

## **Women's ordination worldwide – about women's equality in the ministry**

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„A Woman's Place is in the House of Bishops“ – this was the slogan of the anglican movement for women's ordination especially for ordaining women bishops. Last year on September 12, 2015 in Riga Sally Barnes donated an antependium with this slogan to the Latvian Theologians who celebrated 40 years of women's ordination and 20 years of the Association of Lutheran Women Theologians in Latvia.

Female pastors and bishops exist not only since Maria Jepsen was ordained the first female bishop of the Lutheran Churches worldwide. We know female ministers and bishops also until the 9th century when bishop Theodora's son pope Paschalis I (817-824) granted her a mosaic in the Zeno chapel in Rome. We know a lot of female apostels, prophets, teachers and priests who taught, baptized, conducted services, distributed the Holy Communion and led congregations.

During the centuries the equal ministry changed into a hierachal ordination system owed to the social order, the gender roles in the society and the fact that christianity became the state religion.

At the beginning of the reformation period women again participated actively in the religious controversies in the public area.

The female theologian Maria Heinsius who in 1917 was the first woman graduating a PhD (Lizentiat) in Heidelberg worked and published on these reformatory women in the 1950th.

It was a long way towards women's equality in the ministry in the protestant churches related with lots of breakups, setbacks and new starts. The crucial point of gender justice and women's equality in the ministry is the knowledge of the priesthood of all baptized. The priesthood of all baptized reasons the freedom to evangelize and to share the gospel independently. Accepting the Holy scripture as essential authority leads to a long row of fruitful bible interpretations which in contemporary times present contextuell, libration-theological and feminist features.

On the long hand the democratization of education formed the condition that women were skilled to participate equally on education, work and the resources. Last but not

least the idea of the ongoing reformation asks women and men of all generations to contribute their ideas and impulses to the process of reformation.

### **New possibilities for the university education for women**

Although the reformation removed educational places for the noble and bourgeois women in the cloisters, in the long run it opened education for more people, even if boys received a better education during centuries.

Women's studies in German universities were only possible since the beginning of the 20th century. The Grand Duchy of Baden was the first to open its universities for women in 1900. At the university in Leipzig in the Kingdom of Saxonia women could study since 1906, the Prussian universities opened their classes for women from winter semester 1908-1909 onwards (Berlin, Bonn, Breslau, Göttingen, Greifswald, Kiel, Königsberg, Marburg, Münster).

Even if women were allowed to study earlier in other European universities the theological faculties in these countries also opened their classes for women only in the beginning of the 20th century. In Sweden for example women were allowed to study all subjects since 1873 but only in 1905 the first woman (Ellen Jeansson) registered for theology in Sweden.

When Prussia and Zurich opened their universities for women in 1908 the Prussian noble Gertrud von Petzold already preached in the Martini church in Bremen on Palm Sunday. Von Petzold studied theology at the Manchester College in Oxford and was elected as parish pastor by an Unitarian congregation.

To facilitate the graduation for women at the universities they were allowed to take faculty examinations at the university in Zurich and Basel in 1914 and at German universities in 1919. In 1920 at the university in Strassburg in Alsace four women studied theology, in Geneva one woman. In Paris in 1933 Marguerite Thourot finished her study of theology with the Bachelor examination (comparable with the Master's degree today). In Austria women could study evangelical theology in 1923 and after World War II also Roman-Catholic theology in 1946.

### **Aiming the equal ministry – comparable developments in Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany**

The Lutheran Church in Sweden was a state church since 2000 and although women had access to all services in the state since 1923 and although women enjoyed gender equality in all state offices since 1946 the first three women were ordained only in 1960.

The Swedish synod was occupied by the question of the ministry for women since 1919, but the synod which took place in 1921 put the question from the table.

