"The Farmers of London Conference will make up their own minds"

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Elinor Harwood Leard's ordination as a married woman with three young children took place at the meeting of London Conference on 6 June 1957 and was reported in the *Ottawa Citizen*. It occurred despite a last minute telegram to the Conference from the United Church's Moderator, Dr. James S. Thomson, urging "that the question be left to the Judicial Committee." Finding herself in the midst of an institutional church controversy deeply linked to society's view of the role of women, Elinor Harwood Leard is reported to have said that, "the farmers of London Conference will make up their own minds."

Elinor's sense of call to ministry had been reported two decades earlier in a 1938 newspaper article. The headline read: "Clever Girl Grad, 15, Aims to be Minister." "Chatham, 8 September – Only student at Chatham Collegiate Institute to win an University of Western Ontario scholarship, 15-year-old Elinor Harwood of the 8th concession, Raleigh Township, plans to enter the ministry of the United Church of Canada."

Two years after Lydia Gruchy's 1936 ordination in Saskatchewan Conference as the first woman ordained since the United Church's creation in 1925, Elinor's clarity of vocation was impressive. However, her journey to ordained ministry became an institutional, not only a personal, story. Her ordination, among other things, prompted a request to General Council to clarify "the relationship of an ordained woman to her work following her marriage."

Elinor Leard's story parallels the experience of diaconal women at

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the time, who were disjoined from their ministry as Deaconesses when they married, a story ably presented by Caryn Douglas at the 2011 meeting of the CSCH and published in their *Historical Papers*. This history exposes the choice that many theologically trained women at the time were forced to make, between marriage and ordered ministry. It places this key breakthrough for women in the wider context of the United Church's sustained exploration of its understanding of ministry, evidenced by regular studies and reports, most recently the One Order of Ministry proposal approved for remit by the 2015 General Council. It offers a case study for how institutional change occurs and the critical role of courageous and pioneering individuals in bringing it about.

I began my research with the understanding that Elinor Harwood Leard was the first married woman to be ordained in the United Church, an understanding shared by her family and many others and reported in her obituary in the *Toronto Star* on 11 January 2008. However, reading and research uncovered the information that ten years earlier, Montreal and Ottawa Conference ordained Margaret Butler, a year after her 1946 request to be ordained along with her husband, Mel, was blocked. Montreal and Ottawa Conference asked General Council in 1946 to set up a commission "regarding the existing legislation of the church with respect to the ordination of women and to explore the whole question of the broadening opportunities for the ministries of women in the church and report to the next General Council." Margaret and Elinor were in touch after Elinor read an article in Toronto's *Globe and Mail*. Margaret's 25 June 1946 letter to Elinor gives a full account of the debate and bureaucratic barriers she experienced.

While a significant survey and study was underway, and before the commission brought its report to the 1948 General Council, Margaret was quietly ordained at Montreal and Ottawa Conference in 1947, under her husband's name, Mrs. Arthur Melvin Butler. However ten members of the Conference Annual Meeting asked that their dissent be recorded:

Whereas Ordination to the Holy Ministry is the setting apart of a person, Man or Woman, to the WORK and FUNCTION of the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments. And Whereas this ordination involves a lifetime expenditure of time, energy, interest and devotion, And Whereas no one should be ordained whose personal and family responsibilities prevent him or her from giving this unqualified full-time service, Therefore we dissent from the action of the Montreal and Ottawa Conference this morning, June 4, 1947, to ordain Mrs.

A.M. Butler.⁷

Margaret Butler was not settled into a pastoral charge because she had a child. In her husband's 9 June 2003 obituary in the *Toronto Star*, she is referred to as the first married woman to be ordained by the United Church of Canada.

I became interested in Elinor Leard's role in establishing the ministry of women in the United Church through conversation with her husband, Earl. Like many at Eglinton St. George's United Church, where I first met Earl and Elinor, before her death in January 2008, I was unaware of her ground-breaking role in her own ordination and in the church institution's recognition of the ministry of all women whose call was affirmed. Elinor's personal papers in the United Church Archives are the major source for this paper and I would like to thank Elinor and Earl for keeping and depositing the correspondence, journals, and other important papers which give us access to the story in ways more powerful and personal than are found in the records of the institution, important as these are. In these papers, Elinor comes alive as an eloquent advocate for herself and her vision of the ministry to which God has called her.

