

Getting Women Ordained

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[This is a light revision, with a new Afterword, of an essay first published in 1990, as specified at the conclusion.]

Although the late 1960s were years of unprecedented social upheaval, Lutherans studied and debated women's ordination on the grounds of the Confessions and scripture. Only at the end of the debates did the arguments from movements such as the 1960s' "women's liberation" have much impact on the discussion. If the votes to ordain women had come after the feminist movement had gathered enough strength to threaten the establishment, women's ordination among Lutherans might have floundered. Even though arguments for the ordination of women were to some extent based on claims of equality or argued for on the basis of equal rights, and may ultimately have been the persuasive arguments to the delegates in both the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) conventions, theologians of the two churches repeatedly resisted such reasons for the change. When conflict developed, it focused, in fact, on questions of biblical interpretation which were to send Missouri on its own course, and which a decade before had caused an uproar at both Augsburg Seminary and Luther Theological Seminary when the ALC was formed. How all this happened is worth considering since it raised the fundamental question of how Lutherans theologically understood the office of the pastor, a vexing issue as the question of the historic episcopate came up in the ecumenical conversations of the last century.

John Reumann, New Testament Professor at Philadelphia, wrote the most detailed account of the various meetings, committees, and actions of the churches as they considered the question of women's ordination, although his account was, as he acknowledged, from the point of view of the LCA.¹ All of the Lutheran churches in the newly formed Lutheran Council in the USA (LCUSA), which included the ALC, LCA, Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS), and

the Synod of Evangelical Churches, knew the question of women's ordination was coming during the 1960s simply because of the jaunty, liberal spirit of the times. One cannot overestimate the effect of Vatican II on the religious imaginations of the time. Lutheran theologians, in conversation with once implacable foes, were now able to think of the doctrine of the ministry from the vantage point of the ecumenical movement. What they thought of as old prejudices could be put aside in the rush toward unity.

Meanwhile, in their own churches old practices and traditions no longer seemed sacrosanct. A few women had been ordained in the Lutheran churches of Germany and the Netherlands in the 1920s, but the churches had not as a body approved the action. In 1938 the church of Norway authorized the ordination of women, but did not ordain one until well after WWII. As Lutheran churches of Europe had been increasingly willing to ordain women, the movement was opposed by, among others, German theologian Peter Brunner, who argued on the basis of scripture and the orders of creation that women were not created to be pastors, that being a pastor was a deep violation of a woman's created nature.² Brunner was, in turn, challenged by Krister Stendahl, the Swedish New Testament scholar, in a study published in Sweden for the debate in 1958 over the ordination of women. Stendahl developed the position that the problem was hermeneutical: a matter of how to read the difficult New Testament texts forbidding women to speak in church or be in positions of leadership.

The American churches followed these developments closely. Luther Theological Seminary, with the approval of the ALC Board of Theological Education, had enrolled women who by the end of the decade would press for ordination. There were at the time growing numbers of women who had graduated or were enrolled at some of the seminaries of the church, though these were not the first women to attend Lutheran seminaries.³ Some were known to have attended in the late 1890s.⁴ But the question of women's ordination was not a matter for serious debate among Lutherans in America until the 1960s.

On June 30, 1964, an article appeared in the ALC's *Lutheran Standard* which asked: "Should women be allowed to occupy the pulpit

or not?”⁵ Reflecting on her recent trip to the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Assembly in Helsinki the year before, Anne Jordheim wrote that she had met many European woman pastors and was forced to wonder why there were no women pastors in the ALC. The article contained no specific reference to the New Testament strictures against women speaking in church. Hans Lilje, Bishop of Hannover, was said to be for the ordination of women not “because of a shortage of pastors or a question of equality, but because the church is committed to preach the Word.”⁶ Jordheim concluded her article with a comment from one of the Finnish woman pastors she had come to know: “Sooner or later the seminaries of your church [the ALC] will have to launch their first female theologians. It is unavoidable. They are already forty-five years behind schedule.”⁷

The next month, July 1964, someone wrote to *The Lutheran* (LCA) asking, “How does the Lutheran Church in America stand on the ordination of women?” The answer was brief: “The question has not come up in any broadly representative assembly of Lutherans in America, so no position has been taken. It’s likely that there is very little sentiment in favor of ordination of women in the LCA.”⁸ Things were to change quickly.

In 1964, the ALC at its Second Biennial Convention had accepted a statement on the ministerial office. Though it had not mentioned the idea of ordaining women, it had opened the possibility with the language of its statement, which would be used six years later in the resolution to ordain women in the ALC.

Since the needs of the church down through the centuries are subject to variation, we are led to Luther’s conclusion, namely, that God has left the details of the ministerial office to the discretion of the church, to be developed according to its needs and according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.⁹

Through the next years *The Lutheran* and *The Lutheran Standard* included occasional news notes about other denominations ordaining women. Typical was a piece in *The Lutheran* headed “Right of women to ordination gets wider discussion.” The article stated that women were being ordained in Europe and in other American denominations. Noting that the Roman Catholic theologian Rev. George Tavard saw “no fundamental theological objection to the

ordination of women,”¹⁰ the writer added that soon an LCA commission on the ministry would “report on attitudes which American Lutherans can take to this possibility.”¹¹

In 1966, the year Stendahl’s book was translated into English, the LCA at its second convention considered a document on the ministry. Written by a committee of noted theologians and others, the report was eagerly anticipated by this new church.¹² When it came out just prior to the convention, the “Report of the Commission on the Comprehensive Study of the Doctrine of the Ministry” to the 1966 convention of the LCA was greeted with mixed emotions. The editors of the *Lutheran Quarterly* called for more clarity regarding ordination, although they did praise the document for being bold enough to think of enhancing and expanding lay offices such as “ministries in areas of civil rights, antipoverty campaigns, performing arts, labor-management relations, journalism, and the like.”¹³ Criticizing the proposal as fuzzy because it did not draw clearer distinctions between commissioning and ordaining, the editorial concluded by commending the commission’s call for a study of episcopacy and the “advisability of ordaining women.”¹⁴

Philip J. Hefner, then of Gettysburg Seminary, wrote a second editorial in the same issue of the *Lutheran Quarterly*, praising the report and urging that the ministry of women be honored more by giving women “their full civil liberties in our midst (including adequate salaries, working conditions, terms of tenure, etc.)”¹⁵ Eager to grant a fuller recognition to ministry by women, he was more hesitant on the ordination of women because of the ecumenical question.

