

## Comment

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**A**nd if your church doesn't affirm women as ministers—that's your fault." The assembly broke into laughter and applause when Efreem Smith threw down this challenge to the Covenant Midwinter Conference last February. We might say he was speaking to the pastors who are charged with teaching their congregations about the Covenant's 1976 decision to ordain women to word and sacrament, but in reality, all ministers and church leaders bear that same responsibility. This issue seeks to do its part, offering resources for teaching on the topic.

Jo Ann Deasy provides a broader historical and political context for the 1976 decision to ordain women, detailing developments precipitating and following the decision, both within the Covenant and nationally. Applying the sociological research of Mark Chaves, she critiques the absence of corresponding structural and cultural change needed to ensure full support of the 1976 decision. Deasy calls for a reframing of the discussion so that the affirmation of women's call to ministry is not challenged or defended, but assumed as our church's position and taught to those who wish to join us. After making a case for such a cultural shift, Deasy concludes with practical suggestions toward enacting this shift at the congregational level.

Klyne Snodgrass asks: "Why do some people place limitations on the ministry of women?" A preeminent voice in this discussion since 1976, Snodgrass provides here a clear delineation of the central issues at stake. After setting aside misconceived obstacles, Snodgrass surveys the work and witness of women throughout the biblical witness. Then, isolating the linchpin issues used to restrict the ministry of women, Snodgrass

works through the exegetical difficulties of two New Testament texts (1 Corinthians 14:33-38; 1 Timothy 2:9-15) and challenges faulty notions of Christian authority. In countering the standard arguments used to restrict the ministry of women, Snodgrass offers a lucid, biblical statement of the Covenant's position.

Continuing the tradition of decadal surveys of women who serve in Covenant ministry, Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon review the results of studies conducted in 1987 and 1997 and summarize the findings of their own research. For the first time, surveys were sent out to all women serving Covenant churches, whether or not they graduated from North Park Theological Seminary. The results are encouraging, with fewer respondents reporting dissatisfaction.

The tension in juxtaposing Snodgrass's case and Deasy's call to move past defense is not lost on us. Nonetheless, in a certain sense we recognize a continued need for addressing this topic. In addition to the past ambivalence Deasy describes, individuals and whole churches continue to enter the denomination after the 1976 decision, and for this reason the discussion is necessarily ongoing.

And yet, if Deasy's argument is compelling, as we find it to be, the timbre and focus of the discussion are in need of a shift. While ongoing challenge requires ongoing affirmation, does our stance need to move past the defensive? Snodgrass demonstrates that the biblical case for the unrestricted ministry of women is solid; Olson and Cannon's research demonstrates increased support and advocacy for women clergy: can we move past defense even while we continue to uphold the unrestricted ministry of women?

Moreover, Deasy suggests that a biblical argument alone is insufficient to enact the cultural and structural changes necessary to create a denomination in which women need not defend God's calling to serve the gospel. Has the time come for the Covenant Church to put its efforts into creating a local church culture that matches our denominational position of affirmation of women in ministry? Denominational efforts outlined in Deasy's paper suggest this shift is beginning to take place. If the local church is the true front line for enacting cultural change, it will be pastors, staff ministers, and church leaders who must take seriously Efreem Smith's Midwinter charge: "And if your church doesn't affirm women as ministers—that's your fault."

Note: In the last issue, 67:1 page 14, Robert Larson's title should read "director of urban church planning," not "planting." We regret the error.

## Reframing the Issue: Women's Ordination in the ECC

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In 1976 a historic vote took place at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church. The delegates voted to “go on record as favoring the ordination of women”<sup>1</sup> to word and sacrament, opening the door for them to serve in all aspects of ministry within the church, including the role of lead pastor. Just over thirty years later, there are more than 115 women ordained to word and sacrament. Women make up over 20 percent of the Covenant Ministerium with more than 300 holding licenses or ordination. Women serve as senior, solo, or co-pastors in forty-two Covenant churches.<sup>2</sup> There have been several motions at subsequent Annual Meetings to overturn this decision,<sup>3</sup> but they have been overwhelmingly defeated. It seems that once the door for women’s ordination was open, there was no going back.

The door metaphor seems apt for the decision made in 1976 meeting. Looking back on that historic meeting, some believe that the door was swung wide open, allowing a wave of women to freely and joyfully march through. Others think that the door was only opened a crack, and women were left to squeeze through or force the door wider open in order to make their way. Some wish they could shut the door—or at least the door of *their* church—to those women seeking to serve as pastors. Some assume that there were hordes of women knocking at the door, demanding to be let in. Others wonder what discussions went on behind closed doors to bring about such a vote in our denomination.

So what really happened at that historic meeting? This article will attempt to tell the story of that meeting through the written records of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), placing it in the wider context

of women's ordination in the United States. In doing so, it attempts to reframe the issue of women's ordination in the denomination, moving us away from a defensive posture toward a posture that embraces the historic vote in 1976 as the stated position of the ECC. In addition, it argues that there is a need to shift the majority of the burden of upholding this position away from clergywomen towards local congregations and the denomination as a whole and offers practical steps to move us in that direction.

## **Preparing the Way**

In 1970 the Board of Ministerial Standing and faculty from North Park Theological Seminary conducted a consultation on the meaning of ordination in the ECC. The consultation arose in response to the great diversification that was taking place within ministry in the United States. As Earl VanDerVeer, then executive secretary of the ministry for the Covenant, wrote: "Our present rules governing the Board of Ministerial Standing reflect the time when most men who heard the call of God to so-called 'full-time Christian service' entered the pastoral ministry. We now find ourselves living in a day when men who are giving all their time to ministry are scattered over a wide range of special responsibilities."<sup>4</sup> VanDerVeer goes on to recite the various staff ministries, parachurch ministries, and chaplaincy roles that now make up the majority of our current ministerium. At the time of the consultation, the Board of Ministerial Standing only issued four credentials: ordination to word and sacrament, a ministerial license, a ministerial license for theological students, and a lay minister's license.<sup>5</sup> Christian education workers were commissioned through the Board of Christian Education rather than the Board of Ministerial Standing and were not yet considered a part of the ministerium.<sup>6</sup> As a result of the consultation, the definition of ordination to word and sacrament was broadened to include many of these diverse specializations.<sup>7</sup>

While the issue of women's ordination was never formally mentioned in the documents, VanDerVeer mentioned it briefly in an article in *The Covenant Companion*. Following an overview of the consultation and its recommendations, VanDerVeer added a short paragraph stating: "Another question we face concerns the ordination of women. We have had such a request already. What will the Covenant Church say to this person?"<sup>8</sup> VanDerVeer's question in this context suggests that the issue was at least brought before the consultation. Unfortunately, while the

consultation produced numerous papers on the history of the ordination in the church and the denomination, the theology of ordination, and the biblical understanding of ordination, none of them addressed the issue of gender. It may be that, while not willing to directly address the issue or to bring forward a motion, the consultation thought that broadening the understanding of ordination would make it easier for congregations to accept the ordination of women. With the new, broader understanding, one could approve women's ordination without having to approve women as senior or solo pastors. Women could continue to serve in staff ministries, parachurch organizations, and as chaplains.

While it did not directly address women's ordination at the 1970 consultation, the Board of Ministerial Standing did reflect its commitment to moving toward the ordination of women in its revision of its rules and regulations that were approved in 1973. The revision was undertaken for two reasons. First, the rules had not been updated since 1956, and in the meantime the Annual Meeting had voted on numerous changes and addendums. A revision was needed to provide consistency and clarity. Second, the rules needed to reflect recent changes to the understanding of ordination that had been approved at the 1971 Annual Meeting. In addition, though, the Board of Ministerial Standing decided to remove all references to gender from the documents.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that in *The Covenant Companion* article highlighting the changes to the rules, there is no mention of the move to gender-neutral language.<sup>10</sup> Again, while unofficially supporting the move towards women's ordination, there is no formal mention of such support.

The revisions to the rules and regulations of the now Board of Ministry were approved in 1973. That same year several articles in *The Covenant Companion* began raising the issue of women in the church. Earl Dahlstrom, professor of pastoral studies at North Park Theological Seminary, wrote an article on recruiting new pastors. Dahlstrom asked, "Who is the recruit?" and answered: "Most any young man or woman within the reach of our ministry upon whom you can lay a heavy but friendly hand and say with conviction, 'Joe (Mary), I'd like to see you in the Christian ministry.'"<sup>11</sup> The following month *The Covenant Companion* started a series of four articles by and about women, addressing the issues of feminism, women in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and women in the church and society.<sup>12</sup> Several of them articulated a very moderate feminist position, always emphasizing that they were seeking to maintain unity and relationships. None of the articles directly addressed women's ordination,

but the presence of the articles suggests that the women's movement was beginning to have some impact on the ECC.

There is one final event to mention that occurred in the years leading up to the 1976 vote on women's ordination. In 1974 the ECC was facing a serious clergy shortage. In response the denomination recruited twenty-five men who had obtained their theological training outside the denomination and created a special orientation program for them; it included a quarter of studies at North Park Theological Seminary, a weeklong orientation session, and a year of supervised internship. Several students and their spouses as well as faculty and their spouses at North Park Theological Seminary wrote the following in response to an article in *The Covenant Companion* outlining this decision: "As part of the North Park Seminary community, we were offended by the exclusion of women as a partial answer to the problem... [the article] explained that the shortage is reaching crisis proportions in the Covenant. To ignore the recruitment of women as pastors is to ignore a source that should be utilized."<sup>13</sup> While the seminary was not always supportive of women's ordination,<sup>14</sup> it had recently made the formal decision to allow women to pursue the Master of Divinity degree, providing them with the same educational qualifications as male candidates for ordination. The following June, Emmie Mueller would be the first woman to graduate with such a degree. Again, while there may have been unofficial discussions behind the scenes in support of women's ordination, the denomination's formal decisions did not reflect support for such a position.

## **The 1976 Annual Meeting**

In December 1975, Keith Fullerton, chair of the Board of the Ministry, wrote an article for *The Covenant Companion* announcing the decision to bring the issue of women's ordination before the next Annual Meeting. There is little in the article to indicate what precipitated such a decision. Rather, the tone of the article suggests that the denomination would simply be formalizing a position that most people already supported. Fullerton wrote:

My own feeling is that more [Covenanters] would favor women's ordination than oppose, but that is only my personal assumption and I could be wrong.... Within the Board of Ministry we have wondered if the ordination of women is really an issue among Covenanters. We have questioned

whether it would be wise to precipitate the issue by presenting a statement to an Annual Meeting, approving the ordination of women in principle, or if—in light of our rules—we should just assume such a principle has been accepted and wait until the first candidate appears.<sup>15</sup>

One must question whether the board really doubted that women's ordination would be an issue or whether they were simply trying to avoid a confrontational and controversial Annual Meeting. Their failure to directly address women's ordination during the consultation on ordination in 1970 or to consider women as potential solutions in to the clergy shortage in 1974 suggests that there was an unwillingness to address the issue publicly. In addition, the board's reports to the Covenant Ministerium and Annual Meeting stated that there was debate within the board itself over the matter.<sup>16</sup> While the board was unanimous in its support of women's ordination, board president Keith Fullerton indicated that "some of the members of the board who had previously opposed the ordination of women had changed their thinking as a result of the debate within the board."<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this internal division over the issue in previous years helps explain the board's previous silence on this issue. Unfortunately, they may not have realized that by not going public with their discussions over the years they had failed to give the denomination as a whole the same time to debate and process the issue.

Over the next few months, articles by Covenant pastors would appear in *The Covenant Companion* presenting both sides of the issue. Everett Wilson, a pastor in Ceresco, Nebraska, argued for the ordination of women based on his understanding of the priesthood of all believers and the role of the Holy Spirit in gifting and calling for ministry. He wrote: "The question of ordination is not: 'Is the candidate male or female?' It is: 'Is the candidate called and gifted by the Holy Spirit for this ministry?'"<sup>18</sup> Douglas Ostien, a pastor in Minneapolis, Minnesota, argued against the ordination of women based on his understandings of the created order of male and female and of Paul's writings regarding women, teaching, and authority. He wrote:

One would think—or rather expect—that a denomination whose traditional war cry has been, "Where is it written?" would not succumb so easily to worldly pressures to conform to humanistic ideas regarding qualification for ordination to the teaching/ruling offices of the church. . . . There is simply

no way we could ordain women to the teaching/ruling offices of the church and still claim to be biblical.<sup>19</sup>

Letters to the editor over the next few months responded to both articles with a majority in support of Wilson's position.<sup>20</sup> If the letters to the editor were any indication, Fullerton was right in assuming that a majority of Covenanters supported the ordination of women. What Fullerton and the board did not take into account was the strength of the minority opinion in swaying policies within the denomination.

At the 1976 Annual Meeting two significant issues were much discussed and debated among the assembly. The first was a policy statement on divorce and remarriage prepared by the Board of the Ministry. The second was the ordination of women. Both issues were placed at the end of the agenda and would be addressed near the end of the meeting. Late Thursday afternoon the statement on divorce and remarriage came before the assembly. The statement generated a long discussion that lasted throughout the remainder of the afternoon and was resumed again on Friday morning. Ted Ericson reported in *The Covenant Companion* that "a sense of restlessness pervaded the hall. Friday was the last day of meetings and many people had reservations on planes leaving in the afternoon."<sup>21</sup> Debate was finally cut off, and a secret ballot was taken. As the ballots were being counted, citations were presented to those retiring from the Executive Board, the new financial controller was introduced, North Park College and Theological Seminary gave a short report, and Dr. Frances Anderson was called as assistant professor of Christian education at the seminary. Anderson was the first woman to be called to a full-time faculty position at the seminary.

