

Seventh-day Adventists and the Formation of Ministerial Identity

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Seventh-day Adventist ministerial identity and ecclesiology are integrally intertwined.¹ Whereas the message, organization, and many other factors have each played a vital role in the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the role of the minister has in comparison been somewhat overlooked.² The two most prominent ministers were Joseph Bates and James White, both ordained Christian Connexion ministers, who contributed from 1848 to 1850 to the core theological framework as the fledgling denomination began to form. Based upon my research there were 51 ministers within the fledgling Sabbatarian Adventist movement from 1846 to 1863.³ At the actual time of organization there were 31 active ministers. This number rapidly swelled to 276 ministers by 1881.⁴

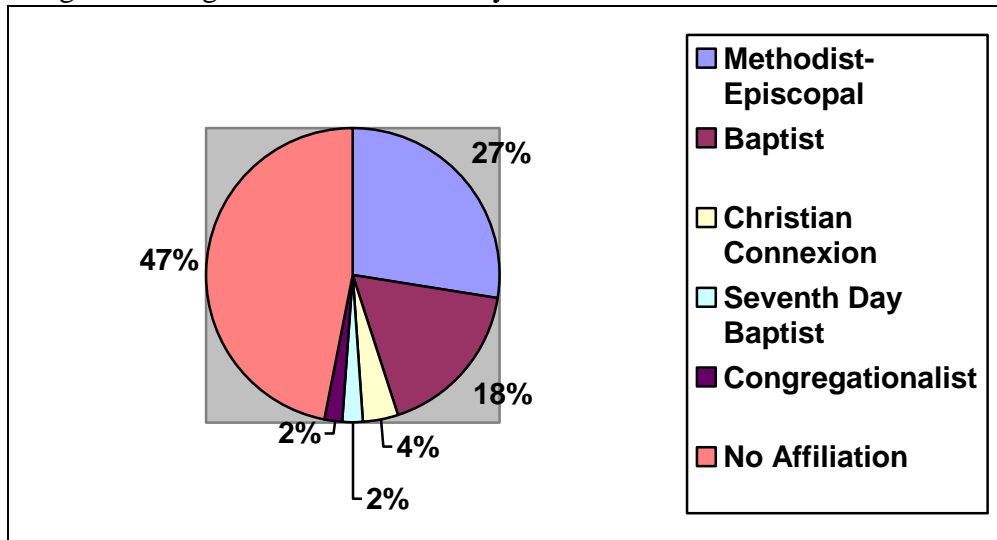
The period from 1863 to 1881 should be considered as the seminal formative period for Seventh-day Adventist ministerial identity. The handful of founding ministers, those who like James White and Joseph Bates played a leading role in the initial phase during the 1840s and 1850s was followed by a second generation of recruits (including ministers who converted). Ministerial identity with closely aligned with Adventist ecclesiology because of the simple fact that early Sabbatarian Adventist men and women felt compelled to proclaim the Adventist message. Such compulsions necessitated a system of organization that mirrored the struggles of the early Christian church.

This paper sheds light on an important aspect of Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology by examining the development of the Seventh-day Adventist ministry from the time when the denomination formed in 1863 through 1881—an arbitrary year to terminate this study that coincides with the death of James White. During this formative time many precedents were set about the nature and role of the minister, the relationship of the minister to other church members, the financial support of the ministry, and even the development of the practice of ordination among early Seventh-day Adventists.

Ministerial composition and challenges

Of the 51 active Seventh-day Adventist ministers between 1846 and 1863, 14 (27%) were affiliated with the Millerite revival. Of those who had some sort of denominational affiliation, the largest part were affiliated with some branch of Methodism (14 ministers or 27%). This was followed by believers affiliated with one of the Baptist traditions, including at least one minister who grew up in a Seventh-day Baptist home (10 ministers, or 19%).⁵ Other ministers included two prominent leaders, James White and Joseph Bates, who were ordained Christian Connection ministers, a branch of the Restorationist movement committed to a return to the purity of the New Testament Church, and at least one Congregationalist convert.⁶ Altogether early Seventh-day Adventist ministers reflected the wide diversity of socioeconomic and religious backgrounds out of which Adventism was born.⁷