In the ecumenical perspective, we must weigh very seriously the effect that our ordination of women would have on other Christians. Would the ordination of women in our denominations be as irresponsible and offensive, ecumenically, as the promulgation of the Marian dogmas by the Roman church?¹⁶

When the “Report of the Commission on the Comprehensive Study of the Doctrine of the Ministry” was presented at the LCA’s Third Biennial Convention in Kansas City, it “came under heavy fire and was sunk in deep water.”¹⁷ Critics appeared not to like the attempt to give full-time lay ministry status in the church: “Anyone selected by the church for full-time service might be commissioned,

rather than merely employed.”¹⁸ The delegates rejected all proposals. William Lazareth, then Dean of the Philadelphia Seminary, attacked the report by arguing that baptism is the ordination to the universal priesthood of believers.

We don't have to try to soup this up with a specious kind of commissioning. To make laymen second-class pastors rather than having the pastors assist laymen to be the baptized people of God seems to me a radical reversal of what the Reformation was about.¹⁹

The Convention, however, did like the recommendation of the Commission that the role of women in the ministry be studied. The “Report” had stated that “there is neither theological nor social consensus on this question” and concluded that a study was necessary.²⁰ To that end a resolution was crafted, after extensive debate, which mandated that the new commission chosen to continue the comprehensive study of the doctrine of the ministry also be charged with studying the ministry of women. After some more discussion the final resolution stated simply that the president of the LCA, Franklin Clark Fry, appoint a commission of not more than fifteen persons for this purpose.

For some this was an inopportune decision that would complicate the church's ecumenical relations. President Fry had said it was not the best time to make the study. It would come, he noted,

at the moment when we are entering into a new compact of friendship and co-operation with other Lutheran bodies and at the moment when we are actively engaged in ecumenical conversations with the great bulk of Christendom, the Roman Catholic, and the Orthodox churches, which haven't the slightest intention of moving in this direction.²¹

Fry took care, however, to appoint three women to the commission, among them, Margaret Sittler Ermarth, who chaired the subcommittee (made up of members from the full committee) that was to be entrusted with research into the “whole problem of the role of women in the church.”²²

That same year the Board of Theological Education of the ALC reported to its 1966 Biennial Convention that it had permitted women to enroll in its theological seminaries to study for the

Bachelor of Divinity (B.D.) degree, fully aware that the church did not ordain women. Not long after the conventions of the two church bodies, the ALC requested, at the November 17, 1966, Executive Committee meeting of LCUSA that the Division for Theological Studies (DTS) pursue joint studies of ordination and ministry. In March 1967, the Board of Theological Education of the ALC took action to transmit the information to the Church Council that some of the women who were matriculated at Luther Theological Seminary in Saint Paul were planning to request that they be certified for ordination. When the Council received this report in June 1967, it asked the DTS to study the question of the ordination of women, commissioning William Larsen, the ALC's Director of the Board of Theological Education, who was to become a strong supporter of the move, to prepare a paper on the ordination of women. In addition, they invited Olaf Storaasli of the Luther Theological Seminary faculty to prepare a paper on the same question.

II

The biennial conventions of both the ALC and the LCA in 1968 were distracted by the social issues of the day. Many of the resolutions in both conventions had to do with the Vietnam War, racism, and the war on poverty. In addition to those pressing issues, the LCA was caught up in the election of a new president to take the place of Franklin Fry, whose sudden death some weeks before had taken the church by surprise. The report by Edmund Steimle, chairman of the new commission on the ministry, to the 1968 Convention in Atlanta was only a preliminary report, given the short time between conventions.

Steimle informed the convention, however, that it was possible to highlight several things the commission had agreed upon: 1) their focus would be both upon traditional materials and modern sociological data; 2) the ministry had been entrusted to the whole church, but what that meant with respect to church order was not clear; 3) there were no "biblical or theological reasons for denying ordination to women."²³ What stopped the convention from approving the ordination of women, according to Reumann, was a plea from Professor

T.A. Kantonen of Hamma Seminary, who persuaded the convention to delay action in hopes that other Lutheran bodies would concur with their very likely approval of women's ordination.²⁴

During its Fourth General Convention, October 16–22, 1968, in Omaha, the ALC received reports that the Church Council was treating the question seriously.²⁵ Other issues seemed more pressing. One major decision of this convention was to declare fellowship with the LC-MS. Though the conflict between the moderates and conservatives in Missouri had not yet erupted, it was simmering. Questions of biblical interpretation, one of which the ordination of women was to become, were growing difficult. Fry's comments at the 1966 LCA convention, though not aimed at LC-MS, proved to be prophetic.

The week after the ALC convention of October 1968 the Luther Theological Seminary faculty issued a statement on the ordination of women which was precipitated by the request of some of their women students for a statement. The faculty's work, a brief but trenchant piece, concluded that there were four sets of objections against the ordination of women: biblical, theological, practical, and ecumenical. They noted, as others before them, that the most serious objection was the fact that the move to ordain women would further divide Christendom. But they concluded,

In view of the considerations above, we can see no valid reason why women candidates for ordination who meet the standards normally required for admission to the ministry should not be recommended for ordination.²⁶

They, too, were prescient in seeing that the most serious objection was ecumenical. But not even their traditionally ambivalent feelings toward Missouri, nor their genuine and well-deserved excitement over the new breakthroughs in the dialogues with Rome, pioneered in part by their own colleagues, prevented them from deciding in favor of women's ordination.

