

Gender and ethnicity in Methodist mission An Irish perspective

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Commenting in the *Cambridge History of Christianity* on the role of women in Christian mission in the 20th century, Kevin Ward declared:

By the early twentieth century, the majority of missionaries were women: wives, single women, or, in the case of the Catholics, members of a wide variety of religious orders. In the period after the First World War, women demanded, and in many cases obtained, full recognition as missionaries and representation on their local and central boards. Their role in education, medicine and evangelism, as well as in fostering Christian family life, was crucial to the whole mission enterprise.¹

I endorse much in this statement, though in the case of *Irish* Methodist women it does not seem to me that they *demand* (Ward's word) to be recognised and represented at the highest levels in the church's life either at home or overseas. Instead they appeared rather passive in accepting the role and positions allocated to them within male-dominated churches at home and overseas. Some of the early Women's Work (WW) officers in Britain and Ireland were undoubtedly formidable characters, but was this only in relation to restricted areas of the church's life? What part were they able to play, for example, in discussion and decisions relating to finance, mission policies and the related topic of inter-church relations in the first half of the 20th century?

Methodist women, including those from Ireland, engaged mainly in medical, social, educational and evangelistic work, and undoubtedly made a significant contribution. Of the Irish MMS doctors serving overseas in the 20th century, for example, women were in the majority. There were too thirty Irish nurses in the 20th century, all of them women with professional qualifications, working in hospitals, clinics or occasionally in less formal settings. Sister Easter Hayden, for example, was a trained nurse, a midwife and a Wesley Deaconess. She served in Ceylon from 1910 to 1944, helping to lay the foundations of the 'Order of Women Workers' on the island. Ismena Warren was a full-time artist with the Christian Literature Society (CLS) in India, providing illustrations for a large number of publications. Deirdre Fee, the Rev. John Fee's wife, used her considerable artistic skills in painting and sketches to portray everyday life in China, including their time as a couple in a Japanese internment camp. Maureen Neill-Watson was a qualified social worker. Her exertions during the Biafran war contributed to her early death at Heathrow airport, on her journey home from Nigeria to recuperate. As many as thirty women were engaged in evangelism in the 20th century, mainly working in villages with women's groups, distributing scripture portions, teaching Bible stories and home skills, and encouraging Christian women to share their faith with others.

¹ In the chapter 'Christianity, colonialism and missions' in *The Cambridge History of Christianity, World Christianities c. 1914-2000*, p. 77.

A report in 1916 from Hunan, China, noted that the Rev. Wesley Hill, the Rev. Deane Little and Dr. George Hadden, all from Ireland and with their wives (Mrs. Hadden was English), lived and worked in the same circuit, with Little the circuit Superintendent. Mrs. Little (nee Caroline Crawford), who had initially gone out as a single missionary, and Mrs. Hadden (nee Helen Vickers), were both ‘qualified doctors’. As ‘honorary workers’, the report ran, they were recognised as playing a valuable part in the Mission’s ‘healing and teaching departments.’² Yet, while prayer was requested for all three couples, there was no question of payment for the two doctors!

Single women missionaries who married ‘on the field’ were treated particularly unfairly, often continuing their work after marriage while losing status and forfeiting income. The case of Nelson Ludlow’s wife - who was English - well illustrates the situation. Ludlow, an Irish missionary minister between the late 1920s and the early 50s, married Joyce Woods in 1933. A qualified doctor and surgeon she had commenced work at Ilesha hospital, Nigeria, two years earlier, where Ludlow was already serving with his sister, a nurse. It proved a highly effective partnership, involving medical, evangelistic and educational work largely among Muslims, facilitated by a specially adapted vehicle in which Nelson and Joyce Ludlow frequently travelled together, ministering over a wide area.³ After retirement, Ludlow wrote a book describing their shared life and ministry. On the MMS attitude towards missionary spouses, he commented:

In our early days, wives did not count in any official lists or appointments and, if a woman worker had the misfortune to marry a missionary, she was removed from the official list... Many of us... would gladly claim that our life partner did as much and often more than we did for the Kingdom of God, but (the MMS headquarters) would have none of these things. To carry matters further, each overseas District Synod had its own Missionary’s Meeting which... included a report on the condition of each residence, its repairs, furnishings and need for improvements. But the missionary’s wife was not a member and was not entitled to attend. This was very sad and frustrating.⁴

Ludlow later noted that what he described as ‘the emancipation of women’ eventually led to the qualifications of wives as doctors, teachers and other professions being listed in the annual *Prayer Manual*. Financial arrangements however remained largely unaffected, and as retirement drew near he and his wife wondered where in England they might eventually find a suitable and affordable property:⁵

² *The Christian Advocate*, 25 February, 1916, p.63.

