

What Were They Thinking? The Place of Women and the 1966 Decisions on Ordination

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The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC) made headlines in January 1970 with the release of a report commissioned by its national Recruitment and Vocations Committee. Headlines included “Presbyterians called ‘Rigid and Inflexible,’” “Presbyterians aren’t with it,” and (a personal favourite) “‘We’re Stodgy, Too Slow to Change,’ Says Report,” above which the newspaper had the caption “Presbyterians Flail Selves.”¹

Amid all the controversy both when the report was released and when its recommendations were brought before General Assembly in June, what stands out most when looking back on the report is not what is in it, but what was omitted. The Ross Report was commissioned to deal with a (supposed) crisis in vocations — a need for more ministers to serve in congregations. Given that the Presbyterian Church in Canada had four years previously accepted that women could be ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament,² thus doubling the pool of potential recruits, one would have thought that the Recruitment and Vocations Committee, or their outside consultant the P. S. Ross Company, would have somehow seen this as a solution to the perceived problem. They did not, however. Women are strikingly absent from the consideration of this committee, which is surprising as this committee was not considered “conservative” in its theology or approach to other issues; indeed, in many ways, this committee represented those within the PCC in the late 1960s that one would have anticipated being most open to, in support of, or even driving the ordination of women. Yet, in the final Ross Report, women are absent as a solution to the crisis of not enough ministers. Indeed, one of the few places women appear in the report is as a perceived problem, namely, minister’s wives who are unhappy and thus persuading their husbands to leave ministry.³

The discovery that, only four years after the decision to ordain women, the Ross Report seemed oblivious to this as a possible solution to the recruitment issues they were considering⁴ was what first got me considering the question: “What were they thinking in 1966 when they made the decision to ordain women?” The key here is not the importance that we now place on this decision or how we understand and interpret it; it is to understand how those participating in 1966 perceived the decision. That decision has come to have a prominent place in the way in which the denomination has understood itself over the last 50 years.

¹ Valerie M. Dunn, “Whatever Happened to the Ross Report?” *Presbyterian Record* (February 1971): 2–3. The headlines can be seen in the graphic with this article.

² Throughout this paper, the term *minister* will be used to refer to “Minister of Word and Sacraments.” The term *teaching elder* also applies to this office, but can be too easily confused with the term *elders*, which will be used exclusively for those ordained to serve on sessions as ruling elders.

³ Stuart Macdonald, “Divining the Entrails: One Challenge in Studying How Presbyterian Church in Canada Looked at Itself and Its Future, 1945–2000,” *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers 2006*, 10–28.

⁴ The discovery was made while researching what became Stuart Macdonald, “Divining the Entrails.”

The General Assembly celebrated the 40th Anniversary with a major presentation and also noted the 50th Anniversary in 2016, as did Knox College, where the Reverend Linda Ashfield was invited to be convocation speaker.⁵ But while the denomination has marked the various key anniversaries of the 1966 decision, the ordination of women is an aspect of the history of the Church that, like so many other aspects of the denomination since the Second World War, has not received much academic study. John Moir noted the debates and decision in his survey of the Canadian Presbyterian Church, *Enduring Witness*.⁶ Jo-Ann Dickson has presented a paper, later published in the *Papers of the Canadian Society of Presbyterian History*, on the background to the memorial sent by the Presbytery of Montreal to the General Assembly in 1979. A. Donald MacLeod has published an article on the relationship between this debate and what became known as the “liberty of conscience” debate, and the origins of the Renewal Fellowship Within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. Most recently, Peter Bush has explored the early work of the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church, from 1953 to 1957, in *Presbyterian History*.⁷ Important work has been done.

What seems clear from these publications as well as various unpublished works⁸ and my own research is that there are two distinct phases to the debate on the ordination of women in the Presbyterian Church in Canada: first, discussion on the place of women in the Church (which takes us from 1953 to 1966); and second, the responses to the changes, particularly related to ordination, which occurred a little more than a decade later and were concentrated in the period from 1979 to 1982, and which included the debate about “liberty of conscience” in terms of accepting this newly defined role for women.

Approach and Methodology

In considering the question *What were they thinking in 1966?* a few methodological decisions needed to be made.

One was that oral history would not be the most useful research tool at this relatively early stage. Some historical events take on a life of their own and are remembered based upon what happens later to the extent that individuals start to recast the historical events in

⁵ The Reverend Linda Ashfield also did a fine presentation on the history of the debate. I am indebted to her for highlighting, among things, the importance of the 1960 overture (discussed below).

⁶ John Moir, *Enduring Witness*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1987), 255, 263–64, 280–82, gives a brief survey of both stages of the debate. Lois Klempa and Rosemary Doran, *Certain Women Amazed Us: The Women's Missionary Society, 1864–2002* (Toronto: Women's Missionary Society, 2002), 304–5, also discuss the background to the 1966 decision. Neither discussion is extensive or comprehensive, and interesting errors have crept into each of these accounts.

⁷ Jo-Ann Dickson, “Testing 1966: Unrest in Montreal” in *Canadian Society of Presbyterian History Papers 2012*, 43–55. A. Donald MacLeod, “From Reaction to Renewal: Presbyterian Renewal Fellowship, 1979–1987,” in *Studies in Canadian Evangelical Renewal: Essays in Honour of Ian S. Rennie*, ed. Kevin Quast and John Vissers (Markham: FT Publications, 1996), 175–94. Peter Bush, “The Opening of the Women's Ordination Debate in the Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1952–1957,” *Presbyterian History* 60, no. 2 (2016): 1–6.

