

**“WORKING WIVES”**  
**and**  
**The Presence and Power of Patriarchy in the Methodist Church**  
by John F. Piper Jr.

“Working Wives” is a phrase which first appeared in the Composite Report of the District Superintendents to the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church made at the Annual Conference in 1957. It was a very specific reference to pastors’ wives who took full-time employment outside the home. The Superintendents opposed such work and in arguing against it revealed the presence and power of patriarchy in the Methodist church. Those who signed this Report and their Districts were: F. Lamont Henninger, Harrisburg; Lester A. Welliver, Williamsport; Robert A. Croyle, Altoona; and Charles F. Berkheimer, Sunbury. Each Superintendent also submitted a District Report which included considerable information particular to his own District. This dual report procedure was in place by 1950 and continued through 1968 when the Methodist Church united with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to create the United Methodist Church.

The Composite Reports highlighted Conference and general church issues. Their contents suggest that the Superintendents used them to offer their collective reflections, opinions and policies. The Composite Report in 1957 highlighted several such issues. The Report included a long section on “The Minister and His Pastoral Functions,” in which the Superintendents encouraged pastors to make more pastoral calls. In another section, “Charge Boundaries and Reduction of Size of Circuits,” they cited their efforts over the previous two years to reduce the size of circuits to enable pastors to give more attention to the members of the churches they served.

The Superintendents introduced the idea of “working wives” in another section of the Report, “Ministerial Support”, and staked out their position in opposition to the wives of clergy working outside the home. They said that “there are those who feel,” suggesting they were among them, “that one of the factors contributing to the instability of many homes in our modern life is the full-time employment of both husband and wife, and especially if there are children in the family.” And then, in what appears to be an effort to make certain that listeners at the Annual Conference session and readers of the *Journal* containing the Minutes of the Conference understood how these general thoughts applied to clergy families, they wrote using italics to highlight their position: “*One thing is certain! No pastor can afford to spend time needed for the demanding work of his church in performing household and family tasks made necessary by the wife’s full-time employment.*”<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 1957 *Journal*, Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church, page 109.

At Annual Conference the next year the Superintendents increased the exposure and importance of their idea by presenting it as a separate section of their Composite Report, titled “Working Wives.”<sup>2</sup> Three of the Superintendents were the same as in 1957, Henninger, Welliver, and Croyle, but Frank W. Montgomery had replaced Berkheimer in Sunbury. The Composite Reports were presented as collective efforts. No record has survived of how they were created – perhaps the work of one of the Superintendents which was edited by the others, or possibly each Superintendent wrote one or more sections and then the group of them compiled the articles, or in some other way. If the section on working wives was the work of a particular Superintendent, no record has been found to identify him. The thoughts about working wives appears to have been accepted and advocated by all of them.

The Superintendents began their presentation with the admission that the practice of working clergy wives was “sometimes necessary and usually helpful in paying old bills, putting children through school, preparing for a rainy day.” It is highly likely that they began this way because in Composite Report after Composite Report over the years their predecessors and they had noted the relatively low salaries of the pastors in their Districts and had urged churches to raise them. With this bow to the financial realities of pastors, the Superintendents proceeded to make four arguments against the wives of pastors taking full-time employment.

The first argument appears to have been the most important. It stated that permitting the practice of working wives challenged the itineracy, which was a basic part of the structure of the Methodist ministry. Methodist clergy from their first appearance on the scene in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century were circuit riders. They were moved from place to place, appointment to appointment, remaining in any given place for very short periods of time – at first measured by months, then for a year, and reaching four years by the 1950’s. The Superintendents put their concern about itineracy this way: “There are churches in the Conference which some of our ministers should be serving. But they do not and cannot pay salary equal to the income of both minister, in his present station, and the salary received by the working wife. Therefore, the minister elects to stay where he is and requires no new assignment.”

This argument has two parts. First, it suggests that the Superintendents had to face a new problem in making appointments: the consequence of working wives. The income the wives earned was increasingly important to their families, and their work typically tied them to their geographic area. The Superintendents chose to see this new development as a serious threat to the ministry as they knew it, particularly the itineracy. This new circumstance made it more difficult, and in some cases much more difficult, to make appointments in the traditional manner. The Superintendents were now forced to factor into their appointment process a new consideration. They chose their Composite Reports as the place to alert the Conference members to this new and important threat to the established order.

---

<sup>2</sup> 1958 *Journal*, Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church, pages 92-93.

They offered no indication of how frequently they had to deal with the new problem. Its presence in their Reports suggests that however many times it was had become large enough for them to describe the problem and take a strong stand to resolve it. Their solution was to highlight the ways the ministry had functioned in the past and to encourage pastors, and their wives, to hold fast to that tradition.