Figure 1
Religious Backgrounds of Seventh-day Adventist Ministers 1846-1863



During the late-1850s and early-1860s leaders such as James White faced two challenges. The first came from a few ministers who claimed to be *bona fide* Seventh-day Adventist clergy in order to solicit donations from unsuspecting church members. Such individuals were “unworthy” of the title of minister and were merely scam artists. Several supposed ministers duped early believers during a time when genuine ministers were often self-supporting and depended upon the generosity of believers to help defray their travel expenses.⁸ A second challenge came from some ministers who defected. Thus Moses Hull, who became a Spiritualist, as well as B. F. Snook and W. H. Brinkerhoff, who formed the offshoot the “Marion party.” Some did not defect but like J. B. Frisbie simply became discouraged and for a time gave up the ministry. Such losses diminished the ranks of Adventist ministers during the 1860s. Each situation was extremely problematic. Once they defected the typical pattern was to use their sphere of influence to draw others

away from the Seventh-day Adventist Church. These problems necessitated that it was a sacred duty, according to James White in 1871, for church members to check ministers for their ministerial credentials.⁹

Ministerial identity

Church organization therefore played a crucial role in the formation of early Seventh-day Adventist ministerial identity.¹⁰ Ministers were credentialed through the local conference.¹¹ Part of the purpose of the local conference was to provide a mechanism for aspiring ministers through which they received a “ministerial license.”¹² Such an aspiring minister would typically be given a set of charts with the expectation that they must raise up a congregation.¹³ By 1869 there were sufficient aspiring ministers that the two-tier system was noticeable. After sufficient experience a young minister received “ministerial credentials” in conjunction with the ordination service, which recognized their call to the gospel ministry.

As the church grew, so did the need for ministers. During the 1860s letters published in the *Review and Herald* frequently contained appeals for ministers to visit isolated church members. It was not uncommon for believers to go many months, or even years, without such a visit. When a minister did show up for a “monthly” or “quarterly meeting” that were regional gatherings of believers that reflected earlier Pietistic gatherings from Evangelicalism in the 18th century.¹⁴ Such meetings were rich times that recreated the earlier “holy fairs” of Scotland.¹⁵ Such gatherings featured the minister who was allowed to preach as much as possible. Such services typically concluded with the administering of church ordinances: a baptismal service and the celebration of the Lord’s

Supper on Sunday evening at the conclusion of the weekend. The Lord's Supper became a special "Advent ordinance" that expressed faith in the efficacious blood of Jesus Christ along with the command of Christ to continue to do this until the Second Advent. Thus the communion service reflected these dual foci within Adventist theology, looking both past and forward.¹⁶

Life was fragile during this period of time. Many ministers succumbed to disease, which only increased the need for ministerial help. From 1846 to 1863 there were 18 ministers who by the formation of the denomination in 1863 were no longer active in ministry. Of the 18, three defected due to apostasy; the remaining 15 could no longer minister due to poor health or old age. From 1863 to 1881 the leading cause of death, based upon a random selection of obituaries in denominational publications, indicates that approximately 80% of church members died from tuberculosis—even the adoption of the health message did very little to slow down the ravages of this disease. Thus, a prominent role of early Seventh-day Adventist ministers, in addition to itinerant preaching, was to conduct funerals. Yet with so few ministers, church members were admonished to seek ministers from other denominations because it proved to be too great a strain on the limited number of ministers.

The primary work of the minister was twofold: to make sure that local churches functioned properly and to pursue evangelistic objectives. The first was accomplished by making sure that the church was organized at the local church level. As a result a basic structure was developed between 1863 to 1865: the spiritual leader of the local congregation responsible for leading out in services each week was chosen as the elder,¹⁷ followed by a deacon who looked after the physical welfare of the congregation, and then

a church clerk who took care of finances and kept track of official church records, including the official membership list of the congregation and minutes from church business meetings. It should be noted that unless the church was particularly large, that only one elder or deacon was necessary for any congregation. The only exception, at least up to 1881, was the Battle Creek Church, which at least for a time when the congregation had more than 400 members had two elders. During this time a practice was developed in which the elder and deacon were ordained. If an ordained deacon became an elder, that person must be ordained once again. This ordination could only be done by an ordained Seventh-day Adventist minister.¹⁸ Additions to the local church could only be done by a unanimous vote by the congregation.¹⁹

