



Redefining Normal

A Brief History of Presbyterian Women Navigating Change

BY SUSAN JACKSON DOWD

Circumstances at home, in our communities, nation and world seem, well, anything but normal. An unprecedented 2020 has given way to an even more surprising 2021. We are in the midst of a dark winter, as President Joe Biden said during his inauguration.¹ He talked about how, in 2021, we find ourselves still engulfed by the pandemics of the coronavirus and racism, as well as an economic downturn, an environmental crisis, an American global identity crisis and an “uncivil war.” Vaccinations, which bring us hope, have been slow in coming. Though we see glimmers of light in this dark winter, those glimmers remain distant. So, is this our new normal?

In thinking about normal and about easier times, I remembered the words of Tom Taylor, the president of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation, when he addressed 2,000 Presbyterian Women during the 2018 Churchwide Gathering plenary. He said, “you people are strange.”

Maybe some of you were there. Tom said this because he had just witnessed an ice breaker involving 2,000 Presbyterian Women making animal sounds and dancing around. Maybe that did appear a bit strange to the unfamiliar eye, but I don’t think we are strange. I think we approach our Purpose and our call to God’s mission and ministry in creative and determined ways. We know how to build community and be in relationship. We

know how to take our work seriously but not ourselves too seriously, as a mentor of mine use to say.

PW’s Faithful, Healthy Response

In the midst of 2020, author and founder of @thebodyisnotanapology Sonia Renee Taylor suggested there is no going back to normal, “because normal never was.” Sonia said, “Our pre-corona existence was never normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature.”² Perhaps a healthy faith, a healthy answer to God’s call, is a rejection of what has traditionally been called normal.

Our PW history tells us that, for Presbyterian women, healthy has often meant a healthy distrust and questioning of society’s norms and a healthy response to God’s call for change.

I believe Presbyterian Women define normal according to God’s call, which we articulate through the PW Purpose: we nurture faith, support the mission of the church, work for justice and peace, build inclusive, caring communities, and strengthen the PC(USA). Circumstances change, but we find normal in our faith and purpose.

I often say the PW Purpose is evergreen—no matter what is happening around us, the Purpose remains relevant

and provides a foundation. We know we are forgiven and freed by God in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. That is PW's normal.

Has PW Ever Been Normal?

In 1789, Presbyterian women believed a Presbyterian Church General Assembly with only white, male commissioners and participants was not normal. The women knew that God's call to mission was for all God's people. The women began to organize and work for change.

Presbyterian women began their structured ministries through missionary, tract, Bible, Ladies Aid and Cent Societies (members gave a penny each week to attend). They did all this even though women were forbidden to "speak or pray in promiscuous (male and female) assemblies." In some societies a minister or elder was present to open meetings with prayer because "no one knew what they would pray for if left alone."³

Presbyterian women continued to challenge normal in the mission field, through church leadership and ordination, and by continuing to organize and develop a financial structure, publications and program.

From 1814 to 1871, Presbyterian women began organizing beyond the congregation—from the Female Cent Society of Hudson Presbytery, New York, to the Women's General Missionary Society—a national women's society approved by the United Presbyterian Church in North America General Assembly.

Expansive Ministries

Women of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America began publishing *Woman's Work for Woman* and *Our Mission Field* in 1871. Presbyterian women have published continuously for 150 years, including the last 33 as *Horizons* magazine and Bible study. We have one of the longest publishing traditions in the PC(USA). Even PW's Bible study is not normal! PW's *Horizons* Bible studies deliver an annual, Reformed Bible study written by women from a woman's perspective.

PW's grants programs—the Thank and Birthday Offerings—were envisaged by two leaders who believed women could redefine normal for marginalized adults and children around the world through community giving. In 1888, Eliza Clokey asked women to give a "thank

offering to their Lord" over and above their usual offerings. In 1922, Hallie Paxson Winsborough told every participant in the Women's Auxiliary of the PCUS to give a Birthday Gift—she said give "a penny for every year you have lived and if that is a secret, bring a dollar." PW's grant program has provided more than \$60 million in grants over the years. Imagine the transformations and new normals.

Re-envisioning normal was key to another program now held dear by Presbyterian Women. During a peacemaking trip in 1956, post-World War II hostilities meant Shanti Solomon was denied entry into Korea because she was from India. While waiting in the Philippines to rejoin the group, she envisaged the Fellowship of the Least Coin prayer movement. Presbyterian women supported her vision and helped establish the movement, which is still a close PW partner today.

Bold Leaders

During the years following their first national gathering for women in 1938, women leaders of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA) were set on creating a national organization. By

Historic Highlights of Presbyterian Women Groups

1780s: Presbyterian women gather in their congregations to form Ladies Aid Societies to support mission work.

