

## **My Impressions of the Early Years of the Women's Task Force**

*Katie Funk Wiebe*

How can I sum up, in fifteen minutes, thirty years of reaching for the freedom of a bluebird flying high in the sky? How can we as a group of Mennonite women bring together the bewilderments, the feelings of being pushed aside or ridiculed, with the joy of sensing slow movement forward on this incredible journey we have made together? My personal voyage to self-discovery as a Mennonite churchwoman has been a never-ending roller coaster ride, yet here I am, not where I began, but on a higher, surer level. Let me mention a few highlights of this journey and the way it connected with the broader efforts of the Women's Task Force.

I have been involved with women's concerns for more than thirty years, writing, speaking, acting on committees, and just being. At first it was a lonely journey, because I thought I was walking alone and therefore there must be something wrong with me. I was a misfit. I felt God's call to ministry, but the doors always swung shut when I tried to walk through them. Why was I misinterpreting God's voice so consistently?

Then, in 1974, I attended the Evangelical Women's Caucus held in Washington, DC. I came apprehensively, wondering whether I would find a group of raging women libbers with swinging breasts and hostility toward men etched all over their faces. I found a large group of mostly gentle but bruised women, many of whom wept to be among people who did not judge them. I had entered a huge red tent. The gathering, a first for the evangelical Christian community, was a time of finding one another as sisters in Christ because of our common cause. Of the 300 women present, about 30 were from Mennonite denominations. The late Herta Funk, a vigorous Mennonite women's leader, called us together for a breakfast. I wish she could be here this evening to see what has happened since then. But at that conference and later ones, I found myself bonding with a community that did not see me as a nut case.

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I became a member of the MCC Women's Task Force as the Mennonite Brethren (MB) representative and helped with a few issues of the Women's Task Force Report. I was not appointed by the MBs and had no one to report to. I had no sending body. Yet I was worried how I would be perceived by my church constituency, which as a body had not yet found the need to travel the journey towards gender equality. And I did want to be accepted by them as a normal person.

I was never quite sure what I was doing on the Task Force, for my experience and preparation was haphazard. I realize now that as a Task Force we weren't always quite sure what direction to head toward. We had no precedents. But I couldn't silence the voice that told me it was wrong to describe women's role only in terms of limitations rather than opportunities. If something is evil and sinful, it should be spoken against. I couldn't understand how conference resolutions could confirm women with words yet leave them powerless in practice.

By then, the women's movement in society generally was in full swing, with those who spoke up openly receiving a full dose of ridicule and trivialization. Writing about the issue was often a monologue, not a discussion. I eagerly read publications like *Daughters of Sarah*, the *Priscilla Papers*, and others. I lined my shelves with all the new books being published about women's roles. I carefully watched what was going on in the broader Mennonite constituency and elsewhere. I clung to these contacts like a rope flung to someone who is drowning. I welcomed every opportunity for ministry that came from them. In addition to my concerns for women in ministry, I was struggling to work my way through issues related to widowhood, being manless in a coupled world, and bringing up four children alone. This added another kind of discrimination – and still does.

It took me a while to accept that decisions regarding women's ministry were actually a political issue related to power rather than theology. In 1982, after a disappointing MB conference discussion of the matter, I wrote to our publications: "I never planned my life this way [referring to being a woman in ministry]. All I promised the Lord at difficult junctures was to enter doors God opened and not break my head and spirit pounding against those closed to me. Yet I'll admit to yearning for the moral and spiritual support of my conference in my service." It was slow coming.

I continued to write and travel. One MB pastor asked me, “Does your concern for women’s lib obsess you?” I sensed I was being perceived as a one-issue person. The daughter of a troubled woman was sent to get a good look at me at a women’s conference in British Columbia. She was convinced I would look like a German Gestapo woman with severely cut dark hair, wearing a dark suit, and exhibiting a harsh, curt manner. The daughter was surprised to find me fairly gentle-looking and moderate in my approach.

I sensed more and more that we who were speaking out for women’s ministries in the church were threatening the well-being of women who preferred things the way they were. Some were certain that if we spoke up for women, we must hate men. My article, “Color me a person,” was clipped and sent to me with little negative comments written all over it to highlight this hatred in the sender’s between-the-lines reading. If only she knew how much I yearned for male companionship in my solo journey!

Another highlight of my journey was the first Women in Ministry conference in Elkhart, followed several years later by the first Women Doing Theology conference in Kitchener. These conferences were overtly political acts, as they brought women of the Anabaptist community together. They were necessary to give the women identity and support, and to make this conference today possible.