Another part of this argument must have been at the time, and remains today, difficult to understand. The Superintendents said that one result of the new situation was “the minister elects to stay where he is ...” It is very hard to imagine how this phrase made sense to either the clergy or informed laypersons in the Conference. Methodist Pastors did not “elect” when or where they wanted to move. The Superintendents, functioning as the leadership team in the Conference, moved pastors. Even if there were occasional exceptions to this practice, very few pastors or churches were treated exceptionally. It may be the Superintendents used “elect” as a public way of explaining why certain pastors were not moved, but the term suggests that the clergy had much more say in the appointment process than was typically the case.

The second argument was as light as the first was heavy. The Superintendents said: “The churches want to see their ministers receiving salaries commensurate with their work and their station in the community, but they are embarrassed when the parsonage wife apparently must go out of the church to seek employment.” And, the Report continued, the churches were already supplying parsonages, which the typical “secularly employed” person did not receive. It seems the Superintendents were willing for some of their clergy families to live on very low salaries and experience financial need simply to avoid the embarrassment of people in local churches. The solution was surely obvious: the Superintendents needed to take a stronger and more forceful position on the need for higher salaries. Local churches, some of them at least, could make decisions to ease their “embarrassment”.

The third argument introduced the expectations of local churches when they received an appointment. The Superintendents said: “Indeed, the churches expect the minister’s wife, and with reason, to be a partner in her husband’s work, although no church should expect the parsonage wife to be an assistant pastor.” The phrase “with reason” carries the old and revered conviction that wives were functions of their husbands’ work, whatever it might be. The word for this is “patriarchy” and it goes back in western civilization at least to the ancient Hebrews, and the ancient Greeks and Romans. It is very telling that the Superintendents followed this declaration with a clarification that such partnership did not mean “assistant pastor.” It is arguable that the Superintendents said what it did not mean because they knew that many people in their audience, clergy and laity alike, understood it to mean exactly that – but with a major difference, in that this “assistant pastor” would not be paid for her work, except that she would get a place to live. The common way to refer to this, at least since the 1950’s, was “twofer”, a term used when a buyer gets two of the same item for the price of one. That is precisely what

local churches received through the Methodist appointment system when pastors were married and their wives did not work outside the home – two “pastors” for the price of one. Her work often included but was not limited to serving as hostess for special functions at the church and parsonage, working as church secretary, playing the piano, teaching Sunday School classes, and an endless number of other things. It often continues to mean that for some in the United Methodist Church, and in many other denominations, despite the presence of women in the ministry and the more frequent outside employment of clergy spouses – today including men.

The final argument the Superintendents presented was the way in which a working wife limited the work of her husband, diminishing his ministry. They claimed: “People in the churches feel that wittingly or unwittingly the minister, whose wife is working elsewhere, takes on more and more of the household duties, spending more time at home than he should spend, and perhaps less time in the study than he should spend.” This argument is boldly and unabashedly patriarchal. It implies the clergyman’s ministry was so important that it overrode the financial well-being of the family – it was so important that his spouse, whatever her talents and sense of calling to a vocation, whatever her gifts, must submit them and her very self to his ministry. Left unsaid was what the minister might do with the time he might have to spend at home in place of time in his study – like, for example, helping to raise any children the couple might have.

The Superintendents were done presenting arguments but not quite finished setting forth their case. They closed by repeating the statement used in their 1957 Report, for some reason not using italics this time, reminding listeners and readers that “no pastor can afford to spend time needed for the demanding work of his church” by spending any time doing household chores.

The problem of wives working outside the home did not go away, however hard the Superintendents worked to let new pastors and their wives know their opposition to it. In their Composite Report in 1960, three of the Superintendents from 1958, Welliver, Croyle, and Montgomery, now joined by Edgar A. Henry, Harrisburg, wrote a long section of their Report on “Ministerial Salaries.” They noted that the average salaries of Conference clergy were well below the national average for all Protestant clergy in the nation, and substantially below that for all Methodist clergy. The ministers in the Conference needed higher salaries. Whenever a serious financial crisis occurred in a clergy family, “the unfortunate alternative of employment for the wife, or even outside work for the minister, is the unhappy result.”<sup>3</sup> In their 1962 Composite Report in 1962 they, Montgomery and Henry, now joined by John F. Stamm, Altoona, and Gilbert L. Bennett, Williamsport, noted that there was a growing feeling among Conference members in support of working wives but the practice continued to be a threat to the appointment system. Their statement on this topic, the last before the union with the EUB church, fully sums up their position on working wives: “It is likewise our

---

<sup>3</sup> 1960 *Journal*, Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church, page 90.

