

Church History 101
Lesson 30
Women in Ministry

Key Concepts: The role of women in church leadership, while originally central to the life of the Jesus' community (see Lesson 8) quickly diminished in importance. By the end of the 19th century however women began to reclaim their rightful place in church leadership.

The Story: An honest review of the scriptures (both Old and New Testaments) will find women in positions of influence and leadership. They served as deacons, Apostles and church leaders. Unfortunately the church existed in a patriarchal society which quickly began to remove women from any meaningful role in church leadership. Even so, in 494 CE Pope Gelasius I condemned the presence of women as celebrants of the Eucharist, meaning there were still some places where women were accepted as leaders. This is attested to by references to female "presbyters" (elders) in the 4th and 5th centuries.

In the Middle Ages women's roles in ministry were those of service, through being benefactors of the church (wealthy women who built churches) or of direct service (those who served the church and/or the poor). Examples include St. Clare of Assisi who founded the Order of Poor Ladies, which was a monastic order for women, Teresa of Avila who influenced Christian meditation practices and Catherine of Sienna who worked with the sick and the poor.

The significant change in women's leadership began to occur in the 1800s. It started with the Quakers who had women leaders early in the century. The Salvation Army, founded in 1865, ordained both women and men to ministry. The Methodist Protestant Church ordained Helenor Davisson in 1866 and Anna Shaw in 1880. The first Presbyterian denomination to ordain women was the Cumberland Presbyterian Church which ordained Louisa Woosley in 1889.

The major branches of the Presbyterian Church, of which there were three (PCUSA and UPNA in the north, PCUS in the south), resisted any move toward the ordination of women until the 20th century. Here are some quotes on the subject.

"Our Confession of Faith and Form of Government say nothing on the subject [of women speaking and praying in mixed assemblies] simply because it never entered the head of any man in the Westminster Assembly that such a thing would ever be attempted in our denomination." 1872

"A Don Quixote fighting windmills may afford us amusement, but a Donna Quixote so occupied is a different affair. In a word, we give the supremacy to women, until she so far forgets herself as to declaim in public on women's rights." 1849

"I'd just as soon rob a hen-roost as to remain there and hear a woman speak in public." By a clergyman who left immediate when a woman opened a mixed meeting with prayer. 1850s

By 1930, things in the north began to change. The PCUSA ordained its first female elder in that year and its first pastor in 1956. The UPNA ordained its first female pastor in 1943. The PCUS ordained its first female ministers and elders in 1965. By the early 1970s both the northern and southern church required all churches to ordain female elders and recognize female ministers.

Currently 36% of all ordained PCUSA pastors are women, with half of those serving in a church. Several of our largest churches now have female senior pastors. Two of our former associate pastors, Rev. Mary Austin and Rev. Louise Westfall, fill such positions. In terms of Ruling Elders, we at First Presbyterian, strive to have equal numbers men and women on session at any given time.

Questions:

1. Does it surprise you that it took so long for Presbyterians to ordain women? Why?
2. Why do you think it took so long?
3. What do you most appreciate about female clergy?