⁸ This is also an area where many students do essays. I am indebted to all of them for their contributions and ideas, for the perspectives and what I have learned. In particular, I am grateful to Susan Shaffer for a sharing a fine paper she did as an M.Div. student and to Jo-Ann Dickson, who raised some issues that I hadn't been aware of and that contributed to my reconsidering the broader debate.

light of later events.⁹ The decision of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, I would argue, is one of those events. Later debates in the early 1980s have recast understandings of the debates in 1966. Commemorations have stressed some aspects of the decision, but downplayed others. Oral history has a place and will offer great insights; however, I consciously chose at this stage of historical enquiry not to interview individuals and ask them about their experiences and to use with caution later recollections related to the events of 1966 and leading up to them. Instead, research relied on traditional historical sources created at the time, such as the *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly*, the reports and publications of the key committees, the denominational magazine *Presbyterian Record*, and archival sources.

One unexpected discovery was a file folder, donated to the Caven Library at Knox College in June 2016, containing minutes of the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church from 1957 to 1963. Much of this material supports what we already know from the *Acts and Proceedings*, but some interesting additional insights can be gleaned. My research project began with an extensive exploration of these primary sources. Only after this did I consult the secondary sources, including the Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives web presentation and the previously noted article by Peter Bush in *Presbyterian History*.¹⁰ This approach led to the discovery of some inaccuracies as well as some significant omissions that have crept into the secondary literature. The story has sometimes been told with a focus on the ordination of women as ministers to the extent that the ordination of women as elders has been lost. This was a debate about the place of women in the Church, with the question of ordination of women as elders being foremost and as ministers secondary: at least, that is what this paper will argue. It will proceed in two stages: first, an outline of the main events and stages of the debate; and second, an analysis of what occurred.

The 1953 Overture and the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church

In 1953, the Synod of Manitoba sent an overture to the General Assembly, asking it to consider the “Place of Women in the Church.” The overture began by quoting scripture, noting that “in the Church of Jesus Christ there is no east or west . . . neither male nor female” before turning to the major concerns. The Synod noted that it was not “the custom” in the Canadian Presbyterian Church “to include women in Kirk Sessions.” In the next of their arguments, they indicated that Presbyterians had “failed to give women equal status and responsibilities in the Church,” the result being that the full potential of the Church had not been realized. The overture then noted “it is our opinion that the question of the status of women in positions of leadership in The Presbyterian Church in Canada needs clarification, to the end that the Church may recognize the teaching of Scripture, that in Christ there is

⁹ I am indebted to my colleague Bruce Douville, who supported this concern during a presentation at a Canadian Society of Church History meeting in 2016. See James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), ix–xii, 1–8, 200–202.

¹⁰ Emily Tippins, “Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Ordination of Women 1966–2016,” Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives online exhibit, <http://presbyterianarchives.ca/2016/07/20/celebrating-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-ordination-of-women-1966-2016>. Peter Bush, “Opening of the Women’s Ordination Debate.”

neither male nor female,” before asking the General Assembly to consider this question and appoint a special committee to report to the next General Assembly.¹¹

It is worth quoting this overture in detail to see what is there as well as what is not mentioned. What we see in the overture is a clear appeal to scripture. The concern is women in leadership, but the specific example mentioned is at the congregational level, specifically Kirk Sessions. What is less clear is whether the Synod had women as ministers in mind as they shaped this overture.

What is clearly absent, though, is the word *ordination*, something noted by the committee established by the General Assembly in 1953. At the next Assembly, it did not present a final report (as the overture seemed to request) but asked that the committee be continued and that “if the question of Ordination is to be considered, the Committee be so instructed.” After an amendment that this be referred to the Committee on Articles of Faith (what is now known as the “Church Doctrine Committee”) failed, the committee was given the power to consider this issue. Its next recommendation, that it consult with “representative women of the Church,” also passed.¹²

The committee’s report to the 1954 Assembly, as well as its report to the 1955 General Assembly, makes clear the issues with which the committee, known as the “Committee re: The Place of Women in the Church,” was grappling.¹³ Scripture was one issue. The committee recognized the principle of male and female equality in Galatians 3:28 which the Synod of Manitoba had raised, but wondered if “this general principle was subject to certain modifications of which I Timothy 2:11, 12 and I Corinthians 14:34, 35 are the extreme examples.”¹⁴ How scripture was to be interpreted was a clear issue. The committee also looked at developments in doctrine and history. It posed a key question: “How shall we emerge from the confusion of doctrine with custom, and how shall we define doctrine in this matter?” Examples used of such confusion include John Knox’s *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* which they declared “of no analogy we may say to the matter of the place of women in the Church, despite much pleading to the contrary.”¹⁵

The committee stressed that they believed that the denomination should not “proceed on analogy with what has been done in the professions” but needed to focus on “Biblical principles.” Three general issues were then presented for the Church to consider: first, how women were being involved in the work of the local congregations (which the committee believed was less effective than current rules in the Church permitted); second, the question of ordination; and third, representation at General Assembly.¹⁶ The committee understood the questions before it very broadly, to include all aspects of the question of how women were exercising their gifts and leadership in the Church, and those places where their voices and leadership were not being used. When it came to ordination, the committee focused both on

¹¹ *Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly, 1953*, 393.

