

METHODIST WOMEN LOCAL PREACHERS

by Dorothy Graham

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It is a revision of Chapter 8, 'Women Local Preachers', by Dorothy Graham, in *Workaday Preachers: the story of Methodist local preaching*, ed. Geoffrey Milburn and Margaret Batty, published by the Methodist Publishing House, 20 Ivatt Way, Peterborough PE3 7PG, UK, 1995. A copy of this book is held by the Wesley Historical Society (New Zealand).

A brief description follows:

Chapters One to Six set out the story of local preaching. Subsequent chapters and the Introduction explore various related themes. The well known conflict of the Wesley brothers with the Anglican establishment is chronicled, also the lesser known difficulties regarding acceptance of lay preachers by, firstly, the Wesleys themselves and, later, the ordained Methodist ministers, and their reluctance to acknowledge the excellent performance of women preachers.

The lives of selected outstanding personalities, both men and women, are followed through.

Altogether the book is a fascinating treatment of the development of the lay ministry of Methodism in the British Isles, its internal conflicts and external opposition, together with lay Methodist influence on the enactment of social legislation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fully accredited as a local preacher in 1954, Dr E.D. Graham, BA, BD (below right), was born in Warwickshire, educated there, and at Leeds and Birmingham Universities. She taught in Scotland and Yorkshire, and latterly in a Birmingham school as Head of Religious Education.

Since 1980 Dorothy has been General Secretary of the Wesley Historical Society, and Connexional Archives Officer since 1989.

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Dorothy Graham (right) with W.H.S. Committee members and a friend.
Left to Right: Jill Weeks, Dave Roberts, Brian Bell, Verna Mossong.

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INTRODUCTION

It was in 1742 that John Wesley learned Thomas Maxfield, a layman, had started to preach at the Foundery in London. Maxfield had been left in charge of the Methodist Society there while John was in Bristol.

John hastily returned to London to be greeted by his mother, Susanna, who had heard Maxfield preach. She advised John, "Take care, John, what you do respecting that young man, for he is as surely called of God to preach as you are".¹

John had the sense to heed his mother and so local preaching could be said to have started. There were objections from many quarters, but Wesley was not ashamed of his preachers because they were effective. Charles Wesley was worried about the danger of separation from the Church of England, but John had already faced and accepted that possibility. He felt that the fruit of his preachers' labours was proof that God was with them - people were being converted.

Wesley had developed his organisation and appointed full-time travelling preachers (itinerants) to look after his rounds (circuits), but it was a while before local preachers as such fitted into the system. All preachers began as exhorters who first spoke in a class meeting and then to the society. Soon the exhorters started to read a Bible passage and comment on it. The great leap from exhorting to preaching was when the exhorter, who could be male or female, 'took a text'. Although evidence is scarce it is obvious that, just as happens today, an itinerant was first a local preacher, but the actual name 'local preacher' certainly existed by 1751.

In 1753 the Minutes of Conference decreed that any married itinerant whose wife could not support herself must revert to being a local preacher, and by 1755 the Minutes identify three categories of preachers -itinerants (34); 'chief local preachers' (15) and 'half-itinerants' (12).

Local preacher status had risen by 1758 when the Minutes stated that if the itinerant had not time to examine the lives and experiences of his band members, then a local preacher might do it. When we remember how important the bands were in early Methodism we can see that Wesley was placing great faith in his local preachers by allowing this.

So it seems that Wesley recognised their value as being equal to that of the itinerants, except that, for various reasons they were not able to commit themselves to itinerating

¹ H. Moore, *The Life of John Wesley*, 2 vols. (1824-5) p.507.
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and therefore worked in the local situation. To all intents and purposes to Wesley they were simply his 'non-travelling preachers'. He had known many of them right from the beginning and they were pioneers and influential in their local societies and communities.

By 1767, John Wesley was beginning to wonder if he was losing his tight control over the local preachers, and so the itinerants were urged to "Fix a regular plan for the local preachers and see that they keep it," to make sure that the local preachers led blameless lives and observed Wesley's doctrines. However, Methodism had expanded so rapidly that in 1787 the Conference ruled that no-one should preach without a note from Wesley himself or his circuit superintendent minister, and a similar rule for exhorters was made in 1790 but by that year John had virtually lost all control over his local preachers.

After Wesley's death in March 1791 a number of matters had to be resolved and not least was that of the discipline relating to the many local preachers working throughout the country. For as we can see by the following some preachers, both local and travelling, regarded themselves as above Methodist discipline.

The rule of 1793 read "All Local Preachers shall meet in class. No exception shall be made, in respect to any who have been Travelling Preachers in former years," and "no (travelling) preacher who had been suspended or expelled shall on any account be employed as a Local Preacher, without the authority of the Conference".²

It became increasingly obvious that some official regulation of local preachers was necessary, so in 1796 the Conference established the Local Preachers' Meeting. This meant that preaching was vetted, which helped both the circuits and the preachers themselves as a standard had to be maintained. It was decreed that the Superintendent should "regularly meet the Local Preachers once a quarter, and let none be admitted but those who are proposed and approved at that meeting; and if in any circuit this is not practicable, let them be proposed and approved at the quarterly meeting".³

WOMEN LOCAL PREACHERS

So having very briefly outlined the beginnings of local preaching we turn to women local preachers. The movement started by John Wesley had a great impact on the lives of the men and women of his time and many lay people wanted to pass on their new-found faith and experience.

In the case of men there was no fundamental objection to this, but when women wanted to do the same there were reservations, though the giving of testimonies and even exhortations was allowed as these mostly took place within the family or in

² Minutes of Conference (1793) p.276.

³ *Ibid.* (1796)p.369.

classes, and from the early years women became class leaders, especially of women's classes.

They were even permitted to speak in services occasionally, but preaching a sermon was quite a different matter.

Wesley and Wesleyanism. John Wesley himself was not against women giving short exhortations, but he would not agree to their actually preaching sermons. In 1761 he declared that, "the Methodists do not allow of women preachers".⁴

However, there were women, for example, Sarah Crosby, Sarah Ryan, Grace Walton and Ann Cutler, to whom Wesley gave guarded support in their ministry because sinners were saved through their work. Nevertheless, in 1780 he stated that he was not prepared to allow women to preach, and wrote on 25 March to George Robinson at Grimsby,

"I desire Mr Peacock to put a final stop to the preaching of women in his circuit. If it were suffered it would grow, and we know not where it would end".⁵

However, as time went on the matter was to a certain extent taken out of his hands and he was forced to give tacit, if reluctant, approval.