In Germany the first regulations for female theologians appeared in 1926-1927. These regulations structured the church examinations, the duties and employment of the female theologians. Trend-setting was the so called Vikarinnengesetz (law of the female vicars) of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union in 1927. This law codified the benediction – not ordination – of the women for the service only on women, girls and children, it layed down that female theologians should only be titled „Vikarin“ not Pastor and it determined that married theologians normally had to quit their ministry.

In Germany and in Sweden the question of a special ministry for women, the so called „Amt sui generis“, was discussed in the 1930th. This special ministry should only support the male ministry, but not act independently. The majority of the first female theologians in Germany who gathered in the Association of Protestant Female Theologians since 1925 preferred this special ministry for women. Also the first Swedish Theologians like Margit Sahlin. On the contrary the Swedish government and the Swedish women organizations rejected this idea.

After World War II also in Sweden the question of women´s equality in the ministry came back on the table. In 1950 a committee ascertained that neither theological nor biblical reasons could be found against women´s ordination. However the synod´s majority rejected the request to admit women to the ministry. Parts of the synod members rejected because they further proclaimed theological and biblical reasons against women´s ordination, others because the request still included restrictions for the women (women were not allowed to lead a parish independently) and the majority of the synod rejected because they were afraid of a schism.

This situation did not change until 1957. Then the government started a new attempt to install women´s ordination and the majority of the synod members accepted the request with a clause in 1958. The clause was that no male pastor

could be forced to minister against his conviction. That means that in bigger parishes with concelebration male pastors were allowed to refuse working with female pastors at the altar, bishops could reject ordaining women. Still in 1958 five of 13 bishops voted against women's ordination, two abstained from voting. In some dioceses like in Göteborg, Växjö or Skara it was a very stony way. But against all the odds on April 10, 1960 the first three female theologians were ordained in Sweden: Margit Sahlin and Elisabeth Djurle Olander in Stockholm and the theologian and deaconess Ingrid Persson in Härnosand. Thirteen years later in 1973 the first female theologian was ordained in the diocese of Skara still causing a „real storm of indignation among the male pastors“.

In 1982 the clause of restriction was cancelled, but the male pastors built so called „Fria synod“ (Free Synod) with deanship in all dioceses where opponents of women's ordination gather until today. Besides opponents of women's ordination emigrate frequently, for example to Latvia and infiltrate the neighbouring countries. Pastor Heidemarie Wunsch, a member of the Association of Protestant Female Theologians in Germany, who researched and worked on the question of women's ordination in Sweden, wrote recently:

„The sad development of the women's ordination in Latvia ... is also connected with Sweden. Hans Martin Jensons coming from Sweden, who was elected bishop in Liepaja [in June 2016 C.S.] is belonging to this unchangeable conservative group of Swedish pastors. After the setup of the new regulations in the Swedish Church in 2000 he left the church.“

It was an important event when Margit Sahlin was preaching in the dome of Göteborg in 1993 during the conference of the nordic female theologians. In the diocese of Göteborg the situation changed after the old bishop retired.

In the diocese of Lund Caroline Krook was the first female dean of the cathedrale in 1990 (the bishop's representative) and Christina Odenberg was the first female bishop of the Church of Sweden in 1997. Her successor was Antje Jackelén in 2007 who was born in Westfalia. Since June 2014 Antje Jackelén is the first female archbishop in Sweden (elected in 2013).

What about the other Scandinavian countries?

In **Denmark** the first three women were ordained in 1948, on April, 28: Ruth Vermehren, Johanne Andersen and Edith Marie Brenneche Petersen, in 1956 the fourth female theologian was ordained.

In 1995 Lise-Lotte Rebel was elected the first female bishop in the diocese of Helsingör, one year later Sofie Bodil Louise Lisbeth Petersen in the diocese of Greenland. Today 11 dioceses exist in the Lutheran Church in Denmark and four dioceses are led by female bishops: Tine Lindhardt in the diocese of Funen, Marianne Christiansen in the diocese of Haderslev, Lise-Lotte Rebel in the diocese of Helsingör and Sofie Bodil Louise Lisbeth Petersen in the diocese of Greenland.

