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# Women and Ministry in the Methodist Tradition

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*Melvin E. Dieter*

*On September 20, 1984, Dr. David McKenna conferred the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree on the Reverend Lea Joyner, pastor of the largest church in United Methodism pastored by a woman—Southside United Methodist Church, Monroe, Louisiana. The special award chapel recognized the accomplishments of one of God's most faithful servants and affirmed once again Asbury Theological Seminary's commitment to encourage and equip women for ministry.*

*The editor's brief remarks at the award ceremony follow. They outline the checkered history of the place the church has given to women since its founding. Excerpts from Dr. Joyner's own contemporary account of her experiences as, at times, the lone woman pastor in United Methodism, complement the historical review. They embody the "stuff" of the on-going history of women in the life of the Wesleyan movement.*

*The emphasis on the enlarging role of women in the church is further affirmed in the publication of Dr. Dorothy Gish's lectures. Her addresses on singleness and aging demonstrate a careful adherence to biblical authority. She integrates the biblical data with the useful insights provided by other disciplines which speak to the issues such as sociology and psychology. Dr. Gish, professor of early childhood and family life education and assistant to the dean at Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania, was the 1984 Ryan Lecturer. The Asbury Theological Seminary Ryan Lectures are sponsored by Dr. and Mrs. Lowell Ryan of Texas.*

—Ed.

The observance of Methodism's Bicentennial and the revived interest in women's studies coincide in such a way that each enhances the other. The Bicentennial provides both interest and impetus for new studies concerning the role of women in the development of

Methodism. The resultant research greatly enhances our understanding of the importance of women in what really made the church “click and tick.” The occasion we celebrate today furnishes an appropriate time to review the role of women in the church over these two hundred years. We will fix our attention upon the main stream body, the United Methodist Church, for the sake of clarity and brevity.

If we were reviewing this story one hundred years ago, as Methodism marked its centennial, the plot would be quite different. In 1880 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church denied ordination to women and in the same breath revoked local preachers’ licenses granted to them since Maggie Van Cott’s in 1869. In 1888 the Conference refused lay voting rights to Frances Willard, founder of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and four other duly elected women delegates from five different annual conferences. Their interpretation: “layman” did not mean “lay woman.” Not until almost twenty years later were voting rights given to females in the highest legislative body of the church. The struggle for full ordination of women continued in the northern church until 1956 when that right was finally granted.

This restriction of the role of women in the official life of the church ran counter to the historical bent in Methodism, a movement which extended women a greater measure of influence and authority long before many other movements did. The church seemed to forget that the Holy Spirit could sing in soprano as well as in bass, as one of her bishops of the period reminded her.

The birth of the Wesleyan movement itself clearly demonstrated the appropriateness of the bishop’s observation. A woman—a special woman—stood in the middle of the fray from the start. Methodism gloried in the wisdom, spirituality, and even theology, Susanna Wesley contributed to early Methodism. She offered direct, and sometimes forceful, input. Her response to her husband Samuel’s letter of concern about religious meetings she held in the Epworth rectory kitchen during his absence on a visit to London underscores that fact. If her husband quieted her by disbanding the meetings, she told him, he must do it in a way which also quieted her conscience before God; his patriarchal authority alone could not absolve her in the solemn day of judgment from the guilt she would bear for the failure to do good when she had the oppor-

tunity. John Wesley himself, at the time of her death, introduced the letter into his *Journal* with the comment, "...she (as well as her father, grandfather, her husband and her three sons) had been, in her measure and degree, a preacher of righteousness." [*Journal*, 3:32] Through her influence upon her sons, and as a role model for women in the developing eighteenth century evangelical revival, she established landmarks for women's place in the life and councils of the movement which subsequent twists and turns in its development could never erase.

Susanna's role was not by any means a solitary one. Frequent references to other women of the revival highlight Wesley's and other early Methodist journals. Mary Fletcher addressed crowds of two and three thousand with Wesley's approval. The story of the spiritual life of Hester Ann Rogers and her "itinerating" across the early Methodist connection, with the encouragement of Wesley, reinforced the growing authority and influence of Methodist women. These persons laid claim to a call of God growing out of the realities of their own evangelical experience of salvation and a pursuit of Christian perfection. Wesley refused to deny their gifts and calling. Both he and Whitefield accepted the invitations of another influential woman, the Countess of Huntingdon, to nominate candidates to chapels she supervised. Both preached in her pulpits at her request, thus recognizing her spiritual authority as director of her parishes.

