

## A DECLARATION OF FAITH ON WOMEN'S ORDINATION

**A Declaration of Faith:** God, through the Holy Spirit, calls both women and men to participate fully in all the ministries of the church.

This declaration testifies to our belief that women and men were created equally in the image of God and that they therefore should be treated with equal respect and dignity. It testifies to the profound unity of all who have been baptized. It testifies to our experience over centuries that God has been calling both women and men to ministries of spiritual leadership and granting them the gifts and graces to carry out those roles. In some of the cultural contexts in which our churches live today, this declaration goes against the prevailing ethos. Thus faithful Christians are often called to be countercultural. Theological integrity and justice require that the churches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) in solidarity courageously declare their commitment to assure that both women and men have equal standing to reflect their common incorporation into the body of Christ in baptism and service.

The churches of the WCRC now pledge that our common practice will be to welcome into ordained ministry women who experience that call and who demonstrate the gifts necessary for leadership and service in church ministries. Their placement and any compensation will be determined on the same basis as for men.

### **The Context**

*Why do we make this declaration now?*

The women's pre-assembly at the Uniting General Council in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA (2010), through its commitment to full partnership between women and men, affirmed both the need to work towards a binding commitment of the Communion to the ordination of women, and also the need to achieve equal representation of women and men on the Executive Committee.

The Uniting General Council then affirmed women's ordination as central to the understanding of communion, stating: "True unity cannot be realized in a context where the call of God to women to actualize their gifts in the ministry of Word and Sacrament is not recognized."<sup>1</sup> Among the recommendations approved by the WCRC General Council was a commitment to "...promote the ordination of women and work toward a time when the ordination of women will be binding on communion."<sup>2</sup> To achieve these mandates, we believe we have to work toward a declaration of faith, and this document attempts to address this issue.

The brutality of the treatment of women across the world today reflects a long-standing view in some cultures that women are by nature inferior to men, born to serve and obey men, that the girl is less valuable than the boy, that women deserve neither respect nor dignity. We see that the girl and the mother are often the last in the family to be fed and are the least educated, so that their life possibilities are limited. We see mass rape of girls and women used as a weapon of war with appalling consequences. We see women forbidden to leave their homes and take part in the wider life of society. Even in highly developed nations, women are paid less for the same work than men, sometimes have restricted access to healthcare and are rarely fully represented in national governing structures.

Churches rightly protest assaults on the human rights of women, but their moral authority is compromised when they demonstrate by their institutional life that they, too, believe in the inferiority of women and their incapacity to serve as ordained church leaders. The churches' refusal to ordain women is experienced by them as painful oppression, robbing them of their proper dignity. Even when the women have been ordained, they often face discrimination and marginalization.

The churches of the Reformed family today, spanning the globe and rooted in diverse cultures, have the opportunity and the obligation to witness before the world that women and men alike are created in the image of God, deserve equal respect and dignity, and can find in the institutional life of the church an affirmation of those beliefs. The ordination of women is a powerful witness to the equality of women and men in the eyes of God. It is also an expression of gratitude for women's rich gifts of leadership that invigorate the life of the churches.

### **The Biblical Foundation: Creation and New Creation**

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<sup>1</sup> Record of Proceedings, United General Council 2010, Grand Rapids, USA, p.160

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*

The Bible, foundation of Reformed belief and practice, has been used to support both the approval and disapproval of women's ordination. The Bible in fact both reflects and challenges the patriarchal world in which it was written, prompting us to define a hermeneutical lens through which to interpret the Bible. Reformed Christians generally read the Bible in the light of the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ, aided by critical biblical scholarship and rigorous reflection and discernment in the community of faith, upheld by prayer. This approach to discerning God's will avoids simply studying and citing isolated texts. God's grace for the whole of creation leads us to approach the Bible embracing mercy, justice and liberation in the face of the fallen world and structures of oppression. Galatians 5:1: "For freedom, Christ has set us free." There has been a fundamental shift in critical scholarship that has supported a renewed understanding of the equality proclaimed in the Gospel. This has guided us in our firm conviction that the ordination of women is a fully biblical imperative. We will sketch the basis of that belief, focusing on two texts: Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28.

**Creation:** Genesis 1:27-28: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (NRSV).

Fundamental to our understanding of the proper role of women is this verse, announcing at the very beginning of the biblical narrative that women and men together are created in God's image. This is a statement of equality and solidarity. Neither here nor in the following verse's charge to be fruitful and multiply and have dominion over the earth is there any suggestion of division of labor by sex or of women's subordination.

