

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Randolph, Robert M. (2012) "The Brookline Church of Christ and the Role of Women," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss2/6>

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The Brookline Church of Christ and the Role of Women

ROBERT M. RANDOLPH

This is a personal memoir of forty-plus years as part of a congregation. It is not an academic exercise. The congregation in Brookline, Massachusetts, began in 1921 on the campus of Harvard University. It moved in 1940 to Brookline, Massachusetts, into a building that had once been an art gallery and most recently “Happy Jack’s Radio Church.” The cost of the building was about \$8000. A single family in the congregation, a painter from Nova Scotia who had married a teacher from Texas, loaned most of it. In 1940 there were three significant congregations of *a cappella* Churches of Christ north of New York City. In addition to Brookline, there was a Sommerite congregation in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and in Portland, Maine, there was another congregation that was premillennial. There were smaller congregations scattered with different descriptors across the New England landscape.

The church in Brookline was made up of a combination of Canadians from the Maritimes, a smattering of immigrants from the British Isles and southerners, black and white, who had come to New England for work and education. When the war began just over a year after the move to Brookline, the number of congregants grew.

Several congregations represented the broad Stone-Campbell Movement in the region, but few were flourishing. The Disciples of Christ had a presence in New Haven and some of their students came to Harvard, which benefitted the church. Early in the century Hall Calhoun, John William McGarvey’s presumptive heir at the College of the Bible in Lexington, Kentucky, had taken his degree at Harvard. The blind J. P. Sanders, who finished his studies at Harvard and was to serve out his ministerial career in the Disciples of Christ, also preached for congregations in the area.

The sense of the broad Stone-Campbell Movement was influential because of the cultural isolation that Brookline felt. That was all too real. So ministers sought out those from similar traditions within the Restoration Movement. I remember a conversation with J. Harold Thomas, minister for the Brookline Church twice in the 1940s, where he lamented that they had not made deeper ties to the Christian Churches in the area. Those congregations were made up of New Englanders, and with a shared heritage Harold felt something could have been learned from closer associations.

My relationship with Brookline began when my grandfather came to Brookline in 1940 to preach the first series of services held in the building. Family lore has him helping bolt down the pews, preaching the meeting and then going off to preach in Maine and hunt moose.

LeMoine Lewis, my teacher at Abilene Christian, J. Harold Thomas, a relative by marriage, and William C. Martin, a friend from Abilene, all played roles in the evolution of Brookline. Over the subsequent years my knowledge of the group grew thanks to conversations, interactions and visits with all three.

Beginning in the 1960s the church again benefitted from a stream of younger people coming to Boston to study. A ministry called House of the Carpenter became well-known and influenced similar programs in the inner cities of Detroit, Chicago and New York. Such efforts tapped into the idealism of the times.

Jan and I moved to Boston in 1967 from New Haven. I was to be the leader of the House of the Carpenter summer camp. The racial climate of the summer was poisoned over the July 4th weekend when Grove Hall erupted in riots. I ended up refreshing myself with the literature on urban ministry. In September I began my

first teaching job but continued to worship at Brookline. What I learned during that time was that Brookline occupied a storied niche in the history of Churches of Christ nourished by the memories of those who had come during the war, encountered New England and lived to tell about it. The congregation still had a vibrant ministry to inner city children that built bridges across cultures, but also did not integrate the congregation at a leadership level. Brookline had also reached across the region to start and restart many congregations. There was good reason that the congregation was well-known.

As you might guess, Brookline was a congregation known for its focus on social concerns. After a series of ministers, who had studied at Harvard and Boston University during the 1960s, Brookline began again to have ministers who came to preach. Denton Crews came from the 16th and Decatur congregation in Washington, D.C. He remained until 1968 and was followed by Charles Prince, who hoped to study at Harvard. Subsequently the congregation has not had either a full-time minister or elders.