At about 11:15 a.m., Fullerton presented the statement on the ordination of women. The statement itself was a five-page document prepared by members of the board, Herb Freedholm and Vernon Anderson, giving a brief introduction to the meaning of ordination in the Covenant, an outline of the biblical arguments for women's ordination, an overview of current practices regarding women in the denomination, and a conclusion recommending "specific educational efforts to achieve more general understanding and concern."<sup>22</sup> Given the lengthy discussion regarding divorce and remarriage and the rapidly approaching lunch hour, there soon came a motion to limit the discussion on women's ordination. Individuals were given two minutes to speak rather than the normal ten.

One of the first to speak was Jean Nelson, president of Covenant Women. Nelson indicated that, like the Board of the Ministry, the leader-

ship of Covenant Women struggled with this issue before bringing their unanimous support. She is reported as stating that “there has been much soul-searching, much discussion among us about the ‘place’ of women in the church with particular questions about women in the Christian ministry. But because of a meeting with three Covenant women now preparing for the ministry, the board has come to unanimity.”<sup>23</sup>

While the discussion on divorce and remarriage took several hours, the discussion on women’s ordination lasted forty-five minutes. According to the minutes in the *Covenant Yearbook*, the debate “revolved around such issues as: scriptural basis and the interpretation of biblical references; qualifications for the ministry and the definition and/or limitations of the term ‘ordination’; the respective roles of men and women in the ministries of the church; the practicality of women serving in pastoral capacity; and the individual’s sense of responsibility to the call of God.”<sup>24</sup> A vote was taken and the motion to ordain women passed. The document submitted by the members of the board, however, was not accepted as the official rationale for the decision.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the assembly rejected the proposal of the Board of the Ministry to begin educational efforts in the denomination and in the local churches. It seems that many thought that once the motion to favor women’s ordination had passed, the matter was over. They left for long lunches or to catch their early afternoon flights home. However, when the assembly returned for the afternoon session the matter was taken up once more. They assembly charged the Board of the Ministry to continue work on the matter and to encourage continuing discussion throughout the denomination. The board was to report back to the 1977 Annual Meeting. There is no record of any report to the Annual Meeting.<sup>26</sup>

## **How Did We Get Here?**

Before we move on to the impact of the 1976 vote to ordain women on the denomination, it might be helpful to pause and ask how we got here. Some might wonder why as a denomination it took us so long to ordain women. Others might wonder how this denomination could even consider ordaining women. All of us can ask why the issue came before the ECC at this particular point in history. A look at the broader historical context provides some answers. In the early documents of the denomination, there is little mention of the role of women in pastoral leadership.<sup>27</sup> While this probably does not seem surprising to most people, it is important to consider it within the context of the day. The ECC

began when a group of Swedish immigrants who called themselves Mission Friends gathered together in 1885 to form the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of America. At the time, the United States was in the midst of tremendous cultural upheaval. Just fifty years earlier, the Second Great Awakening had swept across the country, bringing spiritual revival and challenging the formal structures of church and society. With its emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and individual conversion, women and men, black and white, rich and poor were finding themselves standing next to one another at the altar, sharing testimonies and experiences of conversion. The revivals would serve as a catalyst for both the abolitionist movement and the women's suffrage movement that were in full swing in the late 1800s.

Only twenty years before the founding of the denomination, the United States had been in the midst of the Civil War. As is often the case, women stepped into a variety of new roles while men were at war. Following the Civil War, women began entering colleges, including medical school and law school. These two events, the Second Great Awakening and the Civil War, opened the doors for women to serve in the public sphere. Throughout the nineteenth century women would form numerous evangelistic and benevolent societies, exhibiting tremendous gifts in leadership, public speaking, and the mobilization of volunteers.<sup>28</sup>

One of the key figures in the women's movements of the late nineteenth century was Frances Willard. Willard began serving in 1871 as president of Evanston College for Ladies, a sister institution of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. In 1874 she would become the first president of the Chicago chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union and a key figure in the women's suffrage movement. More important for our discussion, in 1877 Willard played a significant role in Dwight L. Moody's revival meetings that were sweeping the country at the time.<sup>29</sup> Willard often preached at the women's prayer services that took place during the revivals. That same year E. A. Skogsbergh, one of the founding members of the Swedish Mission Covenant Church, would begin using Moody's church for his own revival meetings among Swedish immigrants. In *By One Spirit*, Karl Olsson notes the significance of the relationship between Moody and Skogsbergh. Moody served as model and mentor for Skogsbergh.<sup>30</sup> While there is no mention of a relationship between Skogsbergh and Willard, it is likely that he would have been aware of her preaching and leadership given that both were playing significant roles in the 1877 Chicago revivals. It is also significant to note that just a

few years later Moody would establish the Bible Institute of the Chicago Evangelization Society, which trained both men and women to serve as preachers and pastors. During the first forty years of its ministry, the Bible Institute would proudly endorse its women graduates who would go on to serve as pastors and preachers in various congregations throughout the United States.<sup>31</sup>

Moody, Skogsbergh, and Willard well represent the Free Church movement that significantly influenced the Swedish Mission Friends in 1885. Within the Mission Friends, the movement was led by J. G. Princell and Fredrik Franson. Franson was present at the formational meeting of our denomination in 1885 but was not allowed to speak because of his extreme free church views. In 1896 Franson published one of the key texts supporting the ordination of women, *Prophesying Daughters*, in which he wrote, “The field is thus very large, and when we consider that nearly two thirds of all converted persons in the world are women, the questions of woman’s work in evangelization is of the highest importance.”<sup>32</sup> Quoting Luther he goes on to say, “Each and every child of God, including women, has the right to use the Word, baptism, and the Lord’s supper”<sup>33</sup> and therefore Franson concludes that, “God has teachers installed in the church, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and miracle workers—in no sense can women be excluded from these offices.”<sup>34</sup> In 1908 Princell and Franson would be instrumental in establishing the Evangelical Free Church which, at the time, supported the ordination of women.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly enough, Princell’s wife Josephine would become the first president of what was then the Covenant Woman’s Auxiliary.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the free church, there were two other main streams of influence present at the formational meeting of the Mission Friends in 1885: the Scandinavian Lutherans and the Congregationalists. While the Lutherans would not start ordaining women until 1970,<sup>37</sup> the Congregationalists have a rich history of women preachers extending back to the mid-nineteenth century. Antoinette Brown, who was part of a Congregationalist church in New York, was the first woman to be ordained in the United States in 1853. At the 1885 meeting, the Swedish Mission Friends would chose not to formally align with any of these three groups but to instead form their own organization, the Swedish Mission Covenant Church of America. There is no mention of women’s ordination in the founding documents of our denomination, but as we have seen from the consultation that took place in 1970, formal documents rarely represent the breadth of discussion that goes into a formal decision by

an organization. It is possible that immigrant concerns overshadowed the women's issue within the denomination. While the women's suffrage movement would originally include fighting for the rights of blacks and recent immigrants, following the Civil War it would focus exclusively on the rights of white women.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that this split had already taken place by 1885, alienating new Swedish immigrants from this movement. It is also possible that in choosing not to side with the Free Church or with the Congregationalists, the Mission Friends had intentionally or unintentionally taken a stand against women's ordination. Missing from this discussion is an understanding of women's roles among the Swedish Mission Friends before they immigrated to the United States. This is another important piece of the puzzle that deserves further study. Regardless, it becomes clear that there is no simple answer to why our denomination did not address women's ordination at the time of its inception.

Between 1885 and 1976, women served in significant roles within our denomination, but not in the pastoral office. In 1910 a deaconess program was established at North Park College to train women who were called "to the care of sick, indigent, and otherwise needy people."<sup>39</sup> Five women graduated from the program, but the program was discontinued when the women were unable to find paying positions in local congregations. Between 1894 and 1950, the denomination consecrated and sent out almost eighty women as missionaries. The consecration ceremony used almost the same language and ritual as that of ordination and many of the women fulfilled all the functions of an ordained pastor on the mission field.<sup>40</sup> In 1916 the Covenant Women's Auxiliary was formed. Their first project was a women's dorm for North Park College. They raised over \$56,000.<sup>41</sup> Since its founding, the Women's Auxiliary, now known as Women Ministries, has gone on to fund numerous building projects, to send women missionaries, and to support benevolence programs in the United States and throughout the world. More recently they have begun to take an active role in advocating for women who are victims of violence, whether domestic or through human trafficking.<sup>42</sup> The list could go on, including the role of women in Christian education, worship leading, chaplaincy, and staff ministry. Yet, the topic of women's ordination did not become prominent in our denomination until the 1970s. Rather than asking why the denomination decided to ordain women, one must ask, why then? What was significant about the 1970s?

## Ordination of Women in the United States

Mark Chaves has published a sociological study of the ordination of women in the United States. *Ordaining Women* is a study of the one hundred largest denominations in the United States, asking when they first decided to ordain women and, for some, when they reversed such decisions. Chaves found that denominations rarely followed expected patterns. The following were usually not factors in the ordination of women: a number of women were actively seeking ordination,<sup>43</sup> there was a clergy shortage and women were seen as a possible solution,<sup>44</sup> a women's movement within the church was advocating for ordination,<sup>45</sup> churches were already ordaining women and the denomination was simply responding to congregational practices.<sup>46</sup> Chaves found that external factors were generally more influential on a denomination's decision to ordain women than internal factors. In the late nineteenth century and in the 1970s, the women's movement, in different forms, was quite prominent in the United States. In the late nineteenth century and the 1970s, many denominations began taking positions both for and against women's ordination. By 1900, fifteen denominations had voted to ordain women. This represented 25 percent of all denominations in the United States at the time. Over the next twenty-five years nine more denominations would vote to ordain women. As the first wave of the women's movement died down, so did discussion of women's ordination. In the mid-1950s, the feminist movement would gain momentum, and between 1956 and 1969 ten more denominations would vote to ordain women. In the 1970s seven more denominations would be added to the list, including the ECC. Chaves writes, "a denomination's formal policy permitting female clergy should be understood in large part as a symbolic marker signaling orientation to, support of, and cooperation with a broader norm for gender equality."<sup>47</sup>

Chaves's work is interesting, though, not because it links women's ordination to the women's movement, but because it highlights the deeper symbolic significance the issue holds in most denominations. Chaves argues that the symbolic aspect of women's ordination moved beyond gender equality to an indication of a denomination's understanding of the relationship between church and culture, symbolized by two organizations: the National Council of Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals.<sup>48</sup> In the 1940s and '50s, churches across the country polarized on the issue of the relationship between church and culture. Those who were committed to a kind of cultural humanistic liberalism

with an emphasis on individual human rights joined the National Council of Churches and voted to ordain women. Those who saw human rights more as part of the created order and the church standing in opposition to culture joined the National Association of Evangelicals; they voted against the ordination of women. Chaves argues that the symbolic nature of the vote is highlighted by the disconnect between actual denominational practices and the vote itself. I would argue that the reversal of the decision to ordain women among several denominations also highlights its symbolic and perhaps cultural nature. Denominations such as the Evangelical Free Church and the Southern Baptist Convention based their original decisions to ordain women on strong biblical arguments. While their positions on Scripture and the interpretation of Scripture did not change, their conclusions regarding the ordination of women did change, suggesting the influence of outside forces on their decisions.

The ECC is an interesting case study regarding women's ordination. Formally, the denomination never affiliated with either the National Council of Churches or the National Association of Evangelicals. Instead, individual pastors and congregations were free to associate with either organization if they so desired. In this regard, the ECC does not fit Chaves's framework for understanding the ordination of women. Yet the ECC does fit the model in other ways. While there were a few women in seminary in the 1970s, there is no indication that there were a large number of women advocating for ordination in 1976. In addition, there is no indication that the ECC's women's ministries or some other women's groups were promoting a feminist agenda. We do see hints of the influence of feminism in *The Covenant Companion* articles published in the early 1970s,<sup>49</sup> but there is no evidence of an organized feminist movement within the denomination. While there was a clergy shortage in the early 1970s, we have seen that women were not considered as part of the solution to this problem. Finally, we know of no individual congregations within the denomination that ordained women or hired women as senior pastors before the 1976 vote of the denomination. All of this suggests that the vote to ordain women had some symbolic significance. It also suggests that it had different significance for various congregations and pastors, depending on their understanding of the relationship between church and culture and their affiliation with either the National Council of Churches or the National Association of Evangelicals.

## A Reframing of the Issue<sup>50</sup>

While the 1976 Annual Meeting voted to approve the ordination of women, the subsequent vote referred the matter back to the board for further discussion. They did not vote to discuss ways to educate congregations regarding the newly adopted position of the denomination. Rather, they voted to leave the matter open for further debate and discussion, revealing a denomination still divided. There would be no formal strategy to educate the congregations on the matter.<sup>51</sup> In November 1976 *The Covenant Quarterly* published an article by Klyne Snodgrass entitled “Paul and Women” as well as Fredrik Franson’s “Prophesying Daughters.” In 1978 a one-hour presentation would be made to the Covenant Ministerium on women in pastoral ministry. In 1981 a motion was brought to the Annual Meeting to rescind the decision to ordain women; this motion was overwhelmingly defeated.<sup>52</sup> The defeat of the motion seems to indicate the denomination’s full support of the ordination of women, but the personal narratives of women in the ECC tell a different story. Regardless of what the vote to ordain women symbolized for the denomination, it made women clergy symbolic figures in the church—symbols of theological debate and controversy.

