

Recruiting/Deploying Women in Ministry in The Wesleyan Church

The right of women to respond to the call of God to serve both in lay office and leadership and in ministerial office and leadership is a matter that appeared at one time to have been forever settled in the churches of the holiness movement, including our own. But in recent years, while some denominations that for centuries closed their doors to women leaders and ministers are now eagerly opening those doors to them, we in The Wesleyan Church have in practice almost slammed the doors shut, even while we have strengthened our statements in every respect on equal rights as to gender.

Why are our people, including women who recognize God's call upon them, so confused at this point? A writer from one of our sister holiness denominations has spoken loudly to the issue. Many in our congregations believe that the Scriptures "prohibit women from pursuing and filling pastoral positions in the church." They have not "heard one sermon which would condone it" or "seen or read a book or an article condoning or affirming it." Few have known a female pastor and are thus without any exemplary role model. Few "have been exposed to responsible principles of biblical interpretation on the controversial passages about women, such as studying the statements in context; understanding the difference between descriptive and prescriptive passages, and carefully examining the general tenor or direction of Scripture in order to arrive at the meaning or principles to be applied to the specifics." (J. Peiffer, *Pastoral Theology Lecture Notes*, 1992, quoted by Janet M. Peifer, "Women in the Pew, but Destined for the Pulpit," in *Evangelical Visitor*, October 1997, pp. 8-9.)

Let us revisit this topic, beginning with the Scriptures. The full equality of male and female in the governance of this world is clearly stated prior to the Fall (Gen. 1:27-28—dominion was given to them both). Full equality is restated as a basic principle of our relationship "in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). In the Old Testament there were several women who were prophetesses, serving as the voice of God in instructing and leading men: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah. The Prophet Joel predicted that in the coming age the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon men and women alike, and they would prophesy (Joel 2:28-29). On the day of Pentecost Peter declared that this was now being fulfilled (Acts 2:16-18).

Women prophetesses spoke the Word of the Lord in the early church (Acts 21:9), and Paul himself speaks of women prophesying and praying publicly in the church services as a normal thing (1 Cor. 11:5). Furthermore, throughout the gospel record, unusual prominence is given to women as the more faithful of Jesus' followers. In the oldest and most reliable Greek manuscripts, Priscilla is mentioned ahead of her husband, Aquila, five times out of seven references to this couple. She took the lead in instructing Apollos, one of the most prominent preachers of the New Testament age (Acts 18:26 – the oldest Greek manuscripts put her first in this passage).

Paul refers to Phoebe as a "deacon," not a "deaconess" (Rom. 16:1). This may help to explain 1 Timothy 3:8-12, where in a passage on the qualifications of a "deacon," Paul

drops in a whole verse on women's qualifications (not "wives" as in KJV and NIV); the context would indicate these were women deacons.

Some ancient manuscripts appear to refer to a woman apostle by the name of Junia (Rom. 16:7), and Paul at different times lists women among those he calls his "fellow-laborers."

This summary of course leaves us with two other passages that seem to be diverse from, even contradictory to all that I have cited: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. I would point out that it would be impossible for Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to have written these verses as a universal, permanent forbidding of women to preach, lead, and minister, since the same Holy Spirit had inspired Joel to say it would happen in the age of the Spirit, had inspired Peter to say at Pentecost that that had come to pass, and had inspired Paul to speak of women as prophesying and praying in public as a normal occurrence. I am sure that I cannot satisfy all of our questions about these verses. They may refer to local situations or temporary cultural factors as do other difficult passages, such as the prayer veils or women's head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11, the short and long hair references in the same passage, and some four commands by Paul and one by Peter that we are to greet one another with a holy kiss. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 is in a chapter on tongues-speaking, is concerned about order in worship rather than confusion, may have been forbidding women from disturbing the service by talking among themselves. It is interesting to note that women are not the only ones in that chapter that Paul tells to be still under certain circumstances. 1 Timothy 2:11-15 ends with a verse that no one has been able to interpret – "women will be saved through childbearing." If part of the passage defies our exegesis, humility should deter us from being dogmatically literal about the rest. We cannot set aside all the rest of Scripture because of two brief obscure passages.

I have noted a strange inconsistency on our part when we shy away from our historic position on women in the ministry. We have moved away from our former literalistic and legalistic interpretation of the passages in 1 Corinthians 11 about long hair for women and short hair for men, but have tended to adopt a literalistic and legalistic interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 on women in ministry. And we have moved away from our former literalistic and legalistic interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:9-10 dealing with women's dress, but have tended to adopt a literalistic and legalistic interpretation of the verses immediately following on women in ministry. How can we justify this?