¹² A&P 1954, 33–34. The text of report is not in A&P 1954.

¹³ The committee was sometimes referred to as the “Special Committee,” while at other times, it was referred to as simply the “Committee.” It was always a special committee, as opposed to a standing committee of General Assembly, in the sense that it had been established to do a specific task. Throughout this paper, it has been referred to simply as “the committee.”

¹⁴ 1954 report. This was published as part of a document, *Report of the Committee re: The Place of Women in the Church, General Assembly 1955*, 9. The copy used in this paper was in the Caven Library file folder containing minutes from the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church.

¹⁵ 1954 report, 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

ordination to ministry and to eldership; at the same time, they were cautious in seeing either as a solution to what they considered to be the problem:

There are many who consider the ordination of women to the Holy Ministry and the Ruling Eldership will automatically solve the problem of the place of women in the Church. The problems are deeper than the matter of ordination. We believe that the Churches that have permitted such ordinations have not the full answer, and have less of an answer than they expected.¹⁷

Having noted this concern, the committee, nonetheless, asked the General Assembly specifically if they were to consider the question of ordination, which the Assembly approved. The next year's report (1955) continued the same general themes before addressing the specific issues related to the ordination of women "to the Ruling Eldership or the Ministry or both."¹⁸ The committee noted that it experienced two voices in the Church, the one believing that the principle of equality in Christ now needed to be exercised in full, and a second, contrary voice, which believed in this principle, but did not believe that this implied "equality of function."¹⁹ Recognizing these two different viewpoints, the committee recommended first, that the reports of the committee (1954 and 1955) as well as two papers — one by Professor F. Scott Mackenzie, the other by Professor David Hay — be distributed to the presbyteries, presbyterials, and other "organized Presbytery-wide groups of men or women within Presbytery bounds," for comment; and second, that the two specific questions of whether women could be ordained as elders and as ministers be sent down to the presbyteries, presbyterials, and the other groups named, and that the actual number of votes cast be reported back.²⁰

Negative Response and the Council Plan

When reports came into the committee, it was clear that there was only limited support for the ordination of women as ministers and as elders, although the latter was not nearly as unpopular. The tally of individual votes within each of these bodies was as follows:

- presbyteries in favour of ordaining women to the ruling eldership (elders) — 171; against — 391;
- presbyteries in favour of ordaining women to the ministry — 91; against — 458;
- presbyterials in favour of ordaining women to the ruling eldership (elders) — 826; against — 908;
- presbyterials in favour of ordaining women to the ministry — 638; against — 1,113.²¹

The committee reported these results to the 1956 General Assembly.

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ 1955 Report, 3. This was published as part of a document, *Report of the Committee re: The Place of Women in the Church, General Assembly 1955*. There is a great deal of rich detail in this report.

¹⁹ Ibid. The arguments, particularly around the second view, are fascinating.

²⁰ Ibid., 4. A&P 1955, 58–59.

²¹ This was reported in A&P 1956, as part of the report of the committee, 312–13. The results from presbyteries have been noted in the literature and are fairly widely known. The results from presbyterials are less widely known. *Presbyterials* were official bodies of the Women's Missionary Society, usually following the same boundaries of presbyteries.

Margaret MacNaughton, who was a member of the committee, was given permission to speak to the Assembly before various motions from the committee were brought forward. The ordination of women as ruling elders and as ministers was recognized as impassable at the time (so it was decided not to send recommendation 4 down under the *Barrier Act*), but there were other things the committee believed it needed to do. One was to consider the question of the ordination of deaconesses (recommendation 7), which was amended to involve a study of the role and place of deaconesses.²² The committee continued to consider the place of women in the Church. The question of what to do with women who were ordained by other churches while missionaries was one issue referred to the committee for its consideration.²³

The challenge of giving a voice to women remained the main concern of the committee as noted in their 1957 Report to the General Assembly:

It is now clear to us as a Committee that the matter of ordination for women as Ministers, Ruling Elders or Deaconesses is a minor one compared to the conviction among thoughtful women everywhere that women might well have a more definite voice in the Courts of our Church. The question is, against our centuries' old canonical law, practice and tradition, how shall this be achieved.²⁴

The committee had a proposal: to establish presbytery councils, synod councils, and an assembly council, at which women would be able to participate and have a voice. (No congregational council was suggested because it was believed that a "Session may call into consultation all groups within the congregation.") After the councils met and discussed a wide variety of issues, including doctrine and worship, the requisite church court would then meet "to give formal ratification to the acts and proceedings of the Council." The committee, chaired by Louis Fowler, asked for feedback on the principles of the scheme, knowing that many of the details still needed to be worked out.

One rationale given for the support of the council idea was the experience of ordination in other churches. Citing the example of the United Church of Canada, they estimated that there would be "only nine women ministers" across the denomination if the Presbyterian Church in Canada followed the same pattern in proportion to its size, and, if they followed that of an American denomination, only 28. It was suggested that this would not give women a voice as ministers, nor would women elders be represented in equal numbers to men, "at least not for a long time," nor would ordaining women as deaconesses solve the issue: "In short on the basis of ordination, women will not come into any practical equality." The issue of finding a voice for women — a voice with some degree of equality — had become a greater concern for the committee than had the issue of ordination.²⁵

As most of us recoil at the thought of another structure or committee, it is perhaps not surprising that the council plan did not receive a great deal of support in the Church. The report to the 1958 Assembly noted the lack of enthusiasm, and while the committee

²² A&P 1956, 312-14, for report. The Assembly's actions are in the minutes: 74-75, 84-85.