The earliest detailed “job description” for an early Adventist minister dates to 1873. In it the minister is admonished to examine church records, check the list of members and ascertain their spiritual condition, take proper action about those who are backslidden, send letters to those who are absent, learn who should join the church, inquire after those keeping the Sabbath but not at church, celebrate church ordinances, examine the financial books to make sure they are accurate, encourage people to contribute for the support of the church, make sure that local members subscribe to church periodical, encourage members to support institutional endeavors (at this time by purchasing shares of stock in church institutions such as the fledgling Health Reform Institute), look after family prayers, supply publications, and make sure that those who are poor also have those same publications.²⁰ In another description, ministers were admonished to make sure they conducted the “nominating committee” when they visited the local church. Frequently there were “church trials” so the minister was a more neutral

person who could help to settle squabbles between members. According to the earliest guidelines, the minister selected the nominating committee by selecting “two brethren of good judgment who with him shall act as a nominating committee to nominate candidates . . . and their nomination is to be ratified by a threefourths [*sic*] vote provided that no valid object is raised by those not voting in the affirmative.” Church members were encouraged to nominate people and vote by secret ballot.²¹

Thus from 1863 to 1873 ministerial identity was closely connected to both evangelism and the local church. The primary task of the minister was outreach: ministers must preach the gospel and hold evangelistic meetings. This was particularly true of young aspiring ministers. At the same time, the role of the minister was closely connected to ecclesiology and the life of the local church. As a minister travelled they were responsible to ensure that order was maintained.

