

The “famed woman theologian” and “glorious champion” of women’s clergy rights.

Georgia Harkness

1891-1974

In an 1924 article calling for the ordination of women, Methodist theologian Georgia Harkness wrote, “The Church has a task on its hands big enough to demand the consecrated talent of both sexes, and many of us believe that it is neither wise nor Christian deliberately to reject the assistance which trained women would gladly render in its ministry if given an opportunity. . . . We wonder if the advancement of the Kingdom is not more important than the maintenance of an ancient prejudice.”¹

For Harkness, the struggle for women’s ordination and full clergy rights was at the heart of Christian mission; women’s full rights took precedence over “ancient prejudice” because the full inclusion of women in the ordained ministry was needed for the “advancement of the Kingdom.” Harkness worked for three decades so that women would be granted full clergy rights, and she continued working for the rest of her life so that the church would be more open to the ministries of women. (Although Harkness herself had been ordained in the New York Conference in 1938, full clergy membership had been denied her as a woman.)

Harkness wrote many articles supporting women’s ordination and women’s rights and even devoted a book to the theme of “Women in Church and Society.” She promoted women’s rights in church publications, at General Conferences, and in debates with other major theologians of her time. She once defended women’s equality in a spirited public debate with Karl Barth. When he was later asked about Harkness, Barth tartly replied, “Remember me not of that woman.”²

Barth may not have wanted to remember Georgia Harkness, but the delegates of the 1956 General Conference certainly did. After the General Conference voted to grant full clergy rights to women on May 4, 1956, the next item of business was to recognize and thank one fellow delegate who had been a key player in the midcentury struggle for women’s full clergy rights. Noting that this was a “day of particular triumph and significance to one of the [delegates] who for many years has been looking forward to this moment,” delegate Lynn Corson of New Jersey, asked the General Conference to show its appreciation to Georgia Harkness for the “valiant fight she has waged for this cause for many years.” Corson added, “We know that on this day she must



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have peculiar satisfaction in the knowledge that this fight has eventuated in the final victory for her cause.” With this, the General Conference delegates rose and gave a standing ovation to Harkness, who then took the floor and offered brief thanks.³

Walter Muelder, a General Conference observer from the World Council of Churches later observed, “[T]hey made her stand up and gave her a great hand because they knew that no one had championed this more gloriously than Georgia.”⁴ Many at the 1956 General Conference and throughout the church recognized Harkness as a chief strategist and long-time lobbyist for women’s ordination and full

clergy rights. She had been active in several unsuccessful General Conference attempts to grant women full clergy rights, and she helped coordinate the successful strategy in 1956.

Harkness will be remembered not only for her support of full clergy rights for women. She was also the first woman to hold a seminary faculty position in theology, and she remained for many years on the faculty at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary (then known as Garrett Biblical Institute). A lifelong Methodist, Harkness was also heavily involved in the ecumenical movement. She wrote three dozen books—many of them written for a lay audience, published hundreds of articles, and was described by *Time* magazine as “the famed woman theologian.” (Abingdon Press has just republished two of Harkness’s works and the Pilgrim Press Library of Christian Ethics will soon publish a collection of Harkness’s writing.)⁵ Harkness gave her life to writing, teaching, and speaking about theology—particularly the intersection between theology and issues in Christian life and in the wider world. She was involved in many social issues—speaking against war, racism, sexism, and discrimination against gay and lesbian people and also calling for economic and social justice for all people.

While Harkness accomplished many things, we remember her at this time for her struggle for women’s full clergy rights. We not only remember her struggle, we also continue it. The struggle that Harkness and others waged for women’s full place in the church is not finished. Many of the women students at the theological school where I teach are pastors. Some of them—by no means all—tell me stories about congregations who refused to accept a woman pastor or members who boycotted their church

Did You Know?

There is a Georgia Harkness Scholarship for women who are at least 35 years old and preparing for ordained ministry. More information at www.gbhem.org. Select Loans and Scholarships.

Georgia Harkness is one of the three characters in "A Story to Tell Our Grandchildren," a brief, free dramatic presentation about the debate at the 1956 General Conference written for the fiftieth anniversary celebration by Clayton Childers, who is on staff at the General Board of Church and Society. See www.umc-gbcs.org to download the drama.

when a woman pastor was appointed. A clergywoman from the Seattle area told me recently how she had put up a poster earlier this year commemorating the General Conference decision on full clergy rights, only to have an anonymous church member tear it down. Fifty years later, the job Harkness and others started is not yet finished.

Harkness understood that ordination and full clergy rights were not "the final victory for her cause" as the General Conference delegate claimed in 1956. In an article written in 1924, Harkness wrote "[T]he issue does not lie wholly in ordination. . . . The crux of the matter, to put it baldly, is that women cannot enter a field where they are not welcome. Ordination is desirable . . . But what is needed even more is a general recognition by pulpit and pew of the legitimate place of trained women in this field. Women will never find a welcome in the ministry until the press and our present religious leadership have remolded public sentiment. Ordination is a step in this direction, but is it a step— not the final goal."⁶ In a taped interview that was made about five months before Harkness's death, she spoke of the difficulties still faced by women in ordained ministry almost two decades after the granting of full clergy rights to women. She went on to say, however, that "[T]here is a great day ahead for those of you who feel that that is your vocation."⁷

Harkness, reflecting on her life in her last years of teaching, wrote, "There is nothing I greatly want that I do not have, save more of the grace of God and greater usefulness in his service. Thus far the Lord has led me on, and from a full heart I say, "Bless the Lord, O my Soul, and all

that is within me, bless His holy name."

The United Methodist Church is indebted to the faithfulness of Georgia Harkness and her insistence that women be given opportunities for "greater usefulness in his service." On this fiftieth anniversary of women's full ordination and clergy rights, we give thanks to God for those who prepared the way, and we know, with God's help, that we will continue to work for opportunities "for the advancement of the kingdom."

Looking forward to the "great day ahead" and looking back over the last fifty years, we can say with Harkness, "Thus far the Lord has led me on, and from a full heart I say, "Bless the Lord, O my Soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name." □

1. Georgia Harkness, "The Ministry as a Vocation for Women," *Christian Advocate*, April 10, 1924, 454-55.

2. Georgia Harkness, *Women in Church and Society: A Historical and Theological Inquiry*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972 and Georgia Harkness, *Days of My Years, Unpublished Autobiography of Georgia Harkness*, The Georgia Harkness Archives, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, 28).

3. *Daily Christian Advocate*, May 4, 1956, 534. See also the definitive biography of Harkness, Rosemary Skinner Keller's *Georgia Harkness: For Such a Time As This* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 279-80.

4. Unpublished Transcript, Rosemary Keller Interviewing Walter Muelder, November 17, 1990, Georgia Harkness Archives, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary.

5. See *Understanding the Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005) and *Prayer and the Common Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005) and my soon to be finished collection, *The Theology and Theological Ethic of Georgia Harkness: Chastened Liberal and Theistic Realist*, The Library of Theological Ethics Series, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press).

6. Georgia Harkness, "The Ministry as a Vocation for Women," *Christian Advocate*, April 10, 1924, 454.

7. Unpublished Transcript, Taped Discussion of Harkness book, *Women in Church and Society*, March 6, 1974, The Georgia Harkness Archives, Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary.

Rebekah Miles is a clergy member in the Arkansas Conference and a associate professor of ethics at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.



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