This paper is a small attempt to lift up Elinor's story, often in her own words, and with it the story of the United Church of Canada and its evolving understanding of ministry and who could be called and ordained or commissioned for ministry in the largest Protestant denomination in Canada. The wider backdrop of the three decade-long struggle for women's ordination, culminating in a change to the Basis of Union in 1936 to read "The ministry shall be open to both men and women" and the subsequent ordination of Lydia Gruchy in 1936, is essential to Elinor's story. In turn, Elinor's story reveals many parallels to the subsequent movement to remove barriers to the ordination and commissioning of gay and lesbian church members, accomplished at the United Church of Canada's 1988 General Council.

Biography

Elinor Harwood Leard was born 20 October 1922 on her parents' farm on the 8th Concession, Raleigh Township. The third of four children born to Orval Harwood and Macel Sterling, she was baptized at the age of seven by Rev. Smale and deeply shaped by her connection to Wesley United Church. At the age of four, she began her education in a one-room

schoolhouse across from the farm and, after grade eight, passed the entrance exams for Chatham Collegiate Institute where she studied from 1933 to 1938. Her graduation at fifteen from Chatham Collegiate Institute and acceptance into the University of Western Ontario was noted in the local newspaper, as well as her sense of call to ordained ministry. This call was confirmed when she was accepted by London Conference, on recommendation of the Charing Cross/Wesley Pastoral Charge, as a candidate for ordination in 1939, at the age of seventeen.

At Western, Elinor studied English language and literature with a minor in Latin and extra courses required for entrance to theological studies, including philosophy, psychology, and Greek. The summer of 1939, she spent as staff in a girl's camp and in local preaching. She served a mission field at Talmadge, Saskatchewan, between her third and fourth years at Western. She was active in many extra-curricular activities, including as president of the Student Christian Movement and president of the students intending to study theology. At the time of her 1942 graduation, Elinor was made an Honor society member – those from senior year who have contributed most through extra-curricular activities to the student life of the university.

However her passion and talent for education were not without their challenges. Her education was financed through scholarships as well as living in and working for a local London woman whose husband was a disabled veteran and whose child went to nursery school in the morning. Her family helped as they were able and she also received an annual grant of \$60 from her church. She had stayed at home to care for her ill mother in the summer after second year university, but, as she approached graduation, her father felt that she needed to pursue a more remunerative profession than the church and that her insistence on pursuing ministry was contributing to her mother's ill health.

After a summer working in a war plant and thinking it would reduce the family strain and give her a little more maturity before studying theology, Elinor applied to do an MA in English literature and received an excellent scholarship from Radcliffe College, Harvard. A loan of \$600 from the local IODE (Independent Order of Daughters of the Empire) covered her additional expenses. However, the strains of studying, working, and family discord affected Elinor's own health and, after one term at Radcliffe, she accepted a doctor's advice to take three months off. Happily, as she recovered, she was offered a job teaching Latin and religious education at Alma College, a United Church-related girl's High

School in St. Thomas, Ontario.

Her ambition finally to begin theological studies was realized when Gertrude Rutherford, principal of the United Church Training School (UCTS), invited her to apply for a new scholarship which would allow seven women to complete a year at UCTS in exchange for three years serving the church. So from 1944 to 1945 she studied at UCTS and, in that way, completed her first year of theology at Emmanuel College. The following year she crisscrossed the country as travelling secretary for the UCTS, then helped to found St. Luke's United Church in Sarnia in 1946, working under the Board of Home Mission. She completed her third year of obligation to the church as the first personnel secretary for Women's Work in the Church in 1947-48. That same year she met Earl Leard on the train home to Toronto from the North American Quadrennial of the Student Volunteer Movement in Lawrence, Kansas.

