

Women in (Jewish) ministry – within the Lutheran Church

General Secretary Rolf G. Heitmann, Norwegian Church Ministry to Israel

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1. Theological perspectives

The equality of all human beings is essential according to the Gospel. We are all created in the image of God, all sinners and all beloved by God and surrounded by His grace. In Christ we are all united and have received the same rights of belonging to His people and being heirs of His kingdom. Either being “original branches” or being “grafted into the tree” (Rom 11), we are all called to be followers of Christ and serve Him.

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26-28 NRSV)

However, equality is not identical with total similarity. We are still chosen as Jews and Gentiles, created as men and women and called to various positions and services. In the Scripture we see differences, and even separations, in vocations and spiritual gifts.

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11-12 NRSV)

The ecclesiological hierarchy and relationship between Christ and His Church (Christ as the head of the Church Eph. 5:23) is by Paul further applied on the relationship among spouses (5:21-33), relationship between parents and children (6:1-4) and relationship between masters and servants in civil society (6:5-9)

In Ephesians 5 and 6, the principles and order of family life and the structural model of hierarchy are primarily based on Christological argumentation. When Paul in 1. Tim 2 and 3 applies his principles more directly on the order of Christian service and the variety of spiritual vocations, he uses in addition a creational argumentation: *For Adam was formed first, then Eve.*

In 1 Tim 2 and 3 (and 1 Cor 14:33-35) we clearly see a structural differentiation between the role and vocation of men and women within the Church:

*I was appointed a preacher and an apostle—I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying—a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. ¹² And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then Eve **3** This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. ² A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife(NKJV).*

Understanding and interpretation of these texts, including relationship between text and context, differs among Lutheran churches of today. Some will read and relate Paul's word only to his own culture and contemporary, i.e. without any direct relevance for today's church order. However, Paul justifies his arguments and conclusions, not by referring to his

contemporaries, but to the creation and Divine order. He even refers to the law: *Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says (1 Cor 14:34 NKJV)*

The next issue will then be: What does “silence” mean, and what kind of positions and vocations are reserved for men? This issue is even more complicated as we do not see only one church structure in The New Testament, and even define “pastor/shepherd” (gr.: poimenos), “teacher” (gr.: didaskalos) and “bishop” (gr.: episkopos) differently. And. Are the restrictions linked to the position itself or the fact the person is ordained, or to the function: Where and when the person is “operating” as pastor/bishop?

The “Theology of vocation” (latin: *vocatio*) was very important for Luther. From a Christian perspective he named all kinds of occupations and positions as *vocatio*. Everybody is responsible to carry out the will of God and serve the neighbour through love. Even secular occupations should therefore be regarded by Christians as *vocatio*. The mother’s work at home and the work of the shoemaker are as holy as the position of the bishop. This was a substantial new way of thinking compared to medieval and catholic understanding of vocation.

On the other hand Luther emphasizes a special vocation or ministry for serving congregants with teaching and administering of the Sacraments: *For the obtaining of this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. (CA V). Concerning Ecclesiastical Orders [Church Government], they teach that no man should publicly in the Church teach, or administer the Sacraments, except he be rightly called (CA XIV)*

On one hand Luther opens up for broader involvements in ministry, which has been of great importance for lay people in general and females especially. At the same time he confirms limitations for teaching and administering sacraments.

2. Historical perspectives and practice.

Mission is according to its identity always “holistic” or “integral”: Evangelism, proclamation and teaching should be accompanied by counselling, social service and involvement in the society. The first Norwegian missionary among Jews, sent to Galati in Romania in 1891, was a well educated pastor. However, he was disappointed about the success in mission. A couple of years later (1896), Otto von Harling finds the key to success: School mission.

The daughter of a German workshop owner felt sorry for many of her father’s young Jewish female workers. They grew up without any formal education. With her father’s permission she asked von Harling to start an evening class for these young Jewish women, teaching them to read and write, eventually even giving them some biblical teaching. The consequence was the establishing of the “Scola Protestanta Israelja de Fete” – The Protestant School for Jewish girls. Two female Norwegian teachers, Wilhelmine Tauboell (Headmaster/“Directress”) and Aagot Koren, were sent to Romania (1911 and 1913) to take a lead in this growing ministry. Not ordained, but installed as missionaries and teachers.

World War I was a great challenge for the work as well as workers. Galati had been under constant bombardment, and the new nationalistic regime wanted to close down private schools. Missionary Rev. Gisle Johnson returned to Norway together with “his” co-workers. The question was as always: How to continue.

Through advertisements the Board of our organization tried to come in contact with new potential workers. Rev. Johnson strongly emphasized the need for new staff under new circumstances. A new teacher was recruited, **Ms. Olga Bredal**, to re-establish the school, and a nurse, **Ms. Margit Berg**. Both of them joined Rev. Johnson on his return to Romania in 1919.

