

ORDINATION OF WOMEN IN THE UNITED METHODIST TRADITION

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I

On June 16, 1988, at the Catholic Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Sacramento, California, a remarkable retirement celebration occurred. Bishop Leontine Turpeau Current Kelly, completing her four and only years as an active bishop of The United Methodist Church, asked that we honor her (at the California-Nevada Annual Conference session) by devoting a whole evening, not to her life and ministry, but to all women in ministry throughout Christian history. With the gifted leadership of her friends Diedra and Jim Kriewald, we celebrated the history of women in ministry in word, song, and story. Women played the parts of historical figures while giant puppets depicted New Testament women, early and medieval women, Susanna Wesley, Harriet Tubman, Mary McLeod Bethune, and, finally, Leontine Kelly.

Bishop Kelly knew that women have been in ministry in the name of Jesus ever since Mary bore Jesus, ever since women disciples followed and challenged Jesus, ever since Mary Magdalene ran to tell the other disciples that the stone was rolled away and that she had seen the risen Christ. But ordination of women to "Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service" came much, much later. The story is long and hard and fascinating, filled with diverse faithful women with marvelous gifts, perseverance, wisdom, and commitment. Strong among these women was Anna Howard Shaw, whose 150th birth anniversary was celebrated at Boston University School of Theology in early October 1997, at the Annual Meeting of the Historical Society of The United Methodist Church. It was striking to discover that the 1994 edition of Anna Howard Shaw's autobiography, *The Story of a Pioneer* (originally published in 1915), includes a foreword by Bishop Leontine T. C. Kelly.

The "modern" beginnings for United Methodist women in ministry came by way of *laywomen* who took seriously their baptisms, their learnings from Bible stories told by parents and teachers, and their Christian commitment. These foundations led them to teach others, to evangelize, to raise money to support overseas and home missions, and to go as missionaries themselves. Elaine Magalis in her book, *Conduct Becoming to a*

Woman: Bolted Doors and Burgeoning Missions, summarizes the story well: "While the official mission boards took little notice of her activities ["her" refers to the missionary wife, and later to the single woman missionary], the women's society sustained a close, personal relationship with her."¹

By 1869, women grew impatient with their curtailed role in mission (women raising the money, while men in charge of mission boards dispensed it). They determined to organize the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church² "[f]or the purpose of engaging and uniting the efforts of the women of the Church in sending out and supporting female missionaries, native Christian teachers and Bible women in foreign lands . . ."³ Women of the other denominations which now make up The United Methodist Church soon formed their own "women's foreign missionary societies." Women were sent from these societies directly to China, India, Liberia, and other parts of Africa, and in the United States to serve among Native Americans and Spanish speaking immigrants. Although the story of these *women missionaries* is beyond the scope of this paper, that is where direct involvement and leadership within the predecessor denominations of The UMC began for women. In fact, in 1910, the Women's Missionary Council of The Methodist Episcopal Church, South had as their motto: "Grow we must, even if we outgrow all that we love."⁴

Another strong affirmation of women in ministry occurred within the *deaconess movement*, which flowered in post-Civil War America. From 1870 until the turn of the century, Protestant denominations established over 140 deaconess homes in which almost 2,000 women were trained as deaconesses in Christian service. Of 2,000 Protestant deaconesses serving at the turn of the century, 1,200 were Methodists.⁵ The Methodist Episcopal General Conference of 1888 endorsed the deaconess movement. Norma Taylor Mitchell notes that this movement enabled women to work for almost nothing on behalf of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the urban and rural low-income areas of America. It is telling that the same General Conference refused to seat five lay women delegates (Frances E. Willard among them) who had been duly elected from their respective annual conferences.⁶ In 1901 the

¹Elaine Magalis, *Conduct Becoming to a Woman: Bolted Doors and Burgeoning Missions* (New York: Women's Division of the Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1973), 13.

²Magalis, 20–22.

³Mary Isham, *Valorous Ventures* (Boston: Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, Methodist Episcopal Church, 1936), quoted in Magalis, 14.

