

# WHY CHURCH WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS THRIVED

*The following is an excerpt from Women Work and Worship in the United Church of Canada, Shirley Davy, Project Co-ordinator (Toronto: United Church, 1983). The selection is from the first chapter, "Women Together: The Call to Collective Action."*

*Cet extrait de Women Work and Worship, publié récemment par l'Eglise Unie du Canada, examine l'histoire des groupes de femmes affiliés à une église, et insiste sur le désir de ces femmes d'avoir des camarades et des amies. Les femmes sont des créatures sociales: elles se joignaient à des groupes religieux pour se trouver une communauté; à mesure qu'elles découvraient autre part une camaraderie, ces groupes ont tendu à disparaître. Tant que les groupes de femmes ont pu réaliser leurs buts sans mettre en cause les relations de pouvoir entre les sexes, l'Eglise, en général, leur apportait son appui; lorsqu'elles commencèrent à devenir autonomes, l'Eglise commença à être mal à l'aise. Ces organisations ont affermi le statut politique des femmes dans l'Eglise. Les premières femmes à siéger à des conseils représentaient en général des groupes. Depuis 1962, la représentation des femmes de l'Eglise Unie est obligatoire dans les comités de congrégation chargés d'établir les lignes d'action.*

## Fellowship

*. . . there were many lonely housebound women. I remember one who told us how much the fellowship meant to her — to have tea out of somebody else's cup.*

Whatever their stated purposes for organizing, women hungered for the companionship of their sisters. "Fellowship" and "friendship" are the words which appear most frequently in the Women

Work and Worship reports — not as causes of the organizations, but as heartfelt afterthoughts. The bonds women formed with each other erased the difficult tasks, it seems, and lent dignity to the most menial jobs women did in the church. And it was "fellowship" that helped women survive in an institution which deemed them unfit for positions within its courts. A woman from Steep Rock Community Church (Manitoba) speaks for hundreds of churchwomen when she writes: "if we sat at the front or at the back is not important. Being there, supporting each other, is what has made us strong and successful."

The view that churchwomen can be "strong and successful" apart from the wider church without being "strong and successful" within it (is discussed elsewhere in the book). The point here is that disenfranchised people everywhere are strengthened by community, and that community often becomes the most valuable and valued aspect of its members' existence. Feminists speak of support groups, and workers of solidarity; both are "fellowship" in a secular sense. In significant ways, women's sense of their own special fellowship within the church emulates the earliest Christian experience of community.

Some groups have been straightforward about the importance of companionship. Maple Hill Ladies' Aid, for example, stated boldly at the outset that its purpose was "to provide a monthly outing and to raise money for the church." Young mothers' groups continue to

form so that women may support each other in the onerous task of parenting. "Fun, fellowship and music" was the goal of "The Joy-makers," a Hamilton ensemble of guitars and banjos formed in 1975, as it was for the ukulele band formed in Moncton in 1949. Even women who were not church members participated in churchwomen's groups; doctrine was secondary to friendship, apparently. ". . . women's groups were organized where every woman in the community was welcomed, for fellowship was so necessary in those early days when distances were traveled by foot, or by horse or dog sleigh over bad roads, often through extreme cold and snow."

As one begins to appreciate the importance of "community" to churchwomen, one also begins to understand why quilting was a favourite endeavour. Sitting around a frame in this collective creating was both productive and therapeutic. The quilt was merely the occasion and the excuse for the larger work being done — telling stories, sharing problems, discovering themselves by discovering each other — doing what women have done together for millennia.

Women are social creatures. Although women have frequently been alienated from each other in patriarchal households, the church has provided a medium through which sisterhood could be affirmed. It was the "fellowship" women found there that caused them to continue in church groups. And it is when they found it elsewhere that churchwomen's groups began to decline.

