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Early Glimpses of Women in Ministry within Early Holiness Organizations and the Church of the Nazarene.

Robert Doyle Smith, Olivet Nazarene University.

[Paper first presented at the Women in Ministry Conference held at Glasgow University in May 2012. The conference celebrated the first women, Olive Winchester, to be ordained in the UK. As a document delivered in a speaking context it does not include the normal documentation.]

Reading the journals of the three primary groups that merged to form the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene (PCN) in 1907 and 1908 reveals the context that made possible the ordination of Olive Winchester and her early ministry within the PCN. This paper provides glimpses of women ministers through the journals of these early groups and later in the pages of the Herald of Holiness of the PCN.

One focus will be to examine how these three early groups argued for the inclusion of women in ordained ministry. Next, we will explore writings of Nazarene women ministers and laywomen and examine their specific contributions. While the pages of these journals tell the story of women finding opportunities within the Nazarene church we can also glimpse women being kept out of certain levels of leadership. The paper concludes by making application to the ministry of women today in the Church of the Nazarene.]

I am a Nazarene today because of a woman pastor. My first encounter with the Church of the Nazarene came in a country kitchen where my grandmother listened to the radio broadcast of the Sunday morning service of the First Church of the Nazarene in Little Rock, Arkansas. Broadcasting Nazarene Sunday services had been a feature of radio station KARK since the 1930s. Listening in my grandmother's kitchen in 1960 I knew nothing about Nazarenes. I later attended First Church because my stepmother and her sisters, like many rural Arkansans, had grown up listening on their radio to a Nazarene woman pastor, the Rev. Agnes White Diffie. So, when they moved to Little Rock they visited and became active members of her church.

I later read about the radio history of First Church in their 1938 pamphlet that promoted the church and her pastor, Rev. Diffie. A picture of a college girl caught my attention because of these surprising words: “She was called to the ministry at the age of eleven. [She] has been very successful in her ministry. Many have been led to Christ through her preaching.” I had no idea this woman in my church, who I only knew as the mother of a classmate, had a call to ministry. Today I wonder if she represented a generation of women who felt a call, began preaching, and went to Nazarene colleges but could not follow her call because of shifting cultural views towards women.

Rebecca Laird and Stan Ingersol have charted the history of women ministers in the Church of the Nazarene. During the last decade I focused my research on looking at the holiness movement through denominational magazines: the *Beulah Christian* published by the Association of Pentecostal Churches with congregations stretching from Washington D.C. up to New England, the *Pentecostal Advocate* produced by the Holiness Association of Texas, an interdenominational holiness organization, the *Holiness Evangel*, an official paper of the Holiness Church of Christ with local churches primarily in Texas and Arkansas, and the *Nazarene Messenger* begun by P.F. Bresee as the paper of the Church of the Nazarene with congregations beginning in Southern California and later Chicago. These papers affirmed women ministers to readers in their day and provide glimpses of these women for us to today. How they covered the issue of women ministers often reflected the approach each organization took in handling the issue.

The Beulah Christian, the holiness paper published in the East

March 1892 marked a significant moment for holiness readers of the *Beulah Christian*. The ordination of Anna Hanscome took place and the magazine published an article entitled “Liberty.” This story provided reasons for its readers to support the ordination of women like Hanscome. Listen as the author explained why women should become ministers: “Freedom to obey the Holy Ghost is a necessary qualification in a successful worker. Many have never known what it was to have real success until they cut loose from the opinions of men and became perfectly free to wholly follow the mandates of the Holy Ghost.” Catherine Booth’s testimony about her own call comprised most of the article. Booth shared her own struggle to speak in public: “I now see how foolish I was, and how wrong; but for some four or five months before I commenced speaking, the controversy had been signally roused in my soul which God had awakened years before, but which, through mistaken notions fear and timidity, I had almost allowed to die out.”