²³ A&P 1957, 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 259-60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 260-61. The report makes this clear in a few places. At the same time as the discussion of the issue at the committee level, the *Presbyterian Record* included several articles looking at the question of the ordination of women, in particular, looking at the scriptural issues. For more information on these articles, see note 59 below.

continued to meet and consider various other issues that demonstrated a broad concern for the place of women in the Church, no way forward seemed possible.²⁶

In 1960, completely independent of the Committee on the Place of Women, the Synod of Toronto and Kingston sent an overture to General Assembly asking them “to come to the earliest possible decision on the whole question of the ordination of women to the full ministry of the Church.” The overture had been the result of the session of Knox Waterloo forwarding a female candidate for ministry, Shirley MacLeod, to the Presbytery of Guelph for their support and approval. At the 1960 General Assembly, a motion to allow Shirley MacLeod to speak was defeated, but the question of the ordination of women to the ministry was sent down to the presbyteries under the *Barrier Act*.²⁷ The results were reported in 1961. Fourteen Presbyteries (34%) supported the ordination of women to ministry, but 26 (64%) opposed it.²⁸

The Presbytery of Montreal responded in a different way. They sent an overture to Assembly noting that the presbyteries had not had sufficient time to consider the issue of ordination of women and asking that Assembly withhold any decision “for at least two years” so that a full study could be made “by the Committee on Articles of Faith or such other body as the Assembly shall choose and by the Presbyteries, of the biblical doctrine of woman and of ordination” so that the Church could make its decision “on the basis of its own standards.”²⁹

The Place of Women in the Church — Committee & Study Guide

These two overtures (1960 and 1961) happened outside of the work, but not awareness, of the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church. Louis Fowler had done an excellent job of trying to think broadly of how the talents of women might be better used in the Church and in his leadership of the committee. A memo from him to members of the committee in December 1959 referenced the overture from the Presbytery of Guelph, but also showed him thinking broadly about how women were to be included in the life of the Church. While this certainly included the question of ordination to the ministry and eldership, other questions were also raised: these included “the place of ALL women in the Church” and how they could be integrated into the Church’s various structures.³⁰

At the General Assembly in 1960, a new convener, Eoin MacKay, was appointed. What is evident in the reports to General Assembly in 1961 and 1962, as well as in the minutes of the meetings of this committee from this point on, was a change of focus. At its 16 November 1960 committee meeting, the new chair opened with a reading from Ephesians and a prayer “asking for God’s direction in the work of the committee and God’s blessing on the Church’s work within the Church and in the community.” MacKay then began the task of clarifying and refocusing the committee’s work. This work was cast very broadly, with the task of the committee being “to discover what we conceive to be the real role of women in the Church and the community, and the way in which women can fulfil their role as members

²⁶ A&P 1958, A&P 1959, A&P 1960. This concern is also demonstrated in the minutes of the committee. Minutes of the Committee, Caven Library.

²⁷ A&P 1960, 39, 54, 71, 103. The text of the overture is printed, 456.

²⁸ A&P 1961, 350, for these results.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 415.

³⁰ “Memoranda from Convenor to Committee Members: Dec., 1959,” Minutes of the Committee on the Place of Women, Assembly Committee re: The Place of Women in the Church, Caven Library, Toronto.

of the Church of Christ.” The question of place in the “Courts of the Church,” including ordination, was clearly central, even though the “evidence based on earlier studies is that women are not clamouring for ordination but they do want a real place in the life and work of the church.”

A clear statement of the purpose for the committee and the main question before it became part of the report to the 1961 General Assembly.³¹ The committee’s purpose was “To define the place of women in the Church in such a way that in the totality and unity of the Church’s life and of the Christian life as a whole, women can exercise their gifts to the fullest possible extent as members of the Church of Jesus Christ.” The question before the committee flowed from this purpose: “How is the Church to act in obedience to Jesus Christ in relation to the place and contribution of women in the life of the Church?”³² A clear focus on scripture and the authority of scripture in addressing the question was clearly laid out. The committee noted it had “accepted the responsibility of a biblical approach to the matter.” In addressing the central question before it,

we believe that the matter of the place of women in the Church cannot be rightly dealt with on the basis of considerations of long-accepted custom, traditional or contemporary preferences held more or less strongly, sociological attitudes and pressures of our age with its general acceptance of women in all secular vocations, or isolated scripture texts so often used to justify opposite conclusions to the whole question.³³

The committee was very clear on what it intended to do and how it intended to approach the issue with a focus on what the Bible had to say. Yet it was also clear from this report that the Church was aware of how the Bible could be interpreted differently. It noted that it wanted to hear “the testimony of the Bible, without falling into the impasse which an uncoordinated use of isolated proof texts inevitably produces on this question.”³⁴

If the committee laid out clearly its understanding of its purpose, the question before it, and its intention to look to the Bible as its authority in answering these questions, it also was concrete in addressing the real issues before it, both large and small. It was forthright in saying that it intended to look at “such questions as the ordination of women to the ruling and teaching eldership.” It was also interested in other ways in which women could “exercise their gifts to the fullest extent as members of the Church of Jesus Christ” not only within the Church but within the world. The committee explicitly noted that its task was “to set forth a biblical doctrine of the place of women in the purpose of God.”³⁵

This question of the need for a doctrine of women, which would include the issue of ordination, was also noted in the overture from the Presbytery of Montreal, directed by the 1961 General Assembly to the Articles of Faith Committee. In the months in 1962 prior to the next General Assembly, a subcommittee of the Articles of Faith Committee met with the Committee on the Place of Women for parts of their meetings to coordinate their work on the doctrine of women. Broad questions, as well as specific questions such as “Scriptural Authority” and “the need to discover how to help the church interpret Paul on the question of the Christian service of women” were among the things discussed at the 24 January joint

³¹ Minutes of the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church, 16 November 1960.

