

WOMEN AND MEN RENEWING THE CHURCH



Lilia was a conscientious, hard-working, pastor's wife. She took theology courses with her husband Noel when he was in seminary, and now she taught Sunday school and was active in the women's organization. She also taught in a church-related elementary school and served as its principal. Lilia tried to support the ministry of her husband in Fourth Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla, Colombia, in every way she could.

But it never occurred to Lilia, nor to anyone else in the Presbyterian Church of Colombia, that she herself could be a pastor. No woman had ever been ordained in the church. There was no active opposition to women's ordination, but neither were there any women seeking ordination.

There were also very few male pastors, so Noel's sudden death posed a crisis not just for his congregation but also for his presbytery. Where were they going to find a pastor to take Noel's place?

After the funeral, Lilia stepped in. In the midst of her own grief she felt a responsibility to the congregation. As the church session thought about finding a replacement for Noel, a number of elders began to ask, "Why not Lilia?"

The presbytery was open to the idea. When the petition came in from Fourth Presbyterian Church, the presbytery prepared a special ordination exam that took into consideration not only Lilia's seminary studies but also her years of experience at her husband's side. She became the first ordained woman in Colombia.

Fourth Presbyterian had always been an active church, but its members (and the presbytery) were astonished at the dynamism of the congregation under Lilia's leadership. It established a number of new congregations in neighbourhoods around the city and even in rural communities outside Barranquilla, congregations that a quarter of a century later are still strong and independent.

Lilia is now retired, but her ordination and her leadership opened the door for many more women pastors and church leaders in Colombia. "She has been my inspiration," says Julia, a member of Fourth Presbyterian who is studying theology and plans to follow in Lilia's footsteps.

AT THE WATERS EDGE (EXODUS 1.1-2.10)

The book of Exodus tells the story of the children of Israel in Egypt from two perspectives. First we meet the Pharaoh. His dynasty is recent (he "knew not Joseph"), and he knows he does not have the support of the population; indeed, he fears many of his subjects would join forces with an invading enemy to topple him from the throne.

His first plan is to get them working harder so they will have no time to conspire against him. But after an initial "restructuring" of the labour force, Pharaoh is surprised to find that the opposition has increased. His next step is to order the killing of newborn male infants.

And here the story continues with exquisite irony. A network of women working together for a common goal defeats his objective. The network begins with the midwives who fear God and refuse to carry out Pharaoh's order. Their faithfulness is seen and rewarded by God.

Frustrated again, Pharaoh takes a drastic step – all baby boys are to be thrown into the river. The mother of one of the condemned infants fashions a waterproof basket. Technically, she has obeyed – the baby is in the river – but her creativity has increased the chances that he may live. An older sister hides nearby and watches to see what will happen to her little brother.

Then one of the maidens in the imperial service, and finally even Pharaoh's own daughter, are drawn into the network when they discover the basket at the edge of the river. Aware of the baby's origin

Lilia blessing the marriage of a young couple



and Pharaoh's order, they nevertheless save the child's life and, at the sister's suggestion, hire the baby's own mother to care for him.

This informal network has no hierarchy. It includes women of different ages, social strata and racial-ethnic groups. It does not reject men. Indeed, the whole cooperative effort is dedicated to saving the life of a baby boy. The freeing of this child by the women parallels the future freeing of the slaves by God under the leadership of Moses grown to manhood.

QUESTIONS

1. WHY DID PHARAOH WISH TO KILL ONLY MALE INFANTS? WHAT DID HE THINK OF WOMEN? ARE THERE PEOPLE WHO THINK OF WOMEN IN THE SAME WAY TODAY?
2. CONTRAST PHARAOH'S PROJECT WITH THE PROJECT THAT DREW TOGETHER THE INFORMAL NETWORK OF WOMEN. WHAT ARE PHARAOH'S GOALS AND HOW DOES HE TRY TO ACCOMPLISH THEM? WHAT ARE THE WOMEN'S GOALS AND HOW DO THEY TRY TO ACCOMPLISH THEM?
3. ARE THESE DIFFERENT STYLES REFLECTED IN THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH TODAY?
4. HOW DOES GENDER DETERMINE OUR PARTICIPATION IN THE CHURCH? CAN TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES BE TRANSFORMED? GIVE EXAMPLES.

PRAYER

O God of life and opportunity, we thank you for the women and men who obey the call to your service, for the many gifts you have given them, and for the privilege of working together to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We pray especially for those women who find doors closed and opportunities limited. Give them creativity to find new ways of responding in love to your call.

Give us vision to see the gifts of our sisters in Christ, to break with old structures and to build communities of mission enriched by the talents of all.

We pray for the heartbreak of the world, for women who are abused, oppressed, alone, homeless or living in poverty, worried about the future or the future of their children. Help us to show them your love and give them your hope. Amen.

AUTHOR

Alice Winters, a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA), lives in Colombia where she serves the Presbyterian Church of Colombia in church development and theological education. She is the dean of the School of Theology of the Reformed University of Colombia and teaches biblical studies and languages.

