

## **Women Pioneers** **“Shapers of a Movement”** (From: The Stone-Campbell Movement by Leroy Garrett)

While today 76% of the U.S. population accepts the idea of women preachers, and in some seminaries, including Disciples institutions, upwards of one-half are women, it has not always been that way. While women have always done more than their share of “the work of the church,” their ministry has been confined mostly to the quiet corners behind the scenes. Women, especially before the Civil War, were not unlike children in that they were to be seen and not heard.

The time was when they could not get an education, conduct business, or even have legal control of their children. They could not manage their own money, even when they inherited it. Any influence they had in the church was indirect, as wives and daughters. When they served as missionaries it was under the aegis of some man.

This began to change after the Civil War, perhaps because of the more assertive roles of women during that time. In the post-Civil War period women began to form their own denomination-wide organizations, both benevolent and missionary, some of which had substantial influence. Within a decade or so following the War most every Protestant denomination, including Disciples, had a national woman’s organization. This inevitably led to other public roles of ministry. In time there were women teachers, preachers, evangelists, authors, editors, and reformers. By 1918 there was actually an International Women’s Preacher Association, in which Disciples ministers served as officers. Their number was not legion, but they were there and are to be numbered among the pioneers.

From the earliest days of the Movement women were vigorously involved in preaching and starting churches. The “Three Marys” of Somerset, Pennsylvania were the most notable. Mary Graft, Mary Morrison, and Mary Ogle were all baptized as adults, and early on they resolved to reject creeds and make only the Bible as their rule of faith. By writing letters and calling from house to house they soon taught classes and held prayer meetings. While at first loosely associated with the Redstone Baptist Association, they joined no sect. When Thomas Campbell came to Somerset in 1828, they resolved to call themselves Disciples of Christ.

The three Marys evangelized their community baptizing converts, and building up the church. By the 1840’s the Christian Church in Somerset had 500 members. All three lived beyond their threescore and ten and served the church for some 40 years. Many came to look to them as “Our Mothers in Israel” and they gained a place in the Movement’s history as “the Three Marys of Somerset, Pennsylvania.”

Even earlier than the three Marys were women preachers in Elias Smith’s New England movement. While always a Freewill Baptist, Nancy Cram’s heart was with the Christian Church. Doing evangelistic work in upstate New York, including work among the Oneida Indians, she won converts not only by preaching but also by her fervent prayers. One such prayer was impromptu, at a funeral, and was so moving that she was invited to hold a revival. The revival was protracted, in fields and barns, until hundreds were converted and the community transformed. She converted several men who became preachers in the New England movement, and her preaching built up Christian Churches.

Cram also converted Abigail Roberts, who preached in Elias Smith’s movement as early as 1816, converting hundreds and starting at least four churches. She suffered not only as a “female preacher” but for being part of what was considered a heretical movement, especially since it rejected creeds and sectism. She was threatened with tar and feather.

Nancy Towle, a schoolteacher, was probably the most traveled of New England’s female preachers, itinerating 10,000 miles in a decade, suffering incredible hardship. She worked with numerous other women preachers, who were more abundant in New England than in any other part of the Movement. Some were singing evangelists and others Sunday school evangelists.

It is probable that the first woman to be ordained to the ministry in the Movement was Clara Hale Babcock. She was ordained at age 39 in 1888 or 1889 and became pastor of the Christian Church in Erie, Illinois. She eventually became an evangelist and over a period of three decades conducted revivals in Illinois and Iowa and gained some 1,400 converts. She baptized over a thousand more as the pastor of several churches. She was extolled for her strong intellect and for her ability to expound the Scriptures.