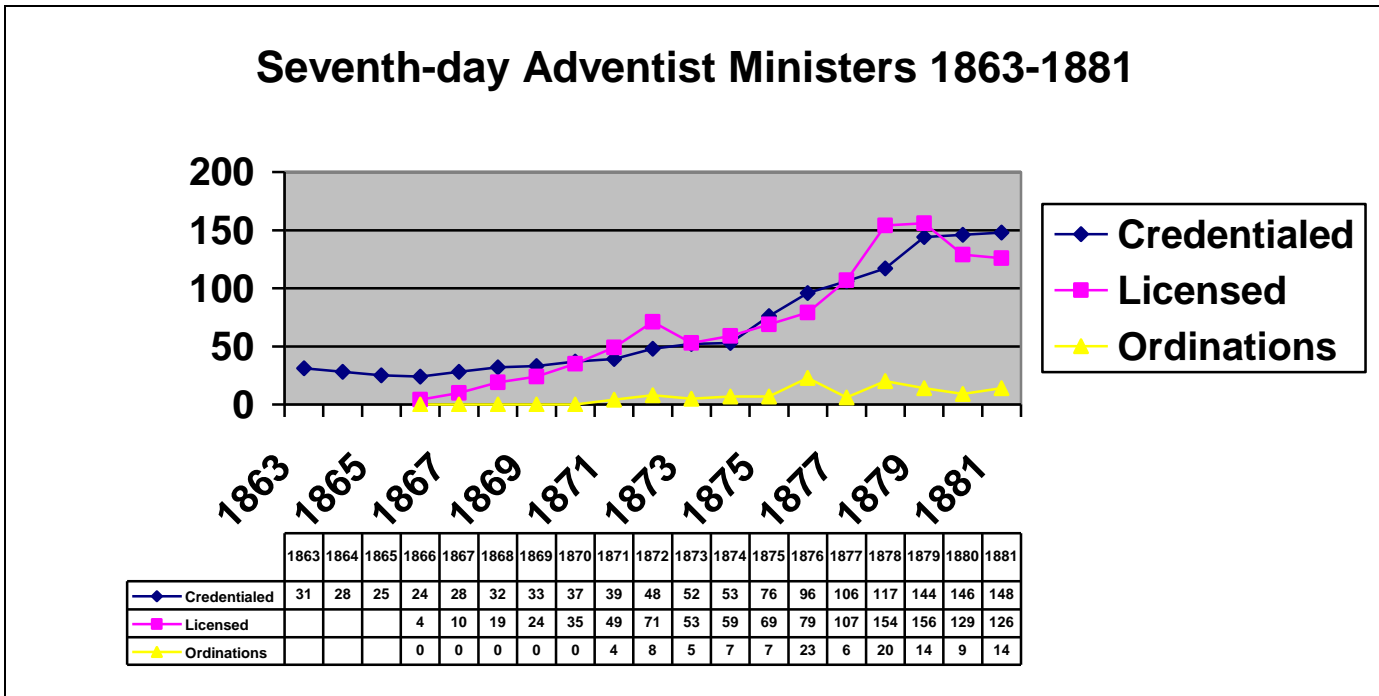
Ministerial growth

A series of defections by prominent ministers coupled with the expansion of the work only accentuated the need for ministers. Both James and Ellen G. White from 1869 to 1873 repeatedly called for Seventh-day Adventist young people to prepare themselves for service. This was a significant reason why church leaders supported the educational endeavors of Goodloe Harper Bell, beginning in 1872, that culminated in the founding of Battle Creek College in 1874. A close corollary to this was the Bible lectures by *Review and Herald* editor, Uriah Smith. He complemented his daily Bible class with short “Biblical Institutes” in which area ministers, and their spouses, could come for brief intensives. These were so popular that the Whites encouraged him to travel to California

and New England to train pastors. Smith's book, *Biblical Institutes*, was thus the first theological textbook for Seventh-day Adventist ministers for this early generation of ministers. It served as a ready reference work about Adventist beliefs.

In response to the repeated appeals by church leaders a new generation of young men and women aspired to the ministry. This wave of new ministers really took off in 1871 (see Figure 1) when the number of new recruits for the first time exceeded the number of ordained ministers. The 1870s witnessed two large waves of ministers: the first from 1871 to 1873, and a second from 1877 to 1879. Ellen G. White in particular had a series of admonitions for ministers during the 1870s. Both she and James White were troubled that young ministers did not appreciate the spirit of sacrifice that characterized earlier ministers. Her cautions for young ministers, especially those from 1874/1875 and again around 1879 correspond with calls to limit ministerial licenses for aspiring ministers and consequently the number of ministerial recruits also slowed down. It appears that the majority of church leaders took her counsel about the sacred role of ministers, and the need to train such ministers, very seriously. As a result, these same church leaders curbed the rapid expansion by restricting ministerial licenses. James and Ellen G. White, for their part, called not only for ministers, but for "laborers" who had a sense of the sacrifice necessary to be truly successful in ministry.

Figure 2



The rapid expansion of ministers during the 1870s (see Figure 2) brought with it new challenges. One such problem was what title to give Adventist ministers. The title of “Reverend” was quickly repudiated. James and Ellen White both referred to early clergy as “ministers,” and less frequently, as “pastors” but they were more concerned that they were “workers” or “laborers.” James White, for example, referred frequently to the role of minister, but described himself also as “pastor” of the Battle Creek Church—even though he was largely absent from that congregation due to the constraints of his leadership role.²²

Earlier problems during the 1860s resurfaced once again during the 1870s. Although the number of clergy was increasingly quickly during the 1870s, there was still a severe shortage of ministers. Obituaries in the 1870s frequently list ministers from other denominations as having conducted the funeral. Church members were encouraged to

make use of ministers from other churches who did not emphasize doctrinal differences. Even more challenging, as Seventh-day Adventists adopted Adventist lifestyle practices such as health and dress reform, was the problem of some ministers who were “addicted to the habit of tobacco.” The matter was referred to the “resolutions committee” who proposed that “it is inexpedient for our churches to allow ministers of other denominations who are addicted to the use of tobacco, or who are avowedly hostile to important features of our faith.”²³ While the use of ministers from other denominations was a stopgap measure as the church grew, new expectations along with lifestyle practices necessitated the formation of a distinctive Adventist ministerial identity.

From 1875 to 1881 Adventist ministerial identity matured somewhat further. Conference leaders admonished all ministers to send in regular reports, many of which were published in denominational periodicals. Ministers were instructed to procure copies of *Robert’s Rules of Order* so that they could properly conduct church business meetings.²⁴ This would help to alleviate local “church trials” as churches were encouraged to hold annual elections to appoint local church leaders.²⁵ And if they could do not obtain education any other way, a practice of developing a list of readings for ministers each began in 1881.²⁶

Ordination

Perhaps the most interesting practice related to early Seventh-day Adventist ministers was that of ordination. The earliest ministers were previously ordained ministers. Thus the first question in the development of a unique Seventh-day Adventist ministerial identity was that of ordination. James White argued in 1867 that just like

baptism, “when this is done to and by the proper persons, once is sufficient, if the candidate does not apostatize.”²⁷ My survey of ministers from 1863 to 1881 only found two examples where Seventh-day Adventist ministers were re-ordained. While this was apparently an option, it appears that by and large early Seventh-day Adventists recognized the ordination given by other denominations as who once converted remained valid. Each situation must be determined upon a case by case basis.

