



## Women in Ministry and Leadership

Almost 18 years ago, the first Brethren in Christ women in ministry and leadership retreat was held at Camp Hebron in Halifax, PA. It was a joint effort of the Boards for Brotherhood Concerns and Ministry and Doctrine (both no longer in existence), and both women and men were invited so that they could work together to help make the church more welcoming to women who felt called to ministry in the church.

One memory that stands out for me from this retreat was the story told by a Brethren in Christ pastor of how he came to change his view on women in ministry. He had been vehemently opposed—so opposed in fact that at two or three previous General Conferences when the issue was up for discussion during business sessions he had said some rather strong and even unkind things. Several women, including myself, had tried to engage him in conversation, both in person and by letter, only to be rebuffed and saddled with some pretty negative labels. Then all of a sudden I and other women received a letter from him apologizing for his behavior toward us and confessing that he had been wrong about his previous views against women in ministry. So his storytelling at that 1990 retreat was highly significant, not only for me but for all the other women who had been the targets of his tirades. It was proof that people do change their minds!

Following the retreat, the two boards continued to collaborate to provide further opportunities for dialogue across the church on the issue. A task force met for a time to plan for a series of regional dialogue sessions. One member of the task force was another Brethren in Christ pastor

who was opposed to women in ministry, largely because of his belief that the Bible teaches that men need to be in authority over women. During one particularly memorable meeting, this pastor talked about his fears that we women would exhibit the characteristics of what he called “unbridled feminism” (images of horses and bits and bridles came to mind). As we talked more, however, his attitude began to change, and by the end of the meeting, he made a startling admission: he was so impressed with the spirit of the women pastors present on the task force that he thought he would be able to serve any one of them as his bishop. What an about-face!

I believe that at least part of the reason both pastors had a change of heart had to do with encountering real women who were living out their calling without the world falling apart. It’s hard to argue against the testimony and experience of women who not only sincerely believe that God has called and gifted them for ministry and leadership in the church but are also passionate and humble about their work and competent and highly skilled at what they do.

The experience of these pastors, as well as many others over the years regarding women in ministry and leadership reminds me of the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11. While Peter was praying, he saw a vision of a sheet being let down from heaven with “all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air,” and he heard a voice telling him to get up and kill and eat the animals. He refused three times, saying that he had never eaten anything unclean. Just then some men came and asked him to go with them to see

Cornelius, a Gentile. When he went in to see Cornelius and his companions, he said, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” As a result of Peter’s ministry to Cornelius, many Gentiles believed and received the Holy Spirit, much to the consternation of Jewish believers in Jerusalem. So Peter recounted what had happened with the sheets of animals and his subsequent visit to Cornelius, and concluded, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”

In the years since that first retreat almost 18 years ago, many more have come to believe that God gives women the same gifts he gives men for pastoral ministry and for leadership in the church, and like Peter, they don’t want to hinder God. The Brethren in Christ Church has affirmed the licensing and ordination of women since 1984, and many of us have benefited from and deeply appreciated the ministries of gifted women in leadership positions in the church, even though, admittedly, there is not unanimity of opinion throughout the church (see the article, “Facts,” on page 10). This edition of *Shalom!* was produced in collaboration with the Brethren in Christ Council for Women in Ministry and Leadership to reaffirm the official denominational position and to help fulfill the council’s vision of “encouraging divinely gifted women to fulfill their call to ministry and leadership.” 🌱

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

# Is There a Gender Gap in Pastoral Ministry?

Several weeks ago, I had a breakfast conversation with Ken Letner and Rob Patterson, bishops of the Susquehanna and Allegheny Conferences, respectively. As the persons directly responsible for lead pastoral assignments in their conference's congregations, Ken and Rob were good people to talk to about the subject of this edition of *Shalom!*—women in ministry and leadership. Specifically, we talked about the perceived gap between women who feel that God is calling them into pastoral ministry and churches that will not call a woman to be their pastor.

We started our conversation by confirming whether or not such a gap actually exists. Ken and Rob agreed that while most congregations in their conference are open to women in other positions, perhaps only 10-20 percent would be open to a woman as lead or senior pastor. However, they also agreed that matching congregations with available pastors is an issue that goes beyond gender; such factors as age and experience are also important, and

“fit” in general is perhaps the biggest issue in placing pastors.

When the issue *is* gender, the reasons are multi-faceted. For some congregations, biblical interpretation is the stumbling block: they believe the Bible requires a man to be in authority, and therefore, a woman cannot be the lead pastor in a church. Ken and Rob point to all of the teaching on Christian television and radio reinforcing this more narrow interpretation of the Bible that contradicts the official Brethren in Christ view. The bishops are hopeful that an upcoming Impact seminar—a collaboration between the BIC Council for Women in Ministry and Leadership and the denominational Equipping for Ministry pastoral development program—will help to provide a counter-balance and a strong biblical case for women in ministry and leadership. Another barrier for women that is harder to address is what Rob described as the “internal hardwiring” of men who are not able to listen at length to a woman preaching unless she “sounds like a man.” Obviously, this is not something women can control, but apparently it can trump experience and education as qualifications for a woman in ministry. Finally, women are sometimes their own worst enemies. The bishops used terms like “pounding on the door” and “strident” to describe the kind of women churches don’t want; instead women are much better served if strong leadership skills are combined with a spirit of humility.

Both Ken and Rob also discussed their experiences in talking with churches about the possibility of filling open positions with women. Whenever there is an opening for a lead pastor, they intentionally ask whether the church would consider a woman, and once they’ve discerned the congregation’s attitudes regarding gender, they put together a list of prospects, including available women, with resumes and examples of teaching and preaching. Sometimes congregations won’t consider a woman, sometimes they will, and sometimes their reticence is set aside if there are

enough positive factors in the woman’s favor. Rob says he is not usually shut out, which he attributes in part to the more open attitude toward women in ministry in some more theologically conservative congregations where there are strong Pentecostal and/or Holiness influences. Some congregations may not say outright that gender is an issue, but couch it in more “politically correct” terms (e.g., the person is not a good fit).

