexts where theological disagreement about women's leadership persists.

Research on leadership support further underscores this point. Alan, Çörekçioğlu, Kaba, and Sutter (2026) found that subordinates were more likely to receive professional and personal support from women leaders than from men, while male employees were similarly likely to receive support from either male or female leaders (p. 4537). Because senior leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church is still largely composed of men, these findings highlight an important area for institutional growth: male leaders

must be intentional in providing the advocacy, sponsorship, and developmental support that women leaders need in order to thrive.

Social Capital Theory provides an additional lens for interpreting this theme. Claridge (2018) described mentoring as an important organizational mechanism for onboarding, socialization, and leadership development. In this study, sponsorship and mentoring also functioned as mechanisms of access. Gatekeepers and advocates were often the people who helped participants move from recognized giftedness into formal leadership responsibility. This was particularly important because women leaders in church institutions frequently faced an uphill effort to establish legitimacy, relevance, and sustainability.

The participant narratives therefore point to the need for the church to create intentional pathways of mentoring and sponsorship for women called to leadership. Informal encouragement remains valuable, but the findings suggest that informal support alone is insufficient. Women leaders need structured opportunities for leadership development, access to networks, advocacy from those with institutional authority, and public affirmation of their legitimacy. Such sponsorship would not only open doors for more women to serve but would also strengthen the church's leadership pipeline and advance its mission.

Calling Sustained Leadership

A third theme that emerged across the participant narratives was the sustaining power of calling. Each participant described experiences of criticism, opposition, or resistance connected to gender. They also carried the ordinary burdens associated with senior leadership, including institutional crises, difficult personnel decisions, board

expectations, financial pressures, and the daily demands of executive responsibility.

When asked what enabled them to continue, all seven participants identified the certainty of God's call as a central source of courage, resilience, and meaning.

This sense of calling also shaped the way participants responded to those who opposed their leadership. Several described extending patience and grace toward detractors rather than investing energy in argument or self-defense. Their responses did not indicate passivity; rather, they reflected a disciplined effort to remain focused on mission. Because participants believed they were serving where God had placed them, they were able to make room for disagreement without allowing opposition to define their leadership identity.

For these women, calling functioned as a source of resilience, identity, and purpose during some of the most difficult periods of their leadership journeys. Their narratives suggest that calling was not merely an internal feeling of vocational preference. Rather, it operated as a theological and interpretive framework through which they understood hardship, opposition, responsibility, and perseverance. Existing literature on vocation and calling supports the significance of this finding, particularly in relation to job satisfaction, meaning, commitment, and resilience.

Scripture provides an important theological foundation for understanding calling and giftedness. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Paul wrote, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of effects, but it is the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (*New American Standard Bible*, 1995). Commenting on this passage, Rehm observed that "individual

gifts were to be manifest not to glorify the individual but for a broader social purpose, for the higher principle of building a common good” (Rehm, 1990, p. 116). This theological understanding aligns closely with the participants’ accounts. They understood their leadership not primarily as personal achievement, but as Spirit-given responsibility for the good of the church and its mission.

Duffy, Dik, Douglass, England, and Velez (2018) developed Work as Calling Theory (WCT) to describe the relationship between perceiving a calling, living a calling, and the outcomes associated with that experience. They identified three major components of the theory: “(a) predictors of living a calling, (b) variables that moderate and mediate the relation of perceiving a calling to living a calling, and (c) positive and potentially negative outcomes that result from living a calling” (Duffy et al., 2018, p. 423).

Within WCT, perceiving a call and having access to work that allows the call to be enacted are key predictors of living a calling (Duffy et al., 2018, p. 426). The authors identified several factors that connect perceived calling to lived calling. First, the work must hold deep personal meaning. Second, commitment to the work and its mission is essential, particularly because every vocation includes difficulty. Third, the work environment must provide a sufficient degree of fit, both for the worker and for the organization. Fourth, calling motivation influences the effort a person is willing to invest in fulfilling the work. Fifth, job crafting allows individuals to adapt and shape their work environments in ways that make faithful service possible. Finally, organizational support is critical because a person who does not feel supported or valued may find it difficult to live out a calling sustainably (Duffy et al., 2018, pp. 427-429).

These dimensions were visible across the participant narratives. Each woman described leadership as meaningful work grounded in mission. Most described a strong commitment to their institutions and to the broader work of the church. Several also described the need to adapt their roles, develop new leadership capacities, and reshape aspects of their work environments in order to lead effectively. At the same time, their accounts demonstrated the importance of organizational support. Participants who experienced advocacy from supervisors, board chairs, or denominational leaders were better able to sustain their work, while those who lacked such support described greater difficulty.

