



PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN IN THE MAKING

A brief history of Presbyterian Women (PCUSA)
And the involvement of the PW of the
Presbytery of Northern New England

Compiled by the PNNE-PW Coordinating Team

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1 THE NATION-WIDE CHURCH

1.1 POST CIVIL WAR

It is not easy to sort out the history of women in the church because of the schism during the Civil War. The church split at that time so it is difficult to follow which advances were made by what church at what time. But it can be said that women have come a long way. In the 1700s and throughout the Nineteenth Century women were second class citizens in the church as well as in everyday life. Women, it was thought, were suitable for preparing church suppers, working at various charities and at the national level fundraising and mission work but nothing else. They could not be elders or deacons so could not participate in decision making and they couldn't even participate in the presentation of a worship service.

1.2 CENT SOCIETY

Women took on their prescribed roles with enthusiasm and they formed mission societies and ladies aid societies. These were called the Cent Society because members paid a cent of their "egg money" each week to belong. But although dedicated to mission work women longed for a larger part in the life of the church.

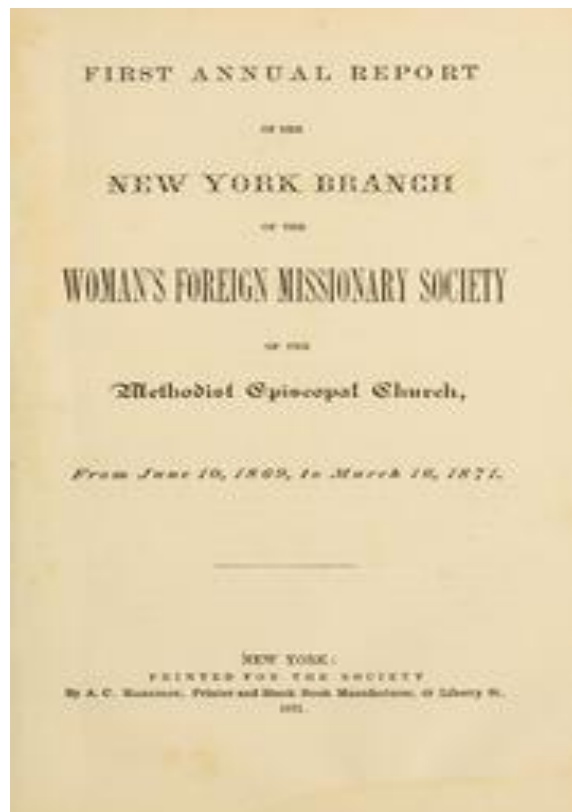
"to teach and exhort or to lead prayer in public and mixed assemblies is clearly forbidden to women"

1.3 SCHOLARSHIPS FOR SEMINARY

In 1815 the General Assembly (GA) asked women to provide scholarships so that needy students could attend Princeton Theological School but at the same time the GA continued to issue statements saying that women were not to speak or pray at church meetings of mixed company. It was said that, "the meeting of pious women by themselves for conversation and prayer" was approved but quoting Paul they said that, "to teach, exhort or lead in prayer in public assemblies of mixed company was clearly forbidden." A man in attendance at one GA quipped that, "if you set women to pray the next thing I suppose will be to set them to preach." He thought he was being funny.

1.4 FEMALE MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF UTICA NY

In 1824 the Female Missionary Society of Utica, NY, sponsored a country-wide crusade. Women were drawn to the crusade because for the first time they could offer prayers in mixed company. This led the GA to issue a warning against revivalist practices that allowed this to happen.



1.5 THANK OFFERING AND BIRTHDAY OFFERING

In their missionary role women established the Thank Offering in 1888 and the Birthday Offering in 1922. So, women continued to work as fundraisers and missionaries, but little by little they began to expand their roles. In 1931, they were allowed to become ordained elders and that was later enlarged to allow women to become ordained teaching elders or clergy. In 1931 five women attended the GA. For the first time women had a voice.

