

And So It Began: On Birthing an Organization

Dorothy Yoder Nyce

To have by nature a point of view, to stick to it, to follow it where it leads, is the rarest of possessions, and lends value even to trifles.
– Virginia Woolf

No history includes all of the possible facts; it is always a selection from the available data. . . . We look for memory that connects us with our past . . . that helps us understand the present and that pushes to the future and to the changes that we have yet to see.
– Lois Barrett¹

Introduction

For as long as I have had a desk of my own, in a room of my own at home, the above wisdom from Virginia Woolf has been on the wall nearby. It has been there for me when bringing feminist thought to a biblical text, when seeing the interrelated nature of all justice issues, when in conflict with a church leader, when writing new paragraphs, when parenting, when relating with Hindu friends, and when pondering the MCC Task Force (TF), now called the Committee on Women’s Concerns (CWC).

Luann Habegger Martin begins her reflection article in this journal on the TF/CWC thirtieth anniversary – her probe of memory – with early 1970s societal influences. My article begins with details from the North American Mennonite environment. Readers will encounter shifts of both time and theme. Already in 1959, the *Gospel Herald* editor had advocated an expanded role for women in the church: “Let us set them free for the use of the talents which God has given them. There are many things that our women can and should do in addition to homemaking.” Yet, thirty years later, another *GH* editor reveals the ongoing controversy: “What (most determined feminists)

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properly object to is having Paul's words used to restrict women in the use of their gifts in the ministry of the church . . . if a congregation chooses not to ask for women to teach or preach, it should not be because of 1 Corinthians 14:34."²

For a course on women at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in 1975, student John K. Hershberger examined writing about women that appeared in fifty *Gospel Herald* articles from 1966 to 1974 and several books by Mennonite women published between 1965 and 1971. The subject of women's role from those pens centered on themes of marriage and family. Articles on the doctrinal topic of headship, represented by a woman's devotional covering, lingered long in Mennonite Church (MC) circles. Headship set more limits on MC women in contrast to General Conference (GC) women, who were not reminded of being inferior to men through a veil for prayer. But socialization shaped both groups. Writer alarm, backlash, and ambiguity revealed the fear that new freedom for women – being more open and frank or being employed beyond the home – would weaken the home's foundation.

Ella May Miller's popular publication *I Am A Woman* (1967) held that "By nature a woman is passive and receptive psychologically."³ Her other Moody Press publication, *A Woman in Her Home*, extols homemaking as the most important career, as God's calling. Researcher Hershberger describes Miller's first book as a Mennonite "proleptic version of *Total Woman*," a resource that blessed female submission and subtle manipulation. Marabel Morgan's sex and materialism gimmicks came sprinkled with biblical quotes. A spate of letters followed the review of *Total Woman* by Margaret Loewen Reimer, who wrote, "In an era when women are struggling to be equal partners and marriage is ceasing to be a viable option for many people, this book can only do harm to those who are striving for happy, healthy marriages."⁴

In addition to her books, Miller's point of view found its way into Mennonite homes through her broadcast "Heart to Heart." In October 1975 Task Force members Loewen Reimer and Erna Klassen attended a Women and Religion Conference in Saskatoon. Fifteen pamphlets from Miller's "Heart to Heart" broadcast were distributed to delegates as examples of "church literature that perpetuates sexism." Knowing that the churchwomen who received the registration material represented a wide range of denominations, TF members discussed the dilemma of "how to support mothers and homemakers without appearing to force that choice."⁵ As part of their strategy

to raise consciousness in Mennonite circles, they corresponded with the Mennonite Media Ministries, to express concern for the image and interpretation that it seemed to endorse. They encouraged programming to “help women deal creatively with changes in role expectations.” A year later, Mennonite Media announced a shift “to a personal growth program for women, called *Your Time*,” with Margaret Voth as speaker.

John Hershberger describes 1970 as a “watershed” year. A year before, Beulah Kauffman had traced the changing function of the MC Women’s Missionary and Service Auxiliary. Mennonite women hoped to use the full range of their gifts throughout the church. Evelyn King Mumaw advocated singleness as a valued, productive lifestyle (*Woman Alone*, 1970). Lois Gunden Clemens’s Conrad Grebel Lectures, published as *Woman Liberated* in 1971, offered the clearest discussion of the issue in the MC to that date. Calling for equal opportunity for women, she, however, blessed sex role stereotypes via ‘complementarity.’ “Her lack of work with Biblical languages and history [for interpreting texts] [was] troublesome” for Hershberger. Had he researched General Conference attention to the subject, he might have encountered Dotty Janzen’s outline of scriptures in a speech given at the conference “Accent on Women,” held at the First Mennonite Church, Newton, Kansas on December 28, 1974.

Rebuttal to, and endorsement of, change followed. Articles about women in the church appeared in the *GH*, written by Anna Frey, Bob Baker, Arnold Roth, B. Charles Hostetter, David Helmuth, Dorothy Swartzentruber, Katie Funk Wiebe, Norman Shank, Winifred Beechy, Glendon Blosser, Anna Detweiler, Phyllis Pellman Good, John Drescher, and others.⁶ Then in April 1971, a thousand women heard Lois Gunden Clemens, Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus, and Helen Alderfer speak about Women’s Liberation at a Homebuilders’ meeting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Ruth defined Women’s Liberation; Lois focused on churchwomen’s response to it; and Helen presented some anti-Women’s Liberation views that she had heard. Among varied points of view, speakers endorsed male headship. They also explained Betty Friedan’s views expressed in *The Feminine Mystique*. Helen noted that either men or women – those “who are afraid of strong relationships” – might oppose liberation.⁷

