

# The Story of Women Preachers In the United Methodist Tradition

# A History of Courage

Patricia J. Thompson

At the 1956 General Conference of the Methodist Church, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, an action was taken that would change forever the face of the Methodist Church.

That action was the decision to grant women clergy the same rights afforded to male clergy! Such action did not come, however, without a great deal of struggle and heartache on the part of untold numbers of women and men. Indeed, women had been advocating for the right to preach from the onset of the Methodist movement in England in 1738.<sup>1</sup> Since the foundation of the Methodist movement was small groups where all members were allowed to express themselves freely, women, in particular, were attracted and eventually became very experienced leaders of the “classes” and the “bands.” Some even came very close to preaching—that is, taking a text and expounding upon it. One of the first to do so was Sarah Crosby, who wrote to Mr. Wesley for advice. He responded that though the Methodists do not allow women to preach, he did not feel that she had broken any law and encour-



aged her to continue as she had been doing. This seems, then, to have opened the door for other women.

An associate of Crosby's, Mary Bosanquet, was the first woman to be approved by Wesley as having an extraordinary call to preach. In 1787 Sarah Mallet became the first officially approved female traveling preacher in Methodism when Wesley gave her a note of authorization from the Methodist Conference in Manchester. Despite Wesley's limited endorsement of women preachers, however, there was not widespread support among the clergy after his death and in 1803 women who felt that they had a call to preach were limited to speaking only to other women.

This certainly did not limit the work of God in calling women to preach. As Methodism spread to America, so women throughout the nineteenth century continued to experience a call from God to preach and found ways to live out their call—often by marrying a Methodist clergyman. Toward the middle of the century a number of women became freelance evangelists.

The Church of the United Brethren in Christ (UBC) was the first in the United States to begin to officially recognize women preachers when it issued “a note of commendation to liberate to public speaking,” (essentially an exhorter’s license), to Charity Opheral from the White River [Indiana] Conference in 1847. Four years later, on May 3, 1851, the Iroquois Circuit of the Illinois Conference of the UBC granted Lydia Sexton the first quarterly conference license to preach ever given to a woman, though she was not allowed by the conference to receive its annual license. Although a resolution was passed in 1857 by the General Conference prohibiting women from even receiving a license to preach, on April 2, 1859, the Upper Wabash [Indiana] Conference issued Sexton a letter of recommendation to preach.

In 1889 the UB Conference which met in York, Pennsylvania voted to allow laity (both men and women) the right to be represented at General Conference and also voted that women could be licensed to preach and ordained as elders. Following that action the Central Illinois Conference granted Maggie Thompson Elliott and Ella Niswonger a license to preach and ordained Niswonger as an elder. The following year Maggie Elliott was also ordained elder. Thus, the United Brethren became the first in the predecessor denominations of the UMC to formally grant women the right to be ordained as elders in full connection. In 1904 the Northwest Kansas UB Conference ordained an African American woman named Minnie Jackson Goins, making her, apparently, the first African American woman to be received into full connection in the United Methodist tradition.

Although it was the United Brethren who took the first formal action to ordain women, the Methodist Protestant Church (MPC) actually was the first to begin ordaining women. For many years it was believed that Anna Howard Shaw was the first woman to be ordained in the UM tradition when she was ordained by the New York MP Conference in 1880, after having been refused ordination by the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC). But, a young woman from Indiana, Helenor Davisson, was ordained deacon by the MP Church in Indiana in 1866. Then it was believed that Shaw was the first to receive her elders orders—though this ordination was declared to be against church law by the 1884 MPC General Conference. Research for this anniversary celebration, however, has identified at least four women who were ordained as elders in full connection in the MPC prior to Shaw’s ordination in 1880!

