

# Women Moving into Ministry: A Canadian Mennonite Press Survey

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This paper explores the trajectories of women moving into pastoral ministry in two Mennonite denominations: the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (CCMBC) and Mennonite Church Canada (formerly the Conference of Mennonites in Canada).<sup>1</sup> Prior to 1970, both denominations were similarly patriarchal, featuring only male pastoral leadership. The Conference of Mennonites in Canada saw its first woman lead pastor in 1976,<sup>2</sup> while CCMBC saw its first woman lead pastor in 1990.<sup>3</sup> Currently there are 4 lead women pastors serving in the 243 churches of the CCMBC,<sup>4</sup> while in Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada) women make up twenty-five percent of pastoral staff, and serve in relatively equal numbers in all types of ministry.<sup>5</sup> These two different trajectories of women in ministry<sup>6</sup> will be explored through a comparative analysis of each denomination's periodicals, surveying them decade by decade from 1970 to 2009, showing that the relative frequency of the reporting about this topic and the willingness to print women's voices correlated with the movement of women into ministry.

This paper surveys four publications.<sup>7</sup> The first is the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, a publication of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches that was provided free of charge to

all Mennonite Brethren households.<sup>8</sup> The three other publications are associated with Mennonite Church Canada and have a successive relationship to each other: *The Canadian Mennonite* (published until 1971),<sup>9</sup> the *Mennonite Reporter* (1971–97),<sup>10</sup> and the *Canadian Mennonite* (1997–present).<sup>11</sup> The last two periodicals went to every Mennonite household in most provinces through conference subsidies. All four Mennonite periodicals were widely read within their denominations, and the way they reported on women in ministry was influential. Providing access to information is a type of power, and periodical editors either empowered or disempowered women who were considering entering leadership. When women's stories and perspectives were not printed, each woman needed to be a pioneer in her own context. The periodicals reflected the attitudes in their denomination, but they also shaped their denomination.

### A Sense of Change: The 1970s

In the 1970s, the role of women in ministry was discussed in both the *MB Herald* and *The Canadian Mennonite/Mennonite Reporter*, a discussion that increased in frequency in both denominations' periodicals as the decade progressed. Women were moving into new roles in society, and this movement prompted wide-ranging debate over the way churches used women's gifts. First wave feminism had influenced some church denominations towards accepting women into pastoral ministry, but it was second wave feminism that solidified that move. For example, women could be ordained in the United Church of Canada as early as 1936, but it was only in the mid-1970s that United Church women started to be ordained in greater numbers.<sup>12</sup> Both the Anglican and Lutheran churches started ordaining women in Canada in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Even churches that were opposed to women in ministry felt it important to address the matter in this decade. The Christian Reformed tradition held a vote to maintain the status quo of male church leadership,<sup>14</sup> and the Catholic and Orthodox churches made statements about why they refused to ordain women.<sup>15</sup> Historian Marlene Epp writes, "The women's movement and second-wave feminism undoubtedly spurred Mennonite churches and female members to question prohibitions against women in senior ministry and other leadership positions in church bureaucracies."<sup>16</sup> This decade of ferment in Canadian society was reflected in the pages of both the *MB Herald* and the *Reporter*.

The *MB Herald* forefronted the topic in a bold way with a 1973 issue whose cover and content highlighted “the role of women in the church.” The six-page feature article was written by two men, who observed that “we live within a state of unresolved and uninformed tension” around the topic of women in ministry.<sup>17</sup> The authors declared their support for women’s leadership but cautioned that the church should not let society dictate its actions. A 1974 conference report observed that a presentation by David Ewert entitled “The Christian Woman in the Church and Conference” “was probably the most looked-forward-to paper of the 1974 Canadian Conference.”<sup>18</sup> Ewert was positive about women assuming ministry positions. In 1979, the *Herald* published three male-authored articles on this topic. The first observed that the past decade had “forced the Mennonite Brethren to review its theological stance on the role of women in the church.”<sup>19</sup> The second, an opinion column, reflected positively on the changes women had seen,<sup>20</sup> and a third article reported on an inter-Mennonite Women in Ministry Conference.<sup>21</sup>

Women’s voices were sometimes heard in the *MB Herald*; for example, Katie Funk Wiebe contributed a regular column in which she discussed a variety of topics. In “Liberation for Men and Women,” she claimed that the women’s liberation movement produced “hostility and uneasiness in men” and “disdain in women who see it as ridiculous and unnatural.”<sup>22</sup> While Wiebe was not positive here about feminism, she acknowledged that discrimination against women’s leadership in the church needed to be addressed.<sup>23</sup> In a subsequent column she suggested women’s gifts had indeed been ignored in the church, and that women and men needed to do something about it.<sup>24</sup> Commenting on a conference resolution that encouraged women’s participation in ministry, another woman wrote “Women Pleased with Resolution.”<sup>25</sup> While the coverage of women in ministry in the *MB Herald* in the 1970s was generally positive, it was mostly written by men. And the coverage was narrow: there were almost no references to women in pastoral leadership in other denominational settings, Mennonite or otherwise, except for a brief news item picked up from the General Conference Mennonite news service, “A Woman Becomes a Pastor in Illinois.”<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to the MB Conference, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada was starting to see women move into ministry. The *Reporter* carried small news reports, such as “New Pastor for Ottawa Church”<sup>27</sup> and “Martha Smith to Pastor at Stirling Church.”<sup>28</sup> While some articles were written by men, for example an article about the first Mennonite woman ordained in Canada in 1978,<sup>29</sup> the