This changed as young ministers who aspired to the ministry proved themselves worthy as ministers. While not everyone who aspired to the ministry was ordained, of those who did, it appears that it typically took between four to six years, thus starting a precedent for a young minister that continues up to the present. The earliest ordinations that I found occurred in 1872, incidentally the same year in which Ellen G. White was first listed with other ordained ministers as having ministerial credentials.

Of the 117 ordinations that I was able to document from 1872 to 1881 (there could have been other ordinations prior to 1872; but I constrained my search to those published in the *Review and Herald*), there appears to be a fairly uniform practice.²⁸ In all of the descriptions it is clear that the ordination service was a fair solemn and sacred event. The event involved an “ordination sermon” that contained some aspect of personal admonition to be faithful. This was followed by a prayer, often by a different minister, in which the ministers who participated in the ceremony laid hands on him during the prayer. And then this was followed by a charge that uniformly mentioned the “right hand of fellowship” in recognition of their special role.

Observations

James White repeatedly admonished that Seventh-day Adventist ministers should not hover over churches. Ministers seldom remained in one location for more than two or three years, or more often, operated as itinerants who maintained a route of churches. This was because the primary task of the minister was that of evangelism. Both church members and ministers who failed to share their faith became spiritually weak. Church leaders recognized that there was a balance in which the minister did have a responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the flock entrusted to their care, but neither should the minister do the work for them. This dual focus between supervision and evangelism is an inherent tension that characterized the life and work of the early Seventh-day Adventist minister.

The early pioneers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were furthermore pragmatists. Organization was a matter of necessity, and the need to recognize ministers contributed to the need for denominational organization. Church leaders accomplished this by issuing ministerial credentials through local conferences thus placing the locus of authority for approving ministerial candidates one step beyond the local church. It was far too easy for early Seventh-day Adventists to be duped by scam artists or dissidents. As several ministers defected, the late-1860s and early-1870s witnessed a surge of young ministers who received a ministerial license. The ability to share their faith was seen as the litmus test of God's call. With time church leaders developed more intentional ways to train ministers, all of which were closely tied to Seventh-day Adventist education. The early pioneers of the church believed that such an education would only enhance their effectiveness. Such a minister should be set apart to the work of the gospel ministry

through ordination, recognition of God's call that affirmed the sacred role of the minister within Seventh-day Adventist ecclesiology.

¹An earlier version of this paper was published as "Seventh-day Adventists and the Formation of Ministerial Identity: Lessons from our Past," *Ministry* October 2014, 6-10. For a look at the formation of ministerial training, see my earlier article: "A High and Sacred Calling: A Look at the Origins of Seventh-day Adventist Ministerial Training," *Ministry*, April 2007, 20-21.

²Recent contributions by David J. B. Trim and Denis Kaiser now help to nuance and augment this picture on the role of Seventh-day Adventist ministers in early Adventism, particularly in relationship to recent discussions pertaining to ordination. This paper focuses instead upon the broader milieu of ministerial development. See D. J. B. Trim, "Ordination in Seventh-day Adventist History," Paper presented to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, 2013 (<http://www.adventistarchives.org/ordination-in-sda-history.pdf>); "The Ordination of Women in Seventh-day Adventist Policy and Practice," Paper presented to the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, 2013 (<http://www.adventistarchives.org/the-ordination-of-women-in-seventh-day-adventist-policy-and-practice.pdf>); Denis Kaiser, "Setting Apart for the Ministry: Theory and Practice in Seventh-day Adventism (1850-1920)," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 51, no. 2. (Autumn 2013), 177-218.

³A painstaking search of the *Review and Herald* page-by-page indicates that the following ministers were active from 1846 to 1863: J. M. Aldrich, J. N. Andrews, D. Arnold, H. F. Baker, E. L. Barr, J. Bates, J. Bostwick, J. C. Bowles, A. C. Bourdeau, D. T. Bourdeau, W. H. Brinkerhoff, H. G. Buck, J. Byington, H. S. Case, M. E. Cornell, R. F. Cottrell, S. Cranson, D. T. Evans, E. Everts, J. Fisher, J. B. Frisbie, N. Fuller, H. Grant, D. P. Hall, J. R. Hart, G. W. Holton, J. Howlett, M. Hull, A. S. Hutchins, W. S. Ingraham, R. J. Lawrence, H. Lothrop, J. N. Loughborough, W. Morse, S. Pierce, D. C. Phillips, E. A. Poole, S. W. Rhodes, I. Sanborn, B. F. Snook, C. W. Sperry, J. M. Stephenson, T. M. Steward, A. Stone, C. O. Taylor, J. R. Towle, I. N. Van Gorder, J. H. Waggoner, F. Wheeler, J. White, and J. G. Wood.

