

August 4, 2024 – Bonni-Belle Pickard
50 years of women's ordination in the British Methodist Church

Pre-service music

Summoned by the God who made us rich in our diversity (StF 689)

One is the body and one is the Head (StF 688)

In Christ there is no east or west (StF 685)

Hear the Call of the Kingdom (StF 407)

==ORDER OF SERVICE ==

Call to worship – **Gal 3.28**

Summoned by the God who made us rich in our diversity (**StF 689**)

Prayers

50 years of Methodist Women's Ordination

Ephesians 4: 1 -7, 11- 16

One is the body, and one is the Head (**StF 688**)

Meditation: My ordination journey --

In Christ there is no east or west (**StF 685**)

Prayers

Hear the Call of the Kingdom (**StF 407**)

Galatians 3:28 – there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 4: 1 -7, 11- 16

⁴I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord,

beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,

²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,

⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷ But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists,

some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,

to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

This year's Annual Conference marked 50 years
since women were first ordained as Presbyters in the British Methodist Church.
Before 1974, women could be ordained as Deaconesses,
And many flourished in that role,
But there were also constraints: if a Deaconess married, she had to step down from her role.
If she remained single, she could preach and pray and serve,
But she couldn't preside at communion or administer the sacraments.
It hadn't always been like that in Methodism –
John Wesley's own mother, Susannah, had assumed many of those roles
During her lifetime –
Indeed, since her husband, the official rector of the Anglican parish, was often in prison,
Susannah often took upon herself to fulfil the roles –
And when some protested, including her husband, writing from prison,
She responded that if he commanded, she would cease her activities,
But the responsibility for the neglect would then be his.

John Wesley himself encouraged and authorised other women
to take leadership roles in the church.
After his death, though, the number and influence of women in the church
Was greatly restricted as society increasingly looked for male leadership.
And the Church, desiring to be seen as upstanding members of society, agreed.
There were several verses in scripture which were cited to 'prove' it had always been so –
Similar to verses in scripture which can be seen to support slavery
And homophobia and even racism.

In the early 1970s, I encountered some of this myself.
I was a teenager living in Florida, the daughter of a Methodist minister,
And the leader of the church youth group.
We were tasked with preparing the Youth Sunday service,
And I was the only one willing to attempt the sermon.
Others had volunteered to read the scripture and prayers;
my sister was going to play the piano for the hymns,
and another was going to take up the collection.
We had choreographed a liturgical dance.
But no one wanted to do the sermon, so that fell to me.
I don't really remember what I preached on,
only that the service lasted for about 45 minutes.
Then all the adults assured us it had been a lovely service, and they were proud of us!

The next morning, my Maths teacher called me up to the front of the room
and demanded to know if I had actually preached at church the previous day,
as he'd heard rumoured in the staff lounge.
I said yes. And then he thundered, "Don't you know that it says in the Bible
that women are not to speak in church?"
I mumbled something vague and found my way back to my seat
as the room spun slowly around me.

The question would not leave me.
I did NOT know that the Bible said that women could not speak in church.
I had heard my father's sermons twice a Sunday for at least 16 years,

and he'd never mentioned that.
It raised at least two further questions for me:
if the Bible said women were not to speak, why hadn't my father told me that?
Did he not know?
Or was there something else that he knew and wasn't telling me?

Though I was very close to my father, I decided I had to find out for myself,
and I spent the next twenty years doing just that,
using the good Methodist concepts of Reason and Experience
to explore Scripture and Tradition.
At the time, the Women's Liberation Movement was very big in the USA,
and I eagerly followed and attended several political feminist rallies.
I never gave up my Christian faith,
I searched the scriptures for the previously unknown passages my maths teacher had raised.
I became heavily engaged with Christian feminist theology.
Some years later, I took correspondence courses in NT Greek and Hebrew
So that I could translate the scriptures for myself.
When my husband asked if there weren't already enough translations around,
I replied, "There are many, but I have to know for myself."