⁴Noreen Tatum, *A Crown of Service: A Story of a Woman's Work in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South from 1878–1949* (Nashville: The Parthenon Press, 1960), 386.

⁵Keller, Rosemary, Gerald Moede and Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Called to Serve: The United Methodist Diaconate* (Nashville: Division of Diaconal Ministry of the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 1987), 26.

⁶Norma Taylor Mitchell, "From Social to Radical Feminism: A Survey of Emerging Diversity in Methodist Women's Organizations, 1869–1974," *A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review*, Methodist History News Bulletin (April 1975), 28.

General Conference of the United Brethren in Christ voted to sponsor deaconesses; in 1903, the Evangelical Association created a deaconess order.

Lucy Rider Meyer, founder of the Chicago Training School for Deaconess Service (later to be merged with Garrett Biblical Institute), believed the deaconess movement was a step in opening further doors for women in church and society. Many deaconesses advocated the ordination of women, and the expanding of the leadership of laywomen in the church. Scarritt Bible and Training School was the first deaconess training school in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South with vision and direction from Belle Harris Bennett, a southern Methodist supporter of missionaries. Mrs. Bennett was inspired by Lucy Rider Meyer when she visited the Chicago Training School.

In addition to the women who were missionaries and deaconesses, the leadership of diverse lay women in their own home congregations through the years was stalwart—as Sunday School teachers, as mentors to children and youth, as volunteers throughout the church, and as pastors' wives.⁷

We must lift up the importance of *United Methodist Women* (and its predecessor societies and guilds) through the years, and the Women's Division of the Board of Global Ministries and its predecessor groups. It was through the Women's Division that the Study Commission on Women in the Church was instituted in 1968 by the General Conference, which led to the decision by the 1972 General Conference to have a Commission on the Status and Role of Women. The Commission still stands as advocate, catalyst, and monitor for and with women, both lay and clergy, in The United Methodist Church.

II

But can women be authorized by the church to preach? Can they receive licenses from their conferences to preach? Or do Bible and tradition, reason and experience prohibit women in the preaching role? Within 19th century American Methodism, the arguments raged. Numerous women, probably too vast to number were we to count them all, testified publicly and privately that God's Spirit was calling them to preach the Gospel and to be among God's ordained ministers. But with male church authorities denying that this could be possible, given Scripture, tradition, experience, and certainly "reason," many women began to doubt their call. Others, however, pressed on, knowing they were called to preach and not allowing church practice to deter them from their God-given mission. As Dennis Dickerson, professor of History at Williams College and Historiographer of the A.M.E. Church, stated:

⁷For a view of the contemporary scene and the stories of eight remarkable lay women of the 1990s, see Mary Elizabeth Moore, "One Spirit—Many Stories: Contemporary Laywomen Share Their Vocational Visions" in Rosemary Skinner Keller, ed. *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in The United Methodist Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 265–287.

. . . A.M.E., A M.E. Zion, and C.M.E. women preachers, like their counterparts in Euro-American religious bodies, derived their authority through sanctification experiences. Since authority from the Holy Spirit was superior to denominational doctrines, unordained women were empowered to preach. . . . [M]ost of these Wesleyan women functioned as preachers, pastors, and evangelists without the benefit of ordination. The cumulative effect of their practical achievements, especially in distant and difficult assignments, made their arguments for ordination irresistible Moreover, those in the hierarchy took seriously the warnings of Jarena Lee . . . that no churchman should risk thwarting the will of God who alone calls men and women to preach.⁸

In 1847, a United Brethren woman, Charity Opheral, received a “commendation” to preach, though not a license; by 1849 she was granted a license. Lydia Sexton, also a United Brethren preacher, was granted a license by her local church quarterly conference in Illinois in 1851. She recorded the reaction of one of her antagonists when she applied for a license from her church. He said, “I don’t care what you say about women preaching. I know that God never called a woman to preach his gospel. He made roosters to crow, not hens. My house is a preacher’s home; but if that crowing hen should stop here I would not ask her in, but tell her to go home and wash dishes.”⁹