By failing to put in place structures and educational initiatives to facilitate change, the denomination failed to take ownership of their position on women’s ordination. Instead, the ordination of women became a personalized issue as the discussion became focused on the lives of individual women who were seeking to live into God’s call on their lives. For some women, this worked well. Supportive superintendents and open congregations paved the way for women to serve as solo pastors and associate pastors in a small number of churches.<sup>53</sup> The change was slow and gradual, but it did occur. More and more churches became open to women pastors. Unfortunately, the number of open churches did not grow as quickly as the number of women seeking ordination. Women began to seek placement in other denominations, to seek other types of ministry positions, and to leave the ministry all together.<sup>54</sup> As this growing number of women clergy bumped up against continuing resistance in local congregations (and at times in denominational leadership), some became labeled as trouble makers more concerned about their own personal rights than with unity in the church. Some women chose not to pursue ordination so as not to disturb this unity.<sup>55</sup> Only recently have some begun to reframe this issue. When women’s ordination is viewed primarily as an individual choice, women seeking ordination are seen

as a threat to congregational and denominational unity. When women's ordination is viewed through a different framework, such as a denominational position, these women are no longer seen as threats, but rather are embraced as those who live into our denominational identity.<sup>56</sup>

It is this reframing of the question of women's ordination that is at the center of Lenore Knight Johnson's master's thesis, "Organic Transformation of Legislated Change? Women's Ordination in the ECC." Johnson's thesis is based on interviews with nineteen clergywomen and draws on sociological literature that considers change processes within organizations. She argues that while the denomination voted to ordain women in 1976, the culture of the denomination did not change to embrace such a position. It was legislated change rather than organic change. The educational program proposed by the Board of the Ministry was intended to bring about some of the organic cultural change that would be needed to fully embrace the ordination of women. A program, though, was never adopted. The culture of the denomination remained resistant to the ordination of women despite an official vote in favor of it. As a result, those in favor of women in ministry were labeled as troublemakers going against the culture of the church.<sup>57</sup> Discussions of women's ordination were continually framed in the defensive, attempting to continually prove that women had a right to be ordained, that it was a biblical position, while those who argued against women's ordination were never questioned or challenged for going against a denominational position and therefore threatening the unity of the ECC.<sup>58</sup>

Much of the discussion surrounding the ordination of women has been framed as an issue of "Covenant freedom."<sup>59</sup> As stated in *The Covenant Affirmations*, "The Covenant Church seeks to focus on what unites followers of Jesus Christ rather than what separates them."<sup>60</sup> This fits well a denomination formed by Mission Friends who desired to work together for common mission and ministry. Yet Covenant freedom was not extended to all at that first formational meeting. J. G. Princell was not allowed a voice at that first meeting "because of his principles expounded in *Chicago Bladet* that were in direct opposition to the purpose of the meeting, and because he would not retract them."<sup>61</sup> Princell argued for an extreme free church ecclesiology that would preclude forming any formal organizations for mission or ministry beyond that of the local congregation. The Covenant has always had an emphasis on freedom, but that freedom has always been in tension with the desire for unity and common mission.

On the issue of women's ordination, it has often been assumed that those who support the ordination of women should compromise their position on behalf of unity in the church. We were asked to keep silent on the issue or not to speak too strongly for fear of offending those who disagreed with us. In an effort to preserve unity, the issue was often avoided altogether.<sup>62</sup> This strategy was almost implemented in 1976 when Keith Fullerton, chair of the Board of the Ministry, suggested that since the language of the rules for ordered ministry were now gender neutral, "we should just assume such a principle has been accepted and wait until the first candidate appears."<sup>63</sup> It is only in recent years that the denomination has begun to take a public stand on this issue. Most notable has been the creation of the Commission for Biblical Gender Equality in 2002 and a DVD released in 2006 entitled *Called and Gifted* celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the ordination of women.<sup>64</sup> The DVD shows several key denominational leaders speaking forcefully in favor of women's ordination, including Glenn Palmberg, president of the denomination, and David Kersten, executive minister of the ordered ministry. A reframing of the issue of women's ordination is necessary to make clear which side is the dissenting position within our denomination. I am arguing for a cultural shift in which the ordination of women becomes fully embraced as the position of the denomination, with grace being extended to those who differ from denominational policies and the majority opinion of the church.

Such reframing is necessary for two reasons. First, it is a matter of integrity. The denomination took a vote more than thirty years ago to ordain women. In order to live fully into that commitment, it must create a culture that welcomes and embraces women pastors. Second, in this instance Covenant freedom is not a debate about issues and ideas alone. It is about people. One cannot have an abstract discussion about the ordination of women in a culture that makes all women clergy into symbols of the debate. While men may agree or disagree on this issue, they will never embody it. When the issue of women's ordination is on the table, women clergy become "clergywomen" rather than simply women clergy seeking to fulfill God's call on their lives. As Lenore Knight Johnson puts it, clergywomen become theological issues, "thus diluting the individual sense of identity each woman possesses."<sup>65</sup> This is never more clear than when a stranger approaches a clergywoman, often after hearing her preach for the first time, and begins demanding that she prove biblically why she should be allowed to speak from the pulpit.<sup>66</sup> Rather than taking the

concern to the leaders of the church or the denomination, the issue is personalized and the woman is forced once again to defend her calling.<sup>67</sup> Reframing the issue helps move the responsibility to uphold the denominational decision to ordain women away from individual clergywomen to local congregations and the denomination as a whole.

### **Where Do We Go from Here?**

While this work of reframing was begun at a denominational level, it will only take root in the ECC with the support of local congregations. So, what can individuals and local congregations do to help with this process? I would suggest the following. First, congregations should be aware of their own position on women's ordination and the roles in which women can serve in the church. If a woman has never preached at your church, is it because of a formal decision made on behalf of the church or has it simply never come up?<sup>68</sup> If only men serve on the elder board, the church council, the leadership team, or the executive board, is it because of a congregational policy or were these simply the best qualified and most willing individuals to serve in such positions? Of course, perhaps one needs to ask why women were not seen as qualified or were not willing to serve, but that is another matter. When a woman does come to preach at your church for the first time, or if a woman hasn't been to preach at the church in several years, make sure the entire congregation is aware of the church's policy on women's ordination, and ask them to direct any questions to the pastoral staff or lay leaders in the church rather than to the woman preaching in your pulpit as a matter of courtesy and hospitality. Congregations need to be clear about their position on women's ordination and be willing to take the lead on discussing this matter rather than leaving it in the hands of women clergy.

Second, congregations need to find ways to have constructive discussions about this issue rather than avoid it. When a congregation is searching for a new pastor, they often avoid considering a woman because they are afraid it will create division in the church. As an alternative to avoidance, the search committee and the congregation could educate themselves on the matter and come to a congregational decision rather than allowing the possible reactions of a few to determine the direction of the entire congregation. The ECC website has many resources, including a paper entitled "A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry"<sup>69</sup> and the booklet and study guide entitled *Called and Gifted*,<sup>70</sup> that explore the biblical and theological basis for women in ministry. A

congregation might also consider inviting someone to lead the discussion. Faculty at North Park Theological Seminary and denominational officials are often willing to travel to local congregations and teach on this topic. In addition, many of the lay leaders in Women Ministries have been teaching the *Called and Gifted* curriculum regularly at retreats and in local congregations. Whether a congregation decides to lead the conversation internally or bring in an outside facilitator, it is important that the discussion is informed by the denominational position on this matter.

On the other hand, at times a search committee does decide to hire a woman as part of the pastoral staff without taking the time to explore the issue with the congregation. If this is the first woman on staff or as senior/solo pastor, it would be wise to do make sure there has been some discussion and education of the congregation in preparation for her arrival. This is important not only to build support among the congregation, but to make it clear that this is a congregational decision. If someone disagrees with the decision or feels that a woman should not be serving in a pastoral role, they should be directed to discuss it with the search committee, the pastoral staff, or the lay leadership of the church rather than with the new female pastor. Transitioning to a new role can be tiring enough without the added burden of having to defend one's call to ministry.

The work of reframing has begun in the denomination and in many local congregations. If you are one of those congregations that has discussed this issue and come to a congregational decision about the matter informed by the denominational stance, thank you for the work you have already done to move us forward. If you are one of those congregations that has not yet discussed this issue, I would encourage you to do so as soon as possible. Most likely there are women in your congregation who are considering a call to ministry. Create a culture in which that call can be fully explored. May we as a denomination and as local congregations have the courage to follow through on the decision that was made in 1976 and to become a culture that fully embraces the ordination of women.

## **Resources for Congregations**

Board of Ordered Ministry. *Called and Gifted DVD: Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Women's Ordination*, 2006. Can be ordered through the Covenant Resource Center at [www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-dvd](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-dvd).

Chaves, Mark. *Ordaining Women*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Groothuis, Rebecca Merrill. *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Cultural War between Traditionalism and Feminism*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997.

Johnston, Robert, Jean Lambert, David Scholer, and Klyne Snodgrass. "A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry," prepared for the Board of the Ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church and edited by Klyne Snodgrass, approved by the Board of the Ministry February 1987. Found at [www.covchurch.org/resource/a-biblical-theological-basis-for-women-in-ministry-occasional-paper-1](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/a-biblical-theological-basis-for-women-in-ministry-occasional-paper-1).

Manns, Sharon Cairns. *Called and Gifted*. Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005. Found at [www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-booklet](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-booklet).

Phelan, John E. *All God's People*. Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005. Found at [www.covchurch.org/resource/all-gods-people-an-exploration-of-the-call-of-women-to-pastoral-ministry](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/all-gods-people-an-exploration-of-the-call-of-women-to-pastoral-ministry).

Pierce, Ronald W. and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds. *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005.

## Endnotes

1. *Covenant Yearbook 1976* (Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1976), 178.

2. Statistics taken from the *Covenant Yearbook, 2007-2008* (Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church, 2008).

3. See in particular the "Minutes of the Ninety-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America" in *Covenant Yearbook 1981* (Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1981), 240.

4. In a paper produced for the consultation and presented on October 26, 1970, entitled, "The Problem Areas Before Us," 2. The series of papers produced by the consultation are available in electronic form through the Covenant Archives.

5. "Covenant Board of Ministerial Standing: Rules and Regulations," in the *Covenant Yearbook 1970* (Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1970), 364-73.

6. "Covenant Workers in Christian Education: Rules and Regulations," in the *Covenant Yearbook 1970*, 382-84.

7. There was actually some debate over the matter on several fronts. Among the papers is one from Donald Frisk entitled "The Theology of Ordination" which states that ordination should not be broadened because to "extend ordination to such ministries is to do violence to the truth of the general priesthood of believers. It is to blur the conviction that baptism is every Christian's ordination to his servant role in the world," 7. J. Robert Hjelm's paper, "The Biblical Basis for Ordination," argues the opposite point stating that "ordination by laying-on of hands was not restricted to a select kind of office or to a

select few persons, according to New Testament evidence. If this conclusion is accepted, then the question posed for the Covenant Church is "Why do we limit ordination to one specific ministry?" 11. The Covenant Ministerium voted against a recommendation for a second category of ordination and instead approved a motion to expand ordination to word and sacrament. There is no record in the ministerium minutes of their approval of the changes, but they are reflected in the minutes of the Annual Meeting. See "Minutes of the Eighty-Eighth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America," in the *Covenant Yearbook 1973* (Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1973), 157. A second category of ordination, ordained to specialized ministry, was not approved until the 2002 Annual Meeting.

8. Earl VanDerVeer, "Covenant Ministry Today," *The Covenant Companion* 60:8 (April 15, 1971): 5.

9. The 1972 version of the rules and regulations uses male pronouns when referring to candidates for ordination though never names them specifically as men. For example, "The candidate who seeks ordination shall normally have taken his training in and been graduated from the North Park Theological Seminary." ("Covenant Board of the Ministry Rules and Regulations" in *Covenant Yearbook 1972*, Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1972, 385). The 1973 version removes all gendered pronouns from the document. For example, "The candidate shall have completed the educational requirements as outlined..." ("Rules of the Board of the Ministry" in *Covenant Yearbook 1973*, 334.)

10. The article's author, Evan M. Goranson, states that changes were made to the rules partly due to the number of addenda since the last revision was completed in 1956 and partly due to the creation of a new position, executive secretary of the ministry. No mention is made of the change to gender neutral language. Rather, Goranson states one of the reasons for the broadening of the definition of ordination is the concern the board has for "the training of men who will be ministers in the Covenant." Evan M. Goranson, "Covenant Ministers: New Rules and Regulations," *The Covenant Companion* 61:9 (May 1, 1972): 12.

11. Earl C. Dahlstrom, "Covenant Ministry: Recruiting for the '80s," *The Covenant Companion* 62:15 (August 1, 1973): 11.

12. See Frances J. Mason, "Is Women's Role Changing?" *The Covenant Companion* 62:17 (September 1, 1973): 3-5 and Erma Chinander, "Feminism in the Church," *The Covenant Companion* 62:19 (October 1, 1973): 10-11.

13. "Our Readers Write," *The Covenant Companion* 63:2 (January 15, 1974): 2. While a majority of those signing were students, the list also included then professor of ministry Sigurd Westberg and the seminary librarian Donald Dayton.

14. Prior to this time there were women students at North Park Theological Seminary, but they received diplomas that did not meet the educational requirements for ordination. Little research has been done on the relationship of the seminary to women's ordination. Further work in this area would be important to gain a fuller understanding of the denominational response to this issue.

15. Keith Fullerton, "Women in the Ministry: A Call for Study, Discussion, and Prayer about an Issue Which will be Brought before the 1976 Annual Meeting," *The Covenant Companion* 64:21 (December 1, 1975): 8-9.

16. Reported by Ted Ericson in "Proclaiming Life and Liberty: A Report of the 91st Annual Meeting," *The Covenant Companion* 65:14 (August 1, 1976): 12.

17. Ibid.

18. Everett Wilson, "Ordination for Women: Why Not?" *The Covenant Companion* 65:11 (June 1, 1976): 8.

19. Douglas Ostien, "Women's Ordination: Another View," *The Covenant Companion*

65:9 (May 1, 1976): 3.

