MAINTAINING THE TRADITION:
WOMEN ELDERS AND THE ORDINATION OF WOMEN
IN THE EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH

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When the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ formed the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1946, there was at least one area in which the traditions were imperfectly joined: the question of the ordination of women as elders. While the Evangelicals never ordained women, the United Brethren had a tradition of women elders that was nearly sixty years old. The new Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) failed to reconcile these two histories, officially denying ordination to women while a host of female elders nevertheless carried their United Brethren orders into the new church. What role did ordained women play in the Evangelical United Brethren Church from its genesis in 1946 until its union with The Methodist Church in 1968?1

One might suppose that the previously ordained women suddenly found themselves personae non gratae even though their church’s practice dated back to Ella Niswonger’s ordination on September 13, 1889.2 Union agreements indicated that the new denomination would not ordain any more women. Nevertheless, closer investigation shows that this was not the case. So little is known about the service of women during these years that at least two questions need to be answered. What were the experiences of the women ordained prior to 1946? Was the ordination of women effectively ended, resuming with the 1968 union which formed The United Methodist Church? Reconstruction of the careers of these women shows that during the EUB period they served faithfully in ministry. In addition, such research also proves conclusively that a number of women were ordained as elders in the Evangelical United Brethren Church despite a policy to the contrary supposedly established at the church’s formation.

The existing scholarly bibliography is of little value in answering these questions. A history by James Will of the women elders in the United Brethren tradition is the oldest source. Will’s work stops with the union

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1A fuller version of this article, with complete text, bibliography and methodology, is on file with the United Theological Seminary library, Dayton, Ohio.
2For confirmation of this data see Donald K. Gorrell, “Ordination of Women by the United Brethren in Christ,” Methodist History 18 (January 1980), 143.
in 1946 and he incorrectly assumes that the agreement not to ordain women was strictly carried out.\(^3\) Rosemary Keller’s article, “Women and the Nature of Ministry in the United Methodist Tradition,” cites Will in support of the statement: “Creation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church resulted in quiet abandonment of the ordination of females.”\(^4\) In their *History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* Bruce Behney and Paul Eller acknowledge the ordination of women in the EUB years, but Eller writes, “these isolated instances neither provoked any recorded objections nor inspired any generally accepted practice.”\(^5\) Apparently their personal experiences within the denomination support such a statement. The most recent article to touch on the subject, by Karen Strong, quotes Behney and Eller on this point and then demands the very documentation the present research was undertaken in part to provide:

The need for further research into the role of ordained women in the EUB Church is apparent. Historians have barely scratched the surface of the official records and are just now becoming aware of the tremendous lack of knowledge concerning these women and their status in that denomination. A careful study of the information compiled from conference journals and first-hand accounts supplies some of that knowledge and puts one well on the way toward an appreciation of the work of these women elders. It also provides evidence that the United Brethren tradition continued as several annual conferences ordained women between the years 1946 and 1968.

At least 149 women held the order of elder in some form in the Evangelical United Brethren Church. The greatest number of these were

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\(^3\) While the detailed reasons for ending women’s ordination in the church of the United Brethren in Christ cannot be found in official records, the practice ceased with the creation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1946. Thus several decades of ordained ministry by women faded into history as the women already ordained passed from active service.” James E. Will, “The Ordination of Women – The Development in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ,” in *Women’s Rightful Place:* Women in United Methodist History, ed. Donald K. Gorrell (Dayton, OH: United Theological Seminary, 1980), 33.


in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Nebraska. In the EUB Church there was just one order of ordained ministry—that of elder—unlike the two-step deacon-elder process adopted from the Methodist tradition with the 1968 union. The EUBs had several categories of elder relationship. The active itinerant elder was the normal appointive relationship. The local elder was an elder either not received into the itineracy or not continued in the itineracy. The supernumerary elder, "because of impaired health or other sufficient reason," was "temporarily disqualified to perform the functions" of an active itinerant elder. A superannuated elder was unable to serve a charge due to age, disability, or having reached the age of retirement. Women were represented in each category.