³ *The Kingdom Overseas*, November 1949, pp. 208-14. Nelson’s sister, Elsie, also served at Ilesha as a nurse, becoming the Matron at the hospital. Another member of the wider Ludlow family, Bertha, married the Rev. Donald English, a prominent minister of the British Conference, serving with him in Nigeria (1962-6). Their marriage was conducted by Nelson Ludlow. Donald later became President of the British Conference in 1978 and 1990. See Brian Hoare and Ian Randall, *More than a Methodist, The Life and Ministry of Donald English*, 2003, pp. 39-58.

⁴ R. N. Ludlow, *Partners in Pioneering: Ludlow’s Memoirs*, available on his son Tony’s web site: <http://www.tonyludlow.net>, pp. 89-90. The italics are mine.

⁵ As a family they had earlier arranged for their children to be educated in England. This inevitably influenced later decisions including retirement.

The financial aspect was a great worry to me... True I had a wife who was a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons. Her missionary years had earned for her the princely sum of three pounds a week. After our marriage, while she engaged fully in medical activities in pioneering and helping with surgery at our hospital, for eighteen years she received no salary, grant nor allowances.⁶

Others had similar experiences including the Turtles in Burma and the Gallaghers in India. Maureen Turtle was a practicing doctor in a remote part of Burma, providing the base and focal point for much of her shared ministry with David, a minister. In south India Muriel Gallagher (nee Hyman, from England), impressively combined the roles of wife to Ernest and mother to their children while continuing her initial work as an educationalist and nursery school secretary throughout the extensive Medak diocese.

Barry and Gillian Sloan working through the World Church Office in the former East Germany from the late 20th century, commented significantly in 2004 in response to a questionnaire on missionary service:

The biggest change for us was the decision...to pay spouses serving overseas. Gillian had been working part-time in a night school teaching English. She was then able to give this up and offer classes in the church. This was very useful to the church: the students paid a fee to the church for their course; and we had people from outside the church attending.⁷

Turning to *ethnicity*, this emerged as an important factor in mission in the second half of the 20th century, encouraging a need for clarity and sensitivity in expressing the theology and practice of mission in different settings. Deriving from the Greek word *ethnos*, it refers to shared kinship and consciousness among people. Ethnicity may however also be divisive, highlighting difference and leading to bitter conflict with others. Since the gospel is to be shared with *all*, it is therefore vital to define a basis on which this can be done:

Mutuality among cultures...built on the meekness of Christ is the essence of inter-cultural witness to the gospel. Since... all are one in Christ, no ethnic group has intrinsic superiority over any other. This spirit of mutuality in Christ in the intercultural communication of the gospel provides the theological basis for a meaningful witness to the gospel in the context of ethnic division, competition and violence.⁸

The role and place of Sahr Yambasu has been particularly significant in this area. Born and brought up in Sierra Leone, Yambasu studied, taught and ministered in Ireland as well as Sierra Leone. Married to an Irishwoman, herself a Methodist minister, and knowledgeable of missionary literature and methods particularly in

⁶ R. N. Ludlow, op. cit., p. 186.

⁷ I take it that the final comment referring to the payment of spouses implies that the new arrangement, instead of reducing mission opportunity, enlarged it while easing things for the Sloans as a family.

⁸ John Corrie (ed.), *Dictionary of Mission Theology, Evangelical Foundations*, 2007, p.114.

