

Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



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Women's History Month

March is **Women's History Month**. Much has been in the news recently about women and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as a good bit of discussion about equal pay for equal work. That conversation has been going on for a long time, and, like the tide, it rises and ebbs. Through much of history and in most cultures, women have been regarded as second-class citizens. The purpose of **Women's History Month**, however, is *celebratory*, to shine the spotlight on women who have made remarkable achievements and through their leadership and tenacity changed lives. It actually goes without saying that as the vessels which carry new life and who throughout the centuries have been primary nurturers, women's contributions have been nothing short of profound! So, what has been the role of women in *Christian* tradition, and how has that played out in our own Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)?

In first century, Judaism, so central to the development of Christianity, there were different perspectives, but virtuous women were expected to stay at home and obey their husbands. In the temple they were restricted to an outer court. In the synagogue they were seated separately and were not permitted to read aloud, and they weren't counted in the congregational membership. Without husbands or sons, they were on the fringes of society. Enter Jesus who questioned social structures and ministered to those on the fringes; *no one was excluded*. The Gospels name numbers of women who were followers of Jesus, and while they were not among the Twelve, they were effective disciples. A remarkable example is the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), to whom Jesus revealed himself as I AM, and she hurried to tell her neighbors. Jesus was close friends with Mary and Martha together with their brother Lazarus, and Mary sat at his feet and learned from him. And Mary Magdalene was the first at the tomb, and thereby testified to the resurrection. St. Paul's recognition of the radical difference that life in Christ makes is summed up in Galatians 3:28, there is no distinction-- male, female, slave, free, Greek, Hebrew-- all are one in Christ. While some of Paul's cautionary statements in the letters to Timothy and Titus sound chauvinistic, they may simply be advice to steer clear of repugnant norms in the Hellenistic societies in which he was working. There is much evidence in Scripture that women played active roles in the early church both in leadership and service.

In the fourth century, under Constantine, Christianity became the state religion of Rome. While that encouraged its spread throughout Europe and Asia Minor, unfortunately it took on the characteristics of male-dominated societies rather than vice-versa. Women were members of churches and served in many capacities, but they were not permitted to be leaders; priests were men. A substantial number of women through the centuries were venerated for their good works and were named saints.

Dr. Luther, during the Reformation, urged education for girls as well as boys, so they could read Scripture and thus better understand their Christian heritage. He didn't suggest, however, they become church leaders, not even his beloved Katie who managed their household and affairs as well as any CEO. It would be the 20th century with changing societal norms before women in many denominations would be permitted to become leaders. Women who had earlier taken on roles in teaching, serving on committees, organizing events, playing, and directing music now began being lecturers, and a few were elected to councils. By mid-century some churches in Europe including Lutherans in Scandinavia were ordaining women to become pastors, and by 1960 that was happening in the Brethren Church in America. One predecessor to ELCA, the Lutheran Church in America, began this practice in 1970. It has taken time, but today more than one-third of clergy in the ELCA are female.

Elizabeth Eaton, Presiding Bishop of ELCA discusses her own experience and what it is like to be the first woman to hold such an elevated position. Elected in 2013, it was an historic event. She was ordained in 1981 and has not always had smooth sailing, including receiving lower pay for her work than her male counterparts. But she says of herself and other women, "We didn't say yes to God's call because we wanted to be pioneers or trailblazers or make some kind of statement. We said yes because God's call was irresistible."

Whether clergy or laity, women are a mainstay of the Christian community. In the ELCA we are finally asserting that everyone is welcome to do the work of the kingdom. So, March is **Women's History Month**. Or is it *HER STORY*? Let's celebrate!