

WOMEN AND THE NATURE OF MINISTRY IN THE UNITED METHODIST TRADITION

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The bicentennial of The United Methodist Church challenges its members to recover their heritage and to critically appropriate it for the present and future. One of the most primary issues for United Methodists should be the nature of ministry to which Christians are called. According to *The Book of Discipline*, ministry in the United Methodist Church is not defined primarily in terms of ordination or of diaconal ministry. These comprise the representative ministries which are complementary to the general ministries of lay persons. "Neither is subservient to the other. Both are summoned and sent by Christ to live and work together in mutual interdependence." Through the general and representative ministries, the diverse gifts and graces of all persons in Christ are brought together into the one "Ministry of All Christians."¹

The history of women in The United Methodist Church only recently has begun to be recovered in depth and detail through publication in 1981 and 1982 of the two volumes of *Women in New Worlds*.² The volumes, in turn, grew out of the landmark Women in New Worlds Conference sponsored by the General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church in Cincinnati in 1980, the first conference on women's history to be sponsored by a major denomination in the United States. As the rediscovery of this most recent area of church history continues, it provides a rich source of the evolution of lay and diaconal ministries, as well as ordained. For the primary services of women in the church were historically that of laity and of deaconesses, forerunners of the present diaconal ministry. Thus, a survey of women's ministries provides notable contrast to the traditional interpretation of ministry through the work of ordained pastors.

This essay provides a rapid overview of the ministries of women in the United Methodist tradition by focusing on significant areas in three historic time periods: first, the roots of the Wesleyan movement under John Wesley in eighteenth-century England; second, the era of the American Revolution and of the origin of the first Methodist societies in the colonies; and, third, the founding period of the four major women's movements of missionary societies, deaconess orders, laity rights, and ordination one hundred years ago.

¹*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1980* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1980), pp. 105-10.

I

Two strands of women's conscious appropriation of ministerial roles, which would evolve throughout the two hundred years of United Methodism in America, were clearly evidenced in the emergence of the Wesleyan movement in England. They are properly rooted in John's and Charles's mother, Susanna Wesley (1669-1742), who faithfully sought to live within the bounds of the domestic circle prescribed for women of her day. Yet those constrictions could not hold her; Susanna's need and effort to expand them are fundamental to her life story.

Primarily, Susanna understood herself as the pious, godly helpmeet of Samuel Wesley, a clergy in the Church of England, and the mother of their seventeen to nineteen children whom she bore, ten living to adulthood. She sought to be the good mother who supervised their home as a "family church" or "little seminary" where she provided her children proper training in the scriptures, as well as education in reading and writing. Her pastoral vision within the home led Susanna to set aside an hour each evening to discuss with her children the "principle concerns" confronting them during that day or week. While such deepened pastoral concern was of major significance for the upbringing of their three sons, Susanna may have seen this function as even more important in relationship to their seven daughters. Frank Baker describes Susanna changing "from schoolteacher to a kind of Mother Superior helping her girls prepare to face an unsympathetic man's world by endowing them with good habits, firm principles, and a deep religious faith." Letters which survive from her daughters indicate their warm response to her care.³

Equally clear, however, was a thoughtful independence which pervaded all areas of Susanna's life. One of the earliest demonstrations of her spiritual freedom occurred when she was only twelve years old in Susanna's rejection of the Puritanism of her family household. In defiance of her father, a Presbyterian minister, Susanna left his congregation to embrace the Church of England.⁴

Most striking, however, was Susanna's account of the steps leading her toward a public ministry of expounding the Word from the rectory at Epworth to a congregation of her neighbors.⁵ Her husband, Samuel, was a

²Women in New Worlds, eds. Hilah Thomas and Rosemary Keller, vol. 1; Rosemary Keller, Louise Queen, and Hilah Thomas, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981, 1982).

³Frank Baker, "Susanna Wesley," in ibid., vol. 2, p. 122. Also see John A. Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1968) and Rebecca Lamar Harmon, *Susanna, Mother of the Wesleys* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968).

⁴Ibid., p. 114.

⁵Ibid., pp. 113, 121-25; *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols. (London: Epworth Press, 1909-16), vol. 3, pp. 31-34; John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.*, 2 vols. (London: Couchman, 1793-96), vol. 1, pp. 47-53, for a fuller version of the original than that given in Curnock.

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delegate to the Convocation of the Church of England, its governing body, which met in London for several months at a time. His associate pastor, Godfrey Inman, wrote Samuel that his wife was drawing more townspeople to her Sunday night meetings in her home than were coming to the services which Inman conducted in church on Sunday morning. In an extraordinary letter which Susanna wrote to Samuel in 1712, when he was attending one of these convocations, she responded to Inman's attack by justifying her public ministry to her husband.