Eventually it seems, he was prepared to judge each case on its merits, rather than lay down a categorical rule. Zechariah Taft says of Sarah Mallett that not only Wesley, but also the 1787 Wesleyan Conference, "designates, authorises, and so to speak, ordains her as a preacher in his connexion,"⁶ and that this opened the gateway for other females who wished to preach.

Indeed in 1789 John Wesley gave Sarah advice about conducting her services. "It gives me pleasure to hear that prejudice dies away and our preachers behave in a friendly manner... Never continue the service above an hour at once, singing, preaching, prayer and all. You are not to judge by your own feelings, but by the word of God. Never scream. Never speak above the natural pitch of your voice; it is disgusting to the hearers. It gives them pain, not pleasure. And it is destroying yourself. It is offering God murder for sacrifice".⁷

This letter shows that if Wesley did not actually encourage women preachers and never appointed one as an itinerant, several were travelling preachers in all but name.

⁴ *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, AM (hereafter JWL) ed. John Telford 1933, Standard Edition, 8 vols. iv p. 133.

⁵ *Ibid.* vii p. 9.

⁶ Zechariah Taft, *Biographical Sketches of Holy Women* 2 vols. (vol. i 1825; vol. ii Leeds 1828) Preface i. p.iv and p.84.

⁷ *JWL* viii.190.

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Two women particularly notable for their preaching abilities were Mary Bosanquet and Mary Barritt (Barrett).

Mary Bosanquet began her ministry in Leytonstone, near London and continued it when she moved in 1768 to Cross Hall, Yorkshire. People came from miles to her services, which in time developed to include a sermon though she always refused to preach from the pulpit, preferring to stand on the stairs.

In 1771 Mary Bosanquet wrote a long letter to John Wesley about female preaching and her attitude to it, asking his advice. She explained that she and Sarah Ryan had been taking "little kind of prayer meetings, etc" which had been blessed, but some people had raised objections, based on scriptural injunctions about women keeping silence. Needless to say Mary put a different interpretation on these texts,⁸ believing she had an extraordinary call.

In his reply Wesley agreed with her. "I think the strength of the cause rests there, in your having an extra-ordinary call; so I am persuaded has every one of our lay-preachers; otherwise I could not countenance his preaching at all. It is plain to me that the work of God, termed Methodism, is an extraordinary dispensation of HIS providence. Therefore do not wonder if several things occur therein which do not fall under the ordinary rules of discipline. St Paul's ordinary rule was 'I permit not a woman to speak in the congregation', yet in extraordinary cases he made a few exceptions; at Corinth in particular".⁹ Some people asked Mary why she did not become an itinerant, but she said that was not her call; others wanted to know why she insisted on 'holding a meeting' rather than saying she was going to preach. Her reply was that it was less ostentatious, gave her more freedom and caused less offence. To those who asked why she did not become a Quaker, Mary answered that she felt "that the spirit



Mary Bosanquet

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⁸ 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Corinthians 14:34; 11:5; Z Taft, *The Scripture Doctrine of Women's Preaching* (1820) pp. 19-21.

⁹ Taft, *op.cit.* i pp.21-23; JWL v p.257.

of the Lord is more at work among the Methodists... Besides I do nothing but what Mr Wesley approves".¹⁰

After she married the Rev John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, Shropshire in 1781, Mary carried on with her ministry and regularly 'preached' to mixed congregations, which often included clergymen. In fact John Wesley is said to have recorded that he heard the sainted Fletcher preach an excellent sermon in the church in the morning and, "Mrs Fletcher a more excellent sermon in the schoolroom in the evening".¹¹

In 1803 Mary Fletcher wrote to Mary Taft (nee Barritt) explaining that although she could not travel far afield now she had her own preaching room with large congregations and "For some years I was often led to speak from a text. Of late I feel greater approbation in what we call expounding, taking part or whole of a chapter, and speaking upon it... I do look upon the call of women as an extra - not an ordinary call; therefore I strove, and do strive now so to act, not out of custom but only when I have a clear leading..."¹²

The 1803 Conference considered the question, "Should women be permitted to preach among us?" and passed the following resolution:

"We are of the opinion that, in general they ought not.

1. Because a vast majority of our people are opposed to it.
2. Because their preaching does not at all seem necessary, there being a sufficiency of Preachers.... to supply all the places in our connexion with regular preaching. But if any woman among us thinks she has an extraordinary call from God to speak in public, (and we are sure it must be an extraordinary call that can authorise it,) we are of opinion she should, in general, address her own sex, and those only. And, upon this condition alone, should any woman be permitted to preach in any part of our connexion; and when so permitted, it should be under the following regulations:
 1. They shall not preach in the Circuit where they reside, until they have obtained the approbation of the Superintendent and a Quarterly Meeting.
 2. Before they go into any other Circuit to preach, they shall have a written invitation from the Superintendent of such Circuit, and a recommendatory note from the Superintendent of their own Circuit".¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.25; Henry Moore, *The Life of Mrs Fletcher* (1876 - 17th ed.) p. 125.

¹¹ Joseph Ritson, *The Romance of Primitive Methodism* (1909) p. 133.

¹² Taft, *op. cit.* i p. 20.

¹³ *Minutes of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference* (hereafter *WMMins.*) 1803 (1862 ed.) p. 187.

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So it is obvious that any woman who felt a call to preach needed to be very determined. Inevitably there were a number of 'irregular' preachers who ignored the regulation. One of the most famous, Barritt, started preaching in her early twenties, travelled many miles in the north of England and many of her converts later became well-known Wesleyan ministers. She married the Rev Zachariah Taft, a Wesleyan minister, in 1802.

In her memoirs, she emphasised that she only went into a circuit by invitation from the superintendent and other friends, unless, on very rare occasions, she was absolutely convinced it was "my duty and the will of God, for me to go, that I durst not at the peril of my soul neglect going". From the second volume other memoirs, it seems apparent that she worked virtually as another itinerant alongside her husband.