Meanwhile, my journey with God had taken me and my husband to S India,
Where we were Associate Missionaries of the United Methodist Church
at a Christian International School in S India, where we taught music.
There my faith perspectives were stretched enormously
by exposure to persons from a wide variety of Christian denominations
as well as other faith traditions, including Hinduism, Zoroastrianism,
Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Judaism, and even atheism.
I kept searching the scriptures and asking hard questions of God and myself –
Questions which often opened the way to new and exciting understandings.

Being a missionary family meant we had to go back to the States every two or three years
to present programmes for the churches that supported our work in India.
My husband did *not* like to do public speaking, so the sermonising was left to me.
I began to look forward to those opportunities to preach and lead worship
as well as participate in the music.
Some summers, we, along with our growing family of children,
would do 40-50 programmes at various churches.
I got my sermon style polished.

On one of those summer furlough visits, I found myself at the Florida Annual Conference,
sitting next to my father, as I had done so many times as a child
when our whole family went to Conference each summer.
A visiting bishop from S Korea gave the sermon that day
in which he said that the Church urgently needed more preachers.
While I had heard similar sermons many times before,
that one struck a particular chord with me.
Was God calling *me* to be a preacher?

Again, I decided not to tell my father about that call right away.
I needed to confirm it for myself.

A month or so later, I found myself sitting in a pew at a church I'd never been to before,
waiting in the front row to be called up to deliver the sermon.

The minister leading the worship introduced me by saying
that he hadn't heard me preach before,
but he knew my father and had asked my father (at that same Conference)
if I could preach.

The minister told the congregation that my father had said that I could indeed preach,
and if I had been a boy, I probably would have grown up to be a minister!

Again, I felt the room spinning around me as I got up –
not to stumble to my seat, as I had in the school room,
but to walk up to the pulpit – to preach.

Again there was the question, did my father think it was OK for a female to be a preacher?

I took the question back with me when we returned to India.

Some months later, on a New Year's Day walk on the beach,
I confided to my husband that I was considering a call to become a minister.
He said that he knew that if I was hearing something from God, it had to be true,
and he would support me in that calling.

When I began to share my call with other ministers (all male!),
they all said that as soon as they had the Call,
they had left everything and gone immediately to seminary.

Well, that wasn't really an option for me at the time.

We lived on a mountain range in S India where there were no seminaries,
and I still worked full time and had six children living at home.

I did enrol in the distance-learning language courses I mentioned before,
And while my children did their homework in the evening,
I sat at my desk and deciphered Greek and Hebrew scriptures.

Finally came the day when we left India and headed for Atlanta, Georgia,
where I had been accepted in the MDiv programme at Candler School of Theology.

It was a three-year full-time programme, so instead of going on a one-year furlough,
we quit our jobs in India and immersed ourselves in American life.

I joined the new certificate programme for Women in Theology and Ministry at Candler,
and became immersed in feminist Christianity
along with Womanist, Mujerista, and Asian and African feminist theology.

I felt I was drinking from an infinitely large pool of refreshing waters.

In the United Methodist ordination candidacy programme,
one goes before several Ordination Committees one's 'home' conference
while simultaneously completing one's training for ministry.

I had always assumed that I would return to the Florida Conference,
which had sponsored me for training at Candler,
but every time I went before those Ordination Committee panels, it didn't feel right.

Slowly I began to realise that during the twenty years I had spent in India,
both I and the Florida Conference had changed.

My theological views had expanded
while the views of some on the Ordination Committee had narrowed.

I was continually sent away with 'conditions' to meet.

Finally, on the first week of 2001, the beginning of the new millennium,
I had the news that the Florida Conference did not have a place for me for the autumn.
A few months earlier, Alfred had become ill and unable to work –
We were not sure if he would ever be able to work again.
Two of our daughters were in university;
Our two sons were still living at home.
I was about to start my last term at the seminary –
And then what?
There were some serious prayer sessions:
God, you've brought me and my family half-way around the world,
Following what I thought was your Call.
Now what am I to do? Where am I to go?

A few days later, I was seated in the Chapel at the seminary
waiting for the beginning of term Commencement service to start.
A friend, seated in the row in front of me, was chatting to another friend
About the wonderful trip she'd just had to visit British Methodist sites in the UK –
And how welcoming the people had been, and how much they needed Methodist ministers!

