A WELCOME IN THE MINISTRY:  
THE 1920 AND 1924 GENERAL CONFERENCES  
DEBATE CLERGY RIGHTS FOR WOMEN  

WILLIAM T. NOLL

There are many significant dates in the long struggle of American Methodist women to become recognized as preachers, pastors, and ordained clergy on the same basis as their clerical brothers. One landmark decision was the action of the 1924 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church permitting the ordination of women while denying them clergy membership in annual conferences. This decision, and the events leading to it, are the subject of this article.

In 1869, Maggie Newton Van Cott became the first woman on record to receive a preacher's license in the Methodist Episcopal Church. During the next decade, over seventy women were licensed and a handful attended seminaries, looking toward ordination. But in 1880, the General Conference determined that women could not be ordained or licensed to preach under the laws of the church. While the United Brethren voted to ordain women in 1889, and the Methodist Protestant Church followed suit in 1892, the policy of the Methodist Episcopal Church, forbidding any official recognition of women as preachers, continued until 1920.

In the 1920s, the Methodist Episcopal Church experienced a renewed and intensified debate on the subject of women as preachers and ordained clergy. Three factors helped to instigate the denomination's reconsideration of this issue: the passage of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution, and the organization of the International Association of Women Preachers.

The Eighteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1919 and ushered in the Prohibition era of American history, was strongly endorsed by the General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and many of its leaders lobbied diligently for its passage. The great leader of the Prohibition movement was Frances E. Willard, a Methodist Episcopal lay woman, president of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.), and

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1The history of the movement to ordain women in American Methodist denominations during the nineteenth century is the subject of a longer paper by the author of this article. The paper “Shall She Be Allowed to Preach?” was submitted as a master's thesis at Drew University in 1980. A copy is also available on file with the Women's History Project of the Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church in Madison, N.J.
a renowned educator, author, public speaker, evangelist, and advocate of women's rights. Her book, *Woman in the Pulpit*, is a passionate argument in favor of women's preaching. As a child, Willard had dreamed of becoming a preacher, and it was widely said that had she been a man she would have been a bishop. Even after her death in 1898, Frances Willard was the leading name in the temperance campaign. With the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment secured, some of Willard's followers began to redirect their energies toward the issue of women in the pulpit.

The Nineteenth Amendment, mandating women's suffrage, was ratified in 1920. Through the years, the leadership of the Methodist Episcopal Church had shown a great deal of ambivalence about this proposed amendment, but by the close of the First World War, most church leaders had expressed favor about its enactment. One of the leaders of the suffrage movement was the Rev. Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, who had been rejected as a candidate for ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880 before finding acceptance as a clergywoman in the Methodist Protestant Church. Shaw, who also earned a medical degree, was president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association and, during World War I, a member of President Woodrow Wilson's cabinet. She was without question the most widely known clergywoman in United States history, and her example inspired other young women to seek careers in the ministry.

But the principal impetus for the efforts to give women the right to ordination came with the founding of the International Association of Women Preachers (I.A.W.P.), later known as the American Association of Women Ministers and the International Association of Women Ministers. This ecumenical organization, the oldest of its kind, was organized on November 22, 1919, in St. Louis, Missouri, following a W.C.T.U. convention. Anna Howard Shaw was invited to serve as the organization's first president but had to decline because of ill health. Instead, the presidency went to Madeline Southard, a Methodist Episcopal evangelist who had first envisioned the concept of an organization for women preachers. Southard, who would also serve as first editor of the Association's newsletter, *The Woman's Pulpit*, would gain fame as a pastor, missionary, temperance lecturer, and writer. Her book, *The Attitude of Jesus*, was an early feminist classic. As an elected lay delegate to the 1920 and 1924

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3*The Woman's Pulpit* is the official journal, published quarterly, of the International Association of Women Ministers. The most complete file of early issues is found at the Schlesinger Library of Women's History at Radcliffe College.
General Conferences, Madeline Southard led the campaign to permit the ordination of women in the Methodist Episcopal Church.5

At its first meeting, the I.A.W.P. voted to send a memorial (a petition) to the 1920 General Conference, asking that women be licensed to preach. A licensed local preacher would not be ordained and would not hold membership in the annual conference, but could be appointed as a pastor, could baptize, and (in some states) could perform marriages. The memorial was proposed and drafted by Mrs. Sena Hartzell Wallace of Kansas, who "also directed the circulation of the memorial throughout the Church." Many such memorials reached the General Conference. The three Kansas Conferences and the New York Conference gave their unanimous endorsement. Among the memorialists were many district superintendents, a large number of presidents of colleges and universities, the presidents of Garrett Biblical Institute and Drew Theological Seminary, and the dean of Boston University School of Theology.6