Susanna explained in writing to Samuel that she began simply by having family devotions with her children on Sunday evenings. Then a boy who worked in the Wesley home told his parents. They came and others followed until there were thirty or forty attending on Sunday evenings. Then Susanna wrote: "At last it came into my mind; though I am not a man, nor a minister . . . yet if my heart were sincerely devoted to God, and if I were inspired with a true zeal for his glory . . . I might do somewhat more than I do." So it was "with those few neighbors who then came to me, I discoursed more freely and affectionately." Further, Susanna "chose the best and most awakening sermons"⁶ which her husband had preached and she delivered them to her Sunday evening gatherings. Though she would not herself preach, she may well have interspersed her own admonitions and affections among Samuel's words.

Her powers of religious persuasion cannot be doubted. As Susanna continued in her letter to Samuel:

Last Sunday I believe we had above 200, and yet many went away for want of room. . . . We banish all temporal concerns from our society . . . we keep close to the business of the day. . . . [I cannot conceive] why any should reflect upon you . . . because your wife endeavours to draw people to church, and to restrain them, by reading and other persuasions, . . . from their profanation of God's most holy day. . . . For my part, I value no censure on this account.⁷

Susanna concluded her letter by stating that she would dissolve the assembly only upon his "*positive command*." Any request short of this demand would leave her with "guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁸ Wisely, Samuel Wesley allowed his wife to continue the parsonage meetings.

John Wesley himself was so deeply moved by this public witness of his mother's ministry that he wrote in his *Journal*, many years later as a grown man, in introducing his mother's letter at the time of her death: "I cannot but further observe that even she (as well as her father and grandfather, her husband, and her three sons) had been, in her measure and degree, a preacher of righteousness."⁹

⁶Whitehead, *Life of Wesley*, vol. 1, p. 48.

⁷Ibid., pp. 49-50.

⁸Ibid., p. 54.

⁹*Journal*, vol. 3, p. 32.

Women were involved in public ministries from the time that Methodist societies began to spread across the British Isles under John Wesley's leadership in the mid-eighteenth century. For all intents and purposes, these societies were organizations of women. Lists of local societies' memberships, both in Methodism's beginnings and throughout the eighteenth century, characteristically had a ratio of 2:1 women to men. Of even greater significance than their predominant membership, women were conspicuous pioneers in establishing new societies. Proliferation of Wesleyan cluster groups often grew directly out of the activity of a woman or a group of women. They invited and hosted preachers, initiated prayer groups and societies, and propagated and maintained the faith. Such activities could be rationalized as extensions of their domestic roles, not in conflict with women's traditionally sanctioned primary functions. In actuality, Wesleyan women were commonly charged with being so busy with religious duties that they neglected home responsibilities and did not have time to supplement their husbands' incomes, as during the great depression.¹⁰ Clearly, their involvement in Wesleyan societies became women's earliest windows to the public world, providing them with their first relationships and functions of a public nature.

Despite his mother's example of ministry, Wesley was initially skeptical of allowing women to speak in public. At first he instructed women to "keep as far from what is called preaching as you can: therefore never take a text; never speak in a continued discourse without some break, about four or five minutes."¹¹ However, Wesley and the folk attending prayer and class meetings led by women found their messages "enlivening" as he put it. "What most impressed him was that God was blessing the women's work with a harvest of souls. In light of the way God was 'owning' their ministry, Mr. Wesley began to modify his own stand."¹² The activity of early Methodist women proved mutually liberating to Wesley and the females.

Hester Ann Roe Rogers was one of the many "women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism" who "travelled the connection" for John Wesley, leading prayer meetings, class and select band meetings, and preaching throughout England. Though she herself does not appear to have preached, she represents those women who took the first public roles in the Wesleyan movement. Rogers' spiritual biography and letters, like those of other early English Methodist women, reflect the assurance of new birth in

¹⁰Paul Chilcote, "The Women Pioneers of Early Methodism," unpublished paper presented at "Wesleyan Theology and the Next Century: A Bicentennial Consultation," Emory University, August 17-21, 1983.

¹¹*The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), vol. 5, p. 130.

¹²Earl Kent Brown, "Women of the Word: Selected Leadership Roles of Women in Mr. Wesley's Methodism," *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 1, p. 74.