Though in 1859 the Illinois Annual Conference refused to grant Lydia Sexton a license to preach, she served as an itinerant preacher in Illinois, Indiana, and Kansas between 1851 and 1869. In 1885, the year of her death, the church house of the United Brethren Church published her autobiography, affirming her ministry.¹⁰

Margaret Newton Van Cott became the first Methodist Episcopal woman to receive a preacher’s license in 1869, through the New York Conference. The names of women called to preach and requesting official denominational licenses to do so continued. Some of them were given licenses and some of them were not: Amanda Smith, Mary Clarke Nind, Jennie Fowler Willing, Amanda Way, Anna Oliver, Anna Howard Shaw—to name but a few.

The North Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church (later known as the Methodist Protestant Church) ordained Helenor M. Davison deacon in 1866. That same Conference asked General Conference to clarify the issue of women’s ordination. The 1871 General Conference halted such ordination, leaving Helenor Davison’s situation unclear, “though she continued to preach in her clergy husband’s appointment until her death in 1877.”¹¹ Lee Carpenter

⁸Dennis C. Dickerson, “‘Did Not Mary First Preach the Risen Saviour’: Women Preachers within Wesleyan Black Denominations,” Speech given for the Historical Society of the United Methodist Church, Boston University School of Theology, October 4, 1997.

⁹Lydia Sexton, *Autobiography* (Dayton, Ohio: United Brethren Publishing House, 1882), 396, quoted in Magalis, 110.

¹⁰Don W. Holter, *The Lure of Kansas: The Story of Evangelicals and United Brethren* (Kansas West Commission on Archives and History and Kansas East Commission on Archives and History, 1990), 70–71.

¹¹Kenneth E. Rowe, “Methodist Women’s Struggle for the Right to Preach: Some Landmark Events,” Drew University Theological School, 1990.

note that, in 1911, Helenor Davison was listed among “our honored dead” in the Indiana Conference Minutes as “entering the traveling connection in 1863 and served for 13 years.”¹²

The number of able, eloquent, dedicated women being invited into pulpits, and beginning their own evangelistic centers became quite threatening to the male leadership of the Methodist Episcopal Church, which, in the General Conference of 1880, declared that women would no longer be licensed as preachers. This was precipitated by the request for ordination of Anna Oliver and Anna Howard Shaw, both licensed preachers and both graduates of Boston University School of Theology. That General Conference revoked the rights of women to hold local preacher’s licenses, while affirming women as Sunday school superintendents, class leaders, and stewards. It also refused to take action on the request for ordination of Anna Oliver and Anna Howard Shaw. As a result, Shaw left the Methodist Episcopal Church, and joined the Methodist Protestant Church, into whose New York Conference she was ordained, later in 1880, despite bitter opposition. A stained glass window of the resurrection (Mary meeting the angel at the empty tomb) was erected in the Methodist Protestant Church at Tarrytown, New York, with the caption: “Commemorating the Brave Strong Christian Stand of this Church in Ordaining to the Ministry, October 12, 1880, Anna Howard Shaw, whom Other Churches Persistently Refused to Recognize as a Christian Minister.” This window, in more recent years, was given to Boston University School of Theology where it hangs today in a prominent stairwell. Anna Oliver stayed in the Methodist Episcopal Church and pressed her case for years, albeit unsuccessfully.

The 1989 annual conference session of The Southern New England Conference voted posthumous clergy membership with recognition to Anna Howard Shaw and Anna Oliver, apologizing for the bad behavior of the 1880 General Conference and their being denied admission to the earlier New England Conference.

The 1889 United Brethren General Conference approved the licensing, ordination, and conference membership for women. Ella Niswonger of the Central Illinois Annual Conference was the first woman granted full clergy rights by the United Brethren Church. In that same year, without denominational authorization, the Kansas Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church ordained Eugenia St. John, a popular evangelist and lecturer.

