

Your Daughters Shall Prophesy *Nazarene Women and an Apostolic Ministry*

Anna Hanscome's resolve to establish a stable holiness work in Malden, Mass., led to the founding in 1890 of one of the Church of the Nazarene's ten oldest congregations. The Central Evangelical Holiness Association (our New England root) ordained her in 1892. She pastored at Malden until her death. Hanscome was one of the first women ordained in America and the first by any Nazarene parent body. The CEHA merged with the Association of Pentecostal Churches of America in 1896, and Susan Fitkin, Martha Curry, and other preaching women soon united with it. Curry was ordained in 1902.

In the South, Susie Sherman and Emma Woodcock preached daily for two months beside Robert Lee Harris in a Tennessee revival that launched the New Testament Church of Christ in 1894. Mary Lee Cagle and Mrs. Elliot J. Sheeks were ordained by its Eastern Council in 1899. Cagle had already organized a circle of churches near Abilene, Tex., that formed the nucleus of today's West Texas District. In east Texas, Independent Holiness Church preacher Johnny Hill Jernigan was ordained in 1902 in the same service as C. B. Jernigan, her husband. The merger of these Southern groups in 1904 was followed by the publication of a remarkable book edited by Fannie McDowell Hunter, pastor in Rising Star, Tex. *Women Preachers* featured nine women's "call narratives" and marshaled arguments defending women's public ministry. By 1908 one sixth of the Holiness Church of Christ's 178 ordained ministers were women.

On the West Coast, Phineas Bresee employed Amanda Berry Smith, a noted black preacher, as the evangelist in 1890 at Los Angeles' Asbury Methodist Church. In 1895, under his guidance, Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene provided for women to preach at the time of its founding. In 1902 Bresee ordained Elsie Wallace, founding pastor of Spokane, Wash., First Church. He ordained Lucy Knott, founding pastor of a second Los Angeles congregation, the next year.

Most denominations of that day severely restricted women's participation in church governance and ministry, even locally. But early Nazarenes opened every clergy and lay office to female initiative, whether at the local, district, or general level.

The *concept of an apostolic ministry*--a simple but explosive idea, long since ignored—lay behind this openness to women’s voices and gifts. The basic idea of *apostolicity* is that something conforms to or reflects the belief and practice of the New Testament church.

The Wesleyan tradition’s linkage of *women* and *apostolic ministry* stemmed from various sources, including John Wesley’s conviction that the church is essentially “the people of God,” not a clergy hierarchy, and that every Christian bears the gospel and is a minister in his or her own way. Thus Grace Murray and Mary Bosanquet were among the lay people whom Wesley permitted to preach.

The 19th century Wesleyan-holiness movement developed the idea further. Phoebe Palmer’s *Promise of the Father* (1859) grounded women’s right to preach in Peter’s sermon on Pentecost and his resounding declaration: “This is that spoken of by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days,’ says the Lord, ‘I will pour out my spirit on all flesh . . . and your sons and daughters shall prophesy.’” Thus the very gift of God’s Spirit to the Christian church establishes and empowers a gender-inclusive ministry, and one does not deny women their apostolic right to preach without denying the Spirit who calls the church into being. Other writers emphasized different scriptural texts. Wesleyan Methodist leader Luther Lee emphasized Gal. 3:28 as the basis for women’s ministry, as did Catherine Booth, Salvation Army co-founder, in *Female Ministry; or, Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel*. The Nazarene founders, steeped in this growing body of exegetical literature, defended the practice of ordaining women by drawing freely on Peter and Paul alike.

Thus Bresee’s declaration to the Second General Assembly’s manual revision committee had specific content behind it. Asserting that the Church of the Nazarene had *an apostolic ministry*, he argued that women’s right to preach and pursue ordination was sufficiently safeguarded *so long as apostolicity was the hallmark* of the church’s ministry.¹ C. E. Brown, leader in another holiness denomination, later summarized the conviction this way: “The prevalence of women preachers is a fair measure of the spirituality of a church, a country, or an age. As the church grows more apostolic and more deeply spiritual, women preachers and workers abound in that church; as it grows more worldly and cold, the ministry of women is despised and gradually ceases altogether.”² The inclusion of women was not

simply an “add-on” to traditional notions of Christian ministry but represented altogether a radically different doctrine of the ministry held by the more progressive holiness churches.

This intention to open wide the doors to women’s leadership was celebrated publicly from the first. Lura Horton and Anna Cooley were among the seven new ministers ordained at the First General Assembly in Chicago (1907). The next year, at Pilot Point, Tex., Mary Emily Ellyson was ordained beside R. T. Williams and Alpin Bowes at the Second General Assembly. Women subsequently assumed a wide variety of ministerial roles in Nazarene life.

