

Women as Clergymen in Denmark

BY HANS OLLGAARD

AS THE conditions of the Church in the United States and in Denmark are so different, it is necessary to begin by rendering an account of the conditions of the church in this country.

The Danish church is an Evangelical Lutheran church and encompasses 97 percent of the population. It is a national church and the government of this country has the highest executive power in the church, one of the government ministers being the Church Minister. The highest legislative power is vested in the Parliament. The Danish church has ten bishops. In his diocese each bishop is the highest local authority in clerical matters and is the supervisor of the congregations.

In 1849 freedom of religion was granted, and at the same time a legislation of freedom within the church began which has no equal in any other Lutheran church; in many ways it has been of benefit to church life. For the most part, individual congregations are able to regulate their own affairs, especially economically. To secure a new pastor in a congregation, the Parochial Church Council nominates three applicants for the post. If one of the nominees receives all of the votes of the Parochial Church Council, he or she then has to be appointed by the Church Ministry. In the discharge of his official duties the pastor is independent of the Parochial Church Council.

For a long time we have had a social-democratic government. The Church Minister, Mrs. Bodil Koch, who is a graduate in divinity, has filled her office with great ability and is generally recognized in the church.

In 1904 women gained admittance to study theology at the University of Copenhagen, and were allowed to graduate with a

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degree in theology. Only a few took advantage of this opportunity because it did not lead to a clerical office as an ordained minister. Those who graduated became teachers or secretaries in church organizations, or they married.

In 1915 women received electoral rights to the Parliament and shortly thereafter women claimed that they could be admitted to the clerical office. This caused a great deal of discussion. The opinions of the bishops were sought and most of them opposed the idea. But the Bishop of Seeland, our "first bishop," said that as a principle there was nothing against the admittance of women to the clerical office. Should a congregation want a woman as its pastor, and this woman had the training to be a pastor, the legislature ought to provide the legal right of such an appointment. The Parochial Church Councils were also asked their opinions and a great majority voted against the idea.

In 1924 the question was asked again by women theologians who maintained that there should be at least a legal authority for the appointment of a woman pastor to the prison for women, even if it were not possible for women to be admitted to all clerical offices. Again the bishops were asked and again most of them expressed their doubts, even if some of them did not specifically oppose a woman prison pastor.

Bishop Valdemar Ammundsen, a man well known in the ecumenical movement, said, "It is a fundamental Christian idea that in the new Christian mankind all are religiously equal (Galatians 3:28). From a Christian point of view it is desirable that the external arrangements take place through a coordination between this fundamental idea and the practical conditions of life." He fully agreed to the appointment of a woman pastor at the women's prison. A bill was proposed, but it was rejected.

In 1928 the theologian Ruth Vermehren, with permission from the prison authorities, began an unpaid work among the women prisoners. Her work was much appreciated. For the most part she conducted interviews with the women prisoners and the prison pastor frequently allowed her to preach. In 1938 she was

employed by the prison authorities as an assistant to the prison pastor and she then applied to the Bishop of Copenhagen for ordination in order to administer holy communion and baptism. She did not get the permission. One of the constant objections from the opponents was that it was only a theoretical case because no congregation wanted to have a woman pastor.

In 1946 such a case came to light. A congregation in the country unanimously agreed to have a woman theologian as their pastor. Again a bill was proposed and the bishops were asked. This time there was only one fundamental opponent, two bishops agreed, and the rest of them had some doubts.

A bill which gave women the right to apply for any clerical office was passed in June of 1947. The prison authorities applied for the appointment of Ruth Vermehren as pastor at the women's prison. Shortly after, a senior pastor from the diocese of Funen (where I was then bishop), with the agreement of his Parochial Church Council, applied for a woman assistant pastor. Thus a woman pastor was desired in three locations. These three places were in different dioceses and two of the bishops did not want to ordain women. According to Danish mentality, it would be impossible to try to force a bishop to act against his conviction, so again it was necessary to go through many difficult proceedings to find a compromise.

In March of 1948 a "bishop freedom law" was passed, which enabled a bishop to renounce his supervision of a congregation and its pastor within his diocese if, for instance, the congregation wanted a woman pastor. Then the Church Ministry could give the supervision to another bishop who was willing to take over.

After serious consideration, I was willing to ordain the woman theologian as a pastor in my diocese, and therefore the Church Ministry asked me to ordain and supervise the other two as well. On April 28, 1948, the ordination took place in the cathedral of the diocese of Odense, with great interest from the public. The text for my ordination sermon was Matthew 25:5-10.

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." (RSV)

The first people who heard the message of the resurrection, upon which the whole Christian Church is founded, were women. The first people who were sent to preach the Easter message to the disciples were women. As they hurried away to bring the message of the resurrection they met the Risen Lord and he said to them, "Hail!" The first people who worshiped the Risen Christ were women.

During the time before the ordination there was a very strong debate on the right of ordination for women, both in church papers and in the daily press. The opponents were very aggressive and it culminated in a protest to Parliament signed by 514 pastors (28 percent of the pastors in Denmark). The protest said in part, "We must consider the ordination of a woman as a schismatic act and therefore we have to refuse to acknowledge its validity. In our opinion, both the person who ordains and the person who is ordained have placed themselves outside the community of the National Church." It was a hard time for the three women, who both in public and in private life were the subjects of these attacks. They did not answer the attacks; there were enough to defend them. But I admire them for the courage with which they endured it all.

As time went on, the commotion faded away. Of course, there were still many pastors against the idea, but nobody refused to acknowledge the validity of their ministries, and I did not feel that they had declared me a schismatic bishop. I had taken over the supervision of the two women pastors outside my diocese and had exercised this with visitations, conversations, and correspond-

ence. In 1950 the bishop in the diocese of Lolland-Falster retired, and the new bishop, who was in favor of women pastors, took over the supervision of this congregation. In 1956 the Bishop of Copenhagen took over the supervision of the women's prison.

The discussion started again in 1956 when a bishop refused to ordain a woman who was appointed as an assistant pastor in his diocese. But now he stood alone, as all the other bishops were willing to acknowledge women pastors. (In these eight years no less than six new bishops had been elected.) A neighboring bishop ordained the woman assistant pastor and took over her supervision.

There are now 22 woman pastors in Denmark. Most of them are pastors in city congregations with more than one pastor. One of them is the only pastor in a congregation, and one is a senior pastor in a parish near Copenhagen. Some of them are married and have children.

As far as I know, all women theologians who wanted to be pastors now have clerical offices. At our two universities where pastors are educated, 30 percent of those now studying theology are women, so that an increase is expected in the future.

The women pastors are on quite equal terms with their male colleagues. They are allowed to apply for all clerical offices, and in their positions have the same duties, responsibility, and salaries as men. They do not feel any resistance from the congregations because they are women, but there is still quiet resistance from some male pastors. The "High Church Movement" can not or will not acknowledge that anyone but a man can be a pastor. There may be an argument again, but it will be overcome as before.

Some years ago Dr. Michelfelder, Executive Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, was present at a Danish bishops' meeting. When we discussed these things, he said, "This is very important; it is a burning question all over the world in Protestant churches. There are very different opinions in the different churches: from complete agreement to the most eager opposition. The question will not be settled until a positive answer has been given." I fully agree with him.



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