

## **Free Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century**

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Women have fundamentally contributed to the establishment of the Free Methodist Church in Canada as a source of strength, determination and perseverance in all areas of ministry. I would like to explore the efforts and struggles that women experienced in the formation and progression of the Free Methodist Church in Canada. Beginning with a brief overview of Methodist history, I will trace the roots of Free Methodism in Canada with reference to the role of women preachers. Highlighting several prominent women in the early formation of the church, I will look at the work of women as missionaries, pastors, teachers and evangelists. The final section will deal with the battle for ordination in the nineteenth century, as one of B.T. Roberts' initial, concentrated efforts in the foundation of the Free Methodist Church and its influence upon the church.

### ***Methodist History***

John Wesley began a Holy Club at Oxford in the early eighteenth century where believers came to participate in a methodical program of prayer, study and charity to the captive and down-trodden. Out of this Club grew the Methodist movement in England. By 1781, the Methodist church had grown substantially on both sides of the Atlantic.

At first, Canada was considered a foreign mission of the American Methodist church. A woman named Barbara Heck, the cousin of a loyalist Methodist preacher, revived Methodism in upper New York and then brought it into Upper Canada as they fled the American Revolution in

*Historical Papers 1993: Canadian Society of Church History*

1778. She is considered the mother of American Methodism because of her instigation of Methodist preaching and meetings. Her prayer and study meetings included both black and white, bond and free, and grew to be one of the largest Protestant denominations in North America. Barbara Heck and her husband were loyalists and remained faithful to the Crown as well as to the strict, disciplined principles of John Wesley's Methodism. In Canada, Barbara settled with her family and others from the Methodist fellowships she led in America, near Prescott, ON where the first Methodist church was built in 1817. The church building no longer exists but the Heck house still stands. Barbara and her husband were buried in the cemetery of the Blue Church, near their home. The Blue Church cemetery was used for all different Protestant faiths that stood under the banner of the Church of England. Similar to Barbara Heck's initial work, before any preacher was assigned to an official circuit there were many lay people involved in the spread of Methodism, many of whom were women. By 1828, twenty-four years after Barbara Heck's death, Upper Canada Methodists became distinct from American Methodists.

During the mid-1850s, problems arose within the Methodist church that precipitated a move away from the established Methodist Episcopal Church by a small group of people. The issues that were pinpointed by this small group were that of worldliness of dress, questionable entertainment, prosperity and its pitfalls, and influence from those involved in secret societies such as the Free Masons.

### ***Free Methodism Emerges***

Desirous of maintaining John Wesley's strict methodical doctrine of holiness, a man named B.T. Roberts wrote a series of articles in 1858 entitled, "New School Methodism" which criticized the then leaders and laity of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America. He saw the tenets of Wesley's holiness doctrine being compromised and disregarded. As a result of this, he was charged with immoral conduct and ostracized from the church. Roberts made several attempts to be reinstated into the Methodist church but was turned down and eventually surrendered his credentials. In 1860, in Pekin, NY, a convention was held by the ministers and lay people who supported Roberts; they organized what they at first considered a sister church of the American Methodist Episcopal Church. The word "Free" was added to the name to specify four social justice

issues that were crucial in identifying the new Methodist church. These four issues included: freedom from the sway and domination of secret societies; freedom from slavery; free seats in the church to all people; and freedom of the Spirit in the services which included the granting of equal representation of lay people with ministers in a democratic system which meant limiting the power of bishops. Roberts also fought for the ordination of women in the Free Methodist Church up to the time of his death. In 1891, he published a book called, *Ordaining Women*, which was based on Galatians 3:28. Although Roberts never experienced the satisfaction of witnessing the fruits of his efforts in this area, he was influential and ahead of his time in engaging in the struggle for the ordination of women. Through Roberts, this issue remained a stronghold in the growth of Free Methodism.

The claim was made that the influence of those who belonged to the secret societies, such as the Odd Fellows and the Masons, prevented the reinstatement of Roberts' position within the Methodist church as well as the rejection of his final appeal made to the General Conference in 1858 (Howland 28). In hindsight, fifty years later, the Genesee Conference acknowledged its mistake whereby Roberts' credentials were restored to his son but the differences that initiated division between the Methodist's and Free Methodist's remained.