*Reporter's* coverage of this movement of women in ministry was primarily by women reporters. "Committee on Ministry Approves Women Pastors" highlighted a study document on biblical and Anabaptist women,<sup>30</sup> and two five-part monthly series on "The Role of Women" and "Early Church Women" appeared; all these articles were penned by women. Brenda Schultz's profile of Doris Weber, "Called to the Ministry: One Woman's Pilgrimage," concluded by expressing the hope that sharing Weber's struggle would make it easier for other women to be involved in church leadership.<sup>31</sup>

The *Reporter* also carried numerous small notices tracing the progress of women into leadership in the Mennonite Church in the United States, and in other denominations in Canada. For example, Laverna Klippenstein wrote about Lombard (Illinois) Mennonite Church calling a husband-wife preaching team, titling her article "The Changing Role of Women in the Church." She wrote, "Effective Christian service is dependent on spiritual maturity. Here, for women as for men, there are no limitations."<sup>32</sup> A few months later an article, accompanied by a picture, was titled "Emma Richards: First Woman Pastor among North American Mennonites."<sup>33</sup> The *Reporter* also noted women's progress into ministry in the Anglican Church and the Reformed Church.

Overall, both periodicals affirmed women's leadership gifts and conveyed a sense of expectation that in the future more women would take up pastoral ministry positions. Generally, readers of the *Reporter* in the 1970s were more informed about the movement of women into ministry than readers of the *MB Herald* were, and more of the articles about this topic were written by women. While there was openness to the women's entry into ministry in the *Herald*, men mostly reported on this and women's voices were rarely heard.

### Retrenchment and Progress: The 1980s

During the 1980s, the *MB Herald* gave a lower profile to women in ministry than it had in the previous decade. Even though at least one woman was serving in paid pastoral ministry starting in 1985, this was not mentioned in the *Herald*.<sup>34</sup> There were no special issues or article series devoted to women in ministry, and in fact, there were no headlines that contained the word "women" or "woman". Men reporting on what happened at national conventions wrote most of the periodical coverage on women's leadership roles.<sup>35</sup> A report from a 1981 Canadian convention recorded a resolution to draw out "the spiritual resources found in our sisters for

various ministries in the church and the world”; however, the resolution went on to say that “we do not believe that the Mennonite Brethren church should ordain women to pastoral leadership.”<sup>36</sup> The same report described how “more than at any previous convention, women delegates, present in large numbers, spoke freely to the issue.”<sup>37</sup> The women had commented that the wording of the resolution was a “put-down” for women, but the vote strongly supported the resolution.

In 1987, a controversial resolution on women in ministry was presented at a North American gathering of Mennonite Brethren:

Mennonite Brethren churches free and affirm women for ministries in the church, at home and abroad – e.g., decision-making (committees and boards), evangelizing (visitation and discipling), teaching (Bible study and preaching), pastoral counseling (shepherding and soul care). We affirm women as associate pastors but do not, at this time, endorse women as senior pastors or “leading elder[s].”<sup>38</sup>

Don Ratzlaff reported that delegates were not comfortable with this resolution: it failed to pass, and the Board of Reference and Counsel that had brought the resolution was criticized for being influenced by society.<sup>39</sup> Toward the end of the 1980s the pages of the *Herald* included a brief reference to women in ministry from a Quebec MB conference: Martha Wall reported that a delegate brought a motion to “take a close look at the ministry of women in leadership roles.”<sup>40</sup> The motion was accepted by the delegates. And finally, in 1989 the role of women in ministry was one of the topics in a Canada–U.S. study conference in Illinois on contentious issues. Don Ratzlaff’s article on this event was accompanied by large photos of the six featured speakers, all men. Even in this male-dominated environment, Ratzlaff noted the support for women in ministry: “You could understand if Ed Boschman, pastor of the Laurelglen Bible Church, Bakersfield, Cal., felt a bit like Daniel in the lion’s den on this volatile issue. Boschman’s paper, which argued against women exercising authority over men in the church, was clearly the minority view of those present.”<sup>41</sup>

Aside from these reports on denominational gatherings, the *MB Herald* rarely discussed the topic of women in church leadership during the 1980s, and it published few women-authored articles. From the conference reporting we learn that some individuals within the MB church were in favour of women’s ministry and were showing up at conventions to make their voices heard, but women themselves were not given space to write about this in the *Herald*. There was no mention of any MB women serving in pasto-

ral ministry positions during this decade, although the inter-Mennonite Women in Ministry conferences were mentioned, usually in items from other news services. When an article on one of these Women in Ministry conferences was picked up from the *Reporter* in 1982, the *Herald* retitled it so it did not appear to be about women, changing it from "First Meeting in Canada for Women in Ministry Conferences" to "Giving Birth to New Creation."<sup>42</sup> The *MB Herald* continued its practice from the 1970s of rarely running news articles about women from other denominations who were taking up pastoral leadership, so readers were given no information on how women in ministry were faring across the ecumenical spectrum.

In contrast to the *MB Herald*, the *Mennonite Reporter* in the 1980s published a large number of articles on the topic of women in church leadership, many with the word "women" in their title. The *Reporter* chronicled the progress of women into ministry and the backlash against them. Women pastors were profiled by women, or wrote for themselves about the challenges they faced.<sup>43</sup> Reporting on this topic was becoming more nuanced, approaching the subject from numerous angles. In 1987, the *Reporter* published a long article surveying the state of women in Mennonite church ministry in Ontario, including statistics about how many were serving in pastoral leadership and how many were ordained in that role.<sup>44</sup> The *Reporter* commissioned its own longer survey by a sociologist the following year to gauge views on women in ministry.<sup>45</sup> A feature piece recounted how the *Reporter* tried to interview congregations that would not hire a woman as a pastor, but found that leaders in these congregations were reluctant to comment publicly.<sup>46</sup> The *Reporter* also included articles exegeting biblical passages related to this topic,<sup>47</sup> as well as a five-part series on biblical women from the early church, all written by women. At several points there were comments about the increased attendance of women students at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Indiana, as well as references to the Women in Ministry conferences.

