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A Look at Women in Ministry Today

by Anna M. Griffith

In the calm center of the storm surrounding the issues of "women's role in the church" is a cadre of women actively involved in ministry. Often creative, routinely effective and occasionally dramatic, they are presently advancing the front lines of the kingdom alongside their brothers with a minimum of controversy and friction. The numbers of women in paid positions of ministry are growing, and some of these will be considered in this article. Several fields are already wide open for service by women, and others are opening even as this article is being written. A number of women serve in the following categories, and those presented are only representative.

Children's Ministries

Children's ministries presently compose the largest area for women in ministry. Marti O'Rear, children's minister at the Highland Church of Christ (Abilene, Texas) for seven years, oversees children's education and coordinates their social functions. When the Highland elders were considering hiring Marti, there was some discussion as to her appropriate title—"coordinator" or "director" of children's ministries; but John Willis simply stated, "She's a minister." Marti reminded me that many women now return to school for training to serve in this capacity.

Joyce Davis, director of children's education, has served the Mayfair Church of Christ (Huntsville, Alabama) for ten years. When asked to describe her job, she replied, "... everything the children need . . ." which includes coordinating social activities and benevolence as well as supervising and training the teachers and overseeing the curriculum. At Mayfair,

women also chair several ministry committees, and a woman coordinates the office secretarial staff.

Wendy Ogren, coordinator of children's ministries at the South MacArthur Church of Christ (Irving, Texas), has much the same assignment as Joyce and Marti, but she also is on the worship committee. Suzie Winnett has worked for the North Atlanta Church of Christ (Atlanta, Georgia) as director of children's ministries since December 1994. She directs the Bible school through fifth grade, coordinates Vacation Bible School and children's worship, directs a summer camp and is in the process of starting an elementary school. Children are her "true love"; she wishes there had been more women in ministry as role models while she was growing up.

Deanna Fulenwider has been the children's ministries' coordinator at the Preston Road Church of Christ (Dallas) since February 1995. Her degree from ACU is in education, with sixty hours of related Bible courses. She is in charge of all the children's ministries—education, social activities and VBS—and says, "We are really lucky that lots of things fall under 'Children's Ministries,' because it is such an effective outreach tool." Deanna voiced her enthusiasm saying, "This article needs to be written so little girls can catch dreams of what they want to grow up to be."

Shelly Neilson (Master of Science in Ministry, Pepperdine) is on the ministerial staff of the East County Church of Christ (Gresham, Oregon). While her title is "children's minister," her responsibilities are much broader than choosing curriculum and staffing classes. Her charge to integrate the children into the life of the congregation places her in a

position to shape the worship and community life of the church.

Amy Kendall recently has been appointed minister of children's ministries for the Redwood City Church of Christ (Redwood City, California). This church is the headquarters for Manna International. Amy has a B.A. in religion from Pepperdine University and is in a graduate program in ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary. She has recently returned from Moscow, Russia, where she served for two years as a missionary and was active in the adult teaching ministry of the church.

Education Ministries

Representative of women who oversee the entire education department of a large church is Carol Gafford at University Avenue Church of Christ (Austin, Texas). In addition to the educational program, all of the women's ministries come under her leadership, including the training of women in administrative skills to lead various ministries at the congregation. Carol holds a master's degree in biblical and related studies from the Institute for Christian Studies. She is most enthusiastic about her ministry and when asked about her work she stated, "If I could have asked for a dream come true, this is it . . . I wanted to [minister] in the church."

Counseling

Another area of ministry is counseling. Beverly Becker (Wichita, Kansas) and Peggy Blanton (Amarillo, Texas), as well as a number of others, ably serve on the staffs of their respective congregations. Beth Wade, Ph.D. has worked in this field for three years at the Memorial Church of Christ in Houston, after serving for four years at the Westbury Church of Christ. As "counselor on staff" she counsels all ages and addresses "all kinds of counseling needs." She has also taught women's Bible classes, and high school and junior high classes in areas related to family relationships. Her workshops and seminars on family issues for the church and the community have served as an extremely effective outreach tool.

Beth is an "ordained minister," an action taken originally by her Westbury elders to qualify her for their insurance program; but her official ordination document carefully states her position:

We, the elders of the Westbury Church of Christ, do ordain Beth Wade for the work of ministry with the authority to teach the Bible in women's classes, children's classes, and seminars, to do pastoral counseling, and to develop community outreach programs. . . . September 1, 1990.

