

WOMEN AND THE MINISTRY (1933)

The widespread changes in the work and status of women have created a situation which necessitates a fresh consideration on the part of the Church of women's ministries. The opening of professional and mercantile posts to women on the same terms as men, the granting of the vote, the great increase in educational facilities for girls, the opening of Universities, the decay of a multitude of social conventions as to what women may or may not do, are familiar features of the social life of our day. They mark a revolution which must have immense consequences in subsequent history, and already the change is reacting powerfully on the minds of the younger generation.

In recent times the changes in women's service and outlook have been more striking outside the Church than within it, and the questions referred to the Committee must be judged not only in relation to historical precedents, but in the context of the modern world. Methodism was a pioneer in entrusting responsibility and giving opportunities of service to women. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that the Church has not hitherto availed itself to the full of the varied and responsible service which Christian women are able and willing to render, both at home and abroad, and submits to the Conference that the work of the women of Methodism, especially of those who are called to consecrate their life to the ministry of the Church, needs fresh consideration, so that no arbitrary or merely traditional barrier may hinder the fulfilment of their vocation.

That Committee cannot find that there is any function of the ordained ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex, and that there is no longer any sufficient reason for withholding from women the full privileges and responsibilities which are proper to the work they perform.

The long tradition of the Christian ministry, however, supposes a ministry of men, and our organisation has been in accordance with that tradition. The admission of women to the ordained ministry necessarily involves adjustments, which have their difficulties, and would require the goodwill of our people. These are arguments for care and patience, but not for a refusal to go forward.

The Committee begins with the recognition that Methodism already possesses a ministry of women trained and authorised for the service of Christ, and no new legislation will be just which in any way disparages the work which its members perform. This ministry includes:

- (1) The Wesley Deaconess Order of the Methodist Church (which is now inclusive both of the former Wesley Deaconess Order and the United Methodist Order) is, as it was intended by its founders to be, a ministerial Order. The members of it are entitled Sisters. They are examined as candidates by a Connexional Committee, and receive two years' training for their ministry. They are tested by a probationary term of service, and are received in a solemn Consecration service, not really distinguishable from the Ordination service of some of the constituent branches of the new

Methodism. They have a system of retiring allowances; they meet in annual Convocation; and although their ministry, which is of recent creation, is not developed as that of the itinerant circuit ministry, their ministerial status is not lower than that of the early Methodist preachers.

- (2) The women missionaries of the Women's Department of the Overseas Missionary Society, while not a corporate body, are also definitely appointed for their work after training and examination, and perform ministerial functions, teaching, preaching and pastoral, of the highest importance. There is also a system of retiring allowances for them.

It must be acknowledged that our Church has hardly given to these workers the recognition and the scope which they ought to have. So far as the Deaconesses are concerned, they are inadequately represented on the Committee which administers their affairs; they are not provided for in the Circuit and District organisation of Methodism; their allowances have to be found after all other ordinary Circuit and Connexional demands are met, with the result that the dropping of a Deaconess is often the easiest retrenchment, and work which is amongst the most needy is the first to be abandoned or curtailed.

The Committee was informed that the Deaconess Committee, which is better acquainted with the position, would endorse such criticisms and would welcome a remedy. So far as subsequent recommendations in this report affect the work of the Deaconess Committee, or the Women's Department of the Missionary Committee, they are offered tentatively and in outline only, in order that they may have the full consideration of these Committees before being further elaborated.

The Committee therefore recommends:

That the existing ministries of women which involve a dedication of life service already approved by the Conference shall be united, and absorbed into a new Order of a Women's Ministry. The constitution of the Order shall be formulated by the Methodist Conference, on the recommendation of a committee specially appointed for the purpose, on which a sufficient number of representatives of the women's organisations to be unified shall be elected. The Committee shall also consult directly with the official representatives of the organisations involved, if and when such consultation is desirable or necessary. Such an order should have large powers of self-government, should meet in an annual Convocation, and should, in its corporate capacity, have a voice in all matters which affect the members or their work.

Coming to the special question referred to the Committee, it recommends:

- (1) That a woman who believes herself called of God to the work of the ordained ministry (as hitherto understood amongst us) must, in the first place, offer herself for service in the new Order above described. After due training and proof of her call and capacity, she may offer as a candidate for the itinerant ministry, following the existing procedure in relation to Circuit, Synod and Conference, and the Committees appointed thereby, or such modification of that procedure as the Conference may in future determine.
- (2) That since it is the custom of our Church to accept permanent responsibility for the employment and maintenance of all those whom it admits to the Ministry, and since it is not possible to say what openings there may be for the employment of women ministers in the immediate future, a special Committee on women's work shall be appointed, which shall prepare a

report on the available openings for women ministers, and on the qualifications of each woman candidate – such report to be presented to the Conference, so that the Conference may be guided as to the number of candidates to be accepted, and be assured that their continuous employment and maintenance are satisfactorily guaranteed.

- (3) That the Conference shall direct what course of training shall be taken by accepted women candidates, corresponding to the training of men students. They shall serve such a term of probation as the Conference shall direct.
- (4) That at the end of the term of probation, such as are received into full connexion shall be ordained to the Ministry of our Church by the imposition of hands, and receive authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. They would, however, still remain members of the Order of the Ministry of Women as above described.
- (5) The Committee believes that all offers for the Ministry of the Church should be for life service, and that this should be the declared intention of every candidate. As by marriage a woman accepts responsibilities which would interfere with the fulfilment of the duties of an itinerant Ministry, her marriage shall be regarded as equivalent to resignation, unless on special application the Conference shall otherwise determine.
- (6) If these recommendations are accepted by the Conference, there remain some important questions – questions of maintenance, of superannuation and of training, which will require special provision. The Committee has considered these matters and is persuaded that they present no insuperable difficulties, and as they cannot arise in practice for at least five years to come, the Committee submits that there is no reason to delay action until these details are settled.

The Committee is of the opinion that the number of women offering themselves as candidates for the Ministry will not be a large one. It also believes that the greatest care should be exercised in testing the call and qualifications of those who offer. Its deliberate judgment is that this new movement in the Ministry of the Methodist Church should be allowed to develop slowly from small beginnings, in order that each step may be fully considered by the Church at large, and that the progress of the movement may be directed by the experience gained stage by stage. It is from such a viewpoint that the Committee presents the foregoing scheme to Conference.

(Minutes 1933, pp. 438-40)