

REPORT ON SEMINAR: WOMEN IN METHODISM

by Frederick A. Norwood

Upon request of the editor I submit this brief report on the seminar conducted at Garrett Theological Seminary in the spring of 1971 under the general title, *The Methodist Heritage*. One specific topic for intensive investigation through primary sources was "Women in Methodism." A small group of eight students (Donna Behnke, Eugene Brueggemann, Martha Coursey, Donna Green, John Hayek, Kenneth Suetterlin, John Ulrich, plus one who dropped out) engaged in a disciplined ploughing of primary source material, including various editions of the *Christian Advocate*, the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, the *Ladies Repository*, books, and various pamphlets, in an effort to understand the roles of women in the life of Methodist churches, with emphasis on the mainline Methodist Episcopal tradition. Very little attention was paid in this particular seminar to the denominational strands introduced from United Brethren and Evangelical traditions.

The method followed was that of selected case study, which permitted concentration on those aspects most rewarding for investigation in the limited scope of a one-quarter seminar. After introductory attention to the subject of women in Christian history and notable women in the days of Wesley and Asbury (for example, Susanna Wesley, Sarah Crosby, Barbara Heck, Catherine Garrettson), the group spent one entire session and part of another analyzing the material intended for inclusion in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* which bears on women. 323 xerox pages of manuscript articles drawn (by the author and the editor in Lake Junaluska) from the master manuscript for the *Encyclopedia* constituted the basis for this investigation. Almost 200 references concern the participation of women, collectively or individually, in the history of Methodism. One student reported statistically on 23 women who fell to his responsibility: 10 were missionaries, 9 authors or editors, 5 deaconesses, 10 social workers, 1 nurse (several activities overlapped). Of the 23 twelve were married and eleven single, 13 had the B.A. degree, 7 the M.A., and one M.D. Although no statistical data was collected on all the listings, the sample given above represents a good cross-section taken in an alphabetical grouping.

Most of the seminar was devoted to investigation of attitudes expressed in the church on several controverted issues, particularly general women's rights, the suffrage movement, lay representation, deaconesses, and women as ministers, especially ordination. The sources were consulted according to periods in which these issues were being fought over. For example, women's rights and suffrage

rose to prominence in the middle of the nineteenth century and again around 1920; women delegates to General Conference occasioned much debate in 1888, through the nineties, and during World War I (M.E.South); women's missionary organizations began in 1869 and 1880 (1878 and 1890 in M.E.South); deaconesses were much in discussion around the 1880's and 1890's; and the issue of ordination of women was especially debated in 1880 and the 1950's.

It would be difficult to single out particular facets of the investigations. Certainly the controversy over the proposed ordination of Anna Oliver in 1880 was a high point. The valiant efforts of a small group of women to start the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society in 1869 against considerable male opposition was another. Notable also were the careers of Frances Willard and Lucy Rider Meyer. A persistent pattern clearly emerged in the repeated opposition from conservative male centers of ecclesiastical power (bishops like Charles Fowler, editors like J. M. Buckley) to almost any proposal for the advancement of women in activity which might carry with it any measurable increase in influence, power, or financial control. Another general result was increased awareness that many of the issues associated with movements of "women's liberation" in the later twentieth century have roots deep in history. Although Methodists have little cause for pride in the record set in respect of women's roles in the church, one non-Methodist participant remarked that many of the issues fought out and resolved a hundred years ago in Methodism are still being debated in his own conservative Lutheran synod. Whatever strictures may fairly be placed on Methodist sexual prejudice, a church that could produce Sarah Crosby, Mary Bosanquet Fletcher, Frances Willard, and Lucy Rider Meyer can't be all bad. A contemporary flavor was added to the seminar through visits by a deaconess active in Chicago, Phoebe Reynolds, and a district president of the W.S.C.S., Florence Norwood.