Duffy et al. (2018) also noted that living a calling may produce positive outcomes, including job satisfaction and enhanced performance, as well as negative outcomes, including workaholism, burnout, and possible organizational exploitation (p. 430). The present findings reflect both dimensions. Participants described deep satisfaction in doing work they understood as God-given and mission-centered. At the same time, some described seasons of fatigue, overwork, or insufficient institutional support. Thus, calling sustained their leadership, but it did not eliminate the need for healthy organizational structures, boundaries, and support systems.

The tenets of WCT were evident in the participants' testimonies. All seven women described a strong sense of calling and deep purpose in their work. Most also reported that they eventually came to feel at home in the administrative responsibilities they carried. One participant summarized this experience by stating, "I finally felt at peace I was working where I felt I was gifted to work." This comment illustrates the connection between calling, giftedness, vocational fit, and leadership identity.

Participants also demonstrated high levels of commitment to their work and to the mission of the church. Many described significant support from their organizations, mentors, or boards, though this support was not always consistent. Some also acknowledged the costs of leadership, including fatigue, work intensity, and, in at least one case, an environment in which the participant did not experience the support needed to function as effectively as she desired.

Taken together, the biblical framework of spiritual giftedness and the vocational framework provided by Work as Calling Theory help explain why calling was so important in the lives of these women leaders. Their certainty of calling gave meaning to their work, helped them interpret resistance, sustained resilience, and contributed to a sense of fulfillment even in difficult institutional environments.

For a church seeking to develop more women for leadership, these findings suggest that leadership preparation should include more than technical skill development. The church must also support spiritual formation so that women who sense a call to leadership can discern that call clearly, develop confidence in God's leading, and receive the institutional support needed to live their calling faithfully and sustainably.

Tokenism and Visibility

A fourth theme that emerged across the participant narratives concerned tokenism and visibility. Participants described the tension between being included in leadership spaces and being meaningfully engaged as contributors. In several instances, women were invited to serve on boards, committees, or institutional bodies in ways that created the appearance of inclusion but did not necessarily align with their expertise, experience, or capacity to influence outcomes. The participants perceived this pattern as harmful

because symbolic inclusion can reinforce assumptions that women have little to contribute when, in reality, they may not have been placed in contexts where their gifts and knowledge could be used effectively.

Romsland, Milosavljevic, and Andreassen (2019) described tokenism as “a false appearance of inclusiveness” (p. 1). Similarly, Lee (2020) defined tokenism as “a sophisticated way of making institutions look progressive” (p. 387). These definitions align with participants’ accounts of women being added to committees primarily to demonstrate gender representation rather than because their expertise was central to the work. When women are placed in such roles without adequate preparation, relevant knowledge, or genuine opportunity to shape decisions, their silence or limited participation may be misinterpreted as evidence that their presence was unnecessary. In this way, tokenism can reproduce the very assumptions it appears to challenge.

Participants emphasized that meaningful inclusion requires more than numerical representation. Women should be invited into leadership spaces because their gifts, expertise, and organizational insight are needed for the task at hand. When women are assigned to committees or given responsibilities merely as symbolic representatives of gender diversity, the institution loses the opportunity to benefit from their full contribution. Conversely, when women’s experience and competence are matched to appropriate leadership responsibilities, their participation can deepen the quality of deliberation and strengthen institutional decision-making.

Kanter’s Tokenism Theory provides a useful framework for interpreting this finding. Kanter argued that individuals who are present in very small numbers within a group often experience heightened visibility, performance pressure, and marginalization.

Subsequent scholarship has noted that when token representation reaches a critical mass, often discussed around 15%, some of the most isolating effects of tokenism may decrease (Holgersson & Romani, 2020). In the context of this study, the problem was not simply that too few women were present in leadership spaces; it was also that women's presence was sometimes treated as representational rather than substantive.

Social Identity Theory further illuminates the dynamics participants described. Islam (2014) explained that Social Identity Theory begins with the premise that individuals define themselves in relation to social groups and that group identification can produce in-group and out-group distinctions. He noted that group identity involves categorizing one's in-group in relation to an out-group and viewing one's own group with a positive bias (Islam, 2014, p. 1781). When women are placed on boards or committees where men constitute the dominant in-group and women are present only as isolated representatives, their contributions may be filtered through out-group status rather than evaluated on their merits.

Taken together, Tokenism Theory and Social Identity Theory help explain why symbolic inclusion can be especially problematic. A woman who is present as the only woman, or one of very few women, may be highly visible while also being structurally marginalized. If she lacks relevant expertise for the specific committee assignment, or if her contributions are not actively invited and valued, her participation may be interpreted through existing stereotypes about women's leadership. This dynamic can reinforce the perception that women do not belong in decision-making spaces, even though the problem lies in the way inclusion was structured.

