

PARENTHETICALLY SPEAKING: METHODIST WOMEN (IN AND) OUT OF THEIR BRACKETS

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An adage says that those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it. It implies that without knowledge of the past, humankind makes the same mistakes again. For me, repeating mistakes is not the biggest loss; I grieve the chance to learn from forgotten successes. When women don't know our history, we keep making the same surge of progress and falling back, and later covering the same territory under the impression that we are creating something new.

In the 1940s, when member Mary Morrison was invited onto the Board of Stewards at St. Mark's Methodist Church in New Orleans, she was taken aback because no woman had ever served on that board. Yet records show there *had* been female stewards; because only men had served during her membership, she assumed women never had. Morrison wound up accepting through a "bargain with God" regarding relatives' safety during a hurricane. This let her believe—and assert—that it was God's will that she lead.¹

As I researched and taught seminary classes on the UMC in post-Katrina New Orleans, I repeatedly encountered people struggling to invent solutions. While the scope of the disaster was unprecedented, some aspects were not new. Methodist women addressed some of them a century earlier, and post-Katrina people spent energy re-inventing their methods.

When I spoke on St. Mark's at a church in a transitional north Tulsa neighborhood, a man was so inspired by the women's work that he began an intergenerational class to study my book. He wrote a study guide, and the church is patterning activities after the deaconesses', learning to know their neighborhood and the people's needs.

More importantly, today's women could draw inspiration from their foremothers. Those women learned that tiny amounts of money saved from housekeeping allowances could be pooled and managed efficiently to accomplish large feats. They perfected strategies of collaborative leadership in an era when a lady was expected to have her name in the newspaper only three times—on her birth, marriage, and death—and there was a limit to how powerful any one woman could be perceived to be without losing the place in society which enabled her controversial projects to succeed. Today, the kinds of leadership that earlier Methodist women used are beginning to receive attention from experts on leadership. Some are discussed in this paper.

¹ Mary Morrison, interview by Margery Freeman (July 24, 1979), cited in Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*.

Telling stories is one of the most powerful things humans can do. As an agent of social change, telling stories “works.” As I have told the stories of the laywomen who founded and ran St. Mark’s Community Center, I have seen UMW members become energized about the possibility of their effecting social change. They say they had no idea what their foremothers accomplished and they wish they had understood the possibilities earlier.

Bracketing Women Out

Asked who Deborah was, most biblically literate people would respond that she was a judge of Israel. “And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak . . .” (Judges 4:4-6a, KJV). When Barak arrived, Deborah told him God had commanded that he go into battle with ten thousand men against Sisera. Barak said he would go only if she went with him. She did, and the Israelites won.

In a Hebrew Bible textbook published in 1984 which I had in seminary in the 1990s, there is a list of the Judges. The author “knew” it couldn’t possibly be Deborah who was *really* the judge. He put “Barak” on his list as the judge, and after Barak’s name, he put “(Deborah).” He wasn’t comfortable leaving her out entirely, but he could not bring himself to list her as a judge. So he put (Deborah) into parentheses.²

Why did the author do this? We can’t ask, since he is dead, but he was a Roman Catholic priest. Perhaps his church’s continuing prohibition of women’s ordination helped him decide the story needed correcting. Perhaps it gave him the courage to put the woman in brackets.

“Voices Lost and Found,” 2015

Thirty years after that textbook’s publication, bracketing women out still has to be discussed at a conference on Methodist women’s history. The 2015 conference, “United Methodist Women: Voices Lost and Found,” was intended to assess where the recording and analysis of Methodist women’s history has been and is going. How and why were women’s voices lost? How can we find them? When we do, how can we listen with the respect they deserve? How can we honor those stories and prevent losing our own?

A recognition of the need for women’s history arose at around the same time as two other moves in the field of history. One was construction of “people’s histories” of the sort for which Howard Zinn became known. They still dealt primarily with the same topics—politics and wars—but questioned the accepted view as told by the victors.

