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A chair for women's support

topics:

- study and work of women at a Methodist School of Theology
- women in the Methodist Church in Brazil

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The Otilia Chaves Chair at the Methodist School of Theology

Professors Barbara Kemper, Thomas Kemper, Rui de Souza Josgrilberg and the Women's Project of the Pastoral Institute of the School of Theology created the Otilia Chaves Chair in the context of the Decade of Women. In order to make this dream possible, support was sought from the Board of Global Ministries and the Women's Division of the United Methodist Church of the United States. In 1994, pastor Nancy Cardoso Pereira assumed this chair, and all of its many responsibilities. For a short time, the chair was empty because of the departure of Pastor Pereira, and during this time the duties and responsibilities related to the position were rethought. In keeping with the plan of the School of Theology, the purpose of the chair was defined as seeking to develop pastoral questions that affect the work of women pastors, the theme of women in the Church and theological research related to pastoral development within the Methodist Church.

After twelve years of work as a pastor, I was offered the challenge of returning to the School of Theology to fill this chair. During my time as a pastor I had the opportunity to work in a wide variety of settings. I was a District Superintendent of a District which had 42 churches, did pastoral work with an agricultural ministry, experienced the challenge of youth ministry, and had the opportunity to work in the ecumenical community through CEBI – The Ecumenical Center for Biblical Studies. All of these proved to be both challenging and fulfilling. Now I face a new challenge. The Otilia Chaves Chair brings together a variety of ministries that interest me a great deal, and challenge my understanding of ministry.

This work is very diversified. I work in pastoral ministry to the life of the community of the School of Theology, together with Bishop Nelson Luiz Campos Leite and Professor Otoniel Ribeiro. We also work with Professor Dr. Ronaldo S. Rosa and Bishop Nelson accompanying theology students in their supervised pastoral internship. I also participate in planning and carrying out worship services at the seminary. Beyond this, I am active in a variety of meetings, programs, assemblies, congresses and workshops that make up the life of the seminary. In the midst of all of these activities, I constantly seek to raise questions regarding the identity and presence of women.

Working with students and women

I try to accompany the students in their studies, and, when possible, in their pastoral activities. I pay particular attention to the pastoral aspect of my ministry because I am identified by my conference, in Sao Caetano do Sul, as a pastor working in Theological Seminary. In this way, I see my work as an integral part of the ministry of the local church. I try to avoid separating the seminary community from the life of the local church, and very much want to communicate this belief to the students.

However, the central focus of my ministry is with women. In this capacity, I work with local churches, districts and in regional and national conferences to raise questions regarding and try to inform others about the identity and role of women in the Church. I also do this at the ecumenical level and in conjunction with other groups and institutions. In the Pastoral Institute of the School of Theology, I have the responsibility of developing the Women's Project. This project sponsors a yearly national encounter of Methodist Women. The National Encounter of Women of the Methodist Church seeks to enable leadership in all aspects of women's ministry in the Church. Women attend this encounter from the six ecclesiastical regions of the Methodist Church and the two missionary regions - REMENE, in the northeast of Brazil, and The North and Northwest Missionary Field.

The Women's Project also sponsors a yearly ecumenical women's meeting. The Ecumenical Meeting of Women seeks to integrate work related to women in other denominations. The central theme of this encounter is the fight for women's dignity. Women from other denominations and women involved with popular movements such as Sem-Terra (The Landless) and Pastoral Work with Marginalized Women all participate in this exciting event. Out of this encounter comes a yearly publication called: *Telling Our Stories*. Besides being a record of the event, this publication challenges others to participate in the journeys of women.

The Women's Project is also related to NETMAL – Nucleus of Women's Theological Studies in Latin America. The Women's Project and NETMAL work together in a wide variety of ways and on diverse projects. However, a central image that holds the two groups together is that, as women, we are learning to learning to walk together.

It is important to point out that in Brazil, more than 70% of the membership of the Methodist Church is composed of women. There are women working in diverse areas of the action and mission of the Church. Women work in SMM (The Methodist Women's Society) and others as church school professors. Women work in a variety of settings with children, youth, the elderly and persons with special needs. Women work as pastors in diverse Churches, congregations, missionary points, and community centers and as missionaries.

Presently, there are 155 women pastors in the Methodist Church in Brazil. Last year, for the first time, the Methodist Church had three women Episcopal candidates. One of these candidates missed election as the first woman bishop by only three votes. This event raised fundamental questions, among both men and women, regarding women's participation in the Church. Why not women? What would keep a woman from participating in the Episcopal College? Why not have an Episcopal College made up of both women and men? Certainly, there are still

many barriers, but women should not lose hope. Women must continue to fight and face the most diverse situations. In so doing they go forth and signal their presence in the coming of the Kingdom. Women also have the challenge of being “The Image of God” in a world full of so many contradictions.

Finally, the Otilia Chaves Chair, since it is at the School of Theology, can raise fundamental questions and active discussion about women’s identity, their presence in the Church and their work as pastors. As such, the School of Theology is fertile soil. It is the place we train new pastors for the Methodist Church in all of Brazil. Perhaps this is a sign of a better world in which the barriers that separate men and women can be broken down in this theological, pedagogical and pastoral journey. Perhaps we can discover how men and women can better work together in the construction of the Kingdom of God. Since, for God “there is no longer Jew of Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).