Addressing tokenism therefore requires intentional institutional practice. The church can counter the harmful effects of symbolic inclusion by ensuring that women are invited into leadership spaces where their expertise, experience, and calling align with the work being done. This includes providing training, mentoring, and preparation for women who should have a seat at the table, as well as ensuring that their participation carries real influence. The women in this study consistently emphasized the need for strong mentorship, leadership development, and institutional support so that women who are called to leadership can contribute from positions of knowledge, confidence, and recognized authority.

Women Were Seen as Women First and Leaders Second

A fifth theme that emerged across the participant narratives was that women leaders were often perceived first through the lens of gender and only secondarily through the lens of leadership. Participants described experiences in which their credentials, gifts, and institutional responsibilities were initially filtered through assumptions about what women should be, how women should behave, or whether women should exercise authority. Unlike many male leaders, whose leadership is often presumed until proven otherwise, the women in this study frequently had to overcome an initial interpretive barrier created by gender.

This finding is consistent with Scott and Brown's (2006) research on gender bias in the encoding of leadership behavior. They found that observers had greater difficulty associating agentic leadership behavior with prototypical leadership traits when the behavior was performed by a woman (Scott & Brown, 2006, p. 230). In other words, the same behavior may be interpreted differently depending on whether it is enacted by a

man or a woman. This helps explain why participants in this study sometimes experienced their leadership actions as being evaluated through a gendered frame before being assessed on their substantive merits.

The practical consequences of this pattern were evident across the narratives. Participants described being evaluated not only for competence, experience, education, judgment, and leadership effectiveness, but also for matters rarely applied with the same intensity to male leaders. Questions emerged, implicitly or explicitly, regarding whether a woman leader was sufficiently prepared, too assertive or not assertive enough, too nurturing or not nurturing enough, appropriately dressed, properly maternal, sufficiently strong, or able to balance leadership with family expectations. Such questions shifted attention away from the women's qualifications and toward gendered assumptions about their identity and role.

Although these assumptions could sometimes be overcome over time through sustained performance, they created an initial deficit that male leaders were less likely to experience. All seven participants described this dynamic in some form during their leadership journeys. For some, it appeared in subtle feedback about demeanor, clothing, tone, or presence. For others, it appeared in more direct questions about whether a woman should hold authority over men, preach, lead institutions, or supervise areas connected to ministry and theology.

Social Role Theory and Gender Role Theory provide a framework for interpreting this finding. Social Role Theory proposes that people form expectations about women and men based on the social roles they most commonly occupy (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Gender Role Theory similarly explains that observers infer dispositions from patterns of

female and male behavior and then apply those inferred expectations to individuals (Eagly & Wood, 2012a, p. 458). Within the Seventh-day Adventist context, these broader social expectations are further intensified by theological perspectives such as Headship Theology, which can frame women's authority as inconsistent with proper ecclesial order (Chudleigh, 2014). Together, these social and theological frameworks help explain why women leaders in this study were often perceived as women first and leaders second.

These findings are important because they point to the need for church institutions to examine implicit assumptions about leadership and gender before, during, and after appointing women to executive roles. If boards, administrators, employees, and constituents interpret women's leadership primarily through gendered expectations, even highly qualified women may face unnecessary barriers to trust, authority, and effectiveness. Institutions that call women to leadership must therefore cultivate cultures in which women are evaluated first as leaders whose gifts, preparation, experience, and calling are relevant to the mission of the church.

Implications for SDA Leadership

The findings of this study suggest that the Seventh-day Adventist Church would benefit from the fuller participation of women in senior leadership. Existing literature indicates that women leaders often contribute strengths in trust-building, listening, fairness, relational leadership, and organizational effectiveness (Barbuto et al., 2007; Chakraborty & Serra, 2019; J. E. Dahlgvig & Longman, 2010; Eagly et al., 1992; Hoobler et al., 2016; McKnight, 2013). The participant narratives in this study further demonstrate that women leaders within the church bring not only professional competence but also deep spiritual commitment, resilience, and dedication to mission.

Listening carefully to the experiences of these senior women leaders can help church administrators, institutional boards, conferences, unions, and the North American Division strengthen the leadership pipeline and create healthier institutional environments. The findings indicate that women who are gifted and called to leadership need more than permission to serve; they need structures that affirm their legitimacy, support their authority, and provide the resources necessary for effective leadership.

