

# Full Participation A Long Time in Coming!

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## Introduction

1989 marks the tenth anniversary of the action of the General Synod to approve the ordination of women as ministers of the Word in the Reformed Church in America. It is the sixteenth anniversary of the ordination of the first woman to the office of the minister of the Word in our denomination. Anniversaries are occasions for remembering, refreshing our memories, and anticipating the future. The goal of full participation for women in the life of the church is a concern which needs urgently to be addressed. This article will reflect on the evolving involvement of women in the ministry of the Reformed Church in America, assess the present situation, and consider some future directions.

## The Ministry of Women

By 1800 American women were participating in higher education and had begun to be involved in church activities. In Massachusetts, a group of women organized the Boston Female Society of Missionary Purposes. Such organizations were known as "cent societies." The membership fee was one cent per week. The contributions of cent societies in the then Dutch Protestant Reformed Church were given to New Brunswick Theological Seminary.

One New Brunswick student who benefited from those contributions was David Abeel. Upon his graduation, Abeel was called to be a missionary to China. Abeel is rightly regarded as the impetus for all women's boards for foreign missions. He maintained that women were greatly needed in evangelization. Abeel stressed the responsibility of missionary wives in domestic tasks and emphasized the need for single women to engage in mission work among women. He contended that "ladies alone have access to their own sex." It was at his urging that "the society for promoting females' education in the East" was established in England. Upon his return home in the early 1830s, he challenged women to develop missionary societies to alleviate the suffering of women in "heathen" lands and to organize Christian schools and programs in mission areas. His plans emphasized the degraded condition of women in China and focused particularly on such practices as footbinding.

Mrs. Thomas C. Doremus, a member of the South Dutch Church in New York City, responded to Abeel's plea in 1835. She invited to her home large gatherings of influential men and women to hear the reports of missionaries on furlough. Mrs. Doremus was born into wealth and social position. A woman of charm, wisdom, and even temperament, she was the mother of nine children. Despite a demanding and busy life, she was instrumental in 1861 in organizing the Women's Union Missionary Society. Many Reformed churches organized similar societies to cooperate with this group prior to the organization of the Woman's Board in 1875.



The period of the Civil War marked a major change for American women in general, and particularly for women in mission.

The ideals and ideas of women had changed since the beginning of the nineteenth century ... The abolition movement, woman's suffrage, woman's rights, woman's sphere, were burning questions of the hour, in the discussion of which the voices of women rose high above the din of masculine strife. Men and women everywhere were revising their ideas of the relation of woman to the universe. The ministry of women to soldiers in the war had proved that they possessed great executive ability and an amount of energy which, once set free, could not be and ought not to be suppressed. The vision of national need which they had so clearly seen in the struggle of the war, developed at its close into a wider comprehension of world demands and they were ready at the end of that decade to begin the most strategic and far-reaching enterprise in which they had ever yet engaged the work of carrying their vision to the women and children of far Eastern lands. [1]

In 1869 the Reformed Church in America had the honor of sending the first single woman missionary to Japan. This courageous woman was Mary Kidder. At a time when the Christian religion was despised and forbidden in Japan, Miss Kidder began to teach a class of four girls. She quickly realized the need for the establishment of a boarding school. Because her vision was shared by the church, land was obtained, suitable buildings for a home and boarding school were erected, and on June 1, 1875, the Ferris Seminary was opened. Today that institution is known as the Ferris Girls' School. Of Mary Kidder, who became Mrs. Mary Miller, it was said:

She took her position as a leader in all the philanthropic work and presided over meetings with much dignity and efficiency. Her warmhearted sympathy with all who were in trouble, her word of counsel and cheer to the young and inexperienced missionary, soon led her to be greatly beloved; and until her death, she held this position of counselor and guide, friend and sympathizer to both the Japanese and the foreign community.[2]

For some twenty-nine years Mary Kidder Miller also edited a monthly magazine called Glad Tidings with a circulation of 14,000.



Harriet Scudder is another example of a woman in ministry. She and her husband, Dr. John Scudder, were missionaries to India. In 1870 Harriet Scudder started the first industrial work for women of the Arcot Mission by introducing weaving into the schools. Her ministry is captured in this tribute:



Mrs. Scudder was the heart of everything. She had a wonderful faculty for remembering faces and names, and she knew the family histories of all the Christians in the Ranipet villages. Her own home was overflowing with her little flock (six children), keeping heart and hands busy, but no matter how busy she was, no one ever came to the mission bungalow, without having a talk with the dear 'DORAISAN.' Family problems were talked over, family and village quarrels were settled. And her decision was final. A new baby could not have a name until there had been a council with 'Mother' in Ranipet.[3]

In the 1870s the role of women was being reassessed in the Arcot Mission:

Dr. Silas Scudder first proposed training Indian women in medicine; it was the decade when Ida Scudder was growing up in India; it was the decade when single women began arriving to serve as professional teachers and administrators in the girls' schools, thus slowing the shift to male teachers who had replaced the missionary wives; it was the decade when a woman first wrote a part of the mission annual report; it was the decade when the girls' boarding schools began to place more emphasis on preparing not just wives but teachers; it was the decade when the mission began to train and employ Bible women and female catechists. [4]

In 1875 the Woman's Board of Foreign Mission was established. Its purpose was to promote the work of foreign missions through women's groups. At the first meetings men read the reports and made all the comments. Auxiliary societies were organized in congregations among women and in mission bands among the children. By the turn of the century, there were over 500 societies. Between 1875 and 1900 they raised nearly \$750,000, primarily for women missionaries, girls' schools, and seminaries.

