



Women in Leadership in Methodism: a historical approach

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Women in Leadership in Methodism: a historical approach

The study of Methodist history suggests, I would argue, that the denomination and its offshoots are well placed to offer leadership opportunities to women. The prominence of women in the early history of Methodism was highlighted by Earl Kent Brown¹ in 1983, and further studies, notably by Paul Chilcote², have ensured that this feature of the eighteenth-century movement is firmly established in its historiography. I propose to examine the later history in the light of this 'early Methodism baseline', seeking to identify some of the factors that led to change over the ensuing two centuries, and to examine the extent to which it may be held to have persisted.

¹ Brown, Earl Kent, *Women of Mr. Wesley's Methodism* (NY: Mellen 1983)

² E.g. Chilcote, Paul Wesley, *John Wesley and the Women Preachers of Early Methodism* (Metuchen, New Jersey & London: Scarecrow Press 1991); *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1993); (ed.) *Her Own Story: Autobiographical Portraits of Early Methodist Women* (Nashville: Kingswood Books 2001); Lenton, John, *John Wesley's Preachers* (Carlisle: Paternoster 2009)

‘Early Methodism’ 1738 – 1791

Both sociological and theological factors help to explain the nature and importance of women’s leadership in early Methodism. It took root most readily among small and middling tradespeople – precisely the situations in which women were most likely to be found working as equal partners in a family enterprise, or where they had a degree of economic independence, thus giving spiritual authority to any individual, whatever their gender or status. Methodism’s Arminian theology shared with Evangelical religion in general a reliance on the individual’s testimony to an inner experience of conversion. Its particular theological framework was (and is) built around the concept of three stages of grace, – (a) prevenient grace, offered to all (c.f. Calvinism), stirring people to an awareness of their spiritual need (b) convincing grace, bringing about repentance and conversion (c) sanctifying grace, working to increase holiness in the believer. This gave particular implications for women’s leadership.

1) ‘Leadership’ in early Methodism did not necessarily mean ‘ordained leadership’. Methodism famously began as a movement within existing church structures, principally the Established Church: John Wesley, despite some ambiguous actions in his later years, always proclaimed his determination to keep it so. A virtual ‘clergy caste’ was created from 1744 onward, consisting of those preachers whom Wesley regarded as being ‘in connexion’ with himself and one another, whom he met annually in Conference and stationed to a new circuit every year by his own authority. Most of them were laymen: women were necessarily excluded from this itinerant and self-supporting life. The majority of preachers however did not itinerate but were ‘local’. A distinction was made between ‘preaching’, which involved ‘taking a text’ i.e. preaching from Scripture, and ‘exhorting’, which did not. The speed and fervour of revival, combined with blurring of distinction, made it possible for many women to act as preachers. Some travelled widely on the basis of personal invitation rather than stationing, and a few women were either explicitly or tacitly recognised as ‘preachers’ by Wesley himself.

2) ‘Leadership’ did not necessarily involve preaching. The class meeting, held weekly under the guidance of a class leader, was a crucial component of Methodist spirituality. All Society members were expected to meet in class: the class could include people ‘seeking salvation’ as well as those ‘pressing on to perfection’, and the class leader’s skilled task was to enable the testimony of the latter to bring the former to the point of assurance of salvation. In theory women led classes composed entirely of women: detailed research into local situations shows that they led mixed classes also.³

³ E.g. Graham, E Dorothy, ‘Women Local Preachers’ in Milburn, Geoffrey E. & Batty, Margaret (eds.) *Workaday Preachers: The Story of Methodist Local Preachers* (Peterborough: MPH 1995)

3) Leadership was also called for in the organisation of active discipleship. The life of the person 'pressing on to perfection' was marked not only by personal devotion and holiness but by acts of service. From its earliest days Methodism was (and is) highly activist. Women had opportunities to take up overt leadership roles in organisations specifically addressing the needs of women, such as Childbed Linen Societies, and to occupy highly active and important roles in others such as Strangers' Friend and Benevolent Societies where institutional leadership was confined to men.

In the 'Wesley' period, therefore, the fluidity of a rapidly growing revival movement, combined with Wesley's own sympathy for women's faith and spirituality, gave considerable scope for women in leadership roles. To what extent, however, did these characteristics persist in later generations?

Consolidation and division, 1791 – 1850 approx.

1) Evolution from 'revival movement' to 'church' took place at varying speed in the different branches into which Methodism split in this period. The change overall was characterised by the professionalisation of ministry and a membership increasingly constituted by birth rather than conversion, with the expected consequences for women's opportunities to exercise leadership.