Since 1938 women could be a parish pastor in **Norway**, but only in 1961 the first women's ordination took place. Instead in 1993 Rosemarie Köhn in Norway was the first female bishop in the Scandinavian countries one year after Maria Jepsen in Hamburg was elected the first female Lutheran bishop worldwide.

Auður Eir Vilhjálmsdóttir in the Lutheran Church in **Iceland** was the first woman ordained in 1974. In 2012 two female bishops were elected in the Lutheran Church in Iceland: Agnes M. Sigurdardóttir and Solveig Lára Guðmundsdóttir in the diocese of Hólar Hjaltadalur in Northern Iceland.

In **Finland** a long battle was fought for the permission for women's equality in the ministry. Still the synods in 1970 and 1984 failed the three-quarters majority necessary for the permission of women's ordination. Only the synod in 1986 approved women's ordination with 81 against 21 votes. Up to 1986 they had only a restricted ministry for women without administration of the sacraments. In March 1988 the first women were ordained and in June 2010 Irja Askola was elected the first female bishop in Helsinki.

In the **Netherlands** the theology student Laurence Caroline Dufour opened the debate about the ministry for women. The question was discussed in 1922 in the synod and most members stated that no principal argument against women's could be found in the church regulations. Prof. H. A. van Bakel, professor of theology at the Lutheran Seminary in Amsterdam, argued in favour of the ministry for women in 1922 as well as in 1926 when the question was discussed again in the synod.

In 1927 the synod decided a restrictive clause that married women should not take up or keep fulfilling the responsibility to serve as parish pastors in all aspects. Women pastors in charge of parishes who would get married would have to quit their ministry. The first married woman to be a pastor in the Lutheran Church was L.J. Houtman-Visser from 1975 to 1984.

The first ordained pastor was Jantine Auguste Haumersen who studied theology in Leiden, then became vicar in the Reformed congregation in Keodijk. After finishing the Lutheran Seminary in Amsterdam she accepted a call to the Lutheran congregation in Woerden-Bodegraven. There she was ordained in 1929, November 17 and held the office until 1934. Afterwards she worked in Kampen until 1948.

In **Switzerland** every Canton is adjusting church related questions independently and the legal status of the churches might be very different. They have state churches, regional churches and churches which are separated from the state. Where no Cantonal church exists the single congregation is responsible to adjust all questions.

In the reformed regional church of the Canton of Zurich one of the first women's ordinations took place throughout Europe. In 1918 on October 27 the two former teachers Rosa Gutknecht and Elise Pfister were ordained in Zurich. They had studied theology in Zurich and together with four men they were ordained *Verbi Divini Ministra* during the service. Already in 1921 the synod in Zurich decided to allow women to be parish ministers only heeding the restrictive celibacy clause. But they could not enshrine this policy in the church regulations because of the male majority in the Canton. So, it was only possible that the Zurich synod in 1923 allowed the congregations to engage women as so called „Pfarrhelferinnen“ (pastor's helpers).

The synod in Bern decided in 1918 to appoint „Pfarrhelferinnen“ (pastor's helpers). Only the independent congregation Furna in the Canton of Grisons appointed Greti Caprez-Roffler in 1931 as parish pastor without ordination.

The early Swiss female theologians sought from the off the equal ministry for women contrary to the majority of the early theologians in Germany. They declined the subordinated special women ministry, the „Amt sui generis“.

In Germany only the minority of female theologians like Carola Barth, Annemarie Rübens and Ina Gschlössl who in 1930 separated from the main Association and founded the Assembly of Evangelical Theologians, fought due to biblical, theological and ecclesiological reasons for the equal ministry for women. The Swiss Verena Pfenninger-Stadler who studied theology in Marburg/Lahn between 1926 and 1928 was a member of the Assembly of Evangelical Theologians.