Ordination issues received attention. A March 1973 General Conference Progress Report on Ordination engaged the Believers Church concept of “priesthood of all believers.” Every Anabaptist was a minister. With categories

of clergy and laity downplayed, occasions transpire when “any Christian can minister to another . . . can be a mediator of mercy and grace.” Vinora Weaver Salzman did just that. She loved to preach and did so on occasion, over fifty years, often when her pastor-husband Earl needed to be away.⁸ When Emma Richards was ordained in 1972 in the MC Illinois Conference, officials stipulated that ordination was not open to all women. After a Kingdom Interest Group that focused women’s leadership, at the 1975 Mennonite Church Assembly in Eureka, Illinois, I wrote: “The important issues, I think, go beyond the mere frequency of positions held. When will we discuss: What changes in attitude result from genuine *co-operation*? Can *interdependence* be realized if women are still seen as dependent on men but not vice versa?”⁹

A strong heritage of headship for men and submission for women prevailed. A study (*Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, 1975) of five Mennonite groups by sociologists J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder found that sixty-one percent of respondents favored no change in the ordination policy. Lois Barrett Janzen observed, “The problem is not official doctrine about ordination but that women simply are not seen as gifted.” David Schroeder tried to uphold change through better “use and understanding of Scripture.”¹⁰ Dutch Mennonite women had been formal ministers since early in the 1900s. And although Mennonite Ann Allebach was ordained in Pennsylvania’s Eastern District in 1911 (not to serve Mennonites, however), not until 1976 was another GC woman, Anne Neufeld Rupp, ordained. Elizabeth Yoder later notes, in a 1987 document,¹¹ that by 1986 thirty-nine women’s names appear in the GCMC Directory of Ordained Leaders.

A ‘feminist manifesto’ of sorts appeared in *The Mennonite*, March 20, 1973, through three articles: “Releasing Gifts,” “Mennonite Women: Three Portraits,” and “Personhood and the Real Woman.” A related bibliography, meditation, and editorial by assistant editor Lois Barrett Janzen followed. Before long, another spate of reader letters pro and con appeared. That fall the seminary in Elkhart offered a course titled “Women in Church and Society.” In October a General Conference “Consultation on the Role of Women in the Church Today” took place at AMBS. Positive results of that event were naming Herta Funk to a half-time staff position for Women’s Concerns and Adult Education by October 1974, and naming a woman to each of the GC major Commissions by 1975.

Peace Section Meeting in Ottawa

Within such a milieu, need we be surprised that four women approached the MCC Peace Section in February 1973 with a proposal? Together, Ferne Umble (the MC Women's Missionary and Service Commission representative to PS), Lora Oyer (who represented the GC Women in Mission), Luann Habegger (Martin), MCC PS staffer in Washington, and I (incoming WMSC rep) convinced Peace Section members that women's experience was a justice issue, that it was worthy as ongoing agenda for MCC. Several quotes from the scripture-focused paper "Male and Female He Created Them" that I presented to PS members provide flavor.

- . . . Continuing to misinterpret and over-emphasize the creation account in Genesis 2 and intentionally ignoring the aspect of equal male/female responsibility for being the image of God as explicitly stated in Genesis 1 deprive all of humanity from developing into the whole people that God intends us to be.
- . . . We need to look between the layers of editorializing and the cultural mindset of male editors, translators, and leaders through the centuries to discover women's roles described in scripture. Elsie Thomas Culver maintains that "with the possible exception of the Persians, the Hebrews developed what may have been the most pervasively male cult in the ancient world. . . ."
- The degradation of women followed the same downward spiraling pattern and for the same reason: man's unwillingness to be dependent (on God or woman) and to share equally the responsibility for dominion (intended as 'responsible care'), under God. Domination (as it developed) describes fallenness, for the one dominating and the one willing to be dominated. . . .
- Quoting Madeleine Barot: 'In Christ we are liberated from our temptations to selfishness, exploitation, and domination and are led to possibilities ever renewed of communion with others, which is the creative aim of God.'¹²

Following my presentation to the Peace Section, Luann said, "In this 'Decade of Women' (the 1970s), women are being freed with a new self-respect and are calling on the church to allow us to develop and use our full potential."

She reported to Peace Section members on the women's caucus that had followed the 1972 MCC PS Assembly in Chicago. There, women had asked, "How could a church concerned about issues of peace and justice deny women full participation because of their gender?" There, concerns had surfaced about male-oriented God language, limited vocational choices for articulate women in church work, the need for feminist theologians in Mennonite circles, and whether MCC might invite women leaders from other countries to address issues that concern them about North America.

Ferne Umble was also persuasive. "Women's peace interests are the same as men's, their concern is the liberation of all groups." Lora and Ferne spoke on behalf of their women's groups. Churchwomen experienced injustice, even though some men or women might deny that fact. Less experienced as leaders, women desired to be mentored, but with freedom to lead through patterns different from those of most men. Ferne concluded by inviting PS members to share the concerns raised within their spheres of influence, to see how this agenda fits within PS Guiding Principles, to assist with related publishing projects, and to invite a woman to give major input at the next Peace Assembly.

The following actions were passed:

Moved that MCC Peace Section express its appreciation to the women members and participants in this session. We are grateful that they have sensitized the male members to faulty use of language, distorted values, inadequate biblical interpretation, and discrimination against women in church and societal structures.

The Peace Section accepts the challenge to place women's interests on its continuing agenda and supports bringing these concerns to the attention of the church via a variety of forms, and offers its resources for such. The Peace Section appoints a subcommittee of the women members of the Section along with Luann Habegger and Ted Koontz as staff persons to pursue the suggested goals. *Motion: John Lapp, Second: Lee Roy Berry. Carried.*¹³

Initial Task Force Activities

Two months later the subcommittee ‘met’ by conference telephone call. We abbreviated the organization name – MCC Peace Section Task Force on Women in Church and Society – to the Task Force, or MCC Task Force. Members agreed to share roles and assignments, value diversity, be visionary, and serve as a catalyst. The agenda reflects goals: (1) Networking: “We feel a great deal of support for each other”; “We need Canadian members.” (2) Information exchange: upcoming GC Consultation on Women; journals for each to read; (3) Projects and events: newsletter and book of essays – “The TF is one way for us to get women’s concerns into print”; the next Peace Section Assembly, a seminar in Washington, DC; (4) Strategy: filling more church positions with qualified women.