³² A&P 1961, 290.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

meeting.³⁶ These questions were discussed further at the February joint meeting. That same meeting included the discussion of resources, as well as the need to find someone to translate the key findings of a recently published German scholarly book on the place of women in the ancient world and church.³⁷ By the May meeting of the joint committee, an outline of an adult study document with some suggested biblical passages for consideration and other content was presented, as well as recommendations for other material.³⁸

It is not surprising, then, that the report of the Articles of Faith Committee noted that, in relation to Overture No. 6, 1961, they had been working with the Committee on the Place of Women because of its existing and ongoing work on "the doctrine of woman."³⁹ The Committee on the Place of Women reported as well on their work with the subcommittee, but went into much greater detail as to the questions they were considering and the approach they were taking.⁴⁰ In the end, the Articles of Faith Committee focused on questions related to ordination in general. The question of doctrine of woman was handled by the Committee on the Place of Women, and the Articles of Faith Committee commended the study guide prepared by that committee.⁴¹ This document, which we know as *Putting Woman in Her Place*, continued to be worked on by the Committee on the Place of Women, and was distributed for study and comment following the 1963 Assembly.

The study guide produced by the committee, *Putting Woman in Her Place*, was brief and demonstrated the concerns voiced by the committee. The 16-page document focused on Bible studies, preceded by some introductory articles and followed by a summary of what the committee had reported to General Assembly in 1961, 1962, and 1963. Authorship of the document was ascribed to the committee, with Robert Carter being noted as the editor, and various other contributions noted. The Bible studies themselves arose out of the committee's own work, as well as contributions by the "co-operating members" from the Articles of Faith Committee. The Bible studies were preceded by three articles: (1) a summary of an article by Henrietta Visser't Hooft published in *Theology Today* which drew on the insights of Karl Barth and Martin Buber; (2) a shorter summary of an article by Professor Paul Ramsey of Princeton about marriage, in which male-female partnership was stressed; and (3) a committee-prepared summary in English of a recent German publication by Johannes Leipoldt, outlining the latest research on Jewish and Greek attitudes to women around the time of Jesus. Summaries of the latest scholarship were thus seen to frame how the scriptures were to be understood.

The six-part Bible study looked at the relationship between men and women in Creation (Bible study no. 1), in the Fall (Bible study no. 2), and in the new state of redemption in Christ (Bible study no. 3); it also considered Jesus's attitude to women (Bible study no. 4) and Paul's view of women (Bible study no. 5) before the final study (Bible study no. 6), which considered various texts under the general rubric "some practical considerations." Texts from Paul that many understood to restrict what women could do within the Church were considered, but were not the starting (and thus ending) point in this discussion; they were considered within what the committee saw as the broader context of scripture. Within

³⁶ Minutes of the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church, 24 January 1962.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26 February 1962.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 May 1962.

³⁹ A&P 1962, 288.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church indicate that members were very explicit about some of the questions they were considering.

⁴¹ A&P 1963. The Articles of Faith report, 301.

each study, biblical texts were considered, questions were raised, and specific issues for discussion were encouraged (although in the study on Jesus's view of women no section marked "Discuss" is identified; instead, five selections from the Gospels are noted as "Bible Passages to consider"). The hope was that congregations would engage in study with each participant having a copy of the booklet and that feedback and responses would be provided to the committee in the ongoing process of the Church seeking "the guidance of God" in order to discover what actions needed to be taken "in accordance with His will."⁴²

When the committee reported again in 1964, they had received considerable feedback and input from the Church in relation to their work. In the committee's mind, this would be their final report. They had done the task set out for them by the Church and it was now up to the Church to decide. The committee began by noting that the study *Putting Woman in Her Place* had been widely distributed, used, and generally well received. To those who responded that they believed "the material was slanted a bit in a particular direction," the committee noted that this had not been their intent, "however well we succeeded."

The committee then laid out what it believed were its main affirmations. The first was that *genus man*, or humanity, was to be a partnership of male and female, and that men and women were created to live in harmony. The second was that when the Bible speaks of man it was referring to "this partnership of male and female." One implication of this which the report noted was that when this was forgotten, "[w]hen we think and act as if only the male is called to know and serve God and His purpose for the world and as if only the male is endowed with the Holy Spirit to fulfil such a calling we are unbiblical."⁴³ A third affirmation was that challenges in living this out related to the challenges of biblical interpretation. The committee again argued that an impasse was reached when "isolated proof-texts" were chosen. The Church needed to look more broadly:

[T]he prophetic-apostolic Word of God of which the incarnate form and content is Jesus Christ is not to be identified in any mechanical way with the individual words of Scripture. To put it bluntly, a verse we may read in Leviticus or a pauline epistle must be judged and, if necessary modified or corrected in the light of Jesus Christ and the essential message of the gospel. The confession that both Church and Bible stand under the final authority of the Word of God is a cardinal tenet of reformed theology.⁴⁴

The committee made one final affirmation, asserting the sovereignty of God over all human structures and authorities.