Indeed Joseph Benson was reputed to have written to Taft that Conference had not realised "he was taking a female to assist him in the ministry".¹⁴

Although at first Taft paid lip-service to the Conference resolution he was convinced of the validity of women's preaching for its own sake and not just because of his wife's talents. He wrote several articles on the subject¹⁵ and a two-volume work, *Biographical Sketches of the Lives and Public Ministry of various Holy Women*.

It is not possible to say how many 'unofficial' women local preachers there were in Wesleyan Methodism in the period after 1803, but probably the most famous was Elizabeth Evans, immortalised by George Eliot as Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*.



Mary Taft, nee Barritt

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¹⁴ See 'A Famous Lady Preacher' by Dr Waller and the Editor, an article from the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* (hereafter WMM) (1907) pp.538-44. The same day John Pawson wrote to the church at Dover commending Mrs Taft.

¹⁵ Zechariah Taft, *Thoughts on Female Preaching* (Dover, 1803); *The Scripture Doctrine of Women's Preaching: stated and examined by Z. Taft* (York, 1820): a reply to an article inserted in WMM for April 1809 entitled 'Thoughts on Women's Preaching' extracted from Dr James McKnight; 'Thoughts on a Proper Call to the Christian Ministry' in the Bible Christian Magazine (1826); MSS correspondence in the Taft Collection in the Methodist Archives and Research Centre.

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Elizabeth was converted in 1798 and began speaking in prayer meetings and sick visiting, but she really started to preach around 1802-3.

She travelled from Nottingham into Derbyshire and Staffordshire on a sixteen week missionary tour, but finding much opposition and that all doors were closed to her, she returned to Nottingham. It must have been during this preaching tour that Samuel Evans, a local preacher from Roston Common, heard Elizabeth preach at Ashbourne and their marriage in 1804 provided the opportunity for them to preach together. Now that she was no longer a female preacher on her own Elizabeth met with much less opposition!

Many villages experienced conversions and societies were formed.

The Evans first lived at Roston, then in Derby before finally settling at Wirksworth in Derbyshire in 1819 where Elizabeth formed a class of four members out of which grew four more classes. The names of both Elizabeth and Samuel appeared as local preachers on the Cromford plan up to 1832.



Memorial to Elizabeth Evans (1775-1849) at the Crown Yard Heritage Centre, Wirksworth, Derbyshire. D.Graham photo. Reproduced from *Workaday Preachers* with kind permission of the Methodist Publishing House.

After the Arminian Methodist (or Derby Faith) secession, the 1832 Wesleyan Conference discussed the matter and apparently decided women preachers should not be encouraged, so it was suggested that "Mrs Mary Evans while allowed to take appointments, should be indicated on the plan • by a simple asterisk". Elizabeth refused and she and Samuel joined the Arminian Methodists, but later returned to Wesleyan Methodism.¹⁶

Three other Wesleyan women worthy of a brief mention are Mary Sewell, Sarah Mallett and Diana Thomas. The fact that they came from as far apart as East Anglia

¹⁶ H.B. Kendall, *The Origin and History of the Primitive Methodist Church*, 2 vols. (n.d.c. 1905), i, p. 142.

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and the Welsh borders shows that there were able women in many parts of the country who felt called to preach.

Mary began her public ministry when she was twenty and continued until her death. She preached, often in the open air, throughout East Anglia and Lincolnshire, where "Her word was made quick and powerful to some, who are now ashamed to acknowledge that a feeble woman was the instrument of their salvation. But the day is at hand which shall declare it".¹⁷

The oldest register of the Great Yarmouth Circuit (part of the Norwich Circuit) in 1785 recorded that among the five local preachers was "Sister Mary Sewell", a class leader at Thurlton. On 27 October 1787 Joseph Harper, an itinerant in the Norwich circuit wrote, "We give the right hand of fellowship to Sarah Mallett, and shall have no objection to her being a preacher in our connexion so long as she continues to preach the Methodist Doctrine and attends to our Discipline, Josh. Harper B.N. You receive this by order of Mr Wesley and the Conference".¹⁸ As Sarah's name is in the 1785-7 list of members at Loddon also in the Norwich Circuit, it seems that that Circuit had two female Wesleyan preachers at about the same time.

On the other side of the country was Diana Thomas, whose diary reveals that in 1809 she was authorised by the Kington quarterly meeting and William France, her superintendent minister, to preach in the circuit. According to the diary she travelled thousands of miles and preached widely throughout Wales and the borders.

In spite of this, in her brief obituary notice in 1821 *The Methodist Magazine* makes no reference to her preaching.¹⁹ Perhaps the editor, a certain Jabez Bunting, suppressed this part of her story because of disapproval of women's preaching! If so then it is likely that there may be many more such omissions and consequently numerous 'hidden' women local preachers in Wesleyan Methodism.

A number of travelling preachers' wives became involved, with many exhorting and yet more 'prophesying' and some actually engaging in 'preaching'. So Mrs Hainsworth, after her marriage, continued to preach and exhort as opportunities occurred and often accompanied her husband to his appointments, speaking after he had preached. After his death she took occasional services.²⁰

¹⁷ Taft, *op. cit.* i, pp.326-8.

¹⁸ J Conder Natrass, 'Some Notes from the Oldest Register of the Great Yarmouth Circuit' *WHS Proc.* vol. 3 (1902) p.74.

¹⁹ William Parlbay, 'Diana Thomas, of Kington, Lay preacher in the Hereford Circuit 1759-1821', *WHS Proc.* vol. 14 (1924, Part 5) pp.110-11.

²⁰ Taft, *op. cit.* ii, pp.224-7.