In the protocols of the Board we see the following comments:

The Red Cross nurse Margit Berg will join Rev. Johnson on his return to Galatz (Galati). The outcome is not obvious. Only the future will show Sister Margit is given a special assignment for our mission. On this occasion we will pray for God's blessing for this specific assignment as well as other tasks she will carry out for our mission.

It is not quite clear what this “special assignment” was. Was it a personal assistant or housemaid for Rev. Johnson? We know that he the year before had lost his mother who joined him at the mission field, and a year after had to take a break from ministry. Or is it just a new project among survivors of the war, especially for orphaned?

What is clear is that there was a need of new workers. In 1921 the staff expanded with two more Norwegian female workers, Teacher Antonia Anniksdal and Nurse Olga Olaussen. The same year Gisle Johnson had to leave the country for recovery in France. It is obvious that these female workers made a great effort and took a lead in mission in challenging times. History has probably not given them the honour and respect they deserve. How is it that man always needs a spouse or female assistant while women manage to serve alone? They even take the role as mothers. Margit Berg writes in our magazine (*Misjonsblad for Israel* 3/1922):

On the eve of New year Sister Olga and I went to the Jewish hospital to visit a mother of four children. We found her dead. We had spoken with her the day before and promised to take care of her children. We went to the Jewish community and asked if they could receive two orphans in their orphanage, but without result. They had already too many children to take care of. The Jewish committee gave me the permit to receive these children at our home, and I returned back with good news. This was a joy for them as well as for us!

Margit Berg returned from Romania in 1927, but continued for the next ten years to serve as leader of our mission's social and evangelistic work among the 2.000 Norwegian Jews, many of them refugees from East Europe. She writes:

Yesterday I visited three homes. The breadwinners of the families were unemployed. This is not a unique situation. When we visit these poor families, we bring with us food and some tracts. Then the conversation starts, we are asked to sit down, and we are able to share mutually what is on our hearts. They also want to hear more about the conditions for their fellow Jews back in their home countries.

Antonia Anniksdal (1871-1957) had a different career. She started as a missionary among Jews in Norway, and continued in Romania. We may say that they replaced each other. Actually she had a fight with our Board regarding her calling. She wanted to go abroad, but the Board did not dare to send her in times of war in Europe. They offered her the position in the Norwegian ministry. First she refused, but later accepted. However, 50 years old she left Norway with her one and only suitcase. At the age of 77 (1948), she, together with the other missionaries, were forced by the communist regime to leave Romania. One of her relatives told me that she upon arrival at the train station in Oslo showed up in the same overcoat as she left with 28 years earlier, completely worn. Even the body inside was exhausted – after

serving, teaching, saving, hiding Jews during World War II. Through this war it was accepted to stay, even if the conditions were worse.

Antonia Anniksdal was teacher. At most 180 students participated at her commercial school. But she was much more than that: Many girls were taken care of and became like daughters of Antonia. By the Jews of Galati she was honoured by the nickname “Herzi” (i.e. my heart).

Ms. Olga Olausson (1892-1981) arrived in Romania the same year as Antonia. Despite 20 years of difference in age they became good friends and close partners in mission. Together they were involved in education and nursing, humanitarian aid and evangelism, distributing literature and building congregation. In his biography, Rev. Magne Solheim describes the “annus horribilis” 1941: *Our homes were open. People came and went, and we baptized illegally 6 Jews in Galatz. Several Jews escaped holocaust through deeds and efforts of our female missionaries.*

Before the war, “Sister Olga” moved from Galati to Iasi together with the Feinstein family. During the pogrom of Iasi – “The black Sunday” – the last two days of June 1941, several Jews were hidden by Sister Olga in the cellar of the mission station. Feinstein was arrested and died together with 12.000 other Jews these days .

With the great risk of being killed herself, Olga expressed her love for the Jewish people: *Every Jew who knocks at my door this night will be let in.* One of them was Iancu Moscovici, who later became Lutheran pastor in Hamburg. There was a curfew in the town, and his family was taken by the Nazis and Romanian Iron Guard. There was nowhere to go, except one place. Iancu describes his encounter with Sister Olga in the cellar in this way:

Sister Olga brought us some food. Before eating, Sister Olga said: “Let us pray!” With few words she gave thanks to the Lord and delivered us into His hands. For the first time in my life I heard something like that. I had learned prayers written in books, and I had even heard prayers in the meetings at the Norwegian mission station, but I thought all prayers were written in books. Now I learned something completely new. I heard a prayer like a conversation between a child and a caring father.

Sister Olga continued her ministry and simple life in Israel for another 25 years until she moved in at Ebenezer Home in Haifa in 1976, where she also shared fellowship with Jewish immigrants and Believers from Romania. She passed away at Ebenezer in 1981, almost 90 years old.

One of our pastors at Immanuel church in Yafo told me that the most common position for Sister Olga, was on her knees in the corner of her simple room – if she was not out meeting, serving and speaking with people. Like Golda Meir, she was named “The mother in Israel”, and was also granted residence permit in the land as long as she lived. She was also honoured by the King of Norway through his Gold medal.