From 1880 to 1920, the situation was ambiguous regarding women preachers in the Methodist Episcopal Church while the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, flatly refused to license or ordain women. In 1924, women in the Methodist Episcopal Church were given limited clergy rights. They could be ordained as local deacons or local elders, but not conference members;

¹²Lee Carpenter, “Anna Howard Shaw: pioneer!” printed brochure of the Anna Howard Shaw Center, Boston University School of Theology, n.d.

thus there were no guaranteed appointments, no pension, no vote in annual conferences.

In 1919, The American Association of Women Preachers (later renamed The International Association of Women Ministers or IAWM) was founded by an evangelical Methodist woman pastor from Kansas named Madeline Southard. Articles in the IAWM journal between 1924 and 1956 helped press the cause of women and ordination.

In 1938, just prior to the merger into the Methodist Church in 1939, there was still a paragraph in the *Discipline* of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South which read:

Women Not Recognized as Preachers—Our church does not recognize women as preachers, with authority to occupy the pulpit, to read the Holy Scriptures, and to preach, as ministers of the Lord Jesus Christ; nor does it authorize a preacher in charge to invite a woman claiming to be a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ to occupy our pulpits, to expound the Scriptures as a preacher. Such invitations and services are against the authority and order of our Church.¹³

In 1939, with the formation of The Methodist Church, the Methodist Protestant Church gave up the practice of full clergy membership for women in order to join with the Methodist Episcopal Church (which ordained women but did not grant conference membership) and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (which had not ordained women, but then agreed to begin to ordain them as local deacons and elders). In 1947, with the formation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the United Brethren Church gave up the practice of full clergy rights for women to unite with the Evangelical Church which had no such rights.

I want now to affirm the vital ministries of the foremothers and sisters within the Methodist Episcopal Church who were local elders (ordained but having no conference membership and no traveling membership). They founded churches, served in rural areas for very low pay, and were faithful pastors.

In the mid 1970s, Martha Rowlett (clergywoman then of the California-Nevada Annual Conference and now of the California Pacific Annual Conference) wrote an excellent article on some of these lay pastors of the California-Nevada Annual Conference, published in *The Pacific Historian*. She wrote about full time women pastors in Stockton (in 1924), in Sonoma County (four women in neighboring churches), in the Smith River area among Native American persons, and in the eastern section of Nevada. She wrote of Dorothy Gleason White who organized seven churches and got them "on their feet" before she was succeeded by male pastors who were conference members.¹⁴ Such stories could be paralleled in many other annual conferences.

¹³*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South* (Nashville: Publishing House, Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1938), 435.

¹⁴Martha G. Rowlett, "Women of the Ministry: California-Nevada Conference of the United Methodist Church," (*The Pacific Historian*, Vol. 22, No. 1, n.d), 61–70.

III

Finally, in 1956, after years of work, including petitions since the 1940s from the Women's Division of the Board of Missions (now the Board of Global Ministries), support from numerous persons, and some 2000 petitions on the issue, the General Conference of The Methodist Church acted decisively, voting full access to the "itinerant ministry" which meant conference membership and guaranteed appointments. Georgia Harkness wrote:

In the General Conference of 1952, after repeated attempts to secure full clergy rights for women in successive General Conferences had been rejected, the matter came up in its closing moments. It was passed over rapidly with the usual rejection, to the accompaniment of considerable laughter. I may be divulging some unwritten history when I say that some of the women present resolved that it was no longer to be treated as a laughing matter! The consequence was action by the Woman's Society of Christian Service which resulted in over 2,000 petitions on the subject to the General Conference of 1956; between three and four hours of vigorous debate on the floor of the Conference, mainly between men on both sides of the issue; and a vote for the full eradication of official sex discrimination in the ministry of the Methodist Church. (I purposely sat in silence, for there were able and discerning men to carry the issue, and I had long before learned that this is often the surest way to get something passed.)¹⁵

In 1956 a sentence was added to the *Doctrines and Discipline of The Methodist Church, 1956*: "Women are included in all provisions of the Discipline referring to the ministry."¹⁶ (However, it is telling to note that the male pronouns for ordained clergy continued in the *Discipline* until 1964). Now women could be appointed to churches, have full votes in annual conferences, and be eligible for clergy pensions, as were men. This is taken for granted today in The United Methodist Church, but the struggle of the earlier sisters was very hard.