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Mary Wiltshaw sometimes took the place of her husband, helping him with his work, particularly in visiting villages.²¹

Women preachers were also active in Ireland and the stories of two are particularly interesting, not only for the women themselves, but also for the comments which arise from them. Alice Cambridge joined the Society at Bandon in 1780 and soon began praying and preaching in public, visiting Kinsale, Cork, Limerick and Dublin. However, in 1791 "many of the Methodists, including some of the preachers, pronounced her public address irregular and such as ought not to be tolerated in the Christian church".²²

She, therefore, wrote to John Wesley for advice and in one of his last letters he replied, "Mr Barber has the glory of God at heart; and so have his fellow labourers. Give them all honour, and obey them in all things as far as conscience permits. But it will not permit you to be silent when God commands you to speak: yet I would have you give as little offence as possible; and therefore I would advise you not to speak at any place where a preacher is speaking at the same time, lest you should draw away his hearers. Also avoid the first appearance of pride or magnify yourself... If you want books or anything, let me know; I have your happiness much at heart".²³ This was probably John Wesley's last word on female preaching. As we have noted, after his death opinion hardened so the story of Ann Lutton of Moira shows that local practice was not always in line with the official ruling. She was converted around 1815 and although she only preached to other women, many were converted. Apparently she received no opposition from the travelling preachers and indeed was "encouraged to proceed". Taft comments that "if female labours had always been properly countenanced amongst the Wesleyan Methodists it is likely no other religious denomination would have produced such a number of eminently useful females... Miss Lutton... was not only allowed, but also exhorted to use the talent committed to her care".²⁴

The 1803 Conference edict meant that women preachers in Wesleyan Methodism found it increasingly difficult to exercise their ministry and even though in 1804 the Conference was very short of male preachers, it would not sanction the use of women. The 1803 regulation remained in force for more than one hundred years and in fact, was not repealed till women were officially admitted to the ministry in 1972 though the phrase, "address only her sex", was deleted in 1910, but with a rider added

²¹ *Ibid.* pp. 184-193.

²² Taft, *op. cit.* i, pp.269-70; C.H. Crookshank, *History of Methodism in Ireland* (Belfast, 1885-88) 3 vols. ii, p.400.

²³ *JWL* viii p.259.

²⁴ Taft, *op. cit.* i, pp.326-8.

restricting women to preaching in neighbourhoods where there was no special opposition.²⁵ This was official Wesleyan policy up to 1918.

A paragraph in the report of the 1885 Wesleyan Methodist Conference gives some idea of Wesleyan thinking before these changes. The subject of 'female preaching' came up in connection with the printing of a woman's name as a Local-preacher upon a Circuit-plan. "While the Spirit of the Lord is poured forth upon his handmaidens as well as his servants, we may not close the mouths of holy women to whom the Spirit gives utterance, but to copy the example of the Society of Friends, and acknowledge the public ministry of women in precisely the same manner as that of men, is both inexpedient and unscriptural".²⁶

So within Wesleyan Methodism officially, the subject of women preaching lay dormant till the twentieth century.

The non-Wesleyan Connexions. Things were very different in the non-Wesleyan traditions where women were widely used, both as travelling and local preachers. Briefly, women travelling preachers were used in Primitive Methodism from its start until 1862, and in the Bible Christian itinerancy till 1874, with some continuing in China for many more years. Obviously, before these women could become itinerants they were local preachers, though often only for a very short time, and after retirement, usually because of marriage or ill-health brought on by the strain of the work, they reverted to local preacher status and continued to work zealously.

The greatest number of women travelling preachers in Primitive Methodism was twenty-six (in 1834) and in the Bible Christian Connexion twenty-six (in 1826). These women represented only a very small percentage of the women who preached locally in their circuits throughout the nineteenth century.

In many cases the stories of women preachers cannot now be traced in any detail, and except for brief obituaries in the connexional magazines many have vanished without trace. We can only hazard a guess at the difficulties and dangers they faced and at the dedication which they showed in order to proclaim their faith in season and out of season, indoors and out of doors.

Two stories from *The Primitive Methodist Magazine* paint a picture of the devoted work of these women local preachers.

The story of Elizabeth Elliott is a tragic one. Born in Bristol in 1810, she was converted in 1824 and "Having received a divine commission from above, she went out, with undaunted courage, into highways and hedges, to compel sinners to come

²⁵ *WMMins.* (1910) pp.365-6.

²⁶ *WMM* (1885) p.712.

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in... The word of the Lord abundantly prospered in her hands;... Through her instrumentality God raised up many living witnesses,... She was an excellent speaker; generally short; but very powerful. She preached the Gospel with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven. A great influence generally attended the word that dropped from her lips...".

We are told, "At the beginning... she had to endure much persecution; but as her day was, so was her strength. Her will was swallowed up in doing and suffering the will of God. She was a most willing labourer for the Lord... she never wilfully nor carelessly neglected an appointment. And if any other person's appointment wanted supplying, she would give all possible diligence to supply it, if in her power. In labours for souls she was abundant".

Elizabeth preached at Poathawine (Shropshire) at 2.00 pm on Sunday 17 April 1825 and on the following Saturday, just before 2.00 pm, she left to walk to her Sunday appointment. There was a chain fence across the river to prevent cattle from straying and the ferry-man ought to have crossed below it, but he set off above it. The force of the current drove the boat into the fence, upsetting it. Elizabeth and the ferry-man's wife were drowned. Although extensive search was made throughout Saturday night and all day Sunday her body was not found until Monday evening. Elizabeth was fifteen years and three months when she died.²⁷

At the other side of the country another Elizabeth in her late thirties joined the Primitive Methodists. Elizabeth Swinton, born at Thurlby in Lincolnshire on 22 April 1776, had been brought up in a church-going family. Soon after becoming a Primitive Methodist, she began to tell of her experience to others: "Her zeal and courage were conspicuous from her first attempts to preach; and she was no less distinguished for labouring in the open air.

She was in the habit of visiting the villages during the annual feasts, at which times not a few of the 'baser sort' are gathered together for all kinds of mischief and wickedness. In the centre of a village, surrounded with scores of such characters, in different degrees of intoxication, making all sorts of noises, and missiles flying in all directions, she had stood firm and undaunted, and faced the rabble, and poured upon them, in no very measured terms, the awful truths of the Divine word. And... many of those characters felt the force of the truth as delivered by her, and became the fruits of her zealous labours.

Her appearance in the pulpit was somewhat singular, but very impressive. She generally wore a white or buff dress; and being of sallow complexion, her appearance was striking. The singularity of her dress and appearance induced many to come and hear her, or rather to see her, wherever she preached. And not a few who were

²⁷ *Primitive Methodist Magazine* (hereafter *PMM*) (1825) pp.409-13.

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actuated by mere curiosity in coming to see and hear her, were mercifully regarded by the gracious Saviour, and brought to a knowledge of himself."