At the November 1968 meeting of the Executive Committee of LCUSA, a four-person Subcommittee on the Study on the Ordination of Women was appointed to examine prior studies, listen to consultants, and generate papers.²⁷ They agreed to a set of topics and presented papers addressing the issues on January 17–18, 1969. The

topics were typically Lutheran, focusing on scripture, the Confessions, and Lutheran history and tradition. The papers represent a cautious investigation of the question in the light of current scholarship, from the biblical to the sociological.²⁸ In addition to the papers, they heard reports from their special consultants. Ermarth gave a short account of the LCA studies on the role of women in the church; Richard Jungkuntz spoke of studies that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the LCMS had recently adopted on women's suffrage. Kjell-Ove Nilsson, a Visiting Scholar at Luther Theological Seminary from Sweden, presented the subcommittee with information from the recent debate on the issue in Sweden. He was also asked to inform the subcommittee about the situation at Luther Seminary where two women in the senior class were seeking ordination. These women students were an ever-present pressure group on the ALC to decide. This subcommittee concluded, in a "Statement of Findings" that was adopted by the Standing Committee of the DTS, on March 7-8, 1969, that in "the Biblical material and theological arguments we find the case both against and for the ordination of women inconclusive."²⁹

The essential points of their findings were:

1. that the biblical and theological evidence is not conclusive either for or against the ordination of women
2. that the sociological, psychological, and ecumenical considerations do not settle the question
3. that variety in practice on this question is legitimate within common Lutheran confessions
4. that the decision of the individual Lutheran church bodies should be made only after consultation with the other bodies and in sensitivity to the other Christian churches
5. that the question of the ordination of women involves the broader question of ordination itself, the office of the ministry, the ministry of the whole people of God.³⁰

When the Executive Committee of LCUSA met on April 10-11, 1969, apparently the topic was sufficiently vexing for the committee to postpone indefinitely any action on the findings, though it

accepted recommendations that the church presidents appoint representatives to a conference on the question and its implications for the churches. What was developing as the major difficulty was the hermeneutical question. Hopes for a final rapprochement with Missouri seemed elusive, even though Missouri, at its Denver convention that summer, voted by a small margin to declare fellowship with the ALC. This same convention granted women suffrage in the local congregations, with the warning that women should not exercise headship over men. Others had concluded, as Robert Bertram did on the subcommittee appointed by LCUSA to prepare the "Statement of Findings," that once the church approved women's suffrage, the argument was over: women were speaking in church.³¹

In July 1969, in Denver, at a stormy convention, Missouri elected J. A. O. Preus as President of the LC-MS largely on the basis of his criticisms of those teaching the historical-critical approach to scripture at Concordia Seminary. The church adopted a statement declaring that

those statements of Scripture which direct women to keep silent in the church and which prohibit them to teach and to exercise authority over men, we understand to mean that women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office.³²

With this, the issue of women's ordination became church-dividing. Missouri's President Preus pointed this out whenever he spoke about it to other churches. Though his statements were reported in the church press, they did not elicit much comment from the ALC and LCA. It is important to remember that at the time, this issue was receiving only minimal attention from both the ALC and LCA church magazines. Not even E. Clifford Nelson, editor and one of the authors of *The Lutherans in North America*, noted it as a major factor in the rupture between ALC and LC-MS.³³

Because of the hermeneutical difficulties, each consultation made clear in its statement that the decision one church body made about women's ordination did not have to be church dividing because it was not a matter of the gospel. The difficulties were both intra-LC-MS and inter-Lutheran. Robert Bertram, a representative from the Missouri Synod who participated in the study, favored the

ordination of women on the basis of his reading of the tradition and the Bible. However, the reports of the subcommittee had to pass through the Annual Meeting of the Council where an equal number of LC-MS, ALC, and LCA officials sat, among them, President J. A. O. Preus.

The consultation that the Executive Committee planned during its April meetings took place at Wartburg Theological Seminary, September 20–22, 1969. Three representatives from each church body met to study all of the materials from the study groups, as well as the “Statement of Findings.”³⁴ One of the participants, Roy Harrisville of the Luther Theological Seminary faculty, referred to this consultation and his preparation for it as a time in which he changed his mind from being totally and absolutely opposed “to the idea of a female in the pulpit” to being for it on the basis of his

study of exegetical and dogmatic considerations . . . I learned something about the Scriptural word with respect to women’s ordination, and something from the confessions, whereas before I’d just simply entertained a prejudice against women in the pulpit, period.³⁵

While the members of the consultation agreed on many of the “Findings” (listed above), once again they could not settle the question of women’s ordination. What they acknowledged was that the issue ought not to be divisive of Lutheran fellowship “inasmuch as no compromise or violation of the Gospel is involved.”³⁶ Martin Scharlemann, another participant, later president of Concordia Seminary, argued against women’s ordination on the basis not so much of scripture as of a theology of the “orders of creation.”³⁷ The “orders” were to be described two years later by Scharlemann in his paper entitled “Orders of Creation and the Principle of Ordination as it Pertains to Ministry.” By orders he meant “those social and political structures which are regulated by law in order to make life in community both possible and enriching despite the conditions brought on by man’s fall.” These structures that were given by God, even in the curse to Eve that she would be subject to her husband, were another way for God to continue creating. To attempt to apply principles from the kingdom of grace (God’s right hand) to the

kingdom of law (God's left hand) would be to give a "gospel answer to a law question."³⁸ Anarchy would follow such misguided effort, Scharlemann concluded, much as Brunner had in 1959.

When the Standing Committee of LCUSA met again after the Dubuque conference, it resolved to submit its original "Statement of Findings" to the Executive Committee along with all of the background papers and an extensive report on the September conference at Wartburg. The delicacy of the issue can be read in the minutes which noted that "divergent views do exist in the participating bodies, but it [the Standing Committee] also emphasizes, as the September conference did, that no compromise or violation of the Gospel is involved and that, therefore, divergent practice should not affect church fellowship."³⁹

III

At issue every time was the hermeneutical question. What did the churches think of the biblical admonitions that women should be silent in church because women are to be submissive to men? From the first, the churches had agreed that scripture was not clear on the issue. By the Dubuque meeting the controversy was focused on the idea of "headship." Many of the respondents to the questionnaire filled out after the Dubuque consultation agreed that "headship" needed further study. No one, said Reumann, Chairman of the Dubuque consultation, had "argued against the ordination of women on the grounds that Jesus was male or that women are ontologically incapable of receiving the grace or charismata of God."⁴⁰ On the other hand, the argument from the "orders of creation" says much the same thing: by their very creation women are subordinate, and by their very nature not able to do the things a pastor is called to do.