Let's take a brief glance at the history of women in ministry in the Wesleyan/holiness context. John Wesley used some women as class leaders and apparently one or two as preachers. Luther Lee, one of the founders of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, preached the ordination sermon of the first woman ordained in America (1853), using the Galatians 3:28 text. William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, fully supported women's right to preach and lead. His wife, Catherine, shared fully in his ministry and his daughter, Evangeline, was later one of the top leaders of the Salvation Army. B. T. Roberts, founder of the Free Methodist Church, wrote one of the best books on this subject, fully supporting the right of women to be ordained and to serve in the ministry. Martin Wells Knapp and Seth C. Rees, cofounders of the Pilgrim Holiness Church, were both married to preachers, and both strongly supported the right of women to preach. At one point, forty percent of the ministers in the Pilgrim Holiness Church were women.

My wife, Maxine, is currently researching in preparation for a book on Wesleyan women ministers and their contribution to the promising situation Wesleyans enjoy today. She has identified hundreds of women who have served in the Wesleyan Methodist, Pilgrim Holiness, and Reformed Baptist Churches. Among them were powerful preachers, effective pastors, fruitful evangelists, and many church planters – planting churches that include some of our larger ones today.

Why has the number of women in Wesleyan ministry declined in the period since World War II? Perhaps the enormous tide of women moving into the job market has sidetracked some whom God tried to call. But there is a more apparent factor. The women's rights movement had been cradled in the Wesleyan/holiness movement – the first convention was held in the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York in July 1848. The movement was then strongly committed to biblical values, fighting against slavery and intemperance. But in the mid-twentieth century, this movement was radicalized, with some women moving into leadership who were agnostics or atheists or even pagans worshiping female deities, hating males, taking extreme positions. The more theologically liberal denominations tolerated them, jumped on their bandwagon. Fundamentalists of backgrounds quite different from ours answered with narrow, literalistic interpretations of isolated passages. This conflict did not hear our moderating voice. In fact, we were turned off by the radical feminists and ceased to talk about our position. As a result many of our ministers and laymen attended the seminars of the fundamentalists, read their literature, failed to recognize their errors, and were alienated from our earlier position.

I believe that we are all aware that The Wesleyan Church has taken an unequivocal position on the matter. Its Constitution declares that any member may be elected to any office that any other member can be elected to (*Discipline 302:3*), and it makes it clear that this means a woman can be elected to any office in the Church by declaring that there shall be no discrimination against any member or minister on account of gender (*Discipline 360:3d*). The Wesleyan Church, on the basis of the total context of scripture, believes that woman is fully equal to man in terms of her right (as directed by the Holy Spirit and authorized by the Church) to teach, preach, lead or govern (including supervisory roles and board memberships), lead worship or serve in any other office or ministry of the Church. We have some women pastors, women superintendents over our fields in Puerto Rico and Peru, an executive assistant regional superintendent in South Africa, and have had some general officers in the Caribbean Provisional Conference who were women. We have ladies who serve on local boards of administration, district boards of administration, college boards of trustees, and the General Board of Administration.

Today The Wesleyan Church has a shortage of ministers. Twenty percent or more of our pastors are coming from outside our denomination, not all of whom have been trained in schools like our own. They do not all become acclimated or develop loyalties to Wesleyan concepts and institutions. Meanwhile God is calling an increasing number of our women, younger ones in particular, and they are enrolling in our ministerial training programs. One professor in one of our leading ministerial programs says that the top ten ministerial students in their program, both academically and in leadership, are women. My own granddaughter, called of God at our general youth convention, confirmed in that

call at one of our youth camps, will enroll at one of our schools next fall to major in Christian ministries. What will be our responsibility before God if we allow the spiritual gifts of these women to be hidden, unused, or discouraged? Some of them will not give up. They will go to help build other churches and we will be impoverished by their departure.

What can we do? I want to suggest some practical steps.

1. General and district leaders need to speak out on this issue at every appropriate opportunity.
2. District superintendents must not use the reluctance of unenlightened lay people in local churches as a cop out in this matter. If we exercise the strong leadership for this part of our work that we do in others, we can turn the tide.
3. When preaching on the call, we should appeal to men and women. When referring to pastors and other ministers, we need to use terms that include both genders.
4. We should honor the few faithful women ministers we have, singling out those particularly effective for awards at district conferences and ministerials.
5. We need to use our best women ministers as speakers in camps, revivals, ministerials, have women ministers to lead in public prayer in such services.
6. We need to put one or more women ministers on each DBMS. The girls and ladies who come before the DBMS will see a role model and appreciate such openness.
7. We have prayed that the Lord would send laborers into the harvest. Let's pray that He will empower and guide us in recruiting and deploying the women He is sending in answer to our prayers.

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On Behalf of the Board of General Superintendents

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