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Pioneer Pastors' Wives Chose the Role of Service

"A Noble but Often Difficult Calling"

Initially (from 1876 to 1906) the pastors' wives were born in Finland. There is one exception to this generalization; the wife of a founding pastor (Rhoda Prieststedt-Hoikka, of Swedish extraction) was born in New Sweden, Iowa. Forty-one of these women had married their husbands in Finland while the majority were American-born but of Finnish extraction (Wargelin 1987). By 1962 (when the Suomi Synod entered the new Lutheran Church in America) out of a total of 202 pastors' wives which we cannot account for, only nineteen were of non-Finnish extraction. Eight were women of Swedish extraction, five were of German extraction, three were of Norwegian extraction and one each were of Swiss, French, Hungarian and Japanese extraction (Wargelin 1987).

Suomi Synod pastors' wives commenced their life in the United States in a society which was decidedly less rigidly structured than in Finland. Finnish immigrants in late 19th century USA had become socially and politically sensitized before leaving Finland which made them alert to resisting everything that appeared to be a reestablishment of customs and practices which had irritated them in their past. The image of the privileged position of the "kirkkoherra" and "pastorska" had

been clearly stamped upon the minds of all immigrant Finns.

The modest parsonage homes of pioneer Suomi Synod pastors' wives were located in frontier communities where the restraints of conventional society were barely observed. They were communities characterized by harsh working conditions, occupational hazards and low pay. There was also much drinking and fighting in saloons. These saloons were frequently the chief socializing centers of the communities. There both men and women gave expression to their delight in freedom from restraint. Both Salomon Ilmonen and Kalle Potti commented on these social conditions, the aforementioned in terms of concern and the latter in a humorous manner (Ilmonen 1930, 30-34; Wargelin 1984, 53; Potti...).

Suomi Synod pioneer pastors' wives immediately adopted a service role model; service to home, church and community. It was fortunate that both the pastors and wives of that era were all young and adaptable people. The pastors and wives who came to serve the immigrants were untenured (without permanent calls in the Church of Finland). Being young and untenured they had not become conditioned to the hierarchically entrenched

status enjoyed by the "kirkkoherra and pastorska". The lot of the untenured pastor and wife in Finland was to go from one unofficial position to another with very short periods of service most everywhere. This circumstance meant that the untenured pastor and wife were young and very malleable at this stage of their life. Furthermore, it meant that they had already had experience in making adjustments and getting along. The impact on the lives of pastoral couples who did serve in the United States and who had returned to the Church of Finland was frequently easily recognizable since they continued to manifest a refreshing openness and relaxed manner upon taking up service in the Church of Finland (Salovaara 1902).



Pioneer Suomi Synod pastors' wives commenced their role in ecclesiastical conditions which were distinctly less structured than they were in Finland. Church polity developed different as a result of the conditions and pressures which

characterized pioneer Finnish immigrant society. It also needs to be noted that alienation from the traditional church had become a way of life for the majority of pioneer Finns in America (Wargelin 1984, 5). This alienation was not merely a matter of forsaking the church of their forebearers; it was a separation from Christianity altogether. This development took place shortly after the Suomi Synod was founded. In quite a few parts of the United States the Finnish congregations were completely wiped out (Ilmonen 1912, 136-137; Ilmonen 1930, 178-180) by the rising tide of Finnish Socialism.

Pastors' spouses were inevitably drawn into active roles in the congregation and communities in which their husbands served, particularly in the communities in which the parsonage was located. The congregations were small and struggling. Leadership was in short supply. The people were inexperienced. Furthermore, the pastor's wife invariably had more education and social experience not only in comparison to the women but also in comparison with the men. The talents of the pastor's wife were needed in assisting the Sunday School, the "Summer School", women's work and the church music. Furthermore, the participation of the pastor's spouse was strategic in reaching families of varied ideologies with a warm evangelical approach.

Parsonages, instead of being austere and highly private, became focal points of congregational activity. First plans for forming women's organizations were commonly made in parsonage homes. The church office was in the parsonage which meant that the pastor's wife also met the visitors who had business with the pastor. Arrangements for weddings, baptisms, and funerals were made at the parsonage and most weddings and baptisms were performed in the simple but neat "front

room". It was not uncommon for the pastor's wife to serve a tray of steaming coffee, "nisu" and cookies to the visitors for whom the sundry rites had been performed.

