

The Woman in the Pulpit

—15 Years Later—

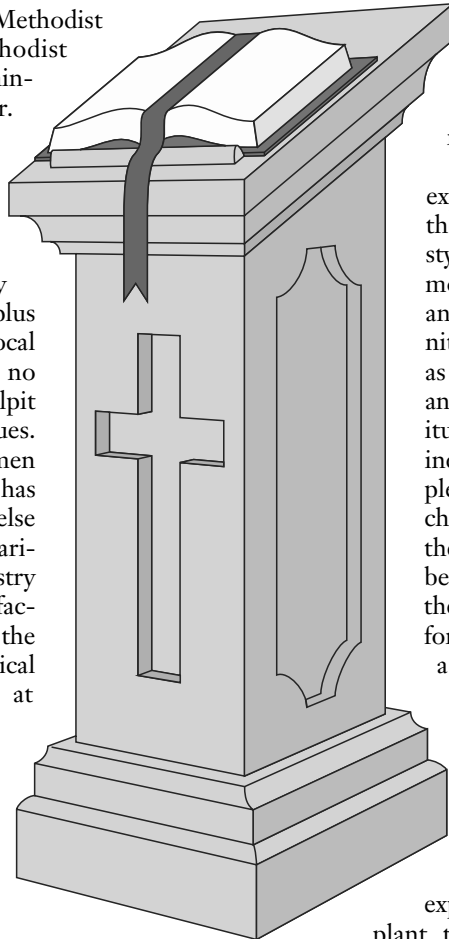
Carol M. Norén

A half-century has passed since the Methodist Church—now called The United Methodist Church—began ordaining women to the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order. Thirty-two years have passed since my ordination, and it is fifteen years since *The Woman in the Pulpit* was published by Abingdon Press. My reflections in that book were based on teaching experiences at Princeton Theological Seminary and Duke University Divinity School, plus interviews with many clergewomen in the local church. Most of those women had few or no female role models prior to their own pulpit ministry and few clergewomen as colleagues. In the years since then, the number of women in seminaries has increased dramatically, as has the number of women pastors. Whatever else has changed, clergewomen are no longer rarities. My own experience in teaching ministry has also changed over the years. I'm on the faculty of North Park Theological Seminary, the denominational seminary of the Evangelical Covenant Church, and have also taught at Stockholm School of Theology in Sweden and Theological Hall in Melbourne, Australia. This has given me opportunity to observe women's preaching across a broader spectrum of the church around the world. However, some developments in women's preaching that I will note pertain more to U.S. American culture than to other cultures.

Trends in Preaching

It should be acknowledged at the outset that much of the evolution in women's preaching over the past fifteen years has also occurred in men's preaching. The trends taking place in the church as a whole demand the development of homiletical skills and emphases regardless of gender. I want to make note of three areas in which there is a general change rather than being the particular province of women.

First, there is a greater interest in spiritual formation as an integral part of church life, and formation concerns are integrated into worship and sermon design. At North Park, we have had two D.Min. theses in recent years on preaching as an act of spiritual formation; both were by men. The United Methodist Clergywomen's Conference planned for August of 2006 will have spiritual directors available to participants throughout the conference: something that has not always been a feature of the conference. What an



earlier generation might have preached under the rubric of 'discipleship' is now sometimes bifurcated into personal transformation versus social action: an unfortunate development, in my estimation.

The interest in spiritual formation finds expression in the structure of worship as well as the focus of the sermon. The popularity of Taizé-style worship and other services in which a monologue by a preacher has a less central role is an acknowledgment that individual and community spiritual renewal occurs through right-brain as well as left-brain experiences. The rediscovery and cultivation of such ritual acts to embody spiritual changes occurring within worshipers have increased dramatically in recent years. For example, during the Good Friday service at one church I know, worshipers heard a sermon about the crucifixion, but in addition, each person had been given a nail upon entering the church. At the end of the service, all left in silence—except for the sound made as they dropped their nails in a bowl on the way out. The metallic clink reminded each person of Jesus being nailed to the cross for his or her sins.

A second and related development is a greater willingness to take risks and experiment in preaching. The use of drama, mass media, and ecumenical and/or cross-cultural ritual is more accepted, sometimes even expected. "Praise and worship teams" often supplant traditional worship committees in the local church, and with this change, the focus of lay teams has shifted from personnel decisions to developing and leading portions of the Sunday service. This is a mixed blessing. On one hand, laity have greater ownership of worship. On the other hand, seminary students often have difficulty designing theologically coherent and denominationally and culturally appropriate orders of worship because they figure the worship team will take care of it. In addition, students no longer take it as given that they will stand in the pulpit to preach or that the sermon will be a monologue. Sometimes this is genuine risk-taking, i.e., willingness to surrender the safety or control of sticking to a script. Other times it is a manifestation of their ambivalence about taking appropriate authority to proclaim the Word.