Madeline Southard prepared an article on "Woman and the Ministry" for The Methodist Review.7 She used the article to "re-examine the arguments that have thus far kept [women] out of the ministry."8 Then she lifted up examples of pioneering women preachers like Catherine Booth, Susanna Wesley, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, Julia Ward Howe, and Frances Willard, and concluded:

Every forward step in bringing woman from the position of an ignorant chattel to her present place of intelligent co-operation in the world's work has been met by the vigorous and determined hostility of the majority of both men and women, good and bad alike. Every battle has been led in the beginning by a small group sneered at by their own generation as unfeminine, honored perhaps by a Susan B. Anthony amendment when they are dead.9

On May 10, 1920, Madeline Southard, representing the Southwest Kansas Conference, introduced the following resolution to the delegates of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church:

Whereas, Today the principle of equality of opportunity for women is being recognized in all fields of activity; and

Whereas, This General Conference has gone on record as urging political equality for women by requesting the Delaware house of representatives to sign the Susan B. Anthony amendment; therefore be it

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5 For information on Madeline Southard, I am indebted to Carol Lynn Yellin, who is custodian of her journals and other writings. The best biographical sketches in print are in the January–March 1969 edition of The Woman's Pulpit (Vol. 47, No. 5).
8 Southard, "Woman and the Ministry," 2.
9 Ibid., 10.
Resolved, That the General Conference approve ecclesiastical equality for women, that it remove all restrictions and limitations upon women in the service of the church, and that it instruct the proper committee to make any changes in the Discipline necessary to accomplish this end.  

In her speech on this resolution, Southard highlighted the careers of two Methodist women whose achievements were well known to every delegate. Of Anna Howard Shaw she said:

Forty years ago this May a woman came to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and asked that she be permitted to preach the gospel of the word of God in that church. She was refused, and went to another connection. A short time ago, when our nation was at a supreme crisis, it looked everywhere for a woman who might lead all the women of the nation to a place of maximum efficiency; and a telegram was sent to this woman whom we rejected, and Dr. Anna Howard Shaw was made president of the Women's Council of Defense for the nation.  

Southard also appealed to the memory of Frances Willard:

Another woman was elected to a General Conference, and when she came she was refused a seat. That woman today is recognized as among the chief prophets who have lived since the days of the apostles. I refer to Frances Willard . . . [who] said "My unconstrained preference would long ago have led me to the pastorate, but even my dear old mother church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, did not call a woman to her altars, and I was too timid to go without a call."  

This resolution was immediately the subject of vigorous debate. Two men rose to support it, followed by a delegate from Northwest India, who said that cultural conditions in his country would not allow for women preachers. Dr. Ray Allen of the Genesee Conference in upstate New York rose with a point of order. The resolution mandated changes in the Discipline but had not been printed for the delegates to study as was required in all cases of disciplinary revisions. After one further speech the resolution was referred to the Committee on Itinerancy. The committee brought its report to the floor of the conference on May 26. They recommended:

1. That the provisions of . . . the Discipline . . . bearing the title "Local Preachers," be so construed as to include women, except in so far as these provisions apply to candidates for the traveling ministry and for Deacon's and Elder's Orders. . . .
2. That the expedience of granting to women ordination and admission to the Annual Conference be referred to a commission . . . with instructions to report their conclusions to the General Conference of 1924.  

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10 The Daily Christian Advocate (official record of the 1920 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church), Tuesday, May 11, 1920, 190.
11 Ibid., 190–191.
12 Ibid., 191.
The Itinerancy Committee had dealt with this report late on the previous afternoon and, as a result of the late hour, only thirty-eight of the over one hundred committee members had been present. The report was approved by a vote of thirty-seven to one, with even Madeline Southard voting for the compromise which would give women preachers' licenses but not ordination or conference membership.  

However, on the floor of General Conference, delegates arose immediately to ask again that women be ordained as well as licensed. George Elliot, newly elected editor of the *Methodist Review*, moved to amend the report in order to "strike out 'ordination and.'" The effect of the amendment would have been to allow women to be ordained but not to become members of an annual conference. Elliot told the delegates:

I am not greatly afraid of the proposition of allowing the ordination of women. We had a great contest many years ago about the admission of women into the General Conference. Nearly 65 per cent of our membership were women and many were afraid if they were admitted that the seats would be flooded with femininity. As a matter of fact, we have had women in the General Conference in small numbers, and they have been most delightful company, and most useful in many of our discussions and deliberations. I am not afraid that admitting women to public positions is going to greatly change the old eternal status of the sexes. As long as June days come, with roses and moonshine, women are going to fall in love, and the great majority will become wives and mothers, the embodiment of eternal, supreme womanhood. But there is no reason why, in the need of the church, for filling vacancies and special services, we should not utilize these women to whom God has denied that privilege, but has made their motherhood a wider motherhood, and given them an even greater task.  