Beth, too, is encouraged by the 'empty-nesters' returning to school for training to serve the church, not only as children's ministers, but as counselors. She feels that every church, particularly larger congregations, should have a woman on staff to carry out in a specific way the directives of Titus 2:3-5. Women come to her from smaller communities and churches in the Houston area for advice on how to minister to younger women with families, and she foresees the time when our Christian colleges will have a degree specifically for women's ministries.

Benevolence

For the last six years, Jan Johnson has directed the Community Enrichment Center for the Richland Hills Church of Christ (Ft. Worth, Texas), and this has become the umbrella organization for a food distribution center (overseen by Evelyn Anderson), the "Open Arms" program for battered and abused women (administered by Elna Vanderberg), "Adopt-a-Family" which works in tandem with HUD to provide homes for the homeless, and numerous smaller programs coordinating relief efforts with other religious groups and community agencies. Under Jan's leadership the Center's scope has expanded to such an extent that it is now being restructured. Its interim director, Alison Repass, is particularly enthusiastic about the "Adopt-a-Family" program. As a mother of two sons, she resonates with homeless, single moms—"the largest segment of the homeless"—and delights in providing opportunities for changing their lives.

Janet Morrison (B.S.W., Harding, 1994) works full time as food pantry coordinator for the Central Dallas Ministry, an inner-city endeavor reaching out to the needy. The Preston Road Church of Christ oversees this project, but at least twelve other area congregations contribute funds. Janet "does all kinds of things," and exclaims, "I love it . . ." One can only imagine these "all kinds of things." During the first conversation I had with Janet, she said, "I'm sorry, but right now I have to send a van to pick up some kids in Austin. Do you know where I can find one right quick?!" I gave her the number at Richland Hills and asked her to call me back at her "leisure." Later, she talked about her job. She distributes food to those coming through the door, but also tries to get to know them, helps in placing them so they can develop skills and find jobs, and also helps train case managers and interviewers. Her greatest reward comes when those she helps return on a volunteer basis to help others.

Possibly unique in our fellowship is an AIDS ministry, begun last summer, at Richland Hills. Presently, the ministry provides AIDS education at

the church, makes personal visits in homes and hospitals, and directs separate support groups for persons with HIV disease, as well as for their families. Anna Griffith (Master of Divinity, ACU) directs this ministry.

Youth And Campus Ministry

Lori Moore has worked as administrative assistant in youth ministry for two years with the Decatur Church of Christ (Atlanta, Georgia). I could not reach her for an interview as she was "off in Colorado with the kids doing her thing," and the staff reports that she is doing a splendid job. Many young women are serving alongside their male counterparts. Churches employ these young women primarily because the elders recognize the need for role models of both genders. Last summer, Becky Bell and Kindra Sorrells were interning in youth ministry at Richland Hills, and Cheri Raines was at South MacArthur Church of Christ. During the fall of 1995, a Pepperdine graduate student in religion, Dena Johnson, was hired as the youth minister for the Simi Valley Church of Christ, north of Los Angeles. LaJuana Gill (Master of Science in Ministry, Pepperdine) has served as a campus minister on the Pepperdine campus for the Malibu Church of Christ since 1990.

Missions

Women have served in mission fields since there have been missions, doing much of what Christian women do in their home communities. But missionary wives and single women usually have much broader responsibilities, adopting teaching, organization and administrative roles. Diane Walsh ably represents these women. The Oakhaven church was planted in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in 1976 by a team of three families who were supported by other churches. In 1979, Diane, a teacher at Harding Academy, attended a youth camp in Wisconsin where she came in contact with vocational missionaries from Oakhaven. One of them suggested that she move north because "... a lot of people where you are can do what you are doing, but there are not a lot of these in Wisconsin." She approached her elders at the White Station Church of Christ in Memphis, and they agreed to support her for two years. "And," she continued, "I am still here," as they have continued her support. Part of the reason is that she was determined to stay and was persistent in her belief that her being there lay within God's providence. Since she was supported by a very conservative church, her official title was "office manager," but she was soon "helping anyone with any ministry project."

Diane is the first to meet all who walk through the door, to assess their needs and then to address them. She regularly greets people new to the community and helps them to get oriented—in the church and in their neighborhoods. She has become the "emergency friend" to various children. If the child needs attention at school and the parents can not be reached, the school contacts Diane. She has taken people to the emergency room, helped them move, taught in the Bible school (grades 6-8), served as youth minister and begun a ministry for battered women.

She reports that this was "... the best decision I ever made in my life ...," because it has exposed her to many diverse ways of looking at Jesus and approaching Christianity. Being on the mission field has broadened her definition of authentic Christianity, "by letting people be who and what they are, ... and coming to Jesus from an entirely different perspective ..."—a lesson we should all take to heart.

