

## CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

# Equality for Women in the Church of the Brethren

### Introduction

In response to a query brought by the Northern Plains District to the 1976 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren held in Wichita, Kansas, a committee to consist of "three women and two men" was elected by Annual Conference and given the following assignment:

This committee shall consider the updating and implementation of the (1972) paper and shall bring the paper to 1977 Annual Conference for consideration.

Accordingly, the committee (composed of the signatories of this report) met to review the 1972 paper in light of current beliefs and practices in the Church. Out of this careful assessment came the decision to proceed from a fresh start. The paper which follows is respectfully proffered to the 1977 Annual Conference at Richmond, Virginia, in the hope that it will be received in the prayerful consideration with which it was written.

### A Biblical Basis for the Equality of Women and Men

#### *What Is the Biblical Understanding of the Relationship Between Men and Women?*

At the very outset of the Biblical drama, the writers of the creation accounts set forth a vision of partnership and equality. Male and female alike are created in the image of God and called to share in responsible dominion over creation (Gen. 1:26-31). When in Genesis 2:18-25 the woman is called a "helper," the term is the same one used to refer to God as our deliverer in the Psalms (33:20; 70:5; 115:9-11). Women and men move forward from God's creation side-by-side, not in dominance nor submission.

Unfortunately, God's creative purpose is soon frustrated. As men and women experience brokenness with God, they experience brokenness with each other as well. The judgment in Genesis 3:16 that a husband will rule over a wife points not to God's deepest intention -- but to a fallen order, a life that is less than fully human. The brokenness between women and men is documented in Israel's history. Patriarchal subordination of women to men became the prevailing pattern. Women were viewed as the property of men (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). A father or a husband could nullify a vow taken by a woman (Num. 30:5ff). Women were held to be worth less than men (Lev. 27:1-7).

Already in the Old Testament period, however, there are glimpses of a way of life that breaks through this oppressive structure. Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah

emerge as prophets whose authority is not inferior to that of their male counterparts. The prophet Jeremiah anticipates a new order which rejects the long-established view of male superiority (31:22).

These anticipations of a new day in female/male relationships are expanded in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' attitude toward women breaks with patriarchal subordination of women. In his teaching about divorce (Mark 10:2-12), Jesus repudiates the right of a man to dispose of his wife as he might sell a piece of land. In the episode of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), Jesus endorses Mary's desire to be spiritually informed rather than to fulfill the expected domestic role. Those who accompanied Jesus on his travels (Luke 8:1-3) included women as well as men. Women were the first proclaimers of the good news of the resurrection (Mt. 28:1-10). In these and other ways, Jesus challenged the old order of dominance and submission, championing a new status and dignity for women.

In this same spirit, Paul sets forth the charter of liberation for the church (Gal. 3:28): "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." To enter the Christian community is to break with the old hierarchy of superior and inferior roles, and to join in a new creation which fulfills God's original purposes for humanity. So women engaged in ministry as full partners of men in the early church (Romans 16:1, 3, 6, 12, 15; Acts 18:2, 18, 26; 1 Cor. 16:19).

To be sure, Paul and his followers sometimes called for practical concessions to the existing order of subordination in male/female relationships (1 Cor. 11:2-16; 14:33-35; Col. 3:18; Eph. 5:22-24, 1 Tim. 2:8-15). As with the similar admonitions concerning slaves submitting to masters, however, these statements reflect the broken society in which the early church took shape. They represent an attempt to prevent chaos in the old order, not the new order toward which the vision of Galatians 3:28 points us. The latter is the norm by which we must judge the subjection passages, not vice versa. The church of the new creation will celebrate, manifest, and witness to the full equality and true partnership of women and men.

