

# The 'Fully-ordained-meat-pie' Problem: Women Church Workers and Leadership under Australian Democracy

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**Abstract:** In the first half of the twentieth century most Christian denominations, calling on biblical and traditional authority, excluded women from leadership roles that were equal with men. While women exercised leadership within separate organisations, the idea of 'organisation' had different and sometimes contradictory meanings for different denominations, and for volunteers and professionals. 'Organisation' could mean vulnerability to intervention and collective strength; openness to new ideas and chain of command. Despite being in organisations that were ultimately subject to male authority, most women in the church found various ways of appealing to, evading, detaching from and living with male authority, and there were some notably sustained expressions of independence.

**Keywords:** church, ordination, organisation, missionaries, deaconesses, nuns, volunteers

During debates on the ordination of women in the Anglican Church in the 1980s, the Reverend Ian Herring, vicar of Bundoora near Melbourne, argued that 'ordaining a woman was analogous to ordaining a meat pie on the altar of God'.<sup>1</sup> The phrase became memorialised in a minor way because in 1988 at one of the peaks of controversy, filmmaker Gillian Coote named a film she made about the Movement for the Ordination Women *The Fully-ordained Meat-pie*. The phrase is a useful entry point for thinking about women's leadership in the church because it captures the character of the misogyny that sometimes erupted in discussion of women's ordination at this time, both its nastiness and absurdity. Its startlingly insulting thrust – juxtaposing 'crude food with a sacred mystery' as Patricia Brennan put it at the time – invites exploration of the deep sources of resistance to women's leadership in the church.<sup>2</sup>

Women church workers provide a particularly apposite case study for interrogating the meanings of women's leadership under democracy because they encourage us to be flexible about how we understand leadership. While women were historically excluded from the highest levels of ministry and

governance, the institutions that the church saw as their special prerogative – family, home, school and the lower echelons of the church – were prime sites for shaping values and creating communities. Australian historians have had ongoing conversations about how our general narratives can best interpret women's exercise of power and influence, as well as their marginalisation within formal power structures. 'Where should the emphasis lie?', we have asked.<sup>3</sup>

The boundaries of women's exclusion from the church have been shifting and ambiguous, marked by an ongoing tension between scriptural and traditional injunctions to women to be silent and the possibility that a woman was answering a call from God. And the boundaries have been different in different traditions. Within 'unorthodox' traditions women had more opportunities to lead. Martha Turner was pastor of Melbourne's Unitarian Church in the 1870s and Catherine Helen Spence was inspired by her to preach in the Unitarian Church in Adelaide.<sup>4</sup> Women in the early Methodist connexions, Bible Christianity and Primitive Methodism, also had considerable responsibility, but they were marginalised over the course of the nineteenth century as the connexions became more formalised and the demands of respectability came to dominate.<sup>5</sup>

The boundaries of exclusion were also different in the mainstream denominations in twentieth-century Australia. To quickly recap: women in the Congregational Church were ordained in the 1920s but it was another forty years before women were ordained into the Methodist, Presbyterian and Uniting churches from the late 1960s.<sup>6</sup> There was a prolonged and quite bitter struggle in the Anglican Church that lasted for fifteen years after 1977, and it took another fifteen years for the first woman bishop to be appointed.<sup>7</sup> Women are still excluded from ordination in the Anglican diocese of Sydney and a number of other dioceses, as they are in the Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches. The Vatican's position has not been unchanging, however. It has become worse. The question of women's ordination was overlooked at the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. Thirty years later, in 1994, in response to the huge outpouring of feminist theology of the intervening decades, the Pope not only rejected the possibility that women could be ordained but proscribed public discussion of the subject.<sup>8</sup> This may not be unrelated to the fact that feminist theology sought not just a place higher up the clerical pyramid for women, but also more democratic approaches to governance. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza wrote of 'the Ekklesia of women' – a democratic decision-making body.<sup>9</sup> To see this subject as 'unfinished business' is a considerable understatement.

Rather than going into depth about the church's resistance to women's leadership, I want to focus on how women have exercised leadership within these contexts. And I'd like to focus on the period before the big shifts of the

1960s and 1970s, in the formative years of women's political citizenship. How can we generalise about leaders in women's church organisations in these years? Perhaps the most fundamental point is that unlike secular women's organisations, such as the Country Women's Association and the National Council of Women, women in church organisations were socially, spiritually and structurally part of larger male-governed bodies. This made their organisations susceptible to intervention in ways that most other groups were not. But there was considerable diversity in the nature of their organisations, particularly if we take a broad interpretation of women's work for the church. For the idea of 'organisation' itself was different for different groups. Most of the major international studies of church women's organisations have focused on Protestant voluntary organisations<sup>10</sup> But if we look at Catholic women, and professional as well as voluntary women workers, we get different perspectives on the meaning of 'organisation'.