As in the 1970s, the *Reporter* published news items about women in leadership in other denominations,<sup>48</sup> as well as updates on how Mennonite women leaders beyond North America were faring, for example in Germany, Brazil, and Zaire. In a front-page article, Bernie Wiebe described the heated debate on women's ordinations that had taken place in an American Mennonite conference and the resolution to "annul said ordinations immediately."<sup>49</sup> The periodical drew attention to discussions about women in ministry in the MB church with a front-page article in 1986: "MB Task Force

Pleads for Unity on Women as Leaders Issue.”<sup>50</sup> This task force is not mentioned in the *MB Herald*. A woman reflected on her attendance at an ecumenical conference on ministry: “Mennonite women are at a place similar to many of their sisters in other denominations – some small acceptance in some places as women in leadership, but only slowly receiving acceptance.... Many congregational search committees still will not consider a woman as a minister for their congregation.”<sup>51</sup>

Overall, the ‘80s saw the *Reporter* increasing its coverage of women in ministry, tracking their progress, and exploring the topic from a variety of angles. The *Reporter* had both women and men writing on the topic, with an emphasis on hearing about women’s actual experiences. This contrasts with the *MB Herald*, which published less about women in ministry in the 1980s than it had in the previous decade. Most of the conference reports it did publish on this topic were written by men.

### **Inching Forward and Diversifying Coverage: The 1990s**

The number of women in pastoral ministry in MB churches slowly increased in this decade, but coverage in the *MB Herald* was extremely limited. A 1990 article by Dora Dueck profiled Salome Hiebert, who had been working as a half-time pastoral assistant in Winnipeg since 1985. Hiebert was quoted as saying: “We do not move into ministry as one does in striving to attain position in the political arena. We cannot, we dare not, campaign for it, nor seek to gain power by it.... Leadership within the church must be discerned and encouraged by the church community, led by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>52</sup> Later that same year there was a news item, accompanied by a very small picture, about Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen’s commissioning as an associate pastor in an MB church in Manitoba, but no mention was made of the fact that she was a woman in ministry.<sup>53</sup> In 1992, the *Herald* devoted its November issue to the topic of women in ministry, twenty years after its similarly themed 1972 issue. In an editorial titled “The Real Problem,” Ron Geddert commented that “it has been ten years since the 1981 conference where we were supposed to encourage women in leadership.”<sup>54</sup> He observed that less than one tenth of associate pastors in the MB church were women, and he wondered why more women were not entering leadership positions. This was the first time the *MB Herald* reported to its readers on how many women were in pastoral ministry. Through the 1990s, a few advertisements appeared for youth or children’s ministry positions that specifically

encouraged both women and men to apply. In the regular notices about new pastor appointments, a few women's names started to appear, but no attention was drawn to that fact. In this decade reports from the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California started to include gender ratios for students, showing a trend of increasing women's enrolment.<sup>55</sup> The *Herald* continued to publish occasional notices about Women in Ministry conferences, mostly picked up from other news services.

During this decade, most of the reporting about women in ministry in the *MB Herald* continued to be found in conference reports about the theological debates taking place there. The Board of Faith and Life commissioned a book about women in ministry titled *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy*,<sup>56</sup> intended to serve as a study guide for a 1993 convention where a resolution supporting women's leadership was going to be presented. In the November 1992 issue, the *Herald* offered ten reviews of the book from a variety of perspectives. The resolution to encourage women to take on more leadership roles was defeated at the 1993 convention:

Take an emotion-laden debate. Mix it with long-standing concern for biblical faithfulness. Now add to that a heavy emphasis on the importance of covenant community and theological integrity. Stir for several years and pour it into a mold of a compromise. What do you get? A recipe for disaster. That may be overstating the ramifications of BFLs [Board of Faith and Life] recommendation on women in leadership for the future, but it aptly describes its fate on the convention floor.<sup>57</sup>

Instead, a resolution was approved that read, "We resolve not to break the bond of fellowship on this issue, but to allow for diversity of conviction and practice in the appointment of women to pastoral leadership."<sup>58</sup> In 1994 the chair of the Board of Faith and Life issued a letter that was published in full in the *MB Herald*, reminding congregations that the latest (1993) resolution did not overturn earlier encouragements for women to increase their involvement in church leadership, and that every congregation was "urged to be active in drawing women into all spheres of service, ministry and leadership with the single exception of the leading pastor."<sup>59</sup>

Throughout this second decade of women in paid ministry in the Canadian MB church, the *MB Herald* profiled only one woman, a pastoral assistant who worked half-time. No seminary educated women employed as full-time pastors were profiled, and reports from conventions that addressed this subject continued to be written by men. The *Herald* did not publish articles that contextualized

women's work in ministry or explored the difficulties they faced. The periodical consistently downplayed what little coverage it carried by avoiding the word "women" in the title of any article that had to do with actual women.<sup>60</sup> For example, the *Herald* picked up a small news item in 1997 from the *Mennonite Weekly Review* with statistics about women in ministry in the United States: in the General Conference Mennonite Church, fifteen per cent of ministers were women, while in the MB church five per cent of ministers were women.<sup>61</sup> The *Herald* titled this article "The Mennonite Church." The piece was equally about the Mennonite Brethren church, and it was about women, but neither subject was mentioned in the headline.