Several implications therefore emerge for senior church administrators, institutional boards, conferences, unions, and the North American Division:

1. The church should recognize that God continues to call women into leadership. Intentional mentoring and sponsorship are therefore essential for identifying women with leadership gifts, preparing them for expanded responsibility, and opening pathways of opportunity.

2. Boards and institutions should understand that appointing a woman to leadership does not automatically create acceptance of her authority. Public affirmation, consistent support, and clear communication are necessary to help constituents receive and sustain her leadership.

3. Church organizations should avoid symbolic inclusion in board, committee, and leadership assignments. Women should be invited into roles where their knowledge, experience, calling, and expertise are directly relevant to the work being done.

4. Boards, administrators, and employees should receive training related to implicit assumptions about leadership and gender. Such training can help institutions recognize how gendered expectations shape perceptions of competence, authority, voice, and leadership presence.

5. Women in senior leadership should be supported by strong institutional systems, including affirming board chairs, supervisors, and ecclesiastical leaders. Such support is particularly important when women encounter opposition rooted in gender, tradition, or theological interpretation.

6. Church leadership should attend intentionally to women's voices in decision-making spaces. Ensuring that women leaders are heard, credited, and engaged strengthens institutional learning and advances the mission of the church.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest several recommendations for strengthening the experiences of women serving in leadership within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These recommendations emerge from the participant narratives, the cross-case themes, and the literature reviewed in this study. They are organized around two primary audiences: individuals who work with or report to women leaders, and women who sense a call to leadership or who are currently serving in church leadership roles.

Recommendations for Those Working With or Reporting to Women Leaders

1. Evaluate women leaders first in relation to their leadership preparation, professional experience, spiritual calling, and demonstrated gifts. Their gender should not be the primary interpretive frame through which their leadership is assessed.

2. Listen intentionally to women leaders in decision-making spaces. Because women's voices may be marginalized, interrupted, or overlooked, colleagues and board members should ensure that women's ideas are heard, credited, and considered on their merits.

3. Communicate directly and respectfully with women leaders. Open communication, including the willingness to address problems or seek counsel directly, strengthens trust and contributes to healthier organizational culture.

4. Allow women leaders to lead from their own gifts and leadership identity. Their leadership style may not mirror traditional male patterns, but difference should not be interpreted as deficiency.

5. Provide visible support for women leaders. Prayer, public affirmation, collaboration, and investment in their success can help create an institutional environment in which mission is advanced and leadership can flourish.

Recommendations for Women Called to Leadership

1. If God is calling you into leadership, pursue that calling with courage, preparation, and commitment. Opposition may arise, but the participant narratives indicate that support often emerges as women lead faithfully.

2. Expect that some criticism may be rooted in theological, cultural, or traditional opposition to women in leadership. Such opposition should be taken seriously, but it should not be allowed to define one's sense of calling or leadership identity.

3. Seek to understand the convictions of those who oppose women in leadership. Respectful engagement does not require agreement, but it may create opportunities for more constructive working relationships.

4. Pursue mentors and sponsors who understand the leadership journey of women in the church. In turn, invest in younger women who demonstrate leadership potential so that the leadership pipeline can be strengthened for the future.

5. Maintain spiritual practices that deepen your relationship with Christ. Because leadership can become consuming, sustained spiritual formation is essential for resilience, discernment, and faithful service.

6. Keep mission at the center of leadership. The women in this study were sustained not by positional ambition but by their conviction that their work participated in the mission of God and the church.

7. Lead in your own armor. Women leaders should not feel compelled to imitate leadership patterns that do not fit their gifts, character, or calling. Authentic leadership rooted in God-given gifts can strengthen both the leader and the institution.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study included a small purposive sample of seven women serving in senior leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America. Although this sample was appropriate for a qualitative phenomenological study focused on depth of experience, it limits the extent to which the findings can be broadly generalized.

Second, the study relied primarily on the voices of the women leaders themselves. This design choice was intentional because the purpose of the study was to understand how these leaders interpreted their own leadership journeys and workplace environments. However, the perspectives of board members, supervisors, employees, peers, or other institutional stakeholders were not included as separate data sources.

Third, practical constraints affected the scope of the study. Interviewing, transcribing, coding, and analyzing a larger number of participants would have required

substantially more time and resources. In addition, because relatively few women currently serve in the senior leadership roles examined in this study, the available participant pool was limited.

Fourth, ethical considerations shaped the presentation of the findings. Because participants shared sensitive information about colleagues, institutions, denominational relationships, and workplace dynamics, some details were omitted or generalized to protect confidentiality and reduce the risk of harm to participants or their institutions. This limitation was necessary in order to preserve participant trust and comply with the ethical commitments established at the beginning of the study.

