



The transformation of an organization

◀ A women's group from College Mennonite Church in Goshen, Ind.

Photo provided.

BY CYNEATHA MILLSAPS

Previous generations pave the way for Mennonite Women USA

Mennonite Women USA is a 104-year organization. Many people today look at our organization and say not much has changed. It's the same old white-women gathering in quilting circles. They don't represent me. And from the outside it may look like not much has changed. But sometimes that is the beauty of transformation—changing within without changing much on the outside.

Without those “older white women” being consistent in their work, we would not even be here 100 years later. Transformation is best when we change aspects of ourselves without losing ourselves along the way. Every 10 years or so, we see women in the church taking on more leadership. We see not only the shifts within the church but in our families and communities as well. Teachers become principals, nurses

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become hospital administrators, stay-at-home mothers assume responsibilities for the finances and fellowship of the family. We are changing.

In the early years, women had no power in the church. We could not become leaders in any real capacity. We were relegated to ministries like Sunday school, hospitality and music—or we could become missionaries. Even though many women felt called by God to lead as pastors, elders or deacons, our doctrine kept us from our call. I had the pleasure of meeting one such woman several months ago.



Edna Krueger Dyck felt a call to ministry early in her life. She loved the Word of God and studied theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (now Canadian Mennonite University) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, when she was 21. But the church did not make room for her gift and call. Edna talked about how she pursued other careers—teaching, writing and copy editing—



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because her first passion was hindered by tradition and culture. She wanted to do mission work overseas, where many women who had a call to ministry in those days were able to work out that call. But even that option did not work out. She married someone interested in studying medicine and psychiatry. There seemed to be no need for his field of study in mission work, so she got a job with the General Conference Mennonite Church creating curriculum materials and editing. Meanwhile, she took seminary courses in Newton, Kan., and Elkhart, Ind. It was some 40 years before Edna could practice her

craft and calling as a preacher/teacher in the church. At age 64, Edna was ordained and called as pastor at Shalom Mennonite Church in Newton.

While her male counterparts throughout the church were planning their retirements and walking away from declining churches, women like Edna were finally getting their chance to lead. When asked what she would say to women today, Edna said, "I would remind them, it's easy these days [to be a leader], so go for it. We need women pastors because women give congregations a perspective male pastors cannot offer."

I am six months into my new role as executive director of Mennonite Women USA and am concerned about our respect for the generations that came before us. We women leaders and pastors today must remind ourselves that if not for women like Edna and those women in quilting circles, meeting in church basements or gathering annually at church camps, we would not be in the positions we are today.

We are pastors, executive directors, professors and deans because they sat in uncomfortable spaces and supported one another until they saw openings. Their steadfastness and words of encouragement to their daughters gave us the courage to open doors. And now a generation of women has been raised with the power not only to walk through the door but to create a new building.

We must honor and respect our past. We must listen and learn from our mothers who are full of wisdom and love. I know many have said, "We tried to join, and they would not let us in." And I believe this is true. Our mothers must have been filled with a level of anxiety or a lack

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of vision for what was possible as the next generation came into power. But we cannot sit back any longer and wallow in their missteps. We must understand the fear of losing what they had worked so hard to create. Men in the church for years had preached

that only male leadership was biblical, yet these women created their own leadership structures alongside them and were doing well. In their structures the next few generations of women grew stronger and wiser.



Another great woman in leadership in our church I talked with is **Miriam Book**. A pastor and former Mennonite Church Women’s Missionary Service Commission member, she talked with me about being supported by other women in leadership in those early years as well as being supported by women throughout the church that gathered in “circles” to support one another. She was one who found that the sewing circles did not speak to her passions and call. But instead of walking away from those women, she and others created a gathering space that met their needs. For some it was Business and Professional Women circles, for others it was “sowing” circles. These circles didn’t focus on quilting or crafts but on leadership and friendship. While some young women grew frustrated with their mothers in sewing circles, others used what they had

to offer and stayed connected. They were not disrespectful to the women who came before them but looked to them for encouragement and support. The women in those sewing circles were not leading from up front. Many would not have considered themselves leaders at all, but without them, Miriam said, she would not have accepted her call.

One hundred years ago, we were relegated to a specific place in the church, family and community. These women were stronger than we give them credit for being. It’s easy to walk when you can see the path or when it is light and no one is chasing you, which is the reality of women today in the West. But these women had no clue what was coming. They gathered in the dark and created sparks of light for one another. Those sparks became candles, then lanterns, then flashlights and now spotlights for us today.

Women today must seek to lead differently from our male counterparts of old. Miriam talked about looking to our sisters who grow up on farms. She said, “Women farmers understand collaboration; they work better together than most [people] because their livelihood depends on one another.” Part of our continuing transformation is learning a new way of creating sisterhood. To do this we must honor our whole story, the good and the bad, so we can provide a sturdy foundation for our daughters as they come into their own power and leadership.

Mennonite Women USA has been transformed. We are different. We are strong because we have been evolving for over 100 years now. We are not just

another organization to join or not join but a spiritual base for support, leadership, guidance and, most of all, sisterhood. MW USA seeks to challenge our calls, move us out of our comfortable spaces, empower us to walk with others and celebrate what it means to be a woman made in the image of God.

We are changing yet remain the same. We need your voice, your leadership and your sisterhood.



Cyneatha Millsaps is executive director of Mennonite Women USA.



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