Meanwhile, the *Reporter* continued its practice of profiling women leaders and addressing the barriers that they still confronted. "Acceptance Comes Slowly for Women in Ministry"<sup>62</sup> explored the resistance women pastors faced from congregations. In numerous articles, the *Reporter* asked women pastors to share their experiences of being leaders. In a profile of Irma Fast Dueck, the interviewer reported Dueck as saying "how difficult it had been for her to be the lone woman Mennonite pastor in Winnipeg."<sup>63</sup> The theological debates continued, as some churches defended their reluctance to hire women.<sup>64</sup> The *Reporter* continued to contextualize the debate on women in ministry: it published statistical information about the status of women in ministry in Canada and the United States in different Mennonite contexts,<sup>65</sup> it profiled the first woman pastor in the Evangelical Mennonite Church,<sup>66</sup> and the 1990 hiring of Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen, the first woman to be a lead pastor in an MB church in Canada. The article on Thiessen observed that "most trained women are only allowed associate positions" in the Mennonite Brethren church.<sup>67</sup> Another article reported that "the MB Conference [of Canada] does not ordain women but has about ten to fifteen women serving congregations in associate pastor roles."<sup>68</sup> In 1992 an ad hoc MB women's group that called themselves the "Women's Network" started meeting with the goal of encouraging women in ministry. The *Reporter* titled their article about this group "Mennonite Brethren Forming Groups to Protest Restrictions against Women";<sup>69</sup> the *Herald* did not profile the group.

Throughout the '90s the *Reporter* provided its readers with more detailed information about the women who were in ministry in the MB church than the *MB Herald* did. The *Herald* increased its coverage of women in ministry during this decade, but did so by reporting on theological debates surrounding the topic rather than by profiling actual women who held ministry positions. The Re-

*porter* consistently published more articles about women in ministry, diversifying their coverage of the topic, and compared to the *Herald*, more of these articles were authored by women.

### The Voices of Women in Ministry: 2000–2009

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw some significant changes in the *MB Herald's* coverage of women in ministry, with more articles that provided facts. A Meetinghouse news service article about women pastors was picked up: "Of the 477 pastors in Canadian MB churches, 55, or 12 percent, are women."<sup>70</sup> The same article quoted Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen, who had left the MB church to pastor in Mennonite Church Canada, which she described as "a more accepting context." Thiessen commented, "My concern is that women with leadership abilities are leaving the [MB] denomination."<sup>71</sup> This was the first time a woman who had been a full-time minister in the MB church was quoted in the *Herald*, twelve years after she began her ministry. The same issue included an article by Sandra Reimer, somewhat ironically titled "Flourishing on Common Ground: Women in Leadership in Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches."<sup>72</sup> Reimer interviewed MB women pastors and observed that each "faced struggles in the beginning,"<sup>73</sup> although she did not name what those struggles were.

The *MB Herald* contextualized the movement of women into ministry internationally with "Ordination Decision: A Sign of Changing Relationships," recounting the ministry of Madame Lukala Londa Charly in the MB Church in Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. While the headline did not contain the word "woman," it was the first article in the *Herald* to have been written by an MB woman pastor, Mary Anne Isaak. Describing Charly's ordination, Isaak told readers that "in many ways, her ordination corresponds to the pre-1957 North American practice of ordaining women for overseas mission work."<sup>74</sup> This was the first time – in 2004 – since the debates about women in ministry began in the 1970s that the *MB Herald* mentioned the previous MB practice of ordaining women for overseas missionary service.<sup>75</sup> It is no coincidence that this happened in the first article written by an MB woman pastor. Four years later, the ordination of two other women for pastoral ministry was discussed, and this time the word "women" did appear in the headline. The article included a quote from MB missionary Paulina Foote, writing shortly after her 1922 ordination for overseas ministry.<sup>76</sup> The same issue profiled Bev Peters,

one of the women who was being ordained.<sup>77</sup> A letter to the editor in response to that profile takes issue with the reporting:

The phrase “women [are] now willing to accept expanding roles in kingdom ministry” struck me as simply not accurate. This implies that only recently have women been willing to accept expanding ministry roles in the church. It dishonors the many women in the past who were also willing to accept ministry roles in the church but had doors closed to them.... I sometimes wonder if the MB church doesn’t have an obligation to publicly apologize for the pain it caused the many women who were called and equipped by God to minister in their churches but who were told to move along and minister somewhere else.<sup>78</sup>

This was one of the few times where the issue of discrimination was explicitly discussed in the pages of the *MB Herald*. The author of this letter to the editor asked to remain anonymous.

The *MB Herald* also recorded resistance to women in ministry, particularly in the early part of the decade, with a number of articles that emphasized biblical reasons for women’s submission in the church.<sup>79</sup> There was a brief reference to some congregations becoming more restrictive about women’s involvement in churches as a result of the 1993 resolution that had allowed churches to make their own decisions on this issue;<sup>80</sup> however, as the decade progressed more consistently positive references to women in ministry appeared in the *Herald’s* pages. The MB church partnered with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada to hold a “Leading Women Conference,”<sup>81</sup> appointed a woman to the leadership planning team, and provided travel scholarships to help MB women attend it: “This will be an opportunity to establish relationships and strategize for continued growth as leaders.”<sup>82</sup> Later in the decade there are more reports about a subsequent conference.<sup>83</sup> The Canadian MB Conference Board of Faith and Life decided to hold a series of “Listening and Learning Sessions” across the country to “explore the biblical, hermeneutical, pragmatic, political, symbolic and personal aspects of the current restriction on women to be lead pastors.”<sup>84</sup> The *Herald’s* coverage included facts about how many women were ministering, rather than only the doctrinal discussions characteristic of past reporting.<sup>85</sup>

This decade saw women moving into ministry in greater numbers in the MB church, and this correlates with more women’s voices telling that story in the *MB Herald*. Statistics were published showing that some congregations were accepting women leaders, but there was no mention of difficulties women had in finding pastoral employment within the MB conference, or the resistance they faced once they were hired.