Opponents of women's ordination often point to Genesis 2:18: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner" (NRSV). The term "helper" has been seen as a sign of subordination. In the Hebrew, however, the word carries the opposite connotation. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures the same word often describes God creating and saving Israel, a source of strong support. The recognition by the man in Genesis 2:23 that the woman is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" is again a declaration of mutuality and solidarity.

We reject theologies that teach that women are by their biological nature inferior to men, or that women reflect the image of God less fully than men, or that women's proper role is limited to procreation and the domestic realm, excluding them from taking public responsibility within creation.

God's intention at creation is equality and solidarity between women and men in harmony with all creation. After the fall both the woman and the man experience distortion of those relationships. In Genesis 3:16, the woman hears that she should be subject to her husband as punishment for sin, and the man is punished by the cursing of the land and his labor. The biblical narrative continues then to portray a patriarchal society. Jewish women in the Hebrew Scriptures rarely appear in official leadership. We do read of Queen Esther and of Deborah the judge, and of prophets like Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah. A rich succession of able women nonetheless pervades the biblical text, such as the clever Hebrew midwives in Egypt, and the beloved Ruth with her own book.

**New Creation:** Galatians 3:27-28: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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" (NRSV).

The ministry of Jesus portrays many challenges to the oppressive practices of society, where public contact between women and men was strictly regulated. For example, he intervened against stoning of the woman taken in adultery. He allowed the hemorrhaging woman to touch his garment, and he healed her. He was surrounded by both women and men as disciples and empowered them in life and ministry. He taught about the reign of God that was already beginning among them and that would upend the current way of life. His intimate friendships with Mary and Martha permitted them to engage in theological conversation. He accepted the Syro-Phoenician woman's challenge to his understanding of his mission, and yielded to her plea to heal her daughter. He crossed the conventional boundary by engaging in a conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, talking with her at length, and enabling her to return to her community and minister by sharing the good news. His interaction with Mary Magdalene transformed her into a faithful disciple who witnessed the resurrection. After his resurrection, he appeared to women disciples and sent them to tell the others that he lived. These examples demonstrate the countercultural nature of Jesus's ministry and indicate the value and significance Jesus gave to women in ministry.

In the band of disciples that gathered in Jerusalem to pray after Jesus' resurrection were "certain women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus" (Acts 1:14, NRSV). All were present at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Peter, addressing the people of Jerusalem to explain how the resurrected Jesus was the Messiah, took his text from the prophet Joel: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters

shall prophesy...Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18, NRSV; cf. Joel 2:28-9). In this new era of the reign of God where the Spirit has been poured out, women will have a far more egalitarian role than before. So it should not surprise us to read in the book of Acts about women prophets like the daughters of Philip, about Priscilla with her husband teaching the preacher Apollos and accompanying Paul on his journey, risking their necks for him, he says, and about the women hosting house churches. Paul speaks warmly and gratefully about his women colleagues in ministry: among them Junia the apostle; Phoebe, the minister (or deacon) of the church of Cenchreae; Priscilla and Mary. Some had been jailed with him (Romans 16:1-16). The widows who cared for the poor (I Timothy 5) were understood by John Calvin to be part of the office of deacon. There are many records in the early centuries of the ordained women deacons.

It is in the context of the new creation, where the Holy Spirit calls those least expected to give leadership, that we read Galatians 3:27-28 as part of an ancient baptismal rite. All who are called into faith and baptized into Christ's body have become one family where human barriers accepted by society must fall. We know from the book of Acts how difficult a struggle it was for those early Christians to accept that the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, previously sanctioned by religion, had been broken by the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet a clear decision was made that Gentiles given the gift of faith must be accepted into the community without circumcision. Some of our churches were still struggling in the late nineteenth century with the implications of that phrase "no longer slave or free," but the teaching of the Bible eventually led them to decide that slavery was morally wrong and that Christians could not be slave-holders. It took another century for some of our churches to understand that the racial barrier has also been broken by the Holy Spirit, and there can be no racially segregated churches. Our Reformed family at the WARC General Council in Ottawa in 1982 declared that apartheid (which had extended to church structures) is sin, and justifying it morally and theologically is "a travesty of the Gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy."

We now are at a moment in history when our churches must declare that among the baptized there is no longer male and female. This means that men can no longer be exclusively privileged with church leadership.