Second, a new subfield, social history, arose. Throughout recorded history, the assumption was that everyone is focused on what monarchs, warriors,

² Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 200.

politicians and titans of industry are doing and that only their activities warrant analysis. Social historians began to wonder what the common people were doing in a given era. What was everyday life like for everyday people? Applying this question to the history of churches, where women have always made up more than half the membership, requires a study of women. How, and why, did women do what they did?

Hopes, Unrealized and New

In 1980, Kathryn Kish Sklar, a respected historian writing about recent work on Methodist women, predicted a partnership of secular and religious scholars who would recover the history of the churchwomen whose work impacted more than the church. This has not happened. Sklar called herself “an outsider to the church.”³ By contrast, the people who have done that work since she spoke have been deeply involved in United Methodist Church (UMC) life. They include John Patrick McDowell, Alice Knotts, Carolyn DeSwarte Gifford, Wendy Deichmann, Priscilla Pope-Levison, Dana Robert, Lacey Warner, and Paul Chilcote. My own work is the product of my lifelong affiliation with Methodism.

Perhaps secular historians are not drawn because the topic is so difficult to research, but another factor is how unvalued the work remains. During my work at Tulane on a dissertation about a settlement house run by Methodist women, one advisor sighed in despair and told me I needed to “get an important topic.” Another professor who read the subsequent book said, “You’ve missed a chance to do an important book about race.” I thought it was an important book about women, but maybe in his view, there is no such thing.

The hope of scholars who developed “specialty” histories was that someday their work would be integrated into the mainstream. Historians of Christian thought like Margaret Miles are beginning to integrate women’s history, creating textbooks which do not absolutely require a supplement on women.⁴ Although the collaboration of Jean Miller Schmidt with Russ Richey and others has taken steps toward integrating Methodist women’s history into Methodist history, there is a huge distance to go. Most historians still write as though women’s history is a special interest rather than the story of the largest group of people within Methodism.

The good news is that the 2015 conference showcased a group of emerging scholars in the field. They brought new energy to the topic and offer renewed hope that more good work will see publication in the coming years.

How Women’s Voices Were Lost: Written out of History

Although we usually say, “women *were* written out of history,” the tense of the verb is wrong. Mary Bosanquet (1739-1815) was one of the first

³ Kathryn Kish Sklar, “The Last Fifteen Years,” in *Women in New Worlds*, Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), 48-65.

⁴ Margaret Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

women licensed by John Wesley to preach. She preached often and to large crowds. In the 1700s, she and Mary Ryan established Cross Hall, a Christian community which housed and educated children and destitute adults. Along with preaching and Bible study, they offered many services, including some medical care. John Wesley called Cross Hall “a vital center of Methodist worship and witness.” Bosanquet did all this *before* she married John Fletcher in 1781 “and embarked upon what was essentially a co-pastorate in his parish at Madeley until his death in 1795.”⁵ Her work is well-known, discussed by Schmidt, Chilcote, Richard Heitzenrater and others.⁶

Yet the author of a major biography of Francis Asbury that appeared in 2009 ignored her contributions to Methodism. Having used a quote from her, he explained who she was by calling her “the wife of theologian John Fletcher.” This is accurate; she was married to Fletcher. But to identify her only as “the wife of” a theologian dismissed her own calling and ministry; it was, in fact, to mis-identify her, to squeeze her into parentheses (the wife of), to consign her to “her proper place,” and to bracket her out of Methodist history.⁷ This sort of marginalization has been going on since the writing of history began, and it continues to this day.

Falling Between the Cracks

I will argue later that the best way to discover what Methodist churchwomen were up to is to read their own writing about it. The problem is finding it. The work of women was dismissed by the church, and it was also dismissed by secular social historians who wrote (or write) as though religious women and their projects did not exist—or if they did exist, they did not matter. Our history has thus fallen through the cracks.

Disrespected by the Church

Methodist women began organizing to address social problems in the latter half of the 1800s. The original charge of the woman’s societies was to build parsonages for pastors on the frontier, and then they began raising funds for foreign missions. Eventually they added work in home missions (within the United States) when the Social Gospel Movement arose in response to changing conditions brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and increased immigration.