The bishops also discussed some specific case examples:

- One congregation has women on the pastoral staff, but it won’t give women the title of “pastor” (they’re directors or something similar).
- In another congregation, the woman’s role and title were issues and people left the church. The interim senior pastor gave the woman the “pastoral” title and was met with resistance. When a new senior pastor came, he was very supportive of the woman’s role and position.
- Another church board, in a congregation where a woman is now the lead pastor, was convinced to hire her because they were moved by her teaching tape. Then when there was a negative reaction from the congregation, the bishop met with them to talk about biblical interpretation. Some people initially left the church, but some are now trickling back.

Ken and Rob suggest that women who feel they are called to pastoral ministry should hone their leadership skills in their own church or in the workplace: “Look for where the need is and do the job so well that the church can’t live without you; make yourself indispensable. Be students of pastors you desire to emulate.” They also note that there are some women who should be in ministry but aren’t, and some who are or think they should be, but shouldn’t. They advocate for people with a pastoral calling, regardless of gender—if they have the gifting, the spirit and the heart of a pastor or minister—but the day is gone when someone is placed in a pastoral role just because he or she feels called.

By the end of our conversation, I

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wasn't sure whether we had really answered the question we started with: is there a gender gap in pastoral ministry? On the one hand, Ken and Rob seemed to agree that there is—some churches simply won't accept a woman in a pastoral role regardless of how called she feels or even how

gifted she is. On the other hand, much of what they said about pastoral placement and how churches choose their pastors applies to both men and women; that is, men can't assume they will be placed either, just because they feel called to the ministry. In the end, I came away from the conversation

believing that both of these bishops will support women who are both called to and gifted in pastoral ministry and do whatever they can to find the right place for them to serve. ☞

*Reported by Harriet Bicksler, editor*

## The Door is Only Ajar

“At the foundation of egalitarianism<sup>1</sup> is a dislike and a rejection of anything uniquely masculine.” I can almost hear your reaction to the above statement. I came across this comment in a book written by Wayne Grudem entitled *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism* (p. 223). Grudem's premise is that when the church views women as equal to men in the functions of the church (licensing, ordination or pastoral positions), the church is on a path that inevitably leads to the undermining of the authority of scripture, approval of homosexuality, and not just calling God our Mother but denying God as our Father. This book is my first encounter with Mr. Grudem although I found after a little research that he is a prolific writer on the topic of women as pastors and all of his writing is vociferously negative. He does acknowledge in passing that not all denominations or women have gone to the above mentioned extremes but still says that allowing women in pastoral positions leads to these extremes. Grudem cautions pastors who are complementarians<sup>2</sup> to be careful not to be too hard on women who want enter the pastorate because they may just make them angry enough to do it out of anger. He also urges complementarians to stop being cowards when it comes to teaching on the proper role of women in the church when their denomination holds an egalitarian view on the issue.

A friend of mine loaned Grudem's book to me and yes, she is still my friend. The loan came about because we were discussing a recent conversation I was a part of on teaching within the Brethren in Christ Church on the topic of women as pastors. In that discussion a genuine concern was expressed that we should be careful about encouraging

young women to enter the ministry because realistically there aren't many places for them to serve unless it is in a larger church. The reason for this concern is that BIC congregations are not calling women into lead pastor positions or even solo pastor positions in a small church. We began to question whether or not there was a trend beginning in the larger church against women serving as pastors.

After reading Grudem's book I went online and started looking to see if I could find statistics addressing trends on women in ministry but could not find a poll that gave me an across-the-board view on the topic. The closest thing I found is the following quote, from a web site entitled the Press Center for A Foundation for Theological Education:

“The number of women seminarians and pastors has risen but many ordained women say it's difficult to advance into senior pastor positions and many leave ministry after just a few years.”

What do Grudem, the expression of concern made about encouraging young women to reach for something that isn't available to them, and the quote from Foundation for Theological Education have in common? The quote seems to substantiate the truth of the concern for young women interested in pastoral ministry in the Brethren in Christ Church. We can count on one hand the number of women serving as solo pastors in our denomination. On the other hand, Grudem, a professor at Phoenix Seminary in Scottsdale, Arizona, represents both the theological argument against women as pastors and the fear of women in pastoral roles. His prolific writings on the topic, his arguments dealing only with

the extremes of the issue, and the vehemence in his writing style, if left unanswered, may very well be among the reasons we and other conservative denominations are reluctant to open more doors for women to answer the call of God on their lives to serve in pastoral ministry.

I don't mean to lay all the responsibility at Mr. Grudem's door because he is certainly not the only author/theologian who espouses such views, but his views are representative. If we, as Brethren in Christ, believe differently than Wayne Grudem and others like him on the topic of women as pastors, then we need to educate both our pastors and the members in the pew on what our stand is and why we hold that view. It won't be easy, but the process may very well open some of those doors that have been closed to women and we will then be able, in good conscience, to encourage young women to enter the ministry without the fear that we are sending them off to be discouraged or to move on to another denomination where they will be able to serve.

Despite Grudem's assertion that women who espouse an egalitarian view reject anything uniquely masculine, my experience has been that Brethren in Christ women in ministry are not there because they dislike men but because they love the Lord and desire to express that love by serving His people. This expression of love is a sincere offering to God and the church. The question is, will you open your doors and receive it, if she is your pastor? ☞

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ministry, and serves as director of children's ministries at the Mount Pleasant BIC Church, Elizabethtown, PA.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>From Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia: "A Christian egalitarian view holds that the Bible teaches the fundamental equality of men and women of all racial and ethnic groups, all economic classes, and all age groups, based on the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and the overarching principles of scripture. While Bible passages are subject to various interpretations, Christian egalitarians believe that:

- there should be no gender

distinction in roles of men and women in the function or leadership of the church, to include ordination of women, or in society in general

- in marriage the wife and husband not only are created equal as female and male, but there is no biblically-prescribed hierarchy giving the husband any authority over the wife" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egalitarianism>).

