



From Preacher in the Field to Mother in the Church

The Reverend Louisa M. Woosley (1862–1952)

BY NANETTE SAWYER

The women are coming . . . knocking at the doors of various denominations for admittance. They say, "This subject is a flame in our hearts; a fire is kindled in our bones." But a voice from within says, Depart. I know you not, ye poor, cursed women. You can't get in here, because your hair is long and your features are fine. You are not masculine enough."

—The Rev. Louisa M. Woosley, 1891

Louisa Woosley was ordained as a minister of the gospel in 1889 by the Nolin Presbytery of the Kentucky Synod of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Her ordination took place 67 years before a woman, Margaret Towner, was ordained as a minister by the PCUSA (the northern stream of the Presbyterian Church) in 1956, and 75 years before Rachel Henderlite was ordained in the PCUS (the southern stream of the Presbyterian Church) in 1964. Louisa's ordination was challenged first by the synod in 1890 and then by the General Assembly of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC), but eventually was allowed to stand.

Much of her tenacity in challenging the church's exclusion of women as ministers came from her inner conviction that God had placed a claim on her life. Describing her first experience of preaching, Louisa wrote, "[F]or the first time in life I went to the sacred desk and opened my mouth for God. Oh, that was a precious hour—a green spot in my memory. A happy season it seemed. . . . My sky was without a cloud, so happy was I in the discharge of duty. I felt that the days of darkness were past, and that God's approval rested on my labors. But alas! This state of things did not last long. The fire of opposition began to burn."

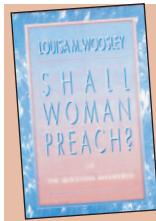
Her friends became her foes, Louisa wrote, and even her father turned his back on her. Her first summer of preaching, she had no invitations from her "own people." She preached "out-of-doors, in the open air, in school-houses."

When the Kentucky Synod, in 1893, instructed the presbytery to "retire the name of Mrs. Louisa M. Woosley" from its list of ministers because she was a woman, the presbytery responded by granting her a letter of dismissal with recommendation, which had the effect of making her a minister in transitu, allowing her to attend presbytery meetings with voice but no vote. Presbytery records show that she was asked to pray or preach at nearly every presbytery meeting for the next seven years.

Though she was still an exception to the rule, Louisa's name was finally added to the ministerial rolls of the General Assembly in 1913—almost 25 years after her ordination. In 1916 she became the stated clerk of the Leitchfield Presbytery and served in that role until 1941. In 1938 she was elected by acclamation as moderator of the Kentucky Synod. Louisa was elected six times as a minister commissioner to the CPC General Assembly. Twice she was not allowed to serve, but she was seated in 1923, 1928, 1935 and 1938.

Louisa Woosley's journey was long and arduous, but the people who knew her, and saw the effectiveness of her ministry, supported her while she persevered in fulfilling the call that God had placed in her heart. She was a committed presbyter and grew to be greatly respected and relied on in the church.

In 1941, when she retired from her position as stated clerk of the presbytery, a special resolution was passed, thanking God for leading "into our midst one whom we all love and admire, one who has been a faithful servant in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church for a period of 54 years." The resolution went on to



Louisa Woosley's book, *Shall Woman Preach? : Or the Question Answered*, is available from The Cumberland Presbyterian Church Bookstore, www.cumberland.org/cprc/cpbooks, in the "CP History and Heritage" section. The 101-page book sells for \$5.95.

say, "We no longer recognize her as a servant at the table but rather as a beloved mother in the Church." 🍷

Nanette Sawyer serves the Presbytery of Chicago as the key leader/evangelist in a New Church Development Probe on the west side of Chicago. She holds a master of theological studies degree from Harvard Divinity School and a master of divinity degree from McCormick Theological Seminary.

Sources used for this article

Hudson, Mary Linnie. "Shall Woman Preach? Or the Question Answered: The Ministry of Louisa M. Woosley in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1887-1942." Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1992.

Woosley, Louisa M. *Shall Woman Preach?, Or the Question Answered*. Caneyville, Ky.: 1891. Reprint, Memphis, Tennessee: Frontier Press (Cumberland Presbyterian Church, Board of Christian Education), 1989.