A second story in July 1893 on the ordination of two women in the New York Wesleyan Conference contended that a woman’s ministerial call should result in her being treated the same as men: “Women are called as truly as men. And if they are called to the work of preaching, there is no reason why they should not, under ordinary restrictions, be awarded the full functions of the ministry. It [is] silly to say that they cannot properly perform these functions. Can woman sing? So she can preach. Can woman preach? So she can baptize, and administer the Lord’s Supper Do not prevent the ordination of women by church law. Leave each case to be disposed of on its individual merits, as it occurs, just as in the case of men.” The writer closed by saying he looked forward to “receiving the Lord’s Supper at the hand of some godly woman.”

One such godly woman could have been Anna Hanscome who we noted above had been ordained in March. Her ordination followed two years as a pastor at Malden Mission, a surprising vocation for a woman who had grown up in a church that did not allow women to speak in a public meeting. Reporting on her ordination service performed by the Central Evangelical Holiness Association, The Beulah Christian reported that the congregation wept upon hearing her answers to questions concerning her Christian experience, views of Christian doctrine, and call to the ministry. The writer justified the ordination of a woman by pointing to her call: “it became evident that the church had acted wisely in calling the council together and had simply recognized and honored the call that was resting upon their chosen leader. It was evident that it was God, and what was man that he should withstand him.” The description of the scene portrayed the service as a celebration of women in ministry. “The Holy Ghost fell in power, and this ... part of the service continued for some time while the people wept, and shouted, and praised the Lord with hymns of joy.”

The Beulah Christian captured this special moment for its readers and provided its own interpretation that God had shown his approval of women ministers. The magazine also shared excerpts from her pastor’s report given at the time of her ordination and continued with regular reports on her ministry until her unexpected death three years later. Her obituary explained the central role her call played in her life: “She felt at times her unique position being the second woman who had ever been ordained in Malden, but she was strong in the assurance of her divine call and enjoyed the confidence and fellowship of her associates of like faith.”

Ten years later, an obscure and brief reference mentioned the ordination of Martha Curry. If readers of the *Beulah Christian* saw the small notice, they would not have been surprised for they had been told of her successful ministry in recent news items from pastors of churches in Lynn, Massachusetts and Washington D.C. In a related note from Lynn we discovered another woman preacher: “Sister Olive Winchester, a member of this church, and senior at Radcliffe College, spoke at the morning service with special unction.” The *Beulah Christian* enabled its readers to see women being ordained and actively participating as ministers just like men. The magazine also provided them with a theological justification for them to do so; the church simply recognized their divine call.

The Pentecostal Advocate and Holiness Evangel Report Holiness to the South

Southern women produced extensive works defending their Biblical right to minister. The *Pentecostal Advocate* advertised two of them and published another. In a 1903 sermon, “Woman’s Right to Preach,” Annie May Fisher explained her intent as not to take woman out of her sphere but “to prove ... from the bible that she has a part in the great work of God.” She explored passages from both testaments including a rebuttal to opponents who used I Timothy 2 and I Corinthians 14 against women. She claimed the former referred to man’s authority in the home, not the church. The latter addressed a problem peculiar to Corinth. After all if women were to be silent in church why did men want them to sing? She also asked why protests resulted when woman obeyed God and went into the ministry, when the same outcry failed to materialize if she entered into most any other profession.

A year later Fannie McDowell Hunter wrote her book: **“Women Preachers: Who gave thee this authority?”** Her comments on the subtitle suggested the reason for her formal defense: **“This is the question propounded by many when a woman enters the pulpit, takes a text and preaches a sermon.”** Similar to Fisher, her argument consisted of a study of the Bible, modern history, and answers to supposed biblical objections. Perhaps more importantly, she allowed nine women to plead their own case by testifying about their spiritual pilgrimage and divine call. For most of them, God revealed their call in a religious experience, especially entire sanctification. Five initially thought God had called them to foreign missions because, as Mrs. Sheeks explained, she could not **“think that a woman would be allowed to preach the Gospel here in Christian America.”** Mrs. Jonnie Jernigan expressed her frustration with the double standard: **“I wondered why ... the Church would have a grand missionary rally on the return of a woman missionary from China and allow her freedom in the Churches to tell of her foreign work, but would refuse the pulpit to a woman of America to preach the Gospel.”**