As I reflect on the early Task Force years, I am amazed at all that we achieved with so little funding, so little voice in church-wide structures, so little exposure to being political – all without computers. To network meant that we looked to each other as women, for Wisdom. (Ted Koontz, who served the TF from his Akron staff desk, is to be commended for working so effectively with a group of women. He was indeed “sympathetic to the cause.” After Ted, all other MCC staff people for the TF have been women. Also, the TF budget, never large, started at \$1,500 for a year; by Dec. 1977 it was \$1,800.) Women found a voice; once found, it could not be silenced again. Getting ideas into print enabled a growing sense of consciousness raising, of bonding on issues, and of shaping liberation through Mennonite values, women’s experience, and broad principles of justice.

Resistance surfaced. An active MC Peace Section member questioned me as to whether women’s issues or gender was actually a peace issue. The TF needed to establish legitimacy. We needed to discover how feminism would shape peace efforts. Carol Gilligan, a secular writer, identified “stoppers” (ideas meant to silence) that we came to recognize. For example, one person suggested that “Luann and Dorothy could be replaced with people less committed to the agenda.” A seminary faculty member said, “AMBS should not take an advocacy role for women. Women are accepted by virtue of their competence, but they may need to be ‘super-competent.’ [AMBS] needs to provide more counseling for women students to take a gentle approach followed by questions.”¹⁴

In her organized fashion, Luann chaired our first TF meeting ‘in person’ – late October of 1973. Lois Keeney kept detailed minutes.

- Ruth C. Stoltzfus (Jost), another PS member, presented a list of topic areas for an essay book, to be written primarily by Mennonite women. We considered gathering a packet of reprinted articles too.
- TF membership depended on PS membership. Since Mennonite Brethren women had no overall structure through which to make such an appointment, and “TF prodding had failed to get priority or passage through MB male organizational channels, we chose to nominate Katie Funk Wiebe as a Peace Section member-at-large. Steps to bring on three Canadians to the TF by 1975 were begun.
- Recommendations to be presented to the 1974 PS meeting included projects and events, and authorization for members to consult with conference offices, to collect a library of useful resources.
- A TF review was scheduled for presentation at the 1975 PS meeting.

Members updated each other on assignments. Luann agreed to continue as editor of the “Report” / Newsletter; all suggested themes or writers. Luann’s vision for a seminar on the family, to be held the following May in Washington, DC, looked promising for fifty Mennonite women. It would explore family trends and pressures, assets or limits through schools, sexism, children’s rights, the welfare system, and employment. With Luann and Marian Claassen Franz familiar with Capitol Hill, contacts were simplified. With qualified speakers invited such as Congresswoman Martha Griffiths (Michigan), sponsor of the Equal Rights Amendment, Audrey Colom, with the Children’s Defense Fund, and noted theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, participants could expect a flurry of information and challenge to their ideas.

Ted and I outlined the Peace Section Assembly scheduled for two weeks later (November 9-10) at Camp Friedenswald, not far from Elkhart. With a focus on the “Interdependence of Men and Women,” we anticipated healthy exchange. Nearly fifty people accepted speaking assignments, three-fourths of them women. Delighted to have over two hundred attend, the TF knew that the varied formats for input and conversation would highlight the

socialization process that shapes human relationships. Total costs per person would be between \$17 and \$20.

Notes from the Assembly reflect diverse themes and speakers:

- “. . . separation of people lies at the root of other problems.” (John A. Lapp)
- “Luann explored women’s actions and Peace Activities in 1840, at an anti-slavery convention.”
- “The constitution gave equality to women for the first time in Japan in 1945.” (Alice Ruth Ramseyer)
- “In Botswana, women work very hard. They are in charge of agricultural work in addition to housework. Men have control of the cattle and, therefore, of the wealth.” (Anna Juhnke)
- “A most significant aspect in our struggle with relationships is our willingness to never give up in discouragement because of barriers.” (Lora Oyer)
- “Early Anabaptist equality occurred through voluntary baptism, confession of faith, discipleship, and death. In their writings, the phrase ‘brothers and sisters’ was often used.” (Richard Friesen)
- “In order for both husband and wife to be employed, some sacrifices are needed.” (Alta Hertzler)
- “Of all people on welfare, two-thirds are women and children.” (Dorothy Ann Friesen)
- “If we cannot deal justly with the one woman in prison, there is little hope for thirty men prisoners, the present ratio.” (Lois Rensberger)

The TF was “a working group, not an advisory board.” Correspondence between meetings always included personal items alongside assignment updates. Details might refer to plans for marriage, birth of a first child, gardening results, or dealing with a child’s case of chicken pox. With two meetings scheduled per year, each person was expected to send a mid-meeting report to the others – of progress on tasks being done (or insight from meetings attended and journals read). Luann designated three journals for each member to explore: feminist, church, or general women’s types.

Other Christians, whether Methodist, Roman Catholic, or Church of Christ, produced materials useful for us. We brought Mennonite insight to our

learning from them. With churchwomen like Letty Russell, Alice Hageman, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Anne McGrew Bennett, and Carter Heyward, we were never without mentors. I knew that fact also with seminary courses: I researched all of the women mentioned in Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, all references to goddess figures in Jeremiah, specific medieval women, Anabaptist women's accounts in the *Martyrs Mirror*, and many nineteenth-century US ordained women. Hearing Mary Daly, Suzanne Haibt, and Phyllis Tribble lecture provided wisdom for more than TF correspondence.