Finally, researcher positionality should be acknowledged as a limitation. My professional life has been situated within the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and my wife has served as president of a major North American Division institution. These experiences contributed to my interest in the topic and provided contextual understanding of the organizational environment. At the same time, they required careful reflexivity so that participant narratives, rather than my own assumptions or experiences, remained central to the analysis.

Future studies could address several of these limitations by using quantitative or mixed-methods designs, expanding the participant pool, including women in a wider range of leadership positions, and incorporating perspectives from colleagues, supervisors, board members, and employees. Such approaches could broaden understanding of the organizational conditions that support or hinder women's leadership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Recommendations for Further Research

The narratives presented in this study offer rich insight into the leadership experiences of women serving in senior roles within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. At the same time, the findings point to several areas where additional research is needed. Future studies could deepen understanding of the organizational, theological, and cultural dynamics that shape women's access to leadership and their experiences once they enter senior roles.

1. Future research could examine barriers to women's leadership beyond the issue of ordination. Such studies might explore whether structural, cultural, relational, or procedural factors within church organization limit women's access to leadership opportunities even in roles that do not formally require ordination.

2. Further research could investigate intentional pathways for developing women leaders within the church. This might include examining the effectiveness of leadership internships, mentoring programs, sponsorship networks, coaching models, theological education, or other structured development initiatives designed to prepare women for senior leadership.

3. Additional studies could explore how church administrators, boards, and educators might help members understand the benefits of women's leadership. Research in this area could examine whether training related to gender assumptions, leadership stereotypes, and theological diversity affects congregational or institutional acceptance of women leaders.

4. Future research could also examine the organizational outcomes associated with increased representation of women in leadership. Such studies might investigate

how women's leadership affects institutional culture, employee engagement, mission effectiveness, governance, conflict resolution, and perceptions of trust within church organizations.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the expertise, resilience, spiritual commitment, and leadership capacity of women serving in senior leadership roles within Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America. Across the narratives, participants demonstrated sustained dedication to mission while navigating gendered expectations, theological resistance, and institutional structures that have historically limited women's access to leadership. Their experiences reveal not only the challenges associated with women's leadership in a male-dominated ecclesial context but also the significant contributions women make when their gifts, preparation, and callings are recognized, supported, and affirmed.

The history of the Seventh-day Adventist Church indicates that women have long contributed to the leadership and mission of the denomination. Although women held more visible leadership roles in the early decades of Adventist history than during much of the twentieth century, the present moment suggests renewed opportunities for women in ministry, education, administration, and institutional leadership. The findings of this study indicate, however, that such progress should not be assumed to continue without intentional action. Sustained advancement will require deliberate structures of mentoring, sponsorship, institutional support, and theological reflection that affirm women's leadership as integral to the mission of the church.

Therefore, the church must continue to examine the cultural, organizational, and theological assumptions that shape perceptions of leadership and gender. Supporting women currently serving in leadership, preparing emerging women leaders, and creating pathways for their full participation are not merely matters of representation; they are matters of mission, stewardship, and faithfulness to God's gifting of the whole body of Christ. As the church more fully recognizes, cultivates, and receives the leadership gifts of both women and men, it will be better positioned to fulfill its calling and strengthen its witness in the world.

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Dissertation Recruitment Document

For dissertation recruitment of interviewees for Study on NAD Women Leaders

In the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventist

Dear President or Director _____,

I would like to ask you if you would be willing to be a part of a case study I am conducting with the women presidents or directors of major education, conference, or other church institutions within the North American Division. You are receiving this letter because you have recently or currently are a leader for the SDA in the capacity of president or director.

I would like to come to conduct the interview by a Zoom call. With your permission, I would record the interview and later transcribe them verbatim. In addition, I will be taking copious notes during the interview process. This open-ended interview would begin with five research questions. However, I want to just listen and let the narrative of the interview go wherever it needs to. I am hoping for about 2 hours of your time to conduct these interviews.

The interviews will be completely confidential. After transcribing the interviews, I will destroy the taping of your interview. Only myself and possibly my advisor, Dr. Ledesma, will ever lay eyes on your interview.

I am planning on interviewing 7 women presidents of NAD institutions and will do my best to relate your stories of your journey to leadership and the workplace experience you have.

I will let you read the dissertation, and you will have complete editing rights to anything you are uncomfortable with before it is finished.

Thank you for your consideration to be a part of this case study. On a personal note, my wife became a president of a NAD institution. That is when I became interested in this area because of watching how her journey differed from mine as a leader in the SDA church as a female leader. I believe your stories need to be told so we as a church can become aware of challenges you have faced simply because of your gender.