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Christ and her own strong and clear articulation of evangelical faith. Her correspondence with Wesley also suggests the mutual support and encouragement for ministry which she exchanged with him. Wesley allowed women to claim their direct spiritual experience of God's presence and to put it to use in performing public functions that evangelicals believed were essential for ministry—leading prayer groups and preaching services, and bringing converts to the altar to begin their journey toward perfect Christian love.¹³

Some of these female evangelists set the highest standards of commitment and energy in their public ministries. This was true of Sarah Crosby, most famous Wesleyan female preacher who began her long itinerations in the 1770s and continued for twenty years. A description of her work, growing out of accounts in her own diary, is illustrative of the earliest ministries of preaching by Wesleyan women:

In 1774 and 1775, for weeks on end, on many days her diary entries begin by noting a meeting at 5:00 A.M., or occasionally at 5:30 or 6:00 if the local Methodists proved to be slugabeds. On November 22, 1774, in York, she noted she "was pained to find that none in this city rise to meet together to worship God at five o'clock." And when she herself slept until 7:00 because of illness, she mentioned the fact rather guiltily. The early meetings were just a nice start to the day. If it happened to be Sunday, she would attend an Anglican morning prayer and Communion service, as befit a good member of the established church. But she would soon be speaking again. Four meetings a day, with several hours of carriage or horseback travel between, were not at all uncommon. The groups varied from as few as ten to more than five hundred. She reported that at Bradford there was fear that the galleries in the preaching house might collapse, so many were the "quakers, baptists, church folks and Methodists" who crowded into the pews. She described a typical day in 1774: "We had a lively prayer meeting at five [A.M.], a good band meeting at ten, and another at two; at five, Mrs. C. walked with me to Beeston; at seven, the house was full of people. . . . I had great liberty in speaking, and felt my Lord exceeding precious. . . . Glory be to God."¹⁴

A final area of ministry of lay women, which would constitute the major contribution of Wesleyan women in the United States in the nineteenth century, had English roots in the work of Selina Hastings, the Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791). Traditionally, she had been given minor recognition in the history of the Wesleyan movement as a wealthy benefactress to the Wesleys and to George Whitefield, one who founded

¹³Martha Blauvelt and Rosemary Keller, "Women and Revivalism: The Puritan and Wesleyan Traditions," in *Women and Religion in America*, eds. Rosemary Ruether and Rosemary Keller, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), vol. 2, Document 7, pp. 351-55; *The Experience of Mrs. Hester Ann Rogers Written by Herself, To Which are Added, Some Select Letters, Written to Her By the Rev. John Wesley, A.M., which also Afford her much Spiritual Consolation* (Bristol: R. Edwards, 1796); *Spiritual Letters by Mrs. Hester Ann Rogers, Written Before and After Her Marriage; Peculiarly Calculated to Illustrate and Enforce Holiness of Heart and Life* (Bristol: R. Edwards, 1796); Paul Chilcote, "John Wesley as Revealed by the Journal of Hester Ann Rogers, July 1775-October 1784," *Methodist History*, vol. 20, no. 3, [April 1982], pp. 111-23.

¹⁴Brown, "Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism," pp. 79, 80.

colleges for the training of dissenting ministers and chapels for their active evangelical service. Yet Selina's major contribution to the movement was not as a patroness of its male leaders but as a foundress of missionary societies and social reform organizations. She personified the modern female reformer: a woman who in mid-life develops a new and independent identity that provides commitment and purpose self-consciously understood as ministry for the secondhalf of her life.¹⁵

Selina's letters to John and Charles Wesley and to George Whitefield reveal that their relationships were working ones, characterized by collegiality and equality, rather than those of a wealthy benefactress simply supplying revenues for their ministerial operations. In seeking pastors to supply pulpits, Selina was asking for their recommendations of able candidates to fill chapels of which she was in charge. Further, Whitefield and the Wesleys accepted Selina's invitations to preach, thereby recognizing her authority as director of the parishes.

Though she never realized her deep desire to come to the colonies, Selina herself organized the mission of ministers to the Indians in Georgia. While overseeing the enterprise from a distance, she prayed that "the Lord will have me there, if only to make coats and garments for the poor Indians."¹⁶ Her desire became the realized experience of female missionary society leaders and reformers of nineteenth-century America, whose ministries were expressed in the day-to-day fieldwork of their projects.

II

A second definitive period in the history of women's ministries in the United Methodist tradition occurred during the era of the American Revolution, prior to and in conjunction with the official organization of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States in 1784.

As was true in England, most Wesleyan women in eighteenth-century America still performed their spiritual functions within their own homes. The belief that piety was rooted in woman's nature, which was fostered by the Great Awakening, flowered in Wesleyanism of the day. The religious influence of female followers on their husbands and children gave women the evangelical roles which they came to define consciously as ministry. They were the most immediate influence on early nineteenth-century Wesleyan women as well, elevating their domestic roles and providing rational justification for their constriction to the home.¹⁷

¹⁵[Aaron Crossley Hobart Seymour], *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon*, 2 vols. (London: William Edward Painter, 1844); Abel Stevens, *The Women of Methodism* (New York; Carlton & Porter, 1866); Mollie C. Davis, "The Countess of Huntingdon," in *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 2, pp. 162-75.