The church has not been an innocent bystander in the marginalization

⁵ John Wesley, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, John Telford, ed., vol. 4 (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 129, cited in Jean Miller Schmidt, *Grace Sufficient: A History of Women in American Methodism, 1760-1939* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 30-31. Schmidt notes that Wesley quoted Bosanquet’s letter in full on pages 299-304.

⁶ Paul W. Chilcote, *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 68-80; Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 247-248.

⁷ John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 392.

of women; it has actually been the root cause of much discrimination. For some, intentionally excluding women may stem from an opinion about how Scripture is authoritative that leads them to believe that God forbids women to lead.

We know that Elizabeth Cady Stanton was “repudiated” in 1896 by the National-American Woman Suffrage Association for publishing *The Woman’s Bible*. It applied what we now call historical-biblical criticism to passages that require women’s subservience and prohibit women’s leadership. It highlighted passages that acknowledge women’s leadership.⁸ Over a century later, Sarah Lancaster’s *Women and the Authority of Scripture* traced Protestant attitudes toward biblical texts and offered more helpful (and historically authentic) ways of viewing texts. Unfortunately, not everyone in the world has read it yet.⁹

Race prejudice also causes disrespect of Methodist women’s work. Materials from women of color are notoriously undervalued. However, this also applies to the white women’s records, since their organizations were engaged in challenging segregation. I refer not just to segregation in society, but also to the *de facto* and *de jure* segregation present within Methodism. This is made plain in many places, but one excellent source is Sara Estelle Haskin’s “Women of the Left Wing,” which appeared in *The World Outlook* in 1933. Interestingly, her defense against the charges of radicalism was to admit they had done everything they were accused of, and more, because it was the right thing to do.¹⁰

Disrespected by Secular Historians

If the church’s lack of respect stemmed from religious convictions, then we might expect secular writers to have more appreciation for women’s work. This was not the case. Secular writers then and subsequent social historians did not respect church women’s settlement and social justice work, because they believed the women did it only to convert people to superstitious religious beliefs that had been discredited by science.

Allen Davis, who dismissed religious settlements as “merely modified missions,” complained that religious settlements stopped at charity while non-sectarian (“real” settlements) moved on to “social and economic change,” or what we now call justice ministry. He seems unaware that programming was almost identical.¹¹ Overall, historians have not valued work as highly when it is accomplished under church auspices.

⁸ “The Woman’s Bible Repudiated,” in Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1993), 215-217.

⁹ Sarah Heaner Lancaster, *Women and the Authority of Scripture: A Narrative Approach* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Sara Estelle Haskin, “Women of the Left Wing,” *The World Outlook* 23.1 (February, 1933): 30.

¹¹ Allen Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York: Oxford UP, 1967), 15, 23.

How Women's Stories Are Recovered

Some examples from my own work on the history of St. Mark's show how many obstacles there are and how much perseverance it takes to recover women's stories. It took twelve years of work to put together the history of St. Mark's. I've said publicly that there were several points at which I should have been smart enough to quit. Though it followed only one facility, it was a big step in historical recovery, both because it placed St. Mark's into a larger context and because work at many of the Methodist women's centers was so similar, even at those established by different predecessor churches.

Personal Contacts

Helen Mandlebaum grew up in New Orleans across the street from St. Mark's. She became a deaconess, spending much of her career at the Wesley House settlement in Louisville. I learned there was a retirement home for deaconesses in North Carolina and asked the director to put a note on the bulletin board asking if anyone knew anyone from St. Mark's. Mandlebaum contacted me right away.

She led me to women who married and left the order, since until 1959, only single women could be deaconesses. I visited with a former deaconess with Alzheimer's who could not remember St. Mark's, but since she kept scrapbooks, her daughter found me memorabilia. I sat with another mother who had dementia and her daughter, learning little. Then the daughter said, "She has a shoebox of old stuff from St. Mark's on the shelf in her closet. Would you like to see that?" Among its treasures was a long interview with a head resident, Nettie Stroup, printed in what was apparently Stroup's hometown newspaper (though date and newspaper name were missing). It was a tremendous source about a woman who had previously just been a name to me.