There were numerous others. Jessie Coleman Monser, ordained in 1891, not only held several pastorates in Illinois but helped to produce a cross-reference Bible. Marinda Lemert not only felt her own call to the ministry, but became an apologist for other women who wanted to enter the ministry. In 1888 she wrote articles defending the call of women and labeled “the doctrine that seals woman’s lips” a heresy. She insisted that those who make gender a test make Paul contradict himself. A black woman, Sarah Lue Bostick, challenged both racial and sexual prejudice when she became a prominent preacher in both black and white Christian Churches in Arkansas in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Clara Hazelrigg was ordained at the age of 37 in 1897 after a career in education. She evangelized in eight states in the West and served as pastor to the West Side Christian Church in Topeka. Her most noted convert was Jesse Bader, who not only became a famous evangelist, but founder of the World Convention of Churches of Christ. She too defended the woman’s call to preaching, noting that it is preparation and consecration, not sex or previous condition of servitude, that determines the call.

Some women, like Betha Mason Fuller who was ordained in 1896, became ministers when they assumed the pulpit at the illness or death of their husbands. Others, like Gustine Weaver, pioneered by taking classes at a divinity school. She studied under J.W. McGarvey at the College of the Bible in 1895, but only by entering class late, by sitting on the back seat next to the door, by not speaking to the men, and by exiting early when the prof nodded to her! But it was Ellen Moore Warren who was the first woman to take a degree from a Disciples seminary, the College of the Bible in 1916.

Barbara Kellison was more aggressive in her defense of women’s rights in ministry. In 1862 she wrote a long essay on the question, arguing that it should be settled by the Bible. She painstakingly answered the objections to women preaching and pointed to the inconsistencies of those who opposed it. She observed that freed male slaves had more rights in the church than women, and pointed to the way some would have women enter heaven only long enough to sing or be segregated in a corner to themselves!

Some women became writers and editors, a notable instance being Jane Errett, daughter of Isaac Errett, who served the *Christian Standard* for 61 years in various capacities, longer than any other person. When Isaac Errett founded the journal in 1866, Jane was at his side as assistant editor. Debra B. Hull, in her brilliant study of Christian Church women, says that when Isaac Errett died in 1888 his daughter would have become editor had her name been John instead of Jane! But “Miss Jennie,” as they called her, would hardly have been an editor bishop. If a woman filled that role it was Kathryn Sommer, wife of Daniel Sommer, who took over the *American Christian Review* from her husband and would not let him write for it! She had no little influence among the “Sommerite” Churches of Christ.

Other women served the *Standard* as writers and columnists, including the poignant Persis Christian, who did not hesitate to debate “the women’s issue” in her column. In one column she noted that while the male clergy debated the issue, there were 722 women in the U.S. (up to 1890) who had already settled the matter by responding to God’s call to preach the gospel. When the *Standard* began the 20<sup>th</sup> century it announced that five talented writers would serve as special contributors. Four of them were women!

Jessie Pounds, who died in 1921, wrote several children’s books, 600 hymns, and over 1,000 poems. She was also an exhorter, encouraging good works in numerous areas. An endowed chair at Hiram College is named for her. If there was a theologian among the women writers it was Mattie Boteler (died 1929), who taught an innovative Bible class at Central Christian Church in Cincinnati for 35 years in which she trained lay evangelists, men as well as women. She wrote Bible commentaries for classes and served as editor of *The Lookout*. She was known to be uniquely perceptive not only in the scriptures but in the nature of the Movement as well. Eliza Davies heard Alexander Campbell in her native Scotland and attended him while he was in jail in Glasgow. She was so impressed that she followed him to America. She ministered to his distressed family at Bethany for several years, taught at Midway orphanage in Kentucky, and served as a missionary teacher in the back country of Australia. Her engaging 570 page autobiography, *The Story of An Earnest Life (1881)*, is one of the most important books in the Movement’s archives. It provides intimate portraits of such leaders as J.W. McGarvey and Robert Richardson as well as rare glimpses into Campbell family life. It is also the story of a Christian woman’s triumph over incredibly difficult circumstances.

Then there were the women educators, not the least of which were within the Campbell family. Jane Campbell McKeever, Alexander’s sister, founded Pleasant Hill Female Seminary in West Middleton, Pennsylvania near Bethany, first in her home and then in 1842 on its own campus. Offering a Mistress of Arts degree, it was

roughly equivalent in curriculum to the men's colleges, including Bethany. It educated some of the Movement's most influential women, including Jane Errett and Decima Campbell, Alexanders tenth daughter. While she was at it, Mrs. McKeever and her husband reared 20 children, natural and adopted.