2) Preaching: women in the largely undivided Methodism of the time were restricted in 1803 from preaching other than in their own circuit and to women-only groups. At this time around 25 women were preaching publicly. The Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian branches, separating in 1811 and 1815 respectively, continued to allow women to be itinerant preachers. Rather than forbidding their preaching, these Connexions allowed female preaching to wither away as they became more institutionalised: severe decline set in in the 1840's and the last (extremely long-lived) PM woman preacher, Elizabeth Bultitude, died in 1890. But even within Wesleyan Methodism (which from 1836 ordained its (exclusively male) itinerant ministers by the laying on of hands) ongoing research indicates that women's preaching persisted.⁴

3) Women continued to fill a variety of leadership roles. In situations of expansion, particularly in rural areas, throughout the 1830's, 40's and 50's, even in Wesleyan Methodism, they acted as circuit stewards and treasurers, preached at revival meetings, made significant gifts for chapel building and led mixed classes, acted as pastoral leaders for ministers who infrequently visited large rural circuits, as well as exercising leadership in traditionally 'female' areas such as Sunday Schools.

⁴ Lloyd, Jennifer M. *Women and the Shaping of British Methodism: Persistent preachers 1807–1907* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 2009); Lenton, John H, 'Labouring for the Lord: Women Preachers in Wesleyan Methodism, 1802–1932. A Revisionist View' in *Beyond the Boundaries: Preaching in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Oxford: Applied Theology Press (Wesley Westminster Series 8. 1998)

4) Women's leadership was increasingly confined to female contexts, but some of these, such as Sunday Schools, became increasingly important in the life and mission of the denominations. The support of overseas missions in particular opened up new leadership possibilities for Wesleyan women. Missionary Auxiliary Societies run by and for women proliferated from 1813 on. Bureaucratic procedures such as maintaining accounts and forwarding donations gave training in administration, while the presentation of missionaries' wives as responding to a calling of their own, rather than merely tagging along with their husbands', encouraged women to aspire to this highly glamourised form of service.⁵

Institutionalised lay leadership for women, 1850 approx – 1914

1) Wesleyan women were able to use the structures of Methodism to create their own space and thus to develop a new kind of leadership. The setting up of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in 1817 led to the formalisation of 'missionary work' (as opposed to 'an overseas appointment' for preachers), and the development of a discourse which acknowledged 'missionary work' as a vocation for women, albeit accessed only through marriage. In Britain, Ladies' Auxiliaries played a major role in fund-raising among adults, and women also took the lead in administration, teaching and publicity in Juvenile Missionary Societies. Structures were similar in the other branches of Methodism. In 1858 this activity led to the formation of 'The Ladies' Committee for the Amelioration of the Condition of Women in Heathen Countries, and for Education etc.' – the first women-only central structure in British Methodism. This committee and its successors (with changing titles and with ever-closer integration into the general structures and funds of the Methodist Missionary Society, and final merging in 1987 with all women's groups to form 'The Women's Network of the Methodist Church' (since 2010 'Methodist Women in Britain') gave an institutional base for a significant network of power and influence in the life of the Church.⁶ The original Ladies' Committee drew on (1) local support, (2) a group of well-connected women – wives, daughters and mothers of male Connexional leaders, (3) the advocacy of women including former missionary teachers with non-Methodist organisations (4) a 'safe Methodist' place for the training of teachers (the main emphasis of the Committee) in the Westminster Normal College, founded in 1851, and in 1872, Southlands College was established for a similar purpose. Other Connexions set up their own central women's organisations around the end of the century.

⁵ Jones, Margaret, 'Grand-daughters to Susanna: Wesleyan Women's Discipleship, 1800-1860' *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* Vol.59 Part 6, October 2014

⁶ Pritchard, John, 'Women's work: Mary Batchelor to Muriel Stennett' in Virgoe, Norma, (ed.) *Angels and Impudent Women: Women in Methodism. Papers given at the 2005 Conference of the Wesley Historical Society* (Loughborough: Wesley Historical Society 2007)

2) Jennifer Lloyd points out that the programmes of chapel-building in which all branches of Methodism engaged (beginning with the Wesleyans in the 1830's and followed by the Primitive Methodists and Free Methodists from the 1850s and the Bible Christians from the 1860's) led to societies incurring huge debts and needing to run major fund-raising programmes. Women played a major part in these, particularly in organising bazaars and tea meetings.

