

Mère Henriette Feller (1800-1868) of La Grande Ligne and Ordered Ministry in Canada

PHILIP G.A. GRIFFIN-ALLWOOD¹
Wesley Memorial United Church

The history of ordination of women in Canada has various beginning points. The Rev. Lydia Gruchy of the United Church of Canada was the first woman ordained by a Canadian jurisdiction for Canadian ministry in 1936.² In southern Ontario, Michigan Free Baptists ordained Jennie Johnson in 1909 for service in Chatham Township, Ontario.³ Similarly, Rev. Sister M.E. Johnson, spouse of the Rev. B. B. B. Johnson, pastor of the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church, Halifax, 1903-1905, exercised ministry with her husband and independent of him in the area around Halifax, Nova Scotia.⁴

These illustrations are all based on the assumed definition of ordained ministry as a reflection of order and ardour. However, as I previously written about when discussing the history of Baptist ordination, there has been a third component to the definition of ministry, namely that of function.⁵ Function carries within it an implicit rejection of a sacramental definition of ordination.

Ministry as Function

Prominent British North American/Canadian individuals who embodied ministry as function include John Mocket Cramp and Alexander Crawford. Cramp was a British Particular Baptist whose ordination took place without the laying on of hands.⁶ While a service of ordination was performed for Cramp, Alexander Crawford's eldership would exist only

while he served a church.⁷

Crawford was a Scotch Baptist trained in the Haldane school in Edinburgh. Scotch Baptists were an indigenous denomination in Scotland that had formed their first church in Edinburgh in 1765, after the acceptance of immersion by seceders from the established Church of Scotland. Under the leadership of Archibald McLean, Scotch Baptist churches were organized throughout Scotland, Wales, and northern England. Their ecclesial organization differed from that of the Particular Baptists, who were called “English” Baptists in Scotland to distinguish them from the Gaelic-speaking Scotch Baptists.⁸ The “apostolic plan” of the Scotch Baptists declared that: “. . . each Church, to answer the prototype, must have a presbytery of Elders – a plurality of Pastors – as well as a body of Deacons, otherwise it was considered defective . . .”⁹

A significant influence on the Scotch Baptists included two wealthy laymen, James and Robert Haldane. Dissatisfied with the practices of the Established Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), they built a “tabernacle” in Edinburgh and invited British evangelist Rowland Hill to hold meetings. In 1799 they seceded from the Church of Scotland and organized an independent church.¹⁰ In 1808 the Haldane brothers adopted the principle of believer’s baptism by immersion.¹¹

Their ecclesiastical goal was to establish “primitive churches” modelled upon their interpretation of scripture. They defined the church as a local independent body. Connectionalism, with the exception of societies formed for specific projects, was to be avoided.¹² There was a specific place for women within church structure, as “widows” and as deaconesses, albeit with a same sex responsibility.¹³ James Haldane wrote that, “We see that the apostolic churches had deaconesses and female teachers. We may be sure they were very useful and if we follow the direction left for making a proper choice, we shall doubtless experience the good effects of it.”¹⁴

Haldane linked widows and female teachers to Titus 2:3, “the aged women (*presbutidas, the female elders*, as some render it).”¹⁵ Thus, on a theoretical level, Haldane’s ecclesiology defined female and male “elders” as necessary for church life.

Haldane’s Influence in Québec

The most prominent location where Haldane’s ecclesiology was put into practice was Switzerland. In the first decade of the nineteenth century,

Robert Haldane lived and taught in Geneva, instigating a revival in the city's Theological Hall. From that revival an independent church movement developed in Switzerland.¹⁶

The influence of the Haldanes spread to Canada through Scottish immigrants. Among the settlers was Henry Wilkes (1805-1886), a Congregationalist who studied in Glasgow from 1829 until 1832.¹⁷ A Major-General Anderson wrote and distributed "appeals" for missions to "French Canadian Romanists" in 1829 and in 1834. Wilkes cooperated with Robert Haldane and others in forming "the Edinburgh Committee for the Management of the French-Canadian Mission."¹⁸ The committee's object was to: ". . . engage men of approved piety, without reference to names of party distinction, to preach and teach the unsearchable riches of Christ, to traverse the province as colporteurs, and to scatter the seed of the Kingdom wherever they go."¹⁹