My ears perked up, and after the service, I headed down to meet the Dean of Students
Who had been advertising a British-American Methodist Ministry Program –
Where students could do a year of ministry in the UK.
She said, "Bonni-Belle, you'd be a great candidate for that,
But this is January, and the applications had to be in by October,
So, it can't happen this year, but I'll give you the application for next year."
I took it home, and we discussed it briefly at the dinner table;
It wasn't going to happen anytime soon, so the family shrugged their consent.
I filled out the application and returned it the next day.

And then heard nothing.
As it was my last term, I finally had to take the Ethics course,
Which was only offered in the after-lunch slot, my sleepest time of the day.
I remember sitting through the class, willing my pencil to keep taking notes
Which I would read later to make sense of what I'd missed in the actual class.
I would also doodle in the margins. The word 'Hope' kept springing up.

Several weeks later, there was a response.
A small circuit in Birmingham needed a minister from September.
It was called the Asbury Circuit, named after the man Wesley had sent to America
Before the Revolutionary War to spread Methodism there.
My father had had plaster busts of both Wesley and Asbury on his desk.
It seemed a positive sign, and I sent back my agreement.

But then again, weeks of silence followed.
I considered getting a job at MacDonald's flipping hamburgers to feed my family.

One day an email arrived –
From my Super-to-be in the Asbury Circuit,
Full of encouragement and eagerness for me to join them.
Descriptions of the churches and the community and the manse

And strange things like ‘dual carriage ways’ and LEPs and the NHS...
And it was signed by a certain John HOPE.

Oh my. Hope, Hope. Hope. Hope does not disappoint!

We did indeed move to Birmingham about six months later with our two teenaged sons.
Our daughters had to stay in the States, as they were too old to be my dependents.
One of our foster daughters was already living in England as well.
We quickly realised that life in the UK suited our family well –
Halfway between the USA and India in both geography and culture.

The following year we moved to N London, then six years later to S London,
And then here to N Kent.

I was ordained in Llandudno, N Wales in 2003.

In several of my churches (though not all!), I have been the first female minister.
Here in Kent, I have been the first female superintendent.

At one point in S London, my entire circuit was female,
As was my District Chair and the President of Conference.

At this year’s Conference, five of the six persons leading the Conference were female.
Only the Secretary of Conference was male.

It has not always been easy, but it has been rewarding.

As a church, we are still learning how to accept each other’s gifts gracefully,
How to recognise God at work in all our diversity.
Occasional sexist attitudes are still encountered, though these are not as blatant now.

Fifty years on from women’s ordination, one of my fears

Is that men are becoming wary of becoming ministers.

Like teaching and secretarial work, which originally was only done by males,
Ministry could also become a primarily female occupation.

The Church will then have lost a valuable resource of male perspective.

Perhaps some will argue that there is no ‘male’ or ‘female’ perspective.

And yet we are all products of our experience,
And none of those experiences are to be neglected
In the work of building up God’s kingdom.

Over the past 50 years, the verses of Galatians 3:28 –

“there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female...
you are all one in Christ” have come back to me time and time again.

I have no idea where my old Maths teacher is now,

But I would love to remind him that the resurrected Jesus
Met first with the women and told them to ‘go and tell the brothers.’

And I wonder whom God is calling now –

And what protests will be made about who God might be calling.

The need for preachers, for ministers, for leaders in God’s church is greater than ever.

I wonder if God’s calling YOU – and what journey that call will lead you on.

**Prayer for International Women's day - written by the Revd Dr
Barbara Glasson**

We do not ask for strength, we have strength
we pray for resolve to use our strength for good

We do not ask for courage, we have courage
we pray for resilience to rise above defeats

We do not ask for acceptance, we are acceptable
we pray for persistence to demand equality for all

We do not ask for a voice, we have voices
we pray for determination to speak love's truth to power

As Susannah Wesley used her insight, learning and strength to educate her
children equally
we pray that we, the Methodist people, will continually use
our wisdom, courage and diversity
to turn the tables on injustice and embrace equity for all.