In 1860, those present at the convention held in New York, which determined the new beginning of the Free Methodist Church, also established its creed and general rules, but they did not differ greatly from the original Wesleyan doctrines. Roberts was elected the first General Superintendent or Bishop. Free Methodism grew with the struggles and sacrifices common to the establishment of Christian movements during the nineteenth century as well as with the efforts of their itinerant preachers and evangelists.

### ***Free Methodism Comes To Canada***

In 1876, a man named Charles Sage came to Canada, sent by B.T. Roberts, and officially established the Free Methodist denomination among several sects of Methodists who were either uniting with other groups to form the United Church or who were establishing their independence (Kleinsteuber 1984, 9). Roberts saw the importance of establishing a Free Methodist tradition in a place where he felt much of the fervor of revival

fire was being snuffed out (Kleinstauber 1984, 11). Recognizing Sage's zeal for revival, he sent Sage (much to Sage's chagrin) as the first appointed Free Methodist minister to Canada. For Sage at the time, Canada was a cold frontier with little prospect for revival and church growth. Ironically, the advance of women missionaries and evangelists resulted from such apprehension in taking on the difficult task of forging new territory. In memory of Sage, a poem written by Rev. James Robb in 1933, includes reference to such an attitude:

And likewise ladies, too,  
 For the men were all too few,  
 So we sent the sisters out to work instead—  
 Maggie Hagle, Miss Sipprell,  
 Nancy Shantz we sent as well,  
 Martha Thomas, Martha Stonehouse also led.

Then appeared upon the scene  
 Laura Warren and Annie Green,  
 And great revivals came where'er they went.  
 They did preach and sing and pray –  
 Sinners glimpsed the Judgement Day –  
 Many years of fruitful toil they gladly spent.

Much of the growth of Free Methodism in Canada was due not only to revivals and evangelism but also to various papers published carrying Christian news, including Roberts' own publication, *The Earnest Christian*, and the Free Methodist paper, *The Free Methodist Herald*, which began publication in 1886.

### ***Unofficial Preachers***

The first Canadian Free Methodist society Sage visited was in Galt, ON. Once a New Connexion congregation, it affiliated with the Free Methodist Church in 1880. When Sage arrived, it was being pastored by a woman named Sister Smith and was considered the strongest Free Methodist church in Canada with a grand total of 53 members (Kleinstauber 1984, 82). In 1882, Roberts enlisted ten women in the ministry of evangelization and church planting. They were not paid any sort of stipend but relied upon the charity of families in the towns they went to or their

husband's wage. It was extremely difficult for single women, not only financially but also in the struggle of being a woman in a predominantly male calling to ministry. Lay preachers did not have their roots within the established structure of the church (Ruether and Keller, 242). Women became preachers and evangelists by the inspiration of their own calling regardless of whether their husbands were ministers. Roberts admitted his surprize at the large number of women preachers in Canada that were present at the 1882 General Conference near Galt, ON. Sister Smith started the church in Galt prior to any official appointment of a preacher in or to Canada assigned by either Roberts or a local preacher (Kleinsteuber 1980, 15).

### *Sketches of Some Prominent Free Methodist Evangelists*

In 1879, Valtina Brown, from Woodstock, was the first woman officially sent out to preach from her Bracebridge church. She was a popular evangelist and many people were converted through her efforts. She began several societies or small fellowships that covered a large area north of Toronto out of which developed official churches.

During the same time, a woman named Maggie Jerusha Hagle was a lay preacher near Sarnia. She was one of many women who devoted their time to serving as lay preachers and often were successful in opening new areas to the Free Methodist Church. Converted by Charles Sage in 1877, she assisted in a few ministries until she was accepted and sent with a fellow worker to Muskoka. Maggie Jerusha Hagle and Martha Thomas in 1880 preached fire and brimstone to people everywhere they went. In 1883, near Iona, Sisters Hagle and Thomas held services in a schoolhouse and encountered little opposition in their deliverance of "old-time salvation" (Sigsworth 18). They successfully drew in souls and consequently churches were built by the converted. Maggie Jerusha Hagle eventually married Charles Sage and continued to labour in the building up of the Free Methodist Church both in Canada and in America. Jerusha and Martha were officially designated "supplies" rather than pastors or ministers. Although these women were neither appointed nor ordained, they were considered proper evangelists and preachers and were well-respected and admired for their endurance and zealously.