When women began writing in the church press arguing for the ordination of women, they spoke almost exclusively of the biblical materials and theology that woman was not equal to man, perhaps because those were the arguments they always had to answer. Constance Parvey, one of the first women to be ordained in the

LCA, dealt with the difficult scriptural texts and the history of the church's patriarchy, though she made little reference to the Confessions when she argued for the ordination of women.⁴¹

LaVonne Althouse, who would also become a pastor in the LCA, had made a similar argument previously.⁴² She said, as many others after her would, "We need, above all, to be willing to give up pre-conceptions of what is 'feminine' and what is 'masculine' so that God can give us to each other again in Christ."⁴³ Both of these women and many of their sisters chose to argue for the ordination of women because of their changing place in society, and the changing view of women in the society. The strategy was a common and understandable one, but it attacked deep-seated understandings of what it meant to be male and female. More and more the argument turned on what a woman was, rather than on what the pastor did.

IV

In 1969, at its Minneapolis Triennial Convention, the American Lutheran Church Women (ALCW) voted "to call a study conference or some other effective method of studying the role of women in the church with special emphasis on legislative participation and on ordination."⁴⁴ That work bore fruit. When it came time for the ALC to appoint a committee to study the ordination of women in order to make a recommendation of the Church Council, Frederick Schiotz, after a conversation with the American Lutheran Church Women (ALCW) Board, saw his way to appoint two women to the committee with three men.⁴⁵ He shrewdly appointed Margaret Wold, a leader from the ELC tradition, and Evelyn Streng, a strong representative of the old ALC. Their leadership proved crucial to the passing of the resolution approving women's ordination.

When the Executive Committee of LCUSA received the report of its Standing Committee and referred it to the Annual Meeting of LCUSA which was held in February of 1970, it asked the DTS to pursue more questions about ministry, that is, the universal priesthood of believers, the meaning of ordination, and the ordination of women—from the scriptural questions of headship and sexuality to cultural and anthropological questions.

All three presidents of the major Lutheran churches were present at the February 3, 1970, LCUSA meeting where the reports were disclosed and, in what Reumann described as a “charismatic moment . . . [everyone] seemed totally inclined to vote approval, but it had been decided to request only transmission of the DTS report to member churches for ‘study and consideration.’”⁴⁶

The studies were then “redacted” into a report that was made available to all the pastors and congregations of their respective churches. That study document, written by Raymond Tiemeyer, was ready for distribution in May, 1970. Both Robert Marshall and Schiotz, presidents of the LCA and the ALC, sent the booklet to all the clergy of their respective churches. Dr. Preus, on examining the booklet, protested its cavalier treatment of the biblical texts. Though he did send the document “The Ordination of Women” to all Missouri clergymen, he included a letter saying he was dismayed that the “document handled the Biblical material rather flippantly.”⁴⁷ Aside from his obvious disagreement with the historical-critical method used by the committee, his primary objection was to the tone of the report.⁴⁸ The booklet dealt mostly with what scripture said, devoting three chapters to the biblical questions. One chapter surveyed women in Lutheran history and tradition, another the pragmatic consequences of ordaining women. There was very little in it about the doctrine of the ministry as implied by the Lutheran Confessions.

About the same time, an ALC congregation voted unanimously to call a woman graduate of Luther Theological Seminary, but had not issued the call since the ALC Church Council would not authorize the ordination until the study process was completed.

V

As the conventions of the two church bodies neared, the two magazines of the churches began to carry more stories on the question, though it was not hotly disputed in the Letters to the Editor columns. *The Lutheran Standard* carried an article quoting Fred Meuser, Executive Secretary of the DTS, who, on noting that the various churches held divergent views on the issue, emphasized that “there was unanimous agreement among participants in the study

that adoption of the practice of ordaining women by one or more of the several Lutheran bodies ought not to be divisive of church fellowship.”⁴⁹ The article pointed to the study’s conclusions about the inconclusive nature of the biblical materials and then announced that “three women graduated from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, and one or more may seek ordination.”⁵⁰

Another report in *The Lutheran Standard* two weeks later indicated once again Meuser’s fear that the decision would hurt relations between Lutherans: “This does not mean that all Lutherans should be carbon copies of each other.”⁵¹

About this time the Lutheran Church Women organization (LCW) of the LCA adopted a position paper calling upon it to allow the ordination of women and “to implement these changes creatively and vigorously.”⁵² The LCW vigorously supported women’s ordination and the development of materials that would be persuasive to the church. The most substantial work done by either church was Ermarth’s *Adam’s Fractured Rib*, a product of her study for the Subcommittee on the Role of Women in the Life of the Church. A compilation of the thinking about women in the church and society at the time, it quickly reviewed the role of women in the various church traditions, from Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, UCC, Church of the Brethren, and so on, and the various Lutheran traditions in Europe and America, concluding with four arguments against ordaining women:

1. Christ chose only men to be apostles;
2. God and Christ are masculine and thus a priest must be;
3. Women by nature are unable to receive the indelible character conferred by ordination;
4. God has ordained for all time the subordination of women.⁵³

Up until this time, though there were hints of it in the language of those who had worried about the ecumenical movement and the ordination of women, none of the statements for or against ordaining Lutheran women had used any of the first three reasons, though they had been mentioned and dismissed in Reumann’s first paper.⁵⁴ Only the fourth reason, that women were created to be subordinate

to men, was causing difficulty for those promoting the ordination of women in the Lutheran churches. Ermarth concluded with an argument against “headship,” which she refuted from sociological and psychological sources. The book relied, to some extent, on materials drawn from contemporary feminists for its support. It is surprising, for example, to see secular feminists quoted with such authority in such a book. The theological statements by the churches had repeatedly made clear that the ordination of women was not being done to extend rights to women, but rather on the basis of doctrine.