The influence of women on early Methodism in America was equally telling. Most prominent among these women was Barbara Heck—in many ways the foundress of Methodism in England's American colonies. Barbara and her husband, Paul, made their way from Ireland to the English colony of New York where, in 1766, her concern for the morals of Methodist immigrants like herself sparked the formation of one of the first two Methodist organizations in America. The church established out of her efforts in lower Manhattan Island still ministers to the area—now the financial district of the city. Similar religious fervor inspired Methodist converts on the frontier. There, Sally Brown Helm, a member of the first Methodist congregation formed in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, played such an active role that she "perhaps [became] one of Mr. Wesley's first woman preachers in America." "On all proper occasions," reports say, she "presented

claims and hope of Christianity to others.” Her witness, and that of other strong women in her family, inspired the Helm women of the later 19th century who led in the establishment of the women’s home and foreign missionary societies of the church. Great personal cost often attended the efforts of such women because of the diffidence and outright opposition with which the church frequently responded.

One more significant historical segment links early Methodism and the point at which our brief survey began. Particularly appropriate to our own tradition as a seminary and the occasion which honors our guest today, it is the new understanding of the place of women in ministry which grew out of the Holiness revival of the nineteenth century. The revival was a product of Methodism more than any other religious body. It created a unique seed bed for the growth of the claims of women to the right to preach and otherwise take their place as full-fledged participants in the life of the church. The right of women to speak and pray in public had already been encouraged by the waves of revivalism rolling back and forth across America from its earliest history. The right of individual conscience before God, evangelical Protestants could hardly deny—even to women. A strong weapon in their hands, females claimed their obligation to obey what conscience demanded, even to preach. This was Susanna Wesley’s reminder to Samuel in their dialogue concerning her role as a group leader.

The doctrinal emphasis holiness evangelists sounded throughout Methodism and other churches greatly enhanced this basic appeal. Spirit leadership, entire devotedness to the will of God, the urgency to give witness to the work of the Spirit in one’s life, all nurtured new expectations for the women involved in the revival. But the new understanding of the meaning of Pentecost provided the Biblical basis for their claims to ministry. God expressly poured out the Holy Spirit on all flesh—hand maidens as well as young men—and who would finally question the sovereignty of the Spirit? Did He not move where He would? In this context Luther Lee, one of the founders of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, preached the ordination sermon of Antoinette Brown, the first woman regularly ordained in America.

Studies by leading women historians of Methodist women’s history, such as Rosemary Skinner Keller and Carolyn Griffith,

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reaffirm what many of the Holiness movement's own historians have consistently maintained. The Holiness revival provided not only the seed bed for the growth of women who pioneered in evangelism and preaching, but also the organizational practice ground on which future founders and leaders of the women's organizations of Methodism learned the promotion and sustenance of their concerns within the polity and politics of the church. Phoebe Palmer and her sister, Sarah Lankford Palmer, Catherine Booth, Frances Willard, black evangelist Amanda Smith, Hannah Whitall Smith, Jennie Fowler Willing, Annie Wittenmeyer, Melinda Hamline and Martha Inskip, all were instrumental in establishing some of the most significant religious organizations of the later nineteenth century. Clearly, each of them understood her calling and sense of mission in light of the new birth and a subsequent experience of heart purity and complete devotion to God's will. The King's Daughters, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, city missions, Christian Endeavor, and the home and foreign missionary societies of the Methodist Church all felt the strong effect of their leadership.

And so we arrive at 1880 when the general conference took its drastic stand against the ministry of women within the church. History now tells us that it was only a delaying action. The spiritual forces we have briefly described permeate the church and the world in ways which the general conferences could not, and in some measure would not, recognize. But, to use Timothy Smith's phrase, revivalism and social reform had both been at work, and the churches would never be the same again.