<sup>2</sup>Also from Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia: "Complementarianism holds that God has created men and women equal in their essential dignity and human personhood, but different and complementary in function

with male headship in the home and in the Church. Unlike the historic Christian Traditionalist or Hierarchical patriarchal perspective of gender relationships, Complementarianism maintains that men and women are equal in the sense that they bear God's image equally. But with respect to roles in the church and in marriage, gender-based differences determine or restrict the roles appropriate for each. Specifically, there are requirements of men, and restrictions on women" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complementarianism>). ☹

# Learning from Nicaraguan Women What It Means to Be a Strong Woman Serving God

By Beth Claassen Thrush

It only takes a short amount of time in Nicaragua to discover that Nicaraguan women are strong. On the public buses, women juggle two or three toddlers along with trays full of cakes or baskets full of fruit. On the streets, carts with buckets of milk, rice, and baked goods join in with the flow of cars, some pulled by horses or mules, others by women. In the countryside, five-gallon buckets full of water are carried several kilometers on the heads of young mothers.

A longer stay in Nicaragua will reveal another layer of the strength of the women. On the television, the national director of police—a wry young woman—is receiving another honor for her work in breaking up drug cartels. In public buildings, there are pictures of Violeta Chamorro, the president of Nicaragua in the early 1990s and one of a select group of female heads of state. At an ecumenical conference, the Nicaraguan bishop of the Moravian church, one of the few female bishops in the world, delivers an address.

Staying in Nicaragua still longer may bring out some paradoxes of feminine strength—on both personal and institutional levels. An elderly woman across the street recounts her

life of caring for the children of her husband's mistresses. The woman from church in her mid-20s works 12 hour days in the tobacco factory to make sure her children can stay in school. Only 14% of Nicaraguan women own land, yet a large percentage of homes are headed by single women. Domestic violence is widespread, with some statistics showing higher prevalence in Protestant homes than in the general society.

I have now been in Nicaragua one year, and will not pretend to understand the complexities of the lives of women here. You can read articles from our sisters Martha, Lily, and Brenda to hear more from the perspectives of these strong Nicaraguan women. I can offer a few snapshots of experiences that have caught my attention as a woman from the outside.

- I notice that walking down the street is a very different experience for women than it is for men. Whistles, clicks, crude comments, and reaching hands constantly remind women that their bodies are products for the consumption of men.

- I go to a meeting with a well-respected Christian medical organization and listen in admiration to the founder, a doctor and a woman,

who has a vision for advancing God's kingdom by providing healthcare in the poorest communities in Nicaragua.

- My language teacher, a man several years younger than I, explains to me that marriage in Nicaragua is expensive and uncommon. He adds that it is expected that men will have more than one partner.

- I attend a workshop at my BIC church in Managua. The young woman from the Unión Femenil (the BIC women's organization) facilitates a time of well-planned, interesting study of several Biblical passages and an article outlining common misconceptions about women from the Bible.

- The two biggest holidays of the year are the Purisima, celebrating the virgin birth of Mary, and Dia de la Madre, in which motherhood is celebrated. I can't help but hear the message that your value as a woman is based on either your purity or your fertility.

- In the seminary where my husband teaches, I meet women who teach systematic theology and Biblical languages, and who are respected by the rest of the faculty. In meetings, people use gender inclusive language (hermanos y hermanas).

- My neighbor has a baby girl, and

she, her mother, and her grandmother share equally in the parenting responsibilities.

- I visit the BIC Biblical Institute and sit in on a class given by Hermana Margarita, one of the directors of the school and a dynamic teacher.

- When asking some young men from a local church what they think about machismo, they tell me that it no longer exists in Nicaragua. I think of parallels to racism in my home culture—how much more difficult it is to fight when it takes subtler forms.

- I travel to Honduras and see a BIC female pastor commissioned for the first time in my life. Her leadership gifts are identified and blessed by both men and women, and she is sent out to lead a team of church planters.

- I hear a pastor admonishing

women to keep themselves and their homes so that their partners won't be tempted by someone at work who is better kept.

- One of my friends returns from a weekend retreat of Anabaptist women, encouraged by the teaching on the value of women before God, the Bible study, and the workshops on starting a small business. She starts making beautiful cards, using some for ministries of the church and selling others.

Sometimes through striking contrasts, sometimes through offensive comments, and sometimes through beautiful victories, I have been learning new lessons on what it means to be a strong woman serving God and others. When people of any gender or culture find and use their gifts in service of God's kingdom, the Holy Spirit works

in powerful ways. As we listen to the strengths and struggles of our brothers and sisters around the world, we can rejoice in a shared source of strength. ☺

*Beth Claassen Thrush and her husband Alan are serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Nicaragua. Their home congregation is Gateway Community BIC in Chino, California. Thanks to Beth for helping to provide four articles on Nicaraguan women for this edition.*



*The Unión Femenil, along with other Anabaptist women leaders, organized a weekend seminar for women across country.*

## National Unión Femenil of the Brethren in Christ in Nicaragua

by Martha García Maltez

The Unión Femenil Nacional (UFN) is a commission of women who work specifically with the women of the churches in our denomination on a national level. This commission was formed on March 6, 1977 in a celebration of the annual denominational assembly, carried out in the hills above Managua in a place known today as San Antonio Sur. The Brother Executive Minister, who at the time was Bert Sider (a Canadian), called a meeting of 15 female leaders to propose that they organize themselves as a commission, both on the local and national levels, sharing as an example the work a group of women from Canada. The women were nervous and unsure, not knowing where it would lead, but they took on the challenge.

The strongest work of the Unión is in helping women in their spiritual lives, advocating for equal opportunity, and providing training in employment skills so that they can have a source of income (in our country there is a high percentage of single mothers). For example, in 2003, we sponsored

a sewing and hair styling workshop and were able to graduate 30 women who to this day make their living with these skills or other handiwork. Our sisters reproduce these workshops in their own communities, involving the women from the communities regardless of their religion.

In the past, women were not considered for theological or leadership trainings—only male pastors went. But we fought for the opportunity to go as leaders and pastors who deserve training. Now we women are everywhere—CAMCA (Convention of Anabaptist Churches in Central America), RedPaz (the Central American network for peacemaking and conflict mediation through the Anabaptist churches), Mennonite Central Committee, and SEMILLA (Anabaptist Seminary). The strength of the churches is in the women.