By the 1970s the number of congregations in the immediate region grew from four to fourteen, the stable core of older members declined and the gasoline crisis of the early 1970s ended the children's ministry. Brookline would survive based on those near to the building and since it was a congregation known for being non-traditional and scholarly, it faced difficult times.

The discomfort some felt with Brookline had to do with its interracial work. Southern Churches were quick to see in the work of the House of the Carpenter a threat to the status quo and they were right. At the same time a new crop of teachers trained at Boston University and Harvard began to go back to the heartland. Not all were from Brookline, but all had been touched by Brookline. Tom Olbricht had been at Natick as had Jimmy Jack Roberts, who ended up making a career at Princeton. Abe Malherbe came from the Lexington congregation, taught at Abilene Christian University and completed a distinguished career at Yale. Roy Ward and Harold Forshey ended up at Miami of Ohio; Don McGaughey went to Lubbock Christian College and then left teaching. There are others, and the strengths and failings of these men were often connected to Brookline.

This was a period of great upheaval. The charismatic movement swept through the Churches of Christ. The old sense of identity began to fragment. There was a period of redefinition, a search for a new orthodoxy. If we were wrong about race and the Holy Spirit, what else might we be wrong about? It was also a time of generational change.

One response from the heartland of the Stone-Campbell tradition was to move away from the Christian colleges, sending students to be exposed to the inner cities of the nation and the graduate schools that introduced new ideas. Schools of preaching sprang up on every corner and in every town, or so it seemed. Ministers trained in these schools came to New England and influenced the new congregations that offered alternatives to Brookline. An exodus movement came to Burlington, Massachusetts and one of its stated objectives was to offer an alternative to Brookline.

For Brookline the challenge was to rethink our tradition and to decide where we fit. We were a church that had a commitment to racial justice and wished to change the world, but with the emergence of Black Power, that vision was impractical. We were also less clear about who we were. The social action focus turned out to have shallow roots. It was said that the Natick congregation was the best educated biblically and Brookline was the most socially active but suddenly it was not clear what that meant. We needed to rediscover our biblical roots. It was not enough to know who we were not, but we needed to know who we were. So we went back to the Bible led by a succession of ministers who were studying scripture: Steve McKenzie, Michael Williams, David Malone, Tim Willis, Micki Pulley, Shaun Casey, Mark Hamilton and others who helped to refocus the congregation.

At the same time there was another new development. We had women coming to Boston to study and bringing their husbands and families. We had had several women in the 1970s that came to study scripture, but they had come alone and were conflicted about their role in the church. Now the field broadened as women came to become lawyers, doctors, chemists and scripture scholars. A congregation with the awareness of what it might mean to be a woman doing competitive graduate study was needed to support such women.

Brookline was well-positioned to offer such a ministry. At the depths of the difficult 1970s we had concluded that the church owed the Lord its best and that meant that the officers of the church should be

chosen for their skills rather than gender. We elected a steering committee to lead the church. *The Firm Foundation* noted our decision with a loud condemnation, but we needed leadership and from the beginning the leaders of the church had always included women. In 1972 a woman was chosen treasurer of the church because she had the skills needed to handle the money of the church.

The question always was: "What are the gifts God has given you to serve his church?" The roles followed. But for several years we remained a church led by gifted people but a worshipping community led by men. Gradually the issue of gifts spilled over into worship and when a woman choir director joined the congregation, song leading duties followed.

This is not to say that we did not spend time with our Bibles studying the issue of women's roles, but the conclusion seemed rather simple: oneness in Christ and the use of gifts in the service of the church seemed to demand that the walls come down. As they did we realized that women needed to be trained in roles that men had learned to fill when they were teens. But there were unexpected gifts. Women prayed with new words and great insight. The bar for men leading singing was pretty low—literally and figuratively. Women trained in music lifted the worship.

