

Cultural Policy with Dr. Robert Baron

Four Mennonite Pioneers:

Case Studies of the Ordination of Mennonite Women

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Research Strategy Essay

I enjoy researching even more than I enjoy writing. Making discoveries and finding all the pieces that complete a picture of a particular topic or event is very satisfying.

Pieces for this project were challenging to locate. The topic concerned the process used to implement changes in a cultural policy which had remained unaltered for four centuries. Some essential sources were housed in denominational library archives. Accessibility of archived materials depends directly on the sophistication of the cataloging and retrieval capabilities of the library. Limitations of this sort necessitated some prior knowledge of the types of materials which existed. I planned to use oral history methods to interview two key persons who could point me in the right direction. My catch-22 was the need to know enough about what had transpired to ask informed interview questions which could elicit productive leads. I spent hours poring over unindexed archived newsletters to begin piecing the narrative together. The interviews then provided leads for online searches of denominational publications and access to other unpublished archival documents. Some sources referenced other documents, which I also pursued. A variety of sources--archived materials, the online publications, the insights of the interviewees, and a number of books which supplied the historical and cultural context--all provided pieces which I assembled into a picture of the events and the interactions which culminated in an historic cultural policy decision.

Research is rarely as tidy or linear as one might want or expect, especially when it incorporates oral history or archival searches. The amount of time I invested was significant, but good planning and preparation served me well. The pieces came together in a satisfying way. My project is itself now a part of the library archive--and has already been consulted by church leaders to verify some facts as they planned how to recognize the 25th anniversary of the decision.

Four Mennonite Pioneers: Case Studies of the Ordination of Mennonite Women

Four twentieth-century Mennonite women—separated by time, geography, and circumstance—played significant roles as pioneers in the journey toward ordination of women as pastors in the Mennonite Church. Although their names would not be recognized in most contemporary Mennonite households, each made a unique contribution to a transition in cultural policy, in a denomination characterized by a tradition of clear-cut gender roles. In 1911 Ann Allebach, of Green Lane, PA, became the “first Mennonite woman on record to be ordained a minister by Mennonites in North America” (Fretz). Although Allebach’s ordination was not reflective of a broader movement, she technically retains this distinction. Six decades later, in 1973, Emma Richards was ordained as co-pastor of Lombard Mennonite Church in Illinois, distinguishing her as the first denominationally-sanctioned female Mennonite pastor (Swartley 59). In 1984 a proposal to credential Diane Stitt as a pastor in Franconia Mennonite Conference (PA) forced that conference to grapple with its own policy, eventually leading to approval for other women. Much more recently, in 2008, Lynn Parks became the first woman to be officially ordained in Lancaster Mennonite Conference (PA), the outcome of a challenging and contentious process (Sensenig).

The significance of the roles of these women derives its import from the cultural context in which these actions took place. This milieu strongly influenced the questions which were asked, in what manner they were asked, and the eventual outcomes.

Cultural Context

The predominant cultural value for early Mennonites was that of community. Their history was rooted in martyrdom in 16th and 17th century Europe. Their radical espousal of the separation

of church and state, adult believers' baptism, the priesthood of all believers, and pacifism brought persecution from all sides. They were hated and hunted by Catholic and Protestant leaders alike. Thousands were martyred for their refusal to recant such heretical beliefs. Survival in this setting required a separated, close-knit community, where everyone was known by all and deemed safe to include in the group. When the Mennonites fled to the refuge of William Penn's colony, starting in 1683, they took with them a strong value for community, based in this practicality, but also rooted in their theology.

For these Mennonites the only way to serve God and to know Him fully was in the context of the community of faith. They depended heavily on a model of discernment in which God's will was understood through the multiple voices of the community, not through individualistic revelations. Therefore, sustaining the values of their faith required sustaining their community. Mechanisms such as mutual accountability, separation from the world, simplicity of lifestyle, and imposition of agreed-upon cultural values were necessary to maintain the community's purity and continuity. Each settlement implemented rules and discipline purposed to protect the community from influences which might divide it or distract it. Their leaders—bishops and ministers—were chosen at that time by lot¹ and carried a spiritual and cultural mandate to discern policies and to enforce communal understandings.