According to Earl, in an interview after her death, and corroborated by Elinor's journal, they stayed up all night talking as they travelled from Chicago to Chatham. The budding romance led to yet another adjustment in Elinor's plans, as she had applied and been accepted in 1948 as a WMS worker, with an understanding that she wished to serve overseas in education. In her letter of application she reflects:

I have seen (both in my own life and in others') the relationship with Jesus release talents and free people from so many imaginary restrictions of circumstance and personality that I want to spend my life helping people to know Jesus. India now seems to be the place where I can most usefully use my training in English Literature (which I love) and in religious knowledge for the glory of God.⁸

Through this period, she also kept her relationship with the Education and Students Committee of Kent Presbytery up-to-date and, in response to a 19 April 1948 letter from J.T. Clarke of Kent Presbytery, let them know she was engaged-to-be-married to Rev. Earl Leard. Acknowledging that perhaps she should have asked the presbytery's permission to marry, she went on to lay out their plans to apply to serve the church in India and their shared understanding of ministry and how it would unfold in their married life:

We have thought through carefully the implications of my remaining as a candidate for the ministry, and have decided that that is the course I should pursue. Marriage does not change the conviction of either of us that we have been called to the preaching of the gospel. Since my fiancé is a specialist in CE, our work will naturally fall in the same places. Especially because he feels, as I do, that both of us, to be true to our calling, must carry on the work for which we have been trained, I have no doubt but that I shall be able to give myself to whatever work presents itself to be done.

Elinor completed her second year at Emmanuel College after she and Earl were married on 24 July 1948 – Jessie Arnup, the former moderator and secretary of the Board of Overseas Mission, performed the service. In the summer before she and Earl sailed for Liverpool in September 1949, they directed the Student Christian Movement Industrial Work Camp in Brantford. With the support of Emmanuel College's Dean Matheson and Kent Presbytery, she arranged to complete her final year of theological studies at Cheshunt College, Cambridge, where Earl was studying, prior to sailing for their posting in India. Elinor graduated *in absentia* in the Emmanuel College class of 1950, which included two other women, Nettie Wilson and Florence Wilkinson. Elinor and Earl left England for India on 18 June 1950, arriving to serve the Malwa Church Council in the State of Mdhya Bharat, North India.

Their first child, William, was born in Indore Christian Hospital on 25 March 1951 while they were in language school, and John was born the following year on 13 September. However, Elinor was frustrated by the lack of opportunity to work under the mission in the field for which she had been trained. Reflecting the sense of agency and integrity which Elinor brought to all her dealings with the church, a month after her second son's birth, her 16 October 1952 letter to Dr. C.F. Grant, the Acting General Secretary of the United Church Mission in Indore, lay out her decision regarding her relationship to the mission:

Since Mr. Leard was appointed to work and residence in 1951 without reference to my work, and since his appointment has now been changed in 1952, again without reference to my work, I am compelled to conclude that neither the Educational Commission of the Mission, nor the Executive Board of the Malwa Church Council, has need of my service.

In my opinion, one who is not actively engaged in the work of the Mission or Church and charged with responsibility there under, should not sit on the policy-making bodies of either. I wish, therefore,

that my name be removed from the roll of the India Mission Council. If at any time the Mission or Church wishes to appoint me to a work within the scope of my training and experience, as I understood would be the case when accepting a commission as a missionary of the United Church of Canada, I shall be happy to consider the matter again. After all, that is the only reason I am in India, since both my husband and I had a wide field of service for the Church in Canada. Until such time as I am needed in similar work here, I wish to be free to fulfill my vocation according to my own plans.¹⁰

Unwilling to wait upon the slowly grinding wheels of mission field administrators, she created her own job running a nursery school for her own children, along with others, and was the principal of the Ujjain Primary and Middle school for the WMS. Later she taught at Indore College, Union Theological seminary, and Daly College.

The Final Steps toward Ordination

The Leards were on furlough in 1956-57 and spent the year in New York where Earl and Elinor pursued further studies at Columbia University. Their third child, Katherine, was born there on 30 March 1956. As she had said she would do when she left for India, Elinor took the opportunity of their first furlough to be in touch with Kent Presbytery and requested they put her name forward for ordination. Although other women had advised waiting for marriage until after she was ordained, since the church could not remove ordination as it did designation of deaconesses when they married, ¹¹ Elinor had previously determined that the right time to seek ordination was after the birth of her children.