Mid-1800s: UPCNA women organized nationally to form Women's General Missionary Societies.

1872: The General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA) asked women members to devise some way to systematically raise money to support women missionaries in the field.

1888: Eliza Clokey created the Thank Offering program.

1922: Hallie Paxson Winsborough created the Birthday Offering.

1780

1800

1850

1860

1870

1880

1890

1900

1910

1920

19

Mid-1800s: The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA), the United Presbyterian Church in North America (UPCNA) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) become the three main streams of Presbyterianism in the U.S.

1871: Women of the PCUSA began publishing *Woman's Work for Woman* and *Our Mission Field*.

1875: Sarah Foster Hanna was the first woman to speak to the UPCNA General Assembly.

1912: Women's Auxiliary was founded in the PCUS.

1930: PCUSA opened the office of elder to women.

1946, the National Council of Women's Organizations was approved by the UPCUSA General Assembly. In the meantime, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) women helped found Church Women United—an ecumenical national women's organization. In the 1950s, Presbyterian Women helped found the Asian Church Women's Conference. Fellowship of the Least Coin is a program of this conference.

The Women's Auxiliary, founded in 1912 under the leadership of Winsborough, became Women of the Church in 1950.

Women of the PCUS and the UPCUSA began planning life as one organization, producing a joint Bible study in 1979, forming a working team to unite in 1983, joining for the journey in 1987, and celebrating their union in 1988 at the first Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women.

Presbyterian Women incorporated at the national level in 2009 to ensure the organization's accountability and independence, which also safeguards our ability to lead and push against normal—to not be subsumed as in the past. This push changed the organization's status with the church. PW is incorporated

as an integrated auxiliary of the church, meaning we are an integral part of the PC(USA) but are not directed by the General Assembly. With incorporation, PW became a partner, related through covenant, the *Book of Order*, and PC(USA) structures. In 2018 Presbyterian Women was recognized by the United Nations as a nongovernmental organization, joining the global community as a faith-based organization working for human rights.

Presbyterian Women pushed against what was considered normal during civil war and world wars, military crises, flu pandemics, the Great Depression and more recent economic crises, civil rights marches and movements, September 11 and global terrorism—through all the trials and triumphs of American history, then and as we continue to make it now. The mission of Presbyterian Women remains expansive and practical.

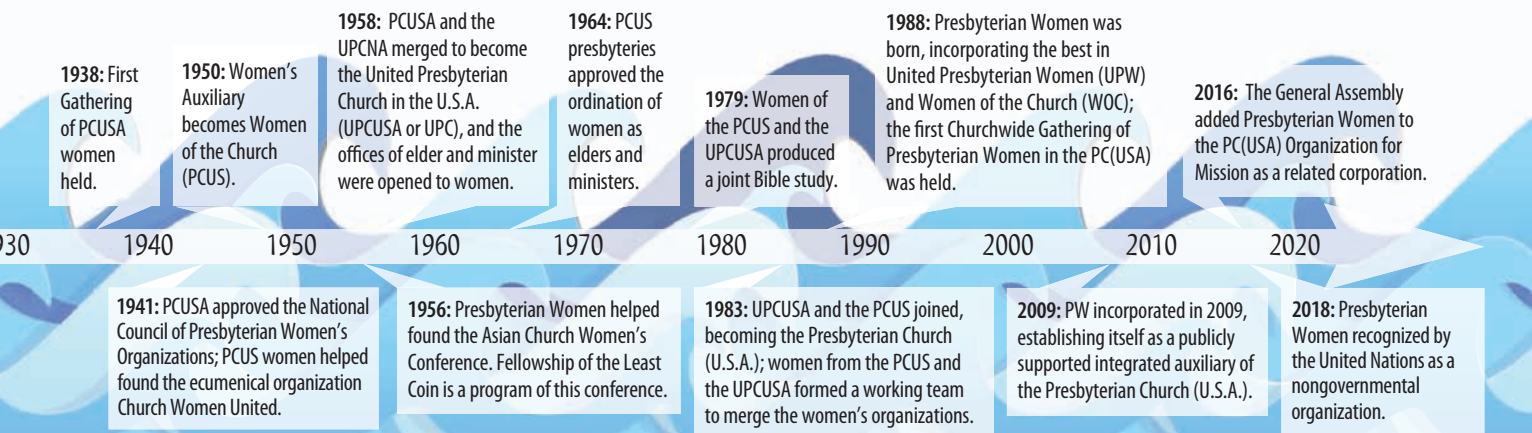
I recite this history to remind all of us that normal doesn't mean right, and to inspire all of us to continue questioning and redefining normal. For more than 230 years, Presbyterian women have pushed the church away from normalized ministry—developing a missionary program,

supporting women's equity, suffrage and leadership (in society and in the church), igniting the peacemaking and hunger programs, advocating for children and the marginalized, working to disrupt systems of oppression: racism, human trafficking, voter suppression, communication rights, and other justice-related work, and even most recently in technology. PW led the church in working through Zoom and meeting online as an economic measure, long before the pandemic made meeting online mandatory.