¹⁶*Women and Religion*, vol. 2, Document 8, pp. 355-58.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 321-28.

The experiences of two early Wesleyan women of the Baltimore area indicate the ministerial roles central to the purpose of the wife and mother in Methodist homes by the end of the eighteenth century. Perry Hall was the plantation of wealthy Henry and Prudence Gough. During the first days of Francis Asbury's superintendency of the Methodist Episcopal churches in America, the Gough estate became identified as the seat of major church planning, where much of the organizational work of early Methodism took place. Both Henry and Prudence Gough were Methodist followers, but Prudence was her husband's spiritual mentor. The distinguished nineteenth-century Methodist historian, Abel Stevens, lifts up Prudence's innate piety in contrast to her husband's weak religious nature. The message which Stevens wanted women of the nineteenth century to receive was that, again and again, Prudence bore with her husband's backsliding ways and desire for alcohol and led him toward regeneration. She was clearly portrayed as the spiritual superior of her husband. Following the example of Susanna Wesley, Prudence Gough performed the widest range of evangelical functions *within the home*: she ministered to both her husband and her child, and she led religious services on the plantation when males were not present to do so.¹⁸

The letters of Catharine Livingston Garrettson, wife of Freeborn Garrettson, one of the first Methodist preachers on the Atlantic seaboard, suggest the function and legacy of early pastors' wives. If not her husband's spiritual superior, Catharine was at least his equal, critiquing his preaching style and freely sharing her doctrinal interpretations with him. In one letter to her husband, Catharine summed up her self-understanding of her own ministry. As a woman and as a pastor's wife, she was to live her life through her husband and to press him to greater public service for both of them. For, she wrote, "I despair of ever being a shining light, but I would wish to see you the most pious man in the world."¹⁹ This legacy of the minister's wife, in finding her identity and practicing a ministry through her husband, is only being put to rest within our own generation today.

Wesleyan women also ventured outside the home during the Revolutionary era to provide instances of the first public ministries of women within the church in this country. One of the most colorful accounts is that of Barbara Heck, an early foundress of American Methodism. In 1760, Barbara and her husband, Paul Heck, along with Philip Embury and his wife and a few other families, left Ireland and arrived in New York City. No Methodist society existed in New York City so the Hecks and Emburys affiliated with a Lutheran Church. Then in the fall of 1766, Barbara Heck took an initiative which resulted in the

¹⁸Ibid., Document 9, pp. 358-61, from Stevens, *The Women of Methodism*, pp. 235-46.

¹⁹Manuscript Collection of Catharine Garrettson correspondence, Drew University; excerpts in Document 10, *Women and Religion*, pp. 361-65.

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founding of the first Methodist society on this continent. Following is Abel Steven's account:

After their arrival in New York, with the exception of Embury and three or four others, [the Palatines] all finally lost their sense of the fear of God, and became open worldlings. Late in the year 1765 another vessel arrived in New York, bringing over Paul Ruckle . . . with their families. A few of them only were Wesleyans. Mrs. Barbara Heck, who had been residing in New York since 1760, visited them frequently. . . . Paul Ruckle, was her eldest brother. It was when visiting them on one of these occasions that she found some of the party engaged in a game of cards; there is no proof, either direct or indirect, that any of them were Wesleyans, and connected with Embury. Her spirit was roused, and, doubtless emboldened by her long and intimate acquaintance with them in Ireland, she seized the cards, threw them into the fire, and then most solemnly warned them of their danger and duty. Leaving them, she went immediately to the dwelling of Embury, who was her cousin. After narrating what she had seen and done . . . she appealed to him to be no longer silent, but to preach the word forthwith. She parried his excuses, and urged him to commence at once in his own house, and to his own people. He consented, and she went out and collected four persons, who constituted his audience. After singing and prayer he preached to them, and enrolled them in a class . . . first of the congregations of American Methodism.²⁰

Together, Barbara Heck and Philip Embury organized a Methodist society and the following year a building was erected on John Street, partly at Barbara Heck's instigation and largely according to her plans. Opened in 1768 as Wesley Chapel, it was a center of early Methodism and the headquarters of Wesley's first appointed missionaries in America. The historic John Street United Methodist Church still functions today, providing noonday services for the workers of Manhattan's financial district.²¹

As Methodism flowered in the south, women performed ministries similar to those of their British counterparts in spreading gospel holiness over the land. The women of the Helm family of Kentucky were major leaders in forming the women's home and foreign missionary societies in their state in the late nineteenth century. Their crusading spirit, however, was instilled in them through generations of Helm women in Kentucky dating back to the Revolutionary War period. One was Mary Edwards Helm, born in 1777, who is described as being a "staunch Methodist for forty-seven years." She hosted as many as one hundred persons for three days during the early frontier camp meetings. Another was Sally Brown Helm, born in 1781, and a member of the first Methodist class in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. It was said that Sally Helm contributed much to the church where she resided and "on all proper occasions presented

²⁰ Stevens, *The Women of Methodism*, pp. 185-86; Document 12, *Women and Religion*, pp. 366, 367.