By the March 1974 PS meeting, plans for an essay book had been set aside. Instead, I had gathered and edited thirty articles for a Task Force packet titled "Persons Becoming." The first printing of 500 copies, ready in April, would eventually lead to 1800 in print. Each sold for \$1.50. Articles, written mostly by Mennonites, were organized under four themes: The Bible and Women, The Church and Women, Changing Relationships, and Third World Women. Gayle Gerber Koontz introduced Christian Feminists as those who call for liberation from destructive sex roles; desire freedom to use gifts in the church; challenge structures that alienate or oppress; seek language, image, and thought patterns that validate women's experience; and balance healthy self-love with an ethic of service.¹⁵

Women and Work

Margaret Loewen Reimer included a paragraph about a study on Women and Work in her review of Task Force endeavor up to mid-1976.¹⁶ That study "led to the formation of an Advisory Group appointed by MCC's executive committee to study recruitment, assignment and services of women in MCC." Asked to serve on this Advisory Group, I also addressed the annual meeting of MCC in Winnipeg in January 1975 on "Women in Church Vocations, Institutions, and Structures." Larry Kehler observed, "If Canadians feel under-represented (one-fourth of the MCC Board members) and unheard, women have good reason to feel even more so."¹⁷ My intent was not to exaggerate women's involvement in ancient scripture or current MCC tasks but "to take them out of hiding":

. . . We sanction the absence of a group by overlooking or intentionally ignoring their presence. Or we lament, "but there is no one qualified," and then proceed to thwart or deprive women

of those options that are available to men, who ‘do qualify.’ We glorify the motherhood of Hannah, Ruth, and Mary, instilling guilt for women who choose from among career alternatives, and perpetuate woman’s vicarious ‘nature’ – achieving satisfaction or identity through another [husband].

We give names to the less desirable – Jezebel, Bathsheba, Delilah, Athaliah – and keep anonymous the wise woman of Tekoa, the wealthy Shunamite woman, and the maid or woman in very human anecdotes of II Kings. . . . We organize Paul-Timothy, Teacher-Disciple programs, but cannot identify or bring ourselves to the teamwork of Paul-Priscilla or to Apollos’ learning from Priscilla and Aquila.

Would not to fill more advanced staff positions with women change the image of such work, thereby crediting competence in either sex? Not until we portray such mutual task/employment circumstances do we grasp the power of Jesus’ redemption for the division of labor meted out at the Fall. . . . Although we have all grown up in societies that expect women to sacrifice their personhood so that men can become, that expect men to sacrifice their nurturing nature to accentuate this quality in women, by now we should recognize these divisions as characteristic of fallenness. . . . What is important is that we together plan for the future, noting candidly what problems may arise. . . .¹⁸

After this speech, “the Committee moved to encourage MCC to review employment practices and to provide increasing opportunities for women in leadership.” Two of its thirty-three members were then women – Helen Alderfer and Marie Wiens. Except for the Peace Section, no women in 1975 were appointed to MCC-related boards.¹⁹ African American Lee Roy Berry reminded the Committee that “white women are also part of the privileged class,” and Siegfried Bartel cautioned MCC to “remain sensitive to congregations who are not ready to deal with the issue.”²⁰

An Advisory Group was formed to assess MCC’s employment practices. It consisted of Joyce Bratton, Sarah Ann Eby, Marian Preheim, Roy Sider, Anne Warkentin, and me. The Group “hope[d] to hear about persons’

past experiences with MCC as an employer, do research on groups comparable to MCC, examine policy statements, and formulate ideas on what should happen in the future.”²¹ (Here I rely on TF minutes and an MCC News Service piece.) After a half-year, Sarah Ann expressed concern that the Group’s twelve recommendations were too general. We chose to present questionnaire results to the Executive Committee but continued to work with specifics. The survey – aimed to discover areas in which MCC could “improve in relating to and using the skills of women volunteers” – provided responses from 160 people serving in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America.

Counsel emerged: Women needed to be more involved in agricultural development, especially where indigenous women do the majority of crop raising. Respondents requested more involvement of women in leadership positions within MCC, at Akron and in global settings. “Skills and abilities should be the criteria rather than sex.” Workers desired more pastoral care. Married couples desired more structured involvement for wives – about one-third of MCC personnel. Their contribution, as with program planning, deserved to be credited. Orientation sessions at Akron could better assist children. Sessions should also aid single volunteers more with adjustments, and better prepare married couples for marriage patterns within each host country.

Advocacy through Correspondence

Communication issues shape all organizations. Examples of Task Force correspondence follow. Editor Harold Jantz wrote in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*: “The question of male-female relationships has loomed increasingly larger within North American Mennonite circles since the quiet days of the mid-1960s, when during the Mennonite World Conference, the Canadians and Americans were astounded by the militancy of the Dutch Mennonite women.”²² He then culled from a TF “Report” several axioms formulated at a conference on interdependence held at Goshen College the year before. He was troubled by the axioms because of a lack of role distinctions (what he called “sameness”) for women and men and because they “reject the notion of a biblical model for the family.” His language and judgements misrepresented the content, a not uncommon feature of discussions toward advocacy for women.

I drafted a response that the Task Force endorsed. We wished he had presented the scope of axioms reported. We found the proximity of his editorial to John Drescher's reflection on Sweden's assault on marriage to be less than helpful. We stated the TF's wish that all Christian relationships (including marriage) reflect interdependence and Christ's self-giving; that marriage and mothering, while indeed valid, are one of several options available; that each person deserves to develop the full range of being human (not carelessly labeled "sameness").

A Task Force letter went to Mennonite College Deans and heads of sociology and religion departments late in 1974. Aware that secular studies were available, we encouraged studies from Christian students regarding women in church and society. Linda Falk Suter identified three Women's Studies courses and special lectures about women available to students at Bluffton College. To share such data through the "Report" reflected the Task Force's conduit role. Later, Katie Funk Wiebe requested information from women faculty at sixteen Mennonite colleges about courses, student research papers, library holdings, and lecturers. We also hoped to promote a resource pool of alumni with seminary or other advanced degrees, so that more women could be named to church or faculty positions. In May 1978, the TF printed a Resource Listing of ninety capable women ready to lead. Five years later, a listing of two hundred women appeared.

Ted's letter encouraged AMBS faculty to assist women with pastoral jobs. Erland Waltner replied (May 1976): "We serve as a channel of information . . . but have not adopted an aggressive placement or advocacy role." He reported that AMBS had appointed a campus task force on the role of women (Bertha Harder, convener), offered two related courses (Women in Church and Society, and "Man: Male and Female" – Greek exegesis taught by Gertrude Roten and Jake Enz), and provided other settings to discuss the issues. I recalled a comment from the wife of a young seminarian at his ordination the year before, "Now, he will increase and I must decrease." That same seminarian's comment to me after seeing my one-act play about Jesus and the woman at the well was, "Your competence threatens me." Though honest, his adjustment was real. Not all seminary students were ready to share strengths.