Based upon these affirmations, the committee then went on to state its conclusions and make recommendations. First, the committee concluded that there "can be no distinction in the status accorded men and women as members of the Body of Christ." The Church, it was argued, should serve as an example to the world in this regard. The committee next concluded that women could be ordained as ministers. As they put it, "we believe that women should not be barred as women from taking their place in the pulpits of the church." The phrasing of this statement needs careful consideration, as do some of the next comments of the committee, in particular, as these relate to marriage and ordination.⁴⁵ When it came to ruling elders, the committee was more direct: "we believe that women in whom the Church

⁴² Committee on the Place of Women in the Church, *Putting Woman in Her Place* (Toronto: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1964). The quotations near the end are taken from the introduction by Eoin MacKay, 1.

⁴³ A&P 1964, 386.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 387.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 388.

discerns the necessary gifts and calls to exercise them should be free to take their place in all the courts of the Church." Marriage was not noted in relation to elders.

These conclusions were followed by a series of six recommendations. The central ones were recommendations 3 and 4, which dealt with women as ministers and elders respectively, and recommendation 5, which asked that these be sent down to the Church for study, "with a view to issue an action at the 1965 Assembly."⁴⁶ Perhaps because it was not clear who was to issue such an action or deal with the reports back, the committee's motions were amended. The amended motion had the committee continuing and responsible for communicating the responses and (one would assume) proposing the actions that needed to be taken.⁴⁷ Thus, the committee reported the findings to the next General Assembly (1965): of the 49 presbyteries, 32 had reported (leaving 17 that had not responded for whatever reason). When it came to ordaining women as elders, 21 presbyteries (64%) were in favour, with 11 (36%) opposed. When it came to women as ministers, there were 3 fewer in favour, 18 (56%), with 14 (44%) opposed. The committee reported these findings, then noted:

Thus, while we have by no means reached a common mind in these matters, when compared with the responses made in past years the returns indicate a definite trend towards the acceptance of women into full partnership in the life and work of the Church. The conclusions of your committee as reported a year ago remain substantially the same.⁴⁸

The committee then commented on the four recommendations it was making, these being essentially the same as those presented in 1964 and including recommendations 3 and 4 dealing, respectively, with the ordination of women to the ministry and eldership.⁴⁹ The 1965 General Assembly considered these motions.⁵⁰ The key recommendations, 3 and 4, were withdrawn and, instead, it was moved "that the substance of recommendations 3 and 4 be sent down to the presbyteries of the Church under the *Barrier Act* in the form and terms required by the said Act." This motion, as well as an additional motion to have the committee continue, were passed without any recorded dissents.⁵¹

The 1966 General Assembly had to deal with the issue of ordination of women, both as elders and as ministers as the responses to the remits were reported. In relation to women as elders, 31 presbyteries (66%) said yes, while 16 presbyteries (34%) said no. The support for women as ministers was notably lower, with 26 presbyteries (55%) agreeing with the remit and 21 presbyteries (45%) disagreeing. The text of these two remits sent down under the *Barrier Act* were presented to General Assembly, and in later seditments, these were debated. In each case, the text noted that "women are eligible" to serve in the respective offices and made it clear that all of the relevant sections of the *Book of Forms* would now apply to women as well as men.⁵² Discussion on the ordination of women to the eldership came first.

⁴⁶ The differences in wording between these motions is interesting, with motion 4 being much clearer. *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 386–88. For the actions of the Assembly in regard to these motions, see pages 48 and 103.

⁴⁸ A&P 1965, 384. The committee reported the number of presbyteries that had responded and the number that had voted in favour of each motion.

⁴⁹ The only motion that seems slightly different in wording is motion 1; 3 and 4 are exact. What is interesting is some of the commentary on page 385.

⁵⁰ A&P 1965, 52, noted that recommendation 2 was altered by amendment.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 52, 108. Report of the committee, 384–85.

⁵² Text of remits, A&P 1966, 47. The vote under the *Barrier Act* was reported, 456.

The motion passed, although there was clearly opposition, and in the end dissents.⁵³ When the motion pertaining to the ordination of women came up at a later sederunt, more significant opposition appeared. A motion to have the vote taken by roll call failed. It was then moved that the vote be by ballot, which passed. After the necessary procedures had taken place, it was declared that the motion had passed and then it was agreed to record the vote: 133 in favour, 72 opposed. Dissents followed and were recorded. The reason given by those 32 who dissented from the ordination of women to the ministry was straightforward: "We can find no authority in the Scriptures which would require or permit women to be ordained to the teaching eldership."⁵⁴

The committee took the unusual step of appointing a subcommittee to reply to the dissent, and when that reply to the dissent was introduced, a protest to the reply followed.⁵⁵ The 1966 Assembly was clearly divided on this issue. A look at the minutes shows that the Assembly was divided on other issues as well, notably on how to respond to the growing war in Vietnam. The results of the decisions of the Assembly were clear: women could now be ordained as elders and as ministers.

