"YOU AND I ARE PARTNERS:"
A HERITAGE FOR CLERGY COUPLES
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN METHODISM

WILLIAM T. NOLL

During the past decade, The United Methodist Church has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of clergy couples, marriages in which both husband and wife serve in the ordained ministry. Throughout its history, Methodism has benefited from the pastoral and evangelistic skills of couples who heeded the call to preach the gospel within the Wesleyan connection. In nineteenth-century America women's preaching was often discouraged and Methodist policy, with a few exceptions, forbade women's ordination. Nevertheless, that era does provide outstanding examples of Methodists couples who together shared fully in a preaching ministry.

In his recent book, *The Minister's Wife*, Leonard I. Sweet refers to such couples as maintaining a "partner" relationship.\(^1\) "You and I are partners, with equal rights and ownerships."\(^2\) Thus, the Rev. William Willing spoke to his wife, Jennie, and thus they lived out a life-style in their ministries. In this paper, I refer to such couples as "preaching partners." These ministers, ordained, licensed, or lay, are the spiritual foreparents of the clergy couples of today.

Such preaching partnerships were an important component of the Methodist movement in England under the leadership of John Wesley. Wesley's own developing openness to the preaching of women has been well documented by Earl Kent Brown in his article, "Women of the Word," contained in the first volume of *Women in New Worlds*.\(^3\) John and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher are the most famous example of preaching partners in eighteenth-century England, and they were an important inspiration to many American Methodists. Other prominent partnerships include Seth and Dinah Evans (who serve as models for leading characters in George Eliot’s novel, *Adam Bede*), Mary and George Holder, and Hester and James Rogers.

---

In America, the earliest records of preaching partners date from the first half of the nineteenth-century. Among these pioneers are Fanny and Ebenezer Newell of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Jarena and Joseph Lee of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and William and Hannah Reeves of the Methodist Protestant Church. Despite the immense difficulties that they faced during the early days of the itinerant system, these couples were able to balance the demands of marriage, family, and ministry over one hundred and fifty years ago.

Ebenezer and Fanny Newell were actively involved in, and products of, the Second Great Awakening and the growing Methodist movement. Fanny and Ebenezer each produced an autobiography and Fanny is the subject of a recent study of Linda Burry, “Called by God, Forbidden by Man; the Ministry of Fanny Newell, 1809-1824.” Burry notes that the Newells were so dedicated to their ministry that they married “not out of love, but from a desire to serve God.” Ebenezer, who had been a bachelor itinerant for twelve years, saw that he had a “duty to bring (Fanny’s) gifts into the more public service of the church” by marrying her. For twenty-four years, until Fanny’s death, they shared the rigors of itinerant ministry throughout New England to the extent that their health allowed. Sometimes, Ebenezer would be forced to travel his circuit alone while Fanny stayed behind on the farm to care for their children and restore her own often precarious health. At other times, Ebenezer’s own health problems would force him to “locate” temporarily. But always they looked forward to returning to itinerant life together. While Ebenezer was a member of Conference, there is no record that Fanny ever sought ordination or licensing as a preacher, although she did speak publicly during at least one session of an Annual Conference.

Some smaller Methodist denominations displayed some limited openness to the idea of women’s preaching during this period. When Jarena Lee first sought blessing for her call to preach from African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Richard Allen, he put her off. But in 1817, after he had witnessed her preaching a particularly impressive extemporary sermon, Allen changed his mind and became a firm supporter of Jarena’s evangelistic work. Jarena’s husband, Joseph, was an African Methodist Episcopal pastor in Pennsylvania, but he died after only six years of marriage. Most of Jarena’s ministry was carried out while she was a widow.