The *Canadian Mennonite* published fewer articles specifically devoted to women in pastoral ministry than the *Reporter* had in the previous decade, but there were more articles about women serving as conference administrators and as theologians in colleges and seminaries.<sup>86</sup> Coverage about pastoral ministry was largely characterized by individual profiles, either through interviews or women telling their own story. Vocational calling was explored in a study chronicling the journey of four pastoral interns.<sup>87</sup> The *Reporter* covered a 2006 event where three women representing three different decades of women's leadership in the church spoke of the challenges each had faced.<sup>88</sup> Statistics about women in ministry were provided by the MC Canada denominational minister, who observed that from 1986 to 2007, the number of women holding pastoral positions had increased from sixteen to ninety-two, so that they currently made up twenty-five percent of pastoral staff.<sup>89</sup>

In "Pioneer Pastors Share Their Stories," Mennonite pastor Elaine Bryant was interviewed: "Bryant, an African-American pastor in Chicago, trained for mission work in a denomination that did not welcome blacks. After she had completed seminary studies the church 'didn't know what to do with me,' she said."<sup>90</sup> This article, published in 2000, marked the first time the *Canadian Mennonite* explored the intersecting barriers of racism and sexism. International reporting on this topic continued with two pieces about Lancaster Mennonite Conference in the United States. Writer Melanie Zuercher observed that women occupying leadership roles in this conference "would agree that it is not the most hospitable environment for exercising their gifts."<sup>91</sup> A few years later, the Lancaster conference held a vote on supporting women in ministry, which was defeated by a narrow margin.<sup>92</sup> The *Canadian Mennonite* also featured articles on the MB church and its move to encourage women to take up church leadership roles, even that of lead pastor.<sup>93</sup>

The *Canadian Mennonite* continued to provide coverage about women in ministry throughout this decade, widening its approach to include other types of leadership such as conference structures and educational institutions. The periodical continued to feature women's perspectives and voices, contextualizing their ministry in an international context.

## Conclusion

In summary, the movement of women into positions of pastoral leadership in Canadian Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren

churches correlates with the way their periodicals reported on women in ministry. In the 1970s, both denominations' periodicals carried numerous articles about women in ministry, calling on women to use the gifts that God gave them. In the *MB Herald* men largely expressed this, while the *Reporter* featured more women's voices. In the next decade the Mennonite Church started welcoming women into ministry, and coverage grew; the *Reporter* gave women space to share their stories. In the MB church, only one woman had taken up a pastoral ministry position in the 1980s: the *Herald* devoted less coverage to this topic, with few articles written by women and a primary focus on theological debate at the conference level. Women began to take up paid pastoral positions in MB congregations in the early 1990s, over a decade later than in the Mennonite church. The *MB Herald* continued to focus on conference reports, primarily written by men, rather than featuring articles written by women about their experiences. Nor did the *Herald* situate the experience of MB women in ministry leadership within a larger ecumenical context. It was only after the turn of the century that the *MB Herald* started to report a few statistics and publish profiles of women in ministry; even then, the *Herald's* coverage did not examine the barriers women in leadership were facing. As women in MC Canada took up paid pastoral positions in greater numbers, the *Canadian Mennonite* became more nuanced in its coverage, providing statistics of women in ministry, profiling individual women, and making connections between pastoral ministry, other types of ministry, and institutional barriers they faced. By 2009, compared to MC Canada, there were far fewer MB women pastors serving in Canadian churches, even though the MB seminary had been educating women for ministry.

Pastoral ministry is a calling that is personally and communally discerned. If MB young women were not educated and given role models and information about ministry options by their conference periodical, it is not surprising that they did not discern a call as frequently as women in Mennonite Church Canada. Similarly, if MB congregations were not informed about women serving faithfully in pastorates, it was less likely that they would take a risk to hire their first woman pastor.

Further research is needed to fully understand why the trajectories of these two denominations were so different. It would be fruitful to interview former editors of the periodicals surveyed here. Were coverage choices about women in ministry always made at an editorial level? The *Herald* had a more direct relationship with their conference, while the *Reporter* was more independently structured. It may be that a few powerful men in the

Mennonite Brethren church leadership limited coverage, and slowed the movement of women into ministry by restricting the flow of information and stories by women. Another avenue of research would be to compare how feminism was accepted or rejected by both denominations: some parts of the Mennonite Brethren Church continued to emphasize a God-ordained order where women were called to be submissive to men.<sup>94</sup> It would be helpful to situate this discussion within the larger American stream of conservative evangelical thought and the influence it had on the two different denominations.<sup>95</sup>

There is a saying that journalism is the “first rough draft of history.” Church periodicals provide an invaluable window into the history of a denomination. With the perspective of time, historians can look back and track trends through the stories and reports they publish. In the case of women in ministry, periodicals are a valuable source of information. Today many church periodicals, like most print media in this digital world, are on precarious financial ground. Conference leaders who make budgets are wondering whether church organizations need journalism at all. Studies like this one show that religious, church-sponsored journalism is a rich resource for historians and an essential tool for self-reflection. Without the *Canadian Mennonite*, the *Mennonite Reporter*, and the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, we would be left with only the official reports of conferences and the memories of individuals, a very sparse picture indeed of women’s movement into ministry.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> These are two of the largest Mennonite denominations in Canada. Both are evangelical denominations that practice adult baptism, however the Canadian MB Conference places a stronger emphasis on individual salvation and evangelism, while Mennonite Church Canada places a stronger emphasis on God working through community life and social justice. Mennonite Church Canada was formed in 1989 from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, a part of the General Conference Mennonite Church, after an amalgamation with Canadian congregations from the Mennonite Church conference.
- <sup>2</sup> Alma Coffman was hired in 1976 as lead pastor for Ottawa Mennonite Church. Mary Schiedel, *Pioneers in Ministry: Women Pastors in Ontario Mennonite Churches, 1973-2003* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003), 41.
- <sup>3</sup> Karen Heidebrecht Thiessen was hired in 1990 as lead pastor for River East Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba. John H. Lohrenz and Abe J. Dueck (December 2009), “General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches,” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, retrieved 10