In 1882 the Women's Executive Committee of the Board of Domestic Missions was established. Mrs. Paul Van Cleef served as its first president. The major initial function of this committee was to provide funds to repair churches and to build parsonages for missionaries connected with the Domestic Board. During the first twenty-five years, over one hundred parsonages were secured, and seventy-five were built or repaired. In 1885 the first Christmas boxes were sent to children living on the prairies.

In the first ten years 309 boxes were sent to churches in the west. It was estimated that over 1600 children received a "token of love" from the forty-one boxes sent in 1892 alone. The "missionary boxes" of clothing and other materials met with an equally generous response. [5]

When the Women's Executive Committee began work, letters were sent to ministers urging them to interest women in their congregations to organize auxiliaries. The response was hardly enthusiastic: "It was a slow process, many ministers feeling that women should be working in their homes and not out attending meetings." [6] The women were undaunted. They persisted, and today their achievements are history:

By 1890 the women of the Reformed Church were far better organized for mission than were the men. They had auxiliaries in almost every congregation. Women were working, studying, dreaming, planning and giving. In an age when they did not enjoy the right to vote, they were denied the possibility of working directly in the structures of either the nation or the church. [7]

### **The Ordination of Women as Elders and Deacons**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women began to assert themselves. They turned to the church, hoping to find an advocate for their cause. In 1900, the National Women's Suffrage Association requested the General Synod to petition Congress to amend the Constitution in favor of women's suffrage. After consideration, synod recommended no action. The reason given was that an affirmative response would

likely open the way to similar requests and synod had no right to bind the churches in such matters.[8] One wonders how the action of the General Synod was communicated to the churches and how that message was received by the women.

In 1918 the issue of the ordination of women to the offices of deacon and elder first came before the General Synod. Overtures from the Particular Synod of Albany and the Classis of Montgomery requested the deletion of the word "male" from Article IV, Section 42 of the Constitution which read, "The elders and deacons shall be chosen from the male members of the church in full communion who have attained the age of 21 years." Synod's review committee recommended that "the overture be not entertained, believing that the submission of the proposed amendment to the Classes will work injury through friction and division out of all proportion to any possible good that might accrue to any portion of our church." [9]

The issue was moot for three years. In 1921, it was raised again by overtures from the Classis of Philadelphia and the Particular Synods of Albany and New Brunswick. Again the request was to delete the word "male" from Article IV, Section 42, and again the synod denied the overtures, indicating that the time was not yet proper for such changes.[10] The next year the Classis of Philadelphia submitted an overture to "remove all restrictions regarding the holding of office by female members of the church and to grant them the same rights and privileges which the male members enjoy." [11] The intent of this overture was to open only the offices of elder and deacon to women. The review committee recognized that this was an important subject and one which could not be ignored. But it was "of the opinion that the time does not seem ripe for the action suggested. It would further call attention to the fact that the overture presented should come properly as a request that the Constitution be amended as prescribed in Article 14, Section 181." [12]

The issue was set aside for the next ten years. Then, in 1932, the Classis of Westchester overtured that the word "male" be deleted. Once again the synod responded in the negative because there was no indication of a general desire for the deletion, and that "strong objections may arise in certain quarters." [13] The majority agreed with the recommendation of the review committee. Four years later the Classis of Bergen requested the same deletion, thereby "enabling such churches as desire to do so to elect women to their consistories." This time the review committee stated:

We have the highest regard for our women, also the important part which they take in the programs of the church. But, we feel that where God created "male and female," each have their distinctive functions. They are our equals what is more, our superiors in many of their qualifications, not to mention consecration. We, however, feel that should they be given the office of Elders and Deacons in our Churches, such would rather hinder than progress the work of the kingdom. The men would become more content to let the women assume responsibilities which properly are theirs. [14]

Once again the request was denied.

In 1941 the North Classis of Long Island overtured the General Synod to study the matter of ordaining women to the office of elder and deacon. The request was submitted to the Committee on Judicial Business, which saw no immediate advantage to such a study. [15] In other words, it did not believe the subject merited study. In 1945 the Classis of Newark overtured for the deletion of the word "male." Again the recommendation was that no action be taken. To a similar overture from the Classis of Westchester the General Synod responded that

the necessity for this provision is not generally apparent in the Reformed Church in America. Also, opening the offices of elder and deacon to women might tend to diminish men's sense of responsibility in the life and work of the Church .... Moreover, it is the opinion of the

committee that the Church is not ready for this change. [16]

A significant change occurred at the General Synod meeting in 1952. That year the synod received thirteen overtures with respect to the deletion of the word "male." Six supported the deletion, and seven opposed it. This time the review committee presented both a majority and a minority report. The majority report suggested that synod provide an opportunity for the classes to vote on the amendment of the constitution. They believed that the classes needed the opportunity to express themselves. The minority report presented biblical support for retaining "male," and reaffirmed the action taken by the 1951 General Synod. The synod adopted the majority report. The amendment was sent to the classes but did not receive the two-thirds vote necessary for amendment.