Turning first to women in voluntary organisations: what forms of resistance and accommodation did they employ? Three case studies provide varying responses. The first concerns the women of the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Association, which was formed in 1891 to support the work of women in foreign missions. During the 1890s they were such effective fundraisers that they were taken over by the Foreign Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church. They were asked to expand their brief from supporting women missionaries to supporting all missions, and in the process they lost control of the funds. What did they do? As Judith Godden has shown, they appealed to authority to retain some control over the finances. Elizabeth Forbes became the first woman to address 'that august assemblage' – the General Assembly – on this issue. When that did not work they engaged in sporadic and minor acts of subversion over the next few decades, 'forgetting' to send the money on. So they lived with the decision as best they could, evading authority where possible, but continuing doing what they were good at.<sup>11</sup>

The Mother's Union (MU) showed slightly different forms of accommodation, after a crucial 'moment' in its history in 1920 when a ruling was introduced that excluded from membership women who were divorced, even if they were the 'innocent' party. This ruling was a source of hurt and contention for years, and has been at the heart of the MU's bad reputation even within the church. What happened? At the meeting in Sydney where the membership of divorcees was put to the vote, the women in the MU voted *not* to accept this nasty new ruling. However, the Bishop then spoke in favour and after some discussion the meeting changed its mind and the ruling was accepted. While this seems like a lamentable capitulation, it is not the whole story. Leaders emerged at the parish and diocesan level who dealt with it in various ways – ignoring the ruling or boycotting the Mother's Union

altogether. Despite the hierarchical structure of the church, it couldn't impose the MU on the parishes, and many parishes had women's guilds instead.<sup>12</sup>

The responses of the central committee of Melbourne's Catholic Women's Social Guild were different again. When they suffered clerical intervention in 1919, the committee resisted for eight months, which was quite remarkable given the pressure they were under to obey, as Sally Kennedy has argued. At stake was loyalty to Archbishop Mannix, who objected to the guild affiliating with the National Council of Women because its president had spoken at a pro-conscription meeting. But this was not just a senior male oppressing defenceless women. The women in the central committee of the guild were anything but defenceless – they were highly intelligent and articulate. And it was the women in the branches, many of whom had a fervent loyalty to Mannix, who put the committee under pressure: one correspondent accused the committee of stabbing 'the bravest man in Australia in the back'. What happened? The committee was not defeated but neither did it win. They resigned as a group, thereby not giving in to Mannix's wishes, as he would have presumably preferred. But they were the ones who moved on.<sup>13</sup>

'Organisation' meant something different to full-time Protestant workers. Deaconesses and missionaries mostly lived and worked in separate sites – in parishes and institutions, reflecting the long Protestant suspicion of women living in community. For them, 'organisation' was a way of protecting their interests. They would never have used the term 'trade union', but the fundamental aims of their organisations were not dissimilar. These organisations were small and informal (and have not left published reports) but they offered mutual support to women who worked in a context where they were likely to be subject to the authority of men less capable than them. If the church offered working-class and lower middle-class women opportunities for meaningful work that might otherwise have been out of their reach, by the early twentieth century the church was not attracting men considered the brightest and best. As Bishop Thomas observed in 1922, 'the intellectual, athletic and social leaders of our schools and universities' were looking 'elsewhere'.<sup>14</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that women such as Lida Gill, a Methodist missionary who ran a large hospital in an isolated area of New Britain, New Guinea, in the 1930s, were sometimes frustrated within the structures of the church. Her diary tells us she thought her superintendent was incompetent, lazy and personally inadequate. So she and the other missionary sisters formed an organisation to improve their situation; they held a one-day conference in 1935, where they talked about their conditions of work and their wages. They were particularly concerned about their 'retiring allowances' and how they were going to provide for their old age. We don't know its outcome

because almost straight after this conference, she stops writing in her diary – perhaps her contact with the other sisters made it less important.<sup>15</sup>

