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Those Women of the Hopwood Church

Bruce and Rosemarie Shields

AND NOW IT HAS HAPPENED!” reads the headline of an editorial in a June 1990 journal of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. “The Hopwood Memorial Christian Church in East Tennessee has recently chosen a woman as an elder, the first independent Christian church/church of Christ to my knowledge to so act.”¹ Dorothy Keister Walker, the elder referred to, had been ordained to the Christian ministry years earlier by her home church in Pennsylvania. After earning a bachelor of divinity degree at Butler School of Religion, she traveled for several years as an evangelist on a team with Medford Jones. Then she developed a Mission to Women and worked with the staffs of congregations to encourage women in their roles in the church as well as in family life. When she married Dr. Dean E. Walker, president of Milligan College, in 1962, she became his first lady at Milligan and then later at Emmanuel School of Religion (now Emmanuel Christian Seminary).

For many years Dorothy had been doing the work of an elder at the Hopwood church—teaching, visiting the sick and infirm, and counseling younger Christians. Her election to that office in 1989 was without controversy within the congregation. Anticipating controversy among other groups, the church board at the time urged people to consider the biblical examples of Mary Magdalene in Matthew 28.1–10, Mark 16.1–7 and 24.10 and John 20.1–18; Priscilla in Acts 18.1–4, 24–26 and Romans 16.3–4; as well as Phoebe in Romans 16.1–2 and Junia in Romans 16.7.

The Hopwood congregation, as is true with most churches, has a history of strong women in leadership roles, whether or not they hold “official” positions. This stream of women leads back at least to Sarah Eleanor LaRue Hopwood, the wife of the founder of Milligan College as a post-secondary educational institution. The congregation was then known as the Buffalo Creek Church, situated as it was (and is) on the banks of Buffalo Creek in northeast Tennessee. What is now Milligan College was originally the Buffalo Male and Female Institute, meeting in the log structure that housed the church beginning in 1832. The Hopwoods arrived in 1875 and purchased the school, soon naming it after Robert Milligan, who as a professor had left a strong impression on Josephus Hopwood. From that time on, the history of both the college and the congregation are well-documented and closely entwined.

Many of the leaders in the congregation since 1875 have been in one way or another related to the college, especially since until recently the pastoral leadership has been college personnel or students. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, very few churches in this rural area expected to have preaching every Sunday. Instead they shared preachers among a group of churches, with the preacher often appearing once a month at each of several congregations. As both college president and congregational preacher, Josephus Hopwood had to travel to raise funds for the college, and so his wife took care of the daily work of both the college and congregation many weeks of the year.

This pattern becomes even clearer during the tenure of Henry J. and Perlea Derthick, who moved into leadership at the college and the congregation in 1917. Milligan had gone through a time of instability after

1. Thomas D. Thurman, “And Now It Has Happened,” *The Restoration Herald* (June 1990): 2.

the Hopwoods left to found Lynchburg College in 1903. Josephus and Sarah Hopwood had returned in 1915, but their advanced age made it impossible for them to carry the whole burden of leadership. Henry and Perlea proved to be just what the college needed, and they served both the college and the congregation for over ten years.

Milligan archives contain a letter from Mrs. Derthick in reply to a request for biographical information. Her letter reads, “About the only thing in which I have great pride is that I have been married forty years to the same man, living in peace, contentment and happiness, which in this day and generation I think might be worthy of mention. Up to the present time, I have been a law-abiding citizen and the mother of four children. This, I think, would cover all that I would care to have mentioned.” Her attitude is typical of the many women and men who gave generously of their resources to the church yet shunned praise and publicity.

The Derthicks continued to lead the college until 1941, but in 1928 Professor Charles Burns became the minister of the Buffalo Creek Christian Church. He had earlier led the church for two years (1919–1921), but then moved to a ministry in Indiana, returning to Milligan and the Buffalo Creek church in 1927. Burns served as professor and dean until he became president of Milligan in 1941.

Dr. Burns was apparently an effective preacher, and the church grew under his leadership. His wife, Florence, played a very active role in many aspects of the congregation’s life for the next thirteen crucial years, while raising four daughters, two sons, and a foster son. The Ladies Aid Society of Buffalo Creek Christian Church elected her president. In 1931 the group changed its name to the King’s Daughters, counting as members women named Watherly, Hopwood, Shepherd, Hyder, Bowman, Price, White, Shupe, Eads, Patton, Thompson, and Buck, whose families are still in the area. The women met weekly as a Sunday School class in the church building and during the week, usually on Thursday, in homes or at the church. It included women from the general community as well as from the church, with a constitution and bylaws, a budget that included local and world missions, and its own song, for which Mrs. Burns wrote the words.