Mandlebaum sat with me while I interviewed Mary Lou Barnwell, former head of the deaconess program and arguably the woman with most influence on deaconess ministry. Barnwell was in early dementia, but she could still remember the 1930s very well, especially with Mandlebaum to assist her with names and places. It was a gift to have met Barnwell when she could still provide good data and to have her friend help her do the interview without frustration.

Minutes and the Rest of the Story

Bound volumes of minutes of the women's organizations exist. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS) women's minutes included brief yearly summaries from St. Mark's. However, it was the context for these reports that could provide information about the challenges the women faced, and context was hard to come by. For instance, the 1912 report for St. Mark's merely says, "We came close to losing the work," and names a few individuals who helped preserve it. No explanation was provided.

One of the few historians who mentioned St. Mark's was John Olen Fish,

who in 1969 completed a dissertation on southern Methodism during the Progressive Era. Among Bishop Warren Candler's papers at Emory, Fish found a letter from 1912 written by John W. Moore. Moore's letterhead showed that St. Mark's had been put under the auspices of Moore's church, making Ragland report to Moore. Accepting Moore's statements uncritically, Fish concluded that at St. Mark's, "the degree of influence of the church in the settlement was slight." I knew that could not be true.

I obtained a copy of the letter, and it was full of outright lies about head resident Margaret Ragland. Moore began, "I am in trouble with the women folks," and followed with a litany of accusations he had to have known were false. He claimed, "St. Mark's Hall has been run largely as a Hull House and the Head Resident does not want the church introduced into her institution." When he wanted her to institute religious instruction and Bible study, she threatened to resign because "she did not want any church in St. Mark's Hall. She takes the position that the church is a decadent institution and that these Settlements are to take the place of the church."

Moore asked Candler to write an article correcting the "secularizing evil" of settlement work, "I believe that with your pen you could puncture some of these silly pretensions and whilst I do not believe that you can work miracles, still some of these women might be won to sanity." Insisting that "one year is all that any man can safely endure under the dominion of those the ungallant John Knox called 'The Monstrous Breed,'" he asked to serve elsewhere because "I dare-say, that by December I shall be a statesman out of a job." He closed, "Your hen-pecked brother, J. W. Moore."¹²

Fish suggested a motive for actions which Moore attributed to Ragland: "The head resident probably viewed the establishment of a Sunday School at the settlement as an exertion of traditionalism that would strangle the program of the mission."¹³ This suggestion exhibits lack of data about programming at St. Mark's and an equal lack of understanding of the deaconesses' mission as Christian workers. Moore's claim that Ragland forbade church functions contradicts evidence in contemporary women's reports in local, state and denomination-wide media. Along with celebrating Bible classes and worship services, Ragland's reports reveal her own deep spirituality.¹⁴

The letter shows Moore thought a person of the wrong sex was threatening his authority. He was correct about his likely short tenure. Moore was replaced the next year by S. H. Werlein, prominent MECS clergyman and brother of the State Organizer of the women's organization. Werlein's was the first signature on a petition to Annual Conference that year to extend laity rights to women. The extremely short report in the bound minutes conceals

¹² J. W. Moore, letter to Bishop Warren Candler (July 9, 1912), box 19, folder 6, Warren A. Candler Papers, Special Collections, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, cited in Ellen Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*.

¹³ John Olen Fish, "Southern Methodism in the Progressive Era: A Social History." 43-44.

¹⁴ *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Woman's Home Mission Society, MECS, 1910*, 165; *Second Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council, MECS, 1911-12*, 358; *Third Annual Report of the Woman's Missionary Council, MECS, 1911-1912*.

the methods the women used to effect this change, but it would stretch credibility too far to believe they were not involved.

Had Fish's dissertation not led me to the letter, I would never have known what occurred in 1912, since the minutes contained no background. Yet it perpetuates the idea that religious settlement women were unspiritual and anti-church. It is an example of how misrepresentation of women's work is compounded. How many others will read Fish's work and believe what Moore had to say?

Women's Own Writing

People called to the mission work in which United Methodist Women (UMW) and its predecessors have engaged spent a lot of time addressing the needs of others and little time documenting what they did. Furthermore, the material they generated was not valued. Researching St. Mark's, I encountered roadblock after roadblock and discovered many instances where records were simply thrown out.