Anglican deaconesses also formed an organisation – the Deaconess Fellowship – to defend their precarious status. In the 1920s they were demoted in formal terms and they were conscious of having to assert their position on a range of issues, including representation on the council of Deaconess House.<sup>16</sup> The very existence of the fellowship was threatening to Archbishop Mowll and he prohibited Sydney deaconesses from joining for seven years. Why? As Deaconess Fulton put it, ‘he seems concerned about what we might discuss’. ‘Surely,’ she went on, ‘we are ... free to talk about anything we want to – or is he afraid that we are a subversive organisation?’ We don’t know a great deal about Deaconess Fulton, as she hasn’t left any papers, but we do have the minutes of the fellowship meetings, and these tell us something about her style. She was cool and respectful but independent and persistent. Only after seven years did the fellowship agree to the changes in the constitution that Mowll wanted; that is, that they wouldn’t make any decisions without his permission. Though the deaconesses worked in a tradition that valued women’s submission to male headship, their correspondence suggests the limitations of their acceptance of ‘submission’.<sup>17</sup>

We should note that it was much more difficult for the few Indigenous women missionaries to try to defend their rights as leaders of their people and we have even fewer records of their leadership. But we do know, for example, that Angelina Noble, who worked at Yarrabah in Queensland and Forrest River in Western Australia, was a highly gifted linguist – she could speak three languages and used to translate for the police and the courts – and she played a central role in the trial following the Forrest River Massacre in 1926. She was nurse and teacher on the missions, but she was the only woman on the staff at Forrest River for years and she did all the domestic work as well as having six children of her own. An official of the Australian Board of Mission reported in March 1920 that ‘Angelina Noble has been cooking for nearly six years now and I can see she is heartily sick of it and needs a spell’. She had a baby two weeks later.<sup>18</sup>

If we ask what ‘organisation’ meant to Catholic religious sisters, the picture is different again. They worked in readymade organisations, which provided an infrastructure for negotiation, but these organisations were hardly of their own making. Path-breaking histories of women religious by Martha Vicinus and Jo Ann McNamara in the 1980s and 1990s have emphasised religious community as a source of independence and empowerment for women. More recent studies have focused on their mixed effects, including their internal inequalities and authoritarian governance.<sup>19</sup>

The ambiguities shaping the leadership of women religious were multiple and complex. The life of Maude O'Connell, who founded a new religious order in Melbourne in 1928, highlights some of the ambiguities specific to this context.<sup>20</sup> Her life shows that a woman could achieve a great deal within the hierarchical model of the Catholic Church – as women had from the time of Hildegard of Bingen – if she could find a powerful patron and convince him of her sincerity. O'Connell found such a patron in William Collins, the parish priest of St Francis Church, Melbourne. The order was founded to provide practical help for overworked and ailing mothers. During the Depression, the Grey Sisters went into their homes, did the housework and took care of the children. O'Connell's own mother had died of overwork in rural Victoria in the 1890s and, in the context of continuing unacceptably high rates of maternal mortality, it was inspired work. It was also work that supported Catholic teaching on birth control, though O'Connell's attitudes to this were different from Collins'. O'Connell was 'devastating' in her critique of the church for having made 'certain laws regarding the family' but not doing anything for the women who were bearing the brunt of them. Collins saw in her scheme 'an antidote to the nefarious propaganda of the contraceptionists'. For O'Connell, its driving force was 'the need of the mother'. Like many women who exercised leadership in the church, she perpetuated papal teaching while trying to mitigate its worst consequences.

O'Connell's story also shows that the only way open to a visionary Catholic woman without qualifications in the interwar period was monastic life. O'Connell did not at first want to become a nun: she told Collins she didn't believe in 'conscriptio'. She envisaged her work more like that of priests than nuns. She wanted 'a new type of mobile religious association', autonomous, independent and working in the community. Collins made it clear that the only way she could do this work was through a religious order. And that mattered because after the first decade or so, she wasn't happy. The monastic life didn't suit her; she had health problems that the system did not help. It was a cruel paradox that by the 1950s churchmen were deciding that this model did not suit anybody. O'Connell was a leader of vision whose work was deeply appreciated by the women whom she and her sisters helped, but her life symbolises, in an acute way, the continuing ambivalence in the church's relationship with women.