We also have fundraising activities such as raffles and handicraft sales. A few times we have come together to kill a pig to make and sell nacatamal (a traditional Nicaraguan food). We



*Martha Garcia (center) and other women use their creativity to make cards and bookmarks, sparking ideas in impoverished women for income generation.*

raise our own funds because we are no longer part of the budget nationally or internationally. This is the largest challenge that we have overcome to be able to survive 30 years, through the efforts and contributions of each of the leaders giving her best.

Many of the first founding members of the UFN continue persevering in their churches—some are now 70 or 80 years old but continue supporting the work through their prayers and wise counsel. They have been an example and a source of strength for each one of us who have been in leadership. Others, like myself, are no longer working directly in formal leadership of the UFN, but continue supporting them and defending the rights of women to have what we deserve, wherever we may be. ☺

*Martha García Maltez is director of the Anabaptist Peace and Justice Commission and former president of the UFN of the Brethren in Christ Church in Nicaragua.*

# An Interview with a Nicaraguan Gender Specialist

Brenda Consuelo Ruiz is currently the director of the Institute for Gender Studies at the Polytechnic University of Nicaragua (UPOLI), an innovative project to raise awareness of gender inequalities, struggle against domestic violence, and encourage women to develop their strengths to serve their communities. She is a counselor, writer, teacher, wife, and mother, and has been involved in leadership in the Nicaraguan Baptist Church and CEPAD (an interdenominational Christian development organization).

*Can you talk a bit about the evolution of gender roles in Nicaragua?*

Traditionally, in the days of my grandparents, women's roles were to stay home and care for the children. They also put up with all kinds of abuse, infidelity, drinking, and abandonment. Marriage is forever, and these things were a part of marriage. My grandfather was a farmer, and since there were no buses in those days, he had to stay over at the various farms. In each farm a woman attended him. He had 27 children with four women, and my grandmother attended to the other women when they were giving birth—that was the expectation.

In my mother's time, she always worked outside the house. It was generally expected that women would contribute to the family income, but not earn more than the man. They remained in charge of the house.

In my generation, middle class women have professions and are expected to have a degree, even if they don't work in it. There are thousands in the maquilas (factories), or working as teachers, nurses, or secretaries. There is still the "second shift" (women working both a full-time job and full-time maintenance of the home), but men are helping more with the children. Not so much with the housework, but taking them to the park or helping with homework.

For my daughter and other young people, the roles are becoming more flexible—washing dishes and cleaning the house together.

*What is causing these changes?  
What is unique about the Nicaraguan*

*situation?*

Nicaragua has a unique context. In the indigenous groups there is some evidence that women were the ones selling products and making decisions about prices. The war also had an impact. Women were taking over jobs like truck driving or management positions. With the solidarity movement, people were coming in from other countries with their ideas, including women theologians helping to read the Bible from a feminist perspective. In the revolution, the ideals were democracy and equality. Many women are strong, well-educated, and in leadership roles.

*Can you describe gender roles in the churches?*

The roles are shifting here too. For the Baptists, education is important, and they gave many scholarships for women to come into the city to live and study. Maybe the society is permeating the church more than vice versa, but that may be good in this way. Some churches are very conservative and isolated, but even then a few women are coming to seminary or starting ministries like a women's prison ministry. In some rural areas, the church continues to be oppressive and domestic violence is still silenced. The pastors deny it and don't address it . . . if they know of a case, it is most common to blame the woman. Ordination is still limited in many denominations, but they are taking leadership in the traditional jobs in the church—Christian education, cleaning the church, cooking for events, visiting the poor . . .

*Often we hear the word "machismo"—how would you define it?*

Machismo in common terms is men assuming that they are superior to women—that they are of more value than women (and thus have more rights, liberty, power, privileges). There are degrees of machismo. When men think of it, it's like John Wayne—or violent, aggressive, non-educated men killing their wives. Most men are not that way. There are more subtle manifestations—telling the wife that she can stay home with the kids,

or when they both come home from work the woman does everything, or emotional, economic, or sexual abuse—but they don't see that as machismo. We talk about the second shift, but sometimes women have a third shift—sexual service. Or even a fourth shift—work in the church.

*What have been some of the projects of the Institute for Gender Studies at UPOLI?*

It started with Lydia (now the provost at the UPOLI) talking to me about doing a book project on domestic violence. But then we thought that it's more than domestic violence—maybe we should have a gender program. One of the great things was the institutional gender policy: it will mean more equality for women who work and study here, they will be treated with respect and encouraged at all levels, there will be no sexual harassment, and this will influence the outside community. I can see a change from when we started three years ago.

*What have been some of your challenges in your work?*

I want to have allies, so I can't be too strong. We are a new organization, and we are small, so I'm trying to be careful not to upset too many people. To know when to be firm and assertive and when to be quiet and sweet—it's a tough path and I'm not sure which way to go sometimes.

*Are there things that people from the outside can do to support this kind of work?*

It makes a difference for men to advocate. For example, one visiting professor shared some research about the capabilities of women in positions of leadership. It's different to have someone from the outside, even if we're saying the same things. It has been helpful receiving recognition from the outside for the gender institute and the policy. I think there is a solidarity that can develop between women working in similar positions—through prayer or by being a sounding board. ☺

*Interviewed by Beth Claassen Thrush*

# On Letting Go

By Rachel Petersen

Less than 10 years ago, any combination of the words “women” and “leadership” was enough to make me cringe. As a young woman brought up to honor the God-ordained differences between men and women, I felt insulted and embarrassed by feminists who called these assumptions into question. But my concern about the emerging egalitarianism of the sexes (or, as I would have put it then, the blurring of the gender roles) in secular society paled in comparison to the feelings that gripped me when I saw similar trends in the church.