Groupings of Mennonites in Pennsylvania gradually drew together and became more institutionalized. The structure which evolved kept community as a central tenet, but recognized a need for increased centralization and consistency among congregations. Geographically based conferences formed and, in cooperation with each other, eventually birthed the Mennonite Church as a North American denomination. (Mennonite Church USA is now comprised of 21 conferences.) As denominational leadership became a 20th century reality, it continued the cultural mandate of implementing policies which had been discerned

¹ Nominations for the leadership position were received, either from the congregation or the district bishops. "The bishop placed on a table in the sight of the congregation a number of hymnbooks or Bibles equal to the number of candidates, in one of which he...had hidden a thin slip" containing a scripture. "A special prayer for divine action was then offered. Each candidate in succession...took one of the books, which the bishop then opened in turn until he found the lot slip. It was assumed that the one in whose book the slip is found is the one whom God had chosen" (Bender, "Lot").

by the churches and conferences it served. A salient point here is that area conferences, while constrained not to violate denominational polity once it was established, still exercised a measure of autonomy in setting policies which did not conflict with the official polity.

Over the decades, this autonomy produced a great assortment of practices among different conferences, based primarily on the relative conservatism of individual conferences. Adoption of modern inventions and conventions most often reflected these differences. Some conferences more readily embraced changes in mode of dress, the use of automobiles, the purchase of radios and televisions, the inclusion of musical instruments, etc., while others held that these changes made the church too worldly and would not allow their adoption. The leaders (usually conference bishops) who made these decisions could usually point to a scriptural basis for their beliefs—some were explicit; others were implied and required interpretation of a passage to reach a particular conclusion. Differences in interpretation, and injunction, at times produced sufficient dissention to cause schisms that created new denominations alongside the old.

One issue which eventually demonstrated great variation among conferences concerned gender roles. In earlier eras, a fairly consistent understanding would have been prevalent: males and females were equal in the sight of God, but He had ordained an authority structure for the church and home which reflected the nature of God's relationship with His creation. God placed leadership gifts in women, but did not intend for these gifts to be used in authority over men. This cultural understanding would not have been questioned, by men or women, during the first few centuries of the Mennonite Church. They did not view the hegemony exercised by male leaders as a self-serving assertion of power. For both genders it was a matter of conscience, based on a common theology. Most women did not feel subservient or oppressed. It cannot be overemphasized that, with occasional pockets of dissention over the centuries, this was the way that Christian society had functioned for nearly 2000 years. It was the norm. However, this in no way asserts that all male dominance was benign, practiced by loving men who never abused their position of power. Given human tendencies, certainly there

were instances of misuse of God-given authority, and resistance from women. But, overall, the system functioned well and was seldom questioned.

By today's standards, on this side of the women's suffrage and women's liberation movements, the rules the church imposed seem oppressive and archaic. Each conference, and each bishop's district, would have its own specific list, but examples included: "[W]omen could be teachers of children and younger women but not of men, for that would be a violation of the authority/submission positions. It also meant that women could fill no leadership functions, since that would put them over men. Thus, with rare exceptions, women did not serve as choristers, secretaries, or chairmen of the Sunday School conferences" (Swartley 13-14). In conservative Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC), rules extended even into the women's domain: as recently as the 1920's women's sewing circles "were required to have even the devotions at their work sessions presented by ordained men" (Ruth, *Earth* 878). In 1920 when American women gained the right to vote, LMC "passed a rule declaring that 'no sister' would be 'allowed to exercise' the now legal privilege of voting in public elections" because this "would contradict 'the New Testament Scriptures and the doctrine of the church'" (*ibid* 892). In 1928 the bishops of LMC published a decision "that women are not permitted to give public addresses in the church" (quoted in Ruth, *Earth* 892). Given this cultural climate, it should be apparent why women being ordained to become pastors was not anywhere within the realm of possibility, or even in the thought life of most Mennonites.