At the Kitchener conference in 1992, I gave an address on “What? Me a Theologian?” I noticed two things at this event: (1) the women present were younger. A newer group was stepping into place, an encouraging sign; (2) however, many were still angry, openly threatening to leave the church. Already some did not understand the pain some of us older ones had gone through in breaking new theological ground in the church.

I told them the story of my husband’s ordination in 1953. At the end of a daylong celebration, I collected my children and headed home. As I took off my new black velvet hat late that afternoon, I noticed that the sweaty fingerprints of the visiting minister, who had laid his hands on my head in prayer, had left permanent indentations. And it was such a lovely hat. Thereafter I wore the mark of ordination on my head, although I had made no public promises and received no formal instructions or blessing for my role as a minister’s wife. The women at the conference laughed. And it came to me that it was actually funny, not something to cry over. This painful journey needed more humor.

At the Millersville women's history conference, I experienced another highlight. I found women who once felt exiled from the Mennonite community circling back. I also found those who had decided to stick with the church despite hindrances to their service. They saw light ahead. What a joy to hear from women who had deliberately chosen membership in the Anabaptist community because of its spiritual strengths! Another name for the Millersville conference might have been "Coming Home."

My personal journey continued. I was often pushed to the brink when I received phone calls, some in anguish, as for example, one from a young professional woman who felt perplexed by her findings about what the Bible actually taught about women as opposed to what she had been taught. Other calls encouraged me. One morning the phone rang. I had been debating whether to get out of my bed early or to enjoy its comfort for another fifteen minutes. The voice on the line was Ruth Brunk Stolfus, a pioneer in women's ministry from Virginia. She gave me a word of affirmation for what I was doing. And the day began – joyously. Thanks to her, I could go to my teaching duties, not feeling like a mashed banana but like the flag bearer at the front of the parade. God loved me. Ruth loved me.

I found I had to give myself permission to speak in public, a scary thing in the early years. I could write a book about what it is like to be a woman speaker in a constituency that finds this entity something akin to a dog walking on its hind legs. At one of the first times I spoke, I prepared zealously. At the end of the women's rally, I noticed a woman barreling her way down the center aisle at full speed. I was certain she was going to laud me for the pearls of wisdom that had fallen from my lips. Her first words were, "Katie, where did you get your dress? Did you make it? Where did you buy the pattern?" After I have finished speaking, it is not a surprise to have someone ask me if I am a visitor that day and what my name is. This has occurred even while I was wearing a corsage, once the requisite item for a guest woman speaker. So much for trying to make an impression!

Pulpits were usually too tall, intended for tall men. With my trifocals I was sometimes unable to read my notes. Once the metal buttons on my jacket rattled every time I moved my arms. Often there was no microphone. My voice didn't carry like that of a basso profundo. I remember one pulpit built like an airplane, with inward sloping wings. My notes and Bible slid into

the trough in the middle. Often I pondered what I should try to sound like. Should I thunder like Tony Campolo and strike the pulpit, or speak in more modulated tones? Or should I sit with head bowed in prayer, as I had seen many male preachers do?

Once I was sure I was lost in the funhouse. I was staying in a very large home with several other guests. The upper floor had at least eight to ten doors, all the same. I got up at night to go to the bathroom and couldn't remember which door it was. No door had a half-moon on it. I cautiously opened one door to find a man sleeping. I retreated even more cautiously.

Once I arrived at an airport, about fifty miles from my destination, to find no one to meet me. Everyone had assumed someone else would do so. I had no personal phone number, only an institutional number. After waiting many hours into the night, I finally hitched a ride with strangers to my destination, where I phoned relatives and asked for a bed. I've been in an airport and had my host say, "I didn't expect you to look like this." On several occasions after finishing my assignment, I found those in charge didn't have money to pay my expenses. I'll admit I've asked myself as I made my way to the airport at five in the morning, "Why am I doing this?" There were times I arrived home late Sunday night to a snow-covered parking lot at the airport, wearing dress shoes and unable to distinguish my car from the others.

Well, I could go on and on. If there was criticism from some people, there was always encouragement from others. When I was approached a number of years ago to become editor of *Rejoice!*, the inter-Mennonite devotional magazine, one man of the asking group said quite openly, "I don't think it will matter that you are a woman." A brighter moment occurred when I heard recently from an MB scholar working on a thesis on the role of women in the MB Church. He sent me drafts of his paper and quite surprised me by the way he traced my writing about women's issues in MB periodicals.

The journey is never over. The goal is never accomplished. You younger women will have different obstacles to overcome. But some will be the same as those we had. I noticed a recent letter from a woman in *Mennonite Weekly Review*, asking "How can women have a call from God when God doesn't call women?" I have found it is important to hang onto a central core of identity as someone God loves and has called to serve, regardless of gender, race, class, or age. My hope is that you will study women's history so that you will never forget the road that others traveled for you.