The April issue of *Scope*, the popular magazine of the ALCW, published three articles arguing for, against, and maybe on the issues of women’s ordination. Dawn Proux argued yes on the basis of a call she had received from a congregation, that she should be ordained. Professor Herman Preus said no, contending against them on the basis of subordination and headship. Storaasli, who had participated in the study by writing a paper for the ALC Church Council, asked “Why Not?” Though he admitted to deeply felt objections at the thought of a woman in the pulpit, he could not find any theological strictures against them in the tradition. He reminded his readers of the theological content of the argument when he wrote “the human minister is commissioned by God to be the instrumental agent through whom he acts.”⁵⁵ For Storaasli, as for Harrisville, the theological arguments overrode his cultural predilections not to ordain women.

On June 9, 1970, *The Lutheran Standard* printed a feature article by Wold on the ordination of women, which would be voted on at the upcoming biennial convention of the ALC. Wold was one of the best-known women in the ALC and would soon become the ALCW Executive Secretary. Her article considered the place most women of the church were in: some against change, some for, some perplexed. She spoke for the typical ALC woman’s “mixed feelings” about women’s rights and feminism and her own struggle to be accepted. A Bible student herself, she handled those materials by focusing on the Galatians texts about equality and left it at that, glossing over the negative statements by referring briefly to previous studies, especially Stendahl’s, which had determined that the scriptural witnesses were mixed. She concluded her article with a plea for conversation and discussion.⁵⁶

In preparation for the conventions of both synods, each church paper published a preview of what issues were to be considered. Neither gave much play to the resolutions to ordain women, though *The Lutheran Standard* gave a few more details about the resolution's progress through the ALC Church Council where it had passed by a 75 percent margin.⁵⁷

VI

It was for the LCA and its committee to write a more substantial piece of theology on the ministry and the ordination of women. Presented to the 1970 convention by a committee chaired by Steimle, and ably assisted by other theologians of note (Sidney Ahlstrom, H. George Anderson, and Martin Heinecken), the "Report of the Commission on the Comprehensive Doctrine of the Ministry" developed a confessionally sound way to speak of the doctrine of the ministry and thus the ordination of women.

The document divided the ordained ministry into two dimensions: the representative, and official or public.⁵⁸ The committee was careful to explain that it had chosen the word "representative" to guard "against the false notion that it is the clergy who constitute the Church," though they took pains to make it clear that they were not defining "representative" to mean one who "resembled" Christ.⁵⁹

Appended to the Recommendations of the Commission was a position paper by the subcommittee on "The Role of Women in the Life of the Church." It found that there was nothing in the exercise of the "'ordained ministry' as a functional office (the office of Word and Sacraments, that is, the official representative ministry—see the Preface to the Report of Commission) which would exclude a woman because of her sex."⁶⁰

The subcommittee's document, drawn largely from Ermarth's book, then went on to discuss the history of women's work in the church, the sweeping revolution of women's liberation, the work of professional women in the church, the church's view of women's liberation, a short section on the ecumenical rediscovery of *diakonia*, concluding with a statement on the "problem of Ordination."⁶¹ Secular feminism had clearly informed much of the work of the

subcommittee.⁶² There was only passing reference to the difficult passages of scripture which so consumed the ALC and the LC-MS.

On June 29, 1970, about 10:00 p.m., the LCA in convention in Minneapolis, voted to change “man” in the bylaw that defined a minister of the church to “person.” It passed by voice vote, though one woman asked that her negative vote be recorded. With that the first decision was made to ordain Lutheran women in the United States. There had been some attempts on the part of several delegates to defer the vote until two more years of study could be done, but after only one half-hour of debate the convention voted to ordain women. Dr. Anderson, who had led the presentation of the report, later said that advocates of the proposal were “dazzled” by the speed with which the convention acted.⁶³

VII

In October when the ALC convention met, everyone was well-aware of the action already taken by the LCA. Schiotez in his last speech as President of the ALC told the convention that since the committee that had been asked to prepare a resolution supporting the ordination of women had concluded that scripture could neither “be used for support or denial of ordination for women,” the decision fell into the category of those that “must be made on the basis of sanctified common sense.”⁶⁴ The study committee of Bruno Schlachtenhaufen, Nelson, Streng, Johann Thorson, and Wold had prepared a resolution recommending the ordination of women, concurring with the “Statement of Findings” and referring back to a 1964 statement by the ALC on ministry:

Since the ministerial office is not precisely defined in the New Testament, and since the duties of early officers were varied and interchangeable, and since the needs of the church down through the centuries are subject to variation, we are led to Luther’s conclusion, namely, that God has left the details of the ministerial office to the discretion of the church, to be developed according to its needs and according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵

Nothing was made of current feminist scholarship. Wold had been careful to avoid using such language in her article and her reluctance

to be party to the radical feminism of the day kept the issue clean. After a brief debate, the resolution passed the October 1970 Biennial Convention of the ALC in San Antonio, 560 to 414 with one abstention. The victory was a narrow one and the decision would come up for further conversations in 1971 when the convention of the LC-MS adopted a resolution deferring enactment of “fellowship” until the ALC had responded to some concerns that Missouri had about the ALC, in particular its 1970 action to permit the ordination of women. In response to Missouri’s request that ALC “reconsider” its action, Kent Knutson, General President of the ALC, asked the three ALC theological faculties to respond to two questions:

1. Do you find that the Scriptures forbid the ordination or service of women in the ministry of Word and Sacrament?
2. Do you find in the Scriptures, orders of creation which enunciate a principle of women being subordinate to men which then pertains directly to the role women should serve in the ministry?⁶⁶

Each of the seminaries prepared statements that concluded with a resounding no to both questions. The nature of the query forced them to deal directly with the scripture and a vexing theological topic: the orders of creation. Joseph Burgess, formerly of LCUSA, then pastor in Regent, North Dakota, was asked to prepare a paper entitled, “What Do the Scriptures Say about the Ministry of Women in the Church?” It began with the direct statement, “Ministry is servanthood.”⁶⁷ Countering the argument of those promulgating “headship,” the paper is a careful exegesis of the difficult verses in scripture with a final appeal to the freedom of the gospel. The Evangelical Lutheran Theological Seminary in Columbus responded with a lengthy piece on the biblical material, but with a specific attack on the idea of the “orders of creation.” Saying that the very term originated with nineteenth-century neo-Lutheranism in Europe, they did a thorough job of discrediting it as an idea that could deny women their calling to be pastors. Wartburg responded similarly, as did Luther. Duane Priebe of the Wartburg faculty prepared a detailed and complete analysis of the idea of *kephale* or headship in the Bible.