In 1910, the *Pentecostal Advocate* published Mary Emily Ellyson’s five part series **“Women’s Sphere in Gospel Service.”** Her arguments reflected the earlier works of Fisher and Hunter. She explained that submission did not mean women should be barred from authority roles in the church because intellectually and morally men and women were the same. Only in brute strength could man be viewed as the superior. As equals women should possess the same privilege and opportunity as men to follow the call of God. She questioned why the church allowed this waste of talent when the world welcomed her: **“If a woman may act as president of an educational institution or a commercial institution and do it with credit to herself and the cause she represents, why should she be barred from like**

official position in the church of God when He has endowed her with qualities which make her equal to such work?" The many examples where women succeeded in leadership lead her to suggest prejudice as the only reason women were barred from ministry. She concluded, "We know of no sphere in gospel service that she may not enter and fill to the glory of the Master whom she loves and serves"

Why did the south produce more formal defenses? Could the answer lie in the numbers? The 1908 General Assembly Journal listed 31 ordained women from the southern churches with 2307 members, but only 27 ordained women from the PCN with 8107 members. Did the presence of more women preachers lead to stronger statements of support and more opportunities for service? Our answer begins in the December 12, 1899 minutes of the Churches of Christ with the note "The first question brought before the church was, 'Is woman eligible to ordination.'" The discussion went on for some time but had to be tabled until the next day where we found this verdict: "it is the sense of the Church of Christ at this place; that she has the right to stand side by side with man in soul-saving work entitled to all the rights and privileges of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. For there is neither male nor female, but ye are all one in Christ Jesus....Hence she is eligible to ordination." On the same day Brother Hammond, Sisters Harris (later Cagle) and Sheeks sought and received approval for ordination. The record of their ordination service the next morning noted they had been called by the Holy Ghost and reported "it was very evident to all that God put his seal upon this service."

The Southern church formalized their practice of women ministers by adopting Manual statements. The 1900 New Testament Church of Christ Manual declared: "We believe that women have the same right to preach that men have." When the Churches of

Christ met with the Holiness Association of Texas for union talks their representatives persuaded the group to adopt a Manual statement calling for equal treatment of men and women. Did these Manual statements result because women participated in the decision making process? For example, the Churches of Christ representatives included Mary Lee Cagle and Fannie McDowell Hunter. Following the 1907 Chicago Assembly both the western and eastern councils of the HCC discussed the differences they had with the Nazarene Manual. The Pentecostal Advocate revealed the Church sent instructions with its delegates for eight changes to the 1908 Assembly. Change seven proposed: “We must have an article in the Manual declaring that we believe in licensing and ordaining women to preach the gospel and perform such duties as apply to said office.” The minutes confirmed that the Assembly sent these instructions to the Manual revision committee. However, change seven did not make it into the Manual while most of the others did. Neither the Pentecostal Advocate nor The Holiness Evangel provided any clues as to why. Writing in 1930, a former leader of the HCC, James Chapman explained what happened. “Sister Mary Lee Cagle ... had waged a long, hard fight in defense of “women’s right to preach” in her ministry, and she wanted a statement in the Manual asserting that we believe that God calls women to preach. But ... [General Superintendent] Bresee said, “The Church of the Nazarene is apostolic. It believes that matters like circumcision and sex are all brought to unity of right and privilege in the gospel. He went on to say that if we put a statement in the Manual saying we believe God calls women to preach we must also put in one saying we believe He calls men to preach, for unless we do both, the mention of the one weakens, rather than strengthens our position. Sister Cagle was quick to see this logical statement and was quite contented to have the matter go forward on the apostolic

basis.” Why does Chapman’s memory attribute the proposed change to a personal request of Mary Lee Cagle? Did his remarks reveal the issue had only been presented because of the insistence of the women ministers? If so, does this speak to the importance of women participating where organizational decisions are made?

The West Proclaims Holiness through the Nazarene Messenger

What about Bresee’s position? In November 1895, he along with other leaders of the new Church of the Nazarene had drafted a general rule that read: “We recognize the equal right of both men and women to all offices of the Church, including the ministry.” While the first Manual in 1898 included the same statement, the second more developed Manual in 1903 did not. What made Bresee change his mind? Did he believe legal safeguards were not necessary if one treated women the same as men? Did he believe Christian leaders would act properly, thus making mandated statements unnecessary? Certainly, the failure of the 1908 Assembly to appoint one woman as a district superintendent even in the south where women had been so active indicated Bresee’s limited application of gender equality and that his theological rationale did not always mean good people would view men and women equally even in a holiness church.