This request for ordination launched a long correspondence between Elinor and Kent Presbytery. At first the Presbytery did not support her ordination. They suggested that she postpone ordination until after they had completed their service in India and that they could continue her as a candidate until then. Her hope to be ordained in 1956 was not met. But eventually after much conversation and correspondence, including eloquent and lengthy communication on Elinor's part about her understanding of ministry, the extent and nature of her work in India, her ability to work full time, and her expectation that the church's understanding of ministry would evolve and be flexible to real life circumstances of its candidates, the Presbytery stated in a 10 May 1957 letter from Graham Tipple, secretary of Kent Presbytery, that "they will recommend and

vigorously support the ordination of Mrs Leard by the London Conference this June."¹²

However, a letter three days later from Clare Oke informed her that he had received a phone call from the United Church's General Secretary, Ernest Long. Her case would need to be discussed further. He ended his letter preparing her for disappointment but also assured her, "We are not, nevertheless, going to surrender to Head Office just as a matter of course." ¹³

In a subsequent 23 May 1957 letter to Elinor, Clare Oke reported that "in view of the opposition which has developed in the Toronto offices to your ordination," he had called a special meeting of Kent Presbytery at which the Session of her home congregation, Wesley Church, was present and quite a number of WMS women. ¹⁴ At this meeting Clare Oke outlined the five objections to Elinor's ordination levelled by Dr. Ernest Long and the other secretaries at the Head Office and his efforts to answer them. He asked Presbytery to endorse the motions that had been previously passed regarding her ordination and, despite much discussion and the objections of Rev. R.B. Craig, the convenor of the Conference Committee on Colleges and Students, the motions passed 22 to 13.

The anticipation of controversy and debate regarding Elinor's ordination was not exaggerated. It began on the first day of conference when the Board of Colleges' non-concurrence motion regarding Kent Presbytery's request for Elinor's ordination was defeated, after which a motion recommending her ordination was passed. The next afternoon the meeting was informed that a telegram from the moderator asking Conference not to proceed with her ordination had been received and the Board of Colleges Chair, R.B. Craig, moved that the decision to ordain Elinor be reconsidered. His motion was defeated and, when he requested a recount, it was again defeated. In this charged atmosphere, later that evening Elinor addressed Conference along with the ten male ordinands. The following evening, 6 June, she was ordained. Valerie Korinek observes that Elinor's ordination was "extremely significant, since for the first time the church had acknowledged that the most important prerequisite for ordination was the merit of the candidate and her calling, not her motherhood."15

But the controversy was not over. On the last afternoon of Conference, a motion to request General Council to "appoint a Commission to make a thorough study of the ordination of women with emphasis upon the practical implications involved, and the ecumenical relationships of the

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United Church of Canada, in order to establish a policy for the guidance of Presbyteries and Conferences" was approved. ¹⁶ The introduction to the motion referenced the difference of opinion at London Conference on the question of Elinor's ordination as a married woman with three children and the two decades of the United Church's experience with women ministers. It also acknowledged that, "the United Church recognizes no theological bases in objection to the ordination of women."

Elinor's 11 June 1957 letter to Anson Moorehouse, of the United Church's Berkeley Studios, is a poignant reflection of the personal impact she experienced during her struggle for recognition of her call, vocation, and commitment to serve in the church. Handwritten just five days after her publically controversial ordination at London Conference, it told of the toll the lack of opportunity and recognition during their time in India had taken on her relationship with Earl and of her resistance to having a third child, lest it be a girl:

Unconsciously, and against my will, Earl came to represent what I had lost from my life rather than my immense gains through marriage. And I determined we would limit our family to two, rather than the four we had planned, lest our third child be a girl. How could I bring a little girl into a world where she is not free, I thought? And it was only the fact that we were leaving that repressive attitude – designed to strengthen our home yet really tearing it apart at the core that – brought me psychologically to the place of desiring the little daughter whom you were the first to discern being cherished in Earl's heart. 17