²¹ *Notable American Women, A Biographical Dictionary*, eds. Edward T. James, Janet Wilson James, Paul S. Boyer, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1974), vol. 2, pp. 174, 175.

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claims and hopes of Christianity to others.”²² It may be that Sally Helm was one of the first female preachers of “Mr. Wesley’s Methodism” in America!

III

One hundred years ago, four great movements of women were launched in the predecessor denominations of United Methodism—the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the Methodist Protestant Church, the United Brethren in Christ, and the Evangelical Association. They represented the efforts for ordination of women and laity rights for females and the origins of women’s missionary societies and of deaconess orders. Through drives for ordination and laity rights for women, persons sought to appropriate the ministries of women in clerical functions and in the mainstream governance and decision-making of the churches on an equal basis with men. Women’s missionary societies sent the first single female missionaries into the field and provided major funding for all mission work. Deaconess societies trained the first female professionals in the church who served as home and foreign missionaries and assistants to pastors. They were separatist groups “for women only,” resulting essentially in a “sphere of their own,” and set apart from general decision-making and clerical rights and responsibilities.

The ministries of women in these four movements were based on a strong biblical foundation. They grew out of Old Testament prophecy and the New Testament messages of Jesus and the apostles. These women based their call to full and equal service with men in the church, first, upon the prophecy of Joel quoted by Peter in the Pentecost story, Acts 2:17-18: “And it shall be in the last days, God says, That I will pour forth my spirit upon all humankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. . . .” The Pentecost story was central to the holiness movement, the spiritual home of so many of the Wesleyan women in the nineteenth century. The movement exerted a powerful leveling force, holding that the spirit of God was poured out indiscriminately on women and men, regardless of sex, status, race, or class. The words “to prophesy” carried the connotation to them, not of foretelling, but of proclaiming the word of God.

Second, these women drew the special purpose of their work from Jesus’ own call to ministry as given in Luke 4:18-19: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because God anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To set free those who are downtrodden, To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”

²²Alice Scott, “The Helm Women: Methodist Women in a Political Family,” unpublished paper presented at “Women in New Worlds Conference,” Cincinnati, Ohio, February 1-3, 1980.

As women organized some of the first major missionary work in each of their denominations, they were especially called to evangelize, educate, and uplift to equality the downtrodden, the outcast, and the poor in the United States and throughout the world, in India, China, Africa, and South America. They felt, too, a special purpose to commit themselves to "Women's Work for Women" because, in most of these continents not yet touched by Christianity, women could not attend public worship services conducted by male missionaries, could not be treated by male physicians, and could not attend schools, even those which had been opened by churches, because they admitted only boys.

And third, the ministries of these women were grounded in the theological truth of Paul's letter to the Galatians 3:26-28: "For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Jesus Christ."

The women who began these four movements knew that the gift of the ministry of all Christians was given as a part of their baptism in Jesus Christ. They were also aware, however, that women could not be equal and one with men to freely exercise their gifts of the spirit unless the church granted them their God-given inherent rights.

Women's foreign and home issisionary societies enlisted more women into service in the late nineteenth century than any type of women's organization in this country. In the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, the founding of both the Women's Foreign and Home Missionary Societies in the 1880s resulted largely from the vision of three Kentucky women, Mary and Lucinda Helm and Belle Harris Bennett. The determination of these women to provide funds and missionaries in global fields impelled them also to give aid and to help bring justice to oppressed peoples of the South and in their own hometowns. They organized schools and centers for Cuban children in Florida, for Japanese laborers in California, for homeless girls in Georgia, and for migrant workers in Texas. They sought better and safer factory conditions for women and worked for creation of child labor laws. Mary Helm led in the establishment of Paine Institute in Augusta, Georgia, to improve conditions for black women. Belle Bennett's concern to begin Methodist missions in Africa led her in 1900 to organize and lead an ecumenical Bible Study Class at St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church in her hometown of Richmond. She continued teaching the class for four years and from 200 to 500 persons attended each week.²⁹

²⁹Carolyn L. Stapleton, "Belle Harris Bennett: Model of Holistic Christianity," *Methodist History*, vol. 21, no. 3, [April 1983], pp. 131-42; Virginia Brereton, "Preparing Women for the Lord's Work: The Story of Three Methodist Training Schools, 1880-1940," *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 1, pp. 178-99.