Africa, Yambasu ministers in Ireland. His book *Dialectics of Evangelization*, published in 2002 and sub-titled *A Critical Examination of Methodist Evangelization of the Mende People in Sierra Leone*, is both instructive and challenging. A Mende himself, Yambasu assessed the aims and preaching of pioneer missionaries among the Mende between 1890 and 1932 in these terms:

In whatever way one chooses to interpret missionary preaching methods, they all had one *single ultimate goal: to achieve the missionaries' intended outcome - conversion from the old Mende way of life to that proclaimed by missionaries*: it was to instil habits of appreciation, of overt behaviour, and of thought, which together were believed to be Christian rules of behaviour. It was to replace, or at the very least, to instil in Mende religion and practice the one and only true religion and its practices, missionary Christianity.⁹

Included as part of 'missionary Christianity' according to Yambasu, was an assumption that missionaries did not need to take seriously the worldview of the peoples among whom they served. Missionaries, he argued, tended to hold fixed 'Western' views of life, conversion and Christian experience in contrast to the Mende who were more open to their immediate environment including African religious traditions.

In 1932, a year of Methodist union in Britain, union took place too in Sierra Leone involving the two branches of Methodism formed by separate British and American initiatives. Examining the following period under the title 'The Power to Live as Historical Beings: Mende Mission 1933-60', Yambasu concluded that the response of Mende converts fell short of what was perceived as the 'pure' and 'perfect' Christian belief and practice for which missionaries looked. Converts refused to jettison Mende beliefs and practices in exchange for 'finished and fixed Christian Truths' and values, as defined by missionaries. Official reports, for example, confirmed that they failed to meet missionary expectations regarding the abandonment of polygamy.¹⁰ Mende converts saw themselves as shaped in part by 'cultural relativity' and remained open to the possibility of 'the existence of other forms of secular and spiritual power' outside their immediate experience. The Mende view of selfhood therefore differed significantly from early Western expectations, and - to their credit, argued Yambasu - missionaries learnt to welcome fresh understandings and approaches:

The (first) missionaries assumed that conversion involved sincere personal belief on the one hand, and on the other, committed membership of a community in Christ. According to this assumption, it was up to every individual to arrive at a rational choice among alternatives and mutually exclusive faiths and then act upon it... Those Mende (however) who became Christians largely expressed

⁹ Sahr Yambasu, *Dialectics of Evangelization*, 2002, p.107. Yambasu himself attended and addressed an earlier conference of the MMS History Project.

¹⁰ Polygamy proved to be a highly sensitive issue for missions throughout Africa. Consideration had to be given, for example, to the need to protect all the wives and children in pre-Christian marriages. This was a subject of debate at the Edinburgh 1910 mission conference. For a useful discussion on the topic, see *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, 1995, pp. 672-3; and John Corrie (ed.) *op. cit.* pp. 291-4.

themselves according to their own understanding of being a person, ownership of property, work and the production of wealth, social and religious relations... (Though) the role of Mende agents in the proselytization of their fellow Mende proved to be crucial (in leading to conversions)... there was no question of total rejection of their pre-missionary Mende faith... Conversion was amorphous, gradual, often implicit, and evidently 'syncretic' in nature. The nature of the transformation it achieved in Mende peoples' lives - their social identities, cultural styles and ritual practices - was complex... *The meaning and significance of conversion must be sought from the peoples themselves who have experienced it, rather than from the preconceptions of other people.*¹¹

Yambasu here identifies and highlights questions and issues relevant to churches in mission in different situations and times. His approach recalls the tension and challenge identified in the early church when consideration was given to whether Gentile believers should be required to conform to the practice and disciplines of Jewish believers. Differences over belief and practice need to be taken seriously, with new believers viewed as converts not proselytes, charged with the task of opening their culture, traditions and values to Christ while seeking to give authentic local expression to their new-found faith in Christ. This process inevitably presents challenges to those thought of as the 'giving', 'going' and 'sending' partners in mission and their need to re-examine past assumptions and to face fresh challenges. This was widely acknowledged in the 20th century as when, for example, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization declared in its Willowbank Report:

Sensitive cross-cultural witnesses will not arrive at their sphere of service with a pre-packaged gospel. They must have a clear grasp of the 'given truth' of the gospel. But they will fail to communicate successfully if they try to impose this on people without reference to their own cultural situation and that of the people to whom they go. It is only by active, loving engagement with the local people, thinking in their thought patterns, understanding their world-view, listening to their questions, and feeling their burdens, that the whole believing community (of which the missionary is a part) will be able to respond to their need... We are not claiming it will be easy.¹²