The two women who were the very earliest pastors' wives were Rhoda Hoikka and Aliisa Tolonen. Pastor Jakob J. Hoikka brought his American-born Swedish wife to Astoria, Oregon in 1883 where he commenced his work among Swedes and Finns. Rhoda Elizabeth Hoikka never learned to speak Finnish, but she entertained her husband's guests and played for the Finnish as well as Swedish services in the congregations her husband served. On the other hand, Aliisa Tolonen and her husband, pastor Leonard Tolonen, commenced their work in Bethel Lutheran of Ishpeming, Michigan in January 1886. Aliisa is remembered as a very active and helpful pastor's wife in the parish which became one of the strongest in the Suomi Synod. Lauri Ahlman memorialized Aliisa Tolonen and her work in Bethel congregation in the 40th Anniversary Album of the Suomi Synod. Aliisa Tolonen is the original role model of the Suomi Synod pastor's wife.

Another example of the pioneer model pastor's wife is found in Ohio. This was Liisi Kivioja of Bethany Lutheran in Ashtabula harbor, Ohio. She assisted her husband in many ways; e.g. by reaching people in the midst of the very difficult social conditions prevailing in that community during its early years. She is known to have assisted in the founding of a temperance society whose ostensible objective was to draw men and women away from the atmosphere of saloon dances held in ("Happy") Ashtabula harbor (Rautanen 1911, 114; Ilmonen 1912, 100-101). Upon her (and her husband's) return to Finland she was elected a member of the first unicameral parliament of Finland in 1907.

The role model for pastors' wives in the Suomi Synod was clearly established by early 1900. The image of the pastor's spouse, active not only as a homemaker but involved in the activities of the parish, was also strongly affirmed by subsequent spouses at the turn of the century. They were Valma Salovaara, Tekla Airaksinen, Hanna Varmavuori, Elin Ahlman, Mrs. Hannes Leiviska, Ida Ronka, Naima Hohenthal and Elizabeth Wuornos.

Congregational Services Rendered by Pastors' Wives

It needs to be understood that in no instances did Suomi Synod pastors' wives displace or threaten male domination in early congregations. Suomi Synod women received the right to vote in congregations and synodical conventions in 1909, two years after women's suffrage had been granted in Finland (Minutes...). They served because of the great need for the kind of leadership they could provide and because of their educational advantages. The earliest Finnish immigrants generally had only the equivalent of the Kiertokoulu (literally: circulation school) education.

Suomi Synod publications reveal that both Sunday Schools and Summer Schools were established in the very earliest period of the Suomi Synod. They also reveal that pastors' wives were involved from the very beginning in these programs as leaders and teachers (Hetic 1958). These women were known for their high motivation and desire to improve the parish education programs of congregations (Ilmonen 1930, 148-162). Their husbands, the pastors, frequently entrusted the entire parish education program completely to their wives' attention.

Elma Krym, a leader in women's work in the Synod, paid high tribute to pastors'

wives for their work in parish education with these words: "As a teacher and a Christian, pastors' wives have been and continue to be examples for the growing youth without realizing the long-time effect of their work" (Krym 1976, 122). Pastors' wives frequently wrote valuable articles on parish education for the Synod publications encouraging church members to greater diligence and patience in Christian education (Kuusisto 1928). This high commitment to parish education carried over into the Lutheran Church in America. Martha Saarinen-Asuma, reared in a Suomi Synod parsonage, wife of an ELCA pastor, is coordinator of parish services in a large central Wisconsin parish.

Ladies Aid of Sewing Circles

Photo albums found in traditional Suomi Synod homes portrayed vividly the leadership role that the typical Suomi Synod pastors wife played in Ladies Aid societies and Sewing Circles of a bygone era. Elma Krym's comment on this area of women's work is revealing. The pastor spoke occasionally at these Ladies Aid societies which were held in homes as well as churches. Most of the time the women provided their own program. The pastor's wife, however, was always along in some leading capacity (Krym 1976, 122).

Just how "leading" can be gathered from the role that pastor's spouse, Hannah Hillila, played in reorganizing the Ladies Aid activity in Suomi Zion Lutheran congregation of Fairport Harbor, Ohio. This congregation of 1400 souls had two ladies aids, one in Fairport and the other in the near-neighboring community of Paynesville. Hannah Hillila persuaded the women in the two organizations to unify the women's work in the congregation by creating 26 regional committees

which included all the women of the congregation. This meant that each committee (of roughly 20 each) served as the hospitality committee twice a year for the every Wednesday evening Ladies Aid directed devotional and business meeting at the church parlors. The suggestion was approved and the result was that some 500 women of the congregation became actively involved.

