***The Promise Fulfilled***

Understanding a Wesleyan/Holiness paradigm for women in ministry, by Rev. Dr. Susie Stanley, with Rev. Dr. Carla Sunberg. **[[1]](#footnote-1)**

While evangelist Lena Shoffner was preaching in Oklahoma City in 1904, a man rose and proceeded to the platform. Disrupting the meeting, he shouted: “I rebuke thee in the name of the Lord.” The individual insisted Shoffner leave the pulpit. In response, she stopped her sermon long enough to place her hand on her hip, look the opposer in the eye and tell him that they had paid rent for the hall and furnished it and if he did not like what he was hearing he could rent a place and preach as he wished.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this incident Shoffner exhibited “holy boldness,” a characteristic many Wesleyan/Holiness women possessed. Gifted by the Holy Spirit, women such as Shoffner broke through the invisible boundaries of “woman’s sphere” and preached. The doctrine of holiness provided an alternative social ethic that challenged the ideology that woman’s place was in the home. Recognizing that “woman’s sphere” was a man-made construction, women appealed to a higher authority, quoting Bible verses such as “we ought to obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29).[[3]](#footnote-3) They rejected the confining strictures of “woman’s sphere” and performed the public ministries God called them to accomplish.

Sociologist Bryan Wilson has observed: “The Holiness Movement in its varied forms brought women to the fore, perhaps more than any previous development in Christianity.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Emerging during the nineteenth century in the United States, the Wesleyan/Holiness movement affirmed the ministry of women from its inception.[[5]](#footnote-5) It offers a usable past for the support of contemporary women clergy that is lacking in most mainline Protestant denominations which only recently have granted women ordination. The movement is distinguished by the emphasis on the second work of grace, also called sanctification or perfection, a distinct experience following salvation or being born again. Sanctification, an instantaneous experience accomplished by the Holy Spirit upon total consecration to Christ, results in holiness. Tracing its roots to Methodism, the movement values the writings of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley, particularly “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection” (1739), a document which serves as a key reference.

Given the initial strong affirmation of women clergy in the Wesleyan/Holiness movement and the many women who ministered during its formative years, an examination of Wesleyan/Holiness clergy statistics by the early 1990’s presented a far more dismal picture for women than would be expected. They only exception was the Salvation Army, which has maintained a high percentage of women clergy. In 1896 the Salvation Army had over 1,000 women officers out of a total of 1,854 in the United States. By 1992 women still comprised a majority of the 24,779 ordained Salvation Army officers. Despite these impressive statistics, there are some practices in the Salvation Army that discriminate against women. For example, when a woman marries, she assumes her husband’s rank if she outranked him prior to marriage.[[6]](#footnote-6) A couple’s allowance is based on the husband’s years of service. Likewise, husbands receive appointments, and their wives serve under them. Some of these discriminations have recently (2015) been addressed, providing married female officers their own salary.

In contrast to the Salvation Army, the percentage of women clergy in the Church of the Nazarene dropped from 20 percent in 1908 to 6 percent by 1973.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1989, only 49 Nazarene women pastored churches in the United States. This is less than 1 percent of 5,129 American congregations.[[8]](#footnote-8) In 1992 almost one-third (197) of the women clergy were retired, 56 pastored churches or missions while 121 served as associate pastors, and 61 were involved in other ministries or were students. The remaining women were unassigned.[[9]](#footnote-9) Currently only one woman serves as a district superintendent, and only 4 women have held this position in the USA or Canada throughout the history of the denomination.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The highest percentage of women pastors in the Church of God (Anderson) was 32 percent in 1925. In 1992 the percentage of women clergy was 15.[[11]](#footnote-11) Three Church of God women held executive positions in national agencies in 1989 compared to 45 men.[[12]](#footnote-12) Jeannette Flynn became the first woman to direct an agency when she became director of Church and Ministry Service in 1994.

Sect analysis helps explain the reduction in the percentage of women clergy that has taken place in most Wesleyan/Holiness churches. In the early stages of development, sects value prophetic leadership and accept women preachers. As they institutionalize and shift from a prophetic to a priestly understanding of authority, the percentage of women in leadership positions declines.[[13]](#footnote-13) Groups that earlier had readily approved the prophetic authority of women evangelists found it difficult to affirm women in a pastoral role that relied more and more on priestly authority.