20. Between March and November of 1976 there were at least seventeen letters to the editor responding to the articles by Wilson and Ostien. Over three-fourths were in support of the ordination of women.

21. Ted Ericson, "Proclaiming Life and Liberty: A Report of the Meeting," 12.

22. From an unpublished document entitled "Statement on the Ordination of Women," distributed at the Annual Meeting of the ECC in June 1976. Covenant Archives, Chicago.

23. Ibid.

24. "Minutes of the Ninety-First Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America" in *Covenant Yearbook 1976*, 178.

25. The minutes of the 1976 Annual Meeting simply state that the Annual Meeting voted to "go on record as favoring the ordination of women" (*Covenant Yearbook 1976*, 178). The Board of Ministry Annual Report provides more information stating: "The ordination of women was approved with the clarification that the meeting was not necessarily accepting all the rationale of the supporting statement" (*Covenant Yearbook 1977*, Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1977, 95). No further information is given.

26. The 1977 Annual Meeting minutes reflected that research was being done to review the issue of ordination and that a full report would be given in 1978 (*Covenant Yearbook 1978*, Chicago: The Evangelical Covenant Church of America, 1978, 180). The 1978 minutes reflect a significant report on ordination in the ECC, but the issue of women's ordination is not addressed (ibid., 164).

27. See Glenn P. Anderson, ed., *Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1980).

28. For a short overview of this history, see the article by Janette Hassey entitled "Evangelical Women in Ministry a Century Ago: The 19th and Early 20th Centuries," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 39-57, and Rebecca Merrill Goothuis's *Women Caught in the Conflict: The Cultural War between Traditionalism and Feminism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997). Also, see the lecture by Mimi Haddad at the closing breakfast of the Midwinter Conference, January 31, 2008. The lecture can be ordered at [www.myconferenceresource.com/ordering.html](http://www.myconferenceresource.com/ordering.html).

29. Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, "Willard, Frances Elizabeth Caroline," in *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed. Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 970-71.

30. Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1962), 258-60.

31. Janette Hassey lists several examples of women graduates from Moody who went on to become pastors in "Evangelical Women in Ministry a Century Ago," 39-42. Frances Willard was not the only prominent woman evangelist during the 1870s. In 1870 Catherine Booth co-founded the Salvation Army and Amanda Berry Smith, a former slave, began evangelistic crusades that extended to England, India, and West Africa. A decade or two earlier Phoebe Palmer served as a principal figure in the Third Great Awakening. *Women Caught in the Conflict*, 52-54.

32. Reprinted in *The Covenant Quarterly* 34:4 (Nov. 1976): 21-40. The quote is found on page 25.

33. "Prophesying Daughters," 33.

34. Ibid., 38-39.

35. The Evangelical Free Church was one of several denominations that, at their inception, supported the ordination of women but later rescinded that decision. Perhaps

the most well-known reversal of such a decision was the Southern Baptist Convention that reversed its position on women's ordination in 1984. There are several excellent resources that give an account of this vote including Steve Lipscomb's video *Battle for the Minds* and Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Baptist Battles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

36. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 637.

37. Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 19.

38. Susan Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 36-38.

39. Sigurd F. Westberg, "Ordination in the Covenant: A Historical Overview." Written at the request of the Board of the Ministry, May 4, 1977, 11.

40. In 1946 Peter Person used this argument in support of women's ordination in "The Place of Women in the Christian Ministry," *The Covenant Quarterly* 6 (Fourth Quarter, 1946): 208-13.

41. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 637.

42. One of Women Ministries key ministries is Advocacy for Victims of Abuse (AVA). See their website at [www.covchurch.org/women/ava](http://www.covchurch.org/women/ava) for more information. They also initiated a denomination-wide ministry called "The Human Trafficking Project" which is perhaps best known by the title of their video "Break the Chains." For more information on this ministry see [www.covchurch.org/humantrafficking](http://www.covchurch.org/humantrafficking).

43. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 18.

44. *Ibid.*, 132-33.

45. *Ibid.*, 183-84.

46. *Ibid.*, 20.

47. *Ibid.*, 36. See also Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Women Caught in the Conflict*, especially chapter 8 ("The Feminist Bogeywoman") and chapter 11 ("Culture Wars and the Traditionalist Fear of Feminism").

48. Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 83.

49. As Mary Nella Bruce points out, the influence of the women's movement is also evident in the news stories present in *The Covenant Companion* in 1975. In February alone the news items included the ordination of three Episcopal women, a story about women students at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, the formation of the Evangelical Women's Caucus, and the United Nation's International Women's Conference. See Mary Nella Bruce, "The Recent History of the Ordination of Women in the Covenant," an unpublished paper for *Free Church Heritage*, December 5, 1984. Found in Covenant Archives and Historical Library, Box 10, Folder 13, pg. 5.

50. This concept of "reframing" the issue of women's ordination in the ECC was first discussed in Lenore Knight Johnson's master's thesis, "Organic Transformation or Legislated Change? Women's Ordination in the Evangelical Covenant Church," written for Loyola University Chicago, May 2005, 19-21.

51. For further critique on this decision, see Knight Johnson, "Organic Transformation or Legislated Change?" 9.

52. "Minutes of the Ninety-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America," in *Covenant Yearbook 1981*, 240.

53. In 1980 Janet Lundblad became the first woman to serve as solo pastor in an ECC church when she was called to the Evangelical Covenant Church of Donaldson, Indiana. For details of more firsts for women in the ECC see the Association for Covenant Clergy Woman website at [www.covchurch.org/accw/history](http://www.covchurch.org/accw/history). See also Mary Nella Bruce, "The Recent History." Her questionnaire to the first sixteen women seminary graduates from North Park reflects both positive and negative placement experiences

for women candidates, 19.

54. See Mary Miller, "A Decade Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977-1987)," *The Covenant Quarterly* 46:4 (1988): 6-26, for stories of those who left the denomination due to difficulties with placement. See also Isolde Anderson's follow up ten years later, "Two Decades Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977-1997)" *The Covenant Quarterly* 56:3 (1998): 19-36, and "Three Decades Later: Credentialed Clergywomen in the Covenant (1997-2007)" by Amanda Olson and Mae Cannon in this issue; Lenore Knight Johnson's "Organic Transformation or Legislated Change?"

55. My reflections on the placement of women pastors in the denomination are guided by my own experiences as a Covenant clergywoman as well as stories I have heard from other women—friends in the ministerium as well as women students I came in contact with when I served as dean of students at North Park Theological Seminary from 2000 to 2007. For more research in this area see Knight Johnson, "Organic Transformation or Legislated Change?"

56. Perhaps the clearest reframing of the issue came in *Called and Gifted*, a DVD produced by the Department of the Ordered Ministry for the thirtieth anniversary of the ordination of women in the ECC and shown at the 2006 Annual Meeting. In that DVD, many of the early clergy women shared their struggles as pioneers in the denomination, current clergywomen shared their joys in ministry, and denominational officials stated clearly that the ECC was in support of the ordination of women. The DVD was updated in 2009 to include more footage from Gary Walter, the new president of the denomination, and can be found in the Covenant Resource Center.

57. Lenore Knight Johnson's paper illustrates how many clergywomen worry about being seen as divisive by taking a strong position on women's ordination, 17-18. In 2003 I wrote an article for the Association for Covenant Clergy Women (ACCW) newsletter highlighting my own struggles with issue. ACCW had, and still has among some women pastors and seminary students, a reputation for being bitter and angry. They were troublemakers because they continued to raise issues that were divisive in our denomination. I had failed to recognize the pain many of them had gone through as pioneers in our denomination, and it was not until I faced my own significant barriers as a clergywoman that I was able to empathize with their pain and anger.

58. The defensive nature of the argument remains in the denomination to this day. The most recent denominational publications on this issue, Sharon Cairns Mann, *Called and Gifted* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005) and John E. Phelan Jr., *All God's People* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 2005), focus on the biblical arguments for women's ordination. *Called and Gifted* is available online at [www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-booklet](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-booklet).

59. The motion presented by First Covenant Church in Billings, Montana, to rescind the denomination's support of women's ordination stated as one of the reasons: "Whereas, the freedom that we have in the Covenant should not mean that we can believe whatever we want to, but we are to search out what the Word of God says and then accept and obey the Word." ("Minutes of the Ninety-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Covenant Church of America," 240). Lenore Knight Johnson draws heavily on this concept in "Organic Transformation or Legislative Change?" She provides the following quote from Sharon Cairns Mann: "The church stands by its position on freedom. The policy on freedom applies to doctrinal issues that might tend to divide, but are easily resolved when we share a respect for each other's positions. We recognize that our members come from many backgrounds and we recognize that as people seriously and honestly explore the biblical position on women in ministry, they may come to a different conclusion than presented in this document" (*Called and Gifted*, 12).

60. "Covenant Affirmations," The Evangelical Covenant Church. Available at [www.covchurch.org/resource/covenant-affirmations-booklet](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/covenant-affirmations-booklet), 18.

61. From the minutes of the organizational meeting of the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant of American held in Chicago, February 18-25, 1885. Anderson, *Covenant Roots*, 11.

62. Again, see the examples in Lenore Knight Johnson, 17-19.

63. Fullerton, "Women in the Ministry?" 9.

64. The DVD shows several key denominational leaders speaking forcefully in favor of women's ordination, including Glenn Palmberg, then president of the denomination, David Kersten, executive minister of the ordered ministry, and Gary Walter, then executive minister of church growth and evangelism. The DVD was updated in 2009 to include more from Gary Walter since his election to the presidency.

65. Johnson, "Organic Transformation or Legislated Change?" 21.

66. Female friends and students have regularly shared stories of individuals who have approached them after sermons asking for their biblical defense of women in ministry. I myself have experienced such challenges several times after preaching in local congregations. I have been most distressed by those women who have shared about such challenges occurring while they are on internship or in their first years of ministry.

67. For several years I worked at a church that did not support the ordination of women or the possibility of their preaching and administering the sacraments in the church. There were several instances when, after leading prayers or announcements, I was approached by someone in the congregation asking me to prove biblically that women were allowed to serve in such capacity in the church. I am not alone in this experience. I have heard similar incidents reported by many clergywomen in the ECC.

68. I became a Christian in an ECC church in the mid 1980s. I didn't find out the church's position on women in ministry until twenty years later. The church was inviting many of the former members who were now ordained clergy in the ECC back to preach, and my name was suggested as a possibility. My mother, a current member, had submitted my name not realizing the church did not allow women to preach from the pulpit. The church decided to invite me to share a short "testimony" in one of the services. A male pastor gave the actual sermon.

69. Prepared for the Board of the Ministry of the Evangelical Covenant Church by a committee consisting of Robert Johnston, Jean Lambert, David Scholer, and Klyne Snodgrass and approved by the Board of the Ministry February 1987. Found at [www.covchurch.org/resource/a-biblical-theological-basis-for-women-in-ministry-occasional-paper-1](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/a-biblical-theological-basis-for-women-in-ministry-occasional-paper-1).

70. Sharon Cairns Mann, *Called and Gifted*, found at [www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-booklet](http://www.covchurch.org/resource/called-and-gifted-booklet).

# A Case for the Unrestricted Ministry of Women

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**W**hy do some people place limitations on the ministry of women? Are women inferior, somehow less human than men? While in the past, people from Aristotle to some in the early twentieth century have believed this, hardly anyone argues this way today. Would women do the job inappropriately? Not unless, like some men, their hermeneutic, exegetical method, and/or moral compass were skewed. Women should arrive at the same kinds of theological conclusions, should convey the same gospel, should operate by the power of the same Holy Spirit, and should show the same concern for truth and love and the same resistance to sin and error.

Only three reasons exist to restrict the ministry of women: the tradition of patriarchy, the influence of two New Testament texts (1 Corinthians 14:33-38 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15), and an unjust and inflated view of church office. Any restriction placed on women does not derive from the Old Testament, which has no concept of ministry other than priest and prophet. Old Testament female prophets were known, and yet the Old Testament priesthood is *not* the basis for a Christian understanding of ministry.

## **Setting Aside Misconceptions**

At least three misconceptions should be set aside at the beginning. The first views the concern for women in ministry as a result of feminism and an assault on traditional values. The issue of women in ministry has *not* emerged merely because of feminism, although feminism and other cultural factors have certainly heightened the discussion. Traditionalists—

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or the new traditionalists—think they are resisting a cultural deviation from what is right, but that presumes the past had things right. Some traditional values do not have enough value. The traditional view is not necessarily Christian; it is present in virtually every culture and has led to patriarchy, views of the inferiority of women, abuse, and limitation of women's roles. If we think we are preserving some greater spiritual practice by limiting women, why is it that Christian practices in traditional churches and most other churches relating to sexuality, divorce, abuse, and other issues do not differ from practices in the broader secular society, at least in the United States and Europe? The New Testament challenges the cultural deviations of both past and present. Christianity needs to stand for and embody a rejection of the failures of society. It is clear that women have a role, a responsibility, and gifts to help the church communicate and live its message. Without the exercise of their gifts the church is diminished.

The second misconception is that a decision on this issue depends on whether one is theologically liberal or conservative generally or whether one believes fully in the authority of Scripture. Neither is true. Especially early in the *renewed* discussion that began in the 1970s, denominations that were more hierarchical structurally (such as the Anglicans) had difficulty accepting the full ministry of women, not because of Scripture but because of their hierarchy. Denominations that were more Spirit oriented (such as Pentecostals) had the least difficulty.<sup>1</sup> Regarding Scripture, people with equally high views of Scripture are on both sides of the debate. Indeed, many of us argue for the full ministry of women *because* Scripture pushes us to that conclusion.