Commitment was made to fund the mission from Scotland and to seek a missionary from Switzerland. In Lausanne, Switzerland, members of the national and independent churches had united to form a missionary society.²⁰ Responding to Canadian requests – Anderson's pamphlets perhaps – in 1834 Henri Olivier, who had been minister of the Lausanne independent church, arrived in Montréal with his wife and two young men. The latter two became missionaries to aboriginal peoples in Mississippi, a task that the Oliviers were also expected to pursue. However, the Oliviers decided to stay in Montréal; their decision to preach to the French rather than to engage in missionary work with indigenous peoples resulted in severance from the Lausanne committee.²¹

In response to the decision of the cooperative Lausanne Missionary Society, the independent churches organized their own missionary society. At the organizational meeting a letter was received requesting a labourer for Québec.²²

Henriette Feller

Henriette Odin lived in Lausanne with a family prominent enough that she was "introduced into society."²³ In 1822 she married a widower, Louis Feller, part of the "aristocracy (so to speak) of the Swiss Republic."²⁴ They also belonged to the established Reformed Church in Switzerland and family worship was practised in their home.²⁵

The presence of Haldane-influenced revivalists in Lausanne coupled with the death of Henriette Feller's only child, Elize, created a spiritual

crisis in Henriette's life. After reading a treatise called *The Evangelical Doctrine*, she experienced a powerful moment of conversion.²⁶ Following her conversion she associated with the *momiers*, as the independent revivalists were known in Lausanne. Following the death of her husband in 1826,²⁷ Henriette Feller joined the independent church in Lausanne.²⁸ Subsequently, Madame Olivier wrote Henriette Feller requesting that she join the missionary work. Thus, in 1835, she and Louis Roussy, a young man with theological training, joined the Oliviers in Canada,²⁹ having been sent out by the "Commission of the Churches of Switzerland Associated for Evangelism,"³⁰ as the independent society was known.³¹ For Feller, the decision was a spiritual one: "My convictions have been continually strengthened and confirmed, and now I am certain that I am answering God's call."³²

Henriette Feller expressed her vocational identity as part of the church. About 1830 she received believer's baptism and served the Independent church in Lausanne as a deaconess.³³ Her involvement in church was strictly within the terms prescribed by the Haldanes. Churches were to be independent of one another, save for particular moments of cooperation. The primary purpose of churches was revivalistic, not denominational. Thus the goal of the Swiss Mission, established by the Oliviers and continued by Feller and Roussy, in the words of John Mocket Cramp, ". . . was not to make them [the people of Québec] Protestants – to make them Baptists – it was to save their souls from death!"³⁴ This would posture would create tensions as Feller and her associates struggled to maintain Haldane distinctiveness.

Maintaining the Haldane Identity

The first missionary activity of the Ottawa Baptist Association formed in 1836 was the engagement of Roussy as missionary to French Canada.³⁵ The association included others influenced by the Haldanes. At the General Meeting of the Ottawa Baptist Association on 30 March 1867, the Canada Baptist Missionary Society was organized as a cooperative organization with the Baptist Canadian Missionary Society in Great Britain,³⁶ and responsibility for the mission to French Canada – under the direction of Roussy and Feller – was transferred to this society.³⁷

But by February 1839, the Canada Baptist Missionary Society announced: ". . . we are under the painful necessity of stating, that our connection with the Mission at La Grande Ligne . . . has been dissolved,

under circumstances which admitted of no alternative.”³⁸ Tensions had developed between the Swiss Mission and some of its advocates. Some supporters, reacting to the Baptist affiliation, had withdrawn support in 1839³⁹ and in August 1839 the French Canadian Missionary Society was organized. While the Swiss Mission worked in the Richelieu Valley, the French Canadian Missionary Society operated on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River.⁴⁰