belief that proper stewardship cultivation in the local church will help greatly to provide adequate funds to underwrite the program of the church and eliminate the apparent necessity for ministers' wives seeking full time employment to supplement the family income. The growing feeling on the part of some that the wife's income from full time employment must be taken into account when moves are suggested has a tendency not only to retard the normal advancement of the pastor, but also to thwart the intent and purpose of the appointment system."<sup>4</sup>

The Superintendents left a clear trail of their position on working wives and the way their work outside the home placed new pressures on the appointment system and hence the itineracy. There is no indication that either they or anyone else in the Conferences where they espoused this moved to have the Conference take a formal vote in support of this position. What the Superintendents did not do was leave a record of how they moved from advocacy to enforcement of their position. It is not known if they individually or collectively had new Conference members agree formally to their position. Nor is it known how vigorously they, individually or collectively, enforced their policy when making appointments. No survey of pastors asking them to provide information about their appointments and the circumstances surrounding them in the years between 1950 and 1968, or for that matter for any period, has been found.

What does survive, however, are the memories of Methodist clergy and their spouses of the circumstances of their appointments in the years after 1950. A random telephone survey of some of them indicates memories, some vague and distant and others quite vivid, of the appointment process. The summary of their memories is that the Superintendents' position and their enforcement of it had consequences, intended and unintended. One intended consequence was to give men the freedom to explore their call and spread the gospel uninterrupted by the personal needs of their families, including their children. The most important intended consequence was to alert new clergy to the policy in the hopes of discouraging, perhaps preventing, their wives from taking outside work. It seems to have been used in the following way: A Superintendent informed the clergy under his care that if their spouses chose to work outside the home then he, the Superintendent, would view that decision unfavorably. One spouse reported that she took a job secretly so she would not damage her husband's chances to move forward in his ministry, and another said she resigned from a position she had held before her marriage, which was a career job, and never returned to it. She hoped it would help her husband's career. There seems little that can be done about the consequences, painful as they were for some wives. It is not possible to recover the "what might have beens" for any life, the vocation that was missed, the talents that were not fully used, the opportunities to provide greater financial stability for retirement that did not happen.

One reason to reflect on this past policy is to face the fact that the church

---

<sup>4</sup> 1962 *Journal*, Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Church, page 118.

has been a very real participant in institutional patriarchy, the total antithesis of gender equality. The reality is that the human race has been living with 50% or more of its members without voice and, until recently, without vote. The energy, talents, mental and spiritual gifts, the very humanity of women have been ignored, stifled, or dismissed.

“Institutional” is the key term. The ideas that support patriarchy have been so ingrained and taken for granted in history, culture, religion, and language that people who ordinarily oppose patriarchy do not even understand how some of their actions actually support it. The Superintendents from 1957 through 1962 and beyond were good men, leaders of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, but they were educated in and then elevated to lead a system so dominated by patriarchy that they would have been considered traitors to the system had they challenged it – and likely would have been moved out of their positions of leadership. They might well be shocked if they were still alive to have anyone accuse them of patriarchy or so say that any consequences of their actions diminished anyone’s life in any way. Patriarchy has been *the* controlling feature of western civilization and its many institutions, including its religious ones, including United Methodism. Learning about it, accepting its presence, and praying forgiveness for it and its intended and unintended consequences is the only way to challenge it and open the culture in general and the United Methodist Church in particular to everyone.

The inspiration for this brief review is something the Susquehanna Annual Conference did at its meeting in the fall of 2020. To deal with the Covid-19 virus, the meeting was held virtually and proceeded from report to report without meaningful discussion of any of the topics presented – including a proposal by the Council on Finance and Administration to deal with a projected budget deficit by, among other actions, reducing the health care reimbursement for medical expenses for retired persons by 20%. As the group affected includes spouses of deceased pastors, this decision adds another unintended consequence of the patriarchal practice the Superintendents once used. Those early Methodist wives who accepted their home role do not have a separate pension, nor do they have some Social Security benefits because they did not work enough to qualify for them. They are the least financially able to afford the health care decrease voted by the Conference.

Apparently few if any members of the Annual Conference, including members of the Council on Finance and Administration, had any memory of this earlier policy or considered its impact on any particular group within the Annual Conference family today. Not many of the consequences of the past actions of Superintendents can be changed. However, the Annual Conference, in light of this long term consequence of a policy of the past, can review the decision it made and at the 2021 Conference and exempt widows from the reduction in health care benefits, perhaps limited to those whose husbands became part of the Conference before 1968. It would be a fitting recognition of the sacrifices many of them made in support of the ministry of the church. It would also be in accord with the United Methodist clearly announced policy in favor of gender equality.