Women presently are represented in a new kind of mission—teaching on a temporary basis. For example, Marianna Long, a longtime located missionary in Austria and Ireland, who presently lives in Colorado with her husband, Roy, has been making short-term visits to teach small groups over the last three years to Russia.

Teaching and Preaching

Katie Hays met her husband, Lance Pape, in Abilene while they were both pursuing their bachelor's degrees. They went from there to Yale where both completed their Master of Divinity degrees. They and one other person are co-ministers who rotate the pulpit at Cahaba Valley Church of Christ in Alabama. Of Lance and herself, she says, "We share a job-and-a-half!" They both do youth ministry, preaching and teaching, and outreach. The last includes various service ministries such as raising money so that talented but underprivileged young people can go to college. They share a counseling load and "keep office hours and empty the trash."

Outreach

In the Spring of 1995 Billie Silvey was appointed coordinator of involvement ministries at the Culver Palms Church of Christ (Los Angeles), placing her in charge of involvement and publicity. To carry out this broad directive, she prepared an involvement form listing two hundred activities in which members may participate. She coordinated a worship and potluck for a recent "Friends' Day." The publicity for this included a brochure from the church describing Bible classes and areas of ministry with a

map of the building. For this and all other activities, she “uses everybody: artists, writers, printers. The church is really working together . . .” In June 1995, Los Angeles had a major campaign entitled “No to Violence,” and Billie was Culver Palms’ coordinator to involve the congregation in a community effort—businesses, hospitals, and media—to target violence in schools, homes and the world.

Ministry Teams

With the exception of Anna Griffith, the women above represent those in professional ministries, but many volunteer in innovative ways also. A number of churches use a ministry system in which specific activities may be directed either by men or women. Richland Hills (Ft. Worth, Texas), Vandelia (Lubbock, Texas), Malibu (Malibu, California), San Leandro (San Leandro, California), and East County (Gresham, Oregon) are just a handful of these. At the latter, Mark Love, the pulpit minister, reports that women are free to share in confessional and testimonial times, take part in “gender appropriate” readings and drama in worship, and make announcements pertaining to their specific ministry areas. At San Leandro, women are likewise encouraged to make their own ministry announcements and are often interviewed regarding their own ministries during the assemblies. At present, a team balanced by age, gender, race and perspective is drawing up a mission statement for the church. That team is facilitated by Stacey Mullins. Husband-wife teams teach in all of San Leandro’s adult Sunday school classes. In a number of churches, women’s only leadership role in the Sunday assembly is in their participation in worship teams that lead in the teaching of new songs. The Abilene Mission church, Vandelia, the Community church (Houston) and Richland Hills (to name a few) have such worship teams.

Parachurch Ministries

Women are active in key leadership positions in all of the parachurch ministries—hospital and prison chaplaincies, adoption agencies, maternity and children’s homes, and Christian colleges. Kim Pendergraft presently coordinates the women’s prison ministry at the Oak Hill Church of Christ (Austin, Texas) and Susan Gilbert is active in the same work

in the Ft. Worth area. Fran Carver (Ph.D. candidate, Princeton) has recently joined the Pepperdine Religion Division faculty. Jeanene Reese is adjunct professor of undergraduate Bible and ministry at Abilene Christian University and directs the Center for Women in Christian Ministry. We need to be reminded that all of these are ministry extensions of the body of Christ, doing in his name what he would do if he were here in the flesh.

Writing

Our fellowship is blessed with a number of talented, qualified female writers who have contributed books and study guides for all age levels and class/types, as well as contributing to all of our periodicals. Especially noteworthy have been Sandra Humphrey’s work with **Christian Woman** magazine and Billie Silvey’s with **Twenty-First Century Christian**. Additionally, D’Esta Love serves as co-editor of **Leaven**, a journal for ministry among churches of the Restoration heritage.

Anyone can be effective in ministry if she or he, even with many imperfections, strives to be God’s person. If a man or woman further prepares him or herself, God will use that preparation for his glory, regardless of gender. We would like others to join us in offering a hearty salute to all those glorifying God in the broadening of the boundaries of his kingdom!

Questions for Discussion

1. Does it surprise you that women are involved in leading so many ministries around the country?
2. Think of your own congregation. Can you identify women who are “ministering”? Who are they and what do they do?
3. Would you say that the women featured in this article, and the women you just discussed, produce “good fruit”?

Anna M. Griffith is a wife of thirty-six years and mother of three sons and four grandchildren. She is currently enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Abilene Christian University.