The Church of God (Anderson) offers a clear illustration of what happens as a group undergoes the transition from prophetic to priestly leadership. In the early decades of the Church of God, evangelists traveled throughout the country seeking to spread the gospel as far as possible rather than to establish local congregations. One of the distinguishing features at the outset was the Church of God’s anti-institutionalism that inhibited the proliferation of churches and the development of a national organization. However, by the 1910s congregations had evolved in some locations where evangelists had conducted revivals and a national structure emerged.[[14]](#footnote-14) As itinerant ministry diminished, women lost an outlet for ministry.[[15]](#footnote-15)

R. Stanley Ingersol points to institutionalization as one of the main causes of the decline in women clergy in the Church of the Nazarene. Males controlled the institutional development during the early decades while women remained charismatic leaders. The Cagles represent this pattern. C.G. Cagle, the second husband of Mary Lee Cagle, served as superintendent of the New Mexico district (1918-1920) and the West Texas district (1926-1936), while Mary Lee Cagle worked as district evangelist in these two locations.[[16]](#footnote-16)

While most Wesleyan/Holiness churches ordained women from their inceptions, for the most part, they have yet to concede priestly authority to women at the highest institutional levels. This helps to explain why very few women hold executive positions at the national level in Wesleyan/Holiness churches. The Salvation Army has been the exception; Eva Barrows became general in 1986, assuming responsibility for the Salvation Army throughout the world until her retirement in 1993, along with Linda Bond who served from 2011-2013. And now, Dr. Jo Anne Lyon leads the Wesleyan church as their only General Superintendent.

Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton, and Donald W. Dayton attribute the decline in women clergy to the professionalization of leadership that has occurred in Wesleyan/Holiness groups, contending that a growing demand for seminary-trained pastors resulted in a reduction of women.[[17]](#footnote-17) This is particularly evident in the Church of the Nazarene. Rebecca Laird credits increased ordination requirements for having a negative impact on the number of Nazarene women in ministry since 1950.[[18]](#footnote-18) It was probably harder for women to relocate in order to attend seminary than it was for men.

A second reason for the decline of women clergy is acquiescence to cultural stereotypes that support males in leadership roles and limit women’s participation in positions of authority. Lillie S. McCutcheon has observed: “We have had decades when our culture influenced our movement to discourage women in pastoral ministry. . . . It is disappointing that the church continues to remain with male domination when it should have pioneered the equal status for women.”[[19]](#footnote-19) R. Eugene Sterner states that the Church of God “has traditionally seen women in a supportive rather than a decision-making leadership capacity. In this we have pretty much reflected prevailing social standards.”[[20]](#footnote-20) While these statements describe the situation in the Church of God, accommodation to culture has occurred in other Wesleyan/Holiness groups as well.

“Fundamentalist leavening”[[21]](#footnote-21) also accounts for the reduction in women clergy. Often, theological justification has been utilized to support cultural stereotypes. Fundamentalists who oppose the leadership of women in the church attempt to support their position by keeping alive the arguments derived from 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 14, insisting on a literal interpretation of these passages of Scripture. Just as the movement has accommodated to culture, it has also compromised its earlier convictions by adopting fundamentalist arguments that support female subordination. Wesleyan/Holiness laypeople and clergy who are unaware of their heritage embrace the fundamentalist viewpoint expressed by such lecturers as Bill Gothard, who promoted male headship in all areas of life, precluding any leadership role for women in the church.[[22]](#footnote-22) R. Eugene Sterner observes: “With what is an apparent trend to more conservative thinking among our people, there is a tendency to define, again, the women’s place as in the home.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Scholars have documented “fundamentalist leavening” in the Church of the Nazarene and the Free Methodist Church as well as in the Church of God.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Experts who research women’s advancement in the workforce coined the term glass ceiling to explain the fact that, despite the inroads women are making in various professions, the top jobs in their chosen fields elude them. In most Wesleyan/Holiness churches, a similar humanly constructed barrier exists, more appropriately labeled a “stained-glass ceiling” that adjusts to various heights depending on the particular church. Some women never cope with the stained-glass ceiling because a stained-glass door prevents them from entering the church to assume a professional role. Other churches affirm women’s rights to serve as associate pastors while the position of senior pastor is off-limits. Many churches claim no ceiling exists within their communions, but statistics indicate otherwise. People in these denominations believe that they are absolved from any responsibility actively to promote women in ministry because their churches have always ordained women. They refuse to admit that prejudice against women might be the cause for the low percentages of women clergy in their denominations. They do not recognize that fundamentalist leavening and other forms of accommodation account for the large gap between theory and practice.