Matilda Sipprell spent many years as an evangelist and was one of the most effective in Free Methodist history. She was appointed by the

Conference of 1882 to be stationed in London as an associate pastor; she instead chose to travel extensively as an evangelist and did so from London to Galt to Sault Ste. Marie. She was a woman of prayer and was considered a pastor, although not officially ordained, by many people including Alice Walls who eventually became principal of the Free Methodist College in Port Credit, ON. She raised funds to build a church in Sault Ste. Marie and gave most of the money she received from donations to the church fund. She eventually married and moved to California.

Two other itinerant preachers responsible for building up the Free Methodist Church were Sara Gregory and Emma Richardson. They held leadership positions lasting thirty and forty years respectively in different towns in southern Ontario during the late 1800s (Sigsworth 29).

Miss Martha Stonehouse was converted at one of Valtina Brown's revival meetings in 1879. She became a powerhouse preacher after she finishing a four-year degree in three years at Ladies College in Hamilton. She gave up the possibilities that such a diploma offered her and began work as an evangelist in 1882. She was appointed by the Canada Conference and served several years until she fell ill. She willed her estate to the establishment of a Free Methodist school to prepare students for ministry which was her cherished vision. The Lorne Park Free Methodist College opened 35 years after her death.

Annie Green immigrated to Canada from England in 1875 and was converted at a tent meeting. She worked with Laura Warren for many years in the circuit and moved west with her husband to establish the West Conference. She was a great promoter of foreign missions and served as president of the missions society in several locations.

Another woman who was a prominent, historical figure was Alice Walls. She was born in 1887, a minister's daughter. She went to Toronto University and completed her B.A., after which she taught public school. She served as a pastor in Sault Ste. Marie as her first appointment, taught at the Free Methodist school for nearly twenty years which included a season as principal. She served as president and treasurer of missions and as superintendent. She was the first woman to be ordained in the Free Methodist Church at a Ridgeway Conference in 1918. During her last thirty years she laboured toward the completion of the history of the Free Methodist Church.

### ***Revivalism and Women***

Dancing, shouting, being “slain in the Spirit,” weeping, leaping and laughing were some of the characteristics that drew, converted and kept people coming into the meetings and churches. Traversing rough terrain in mid-winter did not stop some people from showing up to hear the powerful preaching of revivalists. Suffering from fatigue and enduring hardships, persecution and difficult struggles did not seem to deter these women from carrying on the work that was either given to them or taken on by the inspiration of God. Tent revival meetings were a common way to call in souls to be saved and where many of these women would preach and evangelize.

Mary Craig, a preacher in 1890s, wrote an article for a Free Methodist paper (3 May 1898) that describes the input of women. She pointed out that there was much opposition to women as preachers in her time yet many were undaunted by such pressure. A few of the more fortunate ones had supportive husbands. It is also noted that single women choosing to be preachers and evangelists had a significantly less chance of marrying (Sigsworth 42). Many of these women did not marry until well past the usual age of that time. They often experienced humiliation as in the case of Miss Sipprell, who experienced not only difficulty with the land but also with some of the people. It was reported that a man spit tobacco juice down her white dress as she knelt praying, and she had doors slammed in her face many times (Sigsworth 58).

There were two great revivals recorded in Free Methodist history. One took place in Saskatchewan and the other in Sarnia, ON. Both of these events began with typical house meetings and blossomed into large meetings, eventually establishing churches in their areas. Four women were responsible for these revivals and it is noted that these revivals were unusually free from the fanaticism that often accompanied the excitement and fervor of tent meetings. In 1926, during a time of declining interest in church involvement and evangelization, Christian magazines were calling out for revival in the land in the attempt to stir up the zealotry of Christians to carry on the work.

