

**ECCLESIASTICAL SUFFRAGE:  
THE FIRST WOMEN PARTICIPANTS AT  
GENERAL CONFERENCE IN THE ANTECEDENTS OF  
THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

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Shortly after I became assistant to the coordinator of the Women's History Project of the General Commission on Archives and History (GCAH) in 1983, I was asked to research the names of the first women to be seated at a General Conference in all five antecedent branches of United Methodism—Evangelical, United Brethren, Methodist Protestant, Methodist Episcopal, and Methodist Episcopal South. Requests for related information have come to the GCAH since that time, convincing me that there should be no further delay in making the results of my inquiry public. My research was done at the United Methodist Archives and History Center in the combined library of the GCAH and the Drew University Methodist collection. Between information in Annual Conference journals, published proceedings of the various General Conferences, and research done by other scholars, I have been able to discover the names of all those women who first participated in General Conferences as voting delegates.

The Methodist Protestant Church was the first in the United Methodist family to seat women at their General Conference. In 1892, Eugenia F. St. John (Kansas) was seated as a ministerial delegate. In addition, three of the lay delegates were women—Melissa M. Bonnett (West Virginia), Mrs. M. J. Morgan (Indiana), and A. E. Murphy (Iowa). The 1892 Methodist Protestant General Conference is thus marked by two noteworthy "firsts" for women. It was not only the first to allow women to participate as delegates, it was also the first to recognize the full ministerial status of a woman in allowing her a seat as a ministerial delegate. Neither "first" was attained without considerable debate, as may be read in the *Methodist Recorder* (Pittsburgh) 53 (June 1-11, 1892) and the *Methodist Protestant* 62 (May 25, May 29, and June 1, 1892).<sup>1</sup>

The following year, 1893, the United Brethren in Christ for the first time included two women as lay delegates at General Conference. Mattie

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<sup>1</sup>For fuller information on the issues and events involved in the movement for women's participation in Methodist Protestant Church governance, see William T. Noll, "Laity Rights and Leadership: Winning Them for Women in the Methodist Protestant Church, 1860-1900," in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, volume 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), pp. 219-230.

A. Brewer was seated with the Lower Wabash delegation and Mrs. S. J. Staves with the Des Moines delegation. It is important to note that the presence of women coincided with the first presence of laity, lay representation having only been established by vote during the previous United Brethren General Conference (1889). Both laity and clergy rights were historic issues at the General Conference of 1889, which confirmed the licensing and ordination of women as well. See *Religious Telescope* 55 (May 11-31, 1889) for the full proceedings of the landmark General Conference of 1889, including the vigorous debates over women's ordination and lay participation.<sup>2</sup>

The road to laity rights for women in the Methodist Episcopal Church is perhaps better known. Five women were elected as lay delegates for the first time in 1888 with another sixteen elected as lay reserves. Their names and Annual Conferences are published in the *Daily Christian Advocate*.<sup>3</sup> But opposition to their eligibility was strong enough to prohibit their seating at General Conference. The controversy over "the woman question" continued through the succeeding three quadrennia. Finally, a majority at the General Conference of 1900 expressed their acceptance of women lay delegates, paving the way for their official inclusion at the 1904 General Conference. In 1904, twenty-four lay delegates and 30 lay reserves were women. The *Daily Christian Advocate* carried an article by Mrs. M. E. Roberts called "The Origin of the Movement for the Admission of Women to the General Conference," accompanied by a photograph of the women of the 1904 Conference, marking the historic occasion.<sup>4</sup> The names of all delegates and reserves are listed by conference delegations in the *Daily Christian Advocate*, but the constraints of space allow me to include here only the names of the women who were lay delegates.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. G. F. Arms, Western South America  
May C. Bliss, Detroit  
Bella E. Bodkin, Southern California

Bertha Crow, St. Louis  
Mary E. Danforth, New Hampshire  
Gertrude Durrell, New England

<sup>2</sup>Two articles which further discuss these issues are available in *Women in New Worlds*, hereafter cited as *WINW*. See Donald K. Gorrell, "'A New Impulse': Progress in Lay Leadership and Service of Women of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Association, 1870-1910" *WINW*, vol. 1, pp. 233-245, and James E. Will, "Ordination of Women: The Issue in the Church of the United Brethren In Christ" in *WINW*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), pp. 290-299. The latter has also been published in Donald K. Gorrell, ed., *"Woman's Rightful Place": Women in United Methodist History* (Dayton, Ohio: United Theological Seminary, 1980), pp. 27-40.