One final prevalent cultural value completes this picture. Even for men it was not considered appropriate to express a desire or calling to become a minister. This was considered distasteful and irreverent self-promotion. If a man felt called of God, he was to keep this to himself, and trust that God would confirm such a calling through the discernment of the community of faith, primarily through the use of the lot (Ruth, *Earth* 708; Swartley 14). So, in later years when women started to assert themselves to be set apart as pastors, this was not only a breach in the culture's understanding of a woman's place but also a violation of the mechanisms through which church leadership was usually affirmed.

Pioneer—Ann Jemima Allebach

Ann Allebach, born 1874, was not raised Mennonite but was baptized into a Mennonite congregation in southeast Pennsylvania. She was a highly educated woman for her time, pursuing doctoral work in pedagogy and philosophy. Her career as an educator and her talents as an activist won her much commendation among a variety of people. In 1911 Allebach took the bold step of asking her pastor, N.B. Grubb of First Church of Philadelphia, to ordain her as a minister. Grubb, along with the pastor of Allebach's home congregation, seized this opportunity to act from their own strong convictions about Christians being on the leading edge of social awareness (Ruth, *Maintaining* 412). On January 15, 1911, Allebach became the first North American Mennonite woman to be credentialed as a minister, surrounded by "the company of a large audience of church members, friends, and family" (Fretz).

This historic ordination was not representative of the feelings of the segment of the Mennonite Church to which Allebach and her pastors belonged. The pastors' willingness, and their personal agendas, made it possible for this credentialing to take place, even without conference support. A few area churches demonstrated some openness toward her ministry and occasionally invited her to speak. Her "Christian commitment and fervent oratory drew large and curious audiences" (Fretz). However, her preaching was viewed by most as more of a "novelty than as an option for other congregations" (Ruth, *Maintaining* 412). Although her name appeared on the annual roster of ministers for a period of seven years, she never pastored a Mennonite congregation. Disappointed by the lack of full acceptance of her as a minister among Mennonites, she served briefly as acting pastor of a Reformed Church in Long Island. Two years after accepting that call, a sudden heart attack brought her life and career to a close, at the young age of 43 (Fretz). Her "black-bordered funeral announcement referred to her as 'Rev. Ann J. Allebach of New York City'" (Ruth, *Maintaining* 445).

The Mennonite Church as a whole was not nearly ready to consider calling women as pastors. Although Allebach's ordination did not really serve to advance that cause, interestingly it did reflect a societal trend of the time, as documented by socio-historian Mark Chaves. Chaves's research showed that "virtually every denomination has been forced to grapple with the

question of full clergy rights for women,” (Chaves 48) and the times of greatest change have coincided with the two strongest waves of feminism. Although the women’s movement of the 1970’s brought the most significant societal shifts, the earlier movement of the 1890’s produced the second most active decade for changes in denominational policies regarding the credentialing of women (*ibid* 49). Women who were ordained around the turn of the century tended to be social activists—active in the suffrage movement and in serving the poor. Instances of “individual women approaching, or coming to the attention of, denominations multiplied” during the latter decades of the 19th century (*ibid* 165). In some denominational settings, women and men mobilized behind an individual woman, “hoping to press a test case” (quoted in Chaves, 166). However, even a mid-century female Methodist evangelist still believed that “the proper sphere for most women was the home” and that preaching was something ‘a few exceptional women’ might do” (quoted in Chaves, 68-69).

A quick review of these characteristics of women ordained during this period reveals that Allebach’s circumstances are clearly described. She was riding the wave of the previous decade’s developments. Mennonites, being late adopters of most societal changes, would not have viewed any of these developments in a positive way. They would not have condoned Allebach’s self-promotion, nor her activism, nor the process her pastors used to make their decision. If anything, this liberal, modernizing trend would have driven them in the opposite direction, strengthening their resistance to the concept. Denominational approval of women as ministers would have to wait another sixty years.