The idea of 'organisation' for women leaders in the church could mean different and sometimes contradictory things: vulnerability to intervention and collective strength; openness to new ideas and chain of command. But it would seem that most women found various ways of appealing to, evading, detaching from and living with male authority, and that there were some notably sustained expressions of independence. It would, of course, be a mistake to assume women in church organisations were simmering under the

weighty hand of clerical authority for most of their days – most women in this period probably worked independently of male authority for most of the time. The point about the cases here is the light they shed on those moments when women's decisions contravened those of men in the church. By outlining the contours of power they invite interrogation of its sources. Perhaps now is the time – in answer to the question 'where should the emphasis lie?' – for a full study of clerical masculinity, sexuality and antifeminism, particularly as the effects of most churches internationally, in terms of women's reproductive health, same-sex unions, the spread of AIDS and revelations about the systemic abuse of minors, are so disturbing.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1988.

<sup>2</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1988. Patricia Brennan, president of the Movement for the Ordination of Women from 1985 to 1989, was an able media performer who drew much public support for the ordination of women.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, 'Roger Thompson, 'Women and the Significance of Religion in Australia' and Anne O'Brien, 'Sins of Omission? Women in the History of Australian Religion and Religion in the History of Australian Women. A Reply to Roger Thompson', *Australian Historical Studies* 28, no 108 (April 1997): 118–33; Marilyn Lake and Bob Birrell, 'Is Federation Blokes' History?', *Lateline*, 30 April 2001, ABC TV, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/s286040.htm> (viewed 9 February 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Scott, *The Halfway House to Infidelity: A History of the Melbourne Unitarian Church 1853–1973* (Melbourne: Unitarian Fellowship of Australia, 1980); Anne O'Brien, 'Women in the Church before 1992' in *Preachers, Prophets and Heretics: Anglican Women's Ministry*, ed. Elaine Lindsay and Janet Scarfe (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Valenze, *Prophetic Sons and Daughters: Female Preaching and Popular Religion in Industrial England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jennifer M. Lloyd, 'Women Preachers in the Bible Christian Connexion', *Albion* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 451–81; Olive Anderson, 'Women Preachers in Mid-Victorian Britain: Some Reflexions on Feminism, Popular Religion and Social Change', *The Historical Journal* XII, 3 (1969); Shurlee Swain, 'In these Days of Female Evangelists and Hallelujah Lasses: Women Preachers and the Redefinition of Gender Roles in the Churches in Late Nineteenth-Century Australia', *Journal of Religious History* 26, no. 1 (Feb 2002): 65–77.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Pitman, 'First in Congregationalism: The Ordination of Women in Historical Perspective' in *Ordination of Women: International Perspectives*, ed. Cathy Thomson and Vic Pfitzner (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum Press, 2005), 9–20.

<sup>7</sup> Muriel Porter, *Women in the Church: The Great Ordination Debate* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1989); Lindsay and Scarfe.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview see Anne O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers: Women and Religion in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), chapter 10.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> See for example Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Ann Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Patricia Hill, *The World their Household: The American Women's Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985); Ian Tyrrell, *Woman's World, Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Judith Godden, 'Containment and Control: Presbyterian Women Missionaries and their Supporters, NSW Australia, 1891–1914', *Women's History Review* 6, no. 1 (1997): 75–93.

<sup>12</sup> See O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers*, 68–73.

<sup>13</sup> Sally Kennedy, *Faith and Feminism: Catholic Women's Struggle for Self-Expression* (Sydney: Dove Communications, 1985), 30–7.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers*, 120–30, 169–80; cited in David Hilliard, *Godliness and Good Order: A History of the Anglican Church in South Australia* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986), 98.

<sup>15</sup> Diary, MOM 587, Lida Gill Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

<sup>16</sup> For shifts in the status of deaconesses in the twentieth century see Brian Heeney, *The Women's Movement in the Church of England, 1850–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> All Australian Deaconess Conference, Correspondence, Fellowship, Report of 1947 Conference, Anglican Archives, Sydney.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Kociumbas, 'Angelina Noble', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), 9; Geoff Higgins, *James of Yarrabah* (Lawson, NSW: Mission Publications of Australia, 1981), 34.

<sup>19</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Jo Ann MacNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996); Christine Trimingham Jack, *Growing Good Catholic Girls* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003); O'Brien, *God's Willing Workers*, part 3.

<sup>20</sup> The following section is based on Anne O'Brien, 'Maude O'Connell and the Need of the Mother' in *Founders, Firsts and Feminists: Women Leaders in Twentieth-Century Australia*, ed. Fiona Davis, Nell Musgrove and Judith Smart (Melbourne: Melbourne University eScholarship Research Centre, 2011).