Within the Canada Baptist Missionary Society disagreement existed concerning the terms for co-operation with missions. For some Baptists the non-immersion of Feller and Roussy undoubtedly raised questions about associating with them. The issue was resolved in 1841 when the society declared: “That the society is, from the nature of its constitution, open to the co-operation of all who hold the distinguishing tenants of the baptist [sic] denomination, in connexion [sic] with evangelical piety.”⁴¹

Following this controversy, which ran contrary to the Haldane ecclesiastical vision, the Mission felt that “they could labour more efficiently if they were independent religious parties.”⁴² Feller and Roussy thus turned for support to the Foreign Evangelical Society, based in New York City.⁴³

Grants were received until 1845 when the Foreign Evangelical Society demanded that the mission join the French Canadian Missionary Society as a prerequisite for continuing aid.⁴⁴ This was not acceptable to the mission. Madame Feller expressed her hope that the Mission’s open position could be maintained in the following letter:

. . . Notre liaison projetée avec la Société Évangélique de New York n'a pas eu lieu; diverses circonstances ont concouru à m'y faire croire que ce n'était pas là le chemin que Dieu nous avait . . .

. . . Nous sommes arrivés à la conclusion qu'une liaison avec les baptistes anglais était celle qui offrait le plus de sécurité pour l'avenir de la mission. Nous avons donc formé ce lien avec la Société missionnaire baptiste à Montréal qui elle-même est une branche de la Société d'Angleterre . . . Cette liaison n'apporte pas de changement à nos vues libérales. Nous demeurons *open communion* et nous espérons bien continuer nos doux rapports avec nos frères pédo-baptistes. Je ne pense pas qu'il y ait aucun changement à notre égard et de la part de la Société Évangélique . . .⁴⁵

The Swiss Mission therefore re-aligned with the Canada Baptist Mission-

ary Society, thus accepting direction from a Swiss Mission Committee containing representatives from both organizations.⁴⁶ The Swiss Missions conditions for reunion were those mentioned in the Feller letter. There was to be no change in their relationship to “pedobaptists” as those who did not practice believer’s baptism were known: “. . . [Swiss Mission] missionaries . . . will be anxious to exemplify the manifestations of Christian friendship with all who ‘love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity,’ and to cultivate acquaintance with Brethren in Christ, of various denominations as heretofore.”⁴⁷

While maintaining a connection with the Canada Baptist Missionary Society, the mission was “essentially independent.”⁴⁸ When the society ceased operations in 1849,⁴⁹ plans were made by the Swiss Mission to become an independent society, which would remain “baptiste libéraux.”⁵⁰

With loss of support from the Baptist Missionary Society and its Canadian affiliate, the Swiss Mission turned toward the American Baptist Home Mission Society for support in 1849.⁵¹ Because of American Baptist concern about their ecclesiology in 1854 the mission agreed to “build up Regular Baptist churches so far as practicable.”⁵² This action apparently had limited effect for all but one of the missionaries of Grande Ligne were open communionists.⁵³

The maintenance of Haldane openness was rejected by Regular Baptists in the Canadas, and in 1858 the Grande Ligne church was removed from the list of Regular Baptist churches.⁵⁴ Despite the pressures, the Swiss Mission, known by Henriette Feller’s death as the Grande Ligne Mission, resisted pressures to abandon Feller’s advocacy of Haldane ecclesiology. At the time of Feller’s death in 1868, an Ontario convention committee visited and declared that the Mission had “a considerable difference of opinion in regard to church-order and ordinances” and “loose views” concerning communion.⁵⁵

Feller as Ordered Minister

So how one should view Henriette Feller? When I initially read her self-description as *mère* I viewed her and Roussy’s role as emulating that of Catholicism. Both were single leaders of a religious community. Readers of the “Grande Ligne Mission” in the *The Canadian Baptist* would see “Sketches of Mme. Feller’s Furniture” that could be viewed at the Feller Institute.⁵⁶ The display of relics suggest a Catholic religious model of leadership, especially in the light of her founding of a school,

that of the teaching sister.