Pioneer Emma Sommers Richards

The six decades following Ann Allebach’s 1911 ordination brought great changes in the cultural norms of Mennonite individuals, congregations, and conferences. Lifestyles that had previously resembled those of the Amish gave way to modernization. Use of new farming techniques and equipment, as well as automobiles and other inventions, gradually became commonplace. Restrictions concerning mode of dress relaxed. Four part harmony was introduced and eventually became a hallmark of worship services, followed later by musical instruments. A greater emphasis on higher education resulted in the chartering of church colleges.

Congregational leadership, which had been composed of teams of unpaid ministers without formalized training, became increasingly focused in a sole professional pastor who was salaried and seminary-educated. The lot as a mechanism of discernment fell into disuse. Decision-making moved away from the centralized power of strong leaders, and was influenced by societal democratic patterns of government and representative delegates (Lebold; Bender and Hostetler).

These changes were not evenly embraced; conferences and congregations in the Midwest changed more rapidly than those in the East (especially Lancaster and Franconia Conferences). The church as a whole managed to remain relatively united, despite differences in understanding related to modernity. But this progress still exacted a price. Although 19th century changes produced more schisms than did those in the 20th century, progressive groups and conservative groups still broke away in response (Bender & Hostetler). Issues concerning the acceptability of adaptation to modern cultural concepts and practices thus threatened the Mennonite cultural value of a united community.

Into this cultural setting came Emma Richards. Her congregation, Lombard Mennonite Church, was part of the Illinois Conference of the Mennonite Church. In October of 1972 her congregation took a bold step and installed her to co-pastor the church with her husband. The following June, “after two years of study and debate,” (Richards, in Swartley, 64) the Illinois Conference ordained her to the Christian ministry, making hers the denomination’s first conference-sanctioned female ordination. Richards was well qualified for her role, with college and seminary degrees, twelve years of missionary experience, and years of teaching and pulpit supply. She successfully pastored for more than twenty-five years, serving also in denominational level positions (*ibid* 59).

Undoubtedly Richards felt a measure of scrutiny as an anomaly in her pioneering role. In reflecting back on her tenure at Lombard MC, she wrote:

I purposed to stay in the local congregation rather than accept invitations to preach and lead studies on the role of women. By staying and keeping my focus there, I could do more to show that the fears of having a woman pastor were unfounded. These fears

included dire predictions that attendance would decline, men wouldn't come to worship or go to a female pastor for help, and so on. By staying in the local congregation where my support was high, I could allay those fears. All of those projections proved untrue. (*ibid* 62)

Since Richards's ordination, numbers of other women have been credentialed throughout the denomination, demonstrating that she was indeed a pioneer in a collective movement. In 1996, following years of discussion, study, and debate, the Mennonite Church delegate assembly officially adopted denominational guidelines which stated that "cultural/ethnic origin, race, class and gender are not criteria for determining who is acceptable for ordination" (quoted in Schrag, "Lancaster Ordination"). Women in more conservative eastern conferences, who followed in Richards's footsteps, would have to wait longer, though, for the same recognition.

Before exploring those journeys, a short connection back to Chaves's research on the ordination of women is in order. As Ann Allebach's ordination reflected the societal trends of her time, so did Emma Richards's. The second wave of feminism which started in the 1960's produced a mobilized force which fought for recognition of gender equality in all fields. Groups devoted themselves to "winning full clergy status for women" (Chaves 47). Chaves found that "more denominations began to ordain women during the 1970s than during any other decade in the past 140 years" (*ibid* 49). Although many additional factors played roles in this cultural shift, there was a clear correlation between the women's movements and significant changes in the status of women in religious organizations (*ibid* 49). What must be reiterated, though, is that Emma Richards was ordained in a Midwest conference, one which was more progressive than those in the East. The very movement which launched discussions of the issue of women's ordination represented a liberal, modernizing trend which would actually strengthen the resistance of conservative Mennonites. Along with other segments of the denomination, Franconia and Lancaster Mennonite Conferences would continue to grapple with the challenge of maintaining their cultural value of community in the face of such radical differences in belief and practice.