A third misconception is that acceptance of women in ministry is a step towards acceptance of the legitimacy of homosexual practice. The fear of homosexuality is a motivating factor for some arguing against the unlimited ministry of women,<sup>2</sup> but there is no necessary relation between the two issues and significant hermeneutical differences exist in the discussion of the pertinent biblical texts on these two subjects. The same biblical text that urges the ministry of women, in my opinion, rejects the legitimacy of homosexual practice.

In addition to setting aside misconceptions, we need to point out that there are not merely two positions on this question. There is a variety of positions just as there is a variety of types of feminism, some very unsympathetic to others. The range of positions include that women should not speak at all, not teach men and boys, not teach from behind a pulpit,

not teach authoritatively, not teach except under emergency conditions (as on the mission field or when no qualified male is present), not teach except under the authority of a male senior pastor. Apart from the first two, none of these positions fits a literal reading of 1 Corinthians 14:33-38 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15. Everyone is making hermeneutical moves to deal with these texts, even if they do not admit it. Some people would allow women to teach in a seminary but not in a church; some would allow neither. Some view women as equal; today fewer view women as inferior, less capable intellectually and spiritually. Obviously some of these positions are not the “traditional” position. The traditionalists have changed the paradigm, but for nearly everyone the discussion has changed. Apart from the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, few churches look like they did even forty years ago, to say nothing of much of the church’s history. To avoid being viewed negatively, some in English-speaking churches define themselves as “complementarians” to avoid the term “hierarchicalists,” but the word “complementarian” is neither clear nor communicative.<sup>3</sup>

There are four fundamental questions that must be answered. Our concerns are primarily with the biblical passages about women in ministry, and space limitations will not permit full treatment of all four, especially the second.

- 1) How do we deal hermeneutically and exegetically with the biblical passages relevant to women in ministry?
- 2) What does it mean to be human and specifically to be male and female?
- 3) What is ministry and who may do it?
- 4) What is authority and who may have it?

Another way to approach the subject is to realize that there are both negative and positive reasons that argue, I believe, for the unrestricted ministry of women. With regard to negative reasons:

- 1) I do not believe that women are less capable intellectually, spiritually, or administratively or that they are more prone to sin, error, or heresy. The same range of gifts, abilities, and failures evident in men are evident in women.<sup>4</sup>
- 2) I do not believe the New Testament has *offices* from which to exclude women. This may well be the determining issue.
- 3) I do not accept that the New Testament views prophets and prophecy as inferior to teachers and teaching.

- 4) I do not accept the view of authority presupposed by those who oppose the ministry of women.
- 5) I do not accept a proof-texting approach hermeneutically.
- 6) I do not accept that 1 Corinthians 14:33-38 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15 are universal and timeless prohibitions.
- 7) I do not accept that any of the New Testament texts discusses gender roles. We lay gender roles on texts like 1 Timothy 2:13. First Timothy 2:15 may come closest to treating a role, but that verse is difficult for any position and needs careful attention.
- 8) I do not accept that an emphasis on the responsibility of the husband in relation to the wife found in 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:22<sup>5</sup> is justifiably transferred to church leadership. (By the way, what Paul really understands for husbands and wives is *mutual* submission, which is evident in Ephesians 5:21-22 and presented in a surprising way in 1 Corinthians 7:4 using the verb ἐξουσιάζειν [*exousiazerein*], “to have authority over.”)

With regard to positive reasons, the following should be said:

- 1) The biblical text reports on the ministries of women and uses the same language for them it does for men doing ministry.
- 2) The risen Lord specifically gives women the task of communicating the message of the resurrection.
- 3) After the resurrection and Pentecost circumstances are different. An eschatological theology changes the way women are perceived and, indeed, the way all relations are perceived.
- 4) The gifts of the Spirit are distributed to both male and female without any hint of distinction.
- 5) The real issue is power. The gospel requires a new understanding and implementation of power, a new theology of power. This is directly related to the teaching on servant leadership—which in my experience very few actually believe.

All of these statements require explanation, and most will be treated in some fashion below.

A caution is in order before looking at biblical texts. Sometimes translations make assumptions and decisions that can mislead, and often they

insert words (such as “man” or “men” in English) when no corresponding Greek word is used or when the masculine is used in a generic sense for both sexes.<sup>6</sup> Reference to the original languages is essential.

## The Biblical Witness

We need to take seriously that women are the source of specific biblical texts. Miriam’s prophecy, Deborah’s song, Hannah’s song, the words of the wise woman of Tekoa, and Mary’s Magnificat are all beloved and *authoritative* passages, to say nothing about the words of other women like Anna who are mentioned in passing. Dare we suggest the voice of women may be heard in Scripture but not in the church?

We also need to take seriously that women were bearers of the gospel tradition. Surely no one would say there is some defect in women that makes them less trustworthy as bearers of the tradition, especially if Richard Bauckham is anywhere close to correct in saying people are named in the Gospels because they were the guarantors of the tradition.<sup>7</sup> Junia (Romans 16:7), who Bauckham argues is Joanna in Luke 8:3 and 24:10, is a Jew who became a Christian before Paul, and like Paul was also in prison for being a Christian.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of whether the identification with Joanna is correct, Junia is called an *apostle*. She is given this title probably because she had seen the risen Lord and was a foundational witness to the validity of the gospel. The earlier attempts to take Junia as a man named Junias, as some translations have it, have been shown to be unquestionably wrong. This supposedly shortened form of the masculine name Junianus does not occur anywhere, while the female name Junia occurs with some frequency. Further, no one thought Junia was a man before Aegidius of Rome in the thirteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Nearly all grant today that Junia was a woman, but a few have attempted to say she was only esteemed *by* the apostles, not esteemed *among* them as one of them.<sup>10</sup> This attempt to avoid the text founders as well.<sup>11</sup> There is no reason Paul would say the apostles thought these people were honorable, nor is there any parallel in Paul’s letters to such a comment. Here is an early Jewish Christian woman known and respected as an *apostle*, a foundational witness to the truth of the gospel.

The women at the tomb were obvious bearers of the gospel message and were explicitly told by the risen Lord or an angel (or both—the accounts vary) to go tell his brothers that he is risen (Matthew 28:7-10 and parallels). Does this not count as authoritative teaching? As some put it, these women were apostles to the apostles. Note also the confession

of Martha in John 11:27, which is as strong a confession of Jesus as any in the New Testament. The Samaritan woman has no such foundational role, but she too provides an essential witness to Jesus's identity (John 4:29, 39).

Even though some women in the Old Testament were recognized as leaders (most notably Deborah, a judge and prophet, and Miriam and Huldah, also prophets),<sup>12</sup> something new happens with Jesus and the eschatological inbreaking of the kingdom. While these Old Testament women leaders are important, this paper will focus mostly on New Testament texts that are the center of the debate.

Women were central to the Jesus movement and the growth of the church. Women were followers of Jesus, recipients of his teaching and care, the last at the cross and the first at the tomb, witnesses of the resurrection, present at prayer and at Pentecost in Acts 1-2, and persecuted and active throughout the story related in the book of Acts. A surprising number of women are named in the New Testament, including eight of twenty-five people mentioned by name in Romans 16.

**Pentecost as Turning Point.** Jesus's attitude toward and association with women is different from the tone set in the Old Testament, but the clear marker of change is Pentecost. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 quotes Joel 2:28-32 (adding the words "in the last days says God" in 2:17 and the second mention of "they will prophesy" in 2:18) and emphasizes that the Spirit is poured out on both *sons and daughters*, with the result that both prophesy, and even on *male and female slaves* so that they too prophesy. Things cannot be the same after the coming of the Spirit. The church lives in an eschatological framework and orders its life differently, and explicitly so with regard to women.

Not only are we told that Philip's four daughters were prophets (Acts 21:9), in 1 Corinthians 11:5 women clearly were praying and prophesying in the church. In several respects 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 is a very difficult text,<sup>13</sup> but even so, why this text affirming women's activity in worship was so long ignored is a mystery. Here there is no concern to keep women silent. The only concern is that women pray and prophesy with proper decorum maintaining their identity as women. The distinction of the sexes is important, even if men and women are valued equally.

The quotation from Joel was important for the early church, not least in its use to describe faith in Christ (Romans 10:13; 1 Corinthians 1:2), but this quotation stands behind a key text regarding the role of women. Galatians 3:28, which is part of an early baptismal liturgy, underscores

that in Christ the old divisions of Jew and Greek, slave and free, and male and female no longer are determinative. The focus on slave and free and on male and female appears to come straight from Joel 2:28-29.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes people seek to lessen the impact of Galatians 3:28 by saying the verse applies only to salvation, standing before God, and not to relations on this earth. This will not do, for the problem Paul addressed was the *social relations*—eating at table—of Jews and Greeks (Galatians 2:11-14). For the same reason one cannot say that Galatians 3:28 describes conditions of the new age, but we live under the conditions of the old age. Christians take their identity from the newness the Spirit brings, not from the old order.

Clarity here is crucial. It is not the distinctions between the three groups that are set aside but *valuations* based on the distinctions. Paul still is proud of being Jewish, but he will not sacrifice oneness in Christ by elevating Jews over Gentiles (cf. Romans 2:28-29 and 3:9). He knew of the difference between slave and free, but he relativized both positions so that both slave and free stand in the same relation to Christ and to each other (1 Corinthians 7:17-24). He also insisted on the distinction between the sexes (1 Corinthians 11:1-16), but he would not allow one sex to be elevated above the other. Rather, he stressed mutuality (1 Corinthians 7:1-16; 11:8-12). The *oneness* in Christ affected by baptism and believers being inserted into Christ prohibits valuations that prioritize one group over another, whether such valuation is based on race, social standing, or gender. Implicit here is the “body” theology that is expanded in other letters. Galatians 3:28 must be given its due. It is the most socially explosive text in the New Testament.

**Coworkers and Deacons.** Not surprisingly then, Paul used the same expressions to describe the ministry of women that he does to describe the ministry of men or even his own ministry. Paul frequently used the verb κοπιᾶν (*kopian*, “to labor”) to describe his own ministry or the labors of people doing ministry. For example, in 1 Corinthians 15:10 he used it of himself, in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 of leaders in the church, and in 1 Timothy 5:17 of elders who teach. In Romans 16:6 and 12 it is used of four women: an otherwise unknown Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, and regarding the last three they are said to have labored *in the Lord*. Similarly Paul used συνεργός (*sunergos*, “fellow worker”) of himself (1 Corinthians 3:9), Timothy (Romans 16:21), Urbanus (Romans 16:9), Philemon (Philemon 1), Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (Philemon 24), Justus (Colossians 4:21), Titus (2 Corinthians 8:23), and Epaphro-

ditus (Philippians 2:25). It is also used of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3) and of Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:3). The language used of Euodia and Syntyche is especially important. They struggled alongside Paul in the gospel “along with Clement and the rest of my [Paul’s] fellow workers.” See also Colossians 4:11 where Paul spoke similarly of “my fellow workers for the kingdom of God.”<sup>15</sup> Whatever Paul’s other fellow workers were doing in laboring for the Lord, these women were doing.

Paul used the word διάκονος (*diakonos*, “deacon” or “servant”) to refer to himself and Apollos (1 Corinthians 3:5), Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21), leaders in Philippi (along with overseers in Philippians 1:1), Epaphras (Colossians 1:7), and apparently both men and women (1 Timothy 3:8-12).<sup>16</sup> Although translations sometimes hide the reality, in Romans 16:1 Phoebe is called a διάκονος (*diakonos*)<sup>17</sup> of the church at Cenchreae. It is fair to conclude that whatever the *diakonoi* were in Philippi, Phoebe was in Cenchreae.

We should pause to remind ourselves how unusual the activity of women in the church might appear to both Greco-Roman and Jewish first-century societies. I do not want to overstate the case, and there were variations in attitudes toward women;<sup>18</sup> still, both societies viewed women as inferior, rarely provided education for women outside the home, thought respectable women should be shielded from the public sector, and thought women should not speak much in public, and especially should not converse with other women’s husbands.<sup>19</sup> Among Jews female disciples of rabbis are virtually unknown, quite unlike what we see with Jesus and the women who were part of his traveling group of disciples (Luke 8:1-3). Some Jews at least would not accept women as witnesses in a court of law, which makes the testimony of women to the resurrection of Jesus that much more striking. While the activity of women in the New Testament may be hardly noticeable to us, in the first-century patriarchal world it was a radical departure from accepted norms.

Sometimes people argue against women in ministry positions because Jesus chose only men as the twelve disciples, but the argument is specious. We have seen already that Jesus had female disciples. Jesus chose twelve *Jewish* men, but no one argues against the ministry of Gentiles. More important is the reason for Jesus’s choice. He chose twelve men as disciples because they were to symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel (and correspondingly the twelve sons of Jacob) in his reconstitution of Israel under his own leadership.

## Restrictive Texts?

**First Corinthians 14:33-36.** When we turn our attention to 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 and 1 Timothy 2:9-15, we encounter a host of problems and strenuous debate. What shall we do with these texts that seem to restrict the role of women? They must be given the same attention as any other text and must be brought into relation to the whole biblical witness. These passages are difficult, regardless of the approach one takes, and we may not pull out the parts we like and jettison the rest. For 1 Corinthians 14:33-36 the following issues must be decided:

- 1) Are verses 34-35 a later non-Pauline addition to the text, as some suggest?
- 2) Are these verses the view of the Corinthians, a view that Paul rejects in verse 36?
- 3) How can verses 34-35, which seemingly require the silence of women, be reconciled with 11:5, which affirms women praying and prophesying in church?
- 4) How should we understand the relation of the words “as in all the churches of God’s people (literally, ‘the holy ones’)” in verse 33b? Does it go with verse 33a or with verse 34? That is, did Paul intend, “For God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the churches of God’s people” or “As in all the churches of God’s people, let the women keep silent in the churches”?
- 5) Why are women not permitted to speak (verse 34b) and why is it shameful (or disgraceful) for them to speak in the church (verse 35)? Is it for cultural reasons or a “theological” reason?
- 6) Where does the law say women should be in submission? No specific verse says this. Is this a reference to Old Testament law or to custom?