⁴These statistics are based upon a detailed compendium of Seventh-day Adventist ministers that I compiled. See Michael W. Campbell, "Compendium of Seventh-day Adventist Ministers 1863-1881," unpublished manuscript, 2013.

⁵Christian Connexion (2): James White, Joseph Bates; Methodist-Episcopal (13): David Arnold, Harry G. Buck, Samuel Cranson, J. B. Frisbie, Nathan Fuller, John Howlett, J. N. Loughborough, Moses Hull, B. F. Snook, Washington Morse, Frederick Wheeler; Methodist-Wesleyan (1): John Byington; Baptist (9) J. H. Waggoner, R. J. Lawrence, A. C. Bourdeau, D. T. Bourdeau, John Fisher, A. S. Hutchins, Stephen Pierce, T. S. Steward, A. Stone; Seventh Day Baptist (1) R. F. Cottrell; Congregationalist (1): Ezra A. Poole.

⁶Ministers from 1863 who were known to be active in the Millerite revival include (6): James White, Joseph Bates, M. E. Cornell, R. J. Lawrence, David Arnold, and Washington Morse.

⁷James White celebrated this diversity, see [James White], "Seventh-day Adventists," *Review and Herald*, October 24, 1871, pg. 148.

⁸As an example see the warning listed in *Review and Herald*, Oct. 15, 1872, pg. 144.

⁹[James White], "Organization," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 22, 1871, pg. 76.

¹⁰See Trim and Kaiser, op. cit.

¹¹"Those who feel it their duty to improve their gifts as messengers or preachers, shall first lay their exercises of mind before the Conference Committee, to receive a license from them, if the Committee consider them qualified." See "Report of General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists," *RH*, May 26, 1863, pg. 205.

¹²In article V, Sec. 2, of the "Model Constitution" for Conferences (1863) is the provision: "Those who feel it their duty to improve their gifts as messengers or preachers, shall first lay their exercises of mind before the Conference Committee, to receive a license from them, if the Committee consider them qualified." "Report of General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists," *RH*, May 26, 1863, pg. 205.

¹³A case in point is that of D. M. Canright whom James White upheld as a model young minister in 1871. See description by James White, "What Shall Be Done? Laborers Wanted," *Review and Herald*, Dec. 12, 1871, pg. 204.

¹⁴Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), pg. 30-31.

¹⁵For an overview, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001).

¹⁶For an overview of these gatherings see Michael W. Campbell, "A Holy Spell: Worshipping with Early Adventists," *Adventist Review*, Oct. 22, 2009, pg. 26-28.

¹⁷H. A. St. John, "Local Elders," *Review and Herald*, Jan. 13, 1876, pg. 11.

¹⁸See question along with answer, presumably by Uriah Smith, on *Review and Herald*, Aug. 16, 1864, pg. 96.

¹⁹Cf. *Review and Herald*, June 6, 1871, pg. 197.

²⁰"Pastoral Responsibilities," *Review and Herald*, June 24, 1873, pg. 13.

²¹"Answers to Correspondents," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 28, 1873, pg. 160.

²²[James White], "Battle Creek," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 8, 1871, pg. 60.

²³RH Oct. 14, 1880, pg. 253.

²⁴Cf. "Illinois Conference," *RH*, Sept. 30, 1880, pg. 237.

²⁵General Conference Committee, "A Change of Church Officers," *RH* Jan. 4, 1881, pg. 11.

²⁶"Report of Committee on Course of Reading for Ministers," *RH*, Dec. 20, 1881, pg. 395.

²⁷James White, "Re-Ordination," *Review and Herald*, Aug. 6, 1867, pg. 120.

²⁸As one of the more detailed examples, see the ordination of Sands H. Lane: "Ordination," *Review and Herald*, Oct. 1, 1872, pg. 128. See also the ordination of Santee, *Review and Herald*, Nov. 21, 1878, pg. 164.