Nevertheless, what survives of women's documentation is the very best source about their activities. One place to find it is in the publications of the Methodist women's groups, written and edited by women. Long runs of their magazines exist in a few locations, including the General Commission on Archives and History (GCAH) in New Jersey. Because the names of the publications changed even more often than the names of the societies, Carol Marie Herb performed a great service when she compiled *The Light along the Way*. It described publications of UMW and all its predecessors and analyzed their coverage of various topics.¹⁵

Some reports by women were also printed in various versions of the *Christian Advocate*. The weekly *New Orleans Christian Advocate* covered the conferences in Louisiana and Mississippi. Every other week, a column was devoted to news from Louisiana's MECS women. I could not have written my book on St. Mark's without working through decades of these newspapers at Millsaps College. *Christian Advocate* versions existed almost everywhere and are often available on microfilm or digitally.

What We Learn

Elvira Beach Carré was the single most important woman in the MECS in Louisiana. It was she around whom the Methodist women's work orbited. She was president of the City Mission Board (an umbrella group composed of women from every congregation) for nineteen years (despite begging toward the end to be relieved of her "onerous duties").

It was not just Methodist women for whom she played such a pivotal role. She was once president of six local organizations at the same time and was eventually named honorary "President for Life" of five. Those organi-

¹⁵ Carol Marie Herb, *The Light along the Way: A Living History through United Methodist Women's Magazines* (United Methodist Church, 1994).

zations shared several goals. For instance, the YWCA was working toward better race relations, as were the MECS women; Carré was instrumental in bringing the YWCA to New Orleans in 1911 and served as the chapter's first president.

She was thus a personal bridge among the memberships and shaped the agenda of each of them. This gave her work a magnified impact. It also gave the organizations a collective impact, as events sponsored by several groups are likelier to be taken seriously and receive press than those with only one group as backer. Today, we talk about interlinked and overlapping boards as a strategy for social transformation. To effect change in her time, when women's leadership had to be more subtly exercised, it was probably a necessity.

One organization many Methodist women belonged to was the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). The WCTU was successful at making it socially unacceptable to drink and eventually achieved Prohibition. They recognized that drunk men were more likely to beat their wives and children. Divorce was far less feasible when the WCTU was active, and so Prohibition was a reasonable strategy to protect women and children. Other Methodist women chose to affiliate with the Traveler's Aid Society, which combatted human trafficking.

The women considered their activities to an expression of their Christian faith. Randy Maddox noted that Methodist founder John Wesley corresponded with Miss March, who did not want to follow Wesley's instruction to spend time with people who were poor. She wanted to be with people of good character who would uplift her; Wesley responded that the poor were at least as likely to be of good character as the rich. The woman's society members in affluent congregations lived out Wesley's instructions to a surprising degree. The 1908 Rayne MECS yearbook "emphasized that the members were by no means hands-off philanthropists; instead, they were expected to have actual contact with 'the destitute.'" The group financially supported a city missionary and a deaconess "who devote their entire time to relieving conditions caused by poverty, sin and suffering." Nevertheless, "our members come in close, personal touch with the needy members of the congregations, and when necessity arises they nurse the sick, comfort the sorrowing, provide funerals for the dead, clothes and food for the living." They also hand-delivered Bibles and magazines to jails and visited female prisoners.¹⁶ One of the state leaders of the Woman's Parsonage & Home Mission Society, Mary Werlein, conducted regular worship services there.

Carré, Werlein and other women's society leaders were suffragists, as were many Methodist women, but their work was not limited to seeking voting rights at public ballot boxes. Most United Methodists forget that women could not vote within the church or serve as delegates to conference. At first, only clergy could vote, but eventually, the right was granted to lay men. However, when Frances Willard and four other women were elected to

¹⁶ Ellen Blue, *St. Mark's and the Social Gospel*, 52.

the 1888 General Conference of the MEC, the powers-that-be decided that the extension of voting to laymen had meant just that—lay men.