\[\text{Linda Burry, } \text{"Called by God, Forbidden by Man; The Ministry of Fanny Newell" (Unpublished paper at the United Methodist Archives Center, Madison, N.J.), 18; Fanny Newell, } \text{Memoirs of Fanny Newell; written by herself.} \text{. (Springfield, Mass.: O. Scott and E. F. Newell, Merriam, Little and Co., 1832); Ebenezer Francis Newell, Life and Observations of Rev. E. F. Newell.} \text{. (Worster, Mass.: C. W. Ainsworth, 1847).}
\]
\[\text{E. F. Newell, 138.}
\]
\[\text{Fanny Newell, 56-57.}
\]
\[\text{Jarena Lee, Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of}
\]
William and Hannah Reeves were raised in England, with its heritage of Wesleyan preaching partners. Hannah was an itinerant preacher with the Bible Christian Church, a Wesleyan denomination. William was a lay preacher with the Wesleyan Methodists, who decided to emigrate to America. Upon his arrival he became an itinerant with the newly formed Methodist Protestant Church in Ohio. William then wrote to Hannah, and asked her to come to America to become his bride. Upon her arrival in 1831, Hannah and her new husband immediately embarked upon a "bridal tour of preaching."

Soon afterwards, William's Annual Conference invited Hannah to preach, and, after her sermon, "appoint(ed) a committee to wait on her and ascertain her wishes in relation to her connection with the itinerancy, whether she desires to be considered effective, and take an appointment." Hannah turned down the offer, but continued a long and effective preaching ministry in William's appointments.

It was not until 1866 that a Methodist Protestant Annual Conference ordained its first clergy couple. The Wabash Conference in Indiana ordained Moses and Helenor Davison as deacons at the conference session held in the parlor of Helenor's father, the Rev. John Alter. Helenor thereby became the first woman ordained in an American Methodist denomination. She and her husband itinerated together until shortly before her death in 1877.

During the years after the Civil War, the Methodist Episcopal Church, while not allowing for women's ordination, did become more open to the idea of women preaching. Some women were even granted preacher's licenses during the years 1868 to 1880. At this time many Methodists were being influenced by the writings of Phoebe and Walter Palmer, leaders of the American holiness movement. Neither of the Palmers was ordained, but both were active members of the Methodist Episcopal Church; they founded Methodism's famous Five Points Mission in New York City. In addition, they edited *The Guide To Holiness*, the influential journal of the movement and conducted holiness revivals throughout the United States. Phoebe Palmer wrote *Promise of the Father*, a defense of the right
of women to preach, based primarily upon the first two chapters of the book of Acts.\textsuperscript{12}

Other important leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church were preaching partners. Edward Taylor gained fame as the “Sailor Preacher” during his pastorate at Bethel Church in Boston, where he ministered to sailors in the Boston port area. His wife, Debora, was involved in every facet of this ministry, helping to establish the Seamen’s Aid Society, preaching in the Bethel pulpit, and earning the nickname “the Rev. Mrs. Taylor.”\textsuperscript{13} “King and queen, father and mother, they held joint sovereignty over their small but far-reaching realm.”\textsuperscript{14}

Jennie Fowler Willing was a noted novelist, lecturer, educator, and evangelist. She was a founder and corresponding secretary of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and presided at the organizing session of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union. Her husband, William, was successively a member of the Genessee, Rock River, and New York Annual Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church. While serving as a presiding elder in the Rock River Conference in Illinois, William helped Jennie obtain a local preacher’s license, and gave her all but nominal pastoral control over a local church.\textsuperscript{15}

Charles St. John was also a pastor in the Methodist Episcopal Church. His wife, Eugenia, began her preaching career filling her husband’s pulpit while he was ill. She soon became disenchanted with the opportunities offered to women in the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1889 Eugenia was ordained by the Kansas Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church and three years later was elected by the conference as a clergy delegate to the General Conference. The Methodist Protestant General Conference had never recognized the legality of previous Annual Conference action in ordaining women like Helenor Davison, so Eugenia’s presence as a delegate caused extended debate. Her election and orders were upheld by the 1892 and 1896 General Conferences where she played a leading role in the ongoing controversy about the proper role of women in the church.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1889, the United Brethren in Christ opened up the possibilities for preaching partners by voting to allow the ordination of women. Among the first female ordinands was Maggie Thompson Elliot, who had received a license to preach in 1874, and whose husband, John, was a minister in


\textsuperscript{13}Haven and Russell, 72.

\textsuperscript{14}Haven and Russell, 369.