Granted, my first-hand exposure to such trends was limited, since none of the churches we attended would have allowed women to serve as deacons, much less as pastors. But I distinctly recall the feeling of utter dismay that washed over me when, as a little girl, I went to church with my aunt and—for the first time in my life—heard a woman preach the sermon. Though I couldn’t have articulated why it was wrong, I felt certain that this was some sort of abomination, and that if I paid attention to anything this woman said, God would surely punish me along with my aunt and all the other sinners who attended this church. I think it was at this point that I started to believe (wrongly) that my aunt was not a real Christian.

As I grew in my tradition, I came to a clearer understanding of our (largely unspoken) rules about gender, not because someone spelled them out for me, but rather because I became conscious of our identity as a “Word-centered” church. Unlike so many other churches, I learned, we believed that the Bible was God’s inerrant, inspired, and authoritative Word, which meant that unlike (for example) my aunt’s church, we took the Bible seriously; even—or rather, especially—the hard parts.

Of course, we understood that God’s Word required some interpretation; the women in my church would never have

been expected to wear head coverings, for example. But it wasn’t up to us as individuals—or even as a congregation—to decide on a whim which parts of the Bible were prescriptive and which were anecdotal. That was the job of some unnamed (and unquestionable) authority to which our godly pastors (thankfully) had access.

Needless to say, therefore, I found it somewhat unsettling when I came to Messiah College and learned that the associate college pastor was a woman. Likewise, my discovery of women on the pastoral staff at Grantham BIC Church initially dissuaded me from seriously considering it as a potential “home-away-from-home” church. But church-shopping didn’t suit me, so after a few months of testing out various congregations, I wound up back at Grantham, drawn by its proximity to the college and an 85-year-old woman whose Wednesday night Bible studies convinced me that—despite their stance on women in leadership—this congregation clearly took the Bible seriously.

Despite my “better” judgment, which would have preferred to know for certain that God approved of women pastors before accepting them myself, I started to put down roots at Grantham, and over time, I grew accustomed to seeing women up front alongside male pastors. Gradually, my discomfort began to fade, not because I resolved once and for all the tension between various scriptures used to support or oppose women in leadership, but because I repeatedly experienced God’s love and grace ministered through these women.

Of course, part of me (the part that was raised to cling steadfastly to the safety of my tradition’s impermeable systematic theology) feared that I was falling prey to the same slippery slope down which so many well-intentioned Christians before



me had slid. I was allowing my experience (which, apart from one’s personal salvation narrative, might as well have been a four-letter-word in my tradition) to inform my theology. Of course, as any of my former pastors would have reminded me, such an approach is backwards; we must always interpret our experiences according to scripture, and not vice versa. But as the church has continually re-discovered throughout its 2000 year history, our experiences sometimes force themselves in on our theology, whether we want them to or not.

This seems to have been the case for many of the women who broke ground in the BIC denomination by pursuing ordination. One such woman, Martha Lady, recently sat down with me to recount the story of how God led her into pastoral ministry at Messiah Village, despite her own reluctance. According to Martha, who spent the first half of her career as a missionary and midwife, becoming a pastor was not a part of her life-plan, nor was it even a consideration when she first enrolled in seminary.

But God gradually re-directed Martha away from the plans she had set for herself (to minister to mothers and babies in a hospital setting), pushing her instead to focus on aging populations. When I asked Martha what steppingstones helped her to discern her vocational calling, she replied with a smile, “Well, I was just sort of pushed into it.”

Insisting to someone like Martha (or for that matter, any of the residents to whom Martha ministered during her 12 years on the pastoral staff at the Village) that God doesn’t approve of women serving in such roles, would be about as effective as the Pharisees insisting to

Barnabas and Paul that God would not accept Gentiles into the Church until they became circumcised (see Acts 15). Though the Pharisees clearly based their argument on a solid scriptural foundation, their convictions about how God would act prevented them from seeing the truth that God had already poured out the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, making “no distinction between them and [the Jews]” (Acts 15:9).

Just as the early church had to unlearn some of its assumptions to keep up with the movement of God’s Spirit, so too must we accept the reality that God is bigger than the tidy theological boxes in which we try to contain him. Acknowledging this, for me, was a bit like letting go of a security blanket. But as it turned out, clinging to my worn-out security blanket was no substitute for clinging to God.

*Since making the Grantham Church her church home, Rachel Petersen has become active in the choir, worship ministries, and the Missions, Peace and Service Commission. For her “day job,” she works at Paxton Ministries in Harrisburg, PA. ☺*

## BOOK REVIEW

# Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover

By Lois Saylor

The title of William J. Webb’s book, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, reflects accurately the subject matter within, but there are those who wish the title was something different. The concern centers around what the casual book browser may assume from the title—mainly that the author will find a reason to free all three categories (slaves, women, homosexuals) from repressive cultural restraints. Assumptions are often wrong.

William J. Webb endorses a “redemptive-movement hermeneutic” that studies scripture within the context of the ancient cultures and historical settings into which God was speaking. He also follows texts on the same subject throughout the Old and New Testaments to see the movement of scripture. He rejects looking at one text or passage in what he calls a “static” reading, one that does not look beyond the actual words on the page to the fuller picture of seeing each text in connection to the culture in which it was written and in relationship to other biblical texts.

By studying scripture against the cultures in which it was written, Webb insists we gain a greater understanding of what God was trying to accomplish. When we look at scripture only from our own modern cultural perspective we can entirely miss the spirit of what

God was doing. To give life to his work, Webb follows three subjects—slaves, women, and homosexuals—as he unfolds his set of 18 criteria to evaluate scripture and its “redemptive-movement.”

In setting up his 18 criteria, he does not give equal weight to each. In fact, he has four categories: Persuasive Criteria, Moderately Persuasive Criteria, Inconclusive Criteria, and then Persuasive Extrascriptural Criteria. These criteria help the Bible reader to understand if the text is cultural in that it is only prescriptive to the culture in which it was written, or if it is transcultural and can be applied more universally. The criteria help to see the spirit of the text and whether one can follow the literal directions of the text or one needs to understand the underlying principles and then apply those principles to modern day life. He often refers to this as ascending the ladder of abstraction.