## Political Bonding

*... women had received the right to vote in national elections and to sit in the Parliament of Canada before the women of St. Paul's were admitted as members of Session.*

Most churchwomen do not give much thought to their political status within the church. Yet the organizing and naming of any special-interest group is essentially a political act. The women of the Halifax Wesleyan Female Benevolent Society could have come together informally to perform their charitable work. Money could have been raised, missions studied, manses painted, and suppers cooked without benefit of statements of purpose, constitutions, and slates of elected officers. The need to organize formally and to identify their organizations as a continuing presence within the congregations demonstrates women's sense of alienation from churches that did not accept them as fully participating members.

It is difficult from the perspective of 1983 to imagine churchwomen's groups as radical or subversive. In the nineteenth century, however, they were met with suspicion and were carefully watched over by clergy or laymen. In her account of early Presbyterian groups in the United States, Elizabeth Verdesi writes about women's meetings held in 1811: "One minister, after opening their meeting with prayer (since women were not permitted to pray in public at this time), was invited by the ladies to leave. He declined, explaining, 'No one knew what

they would pray for if left alone.' "

The situation in Canada was not much different. Dr. Christine MacInnes points to the novelty of Halifax women even thinking they might organize a society of their own: "A very daring idea for women of that day! That they might draw up rules and even have a name."

Even when ministers were sympathetic to the idea of women's organizations, other members of the congregation didn't hesitate to oppose them. "It was June 3rd, 1897 when Rev. Dr. Hincks and Rev. George McCullough gathered seven women of the Congregation to organize a Women's Missionary Society in the Victoria Square Methodist Church. Women's organizations were frowned upon and so a cloud of criticism and stiff opposition came from the men of the Church. . ."

Another account tells of a heated debate that went on in the newspaper of a small Ontario town after a "Mother's Meeting" had been organized in 1900 to do WCTU work.

*This drew a rousing letter from a man in the Methodist congregation who denounced that idea of married women meeting in any organized manner and neglecting their children. The following week an angry mother wrote a scathing letter of reply in the newspaper. She lashed out with 'I think it's high time for fathers to turn a new leaf and stay at home one evening in the week and give the mothers a chance.' She then attacked the Methodist with this comment. 'I am sorry this Methodist cannot find some better employment than trying to put out a flickering*

*flame that a few praying women are trying to fan. Our meeting will be open to all, but there will be no tea drinking. We thank "Pro Bona Publica" for his suggestions, and will make him welcome to some of our gatherings.'*

By signing his letter "For the good of the people," this Methodist gentleman has provided a clue to the nature of the objections to women's groups. "People" in his patriarchal thinking, meant "male society." Obviously the "Mother's Meeting" was committed to what they understood to be the "good of the people" in a more inclusive sense.

Women in most congregations worked under the direction of clergy or church officers. A Ladies' Aid formed in 1929 stated in its constitution that it would "...with the consent and approval of the minister, session and officers of the church, try with God's help to do our bit towards building up the work in our midst." One wonders what might have happened if God had called these women to a task that the "minister, session and officers of the church" did not approve. It is this very issue — the direct access of each individual to God — that prompted the Reformation. The women of the church, it seems, were the only Protestants still in need of intercession.

(Some) women ... had to seek permission from their board before they could clean the church. Others had "to receive the permission of the session" to hold a bridal shower for the minister's daughter in the church. In another area women frequently found themselves locked out of their church on their meeting days and met in the church shed. All of these situations suggest that women had no real "ownership" — spiritual or material — of their churches. Here, as in the broader society, they were regarded as non-primary human beings who, in the proper ordering of things, should commit themselves to the comfort, the support, and the continuance of those humans who were considered primary in the patriarchal worldview.