Some sixty women served as active itinerant elders at some time during this period. Most of these served churches (some with their husbands) and only a few actually accepted appointment in a supply capacity. The annual conference with the greatest number of women elders was the Indiana South Conference (in every category it ranked highest or nearly so). A. Glen O'Dell served as conference superintendent from 1954 until 1968. According to him, the conference was uniquely suited to female pastorates because:

> it was by far and large a 'rural oriented' conference with an over-load of small churches and circuits not able to financially sustain a 'married' or 'family man' pastor. The majority of our women ministers were either 'bachelor girls' or widows who were willing and able to live on a pittance. Bless them!

Elva Hardy, who along with her sisters Bertha and Treasie held the order of elder in the Indiana South Conference, agreed with O'Dell concerning the nature of the charge served by the women. "Of course we served the lesser paying churches," she wrote. "However, on my first charge I was assured a salary of $535 of my own." She was living with Bertha at the time. She remembered receiving another $300 by the end of that first year in the form of personal gifts.

There were several examples of unique and distinguished service on the part of women elders. Individual careers can be reconstructed from conference records. Lois Luzader served as leader of the Pennsboro District of the West Virginia Conference in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Ethel E. King Kinney, a registered nurse and appointed in a missionary capacity to Barnett's Creek charge in Kentucky, actually presided over a session of the Erie Conference in 1951. Ethel Roa was co-minister for several

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8Letter to the author from A. Glen O'Dell, Minister to Older Adults and Visitation, Mount Auburn United Methodist Church, Greenwood, IN, October 27, 1986, 2, 3.
9Letter to the author from Elva M. Hardy, Washington, IN, October 24, 1986, 2.
years with her husband Plutarco in the Florida Conference. Mayte Richardson and Sara Mouer spent most of their ministries serving churches together. They met at Bonebrake Seminary (now United Theological Seminary) and became life-long friends. They were appointed to a number of charges in the Wisconsin Conference and performed evangelistic work as well.

Aside from the local pastorate, women elders served in a number of ways. Keller states that most of the women ordained in the United Brethren church served as evangelists.\(^{10}\) If that were true, it did not carry over into the united church. Only a handful of women ever served as official conference evangelists (according to the Yearbook, less than ten). A few did evangelism work for the temperance movement, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union and other groups.

Two women worked as teachers in religious education programs in public schools. Seven were missionaries in this country, Asia, and Africa. One worked for the Young Women's Christian Association in Fullerton, California. One elder and her husband served as consultants to the Gospel Light Publishing Company after working with the Evangelical Teacher Training Association in Wheaton, Illinois. Another woman was a nurse at Otterbein Home, a retirement community now located in the West Ohio Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Two women were deaconesses attached to local churches. Their duties were to visit from house to house reading, praying, singing, teaching, exhorting, or comforting. They were "to nurse or otherwise minister to the sick and needy." Deaconesses reported to their local pastor. They were not required to look after the finances of the church. They were consecrated to the work after a period of study, training, and experience. It was not a permanent order.\(^{11}\) Apparently one could be both an elder and a deaconess.

The EUB Church experienced a high incidence of clergy couples (a situation in which both marriage partners were ordained), probably because marriage to a minister was one of the few ways a woman could have a family and still participate in the ministry. There were fifty-two such clergy couples. The greatest number were in the Kansas, Indiana, and Allegheny Conferences. Twenty-four of the women in these relationships held the title of active itinerant elder at some time during their marriage. It was a United Brethren trend which continued into the new church. A study of the seventy-five year history of the United Brethren antecedents of United Theological Seminary before the union of 1946 concluded that

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\(^{10}\)Keller, 113.

\(^{11}\)Church of the United Brethren in Christ, Discipline (Dayton, OH: Otterbein Press, 1945), 80, 81. There was no definition of "deaconess" in the 1963 EUB Discipline.
"most women married men students and fulfilled their ministry as part of a team. . . . Even though these women served in the pastoral ministry it is clear that most female graduates married ministers and did not minister in their own right." In the EUB Church it was not uncommon for a couple to serve churches (or multiple-point charges) together although this was not exclusively the practice. Women were frequently pastors or sometimes the term co-pastor was used. Certainly in many cases an associate relationship on the part of the woman was assumed. Standard practice in the Indiana South Conference was that, "working as a team on a station or circuit, only the man was salaried." It was not really unusual for women to carry on their husbands' ministries after they had been widowed. Dorothy Wright and her husband graduated from Bonebrake Seminary and were ordained in the Sandusky Conference in 1929. When her husband died in March, 1960, she lived in the parsonage for another three months making the pastoral calls and presiding at board meetings while a retired Methodist minister preached. Two years later she became the pastor of a three-church circuit of her own and then served another congregation from 1965 until her retirement in 1972. Achsah Miller was the widow of a minister in the West Virginia Conference. She had not preached until after his death, but stayed on as minister of the congregation for the remainder of the conference year following her husband's death. She was appointed to the church on her own at the next annual conference and was ultimately ordained following completion of the conference course of study. She served another church successfully after her retirement.