In 1875 the Kansas MP Conference ordained Mrs. Pauline Martindale as an elder in full connection, followed by the ordination of Mrs. Maggie Ritchie

Elliott (not to be confused by Maggie Thompson Elliott above) in Missouri in 1877. Mrs. Emma Baldwin was ordained in Missouri in 1878 and Mrs. Mary Johnson in Kansas in 1879.<sup>2</sup>

It has also been believed for many years that the first woman in the MPC to have her elder’s ordination formally recognized was Eugenia St. John, ordained in the Kansas MPC in 1889. A review of the 1889 Minutes of the Kansas MP Conference, however, revealed that a second woman was also ordained elder that year—Rosetta S. Smith!<sup>3</sup> The Methodist Protestants never did vote at General Conference to approve the ordination of women—the decision was simply left to the various annual conferences.

It was the Methodist Episcopal women who had the longest and bitterest struggle to win full clergy rights. In 1869 Maggie Newton Van Cott was granted the first license to preach in the MEC by the Stoneridge Quarterly Conference of the Ellenville District of the New York Conference. In the next decade, many women were issued licenses to preach by their quarterly conferences, including Anna Howard Shaw and Anna Snowden Oliver. Oliver enrolled in Boston University School of Theology in 1874 becoming the first female graduate of a theology school in America in 1876, followed two years later by Shaw. In 1880 they were recommended for deacon’s orders by the New England Conference. Bishop Andrews, who presided over the conference that year, however, refused to accept their names. Both women appealed the decision to the 1880 General Conference, meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio. The General Conference not only upheld Bishop Andrews’s decision not to ordain Shaw and Oliver but also voted to rescind all licenses issued to females since 1869.

Nevertheless, women continued the struggle for the right to be recognized as preachers. In 1920 the MEC General Conference once again granted the right to receive a license to preach, and in 1924 women were granted the right to be ordained as local deacons and local elders. Although this was but a partial step, there were many women who took advantage of this new opportunity.

In 1939 the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South (MECS), and the Methodist Protestant Church merged to form the Methodist Church (MC). The vote to grant women full clergy rights was defeated by only seventeen



Photos: Page 6, Lydia Sexton; Page 7, Maggie Newton Van Cott (top), Ella Niswonger (middle), Anna Howard Shaw (bottom).

votes. Because of a ruling that no one with full clergy rights from any of the former denominations would lose those rights as a result of the merger, MP women who had been ordained as elders in full connection continued to serve in that capacity in the MC. Former MEC women, however, were able to serve only as local deacons and local elders. On the other hand, women from the MECS who had never even had the right to a license to preach could now become ordained as local deacons and elders.

This partial step seems to have been perfectly understood by folks in 1924 and the years following as women began applying for even these limited rights. In more recent years, however, this step has caused great confusion—especially as attempts have been made to identify “first” women for the fiftieth anniversary celebration. The major issue in the 1956 decision was not ordination, but membership in the annual conference, which gave the right to voice and vote at the annual conference session and more importantly, the right to a guaranteed appointment. This was the issue that caused the most controversy as it was feared that district superintendents would sometimes be forced to appoint women to churches that did not wish to have a female pastor. Equality finally prevailed, however, and after much debate, the 1956 General Conference voted to allow women to be included in all aspects of the traveling ministry!

In 1946, the United Brethren joined with the Evangelical Church to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUBC). Though the United Brethren had been ordaining women since 1889, the Evangelical Church had never even granted women a license to preach. Though many believe that the ordination of women ceased in the EUB Church, some conferences did continue to ordain women. But, it was not until the EUBs and the Methodists formed The United Methodist Church in 1968 that all women finally had the right to become ordained as elders in full connection. □

1. Unless otherwise noted, information for this article and the sources for that information, can be found in chapter one of my book *Courageous Past, Bold Future—The Journey Toward Full Clergy Rights of Women in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, The United Methodist Church, 2006).

2. 1878 Minutes of the Missouri Methodist Protestant Church, 370 [identified by Missouri Conference archivist John Finley] and 1879 Minutes of the Kansas Methodist Protestant Church, 78 [identified by the author].


3. 1889 Minutes of the Kansas Methodist Protestant Church, 279. It appears that it was St. John who became so well known because she was elected by the Kansas MPC to represent the conference at the 1892 General Conference and her credentials were accepted.



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