Elliot's amendment was supported by several delegates, including Madeline Southard, who was grateful that "without any consultation whatever . . . [Elliot's was] exactly the same amendment that I brought into the Committee on Itinerancy." Lizelia A. J. Moorer, a black woman representing the South Carolina Conference, said, "It is about time for the pillars of Methodism to go up again on the housetop, and get another vision which tells them that God is no respecter of persons."  

However, the amendment became bogged down in the long series of parliamentary maneuvers. By the time a vote was taken, the delegates were clearly confused, and several asked for clarification "as to what we're voting on." According to one observer, "The presiding officer stated the matter to be voted upon time and again, but calls for an interpretation of the motion failed to elicit the desired information, and when the vote was taken the amendment was declared lost. Despite attempts to clarify the

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mind of the conference, many failed to properly understand the vote.”19 The New York Christian Advocate offered the opinion that “many desired that full ministerial rights should be granted [to women], and if such action had been proposed, it would probably have been passed.”20

If the New York Christian Advocate was correct, then the cause of clergymen in Methodism was dealt a serious blow by the parliamentary maneuvering of a few delegates to the 1920 General Conference. However, the decision to license women as local preachers was, in itself, portrayed as “a victory for women.”21 Immediately, local churches began competing to be the first to license a woman preacher.22 With the establishment of a commission “to examine the expediency of granting to women ordination and admission to the Annual Conference,” Methodists looked forward to further debate on this issue at the 1924 General Conference.23

The weekly newspapers of the Methodist Episcopal Church kept the denomination aware of the issue. Articles appeared on women preachers in early Methodism,24 and on clergy women in the Methodist Protestant Church25 and the Swedish Lutheran Church.26 Meetings of the International Association of Women Preachers were also covered.27

As the date of the 1924 General Conference approached, debate increased for and against the ordination of women and their membership in annual conferences.28 Among those who joined in the discussion waged in the church press was Dr. Georgia Harkness. Harkness, who was at the time Associate Professor of Religious Education at Elmira College, would become the outstanding clergy woman of her generation and the leader of the movement for equal clergy rights for Methodist women during the next three decades. In an article published in the New York Christian Advocate just prior to the opening of conference, Harkness dealt with six “reasons generally given . . . [for] the exclusion of women from the ministry.” They were:

20The Christian Advocate, October 28, 1920, 1437.
21Northwestern Christian Advocate, 597.
22“First Women Local Preachers” (no author given), in Zion’s Herald, September 15, 1920, 1210–1222.
26The Christian Advocate, April 19, 1923, 486.
27Ibid., December 25, 1924, 1593.
28Ibid., June 14, 1923, 752.
1. that according to Scripture women must "keep silence in the churches"
2. that the ministry would take woman out of her natural sphere
3. that she is by nature unfitted for success in such work
4. that she would not be apt to make it a permanent occupation
5. that increased competition would tend to interfere with the tenure or salaries of men
6. that the Church would lose public esteem by the general admission of women to its ministry

She disputed each of these reasons and concluded:

... the issue does not lie wholly in ordination. Not many more women are preaching in those denominations where ordination is possible than in those where it is denied. The crux of the matter, to put it baldly, is that women cannot enter a field where they are not welcome. Ordination is desirable, I believe, to put the stamp of the Church's approval upon the admission of women to its ministry. But what is needed even more is a general recognition by pulpit and pew of the legitimate place of trained women in this field. Women will never find a welcome in the ministry until the press and our present religious leadership have remolded public sentiment. Ordination is a step in this direction, but it is a step—not the final goal.

The report of the Commission on Licensing and Ordaining women was presented to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church on Thursday morning, May 8, 1924. In the absence of Bishop Stuntz, who had chaired the commission, J. M. M. Gray of the Wyoming Conference (northeast Pennsylvania and a portion of nearby New York State) presented the report. The report affirmed "the validity of a woman's call to preach" and found a "very evident and acute need to an effective sacramental ministry on the part of women, in certain home and particularly in the foreign fields." But they also concluded that "in the connectional polity of Methodism, the ordination of women and their admission to the Annual Conference would introduce peculiar and embarrassing difficulties ... [because] our connectional polity guarantees to every effective minister a church ... ." Without spelling out the nature of these difficulties, the commission determined "that Methodism had had altogether too limited experience in licensing of women as preachers to provide a basis upon which a final decision ought to be reached." Therefore, they recommended unanimously "that the General Conference enact such measures as shall provide for the ordination of women as local preachers ... ."