\textsuperscript{15}Agnew, 623-625; Frances Willard, \textit{Women and Temperance} (Hartford: Park Publishers, 1883), 147-153; \textit{Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Spring Conferences of 1895} (New York: Hunt and Eaton).

\textsuperscript{16}Methodist Recorder, Vol. 53, No. 22 (May 28, 1892), 8.
the Indiana Conference. After Maggie's ordination, they itinerated together for many years in central Illinois. Records of the United Brethren in Christ list several other clergy couples serving the church in the 1890's.17

While the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was extremely reluctant to recognize or approve of leadership roles for women, Orceneth and Rebecca Gilleland Fisher were able to develop a preaching partnership within the denomination by serving on the home mission fields of Texas, California, and Oregon. Together they can be credited with establishing the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in the Pacific Northwest. Orceneth was a dynamic preacher, pastor, and presiding elder, who founded for the denomination Corvallis College, now Oregon State University. He also attempted an unsuccessful mission in Mexico. Bishop O. P. Fitzgerald described his preaching: “I had seen and heard preachers who glowed in the pulpit — this man burned. His words poured forth in molten flood, his face shone like a furnace heated from within, his large blue eyes flashed with the lightening of impassioned sentiment . . .”18 During camp meetings, Rebecca would spend her days cooking in the tent, but at night she would “enter the altar . . . and point penitents to the world’s redeemer.”19 She was also a writer and the founder of the “Daughters of the Republic of Texas.” She has been called “the Mother of Texas.”20

These couples were able in a remarkable way to combine marriage and mutual ministry within a Methodist tradition. In her study of the life of Fanny Newell, Linda Burry points out that “(t)he Wesleyan tradition offered fertile ground for the birth and growth of women preachers.” This tradition offers a theology of conversion for all, Wesley’s own openness to a woman’s call to preach, and the system of lay preaching and class meetings which gave women opportunities for leadership and public speaking.21 In the latter half of the nineteenth century the growing number and effectiveness of women’s organizations in Methodist churches provided additional avenues for women to develop speaking and leadership skills.

Nevertheless, preaching partnerships in American Methodism faced tremendous obstacles in the nineteenth century. Leonard Sweet describes the hardships and suffering endured by women who itinerated with their husbands:

20William Sweet, 477.
21Burry, 2-3.
Ministers and their wives could be sent to circuits where there were no churches, no parsonages, and no official members. The mountains were the only pulpits, and the heavens the only sounding boards. The wives slept with their husbands on “Jacob’s pillow” by night, and by day they caught colds with their husbands fording “Jericho rivers.” Many a minister’s wife wept in some desolate forest, cradling in her arms a dead child. Many a minister’s wife had to bury her children hundreds of miles apart; some had no two children occupying the same cemetery. More than a few wives of preachers dropped like autumn leaves.  

Of course, the husbands suffered as well. Itineracy meant frequent transfers, constant travel, no permanent home, poverty level wages, and, often, an early death.

In the early years of the century Bishop Asbury was an outspoken proponent of a celeb ate Methodist clergy. His reasoning seemed eminently practical: “I calculate that we have lost, the traveling labors of two hundred of the best men in America, or the world, by marriage and consequent location.”

Under Asbury and other early Methodist bishops, “marriage was a decision that caused a couple to ‘go far’ in the ministry, often as far as one could get into the wilderness.” Hannah Reeves pointed to an additional worry for a clergy couple: “You might appoint me to Cincinnati and Mr. Reeves to Pittsburgh, and you know, sirs, that would never do.”