As in many other protestant churches in Europa also in Switzerland women's equality in the ministry was only won after World War II as part of the role change of women and men in the society of a whole. In the Cantonal Church of Basel city women could work as pastors since 1956 and up to 1968 all the other Cantonal churches followed. Between 1979 and 1981 the last restrictive clause, the celibacy clause, was removed. Women in church leading function as presidents of the church council and synods who do not need to be a pastor are in office since the 1980th.

### **Women's ordination in non-European countries and in other religions**

In non-European countries some churches like the United Methodist Church in the USA women were assigned to preach and were ordained as deacon since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before European theological faculties permitted women to study theology Anna Oliver graduated in 1876 as first woman at the Boston University School of Theology in the USA with the Bachelor of Divinity. But she was not allowed to work as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. She supported women's ordination in 1880 in the General Conference of the United Methodist Church and remained a pioneer until she died in 1892. It took 75 years until in 1951 women were accepted to the equal ministry.

Leontine T. Kelly who in 1976, 100 years after the graduation of Anna Oliver, graduated with the Master of Divinity at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia was elected the first coloured bishop in the United Methodist Church in 1984. Four years earlier Majorie Matthews was the first female pastor who was elected as bishop in the United Methodist Church in 1980.

While for example in the United Methodist Church in the USA in the 1980<sup>th</sup> the first female bishops were elected many churches worldwide only started to discuss and to facilitate the subject of women's ordination.

The researches of the Association of Protestant Female Theologians underline these asynchronies. We are researching the question of women's ordination worldwide since 2007. During our researches we discovered a huge number of asynchronies.

For example the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia permitted women's ordination since 1978, in 1979 the Presbyterian Church of Ghana and nine Protestant Churches in Simbabwe followed, in 1980 the Anglican Church of Kenya and the Presbyterian Church of Mozambique accepted women's ordination. The Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil is ordaining women since 1982. A lot of other churches followed in the second half of the 1980th until nowadays.

On the other hand there are examples of women's ordination worldwide that already took place in the 1930th. In the United Church of Christ in Japan the first female theologian was ordained in 1933 and the United Church of the Philippines permits women's ordination since 1936.

The fact that women's ordination is crucial to the protestant profile was explicitly expressed by the Lutheran World Federation in the Lund Statement on March 26, 2007 and reinforced in the Gender Justice Policy in 2013. Only when churches ordain women and work on women's equality in the ministry the priesthood of all baptized is taken seriously. The Lund Statement mentions „that limiting the ordained ministry to men obscures the nature of the church as a sign of our reconciliation and unity in Christ through baptism across the divides of ethnicity, social status and gender (cf. Gal. 3:27-28).“<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Lund Statement by the Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches, Lund, Sweden, 26 March 2007, S. 8: “*Ordained Ministry of Women and Men* 40. Unfortunately, in the history of the church, the role of women has been obscured to a great extent, for example, Junia, whom Paul calls an apostle (Rom. 16). In some cases even their names have been forgotten, such as the woman at the well (John 4) and the prophesying daughters of Philip (Acts 21). For centuries Lutheran churches, like other churches, restricted ordination to men. Today the great majority of Lutherans belong to churches that ordain both women and men. This practice reflects a renewed understanding of the biblical witness. Ordination of women expresses the conviction that the mission of the church requires the gifts of both men and women in the public ministry of word and sacraments, and that limiting the ordained ministry to men obscures the nature of the church as a sign of our reconciliation and unity in Christ through baptism across the divides of ethnicity, social status and gender (cf. Gal. 3:27-28). 41. The Lutheran World Federation is committed to the ordination of women. The LWF Eighth Assembly stated: “We thank God for the great and enriching gift to the church discovered by many of our member churches in the ordination of women to the pastoral office, and we pray that all members of the LWF, as well as others throughout the ecumenical family, will come to recognize and embrace God's gift of women in the ordained ministry and in other leadership responsibilities in Christ's church.”



According to the Lutheran understanding the sole ministry of the church requires the equal ministry of women and men.