Inner mission concerns (e.g. the sick, the shut-ins, the social concerns) of the congregation were reviewed at each Wednesday night meeting. Project committees were appointed to strategize how relief could be brought to members in particular needs. An unemployed rheumatoid farmer, whose family lived in a partly completed house, had his home completed (inside and out; siding, roofing, painting and interiorizing) on one Saturday by 80 women and men of the congregation (The writers...)

Pastors' wives participated in the money-raising projects of "ompeluseura" (original name of the Ladies Aid Society). Their participation in these activities was important from the point of morale. It has been said that these women's financial projects were the chief source of income for the struggling congregations of the pioneer era. The bazaars and dinners were also great social events, not only for the congregation but also for the community. The "money plate" was used for the coffee table following Ladies Aid meetings. The "pasty" (meat pies) projects of the typical Suomi Synod women played a most significant role in funding projects. Eventually the women, along with the pastor's wife, were relieved of this kind of stewardship as the vision of the congregation improved in these matters.

Suomi Synod pastors' wives were largely responsible for meeting the challenge of linguistic changes and other ad-

justments in the traditional "om-peluseura" (Ladies Aid Sewing Groups). Isabel Maki, a youthful pastor's wife, was responsible for suggesting the circle (groups) and topic programs for the English-speaking women of Bethany Lutheran congregation of Ashtabula, Ohio in 1939 (Maki 1940, 82-84). The circles remained rather small to preserve greater flexibility.

General meetings, held quarterly, were intended to involve all of the women of the congregation. By the midst of the 1940 decade, this plan became the general pattern for women's work in the Suomi Synod. Younger pastors' wives identified closely with this movement, particularly because they found their own peer group in this fellowship. Pastors' wives were frequently the advisors and consultants for these auxiliaries.

Musical Services

Salomon Ilmonen stated in his book on the Cultural History of Finnish Americans: "Choir directing belonged to pastors' wives". He lists the names of an imposing number of such women. Frequently, the pastor's wife had begun the choir and then became one of the singers when a director became available. Lillian Tuori, pastor's wife, directed choral groups at Bethlehem Lutheran, Detroit, for 30 years.

Service as church organist and piano accompanist was another task that developed upon the pastor's wife very early. Several became professionals in this, such as Toini Heikkinen, who became a faculty member in the Music Dept. of Gettysburg College, when her husband was professor in the Gettysburg Seminary. Hilda Luoma of Crystal Falls, Michigan, pianist and church organist, tutored her son Reino, who was a musical prodigy.

Naima Hohenthal, a pastor's wife and excellent pianist, developed a chamber orchestra of her ten children. Marie Wargelin and Kaarina Wargelin received musical training at music conservatories. Sigrid Lepisto, wife of a president of Suomi College, described the opportunities that aspiring young musicians had at the music department at Suomi College under Martti Nisonen (Lepisto 1929).

"Team Ministry" and Pastors' Wives

Many pastors and their wives developed an effective interrelatedness in serving the needs of the husband's congregation. In several respects it was like a "team ministry". In the average congregation the pastor's wife frequently had the highest sense of responsibility for greeting visitors and strangers. She was the one who noticed visitors who generally stood off by themselves after a service of function because no one noticed to talk to them. She was also responsible enough to find out who they were and share the information with the pastor and the congregation evangelism leader. The pastor's wife would also be singled out by other women of the parish, not only for socializing, but frequently to share some concern that they might have. This was because she was a woman and she was probably easier to speak to.

Impi and her husband, pastor K.V. Mykkanen, worked together to establish and manage homes for the aged, in Republic, Mich. and Sanford, Fla. (Mykkanen 1960). The prompting to do this came from exposure to the tragic despair of aged people in the parish. A visit to an elderly parishioner hospitalized in Marquette, Michigan, proved to be the final motivation to do something. The aged man had no place to go. Something similar led Hannah and Hugo Hillila, wife and

pastor, to establish the Middleboro, Massachusetts, rest home. Helmi and Nicholas M. Joensuu, also wife and pastor, managed this institution together for nearly two decades. Helmi Joensuu stated that it makes all the difference in the world to have people with Christian love operate a rest home for the aged (Joensuu 1960).