1.6 OFFICIALLY PW

Although the GA(s) had granted women a national assembly in 1875 and 1901 Presbyterian Women (PW) did not become an official branch of the church until 1987. In 1996 the GA granted the PW moderator a voice and a vote on the GA Council. By this time the churches had come together again through two mergers. Today it is generally recognized that all women in the Presbyterian church are Presbyterian Women but many women's groups within the church today go by a variety of titles.

2 PW OF PRESBYTERY OF NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

2.1 WOMEN'S PRESBYTERIAL MISSIONARY SOCIETY OF THE PRESBYTERY OF NEWBURYPORT

Presbyterian Women in the Presbytery of Northern New England began as the Women's Presbyterian Missionary Society of the Presbytery of Newburyport. The Constitution and By-Laws were drawn up and the first record we have of an Annual Meeting is 1940. However, the Annual Meeting held on April 8, 1946, was stated to be the thirty-fourth annual meeting. Simple math then indicates that the Women's Presbyterian Society was formed and active as early as 1912.

Early meetings of the Presbyterial were held in conjunction with the meeting of the Presbytery. The Presbyterial began with a business meeting, followed by lunch and a worship service at noon. An executive meeting was held at 1:30 and a continuation of the business meeting in the afternoon session. The meeting was adjourned so that the women could, "join the men" for dinner and an evening service. Some women stayed overnight to attend a Friday devotional session with the Presbytery which was followed by a speaker. The women then had a brief session of their own before returning home. It should be noted that the women joined the men because there were no women in the Presbytery at that time.

2.2 WHO WERE THESE WOMEN?



Melva Geores

Women were now taking a more active role in the business of the Church but rarely do we know them by their full name. The minutes of the early meetings of the Women's Presbyterial all refer to the women by their husband's name. Even in death they have no names of their own. The minutes of the October, 1942, meeting mentions a memorial service for Mrs. James L. Colby and Miss Martha Jacques. If you were single there is a record of your full name but not if you were married. Two leading lights of PNNE PW, **Melva Geores** and Ellen Blackwell, originally appear in the minutes as Mrs. James Blackwell and Mrs. Carl Geores. Not until 1963 did women's first names regularly appear in the minutes.

2.3 WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

The minutes from the 1940s indicate that annual meetings of the Presbyterial were

held at Graniteville, VT; Bedford, NH; Old South, Newburyport, MA; Westminster, Manchester, NH; Westminster, Newburyport, MA; West Barnet, VT; South Ryegate, Litchfield, Londonderry, Haverhill, Windham, Central Maine Mission and New Boston.

Minutes from the 1950s show that Derry, Elmira, New Ipswich, Scarsdale, Leeds and Starks sent representatives to annual meetings along with those mentioned in the 1940's minutes. The 1960s saw the addition of East Craftsbury, Rygate, Anson, East Rygate, Wales, and Burlington.

The last Minutes in the bound record book are from an executive meeting in 1966.

For comparison with those churches in attendance at these early meetings the women attending the 2017 retreat of the PW of the Presbytery of Northern New England came from Mid-Coast, Leeds, The Sudanese Fellowship, Elliot, Nashua, Bedford, Kearsarge, Marturia, Barre and Barnett. Although only about half as many churches were involved in 2017 as there were in previous decades the number of women in attendance remains about the same.

2.4 WHAT DID THEY DO? MISSION!

Throughout the history of women in the Presbyterian Church there is a strong emphasis on mission. In the early days mission and fund raising were about the only activities open to the women of the church and they were very active in these endeavors. Many of the women's groups of the Presbyterial supported missionaries overseas as well as participating in local and national missions. They supported the national church in many projects and endeavors. While many churches still support the Thank Offering and the Birthday Offering much of the current efforts involve local missions.