Ideas for Celebrating the Women in Ministry Around You



- Take part in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s two-year celebration (2005-2006) of the ordination of women as deacons, elders and ministers of Word and Sacrament. Research the history of women who have served your congregation and celebrate their ministries. Who was your congregation's first woman minister? Elder? Deacon? Who is the oldest woman still actively serving in one or more of these roles?
- Nominate someone for the Woman of Faith Awards. On June 18, 2006, during the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Women's Ministries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will recognize accomplished women whose Christian faith has called them to leadership as a deacon, an elder or a minister of Word and Sacrament. Nomination forms must be received by January 15, 2006. For more information or to receive a nomination form, contact the office of Women's Ministries, 888/728-7228, ext. 5362, or visit www.pcusa.org/women.
- Nurture the potential of a young woman in your congregation, presbytery or synod. Encourage her to attend the Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women, July 7-11, 2006, in Louisville, Kentucky. Consider funding her travel expenses or registration fee, in whole or in part. To learn more, call 888/728-7228, ext. 8420, or visit www.pcusa.org/pwgathering.
 - Stay connected to women from your congregation who leave to attend college or seminary. Give gift subscriptions to *Horizons* as a bimonthly reminder of the work and witness of women in their denomination and the world. To subscribe, call 800/524-2612 or visit www.pcusa.org/horizons.
 - Take part in Celebrate the Gifts of Women Sunday, February 26, 2006. Each year, the office of Women's Ministries produces a Celebrate the Gifts of Women resource, which provides an order of worship, prayers and litanies, suggested hymns, scripture and sermon emphasis, recommended resources and more. Copies of this resource are available in the January InfoPak and online, www.pcusa.org/women, to help you plan your celebration.

Women with a Vision

In 2002, the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns (ACWC) sent a survey to 3,853 Presbyterian clergywomen "to look at emerging issues related to clergywomen serving in parish ministry, including the decreasing numbers of clergywomen available for service, proportionately lower numbers of women serving congregations and the increasing numbers of women leaving parish ministry" (Minutes, pp. 53 and 317).

Perhaps more telling than the statistics of this survey are the bits of narrative shared by respondents.

One woman wrote, "I am one who is seriously considering leaving the parish ministry. I believe that one of our major problems is that no one is listening!" The survey's results, and responses like this one, beg the questions, "What drives women to pursue ordained ministry these days? How are they preparing to deal with the hurdles women continue to face in our denomination? And what vision do they have for their ministry?"

Anitra Kitts Rasmussen, a candidate for ministry under care of the Presbytery of the Cascades and a senior at San Francisco Theological Seminary, shares her vision:

"I have done a number of things in my life where women weren't expected to appear or participate. In high school (the early 1970s), I was one of three young women who integrated a Boy Scout Explorer Search and Rescue Post. My two friends stayed in base camp and preferred to help cook food and run the radio. I was much more interested in walking through brush with the rest of the boys.

"In 1994, I won a seat in the Oregon House of Representatives and served for six years in an environment that was very much run by 'alpha male' rules. So I know the boys' rules and how to disrupt them, and I will disrupt them when I believe it to be necessary. During my tenure I also became intensely aware of the need for a strong gospel voice on behalf of the poor in a political process that protected the

rich. At the end of my third and final term, a combination of events occurred that not only left me free to pursue a master of divinity degree, but also compelled me to go.

"I am aware that the female, midlife, divorced population is both strongly represented in the candidate-for-ministry pool and not particularly favored by anxious systems in congregations and seminaries that prefer the model of their perceived glory years: young, male, married with small children. I also think God is up to something if God is calling so many of us with our particular

experience of living through both the joys and challenges of life, family and our culture.

"On my way to seminary, I participated in the installation of a woman pastor to a congregation in Portland, Oregon. One of the minister members of the installation commission had recently given birth to her second child. She robed up, put on a stole, strapped her newborn onto her body in a front baby carrier and proceeded to perform her pastoral duties. I was in awe of the power of her witness—that active parenting was not a barrier to pastoral work—and the richer symbol that God is in the middle of everything and this woman didn't have to set aside her role as mother in order to be pastor.

"My hope and vision for my ministry is to serve God, to point toward this incomprehensible mystery that is the source of love and joy, and to participate in the work of God's transformative vision for God's good creation. I would like to be ordained. I want to break bread and baptize babies. I am amazed and humbled when God and individuals invite me into the intimate places where suffering meets healing. And I want to continue to witness to the need for the faithful with privilege to advocate in political systems on behalf of those without privilege. Mostly, I want to—I need to—continue to say yes to God's call."

WEB BONUS!

Read more responses from newly ordained or soon-to-be-ordained women sharing their vision of ministry. Visit www.pcusa.org/horizons and click on our current issue to find this Web bonus!

The Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns (ACWC) offers this report—"Clergywomen's Experiences in Ministry: Realities and Challenges, 2003"—as a tool to engage the church in conversation about clergywomen's experiences. The 30-page report is available from the Office of Women's Advocacy, 888/728-7228, ext. 5385 and online, www.pcusa.org/acwc.