Elizabeth was buried in Lincoln and it is a remarkable tribute to Primitive Methodism and to the work of a woman local preacher that the local paper reported her funeral, "Mrs Swinton, the Primitive Methodist preacher, who for thirty-seven years devoted a large portion other time to the teaching of the gospel, was interred in St Botolph's, on Sunday last. How this humble woman was beloved, is shown by the fact that 1,500 people assembled to witness the funeral".

There are several points of interest in these two stories which are borne out by other obituaries. First, the very young age at which many of the early women preachers started to preach, for example Sarah Mason (16); Hannah Hardy (18); and Ellen Cooper (19).

Although it is not possible to give definite figures for local preachers, what was true of the women itinerants presumably also applied to the local preachers. Secondly, it was often remarked how the novelty value of a woman preacher attracted crowds. The Primitive Methodists were only too willing to exploit this novelty value if it brought people to hear the saving Gospel, so when Primitive Methodism, in its wisdom, decided to 'side-line' its women travelling preachers, women local preachers, exhorters and evangelists were still readily accepted and widely used.

In many cases women preachers suffered persecution, but as this is equally true of the men, I feel that it was more Primitive Methodism itself which was under attack rather than women because of their sex.

The women local preachers whose obituaries were printed in The Primitive Methodist Magazine must have been just the tip of the iceberg and there must have been many more women up and down the country working faithfully, and without formal recognition.

Several obituaries mention the fact that both husband and wife were local preachers, for example, Mr and Mrs Dunn in the Banbury Circuit, and Mr and Mrs Gardner in the Brinkworth Circuit, or other members of the family such as Mrs Eliza Beavan and her sister in the Monmouth area.

Quite a number were local preachers for many years, such as Hannah Hardy of Ripley, who became a local preacher at eighteen, and was 'on the plan' for forty years till her death at fifty-eight; Jane Gardner (Brinkworth) and Sarah Lawley (Prees Green) both served for twenty years.

The Bible Christian experience closely reflects that of the Primitive Methodists. Both connexions were prepared to make use of all means available to spread their message and to recognise women as equal workers with men. The Minutes of the Bible Christian Connexion of 1819 posed the question, "What are our thoughts on women

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preachers?", with the reply, "We believe God can enable a woman as well as a man to speak to edification and comfort".²⁸

The earliest Bible Christian woman preacher was Johanna Brooks Neale. Expelled from her local parish church in Morwenstow in 1816 for giving a public testimony, she found many of the congregation at the gate and spoke to them for about half an hour. William O'Bryan, the Connexion's founder, visited her and a society was formed. Johanna continued to preach and in 1823 joined O'Bryan in conducting a revival.

One of the people affected by her address when she was expelled from the parish church was Emily Cottle. Emily became a Bible Christian in March and before very long started praying in public, then exhorting, and finally preaching; "She also filled up a useful place in the church, as a local preacher, holding meetings on Sundays and week-day evenings, always embracing every opportunity of working for God. - She has walked many miles, (when she might have rode,) to publish the glad tidings of salvation".²⁹

For a while Emily went with another female speaker, but in May 1818 for the first time she had "an appointment to take..." in the Michaelstow Circuit and so on 23rd she and Mary O'Bryan, who was about eleven years old and already a preacher, set off. Her diary shows that although not regarded as an itinerant, Emily travelled considerable distances taking meetings in Cornwall and Devon.

At the end of January 1819 Emily went to Devon to care for her aunt and family who had the fever. Unfortunately she contracted the disease and died on 21 February 1819 aged twenty-seven.

Another well-known early Bible Christian family were the Reeds, four of whom were preachers. Three, including Catherine, became itinerants.

The fourth, Grace, was a very acceptable local preacher. Grace was born at Holwell, Devon on 30 September 1802 and became a Bible Christian around the age of thirteen or fourteen. She felt a compelling need to tell others of salvation, and although she was well aware that she would be severely censured for preaching, this did not deter her from taking services and prayer meetings. A letter gives some indication of Grace's talents and usefulness. "Her words were few, and seasoned with grace; and such as ministered grace unto the hearers.. Her public discourses were generally such as suited the congregations which she had to address, and I believe they were delivered in demonstration of the spirit, and with power. I believe she always felt the

²⁸ Minutes of the *Bible Christian Connexion* (1819) pp.4-6.

²⁹ Taft, *op. cit.* i, pp.271-90.

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importance of the subject on which she spoke; and it hath been made a blessing to many souls".³⁰

From June 1820 Grace's health deteriorated and she died on 1 October 1821. After the funeral at Holwell, her coffin was carried by six preachers to Lake where she was buried in Ebenezer Chapel burying ground. Her grave-stone records that she "was about five years a Member of the Society of Arminian Bible Christians, and some time a Local Preacher, in which capacities she adorned her Profession, and sweetly fell asleep in Jesus, Oct. 1, 1821, Aged 19 years".³¹

In The Arminian Magazine, (later The Bible Christian Magazine) of 1823 there is an interesting account of the impact made by a female local preacher called Sophia Willis who was working in the London Mission. Entitled 'The Female Preacher' it appeared in The Pulpit, a weekly publication, and indicates the interest in female preachers:

"Passing through the fields..., on Friday evening, May 16th, my attention was drawn towards a number of persons collected together... I approached them, and found they were assembled around a young female, apparently about twenty two or three years of age, who was standing behind a chair, and praying very earnestly. There was another young person standing on the left side of her, most probably her sister, as they dressed nearly alike, and in the neat and simple habits of Friends... The auditory was not numerous, but it was attentive, and amongst others I particularly noticed three countrymen with scythes on their shoulders, who seemed particularly so, I trust not without benefit. The preacher appeared very earnest; she delivered her observations without hesitation, indeed with great fluency, with distinct enunciation, and generally, in very correct language. She needs great encouragement to undertake and persevere in such a task, and no doubt she will have it, from Him who alone can give it her...".³²

The second recorded meeting of the Chatham Bible Christian Circuit contains the names of Mary Malyon and Sarah Clarke as local preachers on full plan. Mary continued till 10 August 1830. Sarah married in 1826 and appears to have taken an appointment on a Primitive Methodist plan because the minutes state that it was agreed if she continued to do so her name should be taken off the plan. As it stayed on until her death in 1828 she must have heeded the warning. About the same time there were three other women 'on trial', but their work was brief.³³

Evidence from other Bible Christian circuits reveals women working as local preachers, e.g. Weare in Somerset, where the Bible Christian Circuit Book (1822-

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp.52-64.