Although no letters followed from people involved with Foundation Series Curriculum materials, Herta Funk did counsel some writers regarding

stereotypes. The TF had alerted writers to develop materials, for children or adults, “that accentuate the wholeness (or partnership) of being human,” that avoid limits and sex stereotypes – whether for people or God. It encouraged stories about Huldah, Hebrew women at worship or as “heads of fathers’ houses,” Jesus’ radical relating with women, and Phoebe’s early church leadership – along with traditional stories.

An unexpected contact could prompt an exchange. During a graduate school class, Luann heard a critique from an incident with Mennonite Disaster Service. The speaker, a staff member of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, had traveled in Guatemala, where she met some Mennonites rebuilding homes after an earthquake. Noting that only men were building, she had asked why no women were involved. “Women don’t build houses,” was the Mennonite’s reply. “Women are unskilled, and we don’t have time to train them.” All of which prompted Luann to write to Nelson Hostetter to ask how MDS was “attempting to integrate women into its program and to eliminate sex role stereotypes.”²³

Appreciative letters also expressed Task Force views. After the 1978 Mennonite World Conference in Wichita, people wrote to Virginia Mininger regarding her major contribution with music planning. “The special music was great. Singing together was an exciting time. We are certain that it was very demanding for you and Mary [Oyer], but you performed your tasks with exceptional spirit and expertise.”

Global Connections

Initial Task Force agenda gave serious attention to global women’s experience, consistent with MCC’s long history. With only \$100 from the TF budget, Luann ‘represented’ us at the NGO forum of the UN International Conference on Women in Mexico City in July 1975. Herta Funk of the General Conference women’s desk also joined the six thousand people from eighty countries who attended this International Women’s Year event. Although the Tribune format involved many panel presentations with audience participation, 190 interest groups (caucuses) also occurred.

Within a political tone, Tribune agenda on themes of equality, development and peace progressed. Ukrainian women from the US held a hunger strike on behalf of Ukrainian women imprisoned in the USSR. Marxist

feminists dispersed a meeting on nuclear disarmament by refusing to give the microphone to the named panelists. “Anti-American feelings ran deep, particularly from the Latin Quarters.” They faulted imperialism. They perceived the US women’s movement as anti-male or anti-family. Because the Tribune had no official voice, the UN faced 900 amendments submitted by official delegations.

Luann valued and critiqued the conference. It failed to examine the impact of religion on attitudes and practices toward women. “If our attitude toward theology is not one of mutual sharing and discovery, our Third World sisters will view us as dogmatic and in some ways imperialistic.”²⁴ She regretted the dominant role US women had had in planning the Tribune; she wished for a broader spectrum of opinion to be voiced toward US policies. Yet, “those of us who went, realizing that we have a responsibility to find out what unites or divides us from other women, were stimulated. . . . It was very valuable for me to get into closer touch with the concrete situation of thousands throughout the world. No one could leave the Tribune without recognizing that the cause of the women’s movement is just, and that the strength of the movement is growing.”²⁵

Luann returned inspired to complete a monograph on Women and Development and to propose an MCC project on so-called Third World women. To understand why North American women are called oppressors, she wished for MCC resources to “sensitize Mennonites to the status of women throughout the world.” She envisioned a short-term staff person with overseas experience to plan seminars, develop a study guide, explore related media resources, and shape MCC programming – domestic and overseas.

Conversation reshaped Luann’s proposal. The Task Force explored plans for the 1978 Mennonite World Conference, to be held in Wichita.²⁶ Paul Kraybill, executive secretary of MWC, cautioned against our hope to bring women to the conference from the Third World: “Overseas churches choose their own representatives, and usually these are church officials. Further, a woman traveling alone with men is not considered in the best of taste.”²⁷ Gladys Goering and Beulah Kauffman, executive leaders of the GC Women in Mission and MC Women’s Missionary and Service Commission, along with Luann from the TF and Herta from her GC desk, pursued correspondence with Kraybill.

Kraybill addressed numerous issues. Conference ‘delegates’ would be only those officially appointed by groups represented on the General Council (“the only decision-making body in MWC”). MWC had established a travel fund for such delegates, perhaps fifty of the ninety-five being from Third World countries. But the Council would not mandate whether to choose women. Kraybill counseled: Expect to interact with women coming from Europe, with minority North American people, with spouses of trainees and students already in the US and Canada, and with a few Third World women who will come at their own expense. Then, he added, a place to begin might be “to offer a travel subsidy to spouses of Third World delegates.” However, such spouses might not “function in one of the five translation languages, or their background and experience may be too limited to enable significant participation.” Implications seemed to suggest that marriage qualifies a woman, rather than her skills, and male delegates can overcome obstacles. Luann expressed Task Force preference for women guests “with a keen interest in the Conference, those who could contribute to the dialogue, here and at home,” not always true of leader spouses.²⁸ The hope was also to integrate women into all program aspects.

With hospitality a strong concept in Third World countries, Kraybill preferred that North Americans engage in escorting foreign guests while in Wichita rather than plan to share a study conference. He welcomed names of potential women speakers or discussion group leaders; seventy names were shared! Herta, Gladys Goering (WM), and Beulah Kauffman (WMSM) joined Luann in making plans for a hospitality center for women at MWC. They hoped that Mennonite Brethren and Brethren in Christ leaders would join them as a committee to plan – for staffing, receptions, discussions, and displays. They needed to raise \$10,000 for a travel fund for sixteen foreign women, which Kraybill offered to match from MWC funds.