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Belle Bennett, too, recognized the inadequate preparation of young women to become missionaries. She caught the vision of a training school for home and foreign female missionaries and was commissioned by the southern Methodist Women's Board of Foreign Missions to collect funds for what became Scarritt Bible and Training School, first located in Kansas City, Missouri and later in Nashville. Dr. Nathan Scarritt gave the land for the original school and \$25,000 to its founding and support, if the church could raise an equal amount. Belle Bennett collected the remainder mostly in small donations from the rank and file of the women's societies and the churches. She tells her story this way:

With the eyes of human wisdom the enterprise seemed one of childish weakness. No money, no resources . . . committed to an earthen vessel, untried and unknown, but I went out as directed in God's strength, committing my works and my ways unto him. . . . From the old and young and rich and poor, donations have come . . . Women have taken earrings from their ears, and watches from their bosoms, saying, "Take these, we have no money, but we want to give something for the cause of Christ."²⁴

Notable examples are found of the partnership of women and men in enabling women's gifts to be released. In the Methodist Episcopal Church, Lucy Rider Meyer was the founder and principal of the Chicago Training School for Home and Foreign Missionaries, first deaconess training center in the denomination. Her husband, Josiah Shelley Meyer, was business manager of the school and deaconess home. During the thirty-four years of their co-directorship, over 5,000 women were graduated into missionary service of the church. The Chicago school provided the inspiration for Belle Harris Bennett's dream of Scarritt. And it was Lucy Rider Meyer's dream of a "Nickel Fund," that collection of one nickel from every woman in the Methodist Episcopal Church, that enabled \$3,000 to be raised in one year to begin building the second home of her deaconess order in the 1880s.²⁵

Among the foundresses of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society in the Methodist Episcopal Church was Jennie Fowler Willing, who, even in the late nineteenth century, described her marriage to William Willing as a partnership of equality. In large part through the prodding of her husband, Jennie Willing led in the formation and organization of the North Western and Western branches of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society from Chicago and St. Louis to the Pacific Coast. It was said that "she went through the territory like a whirlwind." Her vision, like that of Belle Harris Bennett and Lucy Rider Meyer, was that the gifts of *all* women must be released and mobilized for mission. Though only a few women could actually go forth as commissioned missionaries, she inspired

²⁴Ibid., Brereton, "Preparing Women," p. 187.

²⁵Ibid., Catherine Prelinger and Rosemary Keller, "The Function of Female Bonding: The Restored Diaconessate of the Nineteenth Century," vol. 2, pp. 318-37; Mary Agnes Dougherty, "The Social Gospel According to Phoebe: Methodist Deaconesses in the Metropolis, 1885-1918," pp. 200-16; Brereton, "Preparing Women," pp. 178-99.

women in local churches to raise funds and send their sisters into mission service with this call: "Let every lady, who feels that she *would be a missionary*, go to work at home, and she may, by every dollar raised, teach her heathen sisters."²⁶

The legacy of women's missionary service is also the story of the ministry of the first single females sent into mission fields. Without these early women missionaries, females of India, Africa, and China would never be evangelized, educated, or uplifted to dignity of personhood because they could not attend public worship services conducted by men or be given medical treatment by male physicians. Young J. Allen was the superintendent of the China Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South who repeatedly appealed for a talented, capable, and experienced woman educator to come to China to begin women's work. Laura Haygood was the woman who in 1884 responded, arriving in Shanghai just after her thirty-ninth birthday. She directed women's work, founded schools for girls in China, and became the incarnation of foreign missions in the early work of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.²⁷ James Thoburn, a minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church sent as a missionary to India and later Methodist bishop there, saw the same need in India. He encouraged his sister, Isabella Thoburn, to become the first female missionary to India in 1870. In 1889, as an outgrowth of her work for the education of women and girls, she founded the Lucknow Women's College, first Christian college for women in Asia. Clara Swain went to India with Isabella Thoburn and was the first female medical doctor in Asia.²⁸

The Women's Missionary Society of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ was smaller than those of the southern and northern Methodist Episcopal Churches. An editorial appearing in 1882 in the first issue of *Woman's Evangel*, journal of the United Brethren Women's Society, graphically presented the challenge each denomination gave to women in their churches:

Many centuries have passed since the command was given to women, "Go and tell that Jesus has risen," but not till this century (the latter part of it) have Christian women come together with one mind and heart to roll away the stone from the living sepulcher, where her heathen sister sits in total spiritual darkness. She has heard that "the Master is here and calleth for thee." . . . Christian women of all ranks and

²⁶ Joanne Brown, "Jennie Fowler Willing: Churchwoman and Reformer," unpublished paper presented at "Methodism and Ministry: Historical Explorations": A Bicentennial Consultation at Drew University, April 7-9, 1983; *Notable American Women*, vol. 3, pp. 623-25; *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, p. 264.

