

WOMEN AND THE MINISTRY (1939)

I.

In the year 1928 the Wesleyan Methodist Conference first appointed a Committee to report on the question of the admission of women to the Ministry, and from that time the subject has come before successive Conferences. The Methodist Conference of 1933 accepted a report declaring that 'there is no function of the ordained ministry, as now exercised by men, for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex.' (Minutes, 1933, p. 438). The Conference of 1934 in its Representative Session after consideration of a Committee's recommendations, declared that there was 'not sufficient support of the scheme to justify procedure into the main project at present.' (Minutes, 1934, p. 102). The Ministerial Session concurring, added the following:

'The Conference in receiving the Report, concurs in the Resolution of the Representative Session discharging the Committee. The Conference however, would not be content with a merely negative conclusion. It believes that the widespread changes in the whole position of women during our generation, both at home and abroad, are of profound significance for all Christian people. It is deeply concerned that the Methodist Church should respond worthily to the new situation thus created, and in particular, should, when the question is again before the Conference, make all such adjustments in our organisation as will give to women called of God full scope for the exercise of their Ministry.' (p. 249).

The Conference of 1937 appointed the present Committee 'to consider whether and how such adjustments in our organisation can be made as will give to women called of God full scope for the exercise of their ministry.' The Committee presented a report to the last Conference which gave 'general approval to the Report, and refers it back to the Committee for further consideration, and the working out of details.' The Committee therefore now presents its revised report as follows:

II.

The Committee has considered the existing ministries of women, especially in the Deaconess Order and in the work of our Church Overseas, in order to see where they now give or can be amended so as to give to 'women called of God full scope for the exercise of their ministry.'

The Wesley Deaconess Order now numbers 385. Its members are ordained by the President of the Conference with the imposition of hands. Their manifold and responsible service is an indispensable part of the Church's work. The Committee believes that the work of Deaconesses might well receive further recognition by Methodism, but that this further recognition does not lie in the direction of identifying their work with that of the ordained ministry of the Word and Sacraments. Candidates for the ministry must avow a call to preach, and prove a power to preach, and the Conference attaches primary importance to this gift. The work of a Deaconess on the other hand is primarily, and often exclusively, pastoral. To this she is called and for this she is trained. There are some Deaconesses however, who have not only the call

to preach, but also who would appear to be fitted by gifts and experience for the ministerial office.

Women Missionaries number 254. Scattered wide over the world they share in the fellowship, service and administration of the world-wide Church. Most of them are members of Synod and their stations are under the appointments of Synods, in all of which there is a Committee elected for Women's Work. Unlike the Wesley Deaconesses, women missionaries, as such, do not belong to an 'Order,' nor are they ordained. Their number includes doctors, nurses, teachers and trained evangelists, of whom some are Wesley Deaconesses. There are, however, a few women missionaries who are set apart by the Church to a specifically pastoral and teaching service and to the ministry of the Word, and there are growing indications that the life of the Church overseas would be strengthened and enriched if the true character of the work they are doing were recognised by the ordination of such women to the Ministry.

Both at home and abroad, therefore, the Committee believes that there are women called of God to the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, who have proved their gifts and fitness in full-time service over a period of years. By the ordination of such women the Church would acknowledge their call to the Ministry and their fitness for it. These ordinations would be few at first, as is desirable in an experimental stage. None the less they would clearly express the Church's desire to make it possible for women called of God to enter the Ministry that has hitherto been reserved for men, and would open the way for further developments in the light of experience.

The Committee is aware that this is a very restricted proposal and is not by any means a final answer to the new situation in regard to women's work which now confronts the Church. Its merit is that it proceeds upon the principle laid down by the Conference of 1933, and from which there has been no dissent, that 'there is no function of the ordained Ministry . . . for which a woman is disqualified by reason of her sex.' It proposes no large-scale change, with the many practical difficulties which that would involve, but it is a positive step, and would admit some women into the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments, while allowing time for gathering experience and for the many adjustments and developments which that experience may suggest.

The Methodist Church is so organised that the Conference, in accepting men Candidates for the Ministry, recognises the permanent responsibility of the Church both for their work and maintenance. But at the present stage no one is able to say what openings there will be for women Ministers. The Conference needs, therefore, some additional assurance that, as in the case of men, the Church can provide for the work and maintenance of a Woman Candidate throughout the whole of her Ministry. The recommendation I. (c) is designed to meet this situation.

The Committee therefore recommends as follows:

1. The Conference declares its willingness to consider the Ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments of women candidates provided
 - (a) That the Candidate herself believes that she is called of God to this Ministry.
 - (b) That over a period of years, she has made proof of her gifts and fitness in the full-time service of the Church.
 - (c) That her maintenance and the provision of her retiring allowances be guaranteed by the Home Missions Committee, the Overseas Mission Committee, the Wesley Deaconess Committee, or some other department

having kindred responsibilities. (The Committee giving this guarantee should recommend to the Stationing Committee the sphere of the Candidate's service, the final decision remaining with the Conference).

2. Candidates who fulfil the above conditions must
 - (a) Be nominated and approved by a Quarterly Meeting.
 - (b) Be recommended by a Synod in accordance with the procedure laid down for men candidates.
 - (c) Appear before the July Committee, which in reporting to the Conference, shall make recommendations as to further training and probation.
3. Since the social and financial situation in our Church Overseas differs from that existing in Great Britain, there is no need to apply to women 'nationals', received for service in particular parts of our Overseas work, the conditions stated in 1 (c) and in 2 above. Women 'nationals,' if accepted as ministers, should receive allowances in accordance with the financial arrangement of their respective Districts, as do men 'nationals.' Their candidature should proceed according to the rules now operating overseas, and recommendations concerning their training should be made by the Synod in the District where they reside.

(Agenda 1939, pp. 539-42)

The Conference of 1939 appointed a further committee to report on the implications of 'the present scheme' and to make proposals regarding necessary adjustments in organisation (*Minutes* p. 248). The matter was held up by the war and then postponed in 1948 due to discussions with the Church of England (*Daily Record* 1948, p. 28). See also the report of the Committee on the Status of Deaconesses and the Admission of Women to the Ministry (pp. 122-134).