3) When revivalist preaching returned to Britain, following the revival led by Charles Finney in the United States from 1837 onward, women were offered a new justification for insisting on their right to preach. Finney's teaching offered an entirely internal, individualist experience of justification (Christian perfection), as against the mediation of that experience through Christian fellowship as in the classic Methodist schema. Linked with this experience was the obligation to 'give an account', which justified public speaking. Women called to revivalist preaching in this tradition generally tended to move out of the mainstream Methodist organisations in which many of them had begun: Catherine Booth of the Salvation Army is the best-known British example. The confidence given by the assurance of the Holy Spirit gave a spiritual justification for women removing themselves from unsympathetic environments, rather than making the best of it as the earlier women Methodist preachers had done.

4) Women in Methodism, as in other denominations, found opportunities for leadership within organisations for mission and service, some for women only. City Missions set up in the last two decades of the nineteenth century offered women a degree of autonomy in leading groups working primarily among women and children but leading to wider access, (e.g. health care, temperance, rescue of prostitutes, together with evangelism), and a consequential place in the management and oversight groups (e.g. staff meetings) of the missions.

The most notable women-only organisation were of course the deaconess orders. These impacted on Methodism first through the Mildmay Deaconess Institution, founded in 1860, which attracted evangelicals from all denominations including Methodists. Specifically Methodist organisations followed on the same lines: the recruitment of Wesleyan Children's Home sisters (from 1873) led to the foundation of the Deaconess House (later Institute) in 1890, and the formal constitution of the Deaconess Order – with a male Warden – in 1895. The UMFC opened a Deaconess Institution in Pimlico in 1892, and the Primitive Methodists in Southwark in 1900. Wesleyan missions in London and elsewhere recruited women – deaconesses when these became available – as part of their staff teams to carry out both social and evangelistic work. The Deaconess Orders were ultimately accountable to their respective Conferences, but the female Sisters-in-Charge of the various Deaconess Houses were responsible in practice for the training, stationing,

probation and ongoing supervision of deaconesses as well as for the running and finance of the House itself.⁷

5) The second half of the 19th century saw a marked increase in women's preaching in some quarters of Methodism. The status of deaconess gave women a platform from which to exercise a leadership through preaching that was still highly controversial in society at large. Deaconesses were not necessarily expected to preach, but many of the Primitive Methodist sisters, in a denomination where women's preaching was still theoretically accepted, were preachers or exhorters. For Wesleyan women this opportunity was even more significant. In 1910 the Wesleyan Conference removed the restriction of women's preaching to their own sex, but other limitations (i.e. in their own circuit, by invitation) remained.

6) The question of women's ministry was revived in this period. The Wesleyans and the UMFC were firmly opposed, while opinion in Primitive Methodism was divided. Discussion centred around women's 'essential nature' and consequent suitability to domestic and family environments. In 1899 the PM Conference saw its first woman member and one woman beginning to function, though unofficially, as an itinerant minister. The Bible Christians, who also retained women preachers, first admitted a woman into Full Connexion (i.e. gave her full ministerial status) in 1894. Only a few followed, and there was difficulty in stationing them. And when the Bible Christians entered, as the weakest partner, into negotiations to unite with the New Connexion and the UMFC (neither of whom officially recognised women preachers), women ministers were the inevitable casualty when the United Methodist Church came into being in 1907.⁸

7) In 1909 the Wesleyan Conference agreed to admit women representatives, and the first were present in 1911.

'Women's work', 1914 – 1974

The experience of 1914-18 changed perceptions of women's capacity and role, so that their leadership in organisations such as the Wesleyan Women's Work, together with Sunday School work and similar areas was uncontroversial. (The President of Women's Work, Mrs Wiseman, was the first woman to address the Wesleyan Conference.) Nevertheless the perception of their being naturally fitted for domestic roles remained strong during the interwar period and is generally held to have been strengthened again with the desire to 'return to normal' after 1945. Within Methodism, therefore, questions about women's leadership focused on ordination.