Supply preaching by the pastor's wife frequently became a real necessity during the days that the average pastor had multi-parishes. She certainly did not travel the circuit, but she frequently filled in at the congregation where the parsonage was located. Experienced lay leaders were also used. Only one pastor's wife is known to have used the pulpit for her message. She was Aino Lilja Kantonen-Halkola, who was an unusually gifted speaker. She is also known to have been a frequent guest speaker in churches of other denominations. Alma Hinkkanen-Lipsanen was another especially gifted speaker (as well as an outstanding business woman). Ilmonen reports that in 1908 she made an extended speaking tour through the United States on behalf of the Finnish National Temperance Brotherhood. Her itinerary consisted of lectures at 150 temperance halls scattered about the USA; the circuit lasted 14 months (Ilmonen 1930, 116).

Church and Correspondents

Some pastors' wives carried out the duty of reporting parish news in the synodical tri-weekly newspaper, the *Amerikan Suometar*. It is significant to note that the responsibility was most generally assumed after they had become widows. Probable reasons for this were: good correspondents were difficult to secure. Secondly, pastors' widows had by virtue of having been in parish affairs become especially

observant of news worthy items. Thirdly, it was a meaningful thing to do in the altered state of their life. A few examples of such women are: Hannah Hillila, Eva Karlin, Kerttu Kyllonen, Alma Hattula, and Martha Waltari. Waltari also penned a very descriptive article for the Kirkollinen Kalenteri on congregational life in the Synod during the late 1920s (Waltari 1970, 61-66). Other pastors' wives also wrote articles for the various publications of the Synod. The bibliography for this paper contains many such examples.

We have earlier mentioned the type of entertaining the pastors' wives did for their own parishioners. However, there was also a considerable amount of hospitality that was done for the benefit of out-of-town visitors from Finland, dignitaries such as bishop, professors, artists and writers. Parishioners of congregations, where parsonages were located, assumed that these guests would be entertained and housed in the parsonage. However, it was also true that parishioners in isolated congregations and preaching places did provide hospitality to their own parish pastor or visiting pastors. Isabel Maki, whose husband served in several parishes of the Synod, acknowledged that parsonage guests did bring a refreshing change into parsonage life and were frequently "angels unaware". However, she observed that the same benefits could have been enjoyed by others also (Maki 1948).

Marie Hoikka-Wargelin reminded her family occasionally of the time when she entertained a bishop from Finland as guest in the parsonage while being involved in the festivities as a piano soloist. She also recalled a similar "tight situation" when she entertained a Finnish operatic star and served as the singer's accompanist at a series of concerts in the area. Pastors' wives, who responded to the questionnaire sent to them, largely indi-

cated that there had been a considerable amount of obligated hospitality imposed upon them. Understandably, their answers differed.

Services Performed by Pastors' Wives to the Conference and Synod

The Synod was very slow in electing women to boards and committees on the Conference and Synodical level. We have alluded earlier to the granting of voting rights to women of the Synod in 1909. Initially opportunities to serve came slowly and pastors' wives were the first to benefit. Both Alma Haapanen and Thyra Rautalahti were elected to serve on the Board of Directors of Suomi College, 1912 and 1922 respectively.

Alma Haapanen served on the editorial staff of several parish education books published by the Synod, namely *Lukukirja I & II*, as well as *Pyhäkouluopas* (Kuusisto 1928). Kaarina R. Wargelin edited the Synod's parish education paper for children, *The Messenger*, as well as *Favorite Finnish Hymns* (English arrangements of Finnish songs and hymns). Aino Lilja Halkola, Ida Kaskinen, Tynne Isaac and Kaarina R. Wargelin served the Synod on the Translation Committee for Finnish hymns the Synod submitted to the Joint Lutheran Hymnal Committee of the Service Book and Hymnal.

Community Services Rendered by Pastors' Wives

While community involvement by pastors' wives developed slowly as the Synod shook of its ethnic shell, these women had active involvement in relief work for Finland and the United States. They led the women of their congregations into relief work for Finland and also in doing Red Cross bandage work for the United States.

Leaders, such as Martha Hanninen, Alma Haapanen and Thyra Rautalahti assumed leadership in Help Finland Inc. and the Mannerheim Children's Protective Society. Kaarina Wargelin spoke to numerous women's organizations in northern California for Help Finland Inc. She was also involved in publicizing the benefit concert of violin prodigy, Heimo Haitto, at the Oakland Public Auditorium in 1940. Several congregations had Red Cross auxiliaries.

In parts of the country where American service men were quartered, pastors' wives helped their congregations to participate in Lutheran Service Center programs by providing food and personnel. As the vision of cooperative activities grew, Synod pastors' wives broadened their contacts and participation in other forms of community activity.