Yet in the light of the continued Haldane ecclesiology, another view can be taken. Cramp described Feller in these terms:

. . . although Madame Feller occupied a somewhat anomalous position, for her influence was well-nigh all-powerful, and few ventured to contradict or oppose one in whom the tenderness of woman and the firmness of man were so happily united, she never overstepped apostolic limits.⁵⁷

This description matches that of the female presbyter as stated by James Haldane. Thus Feller's title as "*mère*" could be seen as being used as "Father" and "Mother" as in the revivalist tradition for ordered leadership. This practice, using a functional definition of ministry, makes her one of the first ordered ministers in what is now Canada.

Endnotes

1. The author wishes to express gratitude to Jacques Monet, Don Goertz, and Judith Colwell for aid and insight into this research project.
2. M. Hallett, "Lydia Gruchy – The First Woman Ordained in the United Church of Canada," *Touchstone* 4, no. 1 (1986): 18-23.
3. Dorothy Shadd Shreve, *The AfriCanadian Church: A Stabilizer* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia Press, 1983), 111-12.
4. Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in late-19th-Century Halifax County," *Acadiensis* 22, no. 2 (1993): 61-83.
5. Philip Griffin-Allwood, "'The Christian Ministry is an Ordinance of God': Definition and Redefinition of Who and What is a Minister?" in *A Fragile Stability: Definition and Redefinition of Maritime Baptist Identity*, ed. David T. Priestley (Wolfville, NS: Acadia Divinity College and the Baptist Historical Committee of the United Baptist Convention of the Atlantic Provinces, 1994).
6. T.A. Higgins, *The Life of John Mockett Cramp, D.D., 1796-1881, Late President of Acadia College; Author of the "Council of Trent," "Baptist History," Etc.* (Montreal: W. Drysdale, 1887).
7. While Nova Scotia Regular Baptists gave him the title "Elder," he himself did not appear to use it unless he was serving a church.

8. George Yuille, ed., *History of the Baptists in Scotland*, 2nd ed. (Glasgow: Baptist Union Publications Committee, c.1926), 44-54.
9. Yuille, ed., *History of Baptists*, 51. The statement continued: "the breaking of bread took place every Lord's Day, and was for baptized believer's alone, and of those only such as held the same principles of order and faith; the prayers and exhortations of the brethren in the public meetings, the fellowship or contribution of the poorer brethren, Agape or Love Feast were all Scriptural institutions to be observed. Minor observances held as obligatory were sustained with a sober judgment; the kiss of charity and the washing of feet, reserved for special occasions, were not regarded as religious institutes. It was the duty of a Christian to marry 'only in the Lord,' and submission to the civil power in all things lawful was prescribed. A unanimity [sic] in Church decisions became the fruitful parent of successions." Also see, Letter from Alexander Crawford to Richard Creed, 13 January 1828, Baptist Collection, Vaughan Memorial Library, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS.
 Scotch Baptists operated with an informal connexion without organization of associations. A serious division took place among the Scotch Baptists after 1810, the cause of disagreement being whether the Lord's Supper could be administered without an elder. See Yuille, ed., *History of the Baptists*, 233-34.
10. Winfred Ernest Garrison and Alfred T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ: A History* (St. Louis, MI: Bethany Press, 1969), 50-52.
11. Yuille, ed., *History of the Baptists*, 58- 59.
12. Yuille, ed., *History of the Baptists*, 234. The Haldanes avoided specific denominational affiliation. Both Scottish Baptists and the Disciples of Christ claim descent from them. See Garrison and DeGroot, *Disciples of Christ*, 50-56; and Yuille, ed., *History of the Baptists*, 55-60.
13. James Alex Haldane, *A View of the Social Worship and Ordinances*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: J. Ritchie, 1806), ix.
14. Haldane, *Social Worship*, 250.
15. Haldane, *Social Worship*, 228.
16. Walter N. Wyeth, *Henriette Feller and the Grande Ligne Mission* (Philadelphia: Krehbiel and Co., 1898), 19-20; and John Mocket Cramp, *Memoir of Henriette Feller* (London: Elliot Stock, n.d.), 13ff.
17. Philippe Sylvain, "Henry Wilkes," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Volume XI 1881-1890* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 923-24.
18. *Montreal Daily Witness: Evangelical Alliance Extra*, October 1874, 57.