⁷ Graham, E Dorothy, *Saved to Serve: The Story of the Wesley Deaconess Order, 1890– 1878* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House 2002)

⁸ Burnham, C. Paul & Short, Colin, 'Lillie Edwards (1863-1939): A Female Methodist Superintendent Minister', *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society Vol.60 Part 2, May 2015*

The Wesleyan Conference gave women local preachers equal status with men in 1918, vetoed a woman candidate for ministry in 1920 and received a report in 1925 arguing the case for women's ministry. The emphasis across Methodism on a secure sense of 'calling' as the first requirement of those offering for ministry made it difficult to argue with women who insisted that this was the case with them, and focused objections on the questions of suitability and availability. Discussion continued throughout the 1920's but was overshadowed by the prospect of Methodist Union, which came about in 1932. Inevitably the controversial topic was shelved in the interests of not rocking the boat. In 1934 the new united Conference rejected a proposed scheme, approved it in 1938 and again in 1945 after the delay caused by war. Further refusal and delay followed, culminating in an approval in principle in 1966 coupled with a delay in practice because of what was perceived as the very real prospect of Anglican-Methodist union. In 1972, persuaded that ecumenical difficulties could be overcome, Conference finally voted in favour of women's ordination to the ministry.⁹

Ordained leadership for Methodist women, 1974 – present

The much-delayed ordinations of former deaconesses in 1974 therefore took place at a time when women's role in society at large was beginning to be questioned. Pauline Webb, writing in 1979, challenged the traditional images and perceived a general 'shaking of the foundations' in society as a whole. Social change made an increasing impact on women's ministry during the 1980's. The Church of England's struggle with the question of women's ordination at this time gave rise to a much more explicit engagement with theological issues as against Methodism's generally more pragmatic stance. Ecumenical contexts both in training and in ministry itself encouraged Methodist women to engage with a more overtly feminist discourse. The end of the 80's saw a significant rise in the number of women candidates. At the same time the closure of the Diaconal Order to new entrants in 1978, and its re-opening to women and men in 1986, prompted further theological reflection and debate.

Women who have lived through this time of change of course interpret it through the lens of their own experience. The Methodist tradition of collaborative leadership (described in this brief historical survey) may be identified as fitting women's ways of working. On the other hand, examples of exclusion, bullying and authoritarian attitudes (equally likely within Methodist structures) are remembered with pain. It is important to note that the Methodist Church responded to evidence of problems encountered by women presbyters by setting up a Commission on Women Presbyters (at the time of Kathleen Richardson's holding office as the first woman President of the Conference in 1992-3). This led to a report ('The Cry of the Beloved' in

⁹ Field-Bibb, Jacqueline, *Women Towards Priesthood: Ministerial Politics and Feminist Praxis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991)

1995) openly describing problems encountered by women in their ministry, and to the setting up of the Gender Justice Committee whose brief included the collection of statistics.

This work was later merged with the wider brief of an Equalities and Diversity Officer. A Women Ministers' Gathering, first held in 1992, led to the formation of the Methodist Women's Forum which acted as a focus, campaigning group and mouthpiece for activists. After some 6-8 years MWF withered away: those same activists were absorbed in the work of ministry, and the GJC was in place. The Gathering, however, persists as an autonomous body and meets an ongoing need: it continues to hear stories of those same problems.

There is by now, however, evidence of changed attitudes and positive discrimination at Connexional level, and less (anecdotal) evidence locally of 'don't let that woman take my funeral'.

Conversation with a few women currently or recently in key roles in Connexional leadership raises questions such as the following:

- In the current year (2014-2015) 37% of presbyters in the active work are women. 25% of superintendents are women. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when circuits are merged a man is more likely to become superintendent of the new large entity.
- Women's 'special gifts' may be given lip service but not transferred into leadership structures. The discourse around ministry has become increasingly managerial. This is sometimes linked with anxiety about falling numbers and a view of mission which looks for measurable outcomes. Memory suggests, however, that an observable change was seen among candidates presenting themselves in the mid-1990's, suggesting a cultural factor. Fundamental theological issues are raised about what 'effectiveness' in ministry means, and what it means to represent Christ.
- Methodism historically works by means of networks: this can cut both ways for women. History gives evidence of women's collaborative skills being well used (e.g. Women's Work). But it can be argued that when women and men are working together in the same field (e.g. ordained ministry now), men's different style of more goal-directed networking produces more obvious results. Uta Blohm concludes her examination of women's ministry by asking whether women leaders will go on empowering others or collude with oppression.
- Deliberate attempts have been made (by male Chairs of District) to include women for consideration as Chairs. There are now 9 female Chairs and 24 male.
- Some observers would suggest that with the demise or diminishment of women's support structures such as MWF and Women in Theology, women in leadership have increasingly colluded with 'male' models.

- Women remain prominent in local leadership roles, but Methodist Women in Britain (which incorporates the successors of Women's Work) has become less distinctive since women's ordination.