Focusing on the nature of authority, he found that the authority in the Bible “lies in weakness . . . and resides wholly in the Gospel.”⁶⁸

VIII

Scripture was the source from which these Lutherans argued. Finally, perhaps ironically, it was scripture they argued about. The original “Statement of Findings” had seen quite clearly into the future of Lutheran debates on the issue when it noted that one of the most vexing difficulties was “a hermeneutical question which lies not fully resolved among Lutherans on how one interprets and applies scripture.”⁶⁹

When the question came up again in 1971 the ALC, while clear on what the confessional answer would be, was forced to argue with Missouri about what the Bible said concerning ordaining women, especially with older battles about inerrancy still fresh in the minds of the Luther Theological Seminary faculty in particular. The scriptural question was the question animating their discussion and work, so it is not surprising that the Luther faculty’s answer to Missouri began with a very strong statement on the Bible:

We regard the entire Bible as the Word of God to be taken seriously as authority in all matters of faith and life. Yet there is no sentence or section which can be properly understood apart from its setting in a particular historical context. On the other hand, there is no sentence or section which can be ignored or disregarded as being no longer relevant. The task of biblical interpretation is to ask of the entire Scripture the question of contemporary meaning in the light of historical meaning.⁷⁰

The question had been a hermeneutical question; now it was becoming an ecumenical one that stood in the way of ecumenical relationships. The ALC’s ecumenical committee was now the convener of the debate, as both Fry and the Luther Theological Seminary faculty had foreseen.

In the end, the work of the seminary faculties made little difference. *The Lutheran Standard* watched Missouri’s 1971 convention with dismay and ALC President Knutson wrote a concise and measured letter to the ALC after Missouri voted to both continue

fellowship with ALC but defer implementation of it until ALC stopped ordaining women. Succinctly stating his position on the issue, he concluded,

one does not need to agree with the ordination of women in order to accept the position that the matter lies in the realm of administration in the church and this is a matter which should not in and of itself disrupt fellowship.⁷¹

The seminaries and study committees had provided a rich fare of biblical and theological work helpful to anyone studying this question. They had warned of the various difficulties that would come from it, saying the ecumenical difficulty would be the most vexing. Their warnings were prophetic.

Conclusions

As the record shows, when the question of women's ordination was posed in the 1960s, it seemed like an idea whose time had come, an inevitable consequence of social progress. The Finnish pastors who had challenged Jordheim said as much when they accused the ALC of being decades behind the times. Women as well as men could proclaim the Word and God's justifying act in Jesus Christ. To say this was to rely mostly on the Augsburg Confession for an answer to the question.

When Lutherans in this country began to ask the question seriously, they looked first to the Confessions, where they found no objection. They agreed, however, that scripture was mixed. So not surprisingly their work focused largely on scripture, even as the times were transforming the way men and women thought about their social roles. Both the women's movement and the ecumenical movement seemed part of a new consciousness that shunned old barriers and conventions.

Some, such as Fry and Hefner, had inklings that the two movements were on a collision course. When the Luther Theological Seminary's faculty issued its statement, they were aware of the choice they were making and preferred what they saw as the gospel truth to church unity.

Their predictions came true. The ordination of women still causes disunity among Christians. After the consecration of Barbara Harris as a bishop in the Episcopalian church, some Anglicans announced they were in “impaired communion” with the churches that ordained women. The pope wrote the Archbishop of Canterbury to voice his opposition to the ordination of women. Observers said at the time that Christian unity had been set back by decades if not centuries. Those in the ecumenical arena striving for “full communion,” which implied the mutual recognition of ministries, had been stymied by this move.

One fact stands out in all of this discussion about women’s ordination among Lutherans: Both ALC and LCA, when they came to the actual wording of their official documents urging the ordination of women, reached back into traditional Lutheran language about the ministry. As the LCA resolution had it: “There is nothing in the exercise of the ‘ordained ministry’ as a *functional*⁷² office (the office of Word and Sacrament, that is, the official representative ministry) . . . which would exclude a woman because of her sex.”⁷³ Theologians of the LCA considering the ordination of women from the point of view of function could change their minds about ordaining women, even if they were reluctant to do so.

On the other hand, it is important to recall the LCA document that recommended both a study of episcopacy and the ordination of women. Though episcopacy was largely ignored by the 1970 document, the ordination of women was not. Opposition to women’s ordination continued in the ELCA, and came under constant attack by those most interested in the ecumenical movement, particularly in ecumenical relations with Rome. In fact, the articles stressing the importance of Lutherans adopting episcopacy seemed to regard it as the only way to stem the tide of what they thought of as the feminist Protestantism they saw as corrupting the ELCA. For them church unity trumped women’s ordination. The ordination of women was a small thing to give up for the sake of unity, some were reported to have said.⁷⁴ A leader of that group, Richard John Neuhaus, hinted in his *Forum Newsletter* that women’s ordination was decided too hastily and, though probably not rescindable, posed an ecumenical problem. The difficulties between Catholics and Lutherans were centered on

the mutual recognition of ministries. Neuhaus suggested that even if there were evidence in the gospel that women could be pastors, the ELCA should stop ordaining them.⁷⁵ The contradictions of the mid-sixties had hatched and were coming home to roost.

Afterword (2018)

Reading this now after twenty-five years, the events seem like ancient history. Most of the actors are now gone into a world of light. The book of essays edited by Nichol and Kolden was intended to inform the Task Force for the Study of Ministry of the ELCA which convened in 1987 and continued until 1993 when the 1993 Assembly affirmed the traditional Lutheran theology of the ministry and resisted the adoption of the three-fold ministry. At the same convention it approved a diaconate which has continued to grow. By 2016 that office transformed into deacons, and thus a kind of three-fold ministry which the ecumenical advocates had been yearning for.