<sup>3</sup>See "The Woman Delegates Elect" in *DCA* 11 (May 2, 1888), 1.

<sup>4</sup>*DCA* 15 (May 31, 1904), 383.

<sup>5</sup>The list is found in *DCA* 15 (May 4, 1904), 13. For further reading on laity rights for women in the Methodist Episcopal Church, see "Creating a Sphere for Women: The Methodist Episcopal church, 1869-1906," by Rosemary Skinner Keller in *WINW*, vol. 1, pp. 246-260 (also printed as "Creating a Sphere for Women: How Consequential an Accommodation?" in *Methodist History* 18 (January 1980), 83-94).

Alice M. Hayman, Indiana  
 Emeline A. Hypes, Southern Illinois  
 Elizabeth S. Martin, Des Moines  
 Mattie Y. McMahan, Illinois  
 Lucy Rider Meyer, Rock River  
 Emma L. Neeld, North India  
 Medora D. Nickell, Nebraska  
 Juanita Palacios, Mexico  
 Lois S. Parker, North India

Florence Richards, Central Ohio  
 Minerva E. Roberts, Nebraska  
 Florence L. Snow, South Kansas  
 Agnes Snyder, Ohio  
 Annie T. Strickland, Little Rock  
 Viola Troutman, Kansas  
 Lottie E. Valentine, Michigan  
 Mary S. Wilkerson, Northern New York  
 Mrs. Frank Wilson, North Indiana

Eighteen years after the northern church seated women, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South did likewise. In 1918, the question of extending laity rights to women was committed to vote by Annual Conferences. During the following quadrennium, a narrow majority voted to admit women "to membership on official boards and to seats in all the Conferences of the connection."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, in 1922, twenty women took their places as lay delegates — if not blessed by all their brethren, at least officially sanctioned by due process. Eighteen women had been elected as lay delegates, and twenty-six as lay alternates.<sup>7</sup> However, one of the delegates, Belle Harris Bennett, was too ill to attend and an alternate, Mrs. J. H. Spillman, was seated in her place. Two other women alternates were seated in place of the principal delegates from their conferences as well. Following are the names of all the elected delegates and the three alternates who participated in the General Conference of 1922.

#### Delegates

Belle Harris Bennett, Kentucky  
 Mrs. S. H. Bowman, Western Virginia  
 Mrs. H. A. Dunham, Western N. Carolina  
 Mrs. J. Le Grande Everett, N. Carolina  
 Mrs. R. L. Hobdy, Alabama  
 Mrs. R. P. Howell, Los Angeles  
 Mrs. Luke G. Johnson, North Georgia  
 Althea Jones, Texas  
 Mrs. Fred A. Lamb, Southwest Missouri  
 Mrs. J. H. McCoy, Tennessee  
 Mrs. D. D. McGehee, North Alabama

Mrs. J. W. Mills, Texas  
 Mrs. W. L. Oliver, North Arkansas  
 Mrs. Nat G. Rollins, Northwest Texas  
 Mrs. F. F. Stephens, Missouri  
 Mrs. F. M. Tolleson, North Arkansas  
 Mrs. John S. Turner, North Texas  
 Mrs. L. B. Woodside, St. Louis

#### Alternates Seated

Mrs. J. H. Dickey, Louisville  
 Mrs. J. W. Perry, Holston  
 Mrs. J. H. Spillman, Kentucky

Lay delegates first attended General Conference in the United Evangelical Church in 1898. The Evangelical Association established lay representation in church governance in 1903, with lay participation in

<sup>6</sup>See "Laity Rights for Women" in the *Journal of the Nineteenth General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South Held at Hot Springs, Arkansas, May 3-22, 1922*, p. 367, for a statement of the official total of yeas, nays, and abstentions. The total number of votes by annual conferences are listed on pp. 61-62. A more complete discussion of this whole process is given in Virginia Shadron, "The Laity Rights Movement, 1906-1918: Woman's Suffrage in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South" in *WINW*, vol. 1, pp. 261-275.