Here is where some of us come in. We remember Georgia Harkness who chose to remain a local elder her entire life. She was a teacher who did not feel called to the itinerant ministry, but who worked tirelessly for the full ordination of women prior to 1956. We remember Maude Keister Jensen, first woman to be received "on trial" in absentia, in the Central Pennsylvania Conference in 1956. We remember Grace E. Huck, stalwart member of the North Dakota (now Dakotas) Annual Conference, who was received into conference membership on May 22, 1956, after years of serving many churches as pastor and as director of Christian education. The Rev. Ms. Huck made clear in her autobiographical statement that whereas she received an appointment in her annual conference and was present to respond to the historic questions, Mrs. Jensen told her that she had never asked for nor received an appointment from her annual conference, as she was serving as a missionary in Korea.¹⁷

¹⁵Georgia Harkness, *Women in Church and Society: A Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 30.

¹⁶*The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church, 1956* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1956), 115.

¹⁷Grace E. Huck, "I was not disobedient to the Heavenly Vision." Speech given for the North Central Jurisdiction Commission on Archives and History, Bismarck, ND, 1997.

We remember Myrtle Saylor Speer, present and very alive in January 1975, at the first United Methodist Clergywomen's Consultation in Nashville where she spoke of her ministry through the years. Since the 1970s, at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary the Myrtle Saylor Speer Award has been given each year to the graduating woman student who epitomizes the kind of ministry which Speer pioneered. We remember, in the California-Nevada Conference, Louise Long, Eva Maxwell, and Jessie Todd, the first three women to be granted full conference membership there. Each reader may recall the names of these "local elder" women of your conferences, who were received into conference membership in 1956, clergywomen pioneers who paved the way. Soon after 1956, two Methodist women, Gusta Robinette in Sumatra and Margaret Henrichsen in Maine, were appointed district superintendents. As Georgia Harkness wrote of their appointments: "and the heavens did not fall!"¹⁸

At the time of General Conference 1956, I was about to graduate from college. I had been "born into" Kings Highway Methodist Church in Brooklyn, where my father was organist and choir director and my mother was active in the choir and the Women's Society of Christian Service. I felt a strong call to ordained pastoral ministry while at Swarthmore College. I received a license to preach while in college. I entered Union Theological Seminary in New York, doing field education first in a Methodist Church in the Bronx and then at Embury Methodist Church in Queens Village.

I remember well a meeting of the New York East Conference Board of Ministerial Training and Qualifications (BMTQ): a room full of men in dark suits (some with clergy collars, most with white shirts and dark ties) examining me as to whether I was worthy to be continued in the license to preach, and then later whether I was worthy to be ordained deacon. I recall that questions concerned whether I could adequately serve as a pastor if I were to marry and have children. I remember saying that I felt called to the Gospel ministry and presumed I would deal with the issue of marriage and children when and if those opportunities arose. There were some very supportive men in that company and some who had real doubts. My colleague and friend, Jeanne Audrey Powers, recalls going before her BMTQ in Minnesota with white gloves and hat, and being asked no theological questions. Friends married to male seminarians who went before Boards of Ministry at that time share sad memories of being advised by bishops and other ecclesiastical leaders to put their desire to be ordained on hold, so "you won't get in the way of your clergy husband's opportunities."

In 1958, at the end of my second year at Union Theological Seminary in New York, I was ordained deacon by Bishop Frederick Buckley Newell, together with Noemi Diaz, an older Cuban woman who was serving the Church of All Nations in Manhattan. I was scared and in awe of what was

¹⁸Georgia Harkness, 134.

happening, while knowing it was right and good. Because my photo with Bishop Newell ordaining me was in a local Brooklyn paper, I received many letters, some supportive, some obnoxious. For example, I received letters, unsigned, that asked, "Is this evolution or devolution? Women should be silent in the churches!"