While some New Testament scholars are sure verses 34-35 are a later addition, the evidence does not support such a view. Some Western manuscripts of the Greek text do place verses 34-35 after verse 40, but earlier manuscripts retain the traditional order, and no manuscript omits these words entirely. Nor are there sufficient grounds for thinking these words come from the Corinthian church. These suggestions would make it easier to reconcile 14:34-35 with 11:5, but they seem to be an attempt to avoid the problems.

Some try to reconcile 14:34-35 and 11:5 by saying Paul did not really mean the latter—a desperate attempt—or that two different kinds of services are in mind, a more private service where women may speak and a more public one where they may not. No basis for such a distinction exists, especially when the next section (11:17-34) deals with the Lord's Supper.

With regard to the connection of the words “as in all the churches of God's people” (verse 33b), one cannot be certain, but it is preferable to take them with verse 33a. If they are joined to verse 34, a redundancy results with the words “the churches”: “As in all *the churches*...let them keep silent *in the churches*.” Further, while it might seem unnecessary to say God is not a God of disorder but of peace, as in all the churches, Paul does focus on peace as a regulative standard for decision making (1 Corinthians 7:15), and he does emphasize the common teaching he gives to all churches (1 Corinthians 4:17; 7:17; 11:16). The problems of pride and competition in the church at Corinth have called forth this statement. The decision about the placement of these words does not take us far in solving the problems of the text though.

Despite the problems, this passage is not that difficult to deal with. The situation addressed is clearly the disruption of the worship service. Often people pay little attention to this passage except for its word to women, but the section of which it is a part, 14:26-40, is actually quite instructive about the worship of the early church. Each person was expected to contribute to the service for the edification of others. Why do people interpret the statement about women as universally valid but ignore Paul's directions for worship? That the problem is disruption and disorder in the service is obvious in the fact that women are not the only ones told to be silent or to submit. Three groups are asked to be silent: a person speaking in tongues when no interpreter is present (verse 28), a prophet who is speaking when revelation comes to another (verse 30), and women who are causing enough disturbance that they are instructed to wait and ask their husbands at home (verse 35). Prophets are asked to submit to other prophets (verse 32) similar to women (verse 34). To whom are women to submit? To their husbands, which would assume all the women were married? To God? To the church's instruction? The text does not say, but the last seems most likely.

Is this directive required because women were exercising a newfound freedom and throwing off cultural restraints? The head covering discussion in 11:2-16 points in that direction. If women deprived of education

suddenly found the freedom that full acceptance in the body of Christ brings, one can understand the problems that might emerge, especially with men and women being brought together in public in new ways at house churches. Whether we can be specific about the exact nature of the problem, it is clear that the behavior of women was problematic culturally (11:2-16) and that they were one of several sources of disruption in worship (14:26-40). The fact of women praying and prophesying in 11:5 is not countermanded by 14:34-35. The latter relates to disruption of the service and does not call for absolute silence of women but silence in those areas causing disruption. Most today—regardless of their views on women in ministry—think women were being asked not to engage in the evaluation of prophets (14:29), which would potentially have a wife interrupting with questions and evaluating her husband’s theology and conduct in public.<sup>20</sup> The speaking that is disgraceful is not mere speaking but this kind of raising questions and evaluation. The reference to law would be a general reference to the Old Testament and the covenant relation between husband and wife. This focus on evaluating the prophets may be the right explanation, but I am not certain this is the case. What can be said with confidence is that women and others, motivated by pride and competition, were offending sensibilities and disrupting the service. If so, then the passage is not a universal and timeless prohibition of women speaking or of the ministry of women. It addresses a context specific, culturally nuanced situation. It still is pertinent for similar situations where wrongly motivated people cause disruption.

**First Timothy 2:9-15.** This passage is more difficult and more important. Most of what I have said to this point would be acknowledged by many “complementarians.” First Timothy 2 is the main source of disagreement. Those who would restrict the ministry of women usually base their argument here. However, we should not begin with verse 9; the section begins with verse 8, which is instructive for understanding the passage. With this passage the following issues need attention:

- 1) Is 1 Timothy a “church manual,” or is it dealing with a specific problem?
- 2) Why were men instructed to pray *without wrath and disputing*?
- 3) With what should ὡσαύτως (*hōsautōs*, “likewise”) in verse 9 be connected? With “I desire” or “I desire...to pray”? That is, was Paul concerned with how men prayed and how women dressed or with the decorum with which both men

and women prayed? If the latter, the directions to women are very close to the instructions for women praying and prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11.

4) Should ἡσυχία (*hēsuchia*) in verses 11 and 12 be understood as “silence” or “quietness”?

5) In verse 12 how should ἀθεντεῖν (*authentein*) be understood? Is this a word for legitimate authority, or does it have the negative connotation of “domineer,” and how does it relate to the idea of teaching? Does Paul prohibit women from teaching and having authority or from a particular kind of teaching?

6) Why is reference made to Adam and Eve?

7) What is the meaning of verse 15 with the statement that women will be saved through bearing children?

8) How is this text to be reconciled with 1 Corinthians 11:5 where women are clearly praying and prophesying?

First Timothy is definitely not merely a church manual. Already in 1:3-7 it is clear that false teaching is the concern of the letter and the reason Timothy was left in Ephesus. This concern continues throughout the Pastorals, and it is clear that *women in particular* were victimized by the false teachers, most evident in 2 Timothy 3:6-7 which speaks of those who enter houses and capture foolish women laden down with sins, who are always learning but never able to come to knowledge of the truth. (See also 1:19-20; 4:1-3, 7; 5:6-16; 6:3-5, 20-21; 2 Timothy 2:14-18, 23-26; 3:1-9, 13; 4:3-4, 14-15; Titus 1:9-16; and 3:9-11.) The problem of foolish controversies is, no doubt, the reason men are asked to pray without wrath and disputing. All of 1 Timothy 2 focuses on prayer for a “tranquil and quiet” life (2:2).

I am confident that the connection of ὡσαύτως (*hōsautōs*, “likewise”) in verse 9 is with the words “I desire . . . to pray.” The concern is the decorum of women in prayer in modesty and sound thought (or moderation). Women are to learn in quietness, not silence. The word used (ἡσυχία [*hēsuchia*]) is the same word that appeared in 2:2 in the expression a “quiet life.” We must ask again with this passage why people interpret the prohibition on teaching literally but pay no attention to statements about women’s dress in verse 9—or even more to directions about women’s head covering in 1 Corinthians 11:5-6 and 13.

The real battleground is with verse 12 and the meaning of ἀθεντεῖν (*authentein*), but this word does not deserve to be the dividing line.

Ἀυθεντεῖν occurs only here in the whole Greek Bible. It is not related at all to the usual words for authority ἐξουσία (*exousia*) and ἐξουσιάζειν (*exousiazein*). In fact, early occurrences of αὐθεντεῖν are rather rare; the verb only appears six or seven times prior to the third century, depending on what one counts.<sup>21</sup> Occurrences are more frequent in the patristic period, but to what degree are later occurrences evidence for first-century usage? Real caution must be exercised in analyzing patristic and later occurrences where assumptions about the word's meaning may bear little resemblance to first-century use. Many occurrences that people list are from the sixth century or later, but in my estimation occurrences that late—and many in the patristic period—are of no use for understanding the New Testament. Also, people often exclude cognates of αὐθεντεῖν since they are quite negative and frequently refer to murder, suicide, or criminal activity (for example, Wisdom 12:6), but is it fair to ignore cognates? These negative ideas stem from connotations the word group has of someone doing something from one's own hand or having independent jurisdiction. An examination of the early occurrences of the verb show that this is not a neutral word for authority, but a word that suggests “domineer” or “dominate.”<sup>22</sup> For example, a letter from 27/26 BC used it of someone who forced his will on another.<sup>23</sup> Philodemus used it participially in the sense “powerful” as in “powerful lords.”<sup>24</sup> It is used also of the planet Saturn dominating Mercury and the moon.<sup>25</sup> An early comment on Aeschylus's *Eumenides* 42 used the verb to refer to one who has committed murder. Other and later occurrences could be listed,<sup>26</sup> and not all are so negative, particularly if reference is to deity exercising the authority. But, if we go by the limited early evidence, this is not a neutral word for authority, and its use does not point to typical leadership language. This is authority being misused. One suspects that the action referred to would not be acceptable for men either. What is being prohibited is an autocratic grab for power. If this occurred in the context of “new Roman women”<sup>27</sup> pushing for freedom and power, the restriction would make good sense.<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to some claims, “teaching” is not always a positive term,<sup>29</sup> and the reference to Eve makes clear that the teaching is of the wrong kind. The only other time Paul refers to Eve is in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4 where the subject is again false teachers. Elsewhere when Paul speaks of sin's impact he blames Adam, not Eve (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 44-49). Verses 13-14 are not merely an “order of creation” argument but an *ad hominem* rejection of what was happening with

the false teachers. Part of what happened with the false teaching is that traditional roles of women were being challenged, evidenced in marriage being forbidden (1 Timothy 4:3). Verse 15, difficult as it is, asserts that women will be saved as women, an idea expressed by reference to bearing children, the primary role attached to women in the ancient world.<sup>30</sup>

We may never have completely satisfactory answers about the exact nature of the false teaching the Pastorals condemn, but it is quite clear that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 addresses a specific and local problem and that it does so from the perspective of first-century cultural sensitivities regarding the role of women in public life. This passage is not a universally applicable prohibition of the teaching of women, and most traditionalists do not take it that way.

Various attempts have been made to reconcile this passage with women prophesying in 1 Corinthians 11:5. Some, of course, do not think Paul wrote the Pastorals and can blame 1 Timothy 2 on a later, more reactionary, follower. The Pastorals are different in many respects, but I do not think they can be cut off from Paul.

Some attempt to reconcile the two texts by saying that prophecy is permitted to women but teaching is not. On this view prophecy is evaluated and less authoritative, whereas teaching is not evaluated and refers to the authoritative handing on of tradition. This suggests that prophecy functions on a lower level than teaching, but this cannot be supported from the New Testament. In fact teaching and teachers receive relatively little focus by Paul or elsewhere. The only time authority (ἐξουσία [*exousia*]) is used in connection with teaching is with the teaching of Jesus. When leaders are listed, teachers always are listed after apostles and prophets, and it is clear that the latter two are the foundational people for the early church. (See 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5; 4:11.) Further, the attempt to contrast prophecy and teaching, as if one is less authoritative, is quite difficult; note in 1 Corinthians 14:3 that the one prophesying speaks edification, encouragement, and consolation. What more does teaching do? First Corinthians 14:6 and Acts 13:1, if they do not equate teaching and prophecy,<sup>31</sup> at least place them on the same level.

Some suggest women may teach but only under the authority of a male senior pastor, but the text does not say this, and I must ask, is not the authority of Jesus enough? From where in the Bible does one get the idea of a senior pastor anyway?

Some assume there were established offices in the early church, but

there is no uniform language for church offices. People point to overseers (or guardians) in 1 Timothy 3:1-2,<sup>32</sup> but elsewhere the word ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*) occurs only at Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; and Titus 1:7<sup>33</sup> (cf. ἐπισκοπή [*episkopē*] in Acts 1:20). Some texts refer to elders, but Paul makes no reference to elders outside the Pastorals.<sup>34</sup> There is nothing specifically Christian about elders, older people with wisdom respected as leaders (cf. 1 Timothy 5:1 and 17), for Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures had elders as leaders, which resulted from the same respect for older, wise people. The leadership of elders is a logical but quite cultural understanding of community organization. There is no basis for elevating one category of leaders in the church above others. In fact, Matthew specifically rejects setting up humans as teaching authorities and the use of labels such as “rabbi” or “teacher,” for one is our teacher—Christ—and all Christians are brothers and sisters (Matthew 23:8-12). Free churches have always been more comfortable with such descriptions of the church than with structures emphasizing office and gradations. The refusal to make a distinction between clergy and laity and the emphasis on the priesthood of believers both favor the full acceptance of the ministry of women. Also, the issue is not the ordination of women, for ordination is not a biblical concept.<sup>35</sup> I consider ordination an important and legitimate extension of biblical ideas, but if granted to men, I see no reason why ordination should not be granted to women as well.

## The Question of Authority

A further crucial question should be asked. If we restrict the ministry of women, just what precisely is it that men may do and women may not, and why? Is the issue the right to hold some specific title? To hold some position? Or possibly to make authoritative decisions? What theological or exegetical basis exists for such a position? Particularly when some “traditionalists” say women may teach but not hold authoritative office, how do they justify such an argument? It does not derive from 1 Timothy 2 or other texts, and the New Testament has no unified sense of established offices. Further, teaching *is* by necessity the exercise of authority. There is no such thing as non-authoritative teaching.

The treatment of authority—that is, the legitimate communication of power—is crucial. Those seeking to limit the ministry of women seem often to defend a view of authority that does not fit the New Testament, where other than with the ministry of Jesus the words for authority (ἐξουσία [*exousia*]) are rarely applied to ministry. The disciples are explic-

itly given authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal (Matthew 10:1/ Mark 6:7/Luke 9:1; Luke 10:19), but nothing is said about the authority to teach, as crucial as their teaching was. Paul frequently defended his authority as an apostle and would take a back seat to no one. Strangely though, Paul rarely used the word for authority (ἐξουσία [*exousia*]) of his own ministry. Other than of his right to be paid and to have a wife, rights he did not exercise (1 Corinthians 9:4-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:9), he used this language only twice, both cases in dependence on Jeremiah 1:9-10 in asserting that the only authority he has is the authority to build up rather than tear down (2 Corinthians 10:8 and 13:10). The anxiety over authority is misplaced.