Largely because women continued to fight for and won laity rights, the General Conference of The Methodist Church finally approved ordination for women in 1956. The appointment of women as District Superintendents and women's election as bishops were steps toward gender equality, but the exclusion of lay women from voting on church matters and their subsequent achievement of that right as laity was just as significant, and it is largely forgotten today.

For almost 150 years, membership in Methodist women's organizations has prepared women for leadership both inside and outside of the church. During Reconstruction, voluntary organizations like religious and benevolent societies "opened positions of community leadership" to freed slaves.¹⁷ Because it had been illegal to teach enslaved people to read, there was a pressing need for literacy. However, to be full participants in democratic society, freed men needed to learn how to hold and preside at meetings, keep minutes, raise and keep track of funds, make reports, serve on committees, nominate candidates, and vote for officers.

Women of all races needed the same skills. While it was legal for white women to read, they were not encouraged toward education. Many of the first females who finished college did not even receive a degree. If a woman were the top graduate, she would likely be prevented from giving an address at commencement, because it would be unseemly for her to engage in "promiscuous speaking," the term for addressing a group that had men among it. The organization of Methodist women's groups made an enormous impact on the abilities of women to organize and lead.

It might be supposed that the Social Gospel work of Methodist women was inspired by the wildly popular Social Gospel novels of that era. However, the most famous of these books, Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, was written after the women's work in New Orleans and other cities had already been underway for several years. Furthermore, *In His Steps* portrays the work as led by men. The female characters act as individuals, encouraged by a group led by a man, *not* as members of a women's organization. This is not at all how the social gospel played out in the many cities where Methodist women engaged in settlement work.

To grasp what is important about the way women accomplished their work during eras when women's leadership was even more resented than it is today, it is crucial for a historian to understand their leadership. Katharine Rhodes Henderson's *God's Troublemakers: How Women of Faith Are Changing the World* profiles women of our time who have developed innovative ministries. Decades ago, Methodist deaconesses were called "loving troublemakers" as well as "salty characters" and many other less flattering names. They were stepping out of their places, and it was hard for society

¹⁷ Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, updated edition (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2014), 95-96.

to accept them as leaders. When local laywomen worked collaboratively to establish and fund the missions at which the deaconesses worked, they, too, were challenging societal expectations. For instance, one local article about Carré maintained that beneath her feminine exterior lay “the mind of a man.”

Henderson discussed her subjects’ “leading from behind, within, beneath” rather than out in front.¹⁸ Many churchwomen have led from behind, within or beneath not from theological or philosophical convictions, but rather because exclusion from traditional leadership left them no other choice. Because they exercised leadership without formal authority, they were not deemed important enough to have anyone collect their papers.

Today, benefits of collaborative leadership have begun to be acknowledged even by many who could exercise hierarchical power. My work on the UMC in post-Katrina New Orleans demonstrated that whether exercised by women or men, collaborative leadership holds great potential.¹⁹ Ronald Heifetz, a leading expert on adaptive leadership, wrote: “Because we are not used to distinguishing between leadership and authority, the idea of leadership without authority is new and perplexing Thus, nearly all studies of leadership, in addition to many histories, focus primarily on figures of authority.” These include heads of state and CEOs of corporations “who sit at the head of the table.” In reality, “Leadership may more often emerge from the foot of the table, [though] that is not where we spend most of our time looking.” He added: “That I use the metaphor of the table, with the head traditionally a man and the foot characteristically a woman is no accident. Leadership without authority has been the domain to which women have been restricted for ages.”²⁰

Can someone at the foot of the table, someone without authority, truly “exercise leadership”? Heifetz concluded that such a person can and insisted that the leadership provided by Gandhi, MLK or Margaret Sanger would not have been possible for someone with formal authority, responsible for keeping an institution together. The women who led Methodist women’s organizations absolutely used their “inferior” positions to effect subversive, transformative changes in their worlds. Navigating the space where they can create change today is less complicated but still a challenge for UMW leaders.