Ecumenical pursuits and the place of women in all the main line churches proceeded apace. The only holdouts among the historic churches were Rome and the Orthodox. They do not loom with the same kind of presence as before. At the time, however, the proponents for the ordination of women and the ecumenical movement were often the same people. Strong feminists with an awareness of the episcopacy could be heard remarking on how eager they were to receive it, even if Rome would never confer it on them. Students reading my article thought I was opposed to the ordination of women because I had suggested that the ecumenical movement toward Rome and its strongest adherents, who opposed the ordination of women, might, as Father Neuhaus suggested, try to end the practice. They could not see that these two goods could conflict. With the affirmation of the Called To Common Ministry (CCM) in 1999, Lutherans voted to be part of the episcopacy as given by the Episcopal church which had come to ordain women as bishops. (Full communion has not yet been declared since there are still pastors and bishops not ordained into that episcopacy as of now.)

One might attribute the cooling impulses toward the ecumenical movement in no small part to the fact that a number of the strongest

Lutheran proponents of the historic episcopate and opponents of women's ordination, such as Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Root among others, left the ELCA and became Roman Catholic. Instead of bringing unity, it appears the argument about the ordination of women and episcopacy ended in disunity more among Lutherans than with the main line churches. The ELCA has suffered many losses since these debates raged. The ELCA in 1988 counted 5.2 million members. At this writing it is down to 3.5 million. Many of those losses came after the vote in 2009 to ordain homosexuals. Many left the church for that reason, but the losses began when the party against the episcopacy formed the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) which now counts almost one thousand congregations and 300,000 members. The North American Lutheran Church (NALC) while not necessarily against episcopacy, had other issues with the ELCA. They count, as of 2016, two hundred congregations with membership of 100,000. Both ordain women. Ironically, the one place where the ecumenical movement foundered because of the ordination of women was within the Lutheran family. The relations with Missouri and the ELCA have remained difficult because of that decision. To this date Missouri has not ordained women nor does the question appear to be on their horizon. That, more than anything, makes the relationship between these two Lutheran churches difficult indeed.

[*The original version of this essay was published in Called and Ordained: Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of Ministry, ed. Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden (Fortress Press, 1990), 161–179, now available from Wipf and Stock Publishers (www.wipfandstock.com) and here used by their permission.*]

NOTES

1. John Reumann, *Ministries Examined: Laity, Clergy, Women and Bishops in a Time of Change* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 121.
2. Peter Brunner, "The Ministry and the Ministry of Women," *Lutheran World* 6 (1959), 248.
3. The study booklet by Tiemeyer claimed that in 1969, 109 out of 4,258 students enrolled in Lutheran seminaries were women. Only 17 were enrolled in B.D. programs, 7 at ALC seminaries, and 10 at LCA seminaries. None were enrolled in B.D. programs in Missouri seminaries. Tiemeyer, p. 45. [See note 29.]

4. At the Hauge Synod's annual meeting at Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Lyon County, Iowa, October 9–11, 1894, there was considerable discussion about whether or not the deaconess home could train women candidates for mission with the United Church faculty that had just formed in Minneapolis. At that same meeting where the China Mission of the Hauge Synod also met, they decided to call Marietta Fugleskiel to be a missionary, asking her to take some classes at a theological seminary so that when she was finished she could be sent to the mission in China. *Kinamtssionæren* (November 1, 1894), 334. *Budbaeren* (December 8, 1894), 774. The next spring Darnel Nelson remarked in a letter to the *Kinamtssionæren* ([July 15, 1895], 223) that two women missionaries, Marie Christenson and I. Skaar, had both studied at the United seminary in Minneapolis.

5. Anne Jordheim, *The Lutheran Standard* 4 (30 June 1964): 14.

6. Jordheim, 14.

7. Jordheim, 15.

8. "My Question Is . . ." *The Lutheran* 4 (29 July 1964): 46.

9. ALC, *1964 Reports and Actions*, 140.

10. *The Lutheran* 4 (11 May 1966): 29.

11. *The Lutheran* 4 (11 May 1966): 29.

12. Members of the commission included Charles Cooper (President of PLTS), Carl Braaten, Rodney O. Davis, Curtis Derrick, Walter H.P. Freitag, Herbert N. Gibney, Philip Hefner, Walter Kukkonen, H. Karl Ladwig, George Lindbeck, Jerome W. Nilssen, John Rilling, Jose David Rodriguez, Herbert W. Stroup, Wilson E. Touhsaent.

13. Editorial Comment, *The Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (1966): 99–100.

14. TLQ 18 (1966): 100.

15. "The Ministry of Women," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 18 (1966): 102.

16. *Ibid.* In a letter dated March 4, 1970, Hefner wrote to Margaret Sittler Ermarth to clarify the content of his letter, saying that he was not, as some had made him out to be, against the ordination of women. See Margaret S. Ennarth *Adam's Fractured Rib* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 119.

17. *The Lutheran* 4 (20 July 1966): 25.

18. *The Lutheran* 4 (20 July 1966): 25.

19. *The Lutheran* 4 (20 July 1966): 25.

20. *The Lutheran* 4 (20 July 1966): 25.

21. *The Lutheran* 4 (20 July 1966): 26.

22. Edmund A. Steimle, Chairman of the Commission on the Comprehensive Study of the Doctrine of the Ministry of the Lutheran Church in America, in the foreword to Ermarth's *Adam's Fractured Rib*. The new commission included Sydney Ahlstrom, H. George Anderson, Arnold E. Carlson, Margaret S. Ermarth, Marianka Fousek, Victor Gold, Jacob Heikkinen, Martin Heineken, Albert H. Keck, Richard W. Lundin, Floyd Matinson, Sister Anna Melville, Ralph E. Peterson, Alfred H. Stone.

23. 1968 Minutes, 755–56.

24. Reumann, *Ministries Examined*, 122. It would be more correct to say that Kantonen made this clear to the delegates. There is little evidence of a push to ordain women at this time. The report at the 1968 convention was in the nature of a progress report. The Minutes report (756) that Dr. Steimle commented further that only an interim report was presented because there had been insufficient time to adequately prepare a final and definitive statement.