³¹ *Ibid*, pp.52-64.

³² *The Arminian (Bible Christian) Magazine* (1823) pp.281-86.

³³ Minutes of the Chatham Bible Christian Circuit Local Preachers' Meeting 1822-62.

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1853) shows for 1849-50, "local preachers: (14 men, 4 women)", and for 1850-51, "15 (13 men, 2 women)".³⁴

It seems unlikely that there were many official women local preachers in the Methodist New Connexion and indeed the Staleybridge Methodist New Connexion Local Preachers' Meeting, 25 December 1837, resolved that "it is the opinion of this meeting that female preaching is unscriptural".³⁵ Nevertheless Taft records the case of Hannah Hunt. "A native of Breaston, in the county of Derby,... is a member of the New Methodist Connexion, and has been preaching the gospel in many large towns and country villages..., for the last twenty years. The Lord has taken away her natural sight, but he has continued her spiritual vision, so that she clearly sees the things that belong for her peace, and is likewise endued with gifts and talents to preach, to edification, exhortation, and to comfort, before any community of Christians... She has been in Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire, and Nottingham, preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ, endeavouring to persuade the children of men to be reconciled to God. She has preached in various respectable chapels, to the astonishment of hundreds, and it said she has been made the honoured instrument in the conversion of the many".³⁶

In a symposium on 'The position of women in the church' in *The Christian Ambassador* (1885), Thomas Parsons commented that "The New Connexion and the United Methodist Free Churches permit women preaching, but to what extent we cannot say".³⁷

It is not known if or how many women local preachers there may have been in the United Methodist Free Churches, but Oliver Beckerlegge says that in common with the Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians, the Arminian Methodists used women preachers, and adds that the Arminian Methodists "altogether brought into the Union some 1,200 members and seventy local preachers".³⁸ Some of these were probably women.

There is little detailed information available about women local preachers in the later period to fill out the picture, but references in the Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian magazines make it apparent that they were used in the circuits, particularly as evangelists and special preachers for anniversaries and chapel openings, throughout the nineteenth century. Here again perhaps the novelty factor was at work. On such

³⁴ Weare Bible Christian Circuit Book, 1822-53.

³⁵ Staleybridge Methodist New Connexion Local Preachers' Minute Book 1837.

³⁶ Taft, *op. cit.* ii, pp.250-2.

³⁷ Thomas Parsons, 'The Position of Women in the Church' in *The Primitive Methodist Quarterly Review and Christian Ambassador* (3rd series) 1885, p.682.

³⁸ Oliver A Beckerlegge, *The United Methodist Free Churches: A Study in Freedom* (1957) p.27.

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occasions it would be important to have a large congregation and who knows what good might be done to those who came chiefly through curiosity.

Many of the women preachers were ministers' wives whose work was really an extension of their husbands' ministry, for example, Mrs Mary Hallam, "who was known throughout the northern circuits as a woman of exceptional gifts and usefulness. She frequently preached in all the circuits in which her lot was cast and with much acceptance".

Mrs Ann Hirst, when her husband was delayed by a snow storm, took his place by first reading a sermon and then expounding "and revealed such surprising gifts that her name was soon placed upon the plan as a preacher..., [she] became very popular as a 'special' preacher...". Many in later years testified that she was the ablest woman preacher they had ever heard. For sixty years she preached the Gospel as the Spirit gave her utterance.³⁹

Primitive Methodism had a number of local preachers who were regarded as travelling preachers by their own circuits, if not by the Conference. More properly these should be called hired local preachers.⁴⁰

Study of local records shows that when a circuit identified a missionary opportunity and had the necessary money to pay for an extra preacher it would 'take out' a hired local preacher (often one available locally) for a quarter or so. This means that such preachers appear along with the salaried, regularly stationed preachers, but then disappear from the accounts. Female examples are Hannah Petty (Cheshire), Ann Pugh (Shropshire), Hannah Summerlands (Burton-on-Trent) and Mary Thatcher (Hampshire).

Later well-known Primitive Methodist women local preachers were Mary Bulmer, who started as a young girl in the North of England in 1888, conducting many missions and making many converts.⁴¹

She was born at Wylam-on-Tyne and accredited as a local preacher in 1891.⁴² Obviously highly regarded, she acted at times as a hired local preacher and practically as a travelling preacher. For example, in 1899 she was called upon to step into the breach in the Stanley Circuit when the superintendent and the second minister died soon after each other.⁴³ Mary was also employed in the Chester-le-Street Circuit for three years from 1903 and invited to stay for a fourth, but on 8 August 1906 she married the Rev. J.E. Leuty and they went to the Newcastle-under-Lyme Circuit. In

³⁹ Ritson, *op. cit.* pp. 154-7.

⁴⁰ *Primitive Methodist Minutes of Conference* (1821) p.4 (Question 9).

⁴¹ W.M. Patterson, *Northern Primitive Methodism* (1909) p. 221.

⁴² *The Methodist Local Preachers' Who's Who* London, 1934 p.328.

⁴³ Patterson *op. cit.* p.224.

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1904 she was elected to the National Executive of the Christian Endeavour Council, and travelled extensively.⁴⁴

Miss Bennett of Chester was a popular preacher greatly in demand in the north west where she conducted effective revivals in the 1850s and 1860s.⁴⁵

Mary Ridley from West Cumberland was converted in 1829 and became a local preacher in 1831. She acted virtually as a travelling preacher for fifteen years in the Alston area before doing evangelistic work throughout the Border counties.⁴⁶

Selina Jackson from Derbyshire became a local preacher in 1846 and acted as a hired local preacher from 1847-9. Her obituary describes her as "a woman of vigorous thought, eloquent utterance, and godly life, and in great request for special services in many of the most important circuits in the Midland counties. She laboured with great acceptability and usefulness as hired local preacher...".⁴⁷

Patricia Powell from Herefordshire became a local preacher in June 1847 and preached because of the travelling preacher's illness for five months in 1850 before her own health gave way. She acted as a hired local preacher in 1856-7, but finally had to retire through ill-health.⁴⁸

Finally, mention must be made of Jane Spoor, from the north east, who was converted around 1827, became a Primitive Methodist, an exhorter, then a hired local preacher, working with her itinerant brother Joseph, until the strain became too great. She continued as a local preacher and a class leader, dying on 25 May 1878.⁴⁹

These examples indicate the geographical spread of women active in local situations, who were working energetically to spread the Gospel wherever they were. The whole question of women preaching was never very far from the minds of church authorities, especially as the Methodist connexions became more settled and respectable and therefore felt that they should become more conformist, which usually meant toning down more extreme elements such as fervent evangelism and female preaching.