This compromise, allowing women ordination but not conference membership, provoked a storm of controversy. No one objected to the ordination of women. But many protested the exclusion of clergywomen

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30 Ibid.
from the rights of annual conference membership, which included a guarantee of appointment as well as voice and vote at annual conference sessions. Delegates also objected that the report, four years in the making, was not printed and made available until the day before its presentation to the General Conference. Recognizing the validity of the latter concern, Gray asked that the debate be postponed so that those who disagreed “might have ample time to consider the amplifications of the report.”

Gray’s offer was initially ignored as delegates rose to debate the merits of the commission’s report and offer various amendments and motions. Many delegates were clamoring for attention, when a motion was heard to move the previous question. The *Western Christian Advocate* reported with understated glee on the event that followed:

> The climax came when Miss M. M. Southard, who had had difficulty in getting the floor from the rear of the auditorium, could no longer contain herself, when running to the front greatly excited, demanding that she be given the floor. She got it. Verily she did. Bishop Bristol could not do otherwise under the circumstances. She addressed the Conference in no uncertain language, which conformed to her feeling at that very moment.

One report added that “she shook her fist in the face of [the] bishop.”

It is difficult to say whether Southard’s outburst helped or hindered her cause. Certainly, she focused the attention of the denomination on the issue. The *Western Christian Advocate* called it “the most dramatic period so far of the conference.” The *Northwestern Christian Advocate* called it a “great debate,” “one of volcanic action and proportions.” This latter article offered the opinion that, before Southard’s speech, “it appeared that if the vote were taken then, the movement for the ordination of women would be lost.” Southard thus was able to continue discussion of the question, if only for a short time.

After her speech, further debate and parliamentary maneuvering continued. Finally, Ray Allen rose to ask for an adjournment so that he and others might “have time to prepare a proper substitute motion.” Allen’s suggestion was ultimately enacted, and conference adjourned for the day.

The next day, May 9, 1924, Allen returned with his substitute motion and explained:

> This substitute is amply seconded. Just hurriedly this morning we asked some people to second it by putting their names on it. No woman solicited any signature,
and we invited no woman to sign. This end of it is a man's movement. This is the substitute, very simple, very plain:

Resolved: That to women be granted the same ministerial rights and privileges as are granted to men. 38

Allen argued:

You want to be fair to everybody. Be fair now to the women. They have had a long struggle through the centuries. They have risen, they have almost arrived. So far as this particular thing is concerned in the Methodist Episcopal Church, I think practically everybody knows that they will be granted the same privileges that the ministers have at some near day, and if eventually, why not now? 39

Ray Allen's prophetic words did not sway the General Conference delegates. They defeated the substitute motion, and approved the Commission's report as originally presented. Women could be ordained as clergy, but not elected as clergy members of annual conferences. And Allen's prediction that women would be granted "the same privileges . . . at some near day" was rather too optimistic.40 It would be thirty-two years, nine more General Conferences, before the 1956 General Conference would approve full clergy rights for women. In the intervening years, advocates such as Madeline Southard continued to write on the subject of clergywomen's rights, 41 and supporters such as Ray Allen continued to lobby for them on the floor of General Conferences. 42 Georgia Harkness became the spiritual leader of the movement which would gain much of its support from the leadership of the women's missionary societies, and later the Woman's Society of Christian Service.

But the 1924 General Conference would stand as a landmark in the history of the women's rights movement in American Methodism. Historian Hilda Watrous claims that "[in] 1924, the year of the first presidential election in which women in the United States were fully empowered to participate, the women of America probably experienced the peak of their confidence, power and influence in both sacred and secular spheres." 43 Certainly this General Conference marked the culmination of the efforts of a generation of women to expand their rights and role in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The action which the conference did take, to allow for the ordination of women as clergy and pastors, ushered in a new era for Methodist clergywomen whose yearning for full equality with their clergy brethren would eventually be heard.

39 Ibid.
41 See Zion's Herald, February 8, 1928, 170–171.

Note: The title of this article derives from George Harkness's article "The Ministry as a Vocation for Women," in The Christian Advocate (New York), April 10, 1924, 454.