2.5 WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

Today involvement in PW of PNNE as well as financial support is dwindling. A dedicated Coordinating Team continues to meet and offers an annual spring retreat with Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire/Northern Massachusetts rotating responsibility for this event. The team has established a fund so that it can offer scholarships to women who wish to attend the gatherings offered by the Presbytery, Synod and national levels. Women who participate in these efforts find both work on the team and attendance at the retreat to be very rewarding and would encourage more women to become involved.

3 TIME LINE FOR THE NATIONAL CHURCH

c.1800 - Women formed One Cent or Penny Societies to support the work of missionaries and seminary students.

1815 - The General Assembly asked that women raise money so that needy students could attend Princeton Theological Seminary, but continued to forbid them to speak or offer prayers in church.

1824 - The Female Missionary Society of Utica, New York sponsored a country-wide crusade where women were allowed to offer prayers in public.

1832 - The General Assembly (GA) warned the churches against rivalistic practices of allowing women to offer prayers in church. They cited St. Paul's prohibition against women speaking in church.

1872 - The GA asked women of the churches to raise money to support women missionaries,

1874 - The GA continued to opposed women speaking or praying in church.

1875 - Sarah Foster Hanna petitioned the GA (UPCNA) to allow a national woman's organization which became The Presbyterian Church Women's General Missionary Society.

1889 - Louise Woosley was ordained a minister of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. She had local support but the Synod removed her.



Louise Woolsey

1901 - The GA (PCUS) allowed women to form a national organization which was known as Women of the Church.

1930 - Women were allowed to become ruling elders in the UPCUSA.

1931 - For the first time, women could attend the GA. There were five women at this momentous event.

1956 - Women were allowed to become teaching elders/clergy. Margret Towner was ordained as a minister in the PCUSA.



Margaret Towner

1987 - Presbyterian Women became an official organization of the church.

1996 - The national moderator of PW was given a voice and vote on the GA Council.

2009 - PW is incorporated.

2016 - The national moderator is given a seat on the GA Council with a voice although not a vote.

4 TIME LINE OF PW OF PNNE

1912 - The Women's Presbyterial Mission Society of the Presbytery of Newburyport was formed. For several decades the Society supported missionaries abroad and mission projects.

1930s - The definition of mission was expanded to include projects closer to home.

1959 - The Elliot Church in Lowell hosted the first meeting of the Northern New England Presbyterial Society. The name change resulted from a merger of 30 churches in Maine, New Hampshire, Northern Massachusetts and Vermont. The Newburyport Presbyterial was dissolved.

1980 - The first issue of the Presbyterial of Northern New England Newsletter was circulated. Prior to this the various moderators sometimes sent out a letter with notes of what was happening.

1988 - With the merger of the southern churches with PCUSA the United Presbytery in Women joined with the Women of the Church. By July the name was changed to Presbyterian Women and the current statement of purpose was adopted.

1988 - A petition was sent to the Presbytery requesting that the PNNE PW moderator be given a voice and vote on the Presbytery Council. This was granted.

1999 - First issue of The Vision, a newsletter sent out by the moderator introduces the new PW logo.

2004 - The first issue of the Grapevine was published which is the name of the current newsletter which is available on the PNNE PW web site.

The Grapevine



2007 - Some major changes were instituted. For the first time instead of a single moderator two co-moderators were installed.

Also, for the first time the annual meeting was held as a part of an overnight retreat. This practice continues today.

2012 - The Heritage Project was instituted to honor women who have made major changes to PW and PNNE PW.

5 KNOW MORE AND GET INVOLVED

Our archives have records of annual meetings, executive meetings, cluster meetings, lists of moderators, pictures and other information such as reports on attendance at the national gatherings dating from 1940 to the present time. Anyone interested in more a detailed study of PNNE PW history should contact the current historian to arrange to look at the files.

The Heritage Project is in a separate folder on our web site.

Also, our Facebook page has information on retreats and other activities of women in the Presbytery.