Most itinerant wives remained at home, while their husbands traveled the circuit. Those who chose to go along faced the ever present dangers of the road. Orceneth Fisher wrote of one adventure that he and Rebecca shared in Oregon:

> The next morning we crossed the (Pitt) river just below the mouth of Fall River, which literally falls into Pitt River at this place. The fall is perhaps from 30 to 50 feet perpendicular. And just below the ferry there is a cascade; I know not how long, in which the waters rush and tumble over the rocks with great fury. After crossing the ferry we had a long steep grade to ascend . . . Our road was a dug way in the steep hillside, and below us was the wild cataracts. About 2/3 the way up, my mules concluded to go no further in that direction and set themselves back with all their force, cramping the carriage so as to run it off the bank into the roaring river below. The parapet wall on the brinks was only a log, about a foot thick! Two strong young men of our company saw my peril and sprang behind the carriage and with all their might kept it from going over, till in the last extremity, when all hope was giving way, the mules still doing their best against us, one of the breast straps parted as if it had been cut with a knife. This alone saved us! . . . I felt that God saved us . . . How satan would have triumphed if he had tumbled my team and all I had into the river and left me with my wife and two little children in this wild region in a state of utter helplessness and thus defeat my Oregon Mission!”

---

22 Leonard Sweet, 62.
23 Stevens, 214.
24 Leonard Sweet, 48.
George Brown, biographer of Hannah Pierce Reeves, tells of a similar misadventure which befell Hannah and her son on her itinerant rounds:

They were traveling to an appointment in a little wagon; the harness was poor, and as they were descending a long and steep hill, the hold-back strap broke, the horse became frightened, and the dear little child was thrown out of the carriage, but not seriously injured. Such was the goodness of God . . . But not in the least discouraged, as soon as the harness could be fixed, on they went, and she preached as if nothing had occurred to disturb her mind.27

The stories of pioneer preaching partners like the Fishers, Reeves, and Newells refer frequently to the illnesses they suffered throughout their itinerant labors. William and Hannah often substituted for one another's preaching appointments during their illnesses. Three days after the birth of their first child, Fanny Newell contracted a fever and appeared to be near death. Nonetheless, she asked that the scheduled worship service be held in the home where she was bedridden and proceeded “from the bed to exhort the people.”28 Within two weeks she and Ebenezer were riding the circuit with their new child.

The responsibilities of rearing children naturally provided additional challenges for preaching partners. Society expected that “the important duty of training young children (should be) left to the mother . . . If he is a faithful minister of Christ, (the father’s) heart and hands are fully occupied with that work.”29 Hannah Reeves trained her son so that she could leave him

...in the care of any strange woman, and it might be taken to church with perfect safety; while she was preaching in the pulpit, and however long the sermon might be, it would remain perfectly quiet to the end. But the moment she closed the Bible, it would say, ‘Now, let me go to my mamma.’ And she would receive him up into the pulpit, and caress him, while some brother would close the meeting.30

However, there is a great deal of evidence that Hannah and the other wives studied here were extremely limited in their capacity to itinerate while raising children.

In a society which often condemned or ridiculed female preachers, preaching partners faced more than their share of public censure. Society expected the clergy husband to occupy “a conspicuous and very responsible place in the little circle of which he must necessarily be the centre.”31 His wife could “best encourage his heart and hold up his hands, when he is ready to faint under his burdens.”32 Jarena Lee feared that she might

27Brown, 197.
28Fanny Newell, 110-111.
29H. M. Eaton, The Itinerant’s Wife: Her Qualifications, Duties, Trials, and Rewards (New York: Lane and Scott, 1851), 43.
30Brown, 201.
31Eaton, 89.
32Eaton, 90.
be expelled from the church for the “indecorum” of preaching. 

William Reeves had to deal with the discouraging realization that Hannah was a more “acceptable preacher among their congregations:

So he changed both his manner of preaching and his costume. He shaved off his whiskers and purchased a coarse cloth coat, to accommodate [sic] his people.

Preaching partners also faced the disapproval of their clergy colleagues and superiors. Jerena and Joseph Lee waited patiently for seven years until Bishop Richard Allen changed his mind and approved her call to preach. Members of the Wabash Annual Conference introduced a resolution questioning the validity of the orders they had granted to Helenor Davison. The Maryland Annual Conference was so opposed to the ordination of Eugenia St. John in Kansas that they refused even to consider a General Conference overture on the question of ordaining women.

Even family members became upset with the call to public ministry of preaching partners. Fanny Newell’s father warned her: “Fanny, you must not pray and speak so loud, for you will wear yourself out.” Debora Taylor reported that her “daughter came home much mortified” after hearing her mother’s extemporaneous first sermon. The young William Reeves absolutely refused to go to hear the preacher who would in a few years become his bride because he objected to the idea of women preaching. He finally consented to go, “anticipating some amusement, at least, from the presumed mistakes and blunders she would make.”