Suomi Synod Pastors' Wives Coping with Stress

No study was ever made relating to the pressures endured by Suomi Synod pastors' wives. Neither has their ability to cope been studied. When one considers the complex roles they fulfilled (wife, mother, manager of a "public" parsonage, participant in numerous congregational responsibilities) it would seem natural to assume that the incidence of breakdowns and illnesses among these women would be very high. Remarkably, this was not so (Oden 1988, 402-404).

There was also the pressure to manage on a limited income. Two-income families did not become common until after the second World War. Married women were not allowed full-time employment as teachers. The Consistory made a study in 1952 of pastors' salaries in the Synod, which revealed the average salary (with parsonage, without utilities, pension, and

mileage) to be two hundred dollars a month. Founder of the Synod, Dr. J.K. Nikander, stated in a letter to his mission director in Finland, that his salary (1885) was sixty dollars a month. A neighboring LCMS pastor told him: "One should not come here to collect large salaries!" (Wargelin 1984, 16-19).

Some pastors' wives tried to supplement their family income by giving piano lessons at 50 cents an hour. The compensation for choir directing or playing the organ per month was either 25 or 30 dollars a month even in the late 1940s. Earlier generations of Synod pastors' wives did knit as well as sew garments for their families. The average parsonage family (1890 to 1962) was 3,2 children. However, the average Synod parsonage family during the early years had many more children than was the custom towards the end of the Synod existence (Suomi...).

The Sisterhood of Suomi Synod Pastors' Wives and Coping

The motivation for the formation of the Sisterhood of Suomi Synod Pastors' Wives sprang from the need of these women to have their own support group. Church conventions in the pioneer days were only events which provided opportunities to meet on a national basis. The sense of belonging to a group which realistically affirmed their common calling led the relatively few pastors' spouses, attending the 25th Anniversary Convention of the Synod in 1915, to organize a support group. The founding group consisted of thirteen women.

The Sisterhood's stated purpose was: "to bring the members, scattered all over the United States, into a closer relationship with each other so that mutual understanding and love they would strengthen and encourage each other in their noble

but often difficult calling" (Wargelin 1962). The words "noble but often difficult calling", aptly describes the milieu in which these pastors' wives lived and worked. These women commenced at once to demonstrate the depth of their commitment one to another. Alma Haapanen, the wife of long-time synodical president, Dr. Alfred Haapanen, described this commitment in a resume of the minutes of the 40th anniversary of the Sisterhood: "We have always tried to keep in mind the purposes of the Sisterhood and aimed to fulfill its purposes" (Haapanen 1955).

In order to provide greater unity and support for its members, the Sisterhood established a 12-page newsletter, *The Pastor's Wife*. It appeared twice a year. The newsletter always included articles which dealt with the role of the pastor's wife. The fall issue of the 1940 *Pastor's Wife* contained a significant listing of the various subjects dealt with over the years.

The Sisters exchanged news items about their families in the newsletter. It was reassuring for them to know what had taken place in the home of the other sisters. They also shared recipes and household timesaving hints. Sometimes they gave program suggestions for church use. However, the most significant items in the newsletter were those in which the Sisters encouraged one another by sharing personal experiences of faith. Frequently this "soul care" was done in the form of poetry, written by the Sisters or discovered in their reading. Aino Lilja Halkola, Ida Kaskinen and Impi Mykkänen were the most frequent contributors of such poems. Halkola and Kaskinen each wrote one of the two "Sisterhood Songs". These songs (and others) were sung by Sisterhood Choir at Synod Conventions. Their singing was one of the high points of Suomi Synod conventions.

What Has Happened to the Traditional Role Model?

It is germane to our study of the role model of Suomi Synod pastors' wives to note changes that have taken place with the elapse of years. Since this study was completed 25 years after the end of the Suomi Synod, it can be assumed that there has been sufficient time for the development of perspective. The status of women has changed in Finland (as well as in the United States); the first ordinations of women in the Church of Finland took place on March 6, 1988 (Häyrinen 1988, 2-7). The impact of the era of two-income families began in the 1950s. Pastors' wives took advantage of this opportunity and

consequently had less time to devote to church work. The income of congregations also improved and paid staff did more of the work within congregations. In addition, the final years of the Synod were characterized by pastors of diverse ethnic background. They and their wives had graduated from institutions other than those of the Synod. Obviously they brought with them some outlooks which differed from Suomi Synod traditions. All of these changed circumstances would seem to imply that the traditional role model of the Suomi Synod pastors' wives would have been greatly altered. However, this was not necessarily so.

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