

CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

Elizabeth Gillian Muir and Marilyn Fardig Whiteley, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995.

by Lois M. Wilson

This weighty anthology of the history of women in Christian churches in Canada presents a well integrated overview of the subject up until the 1950s. It does not pretend to cover the subject exhaustively, and the exclusion of the contributions of women in the Society of Friends (Quakers), the Salvation Army, Native Women catechists, and the Congregationalist women, as well as women of "French Canada," as the editors identify it, is noted.

Major gaps exist in women's history; much is undocumented. Records of their occupational roles have been lost, as obituaries of women either omitted their public/preaching activity or named it as "rendering valuable aid to the church or to their male partners." Several articles point out that a second volume is necessary to address the questions: Why did the independence of women in the churches of the early nineteenth century go into decline at the end of that century? Why did they retreat into the Victorian cult of domesticity?

The book's main four sections deal with: Women claiming space within institutions (Roman Catholic orders and Mennonites); the Missionary enterprise (Baptists, Presbyterians, and Native peoples' Missions, Women Preachers in British Columbia, and conflict between the male and female Methodist missionaries in Japan); developing occupational roles (Methodist female preachers and

evangelists, Anglican women on the Canadian frontier, and The Order of Deaconesses in the United Church of Canada); and religion as catalyst for social transformation (women and social welfare in Montreal, Women's Christian Temperance Union, YWCA, and Nellie McClung's gospel).

I was both exhilarated and depressed by reading this book. I found it exhilarating when it uncovered for me much of the hidden history of women's contributions to Canadian churches. In the early part of the nineteenth century, women assumed strong public roles in Christian community. Methodists could rejoice in one hundred years of women as preachers in Canada by that time. Blocked by male intransigence women created their own distinctive mission societies (usually ecumenical in nature), or simply went around male structures and did their own thing whether it was the YWCA or the WCTU. By 1939, the Sisters of St. Joseph had established a college for women within the University of Toronto. In the process, women developed their own independent sources of financial support, and learned administrative skills that otherwise would not have been theirs. Women evangelists flourished until the institutions institutionalized the function and men took over. In significant instances, long before the contemporary feminist movement, women directly challenged male authority as they moved into responsible positions within church and society.

I was also depressed when I read this book, because so little "progress" has been made in terms of women's positions within Christian churches. This is not an anthology documenting women's consistent decade by decade achievements. For every two progressive steps forward, one step was then taken back.

Reasons for this are multiple. In

virtually every church, women's enhanced participation came about largely because of social conditions or "accident," not by reason of any gospel imperative or conviction of equality. During and after World War II, the shortage of available men opened the doors for women to assume leadership roles in the churches. But as soon as the war ended, women were sent back to domesticity. The premise was that woman's place was in the home and no higher vocation existed than that of wife and mother. Some women bought this ideology, and lent fuel to the argument that leadership roles were unfeminine.

Male authority and societal mores informed by male power imposed restraints on women. They were assumed to be financially dependent on a male partner, and as late as 1953, deaconesses in the United Church were required to resign if they married! The role of "assistant" to a male was acceptable, but not independence. Salaries for single women were small or non-existent. They did not receive their fair share of pastoral appointments. Their work was confined to dealings with women and children, primarily in works of charity. Notable women broke this mold, and became catalysts for social transformation.

Ordination of women was opposed by all-male governing bodies of churches for a long time, on the same grounds. The Anglican church, for example, felt there was no need to ordain women, because it would mean the flight of their men!

I enjoyed the book, although it was weighted heavily with documentation from Methodism at the expense of some other movements. It has a good bibliography. We can only hope for a subsequent volume that would document the increasingly visible role of women's leadership in the churches' last two decades.