- February 2019, from [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=General\\_Conference\\_of\\_Mennonite\\_Brethren\\_Churches&oldid=143581](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=General_Conference_of_Mennonite_Brethren_Churches&oldid=143581).
- <sup>4</sup> *Canadian Mennonite Brethren Directory* (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Summer 2018).
- <sup>5</sup> Sven Eriksson, "Practicing What We Preach," *Canadian Mennonite* 11:9 (Apr 30, 2007), 27. I have been a lead pastor in both MC Canada, where I had many women colleagues who were lead pastors, and in the MB Conference, where in all of Canada there were only two other women lead pastors. These experiences piqued my curiosity about the different trajectories the two church bodies have taken and inspired this research.
- <sup>6</sup> There are many forms of leadership, and women had long served as leaders in women's sewing circles and through teaching children's Sunday school. However, the focus of discussion in this article is on women in paid pastoral ministry.
- <sup>7</sup> I gratefully acknowledge research funding from Conrad Grebel University College and research assistance from Sandy Conrad.
- <sup>8</sup> In 1970 the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (hereafter the *MB Herald*) was a biweekly publication; between 2002 and 2009 it gradually became a monthly publication. Its defined purpose has been "to keep church members informed of the work of God in their denomination – and beyond – and to stimulate growth in spiritual understanding and Christian responsibility." Masthead, *MB Herald* 9:1 (Jan 9, 1970), 7.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Canadian Mennonite* was an independent weekly publication "devoted to the affairs of Mennonites in Canada." Adolf Ens (February 2005), "Canadian Mennonite, The (1953–1971) (Periodical)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, retrieved 24 November 2018, from [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Canadian\\_Mennonite,\\_The\\_\(1953–1971\)\\_Periodical&oldid=142128](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Canadian_Mennonite,_The_(1953–1971)_Periodical&oldid=142128).
- <sup>10</sup> Founded in August 1971, the *Mennonite Reporter* (hereafter referred to as the *Reporter*) was an independent "Anabaptist periodical of news and reflection." Margaret Loewen Reimer (December 2011), "Mennonite Reporter (Periodical)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, retrieved 24 November 2018, from [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Reporter\\_\(Periodical\)&oldid=162281](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Reporter_(Periodical)&oldid=162281).
- <sup>11</sup> The *Reporter* became more officially affiliated with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada in 1997, when its name was changed to the *Canadian Mennonite*. It retained an independent board, with conference representation.
- <sup>12</sup> Before the 1970s women were much more likely to seek diaconal ministry in the United Church. Charlotte Caron, "The Significance of Women in Ministry," *Touchstone* 4:1 (Jan 1, 1986), 3.
- <sup>13</sup> Alyson Barnett-Cowan, "The Bishop's Messengers: Harbingers of the Ordination of Women," *Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* 26:2 (Oct 1, 1986), 75. There are no comparative studies in other denominations that explore church periodicals and women in ministry.
- <sup>14</sup> Phyllis Ten Elshof, "Reformed Bodies Diverge over Women's Ordination," *Christianity Today* 25:13 (Jul 17, 1981), 86.
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Ostlin, "Women's Liberation in Religion," *Christianity Today* 25:13 (Jul 17, 1981), 85.

- <sup>16</sup> Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women: A History* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 123.
- <sup>17</sup> Allen Guenther and Herbert Swartz, "The Role of Women in the Church," *MB Herald* 12:9 (May 4, 1973), 4-9.
- <sup>18</sup> "The Christian Woman in the Church and Conference," *MB Herald* 13:15 (July 26, 1974), 3.
- <sup>19</sup> Herb Kopp, "Looking for the Biblical Way," *MB Herald*, 18:25 (Dec 21, 1979), 8-9.
- <sup>20</sup> John H. Redekop, "Mennonite Brethren during the '70s," *MB Herald* 18:25 (Dec 21, 1979), 12.
- <sup>21</sup> The first inter-Mennonite Women in Ministry conference was held in 1976, organized by the Lombard (Illinois) Mennonite church. Subsequent events were planned by ad hoc committees and were held every several years in various cities in Canada and the United States. Vic Reimer, "Women in Ministry Conference Calls for Action in Mennonite Churches," *MB Herald* 18:25 (Dec 21, 1979), 18-19.
- <sup>22</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Liberation for Men and Women," *MB Herald* 10:3 (Feb 5, 1971), 7-8.
- <sup>23</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe is widely remembered for being an advocate for women in the MB church, even though her early columns in the 1970s in the *MB Herald* suggest otherwise. She was more outspoken for women's rights in her 1960s column "Women and the Church" for the American MB publication *Christian Century*. Sandra Plett suggests that the Canadian MB context was more conservative than the American MB church, and that Katie Funk Wiebe had to tone down her views in order to be published in the *MB Herald*. See Sandra Plett, "Attitudes toward Women as Reflected in Mennonite Brethren Periodicals," *Direction* 9:1 (Jan, 1980), 14-18.
- <sup>24</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "The Woman Question," *MB Herald* 12:9 (May 4, 1973), 10.
- <sup>25</sup> Neoma Jantz, "Women Pleased with Resolution," *MB Herald* 14:15 (Jul 25, 1975), 4-5.
- <sup>26</sup> General Conference Mennonite News Service, "A Women Becomes a Pastor in Illinois," *MB Herald* 12:1 (Jan 12, 1973), 16.
- <sup>27</sup> "New Pastor for Ottawa Church," *Reporter* 6:13 (Jun 28, 1976), 5.
- <sup>28</sup> "Martha Smith to Pastor at Stirling Church," *Reporter* 7:20 (Oct 3, 1977), 13.
- <sup>29</sup> "After many years of often emotional debate about the place of women in the church, we have suddenly and peacefully done it." David Kroeker, "Female Ordination: A First in Canada," *Reporter* 8:4 (Feb 20, 1978), 6.
- <sup>30</sup> Lois Janzen, "Committee on Ministry Approves Women Pastors," *Reporter* 2:22 (Oct 30, 1972), 3.
- <sup>31</sup> Brenda Schultz, "Called to Ministry: One Woman's Pilgrimage," *Reporter* 9:9 (Apr 30, 1979), 4.
- <sup>32</sup> Laverna Klippenstein, "The Changing Role of Women in the Church," *Reporter* 2:7 (Apr 3, 1972), 5.
- <sup>33</sup> "Emma Richards: First Woman Pastor among North American Mennonites," *Reporter* 2:26 (Dec 25, 1972), 4.
- <sup>34</sup> A 1990 article says that Salome Hiebert began her work as an assistant to the pastor in 1985. Dora Dueck, "Salome Hiebert: Ministry within Community," *MB Herald* (Apr 20, 1990), 6.