The Christian Ambassador had a number of articles on the subject, usually dealing with women in the itinerancy, but much of the comment is relevant to all types of female preaching. In particular in 1885 there was the report of a symposium consisting of six papers on 'The position of women in the church'. Most of the contributors, who were all ministers, are rather ambivalent. They do not wholeheartedly approve of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* pp.275-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.1 75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.143.

⁴⁷ *PMM* (1888) p.242.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* (1887) pp. 177-8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (1880) p. 118.

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women preaching, but on the other hand they are not prepared to go so far as to deny the right of some women to preach.

The most positive attitude was that of Thomas Parsons (already mentioned), who submitted the fifth paper in which he stated that he agreed with the Wesleyans that women might be used "but (they) make the conditions for admission into their pulpits so stringent that only women of unquestionable piety and talent can expect to occupy that position".

Parsons' own view was that "Female preaching will never be other than incidental, accessory, unreliable". Then he went on to urge that female candidates for the plan should be examined as the men were and that they should be under 'circuit control' and not have a 'roving commission'. Parsons had alluded in his paper to the abuse of female preaching, so maybe this is a reference to the fact that when women ceased to be stationed as itinerants in Primitive Methodism many continued to act as evangelists, taking special services and missions, no doubt providing a novelty attraction, which was resented by some of the men whose congregations were lured away by the women preachers.⁵⁰

Very often only the surname or initials of local preachers are given on circuit plans and records so it cannot be determined who, if any, are women. Several women are listed as 'Auxiliaries' which may or may not be significant.

1818.	FEB.				MARCH.					APRIL.			NAMES.				
PLACES.	I	8	15	22	1	8	15	22	29	5	12	19	26				
Derby 2 and 6	S	K	17	8	27	4	10	9	T	7	36	28	17	19	8	1 H. Bourne	
Willton 2	W	A	31	14	36	46	19	37	T	8	17	31	36	8	46	2 W. Clowes	
Nottingham 24 and 6	1	19	10	5	26	9	T	S	K	15	T	26	18	10	S	9	3 J. Buxton
Loughborough 2 and 6	19	M	H	S	K	17	42	9	T	44	42	10	26	H	P	10	4 J. Buxton
																6	5 R. Weston
																	6 J. Wedgwood
																	7 W. Warren
																	8 T. Hunt
																	9 J. Harrison
																	10 R. Winfield

A Nottingham Primitive Methodist plan of 1818 on which women preachers are included by their initials, but not included in the list of preachers.
H.B. Kendall *Origin and History of the PM Church* c. 1905, (i) 208.

Preachers Plan which identified women preachers by their initials.

Reproduced from *Workaday Preachers* with kind permission of the Methodist Publishing House.

It is very interesting to analyse the plans of the Shefford Primitive Methodist Circuit (Andover Branch) for 18 January 1835-10 January 1836 which contain the name of

⁵⁰ Parsons *op. cit.* - reference as in note 37 above.

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'Jane Farr', presumably written in full to distinguish her from 'J. Farr, snr.' (her father?).

In the first quarter Jane had fifteen appointments on eight of the twelve Sundays and also was one of the speakers at a missionary meeting on 1 March at 2.00 pm; in the second thirteen on six out of twelve Sundays; in the third twenty on ten out of the thirteen and on the fourth fourteen on ten out of fourteen. In addition she took a service at Facombe on Wednesday 9 December. So her work load was considerable and certainly equal to the appointments taken by the preachers listed on the plan above and below her.

Full names were given on the 1835 (20 July-12 October) plan of the Bolton Primitive Methodist Circuit. Ann Noble was one of the four travelling preachers, and among the 33 local preachers two are women (16 appointments) plus six men and one woman (5 appointments) 'on trial'.

Twentieth century developments. As the turn of the century approached further debate about women preaching arose in Wesleyan Methodism and an article entitled, 'The place and power of woman in Methodism' by J.W. Walker in *The Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* of 1897 stated, "As preachers they have not been numerous, and possibly may never become so. Long journeys into the country, exposure to rough weather and dark nights, and many other incidents..., will probably prevent women from coming in large numbers on our plans. But if the question is to be answered in the abstract as to the general eligibility of women for this work, there can be little doubt as to the result.. The fact remains that women have been and are being put on our plans, and that with the happiest results".⁵¹

He goes on to impress on the women that as local preachers they have a seat on the circuit quarterly meeting, which gives them the right to vote on all important matters, a heavy responsibility which must be accepted. Walker concludes by saying that "woman is beginning to share more equally in both the work and the rewards of the future, and this in the church as well as in the world... it is one of the many evidences of the adaptability of Methodism to modern times that it has,... made such a large opportunity for women to consecrate their talents to the highest service".⁵²

His comments are particularly interesting in that they appear to confirm that women had been and were being used by the Wesleyans up to that time (1897), even if examples were rare, and not only among the Wesleyans. Statistics of women local preachers in the various brands of Methodism are not easy to find but it seems that in London in 1896 there were only 11 women out of 432 local preachers.⁵³

⁵¹ *WMM*(1897) pp. 174-6.

⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 174-6.

⁵³ E.C. Rawlings, *London Directory for the Primitive Methodists* (1896) pp.23-37.

