

"Courageous Women, Faithful Witnesses"

Celebrating 70 Years of Ordaining Women in the Methodist Church

Esther 4:9-16

June 14, 2026

Yesterday morning, as I and everyone at the East Ohio Annual Conference experienced a worship service celebrating 70 years of ordaining women in the Methodist church, I suddenly felt compelled to completely change what I was going to share with you today. Over the 40 years that I have been preaching, changing my Sunday morning sermon topic last minute has probably only happened about three times. Today is one of those times. So instead of reading from the book of Acts in the New Testament like noted in today's bulletin, I will be sharing with you a passage from the book of Esther in the Old Testament.

But before I do that, I am going to do yet another unusual thing. I want to share with you a history lesson that was shared with all of us attending Annual Conference worship yesterday morning. The lesson was described as a time of centering as the service celebrating 70 years of ordaining women began. The history lesson I am about to read is a compilation of history from the United Methodist Church's General Commission on Archives and History. I experienced it as informational and inspirational, and I hope you will as well. So I now invite you to hear what Sarah and I and several hundred others heard yesterday morning.

Long before any church body formally recognized their call, women shaped the life of Methodism with courage, devotion, and prophetic voice. From the earliest days of the movement, women like Sarah Crosby and Mary Bosanquet Fletcher had the courage to preach the Gospel to crowds. Bosanquet Fletcher would be the first Methodist woman to defend women's right to preach when she wrote John Wesley in 1771: "I do not believe every woman is called to speak publicly, no more than every man to be a Methodist preacher, yet some have an extraordinary call to it, and woe be to them if they obey it not." With this rationale of "extraordinary call," John Wesley began to formally license women to preach.

While women's right to preach did not live much beyond John Wesley's lifetime, women continued to follow a call to ministry as missionaries, class leaders, and exhorters. Within larger American Methodism, Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, Phoebe Palmer, and Anna Howard Shaw – just to name a handful – nurtured communities of faith, preached the good news, and opened pathways for those who would follow them. Yet the journey toward formal recognition of their ministry within the institutional Church was long and hard-won.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, women in Methodist traditions received licenses to preach, served as missionaries in distant lands, and pursued theological education – even as they encountered resistance and barriers to full clergy rights. Within the United Methodist Tradition, ordination rights were granted at different times. The earliest rights were given by the General Conferences of the Methodist Protestant church, who ordained Helenor Davisson in 1866 and the United Brethren who ordained Ella Niswonger in 1889.

However, rights, once granted, can be taken away. As denominations merged, ordination of women was stripped away. When the Methodist Protestant church merged with the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in 1939 to form the Methodist Church, their historic ordaining of women for over 70 years. The same happened when the United Brethren merged with the Evangelical Association in 1946 to create the Evangelical United Brethren church. These reversals stand as a warning to us all to continue to support women in the pulpit, the pew, and the world.

A pivotal moment came in 1956, when the General Conference of the Methodist Church granted women full clergy rights, a decision that opened the doors to full ordination in ways that had been denied for generations. Maud Keister Jensen became the first woman to receive these rights in that landmark year, and in the decades that followed, women have continued to expand their leadership in every sphere of the church's life.

Since then, United Methodists across the globe have witnessed women breaking new ground – serving as pastors, superintendents, bishops, and leaders in every council and agency of the Church. Their ministries testify to the truth that God calls without regard to gender and equips all who respond with gifts for the work of Christ's service. As we celebrate seventy years of women's ordination, we give thanks for the faithful witness of those who have gone before and for the many women whose ministries continue to enrich and transform the United Methodist Church today. (Source: Dr. Ashley Boggan, General Secretary, General Commission on Archives and History of the United Methodist Church).

As a female pastor, my history is part of the past 40 out of 70-year history of the ordination of history. Of course, I am thankful for the women of courage and conviction whose history is a part of that 30-year history before mine began. Those women, some of which I had the privilege of meeting as a young pastor, paved the way for me to not only hear and receive my call to ministry, but to fulfill that call over these past 40 years within the beloved church to which I was nurtured and came to know Christ as my Lord and Savior, the United Methodist church.

Not only is the history of United Methodist Women pastors part of my personal history, but it is also part of your history, the history of the United Methodist Church of Chagrin Falls. For the history of this church from now on will reflect the fact that a woman pastor was appointed to serve this church for 12 years, and those 12 years made her, me, the longest serving pastor in this church's 184 years of history to this point.

And now for some history that is much older than me, this church, and even our faith as Christians. I turn to the book of Esther in the Old Testament, and I invite you to hear and receive God's word...

Yesterday morning's guest preacher was Bishop Ruby-Nell Estrella who is the first female bishop of the United Methodist Church in the Philippines. She was elected in November of 2022. Before becoming a bishop, she was the first female district superintendent of the Philippines Annual Conference, serving on the cabinets of four bishops over the span of more than 10 years. Bishop Estrella has several other first achievements that I could mention but suffice it to say that

it was both appropriate and inspiring that she would choose a lesson about Esther so that she might share with all of us a message about the courage and faithfulness of women leaders in the church.