Luann clarified the rationale for a hospitality center: To get acquainted and establish cross-cultural friendships; to learn of women’s involvement in Mennonite churches overseas; to assist the visitors with their questions. Kraybill’s response countered. The MWC Program Planning Committee (and Rosemary Wyse, staff member in charge of international hospitality) raised serious concern “regarding the planning for a women’s activities committee. . . . [they were] troubled by the prospect of women’s activities, or even a women’s hospitality

center which sets apart one group against another . . . which counters integration . . . perpetuates the segregation of women and men. . . . A fellowship meal for women might be a possibility. . . . In summary, I am concerned that women's activities and planning do not become a block of interest"²⁹

The women replied, confused and frustrated. Never had the women's hospitality center been perceived as a place to "set apart one group against another" or to interfere with the integrity of scheduled activities. Via Luann's letter, they next explored the program time "allotted for special interests." Perhaps an interest group on women and the church, followed by a meal, could be arranged. As minorities or people from the same region might gather to support each other or to reflect on their relationship to the larger group, authentic harmony and integration might evolve.³⁰

Kraybill replied with appreciation for Luann's candor. In his view an interest group for women would "be even less desirable than some other suggestions." Already in 1975 the Presidium (the former name for General Council) stated that it "does not favor separating women from the other interest groups." Working/interest groups are to "represent a mix of persons. . . . We wish to make it possible for leadership persons in various areas such as peace, missions, etc. to get together for specific planning . . . for functional, administrative sessions. . . . I have a serious problem if women's interest groups compete with such meetings. . . . both in terms of limited facilities and in terms of the image that would be created, we raise serious question regarding the justification for a women's hospitality center." His summary comments promised to keep the women informed, to welcome their suggestions for hospitality (for women and men, not women alone), to encourage dialogue other than during scheduled activities, and to understand that a women's committee would not be part of conference structure.³¹

Gladys summarized her and Herta's meeting in Kansas with Kraybill and Wyse: No women's hospitality room. No separate women's committee for anything. Hospitality will include clusters of eight or so chairs in the exhibition hall. A forum or panel of African women would be okay for the "special interest" time slot. Standing Committees would not expect to arrange for food or facilities if women met for a luncheon. Women's organizations should not place women (unless with men) in church contacts following the MWC. Gladys believed that greater awareness of women's perspectives

had engaged MWC pre-planning more than ever before. “Let’s accent the positive though and soft pedal the failures of some of our hopes.”³²

Efforts continued and the goal was reached for sixteen international women to travel to Wichita. Fourteen of the guests spoke English, one each French and German; all were greeted on arrival.³³ By then, Luann was on a foreign assignment. A women’s Task Force for World Conference – Herta Funk, Esther Hess, Joan Wiebe, Thelma Kauffman, Dinah Nachtigall, and Gladys Goering – did plan two events. A Wednesday evening buffet meal meeting was held at the Holiday Inn, with seating for 425 (about one-fourth from overseas), with a hostess for each table. On Thursday noon less than a hundred women met informally for discussion over a bag lunch. A souvenir 8 by 10 reproduction of “Wheatscape” created by Ethel Abrahams was given to each attendee at the meals. Gladys Goering reflected on the 1978 MWC in *Which Way Women?:* “The bonding of Mennonite women around the world is not a unity of sameness, but a unity of understanding and caring.”³⁴

Relationships Within and Beyond the Task Force

Decisions related to TF philosophy and procedures took place routinely, too often for some members. In May 1977 members were asked to comment on ideas like this: “The Task Force strengths are its shared, cooperative leadership and decision-making, shared responsibilities, relationship with the Peace Section, and its inter-Mennonite dimension.” Structural changes and staff links changed with shifts in the US Peace Section and the Canadian Peace and Social Concerns Committee. Early on, we took action to limit a person’s TF involvement to one three-year term, in order for more women to share the responsibility. Later, that limit changed to two terms, to provide more continuity. Reasons that individuals were chosen as members varied; so did member skills and vision for the work. Late in the first decade, Gayle Gerber Koontz stated that “TF membership should not be a training ground for new persons.” Commitment and knowledge of issues involved should be expected.

During those years, I continued to receive TF minutes. On occasion, I feared that some members might discontinue the organization. Two members from Ontario said women and their gifts were well received in their region. They had little need for advocacy. But . . . I thought, “True activists will address the multiple disadvantages for women that continue unchallenged.

Efforts will be needed for generations to change forever or profoundly the attitudes, stereotypes and injustices that exist.' Then I recalled the strong contributions of Sue Clemmer Steiner and Margaret Loewen Reimer, especially their work with "Report" issues. And Erna Klassen, from further west, always impressed me with the diverse themes and concerns that she brought to TF discussions. Canadian women neither assess nor address issues for women through similar lenses any more than happens 'south of the border.' So also, conflicting views will persist among Mennonites. Peggy Regehr's experience detailed in this issue of *CGR* reveals both the pain and zeal.³⁵

Task Force relationships with other Mennonite women or women's organizations have always fluctuated. Later on, a few younger women seriously criticized early activists for anger.³⁶ To charge another with anger, itself a neutral emotion, can carry judgment or can serve as a "stopper" by those who oppose a 'cause' or fail to understand 'the times.' At one point at AMBS, charges about "seven angry women" circulated. The finger pointing lessened when a campus newcomer observed, "It seems to me that the rest of you are angry toward those you call angry." On a few occasions, the TF was perceived as competitive with the more established Mission women's groups.

The Task Force often reached out toward younger, more professional and 'fringe' (or 'on the edge' of church life) churchwomen than those committed to WMSC and WM. An Ad Hoc Committee was formed to evaluate the Committee on Women's Concerns (formerly TF) after a decade. It named "target populations" for CWC endeavor: professional women, women not part of conference women's groups, women interested in women's issues, women in MCC, women on the fringes of church and conference structures, women and men in the MCC constituency who need support or to be made aware of concerns."³⁷ A question to consider: Do women's groups need to compete or be threatened by each other, if needs are expressed and being met differently? Usually, the TF has been ready to serve as a catalyst and then "let go," a phenomenon similar to releasing a child to teen years and then adulthood. While I would have preferred the TF at times to take other routes, an organization deserves freedom to make its choices and then manage the consequences.