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Significant recognition of women local preachers after the 1910 resolution, referred to earlier, came in 1918 when the Wesleyan Methodist Minutes stated, "Women Local Preachers: The Conference declares that women are eligible to become fully accredited Local Preachers on the same conditions and shall hereafter enjoy the same rights and privileges as men who are Local Preachers".⁵⁴

The following year there was a further development, "Wesley Deaconesses and Women Preachers: The Conference authorises Local Preachers' Meetings, in the case of Wesley Deaconesses and other women who have already been preaching under the sanction of the Regulations of Conference of 1910, to receive them upon full plan without further examination".⁵⁵

The non-Wesleyan connexions never broke down their local preachers' statistics by sex, and neither did Wesleyan Methodism until 1927 when the numbers of women are given as "Women Fully Accredited 442; Women on Trial 68; Women Received on Full Plan 43". The fully accredited numbers for the following years were: 1928, 475; 1929, 523; 1930, 561 1931, 598 and 1932,642.⁵⁶

In the first returns after Union, those of 1933, there were 1,422 women in the Methodist Church who were fully accredited (110 placed on full plan that year), with 208 on trial.⁵⁷

These figures seem to imply that at Union, 780 women came into the Methodist Church from the non-Wesleyan traditions, although it is necessary to take into account those who would have become Wesleyan local preachers anyway (an average of 40 over the previous five years) and those who died or left.

Returning to the Wesleyan Methodist statistics, the schedule for 1928 not only gives the total for the whole connexion, but also for each district.

Sample percentages of women preachers by district are South Wales (7.36%), London First (4.2%), Devonport and Plymouth (3.59%), Halifax and Bradford (3.43%). Then at the bottom of the list come Manchester (1.55%), Portsmouth (1.53%), First North Wales (1.32%), Second North Wales (1.08%) and Isle of Man (0.60%).⁵⁸

Looking at the 1932 totals for Wesleyan Methodism, there were 18,785 local preachers, 642 (3.42%) of these being women, while for Methodism as a whole in 1933, the figures were 34,948 with 1,422 (4.1%) women.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ *WMMins.* (1918) p.85.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* (1919)p.271.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* (1928) (gives 1927 numbers) pp.388-9; (1929) pp.404-5; (1930) pp.390-1; (1931) pp.386-7; (1932) pp.250-1.

⁵⁷ *Minutes* (1933) pp.450-1.

⁵⁸ *WMMminutes* (1928) pp.388-9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* (1932) pp.250-1 ;*Minutes*(1933) pp.450-1.

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Studying these district statistics and selecting Districts which most nearly equate with each other, especially for those areas where non-Wesleyan traditions were strongest, it is found that there were increases in Scotland of 3.61%, Carlisle 2.92%, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1.2%, East Anglia 1.1%, Lincoln and Grimsby 0.77%, and Stoke-on-Trent 0.69%. Hull had a decrease of 0.57%. These increases must indicate the greater relative numbers of women local preachers in the non-Wesleyan branches.

According to *The Methodist Local Preachers' Who's Who* (1934), there were 106 women 'Fully Accredited' before 1910. Unfortunately it is not possible, in most cases, to tell from which branch of Methodism they came. Altogether there are 739 women listed in the survey, few give their former connexion, and so one cannot say categorically that at Union there were more women in one branch than another. However, of the 44 preachers who were ministers' wives or widows, 19 or 43.2% were Wesleyan and 25 or 56.8% were Primitive Methodists, but there were none from the United Methodist Church. No firm conclusion can be drawn from this small sample. 67 women were or had been deaconesses or missionaries.⁶⁰

Statistics of Local Preachers continued to be published in full until the late 1960s. It is interesting to note that the Local Preachers' Meeting of the Jersey French Circuit reported on 10 May 1923, "we have the happy satisfaction of welcoming Miss Susan Renouf after oral examination and trial sermon, as the first lady local preacher in the Channel Islands".⁶¹ The Circuit plan of the same circuit in 1938 has the name of Miss Enid Le Feuvre, who was accredited in 1931, and another woman is listed under 'D'Autres Aides'.

Out of a dozen randomly selected 1994 plans representing different parts of the British Isles, four have 50% or more women local preachers, six have 25% or over and the other two around 20%. Looking at the number of women 'Fully Accredited' since 1970, all but two of the circuits show that 50% or more women became local preachers after that date.

Does this indicate a wider acceptance of women? Is there perhaps a link between women becoming local preachers and going on to enter the full-time presbyteral or diaconal ministry? There is room for further research here.

Women feature on my own Birmingham Circuit Plan from 1937 and continued to play an increasing part, especially during the war years until the present day when about half of the total are women. The oldest local preacher in the Circuit is Mrs Mary Worrall who was 'Fully Accredited' in 1930 and she remembers that, "I thought God was calling me to be a missionary... The circuit was very dependent on local preachers...! was put 'on note' and helped with services under the guidance of another local preacher. A close friend was accepted at the same time. I can only remember one

⁶⁰ *The Methodist Local Preachers' Who's Who* 1934 passim.

⁶¹ Minutes of the Jersey (French) Circuit Local Preachers' Meeting, 10 May 1923.

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other woman preacher.. I don't remember any suggestion that we should not become local preachers because we were women. It never entered my head and we were welcomed wherever we went... I normally cycled, but sometimes borrowed my father's motor cycle. I can't remember having any training apart from the services 'on note'. In those days there did not seem to be any organised training and no written examinations, but I did take one or two Methodist correspondence courses. And eventually after two years, I had to preach a trial sermon and answer questions at the L.P. meeting before being put onto 'full plan' in 1930".

Mrs Worrall preached in many parts of the country during the next thirty years and was readily welcomed by all the circuits and churches. Then in 1961 she and her husband moved to Northern Ireland where she found a very different situation. "Most churches in Belfast had their own minister and there was little call on Local Preachers. But each church had an annual Methodist Women's Association service for which they wanted a woman preacher! As a result I preached in almost every Methodist Church in Northern Ireland, and also was invited twice to the Cork District, three times to Dublin, also to Donegal, Sligo and two or three churches in the centre of Ireland".⁶²

On a final personal note I myself became a Fully Accredited Local Preacher in 1954, one of a family whose members can count towards 400 years local preaching among them, and from 1955-60 in Scotland I encountered much the same situation as Mrs Worrall did, where a woman preacher was rather a novelty and so not only did I preach throughout the Wishaw and Motherwell Circuit, but also in most of the Church of Scotland and Baptist churches in the Burgh!

It seems that, from the early struggles to gain acceptance, women local preachers are now equally used alongside their male colleagues and in many circuits equal numerically too. So we can all honour the endeavours of the early women preachers and pay tribute to the countless faithful women who have sought through the years to proclaim the Gospel.

⁶² Memories of Mrs Mary Worrall, February 1994.