## COMMUNIQUE'ELLES

### BIMONTHLY FEMINIST MAGAZINE

*Individuals:*  
free in Québec  
\$12 in Canada  
\$18 elsewhere

*Institutions:*  
\$18 everywhere

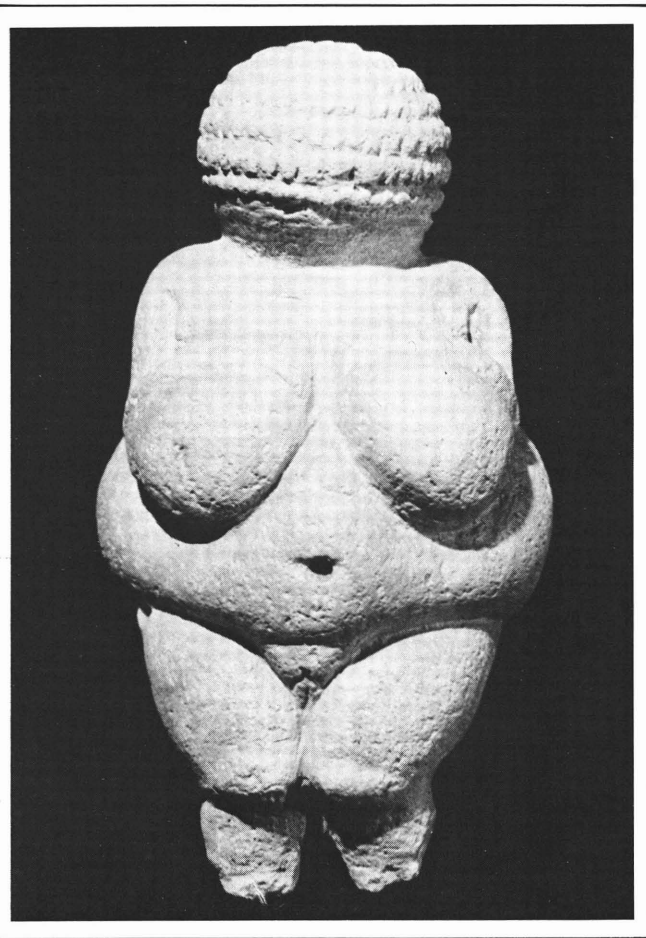
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To the degree that women's groups could achieve their goals without disrupting or threatening the existing power relationships between men and women, they were generally supported by the church as a whole: "... the men of the church were only too ready to accept contributions of money and prayer from women, but could not abide their speaking in public." It was only when they began to have a sense of their own calling and mission and developed autonomous enterprises that the church became uneasy about its women's groups.

While many churchwomen have remained unaware of the political implications of their organizations, some others have been quite deliberate about their strategies to overcome gender discrimination. The current issue of inclusive language, for example, is one that Methodist women in Saskatchewan would have been familiar with in 1906: "At the Methodist General Conference of 1894, the Presidents of Ladies' Aids were admitted to Quarterly Boards, and in 1906 a motion was introduced to change the term layman to lay member, which would automatically admit women to church Courts. (It was defeated, but only by 42 votes.)" Perhaps those brave pioneers felt the same way their sister from British Columbia does today when she writes, "enough is enough!"

Formal organizations strengthened the political status of women, both collectively and individually, in the church. The first women to sit on boards or sessions were usually there as representatives of their group. Many congregations did not admit women to their policy-making bodies until representation of the United Church Women became mandatory in 1962. Now increasing numbers of women are serving on their own merit, not as representatives but as partners with men in the community of the church. Although women constitute the majority of its membership, however, the United Church continues to be dominated by men.

Photo: Courtesy J. Stuckey



## THE VENUS OF WILLENDORF

The Venus of Willendorf  
 Projected in colour on a vast wall  
 Commands space, attention, reverence.  
 The fat woman sits open mouthed and quite still.  
 The figure stands on legs that dwindle to a point  
 As surely as though her huge belly and breasts,  
 Her centre of gravity, keep her upright, stable.  
 Does she ever sway? Slightly? At all?  
 She is a goddess,  
 No pushing her about.  
 She is nature,  
 No arguing with her.  
 "Oh" the fat woman cries in wonder, "oh."

The fat woman goes to the goddess.  
 The goddess is small enough to hold in the palm of one hand.  
 She is a tiny image, a life-size woman, an enormous goddess.  
 "Her belly is the shape of mine,  
 My breasts resemble hers,  
 My heart goes out to her."  
 The fat woman is nearly crying.  
 She pleads with the goddess  
 But the goddess is not of flesh,  
 She partakes of massive stone  
 And she speaks no words.

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