## **An Historical Look at Women in the Church of the Brethren**

### *What Has Been the Role of Brethren Women Throughout the Church's History?*

Historically, the New Testament woman most like the women of the Church of the Brethren has been the mother kneeling before Jesus and asking for places of honor and power for her sons James and John. It is revealing that the names of the sons are known to us, while the mother remains unnamed. Brethren women are named in the stories of the Church, usually as loyal wives who have strengthened the contributions made by their husbands. As wives and mothers, Brethren women have made an inestimable gift to the Church, which maintains its membership, primarily, by bringing into fellowship its own children. The

physical vitality of its women has produced large, gifted families; the spiritual vitality of its women has shaped the use of these gifts in a lifetime commitment to the Church.

Women, both single and married, have enriched the life of the Church in ways traditionally open to them: as unforgettable teachers, both in Sunday School and in Brethren colleges; as missionaries serving in alien cultures and often in geographically isolated assignments; as faithful leaders in small congregations; as writers of poems, stories, hymns, editorials, church school curriculum; as brilliant assistants to the men who relied heavily upon them in their positions of responsibility within the Church; as able executives in the areas thought to be "Women's Work." Even this incomplete listing brings to remembrance the lives of many. Each generation and each region provide its own women to remember and to honor.

Women, not only as individuals, but as a group, have had a significant influence on the life of the Church. Established in 1885, the Aid Societies gave impetus to the mission program of the Church through their emphasis on mission study and their money-raising efforts to support missionaries in the field. Later, Brethren Service received solid support from the Council of Women's Work, which continued the Aid's concern for and direct help to the needy. But perhaps most significantly, through the founding of the Aid, women learned that, on their own, they were capable of bringing a project to fruition. Adaline Hoff Beery expressed this insight in a bi-centennial address in 1908:

The first idea that most people get of a woman is that she is a helper . . .  
But if she has helped...she has also, alone, towed many a beneficent project to a successful terminal.

Women made their gifts to the Church within the unexamined restrictions placed upon them. Sarah Major, the first Brethren woman to heed the call to preach, could be writing for women today in a letter dated April 1, 1835:

Respected Stranger and Brother,

It would be very inconsistent in an apostle, who had his hands on men and women and prayed over them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, to quench the gift of the Spirit of God because it was given to a woman.

Sarah Major answered her call from God only when concessions were made by elders who broke with the majority which sought to silence her. It has been only within the last twenty years (1958) that the Church has granted women "full and unrestricted rights in ministry."

Though it now seems curious and quaint that Julia Gilbert labored sixty years before women were allowed to break bread with each other at the Lord's Table, the Church has permitted a woman to be installed as deaconess in her own right only since 1956.

Throughout the 191 Annual Conferences of the Church of the Brethren, women have been seated as delegates from their local congregations since 1900, on Standing Committee since 1951, and have yet to serve as a Conference officer.

Currently, the unexamined restrictions on the role of women are under intense scrutiny by many persons in the Church, partly because of the total focus of the Women's Caucus on women's place in the Church, partly because of the 1972 General Board paper on Equality for Women, but mostly because of the social milieu in which such examination is occurring throughout all structures of society.

Brethren women today seek to be faithful daughters of the Church. They are not ashamed of the roles assumed by their sisters of the past; many will affirm these same roles with their own life investment (though their families will be smaller). As faithful daughters of the Church, they also affirm their sisters of today who hear a call to serve Christ and the Church outside these roles in ways that have traditionally been available only to men.

### **Review of Current Activity for Women's Equality/Awareness**

*To what extent has the Resolution on Equality for Women adopted by the 1970 Annual Conference at Lincoln, Nebraska, and the 1972 paper on women's equality guided the program of the church in helping persons affirm their full worth and humanity?*

Since the 1970 *Resolution on Equality for Women* was referred to the General Board for study and action, ongoing consideration has been given to the concerns raised in the resolution. The follow-through of the General Board each year since 1970 concerning progress in the work on women's issues is documented in the General Board Annual Reports to be found in the Minutes of Annual Conference. (For the reader's convenience, a summary of official actions is submitted as Exhibit A in the Appendix.)

In 1972, when the paper on Women's Equality was written, the General Board was asked to do four things: develop awareness throughout the Brotherhood; encourage women's participation in leadership roles; educate the people to the exploitation of women by the media; and convey to Congressional committees and agencies the Church's concern over discrimination.

