

Women In Ministry - The Wesleyan Church: A Brief History

by Mari Gonlag

A Radical Church

In the 1830s and early 1840s, tensions mounted in American society as calls for moral reform echoed from both pulpit and lectern. Politicians and preachers joined ranks to attack the evil institution of slavery. Reformers Orange Scott and Luther Lee based their abolitionist position on the fundamental concern that those in bondage to other persons could not fulfill their obligations to obey God. Any system which prohibited persons from obeying their responsibility to God was sinful and evil. Out of this theologically-based abolitionist stance, the Wesleyan Methodist Church was born in 1843 (earliest beginnings of The Wesleyan Church).

Rooted in the concern that persons be able to respond to and serve God freely, it is no surprise that the budding, new church also believed another disenfranchised element of society, women, must be allowed to serve God more openly. By the late 1840s, women concerned over the evils of slavery and intemperance began to shake the social structures with calls for the eradication of these evils. Heretofore the more quiet and reserved element of society, the injustice of slavery and the threats of intemperance to homes and families stirred many women to considerably more visible roles in the movement toward reform.

Women's Rights

When the first Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, NY, in July of 1848, the site of the convention was the Wesleyan Methodist chapel. It was only logical that a church so deeply committed to the right and responsibility of humanity to obey God would open its doors to women taking an unconventional role in calling for reform.

Four years later, when the New York State Temperance Convention refused to recognize delegates from the Women's State Temperance Society or to hear Miss Susan B. Anthony, Luther Lee defended the women's right to participate. When his efforts to convince the conference failed, he opened his church, the Syracuse Wesleyan Methodist chapel, to the women for an evening meeting. The church was packed, while the convention was almost deserted. "Rev. Lee, Susan B. Anthony and others gave stirring pleas for the right of women to work and speak for temperance" (Donald Dayton).

Ordination of Women

In 1853, Luther Lee again stood for women's rights when he ordained to the ministry Miss Antoinette Brown, a Congregationalist who is believed to be the first woman ever ordained to the

Christian ministry in the modern era. The text for his sermon "Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel" was Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

In 1861 the Illinois District led the way for the young church by ordaining Mrs. Mary A. Will as an elder. When the Civil War concluded, the issue of women's rights became a hotly debated topic in the denomination's official publication, the *American Wesleyan*. One article is titled "Woman's Right to Suffrage -- Both Sides Well Defended -- Spicy Remarks"! From 1879 to 1891, the church yielded to the pressure of more conservative elements and decided to allow women to preach, but not to be ordained. In 1891, that decision was reversed and the *Discipline* once again allowed each district to make its own decisions concerning who it would ordain based upon the individual's calling, character, gifts, and fruit in ministry. This decision has remained unchallenged to the present time.

To the end of the nineteenth century and through the first several decades of the twentieth, the westward expansion of the church meant there was always a need for more pastors. Many women filled pulpits, assumed pastoral roles, and were ordained during these years, in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Pilgrim Holiness Church, and in some of the smaller groups that eventually joined the denomination.

Recent History

In the late 1950s and the 1960s, several forces combined to seriously diminish the number of women in church leadership. During those years of political unrest, the civil rights and women's rights movements took on more radical characteristics. When theological debate arose on the topic of women in ministry, the most vocal expositors tended to be from extremely liberal theological traditions or ultra-fundamentalist theological positions. In the absence of a more moderate theological voice, many people from the holiness traditions chose to side with the conservative fundamentalists. Sociologically, women (and men) who resisted more radical feminism or who resented the economic necessities which pushed more women into the labor force united in opposition to the feminist movement and called for a return of women to the more traditional roles of home and family. These persons tended to be identified with conservative, fundamentalist churches, thus carrying along many women and men from holiness churches which had historically been leaders of the cause for women's rights. The irony is that those who now opposed the feminist agenda failed to recognize that the concerns of home and family--moral, physical, and spiritual health--had historically been at the forefront of the feminists cause.

In more recent years, change has been coming at a slow and steady pace. The Wesleyan Church continues to affirm the equality of women and men, recognizing the right of women to "teach, preach, lead or govern (including supervisory roles and board memberships), lead worship

services or serve in any other office or ministry of the Church" (Dr. Lee M. Haines, General Superintendent). More and more women are sensing and responding to God's call, trusting Him to help them find open doors for ministry in The Wesleyan Church. Currently, nearly ten percent of all persons pursuing the goal of ordination are women.

Dr. Earle L. Wilson, General Superintendent, has expressed the current position of the Church on the issue of women in ministry: "The Wesleyan Church from its earliest days has gladly recognized God's calling of women to ministry by ordaining those whom God equipped. The Church affirms again its endorsement of women in ministry and encourages churches everywhere to provide opportunities for meaningful ministry on every level of Church life."

May The Wesleyan Church once again heed the call of one of her founders, Seth C. Rees: "Sisters, let the Holy Ghost fill, call and anoint you to preach the glorious Gospel of our Lord."