

Just As the Spirit Chooses: Women in Leadership

by Dorothy Nickel Friesen

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” 1 Corinthians 12:4–6 (NRSV).

It’s not so strange, really, when I look back on it all. After all, there were preachers on both my mother’s and father’s side of the family. After all, I was reared in a home full of faithful practices of morning devotions and parents who modeled deeply held faith. After all, I went to a Mennonite college, a Mennonite seminary (plus a United Methodist one), and married the son of Mennonite missionaries. It’s not so strange.

Yet, it has been anything but expected—especially by me—that I ended up a pastor and now conference minister. How did the Spirit choose? How did the varieties of gifts come my way and in the path of Mennonite women in that latter part of the 20th century?

My personal story is nothing remarkable. I grew up on a farm in southwestern Minnesota, went to high school where I was

active in all the usual things that girls were supposed to do. I was a leader, although so were a lot of my friends. I knew I was going to be a teacher from third grade and loved teaching dolls as much as I loved teaching a younger brother and sister. I loved music, played clarinet in the band, sang in the high school choir and the church choir, and remember most fondly a small phonograph with a twelve-record set of classical music that I got as a birthday present in sixth grade. To this day, that remains one of my happiest childhood memories. I went to church regularly, was baptized in the 11th grade, and decided to go to Bethel College (Kan.) because, mostly, my best friends were going there.

However, the Spirit was moving in my life. A strong set of values, a love of learning, outstanding preaching and pastoring, and good schools laid a great foundation for me to test my wings. I learned to



Dorothy Nickel Friesen at Laurelville Mennonite Church Center, Mount Pleasant, Pa.

Photo by Rhoda Keener

give speeches and was told by one well-meaning community “lady,” “You should go into politics.” I’d like to tell her I did—but in the church, not government! I loved to read, and the Word became real to me—in

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my imagination, in my experience, and in my growing spiritual awareness.

Yet, there were some horrible disappointments, too. My home church was resentful of willful teen-agers who requested a civil rights approach to hiring a “minority” (African American) as an associate pastor when a vacancy occurred in the congregation. What kind of a church was this anyway? Where was their Christianity? How come nobody listened? The Spirit, it seemed, also gave me the gift of indignation and protest—a useful, although sometimes burdensome, one.

The ‘60’s (yes, I’m a baby boomer) were eye-opening ones. I fasted to protest the Vietnam War. I wrote letters to Congressional leaders and presidents about discrimination in our society. I marched. I married a man who was a conscientious objector and who entered voluntary service—expressly to deal with racism in America. Oh my, the Spirit was moving in our land—and in my heart. Feminism became a part of my vocabulary and I read the Biblical story with new eyes. Where were the women? How did Jesus treat women? Did Anabaptism have women martyrs? And little by little, I claimed an identity as a woman and instinctively knew that my vocation was somehow tied to the church—the Mennonite church.

Another huge awakening came as both my husband (the “real” student) and I (the “auditor”) learned that the ‘70’s would not open wide the doors for me (or other women) for Mennonite pastoral leadership. In fact, only 17% of members in the denomination supported the ordination of women in 1972 according to the massive study done by Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*, published by Herald Press in 1975. I left seminary for the classroom—my love of teaching compelling me more than any acknowledged pastoral vocation.

Photo by Rhoda Keener



Conference Regional Minister for Indiana-Michigan, Nancy Kauffman, of Goshen, Ind., with Dorothy Nickel Friesen at the Constituency Leadership Council meeting

I taught school, birthed two daughters, and volunteered in an urban Mennonite church that never once slowed me down in using my own or others' God-given gifts. I eventually turned my sights back to seminary education and preparation, sensing I could use my teaching and organizing skills to bridge rural and urban congregations.

Diploma in hand, I was shocked to learn that a Mennonite congregation wanted me to candidate as pastor. Progressive Kansas Mennonites affirmed me, and I loved my new role as solo pastor. I learned, however, that the regional church structures were not so sure about ordaining me, so another taste of bitterness with the larger church was mine (and Lois Barrett's). Both of us and our two small congregations faced the elders with our stories of call and commitment—and, in the end, we were both ordained in 1985.

"All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually as the Spirit chooses." I Corinthians 12:11 (NRSV).

The winds of change were blowing, and women in church leadership were occupying board positions. Many younger women moved into seminary with a sense of joy and possibility—nearly unheard of only decade earlier. These changing attitudes were documented by Howard Kauffman and Leo Driedger in *The Mennonite Mosaic*, published by Herald Press in 1991. According to Kauffman and Driedger, the support for ordaining women rose to 49% in 1989, and today it rests at 67% according to Conrad L. Kanagy's study, *Road Signs for the Journey* published by Herald Press in 2007. While I mourn that nearly one-third of the current Mennonite church still refuses to ordain women in pastoral leadership, I am thrilled by the leap from 17% to 67% in my lifetime! The Spirit chooses; the Spirit activates.

What's next? Women will inherit a legacy of faithfulness from the past—the biblical story of salvation and leadership will go on and on. Our daughters and our sons will know greater varieties of gifts, talents and skills because women are in leadership. Our church institutions will become greater servants of the Spirit when they incorporate leaders from a variety of languages, cultures, and include women and men. Women will celebrate more openly their God-given gifts and the world will know we are Christians by our love—and our passion for justice. The tears of rejection and discrimination will be wiped away by the tears of joyful service. Well, maybe not all the tears will be gone because we live in a sinful world. Yet, the promise is there: *"...there are varieties of gifts...of services...of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."* (I Corinthians 12:4–6 NRSV) May it be so. 📖