Pioneer Diane Stitt

Franconia Mennonite Conference (FMC) delegates to the Fall 1984 assembly found themselves confronted with an unprecedented proposal. “James Longacre, representing Conference Council, presented a request from West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship that Diane Stitt be licensed for the ministry” (Schlabach, “Assembly Calls”). Although a decade had passed since the ordination of Emma Richards, the denomination’s oldest conference was about to enter its own time of testing.

In the past the idea of ordaining a woman pastor was so beyond the realm of possibility that no explicit policy had ever been put in place which either prohibited or allowed such a development (Ruth, interview). Therefore, discussion at the Assembly was limited that day to “discovering background information and discerning procedure.” The group decided to schedule a special all-day session in February 1985 “to consider the biblical, theological, and practical issues involved in the question of women in ministry” (Schlabach, “Assembly Calls”).

Diane Stitt was a church planter in Philadelphia. Like Ann Allebach, she did not grow up Mennonite but was baptized into the church as an adult. Her schooling included studies at a Mennonite college and seminary and her employment included work as a nurse and in youth ministry. Stitt had invested five years of her life as part of an inter-conference initiative to plant a new Mennonite fellowship in Philadelphia. That fellowship was impressed by her commitment and vision and recognized her leadership gifts. It unanimously desired to credential her, believing that doing so would also increase her credibility among those with whom she worked in the city. She also had the full support of the pastor who shared in the church’s leadership (Longacre, Letter).

To process this important decision, the FMC Conference Council chose to engage the congregations and delegates in as broad a manner as possible. The special session in February included sermons and responses, small group discussions, and reporting. At its conclusion delegates were encouraged to further process the matter with their congregations. Council soon provided delegates with a resourcing packet to aid them in discussing the issues. The packet’s cover letter included potential wording for a proposal, which essentially acknowledged

the variety of convictions represented in FMC but affirmed West Philadelphia's request for credentialing of Stitt. A vote on the matter was tentatively scheduled for the May Assembly.

At the May Assembly the issue continued to be processed. In the interim many delegates had undertaken the charge of the Council to query their home congregations and a significant number of representatives gave reports. The extremes included complete opposition to or complete affirmation of the credentialing request, with many other voices along that continuum. Each viewpoint was a reflection of personal and corporate scriptural understandings. Based on the group's lack of unity on the issue, the Council recommended that the vote be postponed until the upcoming fall Assembly. However, to test the waters, at the close of the May Assembly delegates were asked to respond to a survey concerning the issuing of ministerial credentials to Stitt. Of the 131 respondents, 28% were "opposed to women in ministry," 23% were fully supportive of women in ministry, and 49% were open to allowing some kind of exceptions, depending on circumstance. It appeared that FMC would soon set new precedent (Schlabach, "Assembly Discusses").

However, by the time for the scheduled vote at the November Assembly, Diane Stitt had withdrawn her request. Citing a change in the direction of her life, including marriage and graduate school, she felt led away from the pastorate at that time. Since the vote was specific to her credentials, and not with the larger issue, the "matter was put to rest for the time being." (Schlabach, "Business").

Although many breathed a sigh of relief at this reprieve, FMC soon continued to grapple with its policy. By May of 1987 reports appeared in the conference newsletter of the work of a Women in Leadership task force which was holding "local listening-learning" sessions throughout the conference. Even in the absence of a specific candidate, the Conference Council continued to move ahead and brought a recommendation to the delegates from the Conference Leadership Commission. In this document the Commission acknowledged that "in the Franconia Conference there is no consensus on this issue," and went on to offer a way "for diverse practice in the midst of strongly held convictions" which appealed to the scripture and precedent in the early church and history to be pragmatically reconciled. The most essential

part of the recommendation was a statement about agreeing “to trust each other in determining how the Lord of the Church is leading each congregation in recognizing and freeing persons with gifts to serve as leaders in the congregation.” The document’s final point was, “We anticipate that most Franconia congregations will continue to call for the licensing and/or ordination of men to pastoral leadership. However, if a congregation feels led to call a woman to pastoral leadership we will support the Leadership Commission’s recommending credentials...for her” (Longacre, Memorandum).