The responses to the 1966 decisions varied. The most immediate response was the ordination of women as elders. Two congregations — Fallingbrook in Scarborough and St. Andrew's, Arthur — ordained women within the month following the decision.⁵⁶ In the subsequent months and years, more and more sessions, as they held elections, elected women to serve as ruling elders. At the next General Assembly, 1967, two women — Mary Whale and Addie Forrester — appeared for the first time as commissioners with voice and vote. Yet, at that same Assembly, the Commission on Recruitment and Vocations continued to wring its hands over the lack of suitable candidates for the ministry. Nowhere in that report nor in the Ross Report of a few years later is there any indication that, by its actions in 1966, General Assembly had doubled the possible pool of potential recruits for the ordained ministry.

After the 1966 Decisions

What were they thinking in 1966? What had the Church done? Church courts were now open to women. Women could now be elders and thus could serve on sessions, at Presbytery, at Synod, and even at General Assembly. This was the crucial decision made in 1966. It solved the problem that the council plan had not been able to resolve other than by replicating all kinds of structures. The Church also allowed women to be ordained as ministers yet it is not clear that there was an expectation that any other than a few exceptional women might answer this call.

Shirley Jeffrey was the first woman ordained as a minister in the PCC in 1968 and is remembered widely as such. She had a clear sense of call. She was also single. But Shirley Jeffrey was not followed by dozens of women; indeed, over the next few years what we see are individual women studying at theological college and then moving forward. They were individuals and, by definition, exceptional. And while not everyone in the Presbyterian

⁵³ A&P 1966, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75–78, 98–100. Quotation at 99.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁶ The women were Wynn Thomas and Joan McInnes, respectively. Source: PCC Archives online exhibit, "Celebrating the 50th Anniversary."

Church in Canada was happy with women studying theology (and some made their female classmates aware that they believed women had no place in seminary) or serving as ministers, there were few women ministers — one could easily ignore the 1966 decision.

Or, one could easily ignore the decision until around 1974 and 1975 when women began to study theology in significant numbers and then seek ordination. Some of these women were also married or intended to be married. This put strain on the system, indeed, on a peculiarly un-Presbyterian part of the system — the Ordained Missionary appointment system — which contributed to a reaction against the changing place of women in the Church. This, in turn, led to a 1979 memorial on the place of women in the Church and the debate about the liberty of conscience of those, particularly candidates for ordination, who did not accept the decision of the 1966 General Assembly that women could be ministers or elders. Discussing these later debates goes beyond the scope of this paper. But we need to be cautious not to read the 1966 decisions through the lens of these later debates.

Conclusions

This paper has looked in detail at the discussion concerning the place of women in the Church from the overture in 1953 through to the 1966 decision regarding ordination. There are some key conclusions that we can derive from the evidence. The first is that we have misunderstood this debate to be about ordination and, in some cases, have focused so strongly on the issue of the ordination of women to ministry that we have missed the significance of the ordination of women as elders. Instead, we need to realize that the debate was about the place of women in the Church. It was a much broader debate, with the question of ordination needing to be raised a year after the original overture.

Ordination was not the end — it was a means to an end, which was a broader involvement of women within the life and structures and ministry of the denomination. Ordination was, in many ways, a barrier to meeting those ends of the greater inclusion of women. This was why the committee, after being turned down in its enquiry as to whether the Church was open to women being ordained as elders or as ministers moved to the council plan. The council plan would not have allowed women to be ministers, but it would have opened up a place for women in the decision making of the Church. It was, however, a clunky solution and it made no headway, leaving the committee caught in what it considered to be a dilemma of how women could effectively be given a voice (but not necessarily a vote) in the life of the denomination. Even when, under the leadership of Eoin MacKay, the committee changed approaches, from polity and structure to Bible and theology, the focus was still, as the study guide's title tells us, on "putting woman in her place" — with the latter word having only a positive meaning.

Ordination was a barrier which needed to be overcome. In 1966, the denomination did agree, with considerable opposition, to the ordination of women as elders and as ministers. What might have happened had women been allowed to serve on sessions without being ordained? One suspects that had they been able to (assuming that neither male nor female elders needed to be ordained), there would still have been some opposition, as this still involved women in leadership, which some considered to be prohibited by scripture.

If women had already been accepted as elders, would as much attention have been given to allowing women to be ministers? We will never know, but what this points to is the reality that the denomination was always more open to women as elders (including ordaining them)

than it was to women as ministers. Even when they were opposed to both, Presbyterians were more opposed to women as ministers. And, even those supporting the right of women to be ordained and serve as ministers included more cautious language and more prohibitions than is often remembered. Marriage was one of these barriers. A member of the Committee on the Place of Women stated in November 1960, as the committee was establishing a new direction that "his own position as that of being in favour of the ordination of women, but said that for him there was one real theological problem around the commitment required to the ministry in light of a woman's higher calling as a wife and mother."⁵⁷ This concern about married women being able to be ministers was not unique to this one individual. Indeed, while the United Church of Canada did allow women to be ordained as ministers in the 1950s, it did not allow married women to be ordained.⁵⁸

What were they thinking in 1966? The evidence shows the denomination struggling to find a different place for women in the structures of the Church. Ordaining women to the eldership was necessary for women to have a voice and vote at the local congregational level and in the various courts of the Church, including General Assembly. What is less clear is how many women the denomination anticipated would seek ordination as ministers. One suspects that in making the decision to allow this — or, more precisely, not to bar someone who felt called simply on the ground that she was a woman — many anticipated that this would allow the occasional, exceptional (single?) woman to serve in this capacity. That significant numbers of women might feel called to ministry or that here might be the solution to the perceived shortfall in clergy does not seem to have crossed anyone's mind. If this is the case, then, our understanding of what we are studying in this period needs to broaden considerably. If we are to talk about the "place of women" in the Church we need to take far more seriously deaconesses and the committee(s) dealing with them in this period and to expand our discussion to include the amalgamation of the Women's Missionary Society (WMS) into the Board of Ministries, the amalgamation of Ewart College with Knox College, the experiences of deaconesses since 1966, and the special programs created to move many graduates of Ewart College into ordained ministry.