But family members could also be extremely supportive. It can be assumed that John Alter, hosting the Annual Conference session in his parlor, was a supportive influence in the decision to ordain his daughter and son-in-law, Helenor and Moses Davison. Hannah Reeves mother was herself a local preacher, and Hannah’s “most intimate and confidential counsellor.”

A preacher partnership did have its own unique rewards. The partnership itself seemed to many if not all of the partners the fulfillment of a divine calling. Ebenezer Newell wrote that he “viewed it as my duty to bring (Fanny’s) gifts into the more public service of the church” by marrying her. As Fanny accepted his proposal of marriage, she prayed: “O God, thou knowest that for thy sake I do this, not for ease, honor, riches, or pleasure.”

---

33 Lee, 17.
34 Brown, 195-196.
35 1967 Journal, 127; Coons, 42.
36 Methodist Recorder, Vol. 54, No. 16 (April 22, 1893), 1.
37 Fanny Newell, 44; Burry, 10.
38 Haven and Russell, 373.
39 Brown, 59.
40 Brown, 35, 260.
41 Ebenezer Newell, 138.
Such a partnership made for a strong and supportive marriage union. Debora Taylor was convinced as a child that “if ever I was a wife, I would prefer a traveling minister to any other being on earth . . . I saw no reason why a woman should not speak and pray in prayer meetings as well as a man. I would often look at a minister’s wife, and think how great her privileges were.”43 Hannah Reeves told her Annual Conference: “All I desire is . . . to labor and do all the good I can in connection with my husband.”44 Fanny Newell found “it good to journey with one, who delights to sing and pray.”45 On the male side, William Willing told his wife, Jennie: “I have no greater pleasure than in helping you up to the level of your best.”46 While preaching partners often married out of a sense of obligation to God, their journals and letters reveal a deep bond of love and respect for one another.

Some preaching partners saw themselves and their partnerships as role models for bringing about a needed change in the ways that society looked at ministry and marriage. William Reeves believed that “one of the ways of banishing denominational prejudice is this new prodigy of female preaching.”47 Arguing for the right of women to preach, Eugenia St. John wrote:

According to God's word, all the church legislation in the earth, all the prejudice of mankind, will not stay the wheels of progress in the kingdom of God . . . Let woman's efficiency be tested, let her be tried, yea, even sorely tempted. As she is proven so shall her work stand and her place be given her by the hand of the Lord. We have no fear but of victory at last.48

There are some slight evidence of a change in attitudes by the close of the century. Eugenia St. John reported on the atmosphere of her Kansas Conference in the 1890's:

I come to represent the Kansas Conference, a band of devoted workers, men and women, who lose sight of prejudice in the higher aims for eternity. The women ministers of this conference are treated by the President and brethren with deference and a respect that brings back large respect and confidence in the strong arm and hearts of our brothers. Women preach before the conference, are active in committee work, assist in sacramental service, and a delightful harmony exists throughout the entire annual conference. The President, with his wife, a lay delegate, take high positions on all questions of progress. They are an inspiration in teaching and example. Our President equalizes the work, giving strength to the weak, and building from the interior to the exterior of all the Lord's work. We pray for the same harmony to extend of the entire field of the Methodist Protestant Church.49

42Fanny Newell, 83.
43Haven and Russell, 77.
44Brown, 138.
45Fanny Newell, 94.
46Willard, 151.
47Brown, 123.
You And I Are Partners

The Rev. St. John's prayer has not yet been fully answered in the life of the successor denomination to the Methodist Protestants, The United Methodist Church. But much has changed, and it may be fairly said that her vision for the church is a great deal closer to reality today. Still, most of those who minister as clergy couples in the United Methodist Church today see themselves as pioneers, witnessing to a new life-style of service for the church. Perhaps the example of those partners who proclaimed together the word of God in a previous century may serve as an inspiration and a vision of hope for a church that is yet to be.