Others, however, comprehend this contradiction. In an editorial in the Church of God’s *Vital Christianity*, Arlo Newell quotes C.E. Brown: “It is only when the church is in deep spiritual apostasy that the voice of her female prophets is silenced.” Newell acknowledges: “It may be that while we have debated doctrinal purity and biblical authority, apostasy has overtaken us through sexual discrimination. Let us return to the apostolic church pattern and hear the voice of the Lord as we recognize and receive female prophets.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Newell wrote in a subsequent editorial: “In a time of social enlightenment when sexist barriers are being broken down, we in the church seem to have some spiritual blind spots. Prejudice and discrimination are never broken down or destroyed without corrective measures being willfully and intentionally implemented.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

At least two groups have recognized the inconsistency between their official support of women clergy and the low numbers of ordained women and have passed resolutions encouraging women in leadership. A resolution adopted by the Church of God in 1974 states in part: “in light of statistics which document the diminishing use of women’s abilities in the life and work of the church, . . . RESOLVED, That more women be given opportunity and consideration for positions of leadership in the total program of the Church of God, locally, statewide, and nationally.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene issued a statement on women’s rights in 1980 that includes the following: “We support the right of women to use their God-given spiritual gifts within the church. We affirm the historic right of women to be elected and appointed to places of leadership within the Church of the Nazarene.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Resolutions alone will not result in more women clergy, but awareness is the first step toward change.

These steps in the early 1990’s led to the formation of Wesleyan Holiness Women Clergy. This began when five Wesleyan/Holiness denominations cosponsored a conference for women clergy in April 1994 attended by over 375 participants.[[29]](#footnote-29) A second conference was held in April 1996 and led to great denominational enthusiasm, reflecting a willingness to support and encourage women clergy. Soon Wesleyan/Holiness Women Clergy was officially organized under the sponsorship of five Wesleyan/Holiness denominations and continues to serve as an advocate, resource and voice for women clergy to this day. The group holds biennial conferences of approximately 500 women clergy from the sponsoring denominations and beyond.

Wesleyan/Holiness advocates of women clergy are challenging fundamentalist leavening and cultural accommodation with biblical defenses first articulated in the early years of their churches’ history. By recovering their heritage, Wesleyan/Holiness groups are appropriating a usable past in their efforts to crack the stained-glass ceiling.