Despite the UB tradition women elders experienced a certain amount of discrimination and prejudice even though they served in annual conferences which were predominantly formerly United Brethren. Obviously the tradition was not well established even at that latter day. As conference superintendent, O'Dell saw the difficulties:

Their assignments were much more difficult to negotiate than for men due largely to the fact that this was a generation prior to the 'Women's lib' movement. The ministry was not a fully acceptable place for women." The sex barrier was no small issue. "The biggest problem was to get congregations to accept a 'woman preacher.' We often had to say: 'Accept this assignment or none.' Also, a woman's authority was much less acceptable than that of a man."15

13O'Dell, 2.
14Dorothy Cope Bailey, In Quietness and Confidence: The Story of Dorothy E. Wright (n.p.:n.d.), Copy in possession of Donald K. Gorrell, United Theological Seminary, 9, 15-17; Eckels, 13, 14.
15O'Dell, 1, 2.
The women's own experiences testified to the unwillingness of some people to accept them on the same terms as they would a man. One church was hostile to Elva Hardy's pastoral leadership:

As I went down the steps outside the church after preaching I met my trustees with their wives that told me I was hurting the church. . . . They were lined up on both sides of the steps. I stood near to the top of the steps and listened. After they were through speaking I made no reply and proceeded down the street. In our next business meeting their leader did arise and say they could not accept my service. I was serving a charge of three churches. When all were through speaking I arose and told the charge I would call the Conference Superintendent when I got to the parsonage and turn the objecting church back to the care of the Superintendent and I would continue to serve the other two. This was near to the close of my first year there. I returned and served four years living in that same parsonage. Others stepped in to make up the salary loss. 16

Dorothy Wright had little trouble because of her sex. One lay leader admitted he had voted against receiving her because she was a woman. However, by the time she left the community he was a loyal supporter and personal friend. One woman schoolteacher questioned whether Dorothy could give proper advice to the teacher's two sons. Dorothy settled the matter by explaining that she had two sons of her own. On the other hand, Dorothy hesitated to attend the meetings of a men's group but was quickly informed that her presence was desired. 17

Thus the women elders continued to play an important role in the EUB Church. But even more important was the fact that the church continued to ordain women into the order of elder despite pre-union agreements not to do so. The UB tradition was not ended although it was diminished somewhat—apparently in sensitivity to Evangelical feelings.

Understandably, the ordination of women was an issue during pre-union discussions. At the 1941 UB General Conference Bishop B. D. Batdorf called it a "sort of sub rosa subject" but said that "the door is not closed completely." Actually the conferring bishops had settled the question two years earlier. The first General Conference of the EUB Church discovered in 1946 that a recommendation had been accepted by the joint Commissions on Church Union in 1939 to the effect that there would be no new ordinations of women. It was maintained all along that previously ordained women would keep their status. But the 1939 decision was not the last word:

16Hardy, 14, 15.
17Bailey, 17, 21, 22.
... in 1950 it was referred to the General Council of Administration for study. The council passed the reference to the Board of Christian Education which in 1962 issued a murky conclusion: 'Whereas the Discipline (Par. 354) may be interpreted to include women: therefore, be it resolved that we continue to accept the intent of paragraph 354. . . . '18

The power of ordination always rested with the annual conferences and it was there that the decision was made whether to ordain or not. The failure of the denomination to establish a clear policy paved the way for ordinations in a number of conferences. O'Dell was in a power position as conference superintendent. Yet he was not aware of the pre-union agreements or any restrictions on the ordination of women. "If this was among the Council of Bishops," he wrote, "it did not become the law of the church." According to O'Dell, advancement of women to the order of elder in his conference occurred because of two conditions. First, the church could not deny that the women's call to the ministry was valid. Second, their "willingness to serve the most menial appointments was commendable."19

Overall, annual conferences ordained at least twenty-three women during the EUB years, 1946-1968. Five of these were in Indiana South. Five were in Ohio Sandusky. Four were in Southeast Ohio. Nine other conferences, spread geographically across the country, ordained one each.