An inauspicious article on page 2 of the January 1988 issue of *Franconia Conference News* noted, “Assembly grants approval for licensing/ordaining women” (Hanger). The measure had passed by the significant margin of 107 to 25. There was little fanfare. Essentially the conference churches agreed to disagree--and to stay in community. Each gave the other the freedom to practice their faith according to their consciences. With even less pomp, the June 1988 newsletter quietly reported that the one of the few actions taken by the Spring Assembly was the approval of a ministerial license for Martha Kolb. Kolb was commissioned as a chaplain. Within a short period Marianne Zuercher would be ordained as pastor of a FMC congregation.

Pioneer Lynn Parks

One final recent case study rounds out this sampling of the processes used to make significant changes in Mennonite cultural policy. Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) is the denomination’s largest conference, and one of its most conservative. Although modern trends have not left the conference behind, certain characteristics of the past can still be seen there. Even with the advent of delegate assemblies, a Board of Bishops continues to exercise final authority in decisions. Women wearing prayer coverings and dressed in skirts permeate the conference’s 171 congregations. Many of the congregations are still small, rural, and composed of family networks; a significant portion is pastored by ministers without formalized theological education (Rutherford).

When the Mennonite Church delegates approved the 1996 guidelines concerning ordination, not all of the constituency of LMC was ready to take the drastic step of reversing its

credentialing ban. The 1980's found the LMC Bishop Board starting to explore the roles of the women in its midst. Even before the 1996 vote, LMC had already formed a task force in 1983 to survey women's activities in the church. This resulted in some leadership roles being opened to women, even allowing some to vote in delegate assemblies. In 1993 the Board of Bishops made policy by creating the Women in Leadership Subcommittee which advocated and educated toward the credentialing of women, and supported women already in ministry. As pressure began to mount in some segments of the conference, the Bishops focused on studying, listening, and communicating with credentialed leaders and congregations. In 1999 the LMC delegates narrowly approved a Bishop Board recommendation that allowed a limited licensing² of women for pastoral ministry. A condition of the new policy, though, was a five-year moratorium on official discussions of the conference's credentialing policy (LMC, "Bishop Board").

The end of the moratorium in 2004 thrust the issue back to the forefront. The stakes were high. There was potential to divide the conference, no matter what the outcome. Strongly held cultural values were in conflict. The Bishops faced this challenge—dealing with differing understandings of gender roles while simultaneously maintaining the community of faith—by being deliberate and thorough in their actions. Before taking any drastic steps, the Bishops continued to engage with the major stakeholders—credentialed leaders, church members, and conference delegates—in a variety of modes and venues.

Unanimity was impossible, so the Bishops appealed to a core cultural value—discernment within the faith community—to deal with this contentious issue. They used a formalized discernment technique to discuss the issue with credentialed leaders in regional cluster meetings. Several conference-wide forums also provided opportunity for leaders and laity to listen to other perspectives. After months of processing, reflecting, and discerning, the Bishops formulated a recommendation. Although the Bishop Board had constitutional and cultural authority to make the decision, it chose to allow credentialed leaders to vote, and designated a two-thirds margin (LMC, "Bishop Board"; Rutherford; Schrag, "Lancaster").

² Licensing is differentiated from ordination. Licensed pastors are "credentialed" but limited in function and in length of term.

The essence of the Bishop Board's recommendation was similar to that of FMC's: each congregation would be given freedom to call and affirm persons to serve in ministry and pastoral leadership, provided they met LMC credentialing qualifications. The recommendation reserved "the role of bishop and similar conference oversight roles" for men. (LMC, "Bishop Board" 8.) This action would align LMC with denominational guidelines but would not force any congregation to accept a woman pastor since requests for ordination would still originate at the congregational level.

After another round of publications, meetings, and listening sessions, in January 2007 the Bishops finally put their recommendation to a vote of credentialed leaders. Signed ballots came from 359 of the conference's 455 credentialed leaders. The count showed that 65.74% affirmed the recommendation, four votes shy of the needed two-thirds (Schrag, "Lancaster"). One-third of the conference was limiting the actions of the majority.