A third change in men's and women's preaching is one reflecting the needs of Gen-X and Millennial generation listeners. Postmodern, biblically illiterate congregations require us to cultivate different homiletical methods. Preachers can no longer

make casual text citations and assume that people will understand the allusion, much less take it as authoritative. Rev. Ann Spurgeon, pastor of Salem UMC in Barrington, Illinois, notes that the simpler approach she takes and the more illustrations she uses, the more likely she is to get her point across. She also recognizes the generational or cultural gap in her preaching: that the messages she hears that “truly fill her soul” do not seem to touch others in the same way. Three-point, propositional preaching is on the wane in mainline churches, while Luccock’s “skyrocket model” or Lowry’s “homiletical loop” are employed more broadly, regardless of denomination. There are exceptions, of course. Propositional sermons employing deductive reasoning are still valued in some ethnic minority congregations, but the dominant culture listens better when the preacher begins in the world of the listener’s own experience, and keeps returning to that experience throughout the sermon.

Gender-Related Changes

What of changes in preaching that do appear to be gender-related? In my estimation, one of the healthiest developments in women’s preaching in the last fifteen years has been greater freedom to use humor—which is not necessarily the same as telling jokes. The tradition of starting the sermon with a funny story predates Charles Merrill Smith’s *How To Become A Bishop Without Being Religious*. It is a device still used commonly, especially in more informal worship traditions. But this is not what I hear women preachers doing. Nor are they engaging in humor at their own expense: a self-deprecating tendency I noted in *The Woman in the Pulpit*. Instead, women preachers are standing with their listeners as they consider the irony or absurdity of circumstances around them. For example, the Rev. Jacqueline Thomas King, pastor of St. Paul United Methodist Church in Port Arthur, Texas, regularly uses humor as part of her lectionary preaching. Judicious use of humor from the pulpit helped the congregation cope with the widespread devastation after Hurricane Rita. In a sim-

ilar way, in the Great Preachers series, Barbara Brown Taylor wryly acknowledged problems in her denomination as a vehicle to proclaim Paul’s vision of the church as recorded in Ephesians. Humor can be both an exercise of power and an expression of solidarity and encouragement in times of stress. The freer expression of humor in women’s preaching is, I believe, a sign of hope, growth, and strength.

A second gender-related change that I have observed is an impoverishment of language about divinity in sermons preached in mainline denominations. I attribute this in large part to the desire to

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be politically correct in speaking about God. Masculine pronouns and terms such as “King of Kings” and “Heavenly Father” are avoided as not being sufficiently inclusive (though curiously, God and Christ, which are both masculine nouns, are permissible). In the majority of sermons I hear in class or in local churches, “God” and “Christ” are the only terms for divinity used, with an occasional “Jesus” if one is preaching on some aspect of his earthly ministry. While men as well as women have a depleted store of evocative words for God in their preaching, I believe there is more social pressure on women to speak this way: a matter of rejecting patriarchal, hierarchical language. Contemporary hymn writers such as Ruth Duck have attempted to cultivate richer liturgical vocabulary; a quick glance at a few of her hymns turns up “living bread,” “living head,” “Cloud of Presence,” etc.—but this language is not generally carried over into sermons. The diminished store of acceptable names, metaphor, and epithets for divinity can result in a sermon where God is depicted more as principle or idea than someone who speaks to and interacts with the world.

There is an opposite trend in the preaching of some evangelical women preachers. The evangelical church has embraced the religious lyrics of Twila Paris (“He is Exalted” and “We Will Glorify the King of Kings”), Babbie

Mason (“Trust His Heart” and “All Rise”), Amy Grant (“El Shaddai”), Gloria Gaither (“Because He Lives”), and CeCe Winans (“Just Like That”). Their more traditional and often not gender-neutral language also finds expression in preaching by evangelical women, reflecting a theology with perhaps greater emphasis on the divine-human relationship than one might find in mainline preachers.

A third characteristic of women’s preaching—and the way it is received or rejected—does not appear to have changed substantially in the last fifteen years. If something is perceived as “not right” about a woman’s preaching or ministry as a whole, critics still occasionally attribute it to the fact the speaker is female. At the same time, the woman preacher is still prone to jump to the conclusion that gender bias

is to blame if there is resistance to her ministry and/or wonder about the viability of her call to preach. As long as the two largest Christian bodies in the United States (the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention) place limitations on the ministry of women within their churches, this is likely to continue to be an issue for United Methodist and other mainline denomination clergywomen. This is, in part, because laity today move freely from one local church to another, regardless of denomination, bringing their experiences and biases with them. □



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