<sup>7</sup>The names of all delegates and alternates are found on pp. 372-376 of the *Journal of the Nineteenth General Conference of the M. E. Church, South*.

General Conference beginning in 1907. Women, however, were not admitted in either case. When the two denominations merged in 1922 to form the Evangelical Church, they continued to exclude women. It was not until the Evangelical Church merged with the United Brethren in Christ in 1946 that the situation changed in favor of laity rights for women. In anticipation of the merger, the Evangelical Church General Conference of 1946 included Mrs. Edward Stukenberg (Illinois) and Irene Haumersen (Wisconsin) among its "laymen."<sup>8</sup> The very same delegates then attended the first General Conference of the newly-formed Evangelical United Brethren Church, immediately following. Although the union confirmed laity rights for women of the old Evangelical Church and the new E.U.B., it had the opposite effect on clergy rights. Women's ordination, a relative commonplace in the United Brethren since the turn of the century, was not acknowledged in the Evangelical Church. With the union in 1946, women's ordination was indefinitely suspended.<sup>9</sup>

This overview of the inclusion of women in General Conferences is just that — an overview. Studies are needed which probe the identities of these women and how they came to be accorded membership in a General Conference delegation. We know virtually nothing about most of them — who they were or the reasons why they (rather than others) were elected. In many cases, even their first names are unrecorded. But these women were seen by their Annual Conferences as somehow "fit" to be voting delegates at General Conference. Learning more about the personal and political reasons why this was so would add depth to our understanding of the process whereby women came to share an active part in church governance. I should like to end with a call for further attention to the women I have named, that the persons they were and the history they made will be more meaningfully known.

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<sup>8</sup>The election of Stukenberg and Haumersen is confirmed in the journals of their respective Annual Conferences. See *Official Proceedings of the 102nd Annual Session of the Illinois Conference of the Evangelical Church*, p. 27 (item #8), "Mrs. E. Stuckenber," and *Proceedings of the 90th Annual Session of the Wisconsin Conference of the Evangelical Church*, p. 25 (item #73), "Irene Haumersen." Furthermore, the *Official Proceedings of the First Quadrennial Session of the General Conference, The Evangelical United Brethren Church* lists all delegates from the United Brethren on pp. 18-20, and those from the Evangelical Church on pp. 20-23. Haumersen and Stukenberg are listed with the latter.

<sup>9</sup>See Jim Will, "The Ordination of Women — The Development in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ," in *Woman's Rightful Place*, especially pp. 32-33 in which Will suggests that the suspension of clergy rights for women was orchestrated behind the scenes and was an unanticipated outcome of the merger. Interestingly, there is little evidence about what became of this issue after the merger. Will leaves the reader with the halt to women's ordination, giving no indication that it was ever resumed in the life of the E.U.B. Church. But J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church*, ed. Kenneth W. Kruger, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), pp. 360-361 offer the following unexpected information:

“In the Evangelical United Brethren Church the ordination of women never became a controversial issue, but in 1950 it was referred to the General Council of Administration for study. The council passed the reference to the Board of Christian Education which in 1962 issued a murky conclusion: ‘Whereas the *Discipline* [Par. 354] may be interpreted to include women; therefore, be it resolved that we continue to accept the intent of Paragraph 354. . . .’ The current discussion of the ordination of women in many denominations no doubt gave the motivation for the recommendation of this study. **In several instances women were ordained in the Evangelical United Brethren Church, but these isolated instances neither provoked any recorded objections nor inspired any generally accepted practice.**” (Emphasis mine.)

The question of women’s ordination in the E.U.B. Church deserves investigation if only because of the obscure state of the current knowledge. Behney and Eller did not document the instances of women’s ordination alleged in their work; their claim needs to be researched in order to confirm the conclusion that such ordinations occurred without larger impact, or to explain why they remained isolated instances.