A second thing which has become clear is how biblical the discussion was in this period. The overture in 1953 appealed to scripture. The committee looked to scripture and did so even more explicitly under the leadership of Eoin MacKay. At the same time, those opposed to the ordination of women also looked to scripture. These various views were made clear in committee reports, as well as in the pages of the *Presbyterian Record* in the mid-1950s.⁵⁹

But scripture was being used and claimed as authoritative in different and ultimately non-negotiable ways. In a thoughtful piece in *Presbyterian Comment* in June 1961, Everett Bean

⁵⁷ Minutes of the Committee on the Place of Women in the Church, 16 November 1960, 2.

⁵⁸ Lois Wilson offers a delightful discussion of the place of women in the United Church of Canada in this period and the dilemma for those like her who felt called to ministry but who chose to be married. Lois Wilson, *Turning the World Upside Down: A Memoir* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1989), 20–35.

⁵⁹ These include Louis H. Fowler, "The Place of Women in the Church," *Presbyterian Record* (September 1955): 10–11; L. Jean Black, "The Place of Women in the Church," *Presbyterian Record* (May 1956): 4–5; John A. Johnson, "Reasons for Opposing the Ordination of Women," *Presbyterian Record* (May 1956): 6–7; Frank S. Morley, "Women Should Be Ordained," *Presbyterian Record* (May 1956): 18–19; Helen Scott Sinclair, "An Order of Women," *Presbyterian Record* (March 1958): 4–5, 30; Madeleine Barot, "Men, Women, and the Church," *Presbyterian Record* (January 1959): 26; James D. Smart, "The Ministry of Women," *Presbyterian Record* (February 1959): 10–11, 32; Helen Scott Sinclair, "Is Woman-Power Wasted in Our Church?" *Presbyterian Record* (October 1959): 6–7. Bush, "Opening of the Ordination Debate," discusses the relevant debate in the *Record*.

explores the place of women in the Old and New Testaments. When it came to Galatians 3:28, central to the original overture of 1953, which spoke of there being "neither male nor female" in Christ, he declared "this verse has no bearing on the question of the ordination of women." In the conclusion, he went on to say:

As one considers the role of women in the Old Testament, and as one considers the teaching of the matter of Church Government in the Old and New Testaments, one must conclude that the ordination of women as Teaching or Ruling Elders is not commended in the Bible. In fact it is not permitted. Since the Bible is our "Church Directory and Statute Book" in doctrine and government, this should settle the matter in the minds of Presbyterians.⁶⁰

The study guide *Putting Woman in Her Place* arrived at different conclusions; however, both sides were clearly arguing from scripture. The debate around whether women could offer leadership and teach in the Church did not create divisions in the Presbyterian Church in Canada as much as make sharper those divisions that already existed. These divisions had existed since 1925. They were about how one read scripture and about theology. What we should recognize in 1966 is that these were divisions between the neo-Orthodox, who seem to have been the majority, and the confessional Orthodox and supporters of other conservative theologies. What is largely absent from the debate is anything that we could legitimately term "liberal." It was not that one side was rejecting tradition and scripture and one side was holding on to these things; rather, both sides were interpreting tradition and scripture in different ways.

This observation leads to a third, final, and very brief point. What role did culture play in all of this? This has become key in our interpretation of historical topics related to the Church. The debate about the place of women in the Church took place at the same time that these issues were being debated in the broader society. But society did not speak with one voice. Nor by 1956 let alone 1966 had the broader culture accepted clearly our current conception of the fundamental equality of men and women. Far from it! Women doctors, engineers, and lawyers were still a rarity.

The contest in society was reflected, in some ways, within the Church. Nonetheless, caution should be exercised to not ascribe to the "traditional" position a biblical mandate, while assuming that those wishing change were driven by culture or pragmatism. There were existing understandings within the Church of what women could and could not do, and these had their origins as much, if not more so, in culture than in scripture. One clear cultural influence on Presbyterians in this period was marriage as a barrier to women being in leadership in the Church.

In 1966, Canadian Presbyterians reached a conclusion. What were they thinking? Divided as they were, they agreed that women's place in the Church included serving on sessions and in the courts of the Church; they also agreed (by a closer margin) that women might be ministers. This was done at a time when the broader culture was also considering the occupations that women could aspire to, as well as broader issues of participation and equality. The evidence shows that a thorough and biblical discussion took place before the decision. This much is clear. What is less clear is to what extent the men who made that decision in 1966 understood how it would transform their denomination.

⁶⁰ Everett Bean, "Regarding the Ordination of Women," *Presbyterian Comment* (June 1961): 3, 4.