If you are willing to be a part of this study, please email me at garyfthurber@gmail.com at your earliest convenience. If you are willing and able, I will contact you to find a good time that fits with your schedule and send you the five starter questions for the interview.

Blessings on your leadership journey!

Gary Thurber
President, Mid-America Union Conference

APPENDIX B
CONSENT STATEMENT

Andrews University INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Research Title: WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES FOR WOMEN WHO ARE LEADERS OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST INSTITUTIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Principal Investigator: Gary Thurber

Research Advisor: Dr. Janet Ledesma

Statements about the Research:

This research study is part of my dissertation project, in partial fulfillment for my PhD in Leadership, at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this research is to understand and describe the experiences of women in presidential leadership for Seventh-day Adventist institutions and their working environment as it relates to their gender. This study seeks to better understand their working environment as a female leader within the institution they lead and how their gender effects their working relationship with the church. The study seeks to identify lessons learned by these women for the benefit of future women called into leadership, and for the church and how it can better support women in leadership.

Procedures: This will be a very straightforward interview process to collect data for this research. I have 5 starter questions to let a dialogue about your journey as a woman leader for an SDA institution. The interview can take place by Zoom or in person if you prefer.

Duration of participation in study: The interviews will take approximately 2 hours.

Risks and Benefits: This study, being completely confidential, has little to no risk to you for your participation. It is possible there could be some emotional moments stemming from sharing:

- Difficult experiences you experienced in your leadership journey
- And having concerns over confidentiality
- And being able to be completely open about your journey

It is hoped this study will lead to a greater understanding of the journey women leaders have in the SDA church as presidents or directors of major institutions within the North American Division.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may discontinue participation at any time.

Privacy/Confidentiality/Data Security: The interview will be recorded for transcribing purposes but will also be completely confidential. The transcriptions will only be seen by myself and my advisor, Dr. Janet Ledesma. After the study is complete, the transcriptions will be destroyed.

In addition, you will have an opportunity to read the research project before it is submitted to my dissertation committee. You will have complete editing rights to remove anything you feel uncomfortable being part of this research.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. There will be nothing linking you to the study. None of your identifiers, if any, will be used in any report or publication.

Whom to Contact: If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, contact my advisor, Dr. Janet Ledesma, (269) 363-0045 (telephone), jledesma@andrews.edu (email); or researcher Gary Thurber (name), (402) 802-5425 (telephone), garythurber@gmail.com (email). You can also contact the IRB Office at irb@andrews.edu or at (269) 471-6361.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I Consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature _____ Date _____
Your Name (printed) _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent: _____ Date _____
Printed name of person obtaining consent: _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C

IRB APPLICATION FORM

**Office of Research and Creative Scholarship
Institutional Review Board
(269) 471-6361 Fax: (269) 471-6246 E-mail: irb@andrews.edu
Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104-0355**



APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

Please complete this application as thoroughly as possible. Your application will be reviewed by a committee of Andrews University IRB, and if approved it will be for one year. Beyond the one year you will be required to submit a continuation request. It is the IRB's responsibility to assign the level of review: Exempt, Expedited or Full. It is your responsibility to accurately complete the form and provide the required documents. Should your application fall into the exempt status, you should expect a response from the IRB office within 2 weeks; Expedited within 2 weeks and a Full review 4-6 weeks.

http://www.andrews.edu/services/research/research_compliance/institutional_review/

Please complete the following application:

1. Research Project	
Title: WOMEN IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES FOR WOMEN WHO ARE LEADERS OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST INSTITUTIONS IN NORTH AMERICA	
Will the research be conducted on the AU campus? ☐ Yes ☒ No If no, please indicate the location(s) of the study and attach an institutional consent letter that references the researcher's study. Zoom and agreed upon location for in-person interviews.	
a) What is the source of funding (please check all that apply)	
☒ Unfunded	
☐ Internal Funding	Source:
☐ External Funding	Sponsor/Source:
Grant title:	Award # / Charging String:
<i>If you do not know the funding/grant information, please obtain it from your department</i>	