The book of Esther tells about a Hebrew woman who rises to the position of queen of Persia. And because of her position as queen, she is in the right place at the right time to use her influence on the king to save the Jewish people from an extermination plot. Her story is an example of God placing people in places and positions not for our own benefit but for God's mission and purpose. It took great courage on Esther's part, because even a queen in those days was not permitted to approach the king unless summoned. She knew that if she took the initiative to approach the king could result in her own death. It was certainly a frightening thought, but then she was challenged by words from a relative, words that are probably the best known words of the entire book of Esther. "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

Esther asked others to pray for her as she courageously accepted that God had placed her in such a place and position to save her people and so to fulfill God's purpose. We are invited to consider what it means that we are where we are "for such a time as this." For "In every generation God raises up people with courage to say "no" to what is wrong so that God's "yes" to justice, dignity, and abundant life may be heard," said Bishop Estrella. The God we know best through Jesus Christ is a God who continues to raise up disciples for times such as these.

So even though 1956 was a historic decision, we need to remember that God had already been at work in woman for centuries – women like Esther of the Old Testament and women like Mary Magdalene of the New Testament. One of the younger female pastors of our conference wrote a poignant poem that she read towards the end of the morning's service. It truly touched my heart and so I asked her if I could share it with you today. She sent it to me, so I could share it with you. The pastor's name is Lindsey Funtik and her poem is titled, "Mary Magdalene's Red Shoes."

POEM

“Mary Magdalene’s Red Shoes”

Spoken Word Poetry by Rev. Lindsey Funtik

With hands scented with spices and a very being dragging the grief of the whole moaning, mourning Creation, Mary of Magdala showed up, yet again, to stand fast by the side of her Lord. She expected a shroud as grey and still as the foggy, suspended dawn, wounds to anoint, and haunting, horrified stillness to confront with only the bitter, tenacious dregs of her courage.

There might have been only a trickle of bravery, but the Magdalene was always among the most faithful of the apostles, her brothers who now huddled, clouded and confused, and so she stepped out of that quaking upper room and walked steadily toward the tomb of her Everything.

But Everything was gone.

Where once was installed the dashed hopes of a people who felt only briefly the balm of eternity, was now only the whistling of the wind as it danced in and out of the hollow cave. Empty. Empty. Empty.

And then, through ringing ears and air made so scarce that it could not fill her contracted lungs, a voice.

Can’t this gardener see she has fallen to her knees to try to define despair? How hard is it for a man to comprehend a woman’s heart? Why was she crying? Who did she seek? Her Lord! Her life! Her brother! Her—“Rabboni!”

That day, Mary Magdalene’s eyes were the first to land upon promises fulfilled, triumph in the flesh, Jesus Christ, risen, indeed!

And when his voice, all the more resonant for how she missed him, spoke once more and said, “Go and tell!”, the woman once riddled with darkness, the woman befriended by Hope and transformed by Freedom, WENT.

Mary did not go and whisper to a world that told her to be quiet.

Mary did not go to hand a baton to her brothers who would pat her head and say, “Thanks, sweetheart! We’ll take it from here!”

No, Mary Magdalene WENT and told.

Mary Magdalene WENT and shared.

Mary Magdalene WENT and invited.

Mary Magdalene, the first appointed preacher of the Gospel, ordained by none other than the Messiah, WENT and PREACHED.

And as she sprinted into the world that was about to be split into “before and after”, she ran so hard and so fast that her heels caught fire. The heat of her heart, now strangely warmed,

worked its way down until the faith of her spirit hit the tangible dirt of that dusty, earthy, blessed road and (picture this) her heels glowed red.

With momentum and so much holy confidence, the Magdalene's shoes brightened and filled with heat and beauty so that, when she set out on this most epic of adventures, she was ablaze. Reverend Mary Magdalene, in the name of Jesus, was the one who started the work of setting the world on fire.

Now, we stand by this hearth of the Church we call home and rejoice in the truth that we are the daughters of the Magdalene.

This has been true throughout time and space, the story written in the cursive of our heavenly Mother. May my voice echo through the ages past and may it carry through the age to come as I name the fiery-soled likes of:

-Junia, Great Among the Apostles (Romans 16:7)

-Priscilla, whose name was listed before her husband's (and he was just fine with that)

-Hildegard and Julian and Brigid, whose mouths and pens poured out the poetry of Love

-Susannah Wesley, who threw open the windows and had Church in the midst of life, whose leadership led her sweet boys to become both faithful and vile

-Ella Niswonger, who was a shepherdess sent to shepherd our predecessors into the first steps toward the future

-Georgia Harkness, whose grandmother's red coat got her kicked out of one church so she could find a home in another where her boldness was welcomed and passed on so that the story of stomping, Spirit-saturated red shoes would keep walking, going, moving into this moment in which we sing and savor the richness of looking down the line of 70 years.

But we know the call of women goes so much further back than this handful of vaporous moments. No, from eternity past the silken song of God's calling has been laid upon these daughters whom God has loved and always will love.

We praise God for 70 turns around the Creator's glorious sun during which Methodist women have been empowered and sent, as the Good Lord intended.

But, also, we praise God for Mary Magdalene, whose heels glowed red with the flame of the Gospel and we praise God for that continued burn within us here and now and forever.

And so, with the song of the command-- "Go and tell!"-- thrumming a rhythm in our breasts, we put on our red shoes, glowing with the flame of the Gospel
and
we
go.