When it became clear that the church building needed more space to handle its growing congregation, the King’s Daughters accepted the challenge of raising funds for construction. The group started with \$800 in savings from the Ladies Aid Society and went to work making aprons, quilts, crocheted pieces, knitted pieces, and other items for an annual bazaar. They put together a cookbook and served “pay meals” in members’ homes.

While the men were saying it was impossible to enlarge the structure, Florence drew plans for the building project and gave them to a local architect to make working drawings. Her group of women continued to raise funds until they could begin the work. The men volunteered many hours of labor digging the foundation and preparing the building to be moved onto a new foundation with space for a kitchen and fellowship hall. Once that was finished they contracted with a local stone mason to envelop the whole building in stone left over from the work of a nearby iron mine. Then they ordered stained-glass windows depicting scenes from the life of Jesus on the side walls and a large, three-piece good shepherd window at the front of the sanctuary. All of this was completed in late 1940 and dedicated on Easter 1941. Thus the present worship center and fellowship hall of the Hopwood Memorial Christian Church became a reality. At that time the congregation changed its name to honor President and Mrs. Hopwood. Florence Burns chaired the building committee that oversaw the whole project, and she did it while caring for her family and helping her husband keep the college going.

As the United States became increasingly involved in World War II, enrollment at Milligan dropped, and soon the college trustees turned the campus over to the V-12 Navy College Training Program. Being pacifists, Mr. and Mrs. Burns decided to retire to Florida, but they left a legacy in both the college and the church. A plaque affixed later to the stone of the church building reads: “In memory of Florence A Burns who inspired many to give of their time and resources to remodel Hopwood Christian Church[.] Presented by King’s Daughters and friends[.]”

It is not surprising then, as life returned to normal following the war, that strong women would once again fill leading roles in the Hopwood church. John Neth, librarian at Milligan, became the preacher at Hopwood in 1954, and he brought with him his wife, Evelyn, who was already an ordained minister with experience on a church staff. While rearing her children, she taught Sunday school classes and ably aided her husband in his leadership.

Using innovative methods and materials like the flannel board and chalk drawings, she began a children's worship service in the church fellowship hall and mentored several young adult women to lead it. Evelyn Neth was joined in the work of the church by Mildred Welshimer, who was professor of Christian education and dean of women at Milligan. Miss Welshimer, one of the daughters of P. H. Welshimer, famed minister in Canton, Ohio, was known during this era as a leader in education among our churches nationwide. She regularly taught an adult Sunday school class and mentored other teachers at Hopwood and elsewhere. Another ordained woman of this era was Janet Rugg, who taught literature at Milligan and played the organ at Hopwood.

Beginning in 1958, Milligan professor Dr. Orville Crowder and his wife, Anna May, moved from Boston by way of Atlanta into the congregational leadership. Mrs. Crowder was an accomplished musician who had sung with the Atlanta Opera Company. A woman of elegance, she organized a children's choir, set up poetry readings, and even directed a performance of *The Mikado*. The Crowders introduced liturgical and classical music into the worship services at Hopwood. At the same time, Anna May directed the Appalachian Girl Scout Council. Soon Hopwood had both Boy and Girl Scout troops. The Crowders left Hopwood in 1982 when he was called to Phillips University.

Not long after this, her marriage brought Dorothy Kiester Walker to Hopwood. As noted above, Dorothy brought with her great experience in evangelism and work with women. She soon had a group of women organized who took the name Service Seekers, meeting weekly to pray for and visit the sick and others needing special attention. As she began this work she found a helpful friend in Wanda Lee Coil Hampton. These two women had been roommates at Butler School of Religion (now Christian Theological Seminary), where Dorothy had done her BD and Wanda Lee her MA in church history and languages.

Wanda Lee was ordained to the Christian ministry at Hopwood in the late 1960s, having pastored several congregations in Indiana before moving to Milligan, where she taught English literature, Latin, and Greek. She also aided the beginning of Emmanuel by teaching Greek there. She had previously taught inner-city children in Washington to read while her husband, Roy, was teaching at the U.S. Naval Academy. During that time they also planted the Glen Burnie Christian Church in Maryland and had four children. At the Hopwood church with the help of her husband, she developed a fine children's program, especially among preschoolers, while raising her own children.²

In 1985 Hopwood hired its first female youth minister, Cynthia Cornwell (later McCachern), a student at Milligan and then Emmanuel. With Cindy's intelligence and creativity Hopwood developed an outstanding ministry for children and youth. Her title was soon changed to associate minister in recognition of the scope of her influence. She worked alongside the preacher, Dr. James Street, professor of counseling at Milligan. With great appreciation, the congregation ordained Cindy on May 29, 1988. She continues to serve the Lord as a teacher and mother in Oklahoma.