The Board responded. There were "awareness" events held in many locations; some congregations licensed young women to the ministry; Ralph and Mary Cline Detrick were employed in an innovative "shared-ministry" position on the General Staff; Beth Glick-Rieman assumed on a part-time basis the responsibility in the area of human awareness; a Task Force on Equality and Language reported to the Parish Ministries Commission. (Exhibit A in the Appendix provides more complete data of the Board's activity.)

To complete the study on the Church and its related institutions, insofar as their activity in the area of human equality is concerned, a brief questionnaire was

distributed to each of the six Brethren colleges and to Bethany Seminary. Their responses have been tabulated and compiled on a chart in the Appendix. Statistics on representation by gender on the Elgin staff appear on Exhibit C. In addition, the numbers of women and men filling positions of Brotherhood and District leadership in the Church of the Brethren from 1970-1976 comprise Exhibit D.

Though any such listing of official action must, of necessity, be brief in a paper such as this, it is apparent that some progress has been made to help men and women toward a fuller realization of themselves as equal creatures in the eyes of God and the Church. However, more remains to be done.

### **Recommendations' of the Committee to Annual Conference**

*After a careful study of the work of the church and its institutions in their efforts to bring about equal dignity and worth for all, and after a word of commendation for the progress already made, what does the committee recommend to Annual Conference as further necessary action?*

In order that the Church of the Brethren may be clear in its priorities and practices, the Committee recommends that the 1977 Annual Conference affirm

1. A commitment to the achievement of equality for all its members, male and female; and,
2. A commitment of staff to provide leadership in the Church to assist all persons in becoming aware of their worth in God's total creation, to enable women to experience greater fulfillment in leadership roles in the Church, and to develop denominational strategy and program for witness to society in eliminating sex discrimination; and
3. That, while the Church will support all its members in their choices of processional and vocational pursuits, it stands firm in its belief in the importance of the family. The nurture and training of children is a responsibility of primary importance belonging to both men and women; hence, the Church will give recognition and high honor to those who choose such roles on a full-time basis, on a shared arrangement, or through creative employment innovations.

In view of the Church's continuing response to these affirmations and to aid in the implementation of the responses, the committee respectfully submits to the Annual Conference the following recommendations.

1. Added opportunities should be made available for women to assume leadership and service responsibilities in full-time ministries of the Church as pastors, administrators of church-related institutions, implementers of specialized tasks, and elected representatives in the general and business sessions of Annual and District Conferences.

2. In the future, annual report forms shall provide for the sex designation of each person's name to furnish data for the talent banks currently being compiled at Elgin, as well as to monitor the male/female balance in leadership positions.
3. Personnel-talent banks at local, district, and national levels must be developed and utilized so as to function as effective repositories of the names and talents of women and men throughout the Brotherhood.
4. General Board staff, congregations, and church-related institutions shall be asked to review regularly their hiring and personnel policies. Affirmative action programs shall be evaluated periodically.
5. The Church is to lead in developing awareness and recognition of the worth of the parenthood experience (planning, teaching, training, etc. in the home) as having legitimate professional value, with the right of inclusion in a person's professional dossier. The Church shall encourage employers to recognize such parenthood experiences as equivalent to the traditional "professional experience and training" in hiring and promotion policies.
6. The Church shall encourage measures to produce an image of women in the home, Church, community, classroom, office, and shop as persons of equal worth and dignity, with equal rights to opportunities and fulfillment. It shall discourage media exploitation -- in all its forms -- of the female body.
7. A careful evaluation and revision should be made by designated staff or committee of the present curriculum materials now in use by the churches, so as to expand the emphasis on outstanding women in the Bible and in church history.
8. Efforts shall be continued at all levels of the Church program to achieve equality for women and men through activity in governmental policy and actions, by both legislative and administrative processes.