2. Principal Investigator (PI)			
mail:	First Name: Gary	Last Name: Thurber	Telephone: (402) 802-5425
	garyfthurber@gmail.com		
☒ Yes I am a student. If so, please provide information about your faculty advisor below.			
mail:	First Name: Janet	Last Name: Ledesma	Telephone: 269 363-0045
	jledesma@andrews.edu		
Advisor's signature:			
Department: School of Leadership Program: Phd Leadership			
3. Co-investigators (Please list their names and contact information below)			
mail:	First Name:	Last Name:	Telephone: E-
mail:	First Name:	Last Name:	Telephone: E-
mail:	First Name:	Last Name:	Telephone: E-
mail:	First Name:	Last Name:	Telephone: E-
4. Cooperating Institutions			
Is this research being done in cooperation with any institutions, individuals or organizations not affiliated with AU?			
☐ Yes ☒ No If yes, please provide the names and contact information of authorized officials below.			
Name of Organization:		Address:	
mail:	First Name:	Last Name:	Telephone: E-
mail	First Name:	Last Name:	Telephone: E-
Have you received IRB approval from another institution for this study? ☐ Yes ☒ No			
If yes, please attach a copy of the IRB approval.			
5. Participant Recruitment			
Describe how participant recruitment will be performed. Include how and by whom potential participants are introduced to the study (<i>please check all below that apply</i>)			
☐ AU directory ☐ Postings, Flyers ☐ Radio, TV			
☒ E-mail solicitation. Indicate how the email addresses are obtained:			
Web-based solicitation. Specify sites:			

Participant Pool. Specify what pool:		
☒ Other, please specify: In person solicitation - Snowballing		
6. Participant Compensation and Costs		
Are participants to be compensated for the study? Yes ☐ No ☒ If yes, what is the amount, type and source of funds?		
Amount:	Source:	Type:
Will participants who are students be offered class credit? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐		
NA		
Are other inducements planned to recruit participants? ☐ Yes ☐ No If yes, please describe.		
Are there any costs to participants? ☐ Yes ☒ No If yes, please explain.		
7. Confidentiality and Data Security		
Will personal identifiers be collected?		Will identifiers be translated to a code?
☒ Yes ☐ No		☒ Yes ☐ No
Will recordings be made (audio, video)? ☒ Yes ☐ No If yes, please describe.		
The interviews will be recorded for transcribing purposes.		
Who will have access to data (survey, questionnaires, recordings, interview records, etc.)?		
Please list below.		
Myself, my advisor and the Dissertation Committee		
8. Conflict of Interest		
Do you (or any individual who is associated with or responsible for the design, the conduct of or the reporting of this research) have an economic or financial interest in, or act as an officer or director for, any outside entity whose interests could reasonably appear to be affected by this research project:		
☐ Yes ☒ No		
If yes, please provide detailed information to permit the IRB to determine if such involvement should be disclosed to potential research subjects.		
Where there is an appearance of a conflict of interest, I will find someone to conduct the interview on my behalf.		
9. Results		
To whom will you present results (highlight all that apply)		
☐ Class ☒ Conference ☒ Published Article ☒ Other If other, please specify:		
Dissertation Approval Committee, general publications.		
10. Description of Research Subjects		
If human subjects are involved, please highlight all that apply:		
☐ Minors (under 18 years) ☐ Prison inmates ☐ Mentally impaired		
☐ Physically disabled		
☐ Institutionalized residents ☐ Anyone unable to make informed decisions about participation		
☐ Vulnerable or at-risk groups, e.g., poverty, pregnant women, substance abuse population		
NA		

11. Risks <i>Are there any potential damage or adverse consequences to researcher, participants, or environment? These include physical, psychological, social, or spiritual risks whether as part of the protocol or a remote possibility.</i> Please highlight all that apply (Type of risk): ☐ Physical harm ☐ Psychological harm ☐ Social harm ☐ Spiritual harm NA
12. Content Sensitivity There could be sensitive information shared by those interviewed. A very careful process will be in place to secure confidentiality to all participants including the opportunity to edit their interview at will.
13. Please provide (type in or copy - paste or attach) the following documentation in the boxes below: Institutional approval letter (if off AU campus): Normally I would consult with the women leaders I will be interviewing to learn if there are any gatekeepers to go through to have these interviews take place. However, in this case, each of the participants has the authority to take the time they deem appropriate for this study. Because of the rapport I already established with each candidate, I do not sense there will be any fear on their part to participate in this study. Participants recruitment documents: Please see Appendix A National Institute of Health certificate of training completion

Principal Investigator's Assurance Statement for Using Human Subjects in Research

☒ I certify that the information provided in this IRB application is complete and accurate.

☐ I certify that co-investigators have approved application for IRB submission.

☒ I understand that as Principal Investigator, I have ultimate responsibility for the conduct of IRB approved studies, the ethical performance of protocols, the protection of the rights and welfare of human subjects, and strict adherence to the study's protocol and any stipulation imposed by Andrews University Institutional Review Board.

☒ I will submit modifications and / or changes to the IRB as necessary prior to implementation.

☒ I agree to comply with all Andrews University's policies and procedures, as well as with all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regarding the protection of human participants in research.

☒ My advisor has reviewed and approved my proposal.