Anyway, more than 80% of all churches belonging to the Lutheran World Federation permit women's ordination and practice it. The more hurtful is the development of the Latvian Lutheran Church which in June 2016 codified that only baptized men are allowed being ordained. This result is not only owed the exports of women's ordination opponents or problems of finding oneself of the churches but also the influence of the ultra conservative Lutheran Missouri Synod in the USA. This church has increased their influence in Eastern European Lutheran Churches, but also in Africa, for example in the Mekane Yesus Church in Ethiopia, after 1989. It is a dangerous influence which forces a biblicistic-fundamentalistic bible hermeneutic and a reactionary church policy.

Up to now the only non protestant church ordaining women is the Old Catholic Church. In Germany female priests have been ordained since 1996. Since the beginning of the 21th century also ordained Roman Catholic deacons, priests and even bishops exist, who are celebrating in congregations worldwide, but they are excommunicated by the Vatican. The Catholic Women's Ordination Conference which was founded in 1975 is fighting for women's ordination worldwide in the Catholic Church. In their press release on pope Franciscus' announcement to instal a commission to study women's diaconate they wrote: "Only when women are equally included in all ordination rites - as deacons, priests, and bishops - and at all Church decision-making tables, can we begin to restore our Gospel values of equality and justice."<sup>2</sup>

In other religions like Judaism and Islam we also know women heading congregations and leading services. The first rabbi worldwide was Regina Jonas (1902-1944, murdered in Theresienstadt) who was ordained in 1935 in Berlin. The Holocaust also destroyed this good and hopeful impulse. Only after World War II again jewish female theologians were ordained rabbi in 1972 in the USA and in 1975

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42. In many member churches of the LWF today, and in the majority of the larger Lutheran churches, women are not only ordained as pastors but are also elected to the episcopal ministry. This is consistent with the Lutheran emphasis on the one office of ordained ministry."

<sup>2</sup> WOC Responds: Pope Francis Names Scholars to Commission to Study Diaconate for Women  
<http://www.womensordination.org/2016/08/02/woc-responds-pope-francis-names-scholars-to-commission-to-study-diaconate-for-women/>, Aufruf 3.10.2016.

in Great Britain. Meanwhile also the first female Imams lead congregations and act as prayer leaders in congregations in the USA and in Germany, for example.

## **Résumé**

In Europe women were allowed to study theology and to graduate in the beginning of the 20th century while in the USA women could study theology thirty years earlier. The first legal regulations for female ministers in the churches came up in the 1920th in some European countries (Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands). Despite commissions (Sweden, Switzerland) and single men (Netherlands) did not register any biblical-theological or ecclesiological obstacles for the ministry of women and despite supporting women's equality in the ministry it was only after World War II that women's equality in the ministry was achieved and all restrictions were removed (right of veto for male ministers, celibacy for female ministers, different titles, restricted office, different salary). This process of overcoming all the restrictions showed a lot of asynchronies in the churches.

Some single women's ordination took already place in the beginning of the 20th century in 1904, 1917 (United Kingdom), in 1918 (Switzerland) and in the 1920th and 1930th (Thuringia 1928, Netherlands 1929, Japan 1933).

The gender equality in the society and the change of roles of women and men after World War II operated as motivation push in the churches (Germany, Sweden, Switzerland).

The subordination which was preached and taught over centuries was a big challenge for all female theologians. Only after they had overcome this internalized self-restriction the necessary energy was set free for demanding women's equality in the ministry. The subordinated female ministry, the „Amt sui generis“ had to be overcome for biblical-theological and ecclesiological reasons.

Not only men or male pastors have difficulties to overcome the patriarchal gender roles and to accept women on the pulpit and in church leading and heading positions.

But the reliability of the Gospel and the priesthood of all baptized require women's equality in the ministry which has to be codified in the church regulations and put into

reality. Speaking about equality and justice according to the Gospel it is crucial to demand women's ordination in all confessions and denominations.