²⁷ Oswald Eugene Brown and Anna Muse Brown, *Life and Letters of Laura Askew Haygood* (Nashville: Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1904); *Notable American Women*, vol. 2, pp. 167-69.

²⁸ *Notable American Women*, vol. 3, pp. 411-13, 443.

Women and the Nature of Ministry

denominations, let us join hands in one endeavor—with one thought, one prayer, one motto, one voice,—*The women of all lands for Jesus.*²⁹

The rise of women's missionary society work brought new dimensions of ministry to all antecedent denominations of United Methodism. More workers and increased funds were channeled into previously untapped areas than would have been possible without their contribution. All this was done by women creating alternative organizations of service outside established power structures.

Nevertheless, responses by bishops, ministers, and general secretaries of church boards to the creation of women's organizations varied from strong support to outright opposition, similar to the acceptance of women into the clergy a century later. In the African Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the denominations of pan-Methodism, women were included in the official structures of the church in 1868, by creation of the position of stewardess, and in 1874, when the Women's Parent Mite Missionary Society was begun. Both moves served to contain the female's functions, however, at a time when preaching women were being denied ordination. The stewardess roll was clearly one of helper and assistant to ordained clergymen, and the missionary society limited women's work to a separate sphere outside the official governing bodies of the denominations.³⁰

Attitudes within the Methodist Episcopal Church were similar. One bishop lauded the "righteous parity" which the late nineteenth century gave to women: "Parity in the churches—parity in the schools—parity in the learned professions—parity wherever her physical and mental conditions fit her to work." Another valued the deaconess movement as a clear alternative to keep women out of the ordained ministry: "Her opportunities for usefulness are now so numerous that she does not *need* to get into the pulpit," he stated. "There must be no clashing in regard to spheres or rights." Perhaps the most prevalent view was expressed by an eminent minister who wrote of women's missionary societies in a church journal: "Some of the most thoughtful minds are beginning to ask what is to become of this Woman movement in the Church. Let them alone,—all through our history like movements have started. Do not oppose them, and it will die out."³¹

Rather than die out, women's missionary societies grew and flourished. In these early years, when subtle resistance and efforts to gain control of women's missionary society funds characterized the attitudes of

²⁹Editorial, *Woman's Evangel* vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1882), p. 2; Selections from the "Editorial" in *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, ch. 6, "Lay Women in the Protestant Tradition," Document 1, pp. 256, 260.

³⁰Jualyne Dodson, "Nineteenth-Century A.M.E. Preaching Women: Cutting Edge of Women's Inclusion in Church Polity," in *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 1, pp. 276-89.

³¹Quoted in *Women and Religion in America*, vol. 1, p. 252.

many church authorities, concerted efforts were made to block ordination and laity voting rights for women. Such movements were highly threatening; the granting of ordination and laity voting rights to women would mean affirmation of their ministries within the mainstream structures of the church.

In the late nineteenth century, the words "laity" or "laymen" literally meant "males," for only men had voting rights at the General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Churches in the north and south. This tradition began to break down within some annual conferences and Belle Bennett and Frances Willard, founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, were the first women to pioneer in the southern and northern churches for inclusion of women as "laity" in these denominations.

In 1881, Frances Willard and four other women from other annual conferences were elected to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. When the exclusion of females was reaffirmed at the 1896 conference, one delegate stated: "to seat the claimants would be to destroy all respect for the Constitution of the Church."³²

Laity rights were finally granted to women in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1906 when Lucy Rider Meyer became the first laywoman to be a General Conference delegate. In the southern church, Belle Bennett, who had long championed laity voting rights for women, became the first duly elected female member to the conference of 1922. Ironically, she died before the General Conference convened that year.³³

The struggle for preaching rights and ordination constitute the final movement of the late nineteenth century for inclusion of women in the United Methodist tradition into the full ministries of the church. Since the days of John Wesley, women had been accepted as evangelists and their effectiveness in bringing conversions had been well attested throughout the nineteenth century in America. One of the most powerful preachers was Amanda Berry Smith, a black woman who gained conversions of hundreds of black and white men and women at holiness camp meetings in the United States before taking extended revivalistic tours in England, Africa, and India. Bishop James Thoburn described her revival meetings as more successful than those of any other visiting evangelist and acclaimed Amanda Smith as the person who "had taught me more that was of actual value to me as a preacher of Christian truth . . . than any other person I ever met."³⁴

³²Lewis Curts, ed., *The General Conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1792 to 1896* (Cincinnati: Curts & Jennings, 1900), p. 201.

³³Rosemary Keller, "Creating a Sphere for Women: The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1906," pp. 246-50; Virginia Shadron, "The Laity Rights Movement, 1906-1918," pp. 261-75, in *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 1.