- <sup>35</sup> When no authors were listed for conference reports, it meant that one of the editorial staff had written it; at this point all the editorial staff of the *MB Herald* were men.
- <sup>36</sup> "Moving Ahead While Looking Behind," *MB Herald* 20:16 (Aug 28, 1981), 6.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>38</sup> Board of Reference and Counsel, "Reference & Counsel: Resolution on Women in Ministry," *MB Herald* 26:13 (Jun 26, 1987), 5.
- <sup>39</sup> Don Ratzlaff, "Board of Reference and Counsel," *MB Herald* 26:16 (Aug 28, 1987), 16.
- <sup>40</sup> Martha Wall, "Growing Pains: A Look at the Quebec Mennonite Brethren Conference," *MB Herald* 28:21 (Nov 10, 1989), 16.
- <sup>41</sup> Don Ratzlaff, "MBs Study but Don't Resolve," *MB Herald* 28:16 (Aug 25, 1989), 14.
- <sup>42</sup> Margaret Loewen Reimer, "First Meeting in Canada for Women in Ministry Conference," *Reporter*, 12:22 (Nov 1, 1982), 4A; Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Giving Birth to a New Creation," *MB Herald* 21:21 (Nov 5, 1982), 21.
- <sup>43</sup> See for example, Doreen Neufeld, "Can a Woman Be Called to Preach? My Theological Journey," *Reporter* 17:17 (Aug 31, 1987), 5; and Elizabeth Yoder, "Profile: Renee Sauder," and "Profile: Mary Mae Schwartzentruber," *Reporter* 18:1 (Jan 4, 1988), 8-9.
- <sup>44</sup> Ferne Burkhardt, "Growing Trend toward Calling Women Minister Both Welcomed and Resisted in Ontario Churches," *Reporter* 17:13 (Jun 22, 1987), 5.
- <sup>45</sup> Henry J. Regehr, "A Survey on Women in Ministry: Culture Is Not the Final Authority in New Testament Times or Today," *Reporter* 18:1 (Jan 4, 1988), 8.
- <sup>46</sup> Ron Rempel, "A Survey on Women in Ministry," *Reporter* 18:1 (Jan 4, 1988), 8.
- <sup>47</sup> See for example, Gloria Neufeld-Redekop, "Must Women be Silent in the Church?" *Reporter* 18:1 (Jan 4, 1988), 8-9.
- <sup>48</sup> Frequent small news items reported on the acceptance or resistance to leadership of women in the Catholic, United Methodist, Christian Reformed, Baptist, Lutheran, and Episcopalian denominations.
- <sup>49</sup> Bernie Wiebe, "Ordination of Women Highly Charged Issue for Eastern District," *Reporter* 12:11 (May 30, 1983), 1.
- <sup>50</sup> Lorina Marsch, "MB Task Force Pleads for Unity on Women as Leaders Issue," *Reporter* 16:22 (Nov 10, 1986), 1.
- <sup>51</sup> Doris Gascho and Martha Smith Good, "Women on Ministry: Reflections from an Inter-Denominational Context," *Reporter* 13:11 (May 30, 1983), 5.
- <sup>52</sup> Dora Dueck, "Salome Hiebert: Ministry within Community," *MB Herald* (Apr 20, 1990), 6.
- <sup>53</sup> "River East MB Church," *MB Herald* 31:6 (Dec 7, 1990), 18.
- <sup>54</sup> Ron Geddert, "The Real Problem," *MB Herald* 31:22 (Nov 20, 1992), 2-3.
- <sup>55</sup> Of the thirty-nine graduates, "the twelve women graduates were an all-time high." Craig Hallman, "MB Biblical Seminary Holds Commencement," *MB Herald* 31:12 (Jun 12, 1992), 12.
- <sup>56</sup> *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, edited by John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel, Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1992).