This is not to say that authority is unimportant, quite the contrary; it is to recognize that authority belongs to Jesus Christ and his gospel, not to the messengers. *We do not possess authority; we express it to the degree that we explain and embody the gospel.* The authority of the gospel has nothing to do with gender. Leaders are important, but we need a different view of authority and power than is present in our societies—and many of our churches. The exercise of authority for Christians should have nothing to do with self-seeking and certainly not with imposition of the will on other people.

Authority in Christian understanding is not a position of power but the willingness to give oneself for the work of God and the people of God. It has nothing to do with a position to which some people are not allowed access. It is about applying the gospel of identification with Christ's death and resurrection to the task of leadership. It is about giving oneself for the needs of the body of Christ and enabling people to understand and live the gospel. This "weakness" is not weak, for it permits no curtailing or diminishing of the gospel. Courage and power are required to oppose evil, but more is required than physical strength.

Women are fully capable of guarding the gospel, of expressing it, of living it out, and of resisting evil. I know of no reason to limit their ministry.

## Endnotes

1. These stances have now changed to some degree for a variety of reasons.
2. See John Piper and Wayne A Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), e.g., 60.
3. "Complementarian" would fit nearly anyone in the discussion, for the term does not indicate the degree of complementarity; it could mean an equal sharing or an extremely unbalanced sharing.
4. Actually the failures of women in ministry are not as evident as those of men, at

least not yet. To say the same range of gifts and abilities are evident in both genders is not to say there are no differences between men and women, but even if we accept differences generally, that says nothing about individuals. Further, I reject that some traits, such as tenderness or aggressiveness, are feminine or masculine. They are human traits, and we have allowed genders to be stereotyped in unhealthy ways.

5. I do not believe that hierarchy is to be found in Genesis chapter 2.

6. Among many examples note that in 1 Corinthians 1:20 the NIV has “Where is the wise man?” but the Greek has only “Where is the wise?” using the masculine σοφός (sophos), which should be left generic. In 1 Corinthians 1:25 the NIV has “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” In this case the word ἀνθρώπων (anthrōpōn) is present, but it is plural: The foolishness of God is wiser than [that] of humans and the weakness of God is stronger than [that] of humans. The NIV changed the plural to a singular for some unknown reason. In 1 Corinthians 4:6 the NIV has “Then you will not take pride in one man over against another,” but the Greek merely has “so that you are not puffed up one over the other against the other.” The masculine εἰς (heis) is generic, for the concern is not merely for men who are puffed up. See also the NIV’s insertion of “man” at Matthew 16:17 and “men” in John 12:32.

7. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

8. Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 165-202.

9. For discussion of issues pertaining to the identification of Junia as an apostle see Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 21-81; and Linda Belleville, “Ιουλιανῶν...ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις: A Reexamination of Romans 16.7 in Light of Primary Source Materials,” *New Testament Studies* 51 (2005): 231-49.

10. Michael H. Burer and Daniel B. Wallace, “Was Junia Really an Apostle? A Reexamination of Romans 16.7,” *New Testament Studies* 47 (2001): 76-91.

11. See Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*, 172-80; Belleville, “Ιουλιανῶν...ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις,” 231-49; Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle*, 69-78. Also abortive is the attempt to say Junia merely was sent as an emissary for the church similar to the use of the term “apostle” in 2 Corinthians 8:3. This would make no sense in Romans 16:7.

12. Also note the use of feminine participles in Psalm 68:11[12] and Isaiah 40:9 for those who announce good tidings. Of course, some women, like Athaliah and Jezebel, were leaders, but, like some men, were not positive models.

13. Not least in the meaning of verse 10, which says a woman is to have authority on her head, not as some translations have it “a sign” or “a symbol” of authority. Is that her own authority on her head, as some suggest?

14. Galatians 3:28 may intentionally counter the blessing said by Jewish men: “[Blessed art thou...] who hast not made me a heathen,” “...who hast not made me a woman”; and “...who hast not made me a brutish man” (b. Menahoth 43b). A Greek version of this blessing exists as well. (See Diogenes Laertius: Thales I.33,34; and Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* 3.1.9, who attributes a similar saying to Plato.)

15. Cf. the use of the verb συνεργεῖν (*sunergein*) of Paul’s work in 2 Corinthians 6:1 and in 1 Corinthians 16:16 of all those, like the household of Stephanas, working together and laboring, to whom the church was asked to submit.

16. Some think deacons’ wives are in view here, but more likely the reference is to women deacons.

17. There is not a feminine form of this word until much later. The masculine is used for women as well.

18. On attitudes toward women see Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Leonard J. Swidler, *Women in Judaism: The Status of Women in Formative Judaism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976). Bruce W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), argues women in the first century Roman world experienced new freedom and public life at the expense of family responsibilities. He sees this as the context for the problems encountered in the Pastorals.

19. The sentiment expressed by Plutarch is illustrative: "Theano, in putting her cloak about her, exposed her arm. Somebody exclaimed, 'A lovely arm.' 'But not for the public,' said she. Not only the arm of the virtuous woman, but her speech as well, ought to be not for the public, and she ought to be modest and guarded about saying anything in the hearing of outsiders, since it is an exposure of herself; for in her talk can be seen her feelings, character, and disposition" (*Moralia* 142 C-D [Advice to Bride and Groom 31]). It is worth remembering that women were not allowed to speak at the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London in 1840 and that as late as 1918 some Christians in the United States were still debating whether women could speak in "mixed assemblies" even to explain a display.

20. D. A. Carson, "'Silent in the Churches': On the Role of Women in 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36," in Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, 140-153; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1156-61. Thiselton argues that ἐπερωτάωσαν (*eperōtātōsan*) in verse 35 means "interrogate" (almost in a legal sense) rather than merely "ask."

21. See the treatments by Linda L. Belleville, "Teaching and Ursurping Authority: 1 Timothy 2:11-15," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 213-17; and Carroll D. Osburn, "ΑΥΘΕΝΤΕΩ (1 Timothy 2:12)," *Restoration Quarterly* 25 (1982): 1-12 and Carroll Osburn, *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001), 212-19. In the latter Osburn excoriates the analysis by H. Scott Baldwin, "A Difficult Word: ἀυθεντέω in 1 Timothy 2:12," in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger, Thomas R. Schreiner, and H. Scott Baldwin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 65-80 and 269-305.

22. In addition to Belleville and Osburn, see Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 116-19; and I. H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 458-60.

23. Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Museen zu Berlin: Griech, IV. 1208.

24. S. Sudhaus, *Philodemi, Volumina Rhetorica*, Lipsiae: B.G. Teubner, 1896, 133.

25. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 3.13 [157].

26. Notably Hippolytus, *On the End of the World* 7:5; Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians* X (on 3:19; NPNF 13.304).

27. See note 18.

28. See Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows*, 97-122.

29. See Matthew 15:9/Mark 7:7; Acts 15:1; Titus 1:11; Revelation 2:14-15, and 20; Hebrews 13:9; 2 Timothy 4:3. False teachers are as common as false prophets.

30. See Gospel of Thomas 114, in which Peter asks Jesus to send Mary away because women are not worthy of life, to which Jesus responds that he will lead her to make her a male so that she too may become a living spirit, to which is added, "For every woman who makes herself a male will enter the kingdom of heaven."

31. See Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek*

*Text*, 963.

32. The claim that women cannot be pastors because they cannot be the husband of one wife is a literalistic reading of an expression for marital fidelity. The language is also used of deacons in 3:12, even though women deacons are referred to in 3:11 (cf. 1 Timothy 5:9 and Titus 1:6).

33. Except for its use of Jesus in 1 Peter 2:25.

34. Some suggest Luke was involved in the composition of the Pastorals; if so, the use of “elders” could stem from his influence. See also the use of the term in Acts.

35. Texts like Acts 13:3 and 1 Timothy 4:14 commission people to service, but they are at best precursors of what later develops into ordination.

## Three Decades Later: Credentialed Clergywomen in the Covenant (1997-2007)

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For more than thirty years, the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) has ordained both men and women to serve as pastors, ministers, and leaders in the church. The vote to ordain women took place at the 1976 Annual Meeting and established that women could serve in all positions of ministry in the local church and other settings. Immediately after the 1976 vote, a motion came to the floor to institute “a denominational-wide program of information, education, and placement in the matter of employment of qualified ordained women in local parishes.”<sup>1</sup> This motion was denied. Instead, a motion was passed that instructed the Board of the Ministry to study the issue of ordination and present a progress report to the 1977 Annual Meeting. A report was never presented.<sup>2</sup>

### **The First Decade**

Ten years later, Mary C. Miller, then Covenant pastor at the Bethel Evangelical Covenant Church of Flossmoor, Illinois, and columnist for *The Covenant Companion*, conducted a study to determine what progress the denomination had made in training and placing women in Covenant ministry.<sup>3</sup> Miller’s study included twenty-four responses from the twenty-five women (96 percent response) who had graduated from North Park Theological Seminary (NPTS) with a Master of Divinity degree (MDiv). Her findings were generally bleak with a few silver linings. The vast majority (87.5 percent) of respondents perceived the denomination’s relationship to women in ministry to be negative, using words like “pessimistic” or “cautiously pessimistic” to describe their sentiments.<sup>4</sup> A third of the

twenty-four respondents had left the Covenant, citing “the inability to find placement in a church, and more support for women in ministry elsewhere” as reasons for their departure.<sup>5</sup>

Several statements from these women suggested that there was a willingness to talk about these issues, yet, “when it comes to taking action to support women in ministry, the denomination is just not there to follow through.”<sup>6</sup> Another respondent used even stronger language: “The Covenant does not want to risk offending its membership by standing with women in ministry in anything but a token few. The Covenant really doesn’t want to be bothered.”<sup>7</sup> There were a few optimistic respondents who felt their gender gave them more visibility in the denomination. Others noted the liabilities of this visibility. They reported experiencing an increased pressure in ministry because of their gender being “on trial” more than their male counterparts.<sup>8</sup> There was also a sense that the second call was harder than the first. As one of the respondents noted, “All I see is a glass ceiling.”<sup>9</sup> Miller summarized her assessment of this first decade in an article published in this journal: “Together the three motions—the quick vote, the lack of investing denominational resources, the avoidance of full discussion—seem an accurate paradigm of the denomination’s treatment of ordained women since those historic votes.”<sup>10</sup>

## **Twenty Years Later**

Twenty years after the 1976 vote, a second study was conducted by Isolde Anderson, then pastor of Sauganash Community Church in Chicago.<sup>11</sup> This review of the second decade explored how the denomination was doing in encouraging, preparing, and placing women in Covenant ministry. The survey included thirty-six respondents of the sixty who were MDiv graduates from NPTS (60 percent response). Overall dissatisfaction had dropped, with 47 percent expressing a negative view of the denomination’s relation to women in ministry.<sup>12</sup>

In this second survey, four women reported that they had left the Covenant. Two of the four left because of “inability to find placement in the Covenant Church.”<sup>13</sup> At the time of the survey, 56 percent (twenty of the thirty-six respondents) were still serving in the Covenant. Nine were serving full-time in a Covenant church (25 percent); four were serving part-time in a Covenant church (11 percent); seven were serving—as chaplains, teachers, or missionaries (19 percent). About a third of the respondents were still part of the denomination, but these women were no longer serving in local church positions.

An important finding of the twenty-year study was the significance of the “placement process,” and it was discussed at length as one of the main hurdles for women in ministry. The second study, like the first, voiced “concern for a lack of teaching in Covenant congregations about the biblical basis for women in ministry as well as the lack of strong support by denominational leaders.”<sup>14</sup> Although lack of support was referenced, the respondents were more optimistic about the prospect of receiving second or third calls than those reporting in the first decade.<sup>15</sup>

### **Three Decades Later**

Thirty years after the historic vote to ordain women, questions are still being asked. Are women being effectively placed and utilized in ministry and leadership in the Evangelical Covenant Church? Does a “stained glass ceiling” still limit women who are ordained in the Covenant? Attempting to answer these questions, a third study was undertaken by the authors, Olson and Cannon. Following a format similar to the first two, the third study distributed a questionnaire to all female MDiv graduates of NPTS, allowing for a comparison with the previous two surveys. In addition, the thirty-year study distributed an additional questionnaire to all Covenant clergywomen who hold a professional ministerial license or ordination.<sup>16</sup> The second survey was added because of the increased specialization in ministry, changes in the credentialing practice of the ECC, and the rapid growth of the number of ministers educated elsewhere.

### **Thirty-Year Study Results**

In the 2007 study 363 women were contacted; 199 of those contacted graduated from the NPTS MDiv program (55 percent). Responses were returned by fifty-one MDiv graduates of NPTS (25 percent response) plus eighteen NPTS graduates holding other degrees and sixty-five Covenant clergywomen who did not graduate from NPTS but currently hold a professional ministerial license or ordination with the denomination (50 percent response). Of the total 134 who responded, only sixteen women (12 percent) reported a negative perception of the Covenant denomination’s relationship to women in ministry. Respondents perceived themselves to be slightly less supported from their conferences than they did from the denomination or their local church. Of the total respondents, twenty-one (16 percent) indicated that they were solo pastors, three (2 percent) were senior pastors, and two (1 percent) were executive pastors.