Alexandrina Campbelline Pendleton ("Miss Cammie") was the precocious daughter of Lavinia and William Pendleton and the granddaughter of Alexander Campbell, who doted over her. She not only became a lifelong professor of modern languages at Bethany College, but helped pull the college through difficult times. She was an effective fund raiser as well as an exacting teacher. Three of Campbell's daughters were also influential in the Movement. While Lavinia and Clarinda, both of whom married William Pendleton, died as young mothers, they traveled with their father and became articulate exponents of his reformation. They also provided moral support for the founding Bethany College.

Decima, a child of Campbell's old age, survived her father by 54 years, thus providing witness to the next two generations. She lived on in the Campbell Mansion and helped to preserve it along with the Old Meeting House. Selina Campbell, Alexander's second wife, survived her husband by 27 years and was a witness of the Campbell era to the next generation, including a book of reminiscences of her husband's homelife. She was also a fund raiser for various causes.

Emily Tubman (born 1794) is honored as one of the influential women of the Christian Church because of her philanthropy. A Georgian and a former slave owner, she supported the Confederacy during the Civil War. She was a charter subscriber to the *Millennial Harbinger* and often entertained Alexander on his trips to the South. She helped start the Christian Church in Augusta. She became a very rich widow when her husband, an Episcopalian, died in 1836. For half a century she doled out large sums for the Movement's causes, including missions. She not only gave money to Bethany College but recruited students from the South. At her funeral it was said she did more good by her exemplary life than by the money she gave away.

Other women in the South served as presidents of de facto co-presidents of colleges with their husbands. Charlotte Fall was a teacher at Nashville Female Academy before she married Tolbert Fanning in 1836. They ran several schools together, evangelized together (though she did not preach), and finally founded Franklin College (for men) and an attending school for women in 1845. The schools were in effect one school and they were sort of co-presidents. When Campbell visited Charlotte's school he gave it high marks. They said that she would teach all day and then do domestic chores at night. This was typical of the pioneer woman.

Luela St Clair's husband became president of Christian College in Columbia, Missouri in 1893 and died a few months later. She was named to succeed him. She was joined later by Emma Moore as co-president. For a time the two women actually owned the college. Two other women, one white and one black and both preachers, were instrumental in starting Jarvis Christian College in Texas in 1913. Many Disciples women were active in the temperance movement, including Carry Nation herself, who was married to a Disciple minister. She and her cohorts destroyed saloons with hatchets in the name of the Lord!

Finally, there were the deaconesses (Why not simply deacons?) who have been more generally accepted than women preachers, at least in theory. Even Alexander Campbell, who said he stood with Paul when it came to women speaking in church, saw women deacons as part of the ancient order. Tolbert Fanning, editor of the *Gospel Advocate* in Nashville also called for women to serve as deacons, as did Robert Milligan in his influential *Scheme of Redemption*, insisting that "The Diaconate of the Primitive Church was not confined to the male members."

Still, women deacons have been rare, virtually nonexistent in some segments of the Movement. But as early as 1833 the Christian Church in Baltimore had "three Elders, three Deacons, and three Deaconesses." There were other instances of women deacons, but such a role for women never materialized, which is odd since it had leadership sanction. But the leaders never promoted it, perhaps because of the Victorian role women were expected to fill, especially in the South. But one Churches of Christ minister made a point when he said, "We have *many* women deacons. We just don't call them that!"

This survey of women among the pioneers is but a tiny sampling of those who served. The vast majority served in the shadows, not only keeping the family together while their men were out as evangelists, but nurturing the church as well. They not only taught the Sunday School and went calling, but they prepared the Communion, stoked the fire, and kept the meetinghouse. When there was a shortage of men they conducted worship, often from their seats lest they offend. They are the unsung heroes of the Movement, even "Shapers of a Movement" as Debra B. Hull puts it.