In Bresee’s defense he strongly supported the ordination of women as illustrated by his disagreement with James McClurkan, the founder and superintendent of the Pentecostal Mission. While McClurkan believed that women could preach, he argued their ordination was unscriptural. John Benson reported “There was no give in Doctor Bresee’s stand on the ordination of women.” The merger with the Pentecostal Mission only took

place after McClurkan's death. In an interesting bit of irony, his wife sought and obtained ordination after the merger. We find her among the listed ordained elders of 1925.

In June 1909 the Nazarene Messenger printed a story from The Way of Holiness detailing the First Annual Assembly of the Pentecostal Church of Scotland that included this statement on women's ministry: "We endorse the action of other holiness churches and put ourselves on record, that the privileges granted young men for gaining a place amongst us in the ministry shall at all times be extended to women in the gospel who know they have a call from God and who in the judgment of the church have been specially chosen by the Holy Spirit to the ministry." Here we have the strongest and most direct statement supporting Women in Ministry in the Nazarene Messenger. Why did the editor include this statement? We do not know for the Nazarene Messenger simply printed the statement without commenting on its significance leaving the reader to draw his or her own conclusion if any.

Lucy Knott's visibility in the pages of the Nazarene Messenger illustrated Bresee's policy of treating men and women equally. She joined the Nazarenes as a charter member in 1895. By 1899 one often read Sunday school lessons and articles by her or about her. In the August 31 issue Bresee noted her importance: "Humanly speaking, we cannot get along without her. She was the first women licensed to preach among us. But her success in work in other departments, especially among young women, has been even more marked than her brilliant ability in the pulpit." In her writings we sometimes glimpse her philosophy of women in ministry. In her April 4, 1901 lesson on the appearance of Jesus to Mary she observed that "not only did Jesus appear first to Mary" but "Jesus gave her the first message to his disciples." Is she arguing that Jesus commissioned women to be

ministers? In her November 1903 Assembly report on the young women's organization started by her, she described women as agents for good in the hand of God. She remarked that the Holy Ghost gave women "unlimited opportunities" and that they were not limited to the field of domestic life and social relationships. As partakers of the "gift of prophecy they are called to aggressive service for God."

Four years after deaconess Knott received her ministerial license, Bresee ordained her in February 1903. In contrast to the news story of Anna Hanscome's ordination by the Beulah Christian, the Messenger recorded the moment with only a hint of its significance: "Sunday night at Mateo Street a memorable service was enjoyed....The pastor, Mrs. Lucy P. Knot, was then set apart by the ordination service to the office of an elder to which she had been elected. ... [I]n the solemn service there was evidently the presence of Him who alone sets apart and empowers His servants to minister to His glory." Still, this reference told more than the one line, 13 word sentence that informed Messenger readers' of Sister Wallace's ordination six months earlier; the first woman ordained by Bresee.

The Nazarene Messenger ran regular stories about Knott's church showing a woman carrying out the normal tasks of a pastor bringing people into the kingdom, preaching the gospel, serving communion and managing the relocation of the church from Mateo Street to Compton Avenue. In two special issues nearly full page articles on her church appeared along with pictures of Pastor Knott. And, in the April 16, 1908 Nazarene Messenger that contained "Easter Messages from our Preachers," Nazarenes read Lucy Knot's sermon "The Power of his Resurrection." Finally, the Messenger reported on her activities at the 1907 Assembly. The December issue published her speech that cast a vision for global holiness, outlined how her church used a system of envelopes to raise money for

missions, and urged Nazarenes to adopt this method to finance world missions. Lucy Knott had become one of the most visible Nazarene pastors in the pages of the Messenger. Were these silent messages enough to overcome the prejudice against women preachers and to establish women as acceptable leaders?

