

Stop Pushing the Sisters Off the Scaffold!

by Linda J. Adams

Eighteen years ago I said “yes” to God’s call into ministry. This month I’ll finally be graduating from seminary, ready to step into service in the Free Methodist Church. What’s on the horizon for an ordained woman? What will I find out there?

First, I see tremendous opportunities. In the past two years I’ve been invited to come on board by three conference superintendents. There are churches to pastor, new works to plant, and a ripening harvest for evangelism. And the great response to the gospel overseas means lots of work for new missionaries, too. The hardest part is deciding where *not* to go!

As our leaders plan and pray for a New Day, they realize that some of the workers whom the Lord of the Harvest is sending forth are women. They want thousands of new pastors in the coming decades— and the Free Methodist Church is one of the few evangelical bodies that acknowledges the Apostle Peter's words at Pentecost:

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).

A hundred years ago our founder, B. T. Roberts, urged the 1890 General Conference to fully ordain the many Free Methodist women who were preaching and evangelizing. His resolution failed by two votes. *But times have changed!* Roberts would have been pleased when the 1974 General Conference finally removed the last restrictions on women's ministry. We are free to fulfill our calling!

Changes in the world around us also are making female leadership more acceptable. Americans are now used to the idea of women functioning in positions of authority. Women are university presidents, doctors, lawyers, newscasters, even Supreme Court justices.

People outside the church and new Christians rarely object to thinking of a woman as a pastor. In fact, some find it a refreshing change. In other parts of the world, there has been a long tradition of women missionaries, and in most places, the doors are still open.

All of these factors add up to a great sense of opportunity for me. However, I wouldn't be realistic if I didn't also admit that there are pockets of opposition. I believe that people who frown on the idea of women in ministry usually do so for two categorical reasons: cultural and theological.

Some nationally-known, fundamentalist figures have led the opposition to women in ministry on cultural grounds. They hear the radical aims of some secular feminists and think that Christian women who believe they are called to preach are "in that camp." They want to defend the family against further breakdown, and fear that any breach of traditional roles will harm the family.

Of course, there are women in some pulpits who are radical feminists. But as far as I know, no female pastor in the Free Methodist Church would fit that description. The ones I've met are radically committed to doing God's will no matter what the cost, like Mary, the mother of

Jesus. They are laying down their lives in service to the church like Phoebe, Paul's associate. The married ones balance family responsibilities with ministry, like Priscilla and Aquila of Corinth. Cultures change, but disciples of Jesus follow a higher voice than that of culture.

The other cultural objection is that it just seems weird. For people who have never heard a woman preach, the thought may make them uncomfortable. It has been my experience that having heard one good example of a spiritually gifted woman preacher lays this objection to rest. If people are willing to "know them by their fruit" and recognize the power of the Holy Spirit when they see it, then the

seven last words of the church—"It's never been done that way before"—can be overcome.

Theological objections are usually based on two or three texts from the Apostle Paul. (See 1 Timothy 2:11-15, 1 Corinthians 14:34-36.) The problem is, the Apostle's own practice shows us that the early church included some very important women leaders. For example, Junias was almost certainly a female apostle.

In addition, Paul allowed women to pray and prophesy in public—he instructed the Corinthian women to cover their heads when they did so, for the sake of propriety.

So the people who object **on** scriptural grounds are simply making a decision as to which passages express Paul's central beliefs. After all, Paul also wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Do they notice that Jesus never spoke one word to "put a woman in her place?" He shocked His friend, Martha, by praising Mary for leaving the kitchen to sit at His feet as a disciple.

He was financially supported by Johanna and other women who joined His band of followers. He "talked theology" with the woman at the well in Samaria, much to the surprise of His male disciples.

He made a woman the first witness of His resurrection, in a day when a woman's testimony wasn't even allowed in a court of law. And, most importantly, He died to reverse the effects of the Fall, including the damaged relationships between men and women that God predicted in the third chapter of Genesis. I prefer to anchor my

theology in Jesus, and understand other parts of the Bible in His light.

In view of all this, when I scan the horizon in the Free Methodist Church, I am optimistic. History shows that whenever the church has experienced spiritual renewal, it has also opened its doors to further involvement by women.

Where the wind of the Spirit blows, women stop bowing to their culture and begin standing boldly to speak for Christ. And, as B. T. Roberts envisioned, *men stop wasting their energy pushing their sisters off the scaffolding and get busy building up the house of God together.*

Meanwhile, the sisters will probably have to help the brothers notice that there is someone standing next to them on the scaffolding. The first time I preached for a week of youth camp, I was on the committee to plan the camp. We were scouring the East Coast for a camp pastor, and no one had agreed to take the position. I kept thinking I heard God telling me that I could do it, but it wasn't until I was bold enough to volunteer that I crossed anyone else's mind as a candidate. That first week brought more invitations, and more great experiences of pastoring youth camps. But I had to stick my neck out the first time.

When I think of the future, I dream of a New Day that echoes the volunteerism of Isaiah, chapter 6. People will be in the Lord's house on the Lord's Day. They will catch a glimpse of God Almighty in His holiness and glory. They'll be purified by God's fire. And then, when the Spirit says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" many men and many women in the Free Methodist Church will answer, "Here am I, send me!" And He will send them.