

I remember once being asked to speak at an evangelical seminar on the role of women in the church. At one point I remarked that as a woman preacher I had never received anything but acceptance and affirmation in the Methodist Church. Clearly that was not the experience of most of the audience. At the end of the session one lady broke down and wept as she described how her attempts to suggest initiatives and contribute ideas in her local church were regarded with suspicion and hostility by the male leadership. I have never forgotten that day. It made me realise how fortunate and blessed I was to be a Methodist and how much hurt and frustration are experienced by women in many other churches. It also caused me to reflect on what the Church over the years has lost out on in refusing to allow women to exercise the gifts God has very evidently given them.

Methodism came into being at a time, in church life, when very little was expected of women apart from attendance at Sunday worship. Dr Samuel Johnson, a contemporary of Wesley, once famously remarked, after the unusual experience of hearing a Quaker female preacher, *“Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.”* Enough said.

John Wesley, by contrast, had a very different attitude. Way ahead of his time, he saw the value of putting women into leadership. As early as 1742 Methodism in London listed 66 leaders and 49 of them were women. Women led classes (fellowship groups), provided vital hospitality for itinerant preachers and were involved in by far the greater part of Methodism’s practical ministry to the outcasts of society.

Some of these early Methodist women were remarkable. There was Hannah Ball who worked with the poor and founded the first Sunday school in Britain. John Wesley had such a high opinion of her judgement that he relied upon her to check on the performance of his preachers in the vicinity of Oxfordshire and even to oversee the building of a Methodist chapel. There was Martha Thompson, a servant from Preston working in London who was converted after hearing Wesley preach and then forcibly committed to the infamous asylum of Bedlam by her employer. Wesley himself secured her release and had her delivered back north to her family. She started a Methodist society in Preston and spent the rest of her life seeing the cause flourish and grow in that part of the country.

There were women like Mary Bosanquet, who was from a wealthy family. She was led to faith by the witness of a Methodist maidservant and one of Wesley’s preachers. She used a legacy from her grandmother to leave home, live independently and form with others a community dedicated to the pursuit of holiness and the care of some thirty five orphans and almost as many impoverished adults.

Then there were the women preachers. At first Wesley was unsure about this. In those days it was only the Quakers who permitted women to preach and he did not want people to confuse Methodism with the Society of Friends. Slowly however, pragmatist that he was, he began to see that God had gifted some women in this way and that in an extraordinary time of blessing God had given some women an extraordinary calling to preach. It was something that happened gradually. First these women led their classes in Bible study and prayer. Then they started to testify to their own personal experience of faith. After that they began to “exhort” – to urge people to come to Christ and to move on in the things of God. All of this would have happened in homes and midweek meetings. It was only a step further on to have them present the gospel and expound passages of scripture in more formal settings.

Wesley could only affirm what he perceived to be of God. He urged them to “Speak, therefore, as you can and by and by you shall speak as you would”.

What women they were! There was Sarah Crosby, one of Methodism’s first woman preachers who travelled for twenty years preaching to great effect. There was Elizabeth Tonkin who started preaching at nineteen and kept going while raising eleven children. There was Mary Taft of whom it was said that “Revival broke out whenever she spoke”. Here in Ireland there was Margaret Davidson from Killinchy who preached around the countryside despite being blind and led over a hundred people to Christ. One of my favourite novels is *Adam Bede* by George Eliot. Its heroine, Dinah Morris, was modelled on Elizabeth Eliot, the author’s aunt, who was a Methodist woman preacher in those early years.

It has to be said that after Wesley’s death everything changed. The British Methodist Conference of 1803 forbade women to preach other than to their own sex and even then only under strictly controlled conditions. Perhaps it was evidence of Methodism losing its cutting edge, seeking respectability and settling for conformity with other denominations. The ban was only lifted in 1910 and from 1918 women were recruited as local preachers on the same basis as men.

In Ireland women were not admitted as members of the Methodist Conference until 1910 and we had to wait until 1977 for the ordination of our first female minister. Since then we have seen a woman elected as our first ever Lay Leader .

So, ladies, we’ve come a long way! This month a little bit of history will be made with the installation of Heather Morris as the first woman President in Irish Methodism. Perhaps the most wonderful part of this is that Conference voted for the person and not the gender. That is the mark of where we have come. We want to wish her God’s richest blessing in the coming year. Heather, you’re standing in a wonderful succession of godly and gifted Methodist women.

Eat your heart out, Dr Johnson!