In 1955 the General Synod voted that "the President appoint a committee to study the whole matter of ordaining women as elders and pastors and report to the 1956 General Synod." [17] At issue was the ordination of women both as elders and deacons, and as ministers of the Word. In 1957 the committee submitted four essays which were sent to the churches and classes for study, review, and criticism. The committee reported that it

is convinced that there is no sufficient Scriptural reason for insisting that the nature and function of the office is such that women should be excluded from eligibility. The fact that the Church may have been slow to recognize that the Holy Spirit does give women as well as men the necessary gifts for eligibility to office is no doubt historically and sociologically conditioned. Tradition, however, which is important in the life of the Church, must not be the determining factor in deciding the issue. The question really is, what does the Holy Spirit say now regarding this question to the Reformed Church in America? [18]

The 1958 General Synod adopted the declaration that Scripture nowhere excludes women from eligibility to the offices but always emphasizes their inclusion, prominence, and equal status with men in the church of Jesus Christ. Once again the synod sent to the classes a recommendation that the offices be open to women and men alike beginning in the year 1962. The recommendation was defeated.

In 1965 the Classis of Ulster and the Particular Synods of New York and New Jersey overtured General Synod to amend the Book of Church Order by deleting the word "male." The necessary two-thirds vote from the classes was not forthcoming. Twenty-four classes voted in favor-twenty-one were opposed. In 1967 the Classis of Raritan overtured the General Synod to delete the word "male" and the Theological Commission recommended to the synod that the office of deacon be opened to women. The recommendation of the Theological Commission was tabled, but the recommendation to amend the Book of Church Order was passed along to the classes where it failed to gain approval. In 1969 the Classis of Mid-Hudson overtured the General Synod and the General Synod approved the appointment of a committee to develop an educational program "regarding the rights of women to the offices of the church." [19] In 1970 the Classis of Raritan reported that two congregations had ordained women to the offices of elder and deacon. The classis overtured the General Synod to show cause from biblical authority why these churches should not have done so. General Synod took no action on the overture. The review committee reported: "It is beyond the scope of the committee to suggest action concerning this matter, even though it is apparent that the Rockaway Reformed Church and the Middlebush Reformed Church are in admitted violation of the Book of Church Order." [20] It also took no action on an overture from the Particular Synod of Albany to delete the word "male" from the Book of Church Order.

In 1971 a delegate made a motion from the floor of the General Synod to amend the Book of Church Order by deleting the word "male." The proposed amendment was sent to the classes and was approved. The General Synod of 1972 took the declarative action which permitted the ordination of women to the offices

of elder and deacon. The next year the Particular Synod of Michigan overtured the General Synod to amend the Book of Church Order with a conscience clause that read: "No one who, by reason of conscience, cannot participate in election, ordination, or installation of women to church offices, shall be expected to do so." [21] This overture was denied for the following reason: "Non-participation by reason of conscience could be referred to many situations in life; one is always free to take such a course and to accept the consequences. Therefore, we do not believe that this one situation should be singled out to be provided with an amendment to the Book of Church Order." [22]

For fifty-four years the church had debated the issue of the ordination of women. It is interesting to note that the reasons given for refusing ordination were that "The time was not right," "Men would abdicate their responsibility," and, "It would divide the church." Despite adoption of a blue-ribbon committee report that there were no scriptural grounds for the exclusion of women from the offices, the necessary two-thirds vote of the classes was long and hard in coming. And despite the 1958 declaration of the unity of the offices, the right of women to be ordained as ministers of the Word had not been resolved. This issue would engage the church for two more decades.

### **The Ordination of Women as Ministers of the Word**

The question of the ordination of women to the office of minister of the Word was first considered by the General Synod in 1942. The synod received a letter from the American Association of Women Preachers requesting that women be given an opportunity to enter the ministry on an ecclesiastical status equal to that of men. In response, the Review Committee on Overtures stated:

Your committee takes cognizance of the very wonderful work of the women of our Church already going on, both in the local parishes and in the great denominational enterprises. All praise and appreciation for our Church women .... However it is the judgment of your committee that, since we have not yet granted permission for women to serve as elders, the time is surely not ripe for giving opportunity to them to enter the ranks of the ministry. We therefore Recommend: that this communication be answered in the negative. [23]

The question was not really addressed, however, until 1955. That year the General Synod voted that "the President appoint a committee to study the whole matter of ordaining women as elders and pastors." [24] Its report not only declared that Scripture nowhere excluded women from eligibility to the offices, but that

the office in the Church of Jesus Christ is indivisible. The several offices are not independent of one another. While there are differences of accent, there is not a difference of essential nature. The three offices together represent the one office of Jesus Christ, the head of His Church, as Prophet, Priest, and King. Accordingly, to open, say, only one office, the office of deacon, to women would do violence to the essential oneness of the office in Christ's Church. [25]

Consequently, the committee recommended that the offices in the Reformed Church in America be open to women and men alike beginning with the year 1962. This proposal was defeated by the classes.

