



Lynne Waihee

Dialogue With the First Lady of Hawaii



Lynne Kobashigawa Waihee is living proof that it is possible for a dedicated Seventh-day Adventist Christian to be prominent in public service without sacrificing her faith. Mrs. Waihee became the first lady of the state of Hawaii in 1986 when her husband John was elected governor. Her duties put her squarely in the public eye and make her a public figure in her own right.

Mrs. Waihee has made good use of her celebrity status in Hawaii to advocate causes she feels strongly about. Before her husband became governor, Mrs. Waihee was an English teacher at Hawaiian Mission Academy, the Seventh-day Adventist secondary school in Honolulu. Because of this previous experience, children's issues, especially an ongoing campaign to promote literacy in the state, are her top priorities and consume large amounts of her time. She also works with other charitable groups like the Hawaii Food Bank and the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation.

Even with all the demands put on her by a packed public schedule, Mrs. Waihee has managed to remain active in the church. She serves on the board of Hawaiian Mission Academy, Andrews University (the alma mater of both she and her husband), and Castle Medical Center, the Adventist hospital in Hawaii. She is also a member of Honolulu Central church, where she can often be found teaching the young adult Sabbath school lesson.

Lynne Waihee was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. She attended Hawaiian Mission Academy, where she first met her future husband. The two of them then went on to Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, where Mrs. Waihee majored in English. The Waihees have two children: John IV, 22, and Jennifer, 21.

The following interview took place at Washington Place, the historic home of Hawaii's last reigning monarch, Queen Liliuokalani. Today it serves as the Governor's Mansion.

■ *Did you have any idea when you married John that he would end up holding political office?*

Not at all. Even though he was student body president at Andrews University, I had no inkling that he would be interested in politics. But I should have known...

■ *People look at you and all of your different roles—a public figure, a champion of several causes, an active church member, a member of various*

boards in addition to being a wife and mother—and wonder, how do you balance all these roles?

That is an area I really wrestle with. One good thing about being first lady is that I have learned to manage my time better and to get things done. I have a wonderful secretary to keep me on track. When you are busy you have to learn to use your time more wisely and become more selective, picking only those things that can really make a difference. Family occasions, though, take priority. For example, today is my husband's birthday and we blocked out time to celebrate even though both of us are very busy. We can

all make a difference, but we can't do everything. Part of Christian maturity is accepting that we can't do it all. That part is hard for me. I like saying Yes to people.

■ *You were an English major at Andrews University and then a teacher. What influence have those experiences had on your role and the causes you advocate?*

My interest has always been in young people. So when I began to look at issues that I would become involved in, most of them were child-centered. And because I taught English, it was only natural that I be interested in literacy. I'm involved with a lot of organizations that are related to education and children. For example I am involved with HUGS, a group that works with children who suffer from life-

threatening illnesses. I've also spent time on the Read to Me campaign in which we encourage parents to read aloud to their children at least 10 minutes a day. I think that a lot of this emphasis comes from my background in the church. My experience as a teacher has affected me a lot. I taught for seven years at Hawaiian Mission Academy. Before that I spent time tutoring students who were learning English as a second language.

■ *Were you born a Seventh-day Adventist?*

No. My mother comes from a Buddhist heritage, although she was never really a practicing Buddhist. I think that made it easy for my sister and I to accept Adventism. We were raised with a Buddhist philosophy that emphasizes dignity and the importance of treating others with respect. Maybe that kind of upbringing made it easy for me to become a Christian.

■ *Do most of the people you come in contact with, especially other public figures, know you are a Seventh-day Adventist? How do they feel about it?*

Yes, I think most people know. I don't just introduce myself as a Seventh-day Adventist, but I never hide the fact that I am. People know I don't do certain things, that I avoid Friday night and Saturday official activities and that I don't drink alcohol or eat certain foods. The subject of my religion comes up frequently because of how I live and when it does, I share my beliefs with them. People usually react very positively when they find out that I am an Adventist. They appreciate the fact that I have certain religious convictions that I am committed to.

■ *Do you find it difficult being both first lady and a Seventh-day Adventist?*

There are certain pressures and even conflicts, many of them having to do with Sabbath observance, that are difficult to resolve at times. It's not always easy to know what is the right thing to do in a particular situation. Most Adventists simply don't have to face some of the issues that I do. But I have really appreciated the support of the Adventist community in Hawaii.

■ *You've been teaching the young adult Sabbath school class at Honolulu's Central church. Now I hear that the nominating committee has asked you to become an elder. Are you going to accept?*

I still haven't made up my mind for two reasons. One, I'm so busy that I want to do it only if I can devote the right amount of time. And then I have to think through that some people might think I'm not a good Adventist—at least not good enough to be an elder—because not everything I do is automatically pleasing to Adventists. I may take a public stand for something that could be controversial—politics is that way, you know—and members might frown. So I'm still thinking about it.

■ *You rub shoulders with dignitaries and important public figures. What sort of image do you think that Adventists have in the political community? Does it ever come up in conversation?*

I don't think that most people know very much about Adventists, or even that we exist. I frequently talk with people who have never even heard of us. That is in itself a good reason for Adventists to serve in the public sector. How can we witness to people if they don't even know what we are?

■ *So you think it is good for Adventists to enter public service and even seek elected office?*

Sure, why not? I think that elected officials can make a difference in people's lives, in the way that Jesus asked us to address the social and humanitarian needs of people. In fact, I believe that many public officials have an opportunity to make a greater difference than many who work for the church. Some Adventists feel that members shouldn't go into politics. Politics does have a bad reputation. But I don't think that many Adventist realize how much politics is a reality in the church today and we simply won't admit it. Sometimes I feel that the secular world is less "political" and has less conflict of interest than the church world. Maybe if we admitted that the church also has politics—it's just the way big organizations are—the church would be better off.

■ *What special qualities does a public official need to have in order to be effective?*

A strong conviction about right and wrong. There are so many people wanting

to pull you in one direction or another. You also have to be resilient. You have to really learn not to be defensive or to react to negative publicity every time it comes out. You just can't react to every negative newspaper article or quote, even if you want to. You can't let it control you. It takes a lot of toughness to be in politics and someone shouldn't go in thinking otherwise.

■ *President Bill Clinton with his wife Hillary and their daughter Chelsea visited Hawaii and were your guests a few weeks ago. You spent quite a bit of time with them. How did it go?*

The Clintons love Hawaii and have been here several times. They needed the rest after coming back from some meetings in Asia. We've known them for more than six years. I think that some of the reasons we have become friends is that we are the same age, belong to the same party, and my husband was one of the first public officials to endorse Clinton for president. They are lots of fun to be around. I don't think that anybody has any idea how hard it is for them to have any privacy; though I can understand just a bit of what they go through.

■ *You are very popular in Hawaii. When are you going to run for public office?*

(Laughter) No, not me. This is as close as I want to get! □

Interview by Charles Sandefur

Charles Sandefur was until recently president of the Hawaiian Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. He now serves as president of the Rocky Mountain Conference, with headquarters in Denver, Colorado.