## **Conclusion**

These recommendations have grown out of discussion, research, debate, and discovery on the part of the study committee. They are made to Annual Conference out of the conviction that they are justifiable actions for a people long concerned about the commonality of *all* Christians and the priesthood of *all* believers. Adoption of these recommendations will mean change, to be sure; but who among us fears change when it serves to enhance the worth of all -- the changers and the changed!

Once women and men entered the meeting-house through separate doors. Now sisters and brothers stand together as a family in the Church. Let us learn to

give and to receive one another as equally valuable, equally capable, equally beloved children of God.

The Committee:  
Louise Baugher Black, Chairperson  
Wayne F. Buckle  
Violet Cox  
Barbara Enberg  
David J. Markey

*The committee wishes to acknowledge the assistance provided by the Elgin staff with particular appreciation for the contributions by Rick Gardner and Carol Sherbondy.*

**Action of 1977 Annual Conference:** The report was presented by Louise Baugher Black with other members of the committee present. *Three recommendations made by the Committee dealing with ways of handling the nominating and balloting procedures to assure a more equitable representation of men and women were deleted from the paper by the delegate body. Thus amended; the paper was adopted. It is to be noted that at the 1977 conference, Phyllis Ann Kingery was elected Annual Conference Secretary, the first woman ever to serve as a conference officer.*

## EXHIBIT A

### EXCERPTS FROM THE MINUTES OF GENERAL BOARD

#### 1971 –1977

- 1971 - Appointed a study committee to write a major paper stating the Church's position on women in church and society
- 1972 - Endorsed the 8-page report of the committee, exclusive of its recommendations and implementations
- Featured the issue in various AGENDA articles
  - Conducted a Human Awareness Training Retreat for members of the General Board and staff and participated in a Board/Staff workshop on Women's Awareness
- 1973 - Authorized the Parish Ministries Commission to assist in scheduling awareness seminars and in facilitating an informal caucus group; made available to AGENDA readers upon request free copies of the "Statement on Equality for Women" (366 copies distributed)
- Contributed Parish Ministries Commission funds for women's awareness materials and events, as well as to the Women's Caucus

- Created a Task Force on Language Use in the Church of the Brethren to "bear witness to human equality" and to study and report on "the scriptures, the worship liturgies, the name of the denomination, the publications including the polity manual, and church school education materials"
  - Instructed Parish Ministries Commission staff to work continuously at the equality issue where it can be integrated with their field assignments.
- 1974 - Increased the level of awareness of the numerous issues related to equality in the life of the Church and to the encouragement of wider participation of women in all its ministries by authorizing
- \*teacher-training sessions
  - \*"Pastor as Educator" events
  - \*consultations with local/district youth and advisers
  - \*local/district events on pastor-church relationships
  - \*workshops on worship, personal and corporate evangelism
  - \*leadership training sessions, encompassing marriage and family enrichment, the aging person, and women's awareness
- 1975 - Adopted a specific Affirmative Action Plan as a commitment to increase the percentage of women and minority persons among employees over the next 5 years
- Encouraged growing dialogue across the Church on social concerns, including equality for women and protection of human rights
  - Testified before Congress on the above areas of concern
- 1976 - Inaugurated a new program in Person Awareness by employing Beth Glick-Rieman as part-time field staff member under the Parish Ministries Commission
- Circulated forms to the congregations in an effort to establish a "talent bank" of church women willing and qualified for church-related responsibilities
  - Held consciousness-raising events on the role of women:
    - June - General Staff and Associate Staff
    - October - General Board/Staff/District Executives Retreat at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin
    - May - Conference on the Role and Status of Women in the Church of the Brethren

- Increased to half-time the position of Beth Glick-Rieman as Person Awareness Coordinator
- Provided support to Stewart Hoover in his resistance, through his office as "Consultant for Media Education and Advocacy for the Church of the Brethren," to exploitation of woman by the media
- Named Ruby Rhoades to the Washington office to succeed Ralph Smeltzer and assigned her the task of conveying the Church's concerns to Congressional committees and federal agencies dealing with discrimination