Elinor's struggle continued when they returned to India. Her request to have a position that recognized her ordination came up against the complexities of a recently amalgamated church that had not arrived at a common perspective on the ordination of women. The newly formed Church of Northern India was reluctant to be dictated to by foreign missionaries. In a 14 March 1958 letter to Rev. K.Y. Masih, secretary of Malwa Church Council of the Church of Northern India, Elinor eloquently stated once again her vision of an unencumbered ministry for women:

Being under vows to give ourselves fully to the work of the ministry, we of course, must perform that in whatever place we can. But we personally, as well as our Church in Canada, would most certainly want the United Church of Northern India to decide freely for itself, without being influenced by us wither the ordination of women or

against it. Since we uphold our Church's view of a prophetic, as well as a priestly ministry, we of course favour a ministry without limitations based on sex; we think it can do a lot for India. But that is for Indians to decide.¹⁸

While in India, Elinor kept Kent Presbytery abreast of her employment situation and recognition by the Church of Northern India that finally came through on 7 June 1958. But the constant effort to overcome barriers was discouraging and, combined with the Leards' growing sense that missionaries needed to get out of the way so that the Indian Church and its excellent leaders could direct the way in which to engage in God's mission in their Indian context, Elinor accepted an opportunity to serve as assistant minister at Tabernacle United Church in Belleville, Ontario. She and the children left for Canada at the end of September 1959.

Earl planned to wrap up his work and return to Canada by the next summer, but an offer from Anson Moorehouse to join the staff at the United Church's Berkeley Studios in Toronto sped up his departure. In his letter of acceptance to their friend, Moorhouse, Earl stated his hope that moving to Toronto would make it easier for Elinor to pursue her ministry vocation:

One of the requirements in terms of any long term job for me is that Elinor find suitable opportunity for the fulfillment of her ordination vows and the expression of them in some branch of the Christian Ministry. The decision to ask for her ordination was very definitely and very fully a joint decision and I have some concern that she find satisfying forms of expression of her ministry as I do for myself. I am confident that there would be more opportunities for her in Toronto than most other places and she has said that she is ready to go forward in faith believing that, if this decision is right for me, God will lead her into some form of meaningful service for him.¹⁹

Indeed, Elinor accepted a call to the Grahamsville pastoral charge near Brampton which she served from 1960 to 1962, helping them recognize the transition that was underway in their community and bringing into existence Emmanuel United Church in Bramalea, which she served for two years, until 1964.

The Commission on Ordination was established in 1958, and Elinor stated in an *Observer* article that its 1962 Report to General Council, which concluded that a married woman could not "discharge her obliga-

tions to her husband and children, and at the same time carry on the work for which she was ordained" ruined her vacation that summer. And in a 1963 letter to Rev. R.G. Oliver, following the commission's report to General Council, Elinor reflected that, "I can only interpret this whole experience as meaning that God wants me to take it on the chin's to speak for the sake of what He is planning to do with women far more capable and useful to Him when the social climate is ready to received them. The 1962 General Council did not adopt the commission's recommendation and it was referred to the General Council Executive which rejected the recommendation in 1963, an action confirmed at the 1964 General Council. The September 1964 Observer reported a male commissioner's comment that, "Our church does not believe that fatherhood impairs a man's ministry. Neither do we believe motherhood impairs a woman's ministry."

While this opened the way for the ordination of other married women, such as Lois Wilson in 1965, it was a bittersweet outcome for Elinor Leard. After almost fifteen years of struggling for opportunity to follow her vocation in ministry in the United Church as overseas personnel and in Canada, she asked Presbytery to retain her in the role, and she moved on to dedicate herself to a high school teaching vocation. An undated clipping in her ordination clippings and correspondence file, likely from 1964, reports:

Church will study ordination of wives. September's biennial General Council of the United Church of Canada will be asked again to study the problem of the ordination of married women. The request was placed by Montreal and Ottawa Conference, which had difficulty placing one of its three women ordinands. Recently at the Annual Meeting of Toronto Conference, the Rev. Elinor Leard announced she was leaving the pulpit to teach high school. Her request for ordination stirred up controversy in the London Conference in 1957 . . . The debate centred around whether an ordained woman, wife of a minister and mother of small children, could fulfill her responsibilities to a congregation. ²³