At about this time we had another influx of students studying scripture who cared about the church. Kathy Pulley and her sister Micki Pulley became an important part of the congregation. Kathy was doing her PhD at Boston University. Micki and her husband-to-be, Joey King, were studying at Harvard. The first sermon preached by a woman at the Brookline Church came in the mid-1980s. Kathy and Tom Geer, also a PhD student and a preacher for a neighboring congregation, were asked to lead the church in a weekend study. As was the pattern then, we left the Sunday services dependent on the material to be covered and it was logical that Kathy should preach. The congregation was not shocked; they listened. No walls fell down, no lightening bolts flashed. I am willing to bet that Kathy preached the first sermon by a woman in an *a cappella* Church of Christ in the twentieth century.

Micki Pulley followed by doing one year of field education with us. She was paid for her work and took her turn preaching regularly. In the 1990s Katie Hays came to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to be an astronaut and discovered a love of ministry. Katie preached her first sermon at Brookline and when she told her mother what she was going to do, learned from her mother that she had always wanted to preach. Both Micki and Katie are now preaching in the Disciples of Christ. Prior to her move to the Disciples, however, Katie served two congregations of the Church of Christ as a preaching minister.

So let me be clear, the change at Brookline was not the result of theological argumentation taken to a new level. We know our Bibles and knew that God's call did not take gender into account; the proclamation of a risen Lord was gender blind. A body made up of many members with many gifts seemed to open many doors if we were marching to God's drum rather than our own. But we also understood that what we were about called us to interact with our own culture and that meant sensitivity to what we expected of one another and support for one another in ways not always thought of in advance. For example, some women found the opportunity to take public roles troubling, not because they thought it wrong, but because they had other things they wished to do such as raising children, supporting husbands and studying law. The new learning was that everyone had the opportunity to serve and all needed to be prepared for the opportunity.

By the end of the 1990s Brookline had become comfortable with an egalitarian approach, so much so that it ceased to be unusual or noteworthy within the circles where we were known. Looking back at the study we did from texts of scripture, I noted how simple it seemed in retrospect, but how difficult it was in fact. I often spent Sunday morning girding for unpleasantness, but no longer.

Similar studies and the influence of Brookline have led other congregations to reach similar conclusions, and those studies are worth noting if your congregation is interested in this topic. The Manhattan congregation has material available on their homepage; sermons preached by women at Manhattan are there as well. The Stamford, Connecticut, congregation also has materials available on their homepage. Tom Robinson at Manhattan spent several years with us at Brookline; Dale Pauls, at Stamford, has been a good friend for longer than I care to remember.

Reflecting back on the history of Brookline, I realize that the congregation would not have survived had it not been for women like Rita Early, who went home this winter having reached her ninety-ninth year, and Elnora Harris. It is only appropriate that we honor them when we talk of what Brookline has become. In her last years Rita could not even hear the words she read when she shared scripture in public, but she was there every Sunday and we were blessed by having to give her manuscripts of our sermons knowing that she might tell us that she had heard Leroy Garrett preach on the same text in 1946 and he had done it better. I think of Elnora every time the cold outside is biting and the church is warm; when she was with us that was not always true and she noticed! Rita and Elnora were role models for countless women, as were Shirley Lewis and Roxie Thomas. They were the wives of preachers, who passed on to their daughters a love of the church and gave their strength to them. Faye Burgess should be remembered as well. God alone knows the names of those she and Wendell touched.

Brookline had a simple but serious theology and strong women. It is also important that Brookline was on the edge of the Campbellite diaspora. Groupthink is easier in Nashville, as is intimidation. The young do not know what they cannot do unless they are told, and if they stay long enough they will become old.

I have also come to recognize that even a small congregation can have a great influence. Brookliners have gone out well beyond Boston and influenced congregations that never heard of the Church of Christ in Brookline. The number of Brookliners on the program of the Christian Scholars Conference this week is probably as large as congregations of far greater size. Some who reacted against the direction we took have grown to appreciate the experience and some who never worked with us have come to count themselves honorary members of our club. I have been involved with this ministry so long that I have lost perspective. There is much we should and could have done, but in the end we have done our best and before God I think it is enough.

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