When Emma and Joe Richards invited women in theological training to gather for the first ("unofficial") Women in Ministry seminar in Lombard,

Illinois, from April 30 to May 2, 1976, the Task Force cheered. Nancy Hardesty engaged the fifty participants in three sessions. Emma preached on “Established as a Prophet of the Lord,” a phrase from 2 Samuel. Personal stories revealed the “nontraditional route” that women were taking to enter the ministry. Vinora Weaver Salzman’s example of preaching was not raised. With the concept of ministry broadened to include anyone serving in church life, the second conference (held in Colorado) was called Persons in Ministry. Subsequent Women in Ministry conferences had a life of their own. They met in diverse Mennonite communities, the seventh in 1984 with over two hundred registered. At that meeting Virginia Mollenkott served as a key speaker; many workshops were again available.³⁸ Later, trained and ordained pastors chose to meet separately. “Women Doing Theology” (WDT) events also began; they too reflect shifts – from more academic, feminist agenda to more personal reflection. During the sixth biennial WDT – “Gifts of the Red Tent” – held in Harrisonburg in 2003, the Task Force’s thirtieth anniversary was celebrated.

Ties with Herta Funk, from her Newton, Kansas office, always inspired Task Force members. A Canadian born in Russia, she completed her Ph.D in German. From April 1975 on, TF minutes report helpful contacts. We discussed how best to use each other’s work. She informed us of conferences she attended; of meetings on women and development; of a study guide by Elizabeth and Perry Yoder, *New Men, New Roles*, launched by the General Conference; of an upcoming single adults’ retreat that she planned, of biographies of fifteen Mennonite women to be published. The intent of the collection was to reverse the trend of women’s oral history often being lost.³⁹ Herta also gathered and shared resources on leadership training for women and learned from consultants how best to structure workshops. Her death in 1989 reminded us to be diligent.

On ‘Bowling Out’

Other than answering occasional staff questions, reading Task Force materials, or planning and editing several issues of the “Report” during the decades, my involvement shifted to other feminist efforts after my term ended with the TF. Except for one other project. During the TF early years, questions surfaced about creating an essay book or a second packet of articles. After completing

my term, I was invited to gather articles for a book. *Which Way Women?* resulted in 1980. Fifteen hundred copies sold for \$3.00 each; my work was again volunteer. Linda Schmidt, then in a half-time position at Akron with women's agenda, was indispensable for getting the large format, 156-page resource printed at MCC headquarters. To use the International Women's Year themes – Equality, Development, and Peace – for clustering the 55 articles seemed right. All writers except four were Mennonites; 40 women shared their views. Wishing to highlight more, I quote from only several articles.

- “The sister concept implies bonding, availability, acceptance, trust, confrontation and reconciliation in a context that is ongoing.” – Ruth Krall, “Female Sexuality: An Open Letter to Mennonite Women”
- “The struggle to maintain a high-quality workable family life is probably the most demanding task we have ever faced.” – Rachel Friesen, “On Choosing to Combine Parenting with Occupations”
- “Having lived and worked among people who have grown up in different circumstances, with different values from my own, I find that to judge their actions on the basis of my own perspectives is increasingly difficult.” – Nelda Rhodes Thelin, “When Circumstances and Values Differ”
- “And so I must confront all that is contrary. I must confront Rocky Flats nuclear weapons facility because it violates the love that God commands me to share with others . . . I believe that there are alternatives to killing . . . to war. I will not be silent.” – Hedy Sawadsky, “Peacemaking in Colorado”⁴⁰

I conclude this rendezvous with memory with further reference to the Ad Hoc Committee created to review the Committee on Women's Concerns. Anna Juhnke was enthusiastic and generous in her June 1984 report, excerpts of which follow.

- The CWC was brought into being to speak to and for the kind of women who have always gravitated toward MCC – those Mennonite and BIC women who have felt called to serve the church and the world beyond the traditional roles
- MCC Peace Section took an early lead in providing the TF a gathering point for Mennonite feminist visions, and theological as well as social concerns.

- The creativity unleashed by this small and obscure TF, now CWC, has been astounding. The packet “Persons Becoming,” the book *Which Way Women?* and the “Report” periodical, all produced with volunteer labor, are resources of consistently high quality. . . . The new creative arts book will be another first
- The periodic efforts of the TF and CWC to influence MCC structures to be more responsive to women’s concerns are harder to assess. They have in a sporadic way subjected MCC to closer scrutiny and higher demands than the Mennonite denominational offices have received from their women’s groups
- Yet, in the context of MCC’s outstanding leadership in development and justice issues in the Third World, the blind spots that remain on development and justice for women need attention in a continuing way
- If in fact fifty percent of the qualified and experienced MCC people are female, and at least fifty percent of the Mennonite constituency is female, it seems reasonable to me to set goals of forty percent women in leadership roles and board membership by 1994⁴¹

The Ad Hoc committee of eight recommended the continued existence of the CWC, with goals and agenda related to education and networking. Encouraging the US Peace Section and Canadian Peace and Social Concerns Committee to strengthen its relations with the CWC, it recommended that MCC create a Personnel Policies Committee, hire a one-half time staff position for women’s concerns based in Akron, and increase the representation of women in its boards. And so the organization birthed thirty years ago has continued.⁴² And so, too, Virginia Woolf’s insight still guides: “To have by nature a point of view, to stick to it, to follow it where it leads, is the rarest of possessions, and lends value even to trifles.”

Notes

I wish to thank Luann Habegger Martin for reading for accuracy an early draft of this account of ‘herstory.’

¹ MCC *Women’s Concerns Report*, Jul.-Aug. 1993, 4.

² Paul Erb, “Church Service for Women,” *Gospel Herald*, Jan. 27, 1959, and Daniel Hertzler, “Keeping women quiet,” *Gospel Herald*, Apr. 4, 1989, 247. An observation: Whereas Erb’s

wife Alta Mae indeed practiced church leadership, a reflection of Paul's authentic call, Hertzler started his discussion with a 'dig': "Women are, generally speaking, generally speaking."

³ Miller 11-12, in John Hershberger, "American Mennonite Women in Church, Society, and the Home: A Twentieth Century Survey through Selected Mennonite Writings," AMBS, May 24, 1975, 10. Photocopy.