After a year of study in Scotland in 1959–60, during which time I received letters from an excellent and supportive district superintendent, Dr. Henry Whyman, I was taken to dinner and then to meet a pastor-parish committee at the Methodist Church in Cold Spring Harbor, NY, on Long Island, about 50 miles from New York City. Dr. Whyman had met the Cold Spring Harbor committee earlier and described me and my education and background in local church and district events without using a personal pronoun! At the end of the meeting he told the committee my name; they were shocked but were more open because they did not have an immediate bias at the beginning.

My story parallels the accounts of several clergy sisters in those early years right after the 1956 decision. We were young and somewhat naive, had gone to seminary right after college, had male clergy for our models of ministry, but nevertheless knew we were called and committed.

In 1995, upon the request of Jeanne Audrey Powers, the Anna Howard Shaw Center sponsored two days of oral history. Fifteen of us gathered, primarily clergywomen who had come into the ordination process in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, along with some ordained in the 1980s and three active laywomen who were supportive of ordination of women. We shared our personal stories of entry points into ordained ministry. Those of us ordained in the 1950s and 1960s spoke of how it was rare ever to have met a clergywoman, especially in our own denomination. We came into ordained ministry because we felt called of God to preach and pastor. Those coming in during the 1970s and 1980s also felt called, yet they entered at a time when the women's movement was rising again in church and in society. Some of us had paved the way; those who came after were more alert to discrimination, oppression and clear social analysis. I certainly learned from the seminarians and clergywomen entering ministry in the 1970s to analyze the issues more clearly and with more of a "hermeneutic of suspicion."

In those years we all had the benefit of the newly formed General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, authorized and funded by General Conference in 1972. Furthermore, the Clergywomen's Consultations began in 1975, first co-sponsored by COSROW, Board of Higher Education and Ministry, General Council on Ministries, and later by the Division of Ordained Ministry of BHEM. The Board of Higher Education and Ministry (in its Division of Ordained Ministry) had a staff position focussing, in part, on clergywomen. Kathy Nickerson (now Kathy Sage) held that position for over ten years and was a tremendous initiator of opportunities with clergywomen. Lynn Scott, in this position for the past seven and a half years, has continued to provide exceptional support, clarity and witness.

The 1980s and 1990s brought more second and third career women into seminaries and into ordained ministry. In the 1980s, clergywomen grew in number in United Methodist conferences in Africa and Korea, and held their own consultations.

The UMC elected its first woman bishop on July 17, 1980—Marjorie Swank Matthews. A laywoman for many years, Marjorie Matthews was ordained an elder at the age of 49, in 1965. She served the Wisconsin Area for 4 years, retired in 1984, and died June 30, 1986. 1984 saw the election of Judith Craig in the North Central Jurisdiction and Leontine Kelly in the Western Jurisdiction, although Bishop Kelly actually came from the Southeastern Jurisdiction. In 1988, Susan Murch Morrison (Northeastern Jurisdiction) and Sharon Brown Christopher (North Central Jurisdiction) were elected, while 1992 saw the elections of Ann Sherer (South Central Jurisdiction), Sharon Rader (North Central Jurisdiction), and Mary Ann Swenson (Western Jurisdiction). 1996 brought Charlene Kammerer (Southeastern Jurisdiction, at last!), Susan Hassinger (Northeastern Jurisdiction), and Janice Riggle Huie (South Central Jurisdiction), into the episcopacy.

IV

The 1996 General Conference made major decisions about and revisions in the ordination processes, especially with the decision for the ordination of permanent deacons in full connection. How does this relate to “ordination of women”? In 1997, many women who were diaconal ministers decided to become ordained as deacons in full connection, affirming the ministry of word and service in the world. Others chose to remain as laity, in their diaconal ministries. For example, in the California-Nevada Conference session in June 1997, from the staff of one suburban church (San Ramon Valley UMC): one woman was consecrated a diaconal minister (for ministries of spiritual formation), another (who had been diaconal minister of education) was ordained deacon in full connection, and yet another was ordained elder (having been a transitional deacon).