An example of the ladder of abstraction would be the text from Leviticus 19:10 which instructs the people to “not reap the very edges of your field.” A static reading of this verse would tell farmers today to literally not harvest the edges of their fields, an interpretation most would find absurd. Instead, Webb studying the culture understands the pragmatic basis for the instruction—letting the

poor glean these leavings as a way to feed themselves—and then climbs the ladder of abstraction to see how to apply the underlying principle or the transcultural principle, feeding the poor, to our cultures today. He would even climb the ladder higher by looking at Jesus’ instructions to “love your neighbor” and see the redemptive spirit as God valuing people created in His image.

In studying slavery and the status of women, Webb argues that the redemptive direction for both is toward greater liberty and personhood than what existed in the ancient cultures of the Old and New Testaments. This is determined by the boundaries the Hebraic laws set up which protected and respected slaves and women to a much greater degree than the surrounding cultures even though from a modern perspective the boundaries are extremely repressive and rejected. Further redemptive-movement is seen in the teachings of the Jesus and the apostles which give each group greater and arguably equal status in the church.

In studying homosexuality, Webb argues against greater acceptance. In the ancient cultures of the bible, homosexuality had varying degrees of acceptance, but God’s people were strongly warned away from practicing homosexual acts in any relationship whether casual or

### Book Review



committed. This stark contrast to the surrounding cultures is still God being countercultural and calling His people to follow Him, but the call here is to restraint not liberty.

These quick encapsulations do not do justice to the detailed work of Webb's book. Nor can they show his diligence in applying all his criteria which he does evenly and fairly. His criteria are logical yet thoughtful. It never seems to fall into a simply scientific formula even though it could be expressed as:

Bible text + criteria = objective conclusion.

A helpful aspect of the book is that it lends itself to be read in several ways. Webb himself suggests that if the reader has an acute interest in either of

the more controversial issues of women, studying a patriarchal to egalitarian view, or homosexuals, understanding a growing acceptance or non-acceptance stance, one can selectively read those sections devoted to the biblical study of each issue as Webb applies each of the 18 criteria.

On the issue of women, Webb himself ascribes to "complementary egalitarianism." In his words this view values "interdependence and mutual submission" unlike a secular egalitarianism that seeks independence and autonomy. "Men and women can and should function in 'complementary' ways," but complementary egalitarianism also seeks a more equitable way of viewing roles based on gifting rather than gender. He

also offers a view he calls ultra-soft patriarchy that retains some of the status that a patriarchal view gives to men while still elevating women and expanding their ability to serve God.

Reading Webb is like reading a thoughtful soul. His work is scholarly and accessible to the general reader. He is diligent and cautious even including a chapter entitled "What If I Am Wrong?" William J. Webb's book adds greatly to today's discussions on women and homosexuality and to biblical study in general. It is a book worth reading completely and then keeping on the shelf for future reference. ☞

*Lois Saylor lives in Elizabethtown and attends the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.*

## Women in Ministry and Leadership at MCC

By Linda Gehman Peachey



**Mennonite  
Central  
Committee**

### Women's service

Women have participated in MCC work from the very beginning. Of the 15 workers sent to Russia, Ukraine and Constantinople in the early 1920s, three were women.<sup>1</sup> In the 1940s, women comprised over half of those who served with MCC during and following World War II: 254 of 500 volunteers.<sup>2</sup> One of these women, Marie Fast, died while accompanying refugees back to Yugoslavia, when the ship carrying them hit a land mine and sank.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these significant contributions, women did not serve in recognized leadership roles until much later. It took until 1963, in fact, for the MCC annual workbook to switch its address from "Dear Brethren" to a more inclusive "MCC members."<sup>4</sup> Since then, women have served in many staff and board roles. Currently, women comprise roughly 60% of all MCC volunteers and staff: 57% in international program assignments and 61-62% of staff in the United States and Canada.<sup>5</sup>

Even so, in terms of leadership, a pronounced gender gap remains. In

2007, for instance, all of the Executive Committee members appointed from MCC Canada were white men. Among staff, women hold only about 30% of management positions in the MCC Akron office. As recently as 2005, there were no women serving on the Executive Council of MCC Binational.

By contrast, women continue to dominate the lowest classification levels. Out of nearly 30 secretarial or administrative assistant positions in the Akron office, all are filled by women. Even when men come into a support position, this is generally short-lived, since they are quickly mentored into other roles.

### MCC commitments

Nevertheless, MCC has worked toward equality between men and women. In 1973, the MCC US Peace Section formed a Task Force on Women in Church and Society, which birthed the *Women's Concerns Report*. In 1982 and 1984 respectively, MCC US and MCC Canada approved a staff position for Women's Concerns. In terms of MCC's development work, the MCC Binational board adopted a statement addressing gender issues

in 1994, followed in 2000 by a Policy on Gender and Development in MCC International Program, which begins:

Mennonite Central Committee's central mission statement declares that the organization will 'strive for peace, justice and dignity of all people.' As a Christian agency, MCC affirms that all people are created in God's image, and that women and men, girls and boys, are equally valued and loved by God. MCC's commitment to just relationships between men and women grows from these affirmations and commitments.<sup>6</sup>

More recently, all parts of MCC adopted a Human Resources Policy Framework, affirming equality for all:

We believe that under the lordship of Christ, differences of worth and status based on human distinctions are abolished. All are invited to participate equally in the reconciling mission of God. MCC recognizes the systemic nature of racism and sexism that has included the social, political and economic domination of people. MCC holds that racism and sexism have no place in the Christian community.<sup>7</sup>

## Barriers to women

Given these commitments, why is there still an imbalance in the roles of men and women at MCC? No doubt there are many reasons, but here are some contributing factors:

1. There is a persistent, underlying assumption in our society and churches that men are to lead and women to serve. In the same way that women usually do more of the housework at home (cooking, cleaning, shopping, laundry), women are expected to do most of the background work in our institutions (copying, keeping schedules, arranging meetings, taking minutes, etc.) They are the “housewives” for the organization: often invisible and taken for granted.