⁴ Margaret Loewen Reimer, "All we're meant to be / Total woman / etc.," *The Mennonite*, Feb. 25, 1975, 134. Ruth Heinrichs' letter in response called for both wife and husband to have both family and public roles, 374.

⁵ Minutes, Mar. 20-21, 1976.

⁶ At the same time, Bill Gotthard's 'chain-of-command' ideology taught through "Basic Youth Conflicts Seminars" had "caught on like wildfire" among some Mennonites. According to writer Wilfred Bockelman, many "satisfied customers" received his "fundamental orientation toward law rather than gospel." Bockelman connects Gotthard's "almost fascistic view of power" with people's search for "an answer man, a man with authority and power." *Christian Century*, Sept. 25, 1974, 877-80.

⁷ Transcript, "Woman's Liberation and the Christian Woman's Response," Concord Associates, Harrisonburg, VA, 1971, 52 pp.

⁸ Lois Barrett. "Preaching was her calling," *The Mennonite*, May 25, 1976, 355.

⁹ TF "Report" # 9, Oct.-Dec., 1975.

¹⁰ David Schroeder, "Jesus relates to women," *The Mennonite*, Jan. 18, 1975, 61-63.

¹¹ Elizabeth Yoder, "Mennonite Women in Pastoral Ministry: A Reflection," Photocopy, 8 pp.

¹² Dorothy Yoder Nyce, manuscript "Male and Female He Created Them," 2, 3, 4, 7. This paper later appeared as a three-part series – "Women in God's Plan and Man's World," *Gospel Herald*, August 1973. *GH* mistakenly printed the series catchword *interdependence* as "Independence" in a subtitle! John Hershberger commends "Nyce's theological depth, clarity, and frankness . . . its example of a more critically constructive hermeneutic." 21.

¹³ MCC Peace Section Minutes, Mar. 29-31, Business item # 23, p. 7.

¹⁴ Over the years, the Newsletter, now titled *Women's Concerns Report*, met a few explicit interventions. A photo of a nude woman had to be cut from an issue on "Women and Body Image," and lesbian voices were recently cut from print. And so justice work continues. Early on I had asked, "Is there a danger in our human relationships having been 'peace-oriented' without the essence of peace (well-being)?"

¹⁵ Gayle Gerber Koontz, "Christian Feminism: An Introduction," *Persons Becoming* packet, Apr. 1974.

¹⁶ Margaret Loewen Reimer, "Task Force Tackles Women's Concerns," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, June 24, 1976.

¹⁷ Larry Kehler, "Some imbalance remains in MCC structure," *Mennonite Reporter* 5/3, Feb. 3, 1975.

¹⁸ Dorothy Yoder Nyce, manuscript, "Women in Church Vocations, Institutions, Structures," 3-5, 8.

¹⁹ *Intercom* 15/2, Feb. 1975, 2.

²⁰ I refrained from publicly sharing my legitimate rejoinders. At the April 1975 TF meeting, we discussed minority women; soon thereafter Margaret Allen (African American) attended meetings

and Emma LaRoque (First Nation) served as a TF member for a year after Canadians were involved.

²¹ TF Minutes, Apr. 5, 1975, 2.

²² Harold Jantz. "Equal and Distinct," *Menmonite Brethren Herald*, May 30, 1975, 9.

²³ Correspondence, Luann Habegger, Feb. 18, 1977.

²⁴ TF "Report" # 9, Oct.-Dec. 1975, 7.

²⁵ Luann Habegger, "Trip Report," 3.

²⁶ I choose to give a detailed account of the negotiation process. Of such history (memory) is the experience of many less powerful groups or individuals.

²⁷ Correspondence, Katie Funk Wiebe, May 25, 1976.

²⁸ Correspondence, Luann Habegger, Jan. 3, 1977, 2.

²⁹ Correspondence, Paul Kraybill, Apr. 5, 1977.

³⁰ Correspondence, Luann Habegger, Apr. 22, 1977.

³¹ Correspondence, Paul Kraybill, Apr. 29, 1977.

³² Correspondence, Gladys Goering, May 13, 1977.

³³ I cannot help but mention here my recent fundraising effort to assist four women from India to attend the 2003 MWC in Zimbabwe – no correspondence with "the management" involved.

³⁴ Gladys Goering. "Mennonite World Conference, 1978, and Women: Some Reflections," in *Which Way Women?*, Dorothy Yoder Nyce, ed. (Akron: MCC, 1980), 133.

³⁵ Jim Juhnke's haunting comment exists for women to ponder. From the Kauffman/Harder diagnosis of the Mennonite pulse, he observed: "Mennonite men today are more open to women's equality in the church than are Mennonite women!" *Gospel Herald*, May 13, 1975, 362.

³⁶ "We are other than they . . . all of us have benefited from their struggles. We feel a certain solidarity with them, yet we cannot share their kinds of anger. We are the next generation. We have grown up assuming our position as valuable members of the 'body.' We do not feel a need to react as strongly as 'our mothers' because we cannot fully understand the injustices they feel." Julia Spicher, Susan Huber, Rebecca Rittgers, and Melanie Zuercher, "New voices at Bethlehem '83, young women speak out," *Gospel Herald*, Sept. 6, 1983, 628.

³⁷ Minutes, Ad Hoc Committee, June 1984.

³⁸ The Third WIM took place in Akron, Pennsylvania in 1978, the fourth at AMBS in Elkhart, Indiana in 1979, the fifth at Bethel College, Newton, Kansas in 1981, the sixth in Kitchener, Ontario in 1982, and the seventh in Harrisonburg, Virginia in 1984.

³⁹ "Biographies on women wanted for publication," *Mennonite Reporter*, March 17, 1975.

⁴⁰ *Which Way Women?*, 29, 39, 77, 153.

⁴¹ Anna Juhnke, "Reflections on the Committee on Women's Concerns and Women in MCC," prepared for the Ad Hoc evaluation committee, June 1984, 1, 3.

⁴² Consult also "Report" #s 50, 109, 165 and www.mcc.org/us/womensconcerns/anniversary/index.html