³⁴James Thoburn, "Introduction," to *An Autobiography: Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist* (Jamestown, N.C.: Newby Book Room, 1893) pp. viii-ix; *Notable American Women*, vol. 3, pp. 304, 305.

But while the gifts of women as evangelists were hailed by clergy and laity alike, the road to ordination was an arduous one because ordination meant a guaranteed appointment to a local church. The resistance to guaranteed appointments for women is strikingly evidenced in the case of Jennie Fowler Willing, one of the first women to be granted a local preacher's license in the Methodist Episcopal Church. When her husband, William, became a presiding elder, now the office of district superintendent, Jennie was appointed to a church in his district. She served the congregation as pastor and preacher but William Willing's name was listed in the conference journal as minister of the church because women could not be given official appointments.³⁵

Licensing and ordination of women as elders in full connection only came in The Methodist Church with the approval by the General Conference of 1956. Thousands of petitions by lay women in the Women's Society of Christian Service made a telling difference leading to the delegates' positive decision. Women were first licensed to preach in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1869, an action which was revoked eleven years later at the time that a decision to ordain women was also rejected. While the Methodist Protestant Church began ordaining women in the late nineteenth century, the practice was revoked before the turn of the century. The United Brethren Church made the most strides. With their first woman, Ella Niswonger (1865-1944), being ordained in 1889, almost one hundred followed during the next decade. Most of these women served as evangelists, however, and were not appointed as itinerating ministers. Ordination of women continued in the United Brethren Church until merger with the Evangelical Association, which had never ordained women, in 1946. Creation of the Evangelical United Brethren Church resulted in quiet abandonment of the ordination of females.³⁶

The experience of Anna Howard Shaw, probably the first woman to be ordained in the United Methodist family, dramatizes something of the journey of women pioneers toward full clergy rights. She first sought to be ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1878 and 1880.³⁷ At every point in her journey toward ordination, Anna Howard Shaw experienced lack of support and rebuff. It first came from her family, who were Unitarians, hostile to her "conversion" to Methodism and to preaching. They offered to send her to the University of Michigan if she would give up preaching. She rejected their offer and earned money herself to attend Albion College and Boston University School of Theology.

Seminary experience was a hazardous journey for a woman. Shaw was ineligible for financial assistance available to young men preparing for

³⁵Brown, "Jennie Fowler Willing."

³⁶James E. Will, "Ordination of Women," in *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 2, pp. 290-99.

³⁷Anna Howard Shaw, *The Story of a Pioneer* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1915); *Notable American Women*, vol. 3, pp. 274-77.

ordination. For room and board she was dependent on what she could earn by "substitute preaching." She nearly starved before being rescued by members of the Women's Home Missionary Society. Graduating in 1878, Anna Howard Shaw was the only woman in her class.

Late in 1878, she received a pastorate of the Methodist church at East Dennis on Cape Cod and temporary charge of a nearby Congregational church. To be able to administer the sacraments, she applied for ordination through the New England Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. She was refused and the General Conference sustained its action and also revoked her preacher's license.

Anna Howard Shaw applied to the Methodist Protestant Church, a smaller and weaker denomination of the Methodist heritage. After sharp debate, she was ordained in 1880. Only a few years later, however, that ordination was revoked. Increasingly she came to feel that her energies and commitments needed to be rechanneled; it was not yet the time for a woman to be able to pioneer as an ordained clergy. She became more directly involved in full-time work for the "great cause" of women's rights, determining that there was "but one solution for women—the removal of the stigma of disfranchisement."³⁸ In years to follow she served as both vice-president and president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association.

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An historical overview of the work of women in the United Methodist tradition provides a significant perspective on the nature of ministry in the bicentennial year. It offers a broader historical framework of the varieties and breadth of ministry than has been assumed in recent generations. During the twentieth century, ministry has increasingly been defined in terms of ordination. The future location and definition of the diaconate will be a major issue confronting the General Conference of 1984 and the nature of ministry underlies much of the contention around it.

To take seriously the disciplinary description of "The Ministry of All Christians" is to understand the ministry of the laity to be equally basic to that of the ordained and the diaconate. The history of women is rooted in the contribution of lay women. Ordination became only the last function which women have begun to assume in broad measure in the church. For women, ministry was initially grounded in service in the local church. From the beginning, the mutuality and support of clergymen and laywomen was fundamental. Ministry was rooted in service not status. It grew out of the gifts of the holy spirit for diverse service and the commission given to Christians in their baptism. The ministries of women in the United Methodist tradition provide vibrant life to the disciplinary statement of the "Ministry of All Christians." May they witness to our own practice of ministry today.

³⁸Shaw, *Story of a Pioneer*, p. 151.