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

February 6, 2025

Gary Thurber
Tel. 402-802-5425
Email: garyfthurber@gmail.com

**RE: APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN
SUBJECTS**

IRB Protocol #:25-007 **Application Type:** Original **Dept.:** Leadership

Review Category: Exempt **Action Taken:** Approved **Advisor:** Janet Ledesma

Title: Women in church leadership: A qualitative study of the workplace experiences for women who are leaders of Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America.

Your IRB application for approval of research involving human subjects entitled:
“Women in church leadership: A qualitative study of the workplace experiences for women who are leaders of Seventh-day Adventist institutions in North America” IRB protocol # 25-007 has been evaluated and determined Exempt from IRB review under regulation CFR

46.104 (2)(i): Research that include interview procedures and in which information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subject. You may now proceed with your research.

Please note that any future changes made to the study design or informed consent form require prior approval from the IRB before such changes can be implemented. In case you need to make changes please use the attached report form.

While there appears to be no more than minimum risks with your study, should an incidence occur that results in a research-related adverse reaction or physical injury, this must be reported immediately in writing to the IRB. Any research-related physical injury must also be reported immediately to the University Physician, Dr. Katherine, by calling (269) 473-2222.

We ask that you reference the protocol number in any future correspondence regarding this study for easy retrieval of information.

Best wishes in your

research. Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mordekai Ongo'.

Mordekai Ongo, PhD.

Research Integrity and Compliance Officer

**Institutional Review Board – 8488 E Campus Circle Dr Room 234 - Berrien Springs, MI
49104-0355 Tel: (269) 471-6361 E-mail: irb@andrews.edu**

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VITA

President <i>Board Chair</i> <i>Trustee</i> <i>Board Member</i> <i>Board Member</i> <i>Board Advisor or Member</i> <i>Member</i> <i>Trustee</i> <i>Chair</i>	Mid-America Union Conference <i>AdventHealth Board of Trustees</i> <i>Andrews University Board of Trustees</i> <i>ADRA Board of Directors</i> <i>General Conference Executive Committee</i> <i>Loma Linda University Board of Trustees</i> <i>North American Division Executive Committee</i> <i>Oakwood University Board of Trustees</i> <i>Union College Board of Trustees</i>	2015-Present <i>2017-19, 23-26</i> <i>2013-Present</i> <i>2015-Present</i> <i>2015-Present</i> <i>2015-Present</i> <i>2001-Present</i> <i>2015-Present</i> <i>2015-Present</i>
Executive Secretary <i>Board Member</i> <i>Board Member</i>	Lake Union Conference <i>AdventHealth Corporate Responsibility Board</i> <i>Lake Union Conference Executive Committee</i>	2013-2015 <i>2014-2015</i> <i>2013-2015</i>
President <i>Chair</i>	Rocky Mountain Conference <i>Rocky Mountain Executive Committee</i>	2009-2013 <i>2009-2013</i>
President <i>Chair</i>	Indiana Conference <i>Indiana Conference Executive Committee</i>	2002-2009 <i>2002-2009</i>
President <i>Trustee</i> <i>Chair</i> <i>Chair</i>	Northern New England Conference <i>Atlantic Union College Board of Trustees</i> <i>NNEC Executive Committee</i> <i>Parkview Adventist Medical Center Board</i>	2000-2002 <i>2000-2002</i> <i>2000-2002</i> <i>2000-2002</i>
Assistant to the President	Michigan Conference	2000
Youth/Family Min. Director	Michigan Conference <i>Director: Camp Au Sable</i>	1995-2000
Senior Pastor	Lansing Seventh-day Adventist Church <i>Lansing, Michigan</i>	1992-1995
Pastor	University Seventh-day Adventist Church <i>Orlando, Florida</i>	1990-1992
Pastor	Olathe, Ottawa SDA Churches <i>Olathe and Ottawa, Kansas</i>	1987-1990
Assoc. Pastor	Kent Seventh-day Adventist Church <i>Kent, Washington</i>	1983-1987
Assoc. Director	Northwest Ministries Training Center <i>Kent, Washington</i>	1983-1987
Teacher	Redwood Academy <i>Santa Rosa, California</i>	1982-1983
• Taught Algebra II and Geometry, choir and voice for academy • Taught eighth-grade Bible, History and elementary music • Implemented community service projects for eighth-grade class, and partnered with a community action group for underprivileged children		

Education

Ph.D.	Andrews University - Enrolled <i>Leadership Doctoral Program</i>	2014-26
M.A.	Andrews University <i>Religion</i> <i>Major Project: Confessional Baptism in Children</i>	1986
B.A.	Southern Adventist University <i>Major: Religion</i> <i>Minors: Secondary Education, History, and Mathematics</i>	1982