Before the Bishop Board could formulate a new plan, a counter-hegemonic move was launched. One district decided to take firm control of its own ordination process by forming its own credentialing committee. The district bishop announced his intention to ordain Elizabeth Nissley, already serving as an associate pastor. Despite warnings from the Bishop Board Executive Committee that the ordination violated conference policy and would not be recognized, the bishop moved ahead. He was reprimanded, but his credentials were not revoked (LMC Board of Bishops, Letter).

The intensity continued to build. The same bishop ordained yet another woman from his district. Some congregations threatened to leave the conference. The conference community was unraveling. Something had to be done. The Bishops began to explore the possibility of invoking their authority to overturn the vote and implement the new policy. After extensive dialog with credentialed leaders and others in the conference, and much prayer, they made their decision. On May 16, 2008, the Bishop Board implemented the new credentialing policy, effective immediately. On October 3, 2008, Lancaster Mennonite Conference officially ordained Lynn Parks as its first woman pastor (Kennel-Shenk; Sensenig).

FMC and LMC Outcomes

Franconia Mennonite Conference has had almost fifteen years in which to indicate its trajectory of ordaining women and calling them as pastors of congregations. Individual congregations continue to grapple with the issue of their relative openness to female leadership. Some have gone through their own contentious processes to arrive at policies which include approval for women pastors; others have formalized policies that clearly exclude this possibility. To date, approximately 15 women have been ordained, with five more currently moving toward ordination.³ At this time seven of the conference's 42 congregations are pastored by women, and one is co-pastored by a husband-wife team. While this proportion seems impressive, it should be noted that all eight of these churches are small and on the geographical fringes of the conference. (This number also does not take into account what fraction this is of the total number of pastors serving in the conference since many churches have multiple pastors on staff; nor does it include female associate pastors.) During the interim since the conference established its policy, there have been two large congregations, in the heart of the conference, which have called women as pastors—one had a female lead pastor, the other called a married couple as co-pastors. Both women have since retired or moved on. Credentialed women also serve in conference level leadership (Ruth, interview; Kolb; FMC website).

Lancaster Mennonite Conference has not yet had enough time for a clear pattern of action to emerge; only four years have intervened since the Bishops' historic decision. In 2011 the conference ordained two women, but only one as a lead pastor. It also licensed 3 women toward ordination, one of whom is serving as a lead pastor. The most radical development in LMC since 2008 is a change in its Bishop Board. Although approval of the 2008 policy included the stipulation that the role of bishop be retained for men, changes have been made to the Bishop Board Executive Committee. A three-year experiment was launched in early 2011 in which the bishops expanded the Executive Committee—now the Conference Executive Council—to include “five additional credentialed persons who represent the diversity (gender, culture, race, language, age) of LMC....These persons are full, voting members of the

³ Some were already serving as pastors; others have no intention of pastoring a congregation.

Conference Executive Council and invited to attend Bishop Board meetings with voice but no vote.” Of the five leaders approved for this Council, three are women (LMC, Report 5, 9, 10).

Additional Analysis

When compared with other denominations, the Mennonite Church as a whole, and Franconia and Lancaster Conferences in particular, were latecomers in adapting their policies to allow for the ordination of women. Of the 44 denominations Chaves listed chronologically according to when they granted “full clergy rights to women,” the Mennonite Church (1973) was 40th (Chaves 16-17). Even so, the denomination followed some predictable patterns, articulated by Chaves, which were based on societal trends and the nature of the church’s beliefs.

As seen earlier in the analysis of the ordinations of Ann Allebach and Emma Richards, denominational actions were influenced by both of the women’s movements. Although the earlier movement did not result in any permanent change, its agitations were still clearly being felt when, for instance, Lancaster Conference explicitly forbade women to vote even after passage of the nineteenth amendment. LMC also experienced, along with other resistant denominations, some “illegitimate ordinations” in response to the second women’s movement (*ibid* 171).