Where are we today, as ordained women in the United Methodist Church? We are many more in numbers than we were in 1958 and 1961, when I first was ordained deacon, then elder. Lynn Scott’s research shows that as of July 1, 1997: 12% of the elders in The UMC are women; 15.8% of the district superintendents are women; 18% of the active bishops are women. It is clear that United Methodists believe women can be leaders in the UMC. Yet, as Scott points out in the interview with Kathy Gilbert: no women are lead pastors in churches of 3,000 or more; of 181 churches with memberships of 2,000–2,999, five are served by women; of 248 churches with memberships

of 1,500–1,999, two are served by women; of 690 churches with memberships of 1000–14999, 10 are served by women.¹⁹ Thus, in churches with a membership of 1,000 or more, only 1.4% are served by women as lead pastors. “Women hit the stained glass ceiling when it comes to serving in positions as lead pastors,” says Elizabeth Lopez Spence, lead pastor, Christ UMC, Rochester, MN. Scott also reported to me in fall 1997, that she has had more calls regarding how women can be ordained according to the Bible in the past three years than in the previous four years on the job.

In the interviews I did in the early 1990s with certain women bishops, women district superintendents, and women staff members of UMC agencies, I heard the deep concern about women leaving pastoral ministry, ordained ministry, and sometimes the denomination over the tight, restrictive patterns in some sections of the church. One bishop said it for many: “They seem to be leaving because boundaries are too tight. That has to do with imagery of God, with worship, with music, with lifestyle, a whole series of things.”²⁰

In the fall of 1997, the significant United Methodist Clergywomen Retention Study was completed by the Anna Howard Shaw Center of Boston University School of Theology, concerning why UM clergywomen are leaving local church ministry.²¹ The authors identified five areas having some responsibility for the support of UM clergywomen: the appointment system, annual conference leaders and clergy colleagues, congregations, seminaries and clergywomen themselves. These aid us as we seek to retain the services of active clergywomen.

The struggle and the joy continue. In the tradition of Anna Howard Shaw, of the faithful lay women who raised money for missions, of the local pastor women predecessors, of the deaconesses, of Leontine Kelly, and that great retinue of foremothers and sisters and children yet to come we stand together to affirm the call of God to preach, to teach, to pastor, to serve. What will the future direction and approach be of ordained women in the UMC in the 21st century? We are women, many of us “defecting in place,”²² called to stand with a foot firmly in the church, and a foot firmly in the world, often having a lover’s quarrel with the church we love and serve.

Hear our foremother, Anna Howard Shaw: “I sometimes feel that it has indeed been hundreds of years since my work began; and then again it seems so brief a time that, by listening for a moment, I fancy I can hear the echo of

¹⁹Quotes from Lynn Scott and from Elizabeth Lopez Spence are found in Kathy Gilbert, “UMC Clergywomen hit ‘stained glass ceiling’” (*The United Methodist Reporter*, Dallas, July 4, 1997).

²⁰Susan Morrison and others, in Barbara B. Troxell, “Honoring One Another With Our Stories,” in Keller, ed., *Spirituality and Social Responsibility: Vocational Vision of Women in The United Methodist Tradition*, 297–298, 307.

²¹Margaret S. Wiborg and Elizabeth J. Collier, *United Methodist Clergywoman Retention Study*, Boston: Anna Howard Shaw Center, Boston University School of Theology, October 1997.

²²See Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes, eds., *Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

my childish voice preaching to the trees in the Michigan woods. But long or short, the one sure thing is that, taking it all in all, the struggles, the discouragements, the failures, and the little victories, the fight has been . . . worthwhile. Nothing bigger can come to a human being than to love a great Cause more than life itself, and to have the privilege throughout life of working for that Cause."²³

²³Anna Howard Shaw, *The Story of a Pioneer*, (first published by Harper and Brothers, 1915, republished by Pilgrim, 1994), 337.