During the same time period, twenty-seven women declared themselves in preparation for ordination as candidates, students, and probationers. They represented conferences from across the Midwest and East with Susquehanna having four and Ohio Sandusky and North Indiana having three. Not only were the annual conferences ordaining women, they were actively encouraging them to prepare for ordination! Perhaps the conferences were where ordained women were more numerous believed the practice had a future. No ecclesiastical or episcopal objections to these ordinations were recorded.

Though the practice may have diminished somewhat, conferences ordained women in numbers significant enough to maintain the tradition until union with The Methodist Church in 1968. The Methodists began ordaining women in the 1950s. There was no doubt that The United Methodist Church would include female ministers.20

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18Will, 33; Evangelical United Brethren Church, General Conference: First Session (Johnstown, PA: 1946), 54; Behney and Eller, 360, 361. Paragraph 354 simply outlined the educational and service prerequisites for advancement to elder. The language was curiously inclusive.

19O'Dell, 1, 2.

20"The plan indicates clearly that all provisions for ministers are open to women." Paul Washburn, "The Order for the United Methodist Church," in Our Churches Face Union, ed. Paul Washburn (Dayton, OH: Otterbein Press, 1965), 34.
Why did the ordinations continue when the church was supposed to have had a negative policy from the outset? First, it may have been a reflection of the state of discipline in the EUB Church. Decisions were made at the annual conference level where some key officials did not even know about the earlier agreements. Some have said that discipline on the EUB side was never as strong as that of the Methodist tradition.

Second, the ordinations and accompanying confusion over church policy may have been a sign of the weakness of the union itself. There may have been other weak points as well. The fact that policy was not set more firmly at the outset and that it was debated without ultimate resolution later spoke to the failure of the denomination to address the issue in an effective manner and to bring the two traditions together over this one point.

Third, this phenomenon may have been the side effect of a denomination in flux during a socially and theologically critical period. The church was struggling to establish a new identity even as women were taking on greater and greater roles in the larger society. Rapid change could have had a dizzying and numbing impact on the church and its members. Some people would have become more open to women elders; others would have become all the more resistant.

Fourth, the ordinations may have been a testimony to the effectiveness of the female pastors and the extent to which the tradition had been part of the institution prior to 1946. Evidently the women had enough support from their male colleagues and the local churches to be ordained elder and to be appointed. Lay approval would have been necessary at the beginning of their careers, anyway, as these women rose to the leadership of their home churches and contemplated ordination.

Clearly the part these women played in the history of The United Methodist Church was significant. They provided a line of direct descent from the earliest female ordination in any of the church's antecedents. Their service as partners in clergy couples dates back several generations from the present, also.

The list of women who were ordained elder in both the UB and EUB years requires more work. The list in the Appendix which follows is probably incomplete and every category deserves separate study and independent verification. Researchers should interview the women still living and the family members of those who have died. It is important that the church reconstruct the careers of these women if it is to understand and appreciate the continued United Brethren tradition of women elders as it was maintained in the Evangelical United Brethren Church until 1968.
# APPENDIX

**WOMEN ORDAINED IN THE EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH**
(Data compiled from conference journals)

**KEY:**
- CC: Clergy couple
- IE: active itinerant elder
- J: joined conference
- LE: local elder
- PR: probationer
- SA: superannuated
- SN: supernumerary

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*Remarks:*
- CC: missionary in Tennessee
- J: 48
Roth, Cleo Sand 1946 46/pastor IE
Sears, Virginia Ry Mt 1948 CC
Sweet, Pearl Kan 1947 61/SA CC
Swift, Meredith N. Erie 1955 46/PR
56/pastor IE
Trujillo, Mrs.
Nellewyn Brookhart OhSand 1950 56/IE J 46 (Miami)

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DENOMINATIONAL RECORDS

(Not including conference journals)