The General Synods of 1961 through 1963 did not deal with the question of the ordination of women. In 1964 the Classis of Metropolitan Jersey (the present Classis of Palisades) overtured the General Synod "To initiate the constitutional changes necessary to permit the ordination of women to the several offices of the Church." [26] The General Synod sent no amendment to the classes. In 1969 the classis of Mid-Hudson sent an overture regarding the ordination of women as ministers of the Word. The final suggested form of the proposed amendment from the Editorial Committee was to change the Book of Church Order to read: "The ministers of the Word are those men and women who have been inducted into that office by ordination in accordance with the Word of God and the order established by the Church." [27] The amendment proposed

substituting the phrase "men and women" for the word "persons." It failed in the classes.

The late sixties was a period of considerable turmoil in the life of the Reformed Church. For several years the denomination had been carrying on merger conversations with the Presbyterian Church in the United States. When the Plan of Union was placed before the classes in 1969, a majority of the classes and presbyteries voted favorably, but because the constitutional requirements were not met, it was defeated. The future of the denomination was placed in question when a recommendation for "the orderly dissolution of the Reformed Church in America" was presented to the 1969 General Synod. A special committee was appointed to study the deep divisions which existed within the denomination. It was to the same synod that James Foreman came demanding that racial inequities be addressed. The church found itself besieged by wrenching issues.

To the 1970 General Synod the Christian Action Commission presented a paper entitled "Equality for Women in the Reformed Church." The Particular Synod of New York overtured the General Synod

To initiate amendment to the Book of Church Order to empower any classis which may so decide to ordain and install to the office of minister of the Word and to permit churches within its bounds to ordain and install to the offices of elder or deacon such persons as are most worthy and most fitted to the needs of the several congregations without distinction as to sex.[28]

The editorial committee divided the amendment into four parts to be sent to the classes for separate vote. All four parts were defeated by the classes. In 1972 the Classis of Raritan overtured the General Synod urging the ordination of women to the office of minister of the Word. With the General Synod's approval, the proposal was sent to the classes where it failed. Through 1977 there were successive proposals to amend the Book of Church Order by changing the word "persons" to "men and women." Although the votes were close, the necessary two-thirds vote continued to be elusive.

It was to the 1973 General Synod that the Board of Theological Education brought a recommendation that ministerial candidate Joyce Stedje be granted a dispensation from the professorial certificate. The professorial certificate entitles a theological candidate to an examination for licensure and ordination. The constitutionality of the application for a dispensation by the Rockland-Westchester Classis and the recommendation of the Board of Theological Education was questioned. Synod president Harry DeBruyn ruled that the application and the recommendation were within the provision of the constitution. Upon appeal, the ruling of the chair was upheld, and Joyce Stedje was granted a dispensation from the professorial certificate. On October 7, 1973, Classis Rockland-Westchester ordained her, and on October 14, 1973, she was installed by the Classis of Mid-Hudson as pastor of the Rochester Reformed Church of Accord, New York. The Home News, a newspaper of New Brunswick, New Jersey, reported the proceedings under the headline: "Lady Preacher Crashes Staid Church." Word of Joyce Stedje's ordination and installation caused consternation in many parts of the church. Consequently, the 1974 General Synod was inundated with overtures recommending that her ordination and installation be declared null and void. Other overtures questioned the legality of the ruling of the president of General Synod and of the actions of Classis Rockland-Westchester in ordaining and the Classis of Mid-Hudson in installing Mrs. Stedje. A presidential consultation was held on April 16-17, 1974, to address questions surrounding her ordination. The findings of that consultation were as follows:

Some members of the church believe that the actions of General Synod in granting a dispensation from the professorial certificate to a woman opened the office of minister of the Word to women. Others believe that this action of General Synod opened the office of minister of the Word only to that one woman. Others believe that all offices of the ministry were opened

to men and women by the deletion of the word "male" from the Book of Church Order in 1972 (Part 1, Article 2, Section 9a). Others believe that the amendment to substitute "members" for "persons" was evidence that classes must vote a change in the Book of Church Order before women may be ordained to the office of the minister of the Word." [29]

President Donald DeYoung in his report to the General Synod reminded the church that there were women who were considering entering seminary, as well as women already under the care of classes enrolled in seminary. He went on to say: "I want to go on record as being supportive to all, men and women, who feel called by God to the office of minister of the Word." [30]

Recognizing the diverse views within the church, the General Synod adopted a recommendation for a voluntary suspension of the attestation of licensure and ordination of women to the office of minister of the Word until action was taken by the General Synod of 1975.