Eight women on the Southern California District’s 1922 clergy roll were missionaries: Myrtle Mangum and Lou Jane Hatch in India; Minnie Staples in Japan; Mrs. Harry Wiese in China; Pearl Ingram in Central America; and Etta Innis Shirley, Maud Cretors, and Louise Robinson in Africa. Esther Carson Winans was an ordained minister who relied on her pastoral experience during missionary service in Peru. The Scottish missionary to Swaziland, Agnes Kanema Hynd, was not only a medical professional but an ordained minister like her mother, Jane Sharpe of Glasgow.

Women shaped home missions. Maye McReynolds led the Church of the Nazarene into ministry to Hispanics. One of her converts in Los Angeles, Santos Elizondo, pioneered home mission churches in Texas and Mexico alike. Minnie Staples’ ministry among Japanese immigrants in Southern California preceded her missionary service in Japan, while Lillian Poole returned from Japan to start a Japanese-American ministry on the San Francisco District. Mary Lee Cagle planted Lubbock, Tex., First Church and at least 21 other congregations in six states.

Scores of women have been Nazarene evangelists. Minnie Ludwig conducted revivals with her husband Theodore. Joy and Mary Latham were full-time evangelists before joining the Nazarene Headquarters staff. Juliet Ndzimandze conducted revivals throughout Swaziland before her ministry took her across a wide swath of Africa. Dell Aycock, Nettie Miller, Elizabeth Venum, and Nettie Hudson are among the revivalists whose voices once resounded from Nazarene pulpits.

And there were pastors. Agnes Diffie, Little Rock First Church’s senior pastor for 18 years, was renowned throughout Arkansas and led one of the denomination’s largest congregations. Emma Irick’s

Lufkin, Tex., church was the Houston District's largest. Rosa Lee served nearly a decade as pastor of her district's largest church when she became superintendent of the Leeward/Virgin Islands District. Bessie Dillingham, grandmother of Focus on the Family executives James Dobson and H. B. London, Jr., co-pastored ten churches, including Shreveport (La.) and Oklahoma City First Churches, with husband M. V. Dillingham. Like many clergy couples, they divided the preaching responsibilities, and "Sister Dill" usually preached an evangelistic sermon at the Sunday evening service. Lucy Knott, Martha Curry, Elsie Wallace, and many others devoted their lives largely to pastoral ministry.

Mary Emily Ellyson taught in the religion departments of several Nazarene colleges. Maude Stunck, whose "classes were always packed out," did so at Trevecca and contributed to the *Beacon Bible Commentary*.³ New Testament specialist Olive Winchester—the first woman ordained in Scotland by any denomination--taught religion at Northwest Nazarene College, where she was also academic dean and vice president, and at Pasadena College.

Mildred Bangs Wynkoop served multiple roles: evangelist, missionary (Taiwan and Japan), and theological educator. Her *Theology of Love* remains a popular study in the theology of Christian holiness. Argentinian preacher Lucia Carmen Garcia de Costa was one of the most effective church planters in Nazarene history. But de Costa, who had a doctorate in linguistics, also taught at the Nazarene Bible college in Buenos Aires and translated Wesleyan theological texts into Spanish.

Does the Church of the Nazarene lay claim to an apostolic ministry today in a way that Bresee and other founders would honor? Rich Houseal studied the development of Nazarene women clergy in the U.S. and found that their ministerial opportunities increased throughout the 1920's and 1930's, but experienced a sharp decline after the mid-1950's. Women pastored over 230 Nazarene congregations in the U.S. as late as 1955.⁴ By 1985 they pastored only 52.

Gifted women with proven leadership skills testify to a call to ministry today but report that institutional doors appear shut to them. New forms of fundamentalism, a drive to join the evangelical mainstream, and the influence of conservative social and political movements upon the church have influenced the way women are viewed and the roles in which they are accepted today.

Our history points back to a solution. The recovery of a Biblical understanding of apostolic ministry needs to once again become part of the church's theological task. If our history teaches anything, it teaches that setting God's people free for ministry is one of the distinguishing hallmarks of the Wesleyan vision.

NOTES

¹ J. B. Chapman, "October Gleanings," *Herald of Holiness* (Oct. 15, 1930): 3; and J. B. Chapman, "Dr. Bresee an Apostolic Leader," *Preacher's Magazine* (Dec. 1938): 2.

² C. E. Brown, "Women Preachers," *The Gospel Trumpet* (May 27, 1939): 5.

³ Quote from Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *The Trevecca Story* (Nashville: Trevecca Press, 1976), p. 197.

⁴ Richard W. Houseal, "Women Clergy in the Church of the Nazarene: An Analysis of Change from 1908 to 1995," (Unpublished M.A. thesis [sociology], University of Missouri at Kansas City, 1996).