Antiracism and Racial Equity

In living out our Purpose, Presbyterian Women commits to ending racism in all its forms and in all places—at all levels of Presbyterian Women, within the church and in society as a whole. Presbyterian Women was the first ministry in the church to commit to becoming an antiracist organization.

At its 1997 Churchwide Business Meeting, Presbyterian Women approved a resolution to seek to eradicate racism. During the 1997–2000 triennium of Presbyterian Women, the Churchwide Coordinating Team (now the national Board of Directors) participated in



antiracist awareness-raising activities that led team members to adopt an antiracist stance. The Board continues this work through the national Racial Equity Committee. Racism has been normalized in this country—but we know this is not normal.

National Changes

As mentioned earlier, PW was somewhat prepared for working in an online world. In the 2015–2018 triennium, the PW Board began meeting online to save annual fund (Mission Pledge) dollars. Face-to-face synod moderator network calls began, bringing together PW leadership across the 16 synods to share information and programming, as well as build relationships. The national board made available communication grants for synod coordinating teams to purchase Zoom for meetings and networking. Who knew that we were preparing for ministry during a global pandemic?

Since quarantine began last March, Presbyterian Women, Inc., hosted online town squares for Presbyterian Women in each synod. Because Presbyterian Women cannot gather in person, in June, the PW staff provided four online Bible study overviews led by Lynn Miller, author of *Into the Light: Finding Hope Through Prayers of Lament*. More than 1,000 women, and some men, from across the country attended

Lynn’s webinars. Magdalena García led the Spanish-language Bible study overview. Lynn hosted two painting webinars based on the art from her study. More than 200 joined a Bible study music webinar.

When I started with Presbyterian Women in 1993, normal was communicated through print materials. Staff had to have special permission to have an internet connection. The move to electronic/online materials was happening apace, but accelerated when quarantine began last March. Many traditionally printed materials are now electronic.

Leadership, Community and Relationships

Presbyterian women’s leadership historically has been critical to the life of the church. Our work is not something of the past. PW’s leadership is needed still, now. Though our participant numbers and giving have decreased over the years, our program is strong. We remain the largest PC(USA) mission partner. We are organized to support the church at every level, and have the structure and flexibility to engage in ministry with creativity and a strong network.

Presbyterian women understand how to do work in community, in relationship. We know that a least coin, prayer or action—when added to other least coins, prayers and actions—changes lives and ultimately

changes the world. You may not feel PW’s mission impact when you meet and work in your congregational groups, or within your presbytery and synod coordinating teams, but I promise you what you are doing locally matters—no matter how small or unstructured your PW group is.

Normal for Presbyterian Women is relationship and community—from the relationships that led us to organize in the 1700s to the bonds getting us through the last year. How do we stay in community when we cannot gather physically? I think it’s through PW’s “normal”—our faith, shared mission and our commitment to the PW Purpose. I believe these shared values keep us together, keep us critical of the world around us, keep us engaged in ensuring wholeness for all people. I believe that, in this way, we witness to the promise of God’s kingdom. 🍷

Susan Jackson Dowd is executive director of Presbyterian Women, Inc.

Notes

1. Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.; www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr
2. Sonia Renee Taylor, Instagram, *There Can Be No Going Back to “Normal,”* March 31, 2020; www.instagram.com/sonyareneetaylor.
3. Katherine Hodge and Margaret Bennett, “Causes of unrest among the women of the Church: A report of Special Committee to the General Council of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.” Philadelphia, PA: January 1, 1927.



Here’s What You Can Do

Let’s take a page from our foremothers in faith and envisage a PW that builds up the church in faithful (although not necessarily normal) ways. With intention and love, begin! Here’s how! In your circle, that might mean answering a call to serve as a leader or sharing your gifts and presence with a PW ministry. In your presbytery or synod, perhaps you can help build partnerships to strengthen existing ministries or

begin new ones. At the churchwide level, you can support PW programs and ministries, such as subscribing to *Horizons*, supporting the Offerings or making a financial gift to Presbyterian Women, including the Susan Jackson Dowd Endowment, established to nurture connections among women of faith worldwide. Visit www.presbyterianwomen.org to learn more.