Meanwhile, the 1974 General Synod had before it a report entitled, "Feminism in the Church," submitted by the Christian Action Commission. Through its recommendations, the commission challenged the church to face up to itself and to commit itself to greater sensitivity to feminist issues. In response the Synod voted to request the church to re-affirm the equality of all men and women in Christ.

request the church to recognize that while affirming decisions have been made in the life of the church, existing discrimination against women remains and that there are points at which the church can change this pattern.

request the appropriate agencies of the Reformed Church in America to develop an immediate plan to correct its discrimination against women in the following areas of particular concern:

1. Christian education materials, with particular reference to Biblical role models, sex stereotyping, and early designation of societal roles. (General Program Council Staff)
2. Political structures of the Reformed Church in America, adequate representation on consistories, classes, Synods, and General Synod. (General Synod Executive Committee)
3. Seminary education, including enrollment, field service experiences, and placement. (Board of Theological Education)
4. Reformed Church in America liturgy, examine for sexist bias including opportunities for women to actively participate in the leadership of worship. (Reformed Church Women)
5. Communication of the issue of feminism, by encouragement of lay groups and individuals to educate themselves; (Reformed Church Women) and similar encouragement of clergy to present and interpret the issues. (General Program Council Staff) [31]

The impact of "Feminism in the Church" is reflected in the actions of the 1975 General Synod. A Task Force on Women was appointed: "The purpose of the Task Force shall be to help the Reformed Church in America to identify the issues and to provide counsel on churchwide policies relating to the role of women within the church." [32] The same year, the Board of Theological Education asked the General Synod to put its own house in order. On the one hand, the General Synod had instructed the seminaries to be non-discriminatory in their recruitment, education, and placement of women. On the other hand, some classes which voted to receive women under their care as candidates for the ministry of the Word, had voted against the ordination of women to that office. Equally inconsistent was the empowerment of the Board of Theological Education to grant professorial certificates to women but not to consider them eligible for

ordination. Consequently, the Board of Theological Education recommended:

That General Synod 1975, remove this inconsistency by adopting and referring to the classes for their approval an amendment to the Book of Church Order, Chapter I, Part 1, Section 3 (BCO, p. 2) changing the word "persons" (which prior to 1973 in practice encompassed only men), to "men and women" and that the rest of the Book of Church Order and the Liturgy be brought into conformity therewith.[33]

The faculties of both New Brunswick Theological Seminary and Western Theological Seminary were advocates of the ordination of women and urged the classes to approve the enabling documents.

The 1976 vote of the classes on the necessary amendment to the Book of Church Order was twenty-nine Yes, fifteen No, and one tie. In his report to the General Synod, president Bert Van Soest recognized the tension which existed in the church over issue. He acknowledged that it came from sincere differences over the interpretation of Scripture. He also noted the inconsistent and untenable position in which the church found itself. He concluded by urging the synod to affirm the right of women to ordination and to make the necessary amendments to the Book of Church Order. Upon the recommendation of its president and the concurrence of the General Synod, the recommendation to amend the Book of Church Order was once again sent to the classes. In 1977 the vote of the classes was twenty-nine Yes, and sixteen No.

President Louis Benes, reporting to the General Synod of 1977, made a plea for unity. He expressed the hope that the church would wait a year before resubmitting a proposed change to the Book of Church Order. He also acknowledged that the actions of the church to open the office of elder and deacon to women but not to the minister of the Word appeared illogical and inconsistent. By allowing women to be ordained as elders, women, as "designated elders," were permitted to administer the sacraments. The contradiction between allowing a woman to baptize and to administer the Lord's Supper as a designated elder but not as an ordained minister was puzzling at the very least. Dr. Albertus Bossenbroek in his presidential report to General Synod of 1978 made the following observation:

More than 50 Reformed Church women have received theological instruction in seminaries and are presently engaged in Christian ministry. Our position is untenable because classes continue to take women "under care," our seminaries continue to admit women for study, and the General Synod continues to grant dispensations from the Professorial Certificate to women.  
[34]

Bossenbroek made two recommendations. The first was to convene a meeting of women in ministry, and the second, to constitute a permanent committee on women to meet the needs of women in Christian ministry.

In an overture to the General Synod, the Particular Synod of Albany declared that the Book of Church Order did not prohibit the ordination of women. The Overture Review Committee recommended no action because it considered the overture a judicial matter which could be resolved only through the judicial process. That process was to be tested. In the latter half of 1978, four women were ordained as ministers of the Word: Valerie DeMarinis, June 25, by the Classis of Brooklyn; Louise Ann Hill-Alto, July 13, by the Classis of Bergen; Constance Longhurst, October 15, by the Classis of Raritan; and Klaire Miller, November 12, by the Classis of New Brunswick. On June 20, 1978, the Classis of Albany had granted Joyce de Velder her request for ordination. Her ordination by the Classis of Albany was challenged by the Particular Synod of Albany. The Classis of Albany filed a complaint with the General Synod against the Particular Synod of Albany for its action of directing the classis not to ordain Joyce de Velder. The issue of the ordination of women as ministers of the Word was at the center of the church's agenda, and led Harvey Hoekstra, president of the 1979 General Synod, to report:

Probably no other issue before this Synod is of greater interest and concern to the entire RCA family than that of women in ministry, the ordination of women to the ministry of the Word and the Book of Church Order. With the exception of last year, the year of celebration of our 350th anniversary, the matter of women's ordination has been before us almost constantly as a legislative proposal [35]

The issue came before the synod in the form of complaints:

The Rev. Martin L. Weitz against the Particular Synod of New York for its decision to uphold the action of the Classis of Brooklyn in ordaining Valerie DeMarinis Miller to the office of minister of the Word.