The location of a denomination’s churches and its degree of centralization affected the likelihood of later adoption of ordination. Mennonites traditionally lived in rural areas, especially in Lancaster Conference but also in Franconia. Chaves’s research showed that, in general, rural congregants were significantly more resistant to female clergy. Paradoxically, the isolation of a decentralized structure actually prompted ordination due to individual congregations’ (or districts’) authority to ordain whomever they chose—as seen in the case of Ann Allebach and the requests for ordination which came from the fringes of the conferences. Decentralization also meant “that the denominational administrative infrastructure [was] less well developed, making enforcement of whatever national rules might exist more problematic” (*ibid* 140).

Resistance to female leadership could also be predicted based on Mennonite theology. Chaves found that denominations with a high view of scripture and biblical authority (with leanings toward inerrancy) were some of the most opposed to this trend. Mennonites have always considered the Bible, particularly the New Testament, their rule of faith and practice, following its teachings as closely as possible. Although the following resolution was passed in 1984 by the Southern Baptists, it could just as aptly refer to the Mennonites: “Therefore, be it Resolved, That we not decide concerns of Christian doctrine and practice by modern cultural, sociological, and ecclesiastical trends or by emotional factors; that we remind ourselves of the dearly bought Baptist principle of the final authority of Scripture in matters of faith and conduct” (quoted in Chaves, 35). Mennonites were not easily swayed by external pressures to conform to the cultural practices of others.

The Mennonite cultural value of community would also influence their resistance to this trend-- which embodied the liberal agenda of modernity. As the women’s movement increasingly emphasized women’s rights and formalized gender equality, the elevation of individual rights became of paramount importance (Chaves 82-3). The concept of individual rights, or individual discernment, directly conflicted with the community of faith valued by the Mennonites. These individualistic trends, then, would have strengthened their resolve against the movement and its manifestations.

Despite their reservations, the Mennonites did eventually formalize the ordination of women. However, as with most denominations, there remains what Chaves terms a “loose coupling of rule and practice [that] is a common feature of women’s ordination” (*ibid* 10). The number of women actually seeking credentialing has not been significant, and those who do pursue it still face many obstacles. Research shows that most credentialed women work as chaplains or associate pastors. Those who are sole or senior pastors serve in small, rural, low-status congregations, often only part time (*ibid* 29).

Whatever the limitations or challenges these women face, it is important to remember that most conflicts concerning their roles do not result from repressive male dominance. It would be easy to assume that men and women have been pitted against each other in this struggle for

recognition. The reality, though, is that conflicts over this issue find men and women aligned on both sides. Cultural understandings of gender roles and church leadership reflect matters of conscience, dictated by faithfulness to the scriptures.

Conclusion

“The issue of women in ministry in the Mennonite Church is still ambiguous. In spite of the twenty-five years since Emma Richards was ordained, we need only to read the church press to realize that women in ministry is still a live issue” (Swartley 17). What significance, then, did these four Mennonite pioneer women have? None of them single-handedly changed a system, or even a policy. None, with the exception of Ann Allebach, were activists, intentionally setting out to improve the world for the women who came after them. Not all of them even benefitted personally from their efforts. But, they were the ones who happened to be in a position to be a part of the processing of this issue by the Mennonites. Although they may not be household names, they did forge a trail for future generations to follow.

The varying processes which the Mennonites followed as they grappled with the issue demonstrated some of the factors which shape cultural policy. Each group strove to harmonize the process, not just the outcome, with significant cultural values. For many the deliberations seemed extremely protracted. But it was essential to the community to be as inclusive as possible. It was imperative that final decisions result from discernment among the community of faith and minimize the potential for discord.

This process, and its outcomes, offer insights for the field of cultural sustainability. This is a cultural group which has been sustained for more than 400 years, through times of change and conflict. Additional study of the ways its cultural policies sustained and/or hindered it could yield principles which may be applicable in other settings. Mennonites themselves can also benefit from studying the history of their own cultural sustainability. In an era of declining membership, with many local congregations facing uncertain futures, a reflexive viewpoint might reveal new ways to apply traditional understandings. Perhaps a new generation of pioneers can be inspired.

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