2. Women’s styles of leadership are often not recognized or validated. Traditionally, men tend to operate more competitively, making decisions on their own and speaking in ways which ensure their voice is heard and acknowledged. Women tend to work more collaboratively, consulting with and listening to others, and making decisions by consensus. Since masculine styles are assumed to be the norm, it is expected that all leaders will operate the way men do. Women are thus expected to adopt masculine styles of leadership. Some have been told to “talk like a man.” Yet, this is often a double-bind, for when a woman talks “like a man” she can be

seen as too opinionated or forceful, since women are expected to be nurturing and supportive, rather than straightforward.

3. Women’s voices and perspectives are often given less weight. Women repeatedly notice that their opinions are not taken seriously until a man repeats and validates what they said. This can make it especially difficult for women in supervisory roles, since others may find it difficult to respect their authority and trust their leadership.

Similarly, women find their work is valued less than comparable work done by a man. For example, when some have taken on additional job responsibilities, their supervisors refused to rewrite the job description or have the job classification evaluated. Yet, when they left the position and a man was hired, the same work was re-classified at a higher level.

4. The workload of management jobs at MCC can be intimidating for women. These jobs tend to assume having a “wife” at home who can take care of the day-to-day tasks of running a household, so the staff person is free to travel and work long hours. Women usually do not have such support, and are more likely to have a spouse who is also working full-time. Additionally, parental leave policies are minimal, especially in the United States, and MCC offers no benefits to help with childcare.

5. Finally, women leaders have fewer

role models and mentors. Although this is changing, women are less likely to experience leaders or pastors who look like themselves. Many churches in fact continue to teach that women are subordinate to men, and use images for God and leaders that are almost exclusively male. Thus, women are less likely to see themselves as leaders or be encouraged toward these roles.

**Toward the future:**

Certainly, much has changed at MCC over the past 85 years. Currently, more women are serving in key leadership roles, including Executive Director, Associate Executive Director and Director of Human Resources. Also, there are ongoing efforts to make MCC’s organizational culture more hospitable to people of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Hopefully, MCC will remain committed to this journey. Although difficult at times, it is truly holy work. For we need the perspectives, expertise and energy of all God’s people. We need the insights of women as well as men, the wisdom of each racial and ethnic group, not only to carry out the work God has called us to do but to also better understand ourselves, our world, and our God. 🙏

*Linda Gebman Peachey is director of the Women’s Advocacy program for MCC U.S. Peace and Justice Ministries, Akron, PA.*

## References:

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Heisey, *Race, Ethnicity and Gender in MCC Work*, presented at the conference, “Unity Amidst Diversity,” March 9-12, 1995, 4. See also P.C. Hiebert and Orié O. Miller, editors, *Feeding the Hungry: Russian Famine, 1915-1925*, MCC, 1929, 340, 363, 365.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 4. See also Irvin B. Horst, *A Ministry of Goodwill: A Short Account of Mennonite Relief, 1939-1949*, MCC, 1950, 114-119.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 5. See also Horst, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Exhibit D, Personnel Information on Workers/Programs In-Service, March 31, 2007. Workbook Report for Human Resources/Binational 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Policy on Gender and Development in MCC International Program, adopted by Mennonite Central Committee, Annual Board Meeting, February 18, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Human Resources Policy Framework, adopted June 11, 2005, section 1. Church in the World, b. Honoring God-created diversity.

# Facts About Women in Ministry and Leadership in the Brethren in Christ Church

## A HISTORY OF FIRSTS IN THE MIDWEST CONFERENCE:

The history of Midwest women in ministry is a history of firsts within the Brethren in Christ Church. An overview of the leadership of these godly women gives evidence of a Regional Conference that has always been at the forefront of encouraging

women in ministry.

**1894: First offering for world missions, Rhoda Lee**

In 1894 at the Brethren in Christ General Conference at Bethel Church in Kansas, Rhoda Lee read a paper encouraging foreign missions, and became the driving force behind taking

the first offering for missions in the BIC Church. The 1895 Minutes recognized her influence, stating, “A paper on foreign mission work by Rhoda E. Lee was read setting forth the necessity of, and urging the brethren to, a more active work in that direction.”

**1894: First BIC city mission, Sarah Bert**

Encouraged by the compelling vision of Rhoda Lee, Sarah Bert left Kansas to become the co-founder of the first BIC city mission in Chicago in 1894. She eventually became superintendent of the mission when no man could be found to accept the role. **1906: First overseas missions established, H. Frances Davidson and Adda Engle.**

Francis Davidson was teaching at McPherson College in Kansas when she sensed the call of God on her life to go into foreign missions. In 1906 she and Adda Engle launched the first BIC mission (Macha) in Northern Rhodesia – today known as Zambia.

**1907: First woman appointed to home mission board, Anna Eshelman.**

Also of Kansas, Anna Eshelman was among the first of three women appointed to serve on the Home Mission Board in 1907. Board minutes record that the women were asked to serve because the board needed to be made up of “the best material.”

**1912: First deaconess, Mary J. Long.**

The first recorded woman to be appointed deaconess in the Brethren in Christ Church was Mary J. Long, wife of Avery Long, chosen in 1912 by the General Executive Board to serve in Salem District, Texas.

**1921: First woman ordained in the BIC Church, Anna Graybill**

Anna Graybill was the first woman ordained to the Brethren in Christ ministry in 1921. When she made her call known, the Oklahoma Church unanimously agreed to ordain her. She went on to become the wife of Bishop M.G. Engle of Abilene, Kansas.

#### FROM THE MINUTES OF GENERAL CONFERENCE:

**1980:** There was one licensed woman: Lucille Dayton.

**1982:**

- Changes to the Manual of Doctrine and Government (MDG) were approved on first reading, eliminating references to pastors as male or female and permitting the ordination of women. For example, Article XXXVI, Section 4 was entitled “Ordained Minister’s Spouse” and stated, “The wife or husband shall share in the ordination service.”

- General Conference voted to “affirm the ministry of women in the life and programs of the church,” and to circulate

the paper “Theology of Women in Pastoral Ministry” throughout the denomination.