### **Experience in the Life of the Church**

Women lost their equality with men in the Church in the early centuries as the house churches moved out into public spaces, and the Church became institutionalized. Theologians living in the dualistic thought of the Hellenistic world lost the Hebraic belief in the goodness of creation. They adopted from Greek philosophy and Roman law unbiblical views of the subordination and inferiority of women. Thomas Aquinas, for example, adopted Aristotle's view of women as defective males, damaged in the process of gestation. Apart from some women deacons in the East who marched with the clergy in the early middle ages, the only official role available to medieval women in the church was that of a nun; but some nuns did exercise remarkable influence. Christine de Pisan, a lay woman, set off around 1400 a centuries-long literary debate about the nature of women in which she challenged the theologians' assumptions. Marie Dentiere in the early years of the Reformation in Geneva took up this debate, insisting that the liberating Gospel called on women to speak and write, and she did. She asked, "Are there two gospels, one for men, another for women?" Women writing in this tradition pointed out the varied roles of women in the New Testament, reading the Bible very differently than either Catholic or Protestant male theologians. Attempts were made to silence these women.

Luther's Reformation, honored in 2017 at its 500th anniversary, gave to all of Protestantism the concept of the priesthood of all believers, the right of all the baptized to stand before God to pray for one another and to teach one another divine things, declaring God's gracious love and forgiveness to one another. This priesthood is distinct, however, from public ministry on behalf of a congregation. Both Lutheran and Reformed theologians repudiated the Aristotelian view of women, gave greater dignity to marriage, and even encouraged women to join congregational singing in public worship. Nonetheless they did not understand the priesthood of all believers to undermine the tradition of exclusively male clergy carrying out public ministry. After five hundred years, it is time for us to declare that a full understanding of the priesthood of all believers calls for equality of women and men in public ministry as well.

The ordination of women already has a long-standing tradition in the Reformed family. The Congregationalists have been ordaining women ministers since 1853, when Antoinette Brown became the first woman Congregational minister. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church ordained Louisa Woosley in 1889, but no other Presbyterians followed for many years. There have been women deacons since at least the late 19th century, and women elders since at least the 1930's. Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, increasing numbers of Reformed churches around the world have been regularly ordaining women as ministers, elders and deacons, and today most do so. Therefore, we have abundant evidence that women in diverse cultures on every continent can become fine theologians and have fruitful ministries. Our churches have confirmed through their experience with faithful women leaders that God is indeed calling women to ordained ministries and through them strengthening the churches.

Through history and in the present there is a disturbing recurrent experience in churches that do not ordain women. It is the disjunction of ordination from the practice of functions ordinarily related to ordained ministry. In all our churches women carry out tasks that churches with Presbyterian governance typically assign to elders and deacons; yet where ordination of women is refused, women carry out those tasks without the authority of office, without the ability to participate in the decision-making of governing bodies, and without the collegial support of ordained colleagues. In unusual situations of flux and transition, where pastors are scarce, where men are at war, on the mission field and in remote locations, able women are also called to exercise pastoral functions. They organize churches, lead public worship, preach, lead and teach in theological schools, and provide pastoral care. Yet even if they are theologically educated, they, too, lack the authority of office, participation in governing bodies, and collegial support, and they cannot offer the sacraments. They are also paid much less than pastors. The Reformed tradition has closely tied ordination to the functions of ministry. If women are trusted to carry out the functions of ministry, they should be ordained. This is a matter of faith and of justice.

When surveyed, most of our member churches that do not ordain women do not cite theology as the reason but culture. Some live in contexts where secular society does not accept women's leadership. Some are minorities in predominantly Roman Catholic or Orthodox countries and feel ecumenical pressure to refrain from actions their neighbors find offensive. These cultural pressures are significant and sometimes life threatening. The Church throughout its history has faced such challenge in its struggle to make a faithful witness in the world. The WCRC needs to accompany these churches in solidarity. In Christ we are called to be a new creation, transcending the oppressive aspects of culture.

Since the Seoul General Council of WARC in 1989, general councils have been calling on the churches to re-examine their practice if they do not ordain women and developing ways to assist them in this process. Those churches that do ordain women have been asked to study whether women ministers have equal access to placement opportunities and equal pay for equal work. The survey made by the office of partnership between women and men in 2009 (WARC) presented not very precise information since all churches did not respond properly. It showed that at least 42 churches do not ordain women to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Those churches are distributed as follow: Europe 7, Africa 18, Middle East 3, Latin America 5, Asia 9. From 2010 until now we have not been able to elicit a clear response from the member churches, though the regional councils that allow us to update these figures point out that those numbers are still valid.

We now seek to live out our commitment to communion and justice as we make this common Declaration of Faith, praying: Living God, renew and transform us!