How We can Prevent Losing our History

In *The Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen speaks of the “confusion, division and much lost time” that result from women not knowing about the past achievements of their sisters. “The root of oppression is the loss of memo-

¹⁸ Katharine Rhodes Henderson, *God’s Troublemakers: How Women of Faith Are Changing the World* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

¹⁹ Ellen Blue, *In Case of Katrina: Reinventing Church in Post-Katrina New Orleans* (Eugene: Cascade, 2016).

²⁰ Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994), 184.

ry,” she wrote.²¹

For every UMW unit, the practice of recording memories—in other words, the use of oral history—should be considered vital. I began my research on St. Mark’s in 1999. Fortunately, St. Mark’s member Margery Freeman received a GCAH grant in 1979 and conducted twenty-two oral histories, including some with people who had died when I began. Freeman’s work was a huge gift for mine.

This is especially important for women of color, as very little research has been conducted with them. After Katrina, I interviewed a group of lay-women affiliated with Hartzell UMC in New Orleans’s Lower Ninth Ward. I documented their work through an ecumenical organization, the Women for Progressive Action (WPA), between 1974 and Katrina’s landfall in 2005.²² Lower Nine was one of the most devastated areas, and post-storm political decisions made it the least likely area to recover. The weekend Katrina hit, the women were to celebrate WPA’s thirtieth anniversary. All their records were lost except one copy of the anniversary program book. Most of my research had to be accomplished through oral history.

I found these women used some of the same strategies that Carré and her contemporaries employed. Specifically, the same leaders operated a web of organizations with similar though not identical purposes. They used overlapping boards and identical slates of officers. Merely establishing the groups was complicated. The first lawyer the women approached refused, saying it was “just a women’s organization” and therefore had no need for incorporation or legal status. They eventually found a female lawyer in a neighboring community who did the legal work.²³ Without oral history work, these women’s struggles would never have been documented.

Many local UMW groups are diminishing in numbers as members age and die. The Oral History Association website has suggestions for recording histories. I urge every local group to see that the memories of their older members are preserved in the best way that is available. Perfection is not required, but making the effort is.

Conclusion

“Every word a woman writes changes the story of the world, revises the official version.”²⁴

At the turn of the twenty-first century, I had a job interview at a United Methodist seminary known for its wonderful library. I was taken to the Methodist librarian to be wowed by their resources. He took me back where all the special resources on Methodist history were kept and asked about my

²¹ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston; Beacon Press, 1992), 13-15, cited in Gloria Steinem, *My Life on the Road* (New York: Random House, 2015), 225-226.

²² Ellen Blue, “‘Yes, We Are Everywhere’: Thirty Years with the Women for Progressive Action, Lower Ninth Ward,” *Methodist History* 52.1 (October, 2013): 4-18.

²³ Ellen Blue, “Yes, We Are Everywhere.”

²⁴ Carolyn See, epigraph at <http://www.carolynsee.com>.

area of interest. I responded, “Women’s history.” He looked at me blankly and finally said, “We do have one book.” He pulled it off some metal shelves and put it in my hands. “That’s all we have,” he said and walked away. It was neither a big nor a helpful book.

To be fair, there were a few books on women’s history in the regular stacks. But in their vast research collections, they had one book. When he came back, I expressed dismay. He shook his head and said, “Women’s history? That’s not even a question we were asking.” His demeanor made it clear that it was not a question he intended to start asking, either. I wish I could admit to some embellishment in this story, but this is simply a recital of what happened.

Why was women’s history, as this esteemed librarian put it, “not even a question we were asking”? First, notice that he called it a question. For librarians to think of “research questions” is legitimate. Yet I have wondered many times what question he superimposed on my response. Perhaps it would have been, “What did women contribute to Methodist history?” but it probably would have sounded more like, “Did women contribute anything worth recording to Methodist history?”

I was told by a scholar who used those archives this year that the collection now includes significant material on women’s history. It may not be correct, but I like to think that maybe my reminding him that women’s history exists could have helped bring about the change.

We are all responsible for continuing to ask the questions about women’s history and its absence from mainstream Methodist scholarship. Women have done some of the most important ministry the church has ever accomplished. Finding the voices of our foremothers and providing venues for those voices to be heard is in my view the most important agenda for Methodist historians of our time.