- There were no ordained women pastors. There were two licensed women: Lucille Dayton and Eva Smith.

**1984:**

- The MDG changes from 1982 were approved on second reading and became official.

- There were no ordained women pastors. There were two licensed women: Lynda Kelly and Eva Smith.

**1986:**

There were no ordained women pastors. There were four licensed women: Judith Angell, Lynda Kelly, Martha Lady and Eva Smith.

**1988:** There was one ordained woman pastor, Lynda Kelly. There were five licensed women: Judith Angell, Leonida DePalma, Martha Lady, Martha Lockwood, and Eva Smith.

**1990:** There were two ordained women pastors, Lynda Kelly and Martha Lady. There were 12 licensed women: Judith Angell, Mary Jane Davis, Leonida DePalma, Sandra Hannigan, Kathleen Leadley, Martha Lockwood, Janet Peifer, Eva Smith, Esther Snyder, Naomi Stambaugh, Martha Starr, Noreen Trautwein.

**1992:**

- There were two ordained women pastors, Lynda Kelly and Martha Lady.
- The Board of Administration reported to General Conference on how the 1982 affirmation of women in ministry “is being practiced in the life of the denomination”:

Historically the Brethren in Christ Church has encouraged, provided, and benefited from the ministry of women in a variety of roles within church life. Most recently, this has been expressed by the appointment of women in denominational leadership and the licensing and ordination of women to pastoral ministry.

The 1982 affirmation of women in ministry was readopted, and General Conference “affirmed the continuing credentialing of women for ministry in the life of the church.”

**1994:** There were seven ordained women pastors: Mary Jane Davis, Lynda Kelly, Martha Lady, Kathleen Leadley, Martha Lockwood, Janet Peifer, and Martha Starr.

#### For further reading:

Janet M. Peifer, “Brethren in Christ Studies and Writing on Women in Ministry, 1887-1987,” *Brethren in Christ*

*History and Life*, Volume XIII, Number 1 (April 1990).

Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Evangel Press, 1978).

#### CURRENT NUMBERS OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY

Number of ordained women: 13

Number of licensed women: 28

Number of women working toward licensing and ordination: 60

Numbers of women in the Directed Study Program

- taken a course since Fall 2004: 70
- enrolled in present term (Fall 2007): 18
- completed DSP over last three years: 4

Number of women currently receiving seminary aid: 4

#### RECENT SURVEY INFORMATION:

The recent BIC Church Member Profile questionnaire asked several questions regarding women in ministry. The results are encouraging or disturbing, depending on your point of view. On the one hand, it is a little disconcerting for women in ministry to find that almost 50% of BICs do not favor ordaining women and more than 73% would prefer a male pastor. On the other hand, it is encouraging to learn that more than 50% do favor ordination for women, and more than 43% believe that women may fill any pastoral roles, including lead or senior pastor. Here are the breakdowns for the three questions:

- *I favor ordaining women for pastoral ministry*—completely disagree, 16.7%; disagree, 30.8%; agree, 31.6%; completely disagree, 21%

- *Which statement best reflects your view of women in pastoral roles?* Women may fill some pastoral roles, but not be lead pastor, 43.6%; women may fill any pastoral roles, including lead pastor, 42.3%; women should never fill any pastoral roles, 14.1%

- *All things considered, would you prefer to have a woman or a man as your lead pastor?* A man, 73.4%; no preference, 26.3%; a woman, 0.3% 🙄

*Thanks to Perry Engle for information about the Midwest Conference, to Andy Saylor for extracting actions and records from General Conference Minutes, to Donna Sturr for current numbers of women in ministry, and to Ron Burwell for conducting and summarizing the Church Member Profile (editorial comment on the last item is the editor's).*

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# Christian Women in the Brethren in Christ Church in Nicaragua

By Lily Rodriguez

In our society, our role as women is changing in light of the obligations to enter the workplace. As we do so, the access to skilled, dignified work is decreasing and unequally distributed, while there is a slight increase in access to non-skilled labor. We are seeing the feminization of traditionally masculine careers such as masonry and refrigeration, and women have integrated themselves into the industrial sector in labor-intensive jobs, as is the case in the free-trade zones (factories or sweatshops). In these positions, many women are confronted with a life full of mistreatment, oppression, forced labor, violence, and impoverishment. The presence of female laborers is also growing in the rural sector. Women often suffer economic, political, and social inequality, but there is a lack of focus on issues of gender, especially for women in poverty.

Extreme poverty is growing most rapidly in the homes of single mothers, where there is little access to credit through formal banks and the amounts received are low in comparison to men. Additionally, women have little participation in decision-making processes, experience physical and psychological abuse, and have fewer

educational opportunities. The problems that impoverish women are different than those of men. Among these issues are birth rates (especially for single women), abandonment, hospitalization, migration, and imprisonment of a spouse or partner.

In light of this heavy description, we as the Brethren in Christ Church have had a very important role in the society, having been called to defend those who are suffering. We have the commitment and the challenge to help people who suffer violence and abuse, to accompany them on their journeys, to give them spiritual support and consolation. We are equipped to offer those who suffer “the good news of salvation”—stretching out hands of friendship to women of all ages who are looking for spaces of loving community in the midst of their pain and suffering from the abuse they experience in their families, homes, communities, or places of work. We have encountered women who have many emotional and spiritual needs. In our churches there are women who think that they are being abused as a punishment



The sign reads, “Welcome, sisters, to the first annual women’s seminar. Women, put into practice the talent God has given you!”

from God for not being good Christians. This is the time to insist that the Spirit of God lives in women, and that God never wants violence used against them. As a temple of the Holy Spirit, we deserve to live in dignity, without fear or threat to our physical, psychic, or sexual integrity.

The Brethren in Christ women here have learned to have large faith, obedience, and hope in our Lord Jesus Christ based on Psalm 27: “If my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up.” Our vision is to untangle oppressed women from the poverty and machista culture and bind them with joy and the love of God for all people.

*Lily Rodriguez is the pastor of the Brethren in Christ Church in San Judas, Managua, Nicaragua. She is also an engineering professor, wife, and mother. 🌿*