The Classis of Albany against the Particular Synod of Albany for its decision to uphold the complaint of the First Reformed Church of Wynantskill, NY, against the action of the Classis of Albany to ordain Joyce Borgman de Velder to the office of minister of the Word.

The Classis of Albany against the Particular Synod of Albany for its action "to direct the classis of Albany not to ordain Joyce de Velder as a minister of the Word," as voted upon by Albany Classis on June 20, 1978

Elder Henry L. Griswold against the Particular Synod of New Jersey for its decision to dismiss the complaint of the Consistory of the Third Reformed Church, Hackensack, NJ, and the complaint of the Rev. Paul Nulton against the action of Classis Bergen in ordaining Louise Ann Hill-Alto to the office of minister of the Word. [36]

The Committee on Judicial Business reported that the central point of the complaints was the definition and interpretation of the word "persons" as used in the Book of Church Order to define ministers of the Word. The committee found no grammatical grounds offered for interpreting the word "person" as having some meaning other than that which it is given in contemporary usage. It judged the scriptural/theological question had been closed by synod's approval of the Theological Commission of 1958 which had found no scriptural impediment to the ordination of women to any office in the church. In making its decision the Committee on Judicial Business also addressed the question of custom and practice. The Particular Synod of Michigan, protesting the ordination and installation of Joyce Stedje in its overture to the General Synod of 1974, had stated: "The Book of Church Order has by custom and practice excluded the ordination of women." [37] The committee declared that custom and practice cannot take precedence over the declaration of the General Synod regarding the meaning of the Scripture, and concluded that, "it is the finding of the Judicial Business Committee of this General Synod, that no deliberate, intentional or actual violation of the Book of Church Order took place on the part of the classes complained against." [38] Consequently the complaints against the Particular Synods of New York and New Jersey were dismissed and the complaint against the Particular Synod of Albany was sustained by a vote of 150 to 115.

After years of painful struggle, the office of minister of the Word was now open to women. Sensitive to the deep divisions within the church, the General Synod Executive Committee sent a pastoral letter to the members of the denomination. As might have been expected, they had received many expressions of concern and opposition to the actions of the 1979 General Synod. The Advisory Committee on Church Order submitted to the 1980 General Synod "A Proposal to Maintain Peace in Diversity in the RCA Concerning Women as Church Officers." This action sought to make the necessary amendments to the Book of Church Order, while making provision for those who for reasons of conscience could not support the ordination of women to the offices of the church.

## **Participation in the Offices of the Church**

Where are we today in regard to the participation of ordained women in the life of the church? For answers to this question, we turn primarily to statistical data. We begin with women serving as elders and deacons. The Task Force on Women made the following report to the 1979 General Synod (873 out of 917 churches responding):[39]

Consistories Delegates	Membership		Elders		Deacons		to Classis	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	<b>GS</b>	96,121 (43.5%)	124,999 (56.5%)	4,890 (91%)	481 (9%)	4,384 (84.5%)	805 (15.5%)	1,480 (92.4%)
<b>PSA</b>	8,016 (40.4%)	11,846 (59.6%)	532 (87.1%)	79 (12.9%)	413 (95%)	21 (5%)	183 (89.7%)	21 (1.3%)
<b>PSC</b>	13,415 (46.5%)	15,447 (53.5%)	663 (98%)	12 (2%)	645 (96%)	26 (4%)	228 (98%)	5 (2%)
<b>PSM</b>	26,830 (45.7%)	31,822 (54.3%)	1,305 (97.5%)	33 (2.5%)	1,259 (97.4%)	34 (2.6%)	349 (96.7%)	12 (3.3%)
<b>PSNJ</b>	11,929 (41.1%)	17,094 (58.9%)	753 (83.2%)	152 (16.8%)	571 (68.5%)	263 (31.5%)	194 (83.3%)	39 (16.7%)
<b>PSNY</b>	10,375 (38%)	17,105 (62%)	572 (76.7%)	174 (23.3%)	458 (62%)	282 (38%)	165 (85.5%)	28 (14.5%)
<b>PSW</b>	25,556 (44.6%)	31,685 (55.4%)	1,065 (97.2%)	31 (2.8%)	1,038 (97.5%)	27 (2.5%)	361 (95.5%)	17 (4.5%)

In 1978 for every woman elder, there were 10.2 men serving. For every woman deacon, there were 5.4 men serving. According to this survey, women represented 56.5% of the membership of the Reformed Church in America.

During 1988 the Commission on Women conducted a survey to ascertain how many women were serving as elders and deacons. The total number of churches participating in this survey was 722.