Miriam Perkins became the administrative assistant at Hopwood while she was a student at Milligan and Emmanuel. Her gifts and wisdom led the congregation to ordain her to Christian ministry on May 25, 1997. After completing her seminary degree she moved into campus ministry at Ohio University and then into a doctoral program in theology at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. Dr. Perkins now serves as associate professor of theology and society at Emmanuel Christian Seminary and attends Hopwood, where she teaches the high school class.

Early leaders, male and female, established the congregation. Their successors enlarged the facilities and broadened its programs. Under the leadership of Tim Ross, called as the congregation's first full-time minister in 1996, the congregation moved to a more active place in the global community. Hopwood had always had an emphasis on missions; however, Tim, his wife, Marcia (who serves as a teacher, artist, and hostess), and their children have led the congregation to a greater awareness of people in need of the gospel and of this world's goods. The Rosses worked previously in Kenya and carried their love for Africa home with them. Many international students at Milligan, Emmanuel, and East Tennessee State University have easily become part of the Hopwood community.

2. This information is from email correspondence with her two daughters, Mary Fern Phillippe and Rebecca Plumer.

Kip and Katy (Drage) Lines became youth ministers at Hopwood in January 1995 while they studied at Emmanuel. The congregation ordained them together on December 13, 1998. They left soon afterwards to become missionaries among the Turkana people in northern Kenya. After several years of effective ministry there, they returned to the States. Katy was children's minister at a church in Lexington while Kip did doctoral work in missiology at Asbury Seminary. Kip is now teaching at Hope International University, while Katy is on the library staff there. This couple is just one among many that Hopwood has helped send to and support on the mission field.

Anna Grant, who served for several years as a missionary in Japan, was ordained by Hopwood in the summer of 1999. Anna is now a hospice chaplain in Johnson City. Jennie Patterson Morrow was ordained at Hopwood on July 14, 2008. She now pastors a church in New York. Other women who serve (with their husbands) abroad after time at Hopwood include Tabitha Hauser in Burkina Faso; Erin Moore in Ethiopia; Ruth Barron in Kenya; Portia Morrison Pelton, who grew up in the Hopwood church, in Asia; Kim Drage in Asia; and Beth Jarvis Silliman in Germany.

Hopwood has ordained two other women since Jennie. Jana Debosova was a student at Emmanuel with an undergraduate degree from Northwest Christian University. Born and reared in the Czech Republic, she came to the United States for further education. The Hopwood church ordained her to ministry in May, 2009. Jana is now completing a second graduate degree in counseling in preparation for service in that field. Heather Holland was ordained at Hopwood on April 25, 2010. Heather moved to Tennessee with her husband, Jack, when he joined the faculty of Emmanuel. After completing her MDiv at Emmanuel, Heather became chaplain of the seminary. She now also directs part of the seminary field education program.

The Hopwood board now consists of both men and women, some of whom are elders and others deacons. The female elders include Patricia Phillips Magness, whose personal reflections article appears elsewhere in this edition of *Leaven*. The others are Mary Belle Holt, whose work as an elder preceded her election to that office; Joy Matson, whose work with children is extraordinary; and Debra Beavers Shields, who was ordained by her home church in Ohio and who is senior chaplain at the Johnson City Medical Center Hospital.

In this article we have merely skimmed the surface of the history of women in leadership at the Hopwood church. Many others have served in important ways with little or no recognition. One good example is Carolyn Walker, who has played the organ in worship services now for fifty-seven years and for many years also directed the church choir.

In addition to these women in formal leadership positions, visitors to Sunday services are often surprised to see women helping to serve communion and receive the morning offering, and they are probably a bit shocked to see women presiding at the communion table and reading the weekly scripture lessons. So Hopwood women teach, sing, prepare and present communion elements, read scripture, and preach on Sunday mornings in addition to visiting the sick, chairing committees, and making decisions day in and day out. These women take their rightful place alongside strong Christian women of other times and along with the strong Christian men in the leadership of the Hopwood Memorial Christian Church, as this historic congregation moves into God's future.

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