

This is Our Story: Free Church Women's Ministry

Edited by Janet Wootton (Epworth, 2007)

While the debates about women's ministry and leadership in the Church of England have been well documented, the longer-standing ministry of women in the Free Churches has been neglected. No longer! In this fascinating book, Janet Wootton presents a series of essays about aspects of ministry and leadership, followed by the stories of eleven women from a variety of denominations, who describe their experience as ministers.

Jane Craske, who has also written a book on women's preaching, surveys some of the elements of churches' very varied beliefs about leadership, ministry and ordination. This ranges from the Quakers and Salvation Army, through Baptists and Methodists to the 'new churches', and she compares the openness of Ichthus to New Frontiers' adherence to Wayne Grudem's views on male 'headship' which preclude women's leadership. Interestingly, she notes that churches which stress service according to gifting are the most open to women, followed by those which emphasise 'call' to ministry.

Kirsty Thorpe provides a fascinating historical survey of women leaders in the Bible and church history, while John and Olive Drane explore women's preaching and worship leading. As an Anglican, I was consoled about the lack of progress for women in my own Church by their reminder that 'Anglican women have made significantly greater progress in a shorter space of time than in any of the major Free Church denominations.'

Another interesting essay is by Cham Kaur-Mann who examines the idea of 'traditional women's ministries' and shows how different cultures see women, which makes any idea of 'women's ministry' very relative. This is followed by Wootton's own contribution, on 'Women's leadership in the church and feminist theology'. She highlights a number of interesting points: the fact that we have amnesia, and every generation has had to pioneer; how feminist theology has served to rediscover and re-tell stories; the interplay between theology and trends in wider society. I was particularly interested in her observation that while more and more women are entering ordained or authorised ministry, and are changing that ministry, this may have an unwelcome outcome. As ministry is restructured (for a variety of reasons), women's leadership may be eroded: there are more part-time positions, more non-stipendiary ones, and more retired priests and ministers used an alternative labour supply, meaning fewer women in full-time stipendiary leadership posts.

The final essay is on 'The Ordination of Women and the Ecumenical Movement'. The stories which follow are interesting, though some are better told than others. They illustrate the general conclusion that some women have painful stories to tell, while others have felt God's call and found the way has opened up for them. The conclusion weighs up hope for a new future of women and men re-shaping the Church, with concern about the current backlash against women's leadership.

A wide-ranging book, well worth reading – though at £16.99 for just over 200 pages you might want to borrow rather than buy!