By 1925, 114 women served as pastors in 1386 churches, with 32 of those being husband and wife co-pastor teams. There were 209 women out of a total of 1150 ordained ministers. Yet, not one woman served as general superintendent, district superintendent or as a member of the Commission of Manual Revision, the Book Committee or on any department or major board except the Orphanage Board, the NYPS committee, and of course the Women's General Missionary council. Chapman often replied in the Herald of Holiness to laymen who wanted an explanation for women preachers. One could ask whether these remarks from 1930 reflected a church in favor of women ministers or a church still needing to be convinced: "Whether one prefers a man or a woman preacher, whether he would like for his own sister or wife to preach, whether he believes that more men than women are called and a lot of other personal questions do not enter in at all. The fact is that God calls men and women to preach the gospel, and when He does so call them, they should gladly obey Him and members of the church and of the ministry should encourage and help them in the fulfillment of their task. Let our Spirit-filled sons and daughters prophesy, according to the will of God"

A 1936 article "Nazarene Women and Wage Earning" suggested a new era where Nazarene women "agreed that the place for a saved and sanctified mother is at home taking care of her children and making the home what it ought to be." Would this attitude allow a woman to be both mother and pastor? In Hunter's 1905 text, Jonnie Jernigan had

expressed a different opinion: “While I have recognized my first duty was to home and children, this has not lessened my zeal for lost souls, nor has it been a hindrance to my obeying the call to the ministry.” And, Fannie Suddarth commented: “The pastoral work has been one of almost daily interest as I have gone with my little girl Vio and held prayer in 29 homes.”

Earlier I mentioned a college girl with a call to ministry. Talking with her 70 year old daughter last week I learned the mother had grieved over her failure to be able to follow God’s call. Last weekend I concluded thirty years of teaching at Olivet Nazarene University. One primary change during those years has been the increase in the number of women who prepare for ministry. Less certain is how many have not been able to fulfill their call and now share the same sadness. The situation for me is even more personal with my own daughter having a call to ministry.

I believe the three holiness groups shared a common theological justification for women ministers but differed on how to make it happen. Readers of each magazine encountered stories of women being ordained and serving in a wide variety of ministries. In effect, they saw women doing ministry and being accepted as ministers. The Beulah Christian, Pentecostal Advocate and Holiness Evangel went a step further in printing articles that educated their public. In their stories about ordination they also connected their ministry to “apostolic call,” the term Bresee used according to Chapman. Yet, while Bresee acted upon this principle, he did not discuss it in the Messenger. Readers saw how he acted but did not know his theological basis. So, each organization attempted to treat women like men when they recognized women experienced a divine call but the east and south felt a stronger need to provide a theological justification for their actions. The

Pentecostal Advocate and Holiness Evangel promoted and printed more extensive defenses by women. Moreover, the Southern branch enacted legal statements in their Manuals and placed women in positions where they could participate in decision making. Two pictures from the Chicago Assembly convey the difference. The picture of the joint legislative commission comprised of delegates from the east and west showed only men, while the picture of the seven representatives from the south included one women sitting in the front, Mrs. E. J. Sheeks.

We also learned that HCC delegates to the 1908 Assembly carried instructions advocating a Manual statement mandating a woman's right to minister. The future might have been different if the proposal had not been blocked by Bresee. However, having a Manual statement may not have been enough to insure progress to gender equality unless the same conditions existed that produced the original statements. Women served on the southern committees that produced them. In contrast, the 1908 Assembly failed to place any woman in the administrative role of district superintendent, even in the south where women had been so active. Belief in apostolic call did not translate into women becoming administrators. We saw the same results in the numbers from 1925 and similar numbers existed in 2001. Eventually the concept would not even prevent the reduction of the number of women pastors so that by 2001 only 3% of churches had women pastors; however, 18% of pastoral associates were women.

Certainly, the concept of an apostolic call provided the theological justification for a church culture wanting to accept women pastors in the United States and Scotland. One question in our enlightened age of increased rights for women is whether the church continues to view the call of God as the prime determiner in who should serve as ministers

in the local church and in administrative roles. Another is how best to go forward to insure gender equality. Would we be better served to combine Bresee's theological concept of apostolic call with the southern churches recognition that women should be placed in administrative positions where decisions are being made on their futures? Or, does the world still value the leadership of women more than the church?