In a conversation many years later with her minister, Morar Murray Hayes, someone who continued Elinor's ground-breaking work for women in the church after her 1975 ordination, Elinor wondered if she had given up too easily – if she should have persisted. Morar assured her that she had done enough. She had opened the way for others to follow a path that

while not smooth, was no longer officially contested. Elinor and Earl remained active and loyal to the church and supported women in ministry in whatever ways they could, recognizing that the barriers and struggles for acceptance in local congregations and the church structures remained real for decades.

Today, women in ministry make up the majority of ministers under retirement age, and women make up the majority of those entering theological studies to study and serve in ordered ministry. Neither Margaret's ordination in 1947 nor Elinor's in 1957 are reported on the United Church's webpage "Historical Timeline." Yet they were significant moments in the long and arduous struggle toward full recognition of women's ministry in the church. Phyllis Airhart, professor of church history at Emmanuel College and author of an acclaimed history of the United Church – A Church with the Soul of a Nation – uses Elinor's fourpage tightly typed letter to Rev. R.G. Oliver as part of the student reader in her church history class. The letter was written in response to his request for her view on the findings of the 1962 Commission on Ordination. It is a cogent challenge to the process of the commission and its culturally complicit recommendations. A small excerpt reflects Elinor's vision of what ministry in the United Church could become:

We want a flexible view of the ministry, such as St. Paul demonstrated. We want a human view of the ministry. . . . We want a ministry in which a man is seen to be a family man . . . Bringing women into the ministry, with families, will eventually bring this gain to men also, that the ministry may once again appeal to full-blooded men who want a balanced, not a driven, life.²⁴

Elinor Harwood Leard met obstacles and disappointment almost every step of the way in pursuit of the call to ministry she declared in 1938 and which the church recognized in 1939. But she would not compromise what she knew to be right and maintained her expectation that the church would find a place for her to exercise that vocation. She created her own path on her own terms and did not compromise her own intelligence and integrity, and she expected nothing less of the church. The record of correspondence leading up to and following her ordination in 1957 is a rich testimony to the way in which an individual with a deep sense of call, supported by family and mentors, can change the church and challenge it to unbind the social and cultural trappings which encumber the Christian ministry. "Like the original decision in 1936, each succeeding phase of

women's ordination was a precedent-setting victory; however, the reality, as well as acceptance by both the public and the clergy has lagged far behind. Women's ordination in the United Church of Canada, illustrates how difficult it is to change the gender ideology that suffuses the work-place."²⁵ The cost to such individuals is real, and Elinor, in her decision to turn to teaching rather than continue to be limited and undermined as a woman in ministry, was consistent with her sense that God could lead her along several paths of satisfying work and service.

Endnotes

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- 2. Interview with Earl Leard 11 November 2014.
- 3. Windsor Star, 8 September 1938.
- 4. Phyllis D. Airhart, "Women in the United Church of Canada," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, ed. Rosemary Skinner, Marie Canton and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 361.
- 5. Valerie J. Korinek, "No Women Need Apply: The Ordination of Women in the United Church, 1918-1965," *Canadian Historical Review* 74, no. 4, (December 1993): 473-509.
- 6. Record of Proceedings, 1946 General Council, 76, United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto (hereafter UCA).
- 7. Montreal and Ottawa Conference Minutes, June 1947, 2236.
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- 9. Elinor Harwood to J.T. Clarke, 22 April 1948, Accession # 98.101C, UCA.
- Elinor Leard to Dr. C.F. Grant, Acting General Secretary, UCC Mission, Indore, India, 16 October 1952, Accession # 98.101C, UCA.
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- Elinor Leard to Rev. R.G. Oliver, 15 January 1963, Accession #98.101C, United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.
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- 24. Elinor Leard to Rev. R.G. Oliver, 16 January 1963, Accession # 98.101C, United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.
- 25. Korinek, "No Women Need Apply," 509.