### **A Direct Comparison: NPTS MDiv Graduates Survey Results.**

Results of the survey conducted with MDiv graduates of North Park Theological Seminary indicated that, of the fifty-one respondents, twenty-seven women (53 percent) were employed in a paid ministry position, one (2 percent) was on staff in an unpaid role, and twenty-three (45 percent) were not serving in a church as of January 1, 2008. Twenty-one of those fifty-one respondents were serving in a Covenant church (41 percent). Of the twenty-eight women in staff positions (paid and unpaid) in the church, nineteen were employed full-time. Of those twenty-eight women, the breakdown of their ministry positions for both full and part-time staff was as follows: solo pastors (eight), senior pastor (two), executive pastor (one), associate pastor (four), youth pastor (one), “other” (twelve). Of those who indicated “other,” six respondents reported they were co-pastors. The perception of the Covenant denomination’s relationship to women improved over the past several decades with only 16 percent of NPTS MDiv respondents reporting a negative view of the Covenant’s relationship to women in ministry (compared to 87.5 percent in the ten-year study and 47 percent in the twenty-year study). Of the fifty-one respondents, six (12 percent) left the denomination for reasons that included theological differences, inability to find placement in the Covenant Church, and more support for women in ministry elsewhere. In general, responses varied widely from “I left the Covenant because women are not supported,” to “I love the Covenant and am very affirmed.” Some seemed to indicate a desire to shift the focus away from gender: “I would just like to be a woman in ministry...why do we have to make it an issue?” “Some women don’t get calls *not* because they are women, but for other reasons.”

**Expanding the Scope beyond NPTS MDiv Graduates.** In the expanded survey of the eighty-three non-NPTS MDiv respondents, forty-nine women (59 percent) were employed in a paid ministry position, five (6 percent) were on staff in an unpaid role, and twenty-nine (35 percent) were not serving in a church as of January 1, 2008.<sup>17</sup> Of the fifty women in paid and unpaid staff positions, thirty-two worked forty hours per week or more. The breakdown of their ministry positions, including both full and part-time staff, was as follows: solo pastor (thirteen), senior pastor (one), executive pastor (one), associate pastor (eleven), youth pastor (four), other (twenty-four). Only 10 percent of respondents in this group indicated a negative view of the Covenant’s relationship to women in ministry.

## Reflection on the Results

One of the positive trajectories identified in the results of the 2007 surveys is the continued decline in negative perceptions about being women in ministry in the Covenant. In the 1988 survey, the vast majority of respondents indicated negative perceptions (87.5 percent). In the second study (1998), the percentage of negative perceptions decreased to 47 percent of the survey respondents. In 2007 only 16 percent of NPTS MDiv graduates and 12 percent of total respondents held negative views.<sup>18</sup>

In the 2007 surveys, there was no clear indication of how difficult the second or third call processes were for women. Of the NPTS MDiv graduates who responded, eight (16 percent) indicated the second or third calling was easier, and for six (12 percent) it was more difficult. The majority, thirty-seven (72 percent), responded “other.” Of those who had an easier time in later calls, one respondent attributed it to leaving the denomination; another was already serving outside the denomination and took a second call outside the Covenant. Several others suggested that the call process was easier because they were more familiar with the process, had more experience in ministry, and had more Covenant contacts.

Of the six who experienced their second and third callings as more difficult, the following reasons were offered: “very few positions that would have been a good fit for my gifting and experience were open to women,” “there were opportunities for service in pastoral roles such as youth ministry, but not for associate pastor or senior pastor positions,” and “many of the opportunities that presented themselves to serve were not in traditional pastoral positions.”

Of the thirty-seven who chose “other,” fifteen were still in their first call. Others are now serving in chaplaincy, active military duty, missions, and other ministry positions. One respondent stated that, while she did not have trouble during her first or second call, some of those involved in the call process “just didn’t get it and many churches wouldn’t even consider a woman at all—so the pool of possible churches was still rather small.”

As in the NPTS MDiv survey, a large number of respondents (thirty-one) of the expanded survey are still in their first call, bringing the number to forty-six total (34 percent). In conjunction with this statistic, it is not surprising that the reports also showed an increasing number of women being educated for ministry at the masters and doctoral levels. Enrollment at NPTS for the 2007-08 school year reflected this trend.

Forty-nine percent of enrolled students were female, and of that group 24 percent were working toward an MDiv (compared with 40 percent of men). In the next several years, the acceptance of women in ministry will be tested as more and more women enter professional ministry in the Covenant.

## **Current Statistics**

It is important to look at the thirty-year survey results in light of ministerial statistics available from the Department of the Ordered Ministry (DOM). The 2008 DOM records show a total of 348 credentialed women of 2,132 credentialed clergy in the denomination (16 percent; credentialing now includes ordination to word and sacrament and ordination to specialized ministry).<sup>19</sup> The total number of women in solo, senior, or co-pastor positions is 45 (6.8 percent) of 656 total.<sup>20</sup> Of the 775 churches in the denomination, less than 1 percent (0.7 percent) has female senior/executive pastors in multi-staff churches. David Kersten, executive minister of the ordered ministry, says: “The senior/solo preaching pastor is the threshold position. The advances in this area have happened in the last seven to eight years. Our department, in conjunction with the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality, plans to continue to advocate for women in ministry through direct conversation with the conference superintendents, education, and orientation for search committees of local churches.”<sup>21</sup>

Formed in 2002, the Commission on Biblical Gender Equality (BGE) is working toward continued advocacy in the denomination through “communication of the biblical mandate on all levels of the church.” According to Carol Lawson, director of staff ministry for DOM, the BGE has created two task forces—one focused on advocacy at the denominational level and one focused on the local church, working for grass-roots level change.<sup>22</sup> The Association for Covenant Clergy Women was formed in 1998 by men and women of the Covenant ministerium to “support collaborative efforts within the ECC to provide women clergy with opportunities to serve in their call,” through advocacy, fellowship, provision of resources, and education.<sup>23</sup>

## **Looking Back, Looking Ahead**

Although the Covenant Church has made significant strides in support of women in ministry, there is still a need for further growth and development. Women need to be given the opportunity to break through

the “stained glass ceiling” of top leadership positions in the church, to achieve an increased percentage of women in lead, solo, and preaching positions (only five of the total survey respondents [4 percent] are senior/executive pastors of multi-staff churches). Efforts have been made to continue promoting education in the denomination, and these efforts should continue to be extended to the congregational level. Too many Covenant churches do not adhere to a theology that affirms women in leadership and too many that affirm that theology do not currently have any women serving in positions of ministry or leadership.

One of the most obvious results of the 2007 surveys was the need for the denomination to have more accessible databases and tracking mechanisms. The number of women graduating with degrees from NPTS is close to the equivalent of men, but the percentage of women serving in executive positions, senior pastor roles, or leadership in multi-staffed churches is disproportionate. While more data is becoming available, especially on the denominational level, there is still a need to consider the role of women in the church at the conference level as well. Common perception is that some conferences are more supportive and intentional about finding roles for female pastors to serve in their churches than others.

Another next step in working toward equal opportunities for women and men in the denomination is a study on salary equity. In the marketplace, 2008 statistics show that women continue to make less money per dollar than their male counterparts in equivalent positions. The church must not only take seriously this matter, it should lead the way for the secular world, honoring the God-given gifts of both men and women.

Looking back over the past thirty years, we can affirm that the Evangelical Covenant Church has made progress in paving the way for women to serve in positions of leadership within the denomination. But there is still much work to be done. The year 2016 will mark forty years since the historic decision to ordain women in the Covenant. With continued advancement and effort, “what will the picture be in another decade?”<sup>24</sup>

## Questions for 2008 Women in Ministry Survey

1. What year did you graduate from North Park Theological Seminary? \_\_\_\_\_  
(Those who graduated from another seminary were sent a separate questionnaire that asked respondents to name that seminary. All other questions were the same.)
2. With what degree did you graduate?
- Master of Divinity
  - Master of Arts in Christian Formation/Education
  - Master of Arts in Theological Studies
  - Master of Arts in Christian Ministry
  - Doctor of Ministry in Preaching
  - Dual degree, if so what two degrees \_\_\_\_\_
3. What was your church membership upon entrance to North Park?
- Evangelical Covenant
  - Presbyterian
  - Methodist
  - Lutheran
  - Evangelical
  - Nondenominational
  - Assemblies of God
  - Roman Catholic
  - Baptist
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your present church membership?
- Evangelical Covenant
  - Presbyterian
  - United Methodist
  - Lutheran
  - Evangelical
  - Nondenominational
  - Assemblies of God
  - Roman Catholic
  - Baptist
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are you ordained?
- Yes, to word and sacrament
  - Yes, to specialized ministry
  - Yes, in a denomination other than the Evangelical Covenant Church
  - Pursuing ordination (type and date expected): \_\_\_\_\_
  - No
6. As of January 1, 2008, are you presently serving a church?
- Yes (paid position)
  - Yes (unpaid position)
  - No
7. If you are currently in ministry, are you serving a Covenant church?
- Yes
  - No, I am serving in a
    - Presbyterian
    - United Methodist
    - Assemblies of God
    - Roman Catholic
-

- Lutheran
- Baptist
- Evangelical
- Nonprofit ministry
- Nondenominational
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

8. If you are serving in a church, how many hours per week are you working?

- Less than 20
- 20-40
- 40 or more

9. What primary role do you fill in your congregation?

- Solo pastor
- Senior pastor of multi-staff church, if so how large is your staff?
  - 1-3
  - 4-6
  - 7-9
  - 10 or more
- Executive pastor of multi-staff church, if so how large is your staff?
  - 1-3
  - 4-6
  - 7-9
  - 10 or more
- Associate pastor, if so what is your primary area of ministry?
  - Christian formation
  - Preaching
  - Pastoral care
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Missions and evangelism
  - Youth pastor
  - Administrative

10. Is your current church a church in which you were a layperson before earning your theological degree?

- Yes
- No

11. If you are not serving a church in a pastoral role, please indicate what work you are doing at the present time. \_\_\_\_\_

12. Are you married?

- No
- Yes, spouse is not in ministry
- Yes, spouse serves in ministry.
 

Please specify what role: \_\_\_\_\_

13. When you graduated from North Park Theological Seminary, did you place your name in process for a pastoral call in the denomination?

- Yes
- No, indicate the reasons:
  - Decision to enter specialized ministry
  - Change in job interests
  - Anticipated difficulty in the Covenant's placement process
  - Theological differences with denomination
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_

14. Please list the contacts you had from Covenant churches in the first year after graduation during the placement process:

- Phone calls from conference superintendent
- Phone calls from church members
- Phone calls from search committees
- Meeting with church search committees
- Meeting with congregations
- Senior pastor of church needing multiple staff
- Phone call from pastor near the open church who informed you of opening

15. What work have you done since graduating from North Park?

- Pastoral ministry, full-time
- Pastoral ministry, part-time
- Specialized ministry, full-time
- Specialized ministry, part-time
- Paid conference or denominational leadership ministry position
- Unpaid ministry
- Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

16. If you have served in more than one church since graduation, how would you compare the second or third placement process with the first?

- Easier
- Other
- Harder
- Please explain your answer \_\_\_\_\_

17. If you were a member of the Covenant upon entering North Park but are not a member now, please indicate some of the reasons for your change:

- Theological differences
- Inability to find placement in a Covenant church
- Change in career goals
- More support for women in ministry elsewhere
- Comments \_\_\_\_\_

18. If appropriate, describe how placement as a female pastor has been either easy or difficult for you.

19. Mark an X where you perceive the Covenant denomination's relationship to women in ministry to be.

Positive \_\_\_\_\_ Negative

20. Mark an X to indicate how supported you feel as a woman in ministry.

Very supported \_\_\_\_\_ No support

21. How would you like to see the progress of women in ministry aided in the Covenant?

22. Comments of encouragement and/or discouragement \_\_\_\_\_

23. Name (optional). Date.

## Endnotes

1. Mary Miller, "A Decade Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977-1987)," *The Covenant Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1988): 9, 15-16.

2. Ibid.

3. Mary Miller currently serves as the director of the Making Connections Initiative at North Park Theological Seminary.

4. Miller, "A Decade Later," 7.

5. Ibid., 11, 8.

6. Ibid., 9.

7. Ibid., 9-10.

8. Ibid., 12.

9. Ibid., 15.

10. Ibid., 19.

11. Anderson currently serves as professor of communication at Hope College.

12. Anderson observed a "clear correlation between employment rates and satisfaction with the denomination." Isolde Anderson, "Two Decades Later: North Park Theological Seminary Female M.Div. Graduates (1977-1997)," *The Covenant Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (1998): 28.

13. Ibid., 21.

14. Ibid., 30.

15. Ibid., 26.

16. It is important to note that a consistent problem over all three studies was the difficulty of finding current contact information for women who have graduated from North Park Theological Seminary and women who are currently licensed and serving in the denomination. Women with a lay license were not included.

17. Three of the total respondents volunteered that the reason they are no longer serving is because of childrearing.

18. It is important to note that with such small numbers of surveys returned, one negative or positive response can significantly affect results. A total of twenty-four out of twenty-five women responded to the 1988 survey, thirty-six out of sixty responded in 1998, and in 2007 the number of total respondents were 134 out of 363.

19. The 2007 survey went out to 363 women based on records given to the authors from the DOM and NPTS in 2006. The difference of numbers are a result of (1) the dates of when the statistics were evaluated, (2) the survey did not include women with lay licenses, (3) difficulty cross-referencing databases and no centralized database for the denomination.

20. Note: seven of the forty-five women in solo, senior, or co-pastor positions are serving outside of the denomination, but are credentialed Covenant pastors.

21. Carol Lawson and David Kersten, interview by authors, August 6, 2008.

22. Ibid. The BGE website is <http://www.covchurch.org/ministry/bge>

23. The ACCW website is <http://covchurch.org/acw>

24. Miller, "A Decade Later," 19.