- <sup>57</sup> Don Ratzlaff, "Smorgasbord of Issues Gets Mixed Reviews: Women in Leadership," *MB Herald* 32:15 (Aug 6, 1993), 7.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>59</sup> Gerry Ediger "To the Congregations...", *MB Herald* 33:2 (Jan 21, 1994), 12.
- <sup>60</sup> Sometimes the word "women" was used in headlines for articles about theological debates at conferences.
- <sup>61</sup> Mennonite Weekly Review, "The Mennonite Church," *MB Herald* 36:13 (Jun 27, 1997), 25.
- <sup>62</sup> Margaret Franz, "Acceptance Comes Slowly for Women in Ministry," *Reporter* 21:2 (Jan 21, 1991), B1.
- <sup>63</sup> Paul Schrag, "Study Probes Experiences of Women Pastors in Two Conferences," *Reporter* 23:5 (Mar 8, 1993), 4.
- <sup>64</sup> Margaret Loewen Reimer, "How Long O Lord?" *Reporter* 23:15 (Aug 2, 1993), 6.
- <sup>65</sup> Paul Schrag, "No Consensus on Women in Ministry," *Reporter* 23:5 (Mar 8, 1993), 4.
- <sup>66</sup> Russell Loewen, "EMC Congregation Calls First Woman to Pastoral Leadership," *Reporter* 22:20 (Oct 19, 1992), 1.
- <sup>67</sup> Wilma Derksen, "Church 'Won Over' by Female Pastor," *Reporter* 22:12 (Jun 15, 1992), 9.
- <sup>68</sup> Paul Schrag, "No Consensus on Women in Ministry," *Reporter* 23:5 (Mar 8, 1993), 4.
- <sup>69</sup> Wilma Derksen, "Mennonite Brethren Forming Groups to Protest Restrictions against Women," *Reporter* 23:24 (Dec 13, 1993), 3.
- <sup>70</sup> Paul Schrag, "Women in the Pulpit," *MB Herald* 43:15 (Nov 5, 2004), 16.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>72</sup> Sandra Reimer, "Flourishing on Common Ground: Women in Leadership in Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches," *MB Herald* (Nov 5, 2004), 23.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>74</sup> Mary Anne Isaak "is a pastor at College Community Church, Mennonite Brethren, in Clovis, California." Mary Anne Isaak and Jeanine Yoder, "Ordination Decision: A Sign of Changing Relationships," *MB Herald* (Jan 16, 2004), 10.
- <sup>75</sup> At least 151 Mennonite Brethren women were ordained for overseas missionary service starting in 1899. The MB church stopped ordaining women in 1957. Doug Heidebrecht, "Women Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren and the Struggle for Denominational Consensus," in *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, edited by Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder and Karl Koop (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2010), 87.
- <sup>76</sup> Laura Kalmar, "Ordination of Two Women Revives Discussion," *MB Herald* 47:5 (May 2008), 19.
- <sup>77</sup> Laura Kalmar, "Taking a Step of Obedience," *MB Herald* 47:5 (May 2008), 19.
- <sup>78</sup> Name withheld by request, "Women Also Willing Before," *MB Herald* 47:7 (Jul 2008), 4.
- <sup>79</sup> Ed Wiebe, "Becoming Reconciled to Scriptures," *MB Herald* 39:20 (Oct 20, 2000), 7; Susan Brandt, "Looking for Loopholes," *MB Herald* 39:20 (Oct 20, 2000), 8; and Jim Coggins, "Defining the Divinity of Jesus," *MB Herald* 42:5 (Apr 11, 2003), 14.
- <sup>80</sup> D. J. Stewart, "Time Again to Talk," *MB Herald* 40:14 (Jul 13, 2001), 14.

- <sup>81</sup> “Leadership Development a Priority for Conference,” *MB Herald* 41:1 (Jan 11, 2002), 13.
- <sup>82</sup> Adult Ministries New Release, “Second Women’s Gathering Slated,” *MB Herald* 42:12 (Sep 12, 2003), 17.
- <sup>83</sup> Barrie McMaster, “Women Get Leadership Boost,” *MB Herald* 47:1 (Jan 2008), 21.
- <sup>84</sup> Walter Unger, “BFL Calls for Study of Women in Leadership,” *MB Herald* 43:5 (Apr 9, 2004), 3.
- <sup>85</sup> Dora Dueck, “The MB Journey on Women in Ministry,” *MB Herald* 43:15 (Nov 5, 2004), 13.
- <sup>86</sup> See for example, Leona Dueck Penner, “Janet Plenert Reflects on Challenges and Opportunities in Leadership,” *Canadian Mennonite* 10:15 (Jul 31, 2006), 19.
- <sup>87</sup> Daniel Rempel, “Pastoral Interns Share Doubts and Affirmation,” *Canadian Mennonite* 5:12 (Jun 18, 2001), 4-5.
- <sup>88</sup> Jennifer Konkle, “Memoir Recalls Commissioning for First Woman Pastor,” *Canadian Mennonite* 10:16 (Aug 21, 2006), 13.
- <sup>89</sup> Sven Eriksson, “Practicing What We Preach,” *Canadian Mennonite* 11:9 (Apr 30, 2007), 27.
- <sup>90</sup> From article in *The Elkhart Truth*, “Pioneer Pastors Share Their Stories,” *Canadian Mennonite* 4:15 (Jul 31, 2000), 20.
- <sup>91</sup> Melanie Zuercher, “Women Review the Rocky Road to Church Ministry,” *Canadian Mennonite* 5:12 (Jun 18, 2001), 5.
- <sup>92</sup> Ross Muir, “Resolution Calls for Equal Treatment of Women Pastors,” *Canadian Mennonite* 11:8 (Apr 16, 2007), 18.
- <sup>93</sup> “Mennonite Brethren Call for Women Pastors,” *Canadian Mennonite* 7:6 (Mar 24, 2003), 18.
- <sup>94</sup> In my reading of the original sources, the word “feminism” appeared only rarely in the *Herald* and much more frequently in the *Reporter* and *Canadian Mennonite*.
- <sup>95</sup> For example, the influence of conservative evangelical James Dobson, whose preaching on male headship is directly opposed to women in pastoral ministry. Colleen McDannell, “Beyond Dr. Dobson: Women, Girls and Focus on the Family,” in *Women and Twentieth Century Protestantism*, pp. 113-131, edited by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth and Virginia Lieson Brereton (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002). For a discussion of the influence of fundamentalism on the Mennonite Brethren see: Doug Heidebrecht, “Authoritative Mennonite Brethren: The Convergence of Church Polity, Ordination, and Women in Leadership,” *Baptistic Theologies* 3:1 (2011), 67ff.