[Columns: 1 - Total # of churches; 2 - Total reporting; 3 - All Elders in office; 4 - Women Elders in office; 5 - All Deacons in office; 6 - Women Deacons in office; 7 - Women Elders not in office; 8 - Women Deacons not in office.]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>PS ALBANY</b>								
Albany	25	17	124	61	125	39	102	62
Columbia-Greene	22	16	99	19	99	33	18	41
Montgomery	16	12	85	28	85	27	30	55

Rochester	16	16	79	10	78	15	16	24
Schenectady	22	20	140	38	145	59	66	93
Schoharie	18	9	66	11	65	33	7	29
PSA TOTAL:	119	90	593	167	597	206	239	304
<b>PS MID-AMERICA</b>								
Chicago	22	15	134	3	136	10	7	7
Florida	15	15	89	6	96	18	4	14
Illiana	23	20	156	0	158	5	1	3
Illinois	23	21	136	5	134	5	5	7
Wisconsin	27	23	195	3	195	4	12	10
PSM-AM Total:	110	94	710	17	719	42	29	41
<b>PS MICHIGAN</b>								
Holland	15	15	174	18	173	7	31	21
Lake Erie	24	16	92	11	95	12	25	27
Muskegon	22	15	156	7	157	9	12	7
No. Michigan	13	11	78	1	77	3	3	6
No. Grand Rapids	20	17	147	10	148	6	19	18
Ontario	19	8	92	2	85	3	1	3
SW Michigan	26	21	168	10	169	6	18	8
Zeeland	26	20	198	0	196		5	
So. Grand Rapids	27	20	239	8	239	4	4	9
PSM Total:	192	143	1,344	67	1,339	50	118	100
<b>PS MID-ATLANTICS</b>								
Bergen	19	12	113	28	118	42	26	57
Newark	19	9	na	15	na	26	22	33
New Brunswick	24	22	152	47	146	54	67	110
Palisades	14	9	76	27	72	28	10	24
Paramus	18	13	124	20	127	33	34	48
Passaic	24	19	143	29	142	39	33	68
Philadelphia	10	6	50	10	58	17	12	21
Raritan	28	21	142	49	145	58	99	149
PSM-AT Total:	152	111	800	225	808	297	303	510
<b>PS NEW YORK</b>								

Brooklyn	15	9	72	29	59	22	23	22
Mid-Hudson	35	26	162	43	162	62	68	92
Nassau-Suffolk	13	8	75	16	76	18	30	39
New York	22	13	89	24	11	47	23	34
Orange	20	12	97	27	96	30	28	53
Queens	25	9	125	21	148	29	13	23
Rockland-Westchester	17	15	113	47	111	47	54	50
PSNY Total:	147	92	773	207	763	255	239	313
<b>PS WEST</b>								
California	40	26	200	21	187	14	22	28
Cascades	19	15	101	5	95	6	7	9
Central Calif.	16	14	79	9	91	10	15	16
Dakota	32	22	132	1	132	0	1	0
East Sioux	19	16	101	3	100	0	6	3
Minnesota	24	22	130	5	128	1	8	1
Pella	16	13	119	11	119	3	17	13
Pleasant Prairie	22	20	94	5	94	0	1	4
Southwest	9	8	43	8	47	14	4	10
West Central	19	16	96	20	97	16	36	39
West Sioux	23	20	149	2	148	7	1	11
PSW Total:	237	192	1,244	90	1,238	71	118	134
<b>GRAND TOTALS:</b>	957	722	5,464	773	5,464	921	1,046	1,402

In 1988 for every woman elder serving, there were 7.1 men. For every woman serving as a deacon, there were 5.9 men. Two classes reported that they had no women as elders. The percentage of women serving as elders and deacons has increased slowly compared to the total membership of women in the denomination.

The 1979 Task Force on Women agreed that it would be important to review annually men/women representation on denominational and regional staff, committees and commissions, boards and agencies, councils, boards of colleges and seminaries, camp and conference staff and boards. A comparative review shows that the number of women serving on commissions and agencies has nearly doubled in the last fifteen years.

#### Women Serving on Commissions/Agencies

1973 1988

General Synod  
Commissions/Agencies

39 67

Reformed Church Women	19	25
Councils	7 *	23
TOTALS	65	115

\* only the Black Council was formed at this time

A concern expressed and addressed in recent years has been the small number of women delegates to General Synod. Of the 291 delegates to the 1988 General Synod, only twenty-nine were women. The number of women delegates to the General Synod over the past sixteen years has been as follows:

Year	Women Delegates
1973	6
1974	7
1975	9
1976	21
1977	16
1978	16
1979	12
1980	9
1981	15
1982	16
1983	19
1984	20
1985	34
1986	29
1987	21
1988	29

To assure greater participation of women as delegates, the 1988 General Synod sent a recommendation to the classes to amend the Book of Church Order to require that two of the three delegates from each of the particular synods be women. This matter is presently before them.

Where are we today with regard to women as ministers of the Word? There are currently forty-three women ordained as ministers of the Word in the Reformed Church in America. Twenty-one serve as pastors, seventeen serve in specialized ministries, three are engaged in graduate work, and two are listed as without charge. Enrollment in Reformed Church seminaries reveals that nearly forty per-cent of the student body consists of women. This is not true of students enrolled with the Theological Education Agency where the ratio is thirteen women to fifty-four men. The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 1988 reports the enrollment of women and Black, Hispanic, and Asian/American students is on the increase. Women seminary students constituted twenty-seven per-cent of the total enrollment. There are 15,310 women enrolled in seminary education. The number of women clergy has doubled in the past decade. The greatest increase in women clergy has occurred in the Assemblies of God church. Of the twenty-one denominations

in the United States reporting on women in ministry, the Reformed Church in America reported the largest percentage increase between 1977 and 1986. The following survey is reflective of the increasing number of women entering the ministry. [40]