The approach of Inderjit Bhogal is revealing at this point. A Sikh, a Methodist minister, indeed a former President of the British Methodist Conference, he is now the Leader of the Corrymeela Community in Ireland. In the year 2000 he wrote:

¹¹ Sahr Yambasu, *ibid* pp.249-51. Lamin Sanneh, from a Muslim background and now a leading figure in world Christian and Muslim-Christian circles, continues to value his contacts with Muslims, makes similar points concerning 'the limitations of ...pre-packaged religion'. In correspondence with me, Dr. Elizabeth Harris, a Methodist Local Preacher deeply involved in inter-faith dialogue, found parallels to the Mende experience in her research on Buddhism and Christianity in Sri Lanka.

¹² Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (edd.), *PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT, A Reader*, 1981, p.517.

Paul, after his Damascus road experience, did not cease to be a Hebrew but remained proud of his culture although he questioned some parts of it. So I try to follow Christ within the Sikh culture. I do not describe myself as a former Sikh. Culturally I remain a Sikh. I am able to worship God and to remain within the communal meals with my family and others in the Sikh temples. And I wear the bracelet, the KARA, for this in Sikhism is the symbol of God's truth and justice. I wear it as a sign of my respect for Sikhs, and my family, and also to remind me that my hands must always seek the truth and justice and mercy of God... Christians, like our Lord, must relate to different religions with respect and with a willingness to learn from them.¹³

Similarly, Jewish converts today often refer to themselves as Christian Jews, not former Jews.

Professor Andrew Walls has helpfully drawn attention to the fundamental distinction between 'proselytism' and Christian 'conversion' in the early church council described in Acts 15, convened to discuss the reception of Gentile believers. Writing of the council's 'astonishing' rejection of a Judaizing type of proselytism he commented:

The early church decided that Gentile believers in Jesus - although expagans without the lifelong training in doctrine and morality that Jews had - should not be circumcised, should not be expected to keep the Torah, and should be left to find a Christian lifestyle of their own within Hellenistic society. *They were not to be proselytes, but converts.*¹⁴

The distinction between 'proselyte' and 'convert' is fundamental, with converts from other faiths, though requiring continuing encouragement and support, recognised as being 'in Christ' and as such entitled to take their place alongside others within the church. It is vital too that in the interests of mission, converts, wherever possible, are encouraged to retain contact with their traditional communities while 'baptising' into Christ what is good among their traditional values, thought-forms and practices. This will inevitably lead to a questioning and confronting of issues best resolved by converts themselves, with established Christians maintaining a supportive role. A recent comment from within Sri Lanka is strikingly relevant:

Genuine conversion is not an abandonment of one identity for another, but the radical re-orientation of the original identity towards Christ... This is a radically new Christ-centred *way of being*... Christianity infuses indigenous cultures and languages rather than replacing them

¹³ Inderjit Bhogal in *A Continuing Faith, The 2000 Methodist Companion*, pp.7-8, Copyright: Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. Bhogal became the Leader of the Corrymeela Community in Ireland in 2011.

¹⁴ See Professor Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 2002, pp.67-8, for a discussion on the church council's decision in Acts 15. The italics within the quote are mine. See however John Corrie (ed.), *Dictionary of Mission, Evangelical Foundations*, pp. 321-2; and Elmer Thiessen, *The Ethics of Evangelism, sub-titled A Philosophical Defence of Ethical Proselytising and Persuasion*, for a wider discussion on proselytism.

with sacred languages, dress codes, dietary laws, and normative philosophical templates.¹⁵

Instances of inter-faith conversion may lead to ‘a long, dynamic and dangerous process, producing distinctive discipleships as diverse and variegated as human life itself.’¹⁶ This is deeply challenging both to established and new Christians. With patience, however, and within the reality of Christian fellowship that includes an openness to one another and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, shared beliefs and characteristics will undoubtedly emerge, contributing to a family likeness among and between believers, however varied their initial ethnic, gender and theological backgrounds.

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¹⁵ Prabo Mihindukulasuriya, a lecturer at Colombo Theological Seminary (CTS), argues this in the *Journal of CTS*, 2010, p. 104.

¹⁶ Howard Peskett & Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission*, 2003, p.79. This is relevant also to the earlier discussion on conversion concerning the Mende people.