1. The majority of this text comes from Stanley, S.C. (1996) “The Promise Fulfilled: Women’s Ministries in the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement.” In *Religious Institutions and Women’s Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream*, ed. Catherine Wessinger, pp. 139-157. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press. Edits and updates have been made by Carla Sunberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John W.V. Smith, *The Quest for Holiness and Unity* (Anderson, Ind.: Warner Press, 1980), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. All texts are from the King James Version of the Bible, which was the primary translation used in the Wesleyan/Holiness movement during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bryan R. Wilson, *Religious Sects* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Other formulations of holiness include one which centered around Charles Finney and Asa Mahan at Oberlin College in the mid1800s and Keswick holiness, which originated in England later in the century. Keswick teachings were particularly popular among fundamentalists in the United States. These expressions of holiness permeated existing denominations rather than resulting in new groups as was the case in the Wesleyan/Holiness movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Minutes, *First Conference of the Christian Mission*, held at the People’s Mission Hall, 272 Whitechapel Rd., London, 15-17 June 1879; quoted in Norman H. Murdoch, "Female Ministry in the Thought and Work of Catharine Booth," *Church History* 53 (September 1984): 349, 355, 360, 358-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Donald W. Dayton and Lucille Sider Dayton, “Women as Preachers: Evangelical Precedents,” *Christianity Today* 19 (23 May 1975): 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stanley Ingersol, “Burden of Discontent: Mary Lee Cagle and the Southern Holiness Movement,” Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1989, 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Phyllis Perkins, “Clergywomen in the Church of the Nazarene: Who Are We?,” *New Horizons* (Spring 1992): 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Maye McReynolds, who had managed the Spanish Mission in the Southwest, was officially recognized as district superintendent in 1911. Elsie Wallace filled a vacancy in the Northwest for four months in 1920. See Laird, 42, 54. Josie Owens served as District Superintendent of the New England District from 2005-2009 and Carla Sunberg as Co-District Superintendent of East Ohio from 2011 to the present. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Susie Stanley, “Church of God Women Ministers: A Look at the Statistics,” in Leonard, *Called to Minister*, 175. Statistics for 1992 were provided by Ilene Bargerstock, Division of Church Service, Church of God. The 1992 figure includes 113 retired women. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Juanita Evans Leonard, “Women, Change and the Church,” in her *Called to Minister*, 162-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Barfoot and Sheppard trace this development in several Pentecostal denominations. As the prophetic emphasis diminished in these groups, men increasingly assumed priestly functions. The Wesleyan/Holiness movement corresponds to this pattern. See Charles H. Barfoot and Gerald T. Sheppard, “Prophetic vs. Priestly Religion: The Changing Role of Women Clergy in Classical Pentecostal Churches,” *Review of Religious Research* 22 (September 1980): 2-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John W.V. Smith, 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Joseph Allison, “Why We Encourage Women to Be Leaders,” *Church of God Missions* 52 (January 1988): 9; and Joseph Allison, “An Overview of the Involvement of Women in the Church of God from 1916,” in *The Role of Women in Today’s World: Six Study Papers* (Anderson, Ind.: Commission on Social Concerns, Church of God, 1978), 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ingersol, 277, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nancy Hardesty, Lucille Sider Dayton, and Donald W. Dayton, “Women in the Holiness Movement: Feminism in the Evangelical Tradition,” in *Women of Spirit: Female Leadership in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Ruether and Eleanor McLaughlin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 249-50. This article provides an excellent overview of women in the Holiness movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Laird, iv. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lillie S. McCutcheon, “Lady in the Pulpit,” *Centering on Ministry* 5 (Winter 1980): 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. R. Eugene Sterner, “Women in the Church of God,” in *The Role of Women*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Paul Bassett coined the term “fundamentalist leavening” to signify the influence of fundamentalism with respect to the understanding of the authority and inspiration of the Bible in the Church of the Nazarene, but “leavening” has influenced other theological positions as well. See Paul Merritt Bassett, “The Fundamentalist Leavening of the Holiness Movement, 1914-1940: The Church of the Nazarene—A Case Study,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 13, no. 1 (1978): 65-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Williams agrees that Gothard’s lectures are often accepted as “gospel,” resulting in women’s diminished role in the church. See Williams, 32. Gothard’s teachings have made inroads into other churches as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sterner, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Ingersol, 277-78; Laird, iv; and Adams, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Arlo F. Newell, “Deep Spiritual Apostasy?,” *Vital Christianity* 100 (8 June 1980): 5. *Vital Christianity* is a Church of God periodical, formerly called *Gospel Trumpet*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Arlo F. Newell, “For Men Only?,” *Vital Christianity* 109 (May 1989): 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Barry L. Callen, ed., *Thinking and Acting Together* (Anderson, Ind.: Executive Council of the Church of God and Warner Press, 1992), 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Church of the Nazarene Manual, 1980 (p. 346), quoted in Karen Schwartz, “And ‘Your Daughters Will Prophesy,’” *The Preacher’s Magazine* 59 (September 1983): 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The denominations sponsoring the conference were the Church of God (Anderson), the Church of the Nazarene, the Free Methodist Church, the Wesleyan Church, the Evangelical Friends, International. The Salvation Army (USA Western Territory) was an official supporter of the conference. For coverage of the conference, see Timothy C. Morgan, *Christianity Today* 38 (16 May 1994): 52; and Stan Ingersol, *Christian Century* 111 (29 June-6 July 1994): 632. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)