25. It had requested that the DTS study the question and had commissioned papers from William Larsen and later Olaf Storaasli of Luther Theological Seminary on the issue.
26. 1970 Reports and Actions, 327.
27. Members of the Subcommittee on the Study of Ordination of Women by the LCUSA were John Reumann, Chairman; Robert W. Bertram of Concordia Seminary; Stephen G. Mazak of Cudahy, Wisconsin; Fred Meuser of what is now Trinity Lutheran Seminary; and Paul D. Opsahl, the staff person from the Council. Their topics were, respectively, "What in the Scripture Speaks on the Ordination of Women?", "What Theological Reasons Are Being Given Pro and Con on the Ordination of Women?", "What in the Lutheran Confessions Speaks on the Ordination of Women?", "The Lutheran Tradition (Outside of the confessional writings) and the Ordination of Women," "The Ordination of Women in the *Oikumene*." Ronald Johnstone, a consultant, presented a paper on "Sociological Factors in the Ordination of Women," and Harold Haas (Concordia, Ft. Wayne) considered the "Psychological Factors in the Ordination of Women to the Pastoral Ministry."
28. ELCA Archives, *Protocol Document of LCUSA Minutes (1970)*, Exhibit K, Exhibit A, 37.
29. "A Statement of Findings Relating to the Requested Study on the Subject of the Ordination of Women," in *The Ordination of Women*, ed. Raymond Tiemeyer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1970), 52.
30. "Findings of March 1969," *Minutes of LCUSA* (February 1970), Exhibit G, p. 8.
31. Bertram, "What Theological Reasons Are Being Given Pro and Con on the Ordination of Women?" *Protocol Copy of 1970 LCUSA Minutes*, Exhibit K, Exhibit A, p. 37.
32. *Denver Proceedings* (1969), Res. 2-17, p. 88.
33. Reumann contends that Professor Scharlemann's letter to President J. A. O. Preus of April 9, 1970, which is thought to be the precipitator of the investigation of Concordia Seminary, specifically mentions the "orders of creation." Compare *Exodus from Concordia: A Report on the 1974 Walkout* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Board of Control, 1977).
34. The participants in this consultation were members of the subcommittee named above and the following: ALC, Roy Harrisville, William Larsen, Stanley D. Schneider; LCA, Margaret Ermarth, Martin J. Heinecken, Ralph Peterson; LC-MS, Fred Kramer, Martin H. Scharlemann, Edward H. Schroeder; Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, Kenneth Ballas.
35. LNTS student paper, *The Concord* 7 (5 May 1978): 12.
36. *Report of the Division of Theological Studies*, LCUSA (February 3-4, 1970), Exhibit G, p. 8.
37. Reumann, *Ministries Examined*, 122.
38. Reumann, 1.
39. *Report of DTS*, Exhibit G, p. 9.
40. *Protocol Document*, Exhibit K, Exhibit A, p. 81.
41. "Ordain Her, Ordain Her Not . . . ?" *dialog* 9 (Summer 1969): 203-8.
42. "Ordain Women?" *American Lutheran* 49 (October 1966): 10-12, 21-22.
43. "Ordain Women?" 22.
44. *The Lutheran Standard* 10 (9 June 1970): 4.
45. DeAne Lagerquist, *From Our Mothers' Arms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 153.
46. Reumann, *Ministries Examined*, 122.

47. James Pragman, *Traditions of Ministry* (St. Louis Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 203 n. 36.

48. The beginning of the first chapter does seem flippant: "Woman was made only as an afterthought, and second-hand at that. She didn't even rate fresh dust—just a rib. Any man can spare a rib" (9). Those opposing the ordination of women would know from the first word that this study was out to persuade them to change their minds.

49. "Ordain Women? Yes and No, Study Finds," *The Lutheran Standard* 10 (17 February 1970): 22.

50. "Ordain Women?" 22.

51. *The Lutheran Standard* 10 (3 March 1970): 20.

52. *The Lutheran Standard* 10 (14 April 1970): 20.

53. Ermarth, *Adam's Fractured Rib*, 124.

54. *Protocol Document*, Exhibit K, Exhibit A, pp. 10–114.

55. Storaasli, "Why Not?" *Scope* 10 (April 1970): 13.

56. *The Lutheran Standard* 10 (9 June 1970): 6.

57. *The Lutheran Standard* 10 (21 July 1970): 22.

58. *1970 Minutes*, 429–30.

59. *1970 Minutes*, 429.

60. *1970 Minutes*, 443.

61. *1970 Minutes*, 450.

62. *1970 Minutes*, 444 n. 2.

63. *The Lutheran* 8 (5 August 1970): 7.

64. "President's Report," *1970 Reports and Actions*, 141.

65. *1964 Report and Actions*, 140.

66. Response of the Inter-Church Relations Committee of the ALC, *1972 Reports and Actions*, 460.

67. Response, 465.

68. Duane Priebe, Inter-Church Relations Committee's Response, *1972 Reports and Actions*, Exhibit C, p. 472.

69. Tiemeyer, *Ordination of Women*, 53.

70. "Statement by Luther Theological Seminary Faculty on the Ordination of Women," Inter-Church Relations Committee Report, *1972 Reports and Actions*, Exhibit E, 482. Two other ALC seminaries issued statements as well.

71. *Lutheran Standard* 11 (7 September 1971): 19.

72. Italics mine.

73. See note 58.

74. See *Exploring the Faith We Share—A Discussion Guide for Lutherans and Roman Catholics*, eds. Glenn C. Stone and Charles La Fontaine, S.A. (Paramus, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 83. There is a section in the book on the theology of headship as a reason for not ordaining women, that is, the biblical reason; and then the statement that "there is also a small but well-spoken group of Lutherans who oppose women's ordination for a quite different reason. These Lutherans have a passion for eventually reuniting Western Christianity. For them, women's ordination poses still another obstacle for Lutheran Roman Catholic dialogue."

75. *Forum Newsletter*, 17 (18 October 1988): 5.