19. *Alliance Extra*, 57.
20. Wyeth, *Henriette Feller*, 41.
21. Wyeth, *Henriette Feller*, 39-47. Also see J. M. Cramp, *A Memoir of Madame Feller with an Account of the Origin and Progress of the Grande Ligne Mission* (London: Elliot Stock, 1876), 39-45. Initially the Oliviers were under the auspices of the American Presbyterian Church, but their baptisms by immersion changed their church relationships.
22. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 68-70.
23. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 6. Her father was head of the penitentiary (2).
24. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 9-10.
25. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 11.
26. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 17-25.
27. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 29-31.
28. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 37-39.
29. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 68-70.
30. *Montreal Register* 4, no. 32 (1845): 2.
31. *Montreal Register* 4, no. 32 (1845): 2.
32. Letter from Henriette Feller to Mark Fivaz, quoted in Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 70. Cramp, with the exception of a few phrases, translates all French passages. His first six chapters were "compiled from a narrative prepared by the Rev. L. Roussy" in French. See Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, iii.
33. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 55, 59.
34. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 240.
35. *Baptist Magazine* (London) 27 (1836): 448; and *Canada Baptist Magazine and Missionary Register* 4, no. 3 (1838-39): 50.
36. *Baptist Magazine* (London) 28 (1836): 541; and 29 (1837): 354. For a discussion of nineteenth-century Baptist life in Canada, see Philip G.A. Griffin-Allwood, "The Canadianization of Baptists: From Denominations to Denomination, 1760-1912" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986).

37. *Canada Baptist Magazine and Missionary Register* (Montreal) 2, no. 3 (1838-39): 50.
38. *Canada Baptist Magazine and Missionary Register* (Montreal) 2, no. 10 (1838-39): 223.
39. *Baptist Year Book for Ontario and Quebec for 1881* (Toronto: T. Hill & Son, 1882 [?]), 115.
40. *Alliance Extra*, 57.
41. *Baptist Magazine* (London) 33 (1841): 569.
42. William R. Williams and Sewall S. Cutting, *The Grande Ligne Mission: Its History, Condition, and a Plea in its Behalf* (New York: J.A. Gray, 1849), 12.
43. Williams and Cutting, *Grand Ligne Mission*, 12.
44. Williams and Cutting, *Grand Ligne Mission*, 13.
45. Letter dated November 27 from Henriette Feller to Narcisse Cyr. Typescript in the Canadian Baptist Archives, McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON (henceforth CBA).
46. *The Swiss Missions of Grande Ligne: Their Origin, History, and Present State* (Montreal: Rollo Campbell, 1847), 10.
47. *Montreal Register* 4, no. 32 (1845): 2. As a result the missions founded by the Baptist Canadian Missionary Society in Milton and Salem became part of the mission. They were founded due to objections of some French Canadiens to the open communion, *Église Évangélique baptiste libre*, at Saint Pie. *Histoire du Protestantisme Français au Canada et aux Etats-Unis par R. P. Duclos: Quelques Corrections et quelques Commentaires* (Montreal: Grande Ligne Mission Board, n.d.), 1; *Baptist Magazine* (London) 36 (1844): 592-93; and *Baptist Magazine* (London) 37 (1845): 431.