### ***Women Missionaries: Domestic and Foreign***

In 1886, the General Conference in America was lame in considering the organizing of a Women’s Missionary Society but in 1890 it was formed under the direction of Mrs. Ella MacGeary. Following this, a

Canadian Missionary Society was formed in 1892, in Brantford, at the prompting of Emma Freeland who reminded the American Society of B.T. Roberts' desire that one be organized. Even though the appeal for the ordination of women was turned down, the motion for forming a Women's Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) was adopted in 1894. The first president was Ellen Lois Roberts, at that time the widow of B.T. Roberts. She was considered a joint founder of Free Methodism and the pillar of her husband in the success of the break from the Methodist Episcopal Church. She continued with the work of the church well after his death. She died in 1908.

A source of strength for women who felt called into missionary work was the multitude of missionary societies that were established in the mid-to-late nineteenth century (Ruether and Keller 243). Women's work became part of the structure of the church even though the leadership positions of pastor, deacon, elder, bishop and president were, as the norm, given to men.

Women who travelled abroad in China and India were generally appointed Superintendents in their assigned areas and made a way for Free Methodism in foreign territory. As early as 1891, a missionary named Celia Ferris was appointed superintendent in India. Women were the first appointed missionaries to countries such as India, South Africa, China, Mexico and Brazil. Many women served as directors of institutions all over the world. Of all the missionary appointments given between 1885 and 1959, sixty-five percent were women, both married and single.

Close to the time when the General Conference okayed the WFMS, the Free Methodist Church was experiencing divisions and problems to the point of defeat. One author states that if it was not for the unifying front of the committed women in the Missionary Societies and their influence in maintaining a clear vision of the work of the Christian, as well as their effort in raising funds for the church, Free Methodist missions probably would have gone under (Lamson 125).

Many women met terrible deaths in the foreign mission field. Miss Ranf in 1890 died of burns when a kerosene lamp exploded during a service she was leading in India; Miss Ferris sailed to Bombay in 1896 but suffered poor health and after four and a half years returned never to become well again; Mrs. Crockett had a nervous breakdown in India in 1900 and had to return with her husband; Miss Chynoweth died of small-pox in 1908 after her journey to India; Miss Sherman suffered the African



fever in 1894 and died in the place where she was ministering. Many others suffered with disease and poor living conditions in the midst of their missionary work (Hogue 2:265-273).

One mission field that held very little written merit in the Free Methodist history was that of Native missions. Services were held on various reservations in the southwest and northern parts of Ontario. An article in the *Canadian Free Methodist Herald* notes that the singing during services on a reservation was usually done in a Native tongue although the Natives were assisted with prayer. Evangelization of Native people was recognized by the Free Methodist Church as an important and vital area of ministry but there is little information on those who volunteered their services with Native people. Natives were considered foreigners in the Canadian mission field yet were considered brothers and sisters in Christ and therefore open to the prospect of evangelization (Vol. 1, 1923, 2).

### ***Battle For Ordination***

In 1890 the American-based Free Methodist General Conference, to which the Canadian Church was bound, turned down B.T. Roberts' proposal to ordain women. In 1911, however, women no longer had to be content with a lay preaching position but could go on to be ordained a deacon. It took another 63 years before women were ordained as elders. Today there are only two female elders in the Free Methodist church in Canada—both are in the Canada East Conference. At the up-coming 1993 General Conference when the next Bishop is elected to replace the current office of Bishop Bastian, one out of the five candidates is a woman. If she is elected, she would be the first woman to hold the office of Bishop in all of the Protestant denominations in Canada.

The battle for the ordination and recognition of women in leadership roles has been in progress for decades in Canada. In 1975, the Anglican General Synod approved the ordination of women; the United Church of Canada since 1936; the Presbyterian Church of Canada since 1967; the Church of England in 1992; the Lutheran Church in 1976; and the Free Methodist Church of Canada in 1918. The Quakers and Salvation Army apparently never restricted the ordination of women.

One article from the *Canadian Herald* written by a student in the Christian and Missionary Alliance seminary in Saskatchewan, asks the

question, “where are all the women?” She comments on the lack of Free Methodist women working as ordained ministers in her generation, even though there were many in the Free Methodist church in its formative years. Her fear was that “if women do not respond to the call of God we will lose this office and the church will suffer” (March 1985, 15).

As with most denominations, the Free Methodist Church opened up to the possibility of ordination for women through the issue being raised at successive conferences. It progressed from bottom up, from lay preacher, to appointed evangelist, to ordained deacon, to elder, and in the present times, to the possibility of the office of Bishop.