Denomination	No. 1977	1977 Rank	No. 1986	1986 Rank	Gain/Loss	% of Inc/Dec
American Baptist Churches	157	(11)	429	(10)	+272	173
American Lutheran Church*	18	(16)	306	(12)	+288	1,600
Assemblies of God	1,572	(2)	3,718	(1)	+2,146	136
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	388	(6)	743	(7)	+355	91
Christian Congregation	125	(12)	290	(13)	+165	132
Church of God (Anderson, IN)	272	(10)	275	(14)	+3	
Church of the Brethren	27	(15)	120	(16)	+93	344
Church of the Nazarene	426	(4)	355	(11)	-71	-17
Episcopal Church	94	(13)	796	(6)	+702	747
Free Methodist Church	11	(17)	69	(17)	+58	527
International Church of the Foursquare Gospel	804	(3)	666	(8)	-138	-17
Lutheran Church in America*	55	(14)	484	(9)	+429	780
Mennonite Church	4	(18)	48	(18)	+44	1,100
Mennonite Ch, The Gen'l Conf	4	(18)	33	(20)	+29	725
Moravian Ch (Unitas Fratrum)	3	(20)	16	(21)	+13	433
Presbyterian Church (USA)**	(370)	(8)	1,519	(4)	+1,149	310
Reformed Church in America	I	(21)	42	(19)	+41	+4,100
Salvation Army	3,307	(1)	3,220	(2)	+183	6
United Church of Christ	400	(5)	1,460	(5)	+1,060	265
United Methodist Church	319	(9)	1,891	(3)	+1,572	+493
Wesleyan Church	384	(7)	255	(15)	-129	+33
	8,471		16,735		+8,264	+98

\* These bodies and the Association of Evangelical Churches merged to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America which began operations on January 1, 1988.

\*\* Data for 1977 are for the United Presbyterian Church in the USA and the Presbyterian Church in the US that merged in 1983.

Finally, what is the present situation in areas not amenable to statistical data? There are those who continue to oppose any ordination of women to the offices on scriptural grounds. For others, such ordination violates both custom and practice. Change comes slowly. But change is taking place. As women are given the opportunity to exercise their gifts, minds are changed, and acceptance begins its advent. For those who have felt the call of God and have had their gifts affirmed by the church, opportunities are beginning to emerge. The birthing process has been long and the delivery overdue. The Rev. Louise Ann Hill-Alto, who is

co-pastor of the Second Union Church in San Juan, Puerto Rico, writes:

I would love to see what would happen in the Reformed Church in America if women were encouraged to minister as I have been. That cannot happen until the denomination as a whole understands that women are being called to ministry in the RCA and that to repress or deny such a calling would be seen as an act of disobedience and that the ministry in Christ's name will not be complete until women's gifts for ministry are recognized and used.

While change has come slowly, progress is being made. Dr. Beth Marcus, former Director of Reformed Church Women, believes that the future for women in ministry (both lay and clergy) is bright with a few shadows. Reformed Church Women has helped to open up the offices for women by providing forums for discussion, leadership training seminars, and the establishment of a scholarship fund for women preparing for ministry. The removal of the shadows will take a concerted effort of the church. The advocacy for full participation of women in the life of the church needs to be owned by the entire church and not delegated to the Commission on Women or Reformed Church Women

## **Conclusion**

On this tenth anniversary, we celebrate the contribution which women in every capacity have made to the life and witness of the Reformed Church in America. We celebrate the fact that women have been given opportunities to exercise their gifts in the offices of the church. On this tenth anniversary, we remember the pain, reluctance, and inconsistencies which surrounded the question of ordination. The struggle has been painful. On this tenth anniversary, we acknowledge that shadows do exist. We have been fearful and apprehensive. We confess that we have not been open to receiving the gifts of all God's children. We have for too long been bound by custom and practice. Anniversaries are more than occasions for remembering the past, or even celebrating the present. They are occasions for embracing the future. The church must move forward, evoking, affirming, and receiving the gifts of all God's children.

In 1988, the World Council of Churches launched an ecumenical decade of solidarity with women. The concerns and perspectives of women need to be on the agenda not only of women's departments and organizations in the churches, but of the church as a whole. The Ecumenical Decade, "Churches in Solidarity with Women," is an ecclesiastical summons to respond to God's call for inclusiveness and solidarity. Through our baptism, we belong to a new community in which old patterns of relationships among classes, races, and genders have ended. Within that community, we need to celebrate the diversity of gifts which the Spirit imparts. All the gifts are needed for the work of the kingdom among us.

Anniversaries are also occasions for recommitment. At this point in time, the Reformed Church in America has an opportunity to commit itself to solidarity with women both in the church and in the world. The church is being challenged to make this matter a priority in its life. On the twentieth anniversary of the ordination of women to all the offices of the church we will know how we have responded to the call for full participation by all God's children. Thus far we have taken only a few steps on the road. In this decade, with God's people around the world we have an opportunity to be in solidarity with women in our common quest for a more just and inclusive church.

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