Tensions over ecclesiology were alleviated by a two part agreement leaving the Swiss Mission the freedom to determine polity concerning the Lord's Table, but stating that all employees of the mission will have been baptized by immersion. *Baptist Magazine* (London) 40 (1848): 611. Because Feller and Roussy had not been immersed, tensions developed in 1848 when word of this circulated throughout the supporting constituency. Some Canadian Baptists demanded severance of the connection with the Swiss Mission. See *Baptist Magazine* (London) 40 (1848): 423-24. The issue was defused by the immersion of Feller and Roussy in that year. See *Baptist Magazine* (London) 40 (1848): 612.

During the controversy, the Swiss Mission modified its church polity to conform to the 1845 articles; immersion was made prerequisite for church

membership. They still maintained the practice of occasional communion, the admittance to the Lord's Supper of the un-immersed. Although many British Baptists and American Freewill and Free Communion Baptists could accept this position, it is counter to the practice of British Strict Baptists and American Regular Baptists. See *The Primitive Church Magazine* (London) (this was the British Strict Baptist journal) and *Baptist Year Book 1900* (Toronto: Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec [1901?]), 84. The latter had an auxiliary society in Upper Canada after 1836.

48. *Baptist Magazine* (London) 41 (1849): 295.
49. *Montreal Register* 8, no. 7 (1849).
50. Letter from Louis Roussy to Narcisse Cyr, 14 February 1848, typescript, CBA.
51. An appeal in behalf of the mission was circulated in 1849. In 1850 the society committed itself to the Swiss Mission. See *Home Mission Record* (New York) 1, no. 8 (1849-1850): 29. With affiliation with the American Baptists, the Swiss Mission adopted a new constitution, renaming itself the Evangelical Society of La Grande Ligne. See *Swiss Mission Register* (Montreal) 3, no. 4 (1851): 25.
52. *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 27 (1862): 2. The statement was “[w]e pastors and brethren connected with the Grande Ligne Mission assembled with a Committee of the American Home Mission Society (viz. B.M. Hill, D.D., and Rev. H.C. Fish) desire to state we regret the existence of any occasion for the practice of open communion and that it is the aim of each one of the ministers of this Mission to build up Regular Baptist churches so far as practicable. We are looking for the consummation of this result, and hoping and working for it.”
53. *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 15 (1862): 2; and *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 20 (1862): 2. The support of the American Baptist society was limited to paying minister's salaries and at the end of 1860 support ceased, a casualty of the Civil War. See Wyeth, *Henriette Feller*, 111; *Home Mission Record* (New York) 7, no. 1 (1861): 3-4.
54. *Canadian Baptist Register for 1858* (Toronto: n.p., n.d.), 41-43. By 1859 internal tensions in the Grande Ligne Mission over open versus closed communion resulted in a controversy between Narcisse Cyr and the Mission. He would eventual withdraw and assist in forming the competing the Regular Baptist French Canadian Missionary Society, which functioned until 1867. Handwritten note in Narcisse Cyr file, CBA. Also see *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 20 (1862): 2; *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 12 (1862): 3; *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 15 (1862): 2; *Canadian Baptist*

(Toronto) 8, no. 16 (1862): 2; *The Thirty-Fifth Annual Report of the Evangelical Society of La Grande Ligne* (1873): 5; *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 27(1862): 2. The tensions had been fueled by the presence of Plymouth Brethren church members on the Grande Ligne committee. See *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 15 (1862): 2; *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 8, no. 43 (1862): 2; J.U. MacIntosh, "Some of the Labours and Disputes of Open And Close Communion Baptists in Ontario and Quebec" (B.D. Thesis, McMaster University, 1936), 15; *The Christian Freeman* (Toronto) 3, no. 2 (1863): 1; *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 9, no. 37 (1863): 2; and *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 9, no. 37(1863): 2.

55. *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 14, no. 3 (1868): 3.
56. *Canadian Baptist* (Toronto) 39, no. 35 (1893): 2.
57. Cramp, *Memoir of Madame Feller*, 244.