A woman named Phoebe Palmer was influential in moving the process along within the patriarchal system. She was a prominent lay evangelist in the Holiness movement in the mid-nineteenth century. After thirty years of powerful and vibrant preaching she wrote a strong defense of the right for women to be in the pulpit (Ruether and Keller, 206). She led a major Holiness revival around 1850 in America and following that, in Canada. She was never ordained and always worked with her husband in the Methodist Episcopal Church which was the mother church of the Free Methodist denomination (Ruether and Keller, 6).

One factor that might account for the availability of evangelist and preacher work for women during the nineteenth century was the small size of the churches and the unavailability of men to fill the roles. It was a time of strong anti-slavery messages which paralleled with pro-women arguments and activism. Revival experiences of ecstatic and free worship also aided the women who headed the preaching circuits because the revivalist spirit emphasized the individual commitment to ministry and the Lord’s work, rather than the ecclesiastical restrictions that imposed silence and subordination on women’s activity. Propitiously, many women experienced the fact that the call on one’s life to go forth and preach the gospel overrode traditional boundaries. There was little need to confirm such a call when the Holy Spirit urged one to evangelize. Many women who did heed the call never sought to secure a licence to preach or ordination through their denominations. The title of women ministers was not, until much later in the Free Methodist records, labelled as pastor or reverend but simply “supply” which covered every area of ministry. Often when women did pursue ordination it was usually denied by the traditional all-male boards or conferences.

As the fight against slavery declined so did the consideration of the

ordination for women. The fundamentalist spirit of the early twentieth century squelched the views of people like B.T. Roberts, yet the suffragettes and the impact of the social gospel began to rekindle the struggle for women to be accepted as equal in and out of the pulpit (Greaves, 168). During the second half of Free Methodist history, the numbers of women holding clerical roles is declining even though the number of male ministers continues to be too few (Sigsworth, 263).

### ***Women's Work***

The Canada Conference of the Free Methodist Church set women to work extensively in the ministry of the church, local and foreign missionary work in evangelizing and preaching, and leadership positions. Their efficiency, stamina and zeal contributed to the basic growth of the church in Canada and sustained outreach to communities both at home and abroad. Women were persuaded to get involved in any way possible. Some suggestions given to inspire women to commit to the missionary cause were listed in the *Canadian Free Methodist Herald*. They included fervent and regular prayer, winning foreign souls in their home country, reading missionary literature to keep informed, passing out tracts, keeping photos of missionaries so that one would be reminded of their sacrifices, and regular attendance at meetings (Vol. 1, 1923, 6).

When women were sent out it was usually in pairs unless they were married. Many societies or congregations, both foreign and domestic, were pastored by these women. One writer states that their devotion, wisdom, and undertaking of the hardship of such labouring can rarely be paralleled among men (Hogue 2:159).

There were Free Methodist allies, all stemming from the Wesleyan tradition and as mentioned above, most of whom amalgamated to form the United Church, where women were accepted or at least tolerated as preachers and evangelists. The restrictions placed upon these women were not as strict or rigid as in the motherland, England. There were many who supported women in the pulpit as preachers or in revival meetings as evangelists. The Methodist tradition in Canada as a whole, generally owes its life force to these determined women. Early Methodist movements relied upon the energetic activity of women evangelists although not much is written about their ministries.

Speaking in public was not considered acceptable by many church-

goers yet many women in the Methodist movement, and later in Free Methodism, were bold in the proclamation of the gospel and salvation. The general increase in female preachers in the early nineteenth century led to the struggle for ordination and the encouragement of women to study and be open to the call of ministry.

At the present time, the recognition of women in active ministry as a stronghold in the growth and maintenance of the church is a must for several reasons. The encouragement it brings to future potential preachers or pastors, the importance of its historical value, the fruits of their labours brought to light, and the wholistic picture of the history of the church are all vital points in researching women in ministry. The women who went before us in the Free Methodist church, as with many denominations, are examples of strength, courage, diligence and perseverance. The labours of women both in and out of the pulpit contribute to the past, present and future life of the church. We must listen to the words of the previously mentioned seminarian in Saskatchewan who reminds us of the importance of women in ministry, for the continuing growth and balance of the fellowship of the body of Christ.

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