Visible and Invisible: Women's Ministry and Microaggressions

Knut Refsdal

This year marks the 70th anniversary of women being granted full clergy rights in the Methodist tradition that later became part of The United Methodist Church. It is an anniversary that gives us reason for both gratitude and pride.

At the same time, this anniversary invites us not only to celebrate an important event in the life of the church, but also to give thanks for the many women who, long before the church formally recognized it, answered God's call to ministry.

Long before the church ordained women, women shaped the life of Methodism in decisive ways. John Wesley gave women permission to lead and preach. As in several other matters, he was persuaded to do so by his mother. Although this permission did not last long beyond Wesley's lifetime, women continued to follow God's call as preachers, missionaries, class leaders, exhorters, and theology students, even when they encountered resistance and obstacles.

A decisive turning point came in 1956 when the General Conference of The Methodist Church granted women full clergy rights. Maud Keister Jensen became the first woman to receive these rights in that historic year.

The United Methodist Church has good reason to be proud of its history regarding women in ministry and leadership. In many ways, we have been a pioneering church.

Yet there is still work to be done.

The book *Visible and Invisible: Women in Pastoral Roles in Norwegian Free Churches* by Linn Sæbø Rystad and Hilde Marie Øgreid, published last year, raises important and challenging questions: What happens after the formal battles for equality have been won? What happens when women have access to all ministries and leadership positions, yet still experience that they are not fully received as the "natural" pastor or leader? Do structures and attitudes still exist that make it more difficult to be a woman in church leadership?

One of the book's most important contributions is that it shifts attention from major visible conflicts to smaller and often invisible experiences. The authors use the concept of microaggressions to describe the many actions, comments, and expectations that may seem insignificant in isolation but, over time, shape people's sense of belonging or exclusion.

For many, this may be an unfamiliar perspective. When we think about discrimination, we often imagine clear conflicts and deliberate actions. Microaggressions function differently. They involve things said in passing, expectations that are never spoken aloud, and questions repeatedly directed at some people but not others. They are not primarily about direct discrimination but about subtle signals that indicate who is regarded as the natural leader, who must prove their competence, and who is still viewed as an exception.

Interestingly, such mechanisms often become particularly visible in denominations that have already adopted full equality, such as The United Methodist Church.

Agnes Nilsen Howard

As noted, the Methodist Church was an early advocate for opening ordained ministry to women. Yet the book shows that this pioneering story has another side.

The story of Agnes Nilsen Howard (1907–1996) is telling. She was the first woman ordained in the Methodist Church, first as a deacon in 1932 and then as an elder in 1954. This happened before such ordinations were officially permitted, and the fact that she was being sent as a missionary to India was likely a major reason the ordinations were approved unanimously and without debate.

When the authors examine sources from this period, they discover that her ministry received little attention. While her male colleagues were described and recorded as natural members of the church's leadership, Agnes appears significantly less visible in the historical material. Her contribution was simply not highlighted in the same way.

This is a classic example of invisibilization. No one necessarily said that women could not be pastors. Yet when women's contributions are not told, remembered, or highlighted in the same way as men's, a message is sent about who truly counts.

Invisibility is perhaps the most typical form of microaggression in the church. Many women do not primarily describe direct opposition, but rather a feeling of being overlooked, forgotten, or treated as an appendix to the "real" story.

Jorunn Wendel

A similar pattern appears in the story of Jorunn Wendel. As Norway's first female district superintendent, she represented an important breakthrough. Yet the book also shows how complex the situation was.

Jorunn recounts many difficult experiences and describes how, as a woman pastor, she was often treated differently from her male colleagues. In Bergen she was the city's only female pastor, which led to several challenging experiences.

One of the most striking aspects was how attention was constantly drawn to the fact that she was a woman. She was not simply a pastor. She was a *female* pastor. She was not merely a leader. She was a *female* leader. She was not only identified by her office but as "the first *woman*."

When men are allowed to be individuals while women become representatives of their gender, an imbalance emerges. Gender becomes more important than ministry. The woman is continually reminded that she is not perceived as the norm. The concept of microaggressions helps us understand this reality. It is not primarily about ill will but about cultural assumptions so ingrained that they often go unnoticed.

The book also describes how female pastors encountered opposition justified on theological grounds. During her years in ministry, Jorunn was rejected by some Christian environments because her ministry was regarded as unbiblical. She recalls reactions in which her very calling was questioned. Arthur Berg, former editor of the newspaper *Dagen*, reportedly stated that she believed she had a calling, but she did not. When she was later appointed district superintendent, some described it as a "symptom of illness."

When a male pastor's calling is taken for granted while a female pastor's calling must continually be defended, a difference emerges that affects both the work environment and

self-understanding. Theology then becomes not merely a matter of doctrine but also of who is considered to belong in ministry.

The authors show that such experiences leave lasting marks, even when they do not result in formal restrictions.

One of the book's most illustrative examples concerns Jorunn's ordination. Public attention focused not only on her theology, preaching, or leadership abilities, but also on the length of her dress.

Some may shrug their shoulders at such a story. Yet that is precisely why it matters.

No one would have spent energy discussing the trouser length of a male ordinand. When attention is directed instead toward a woman's body or appearance, focus is shifted away from her competence and ministry.

A single comment means little. Twenty similar comments over the course of a career mean a great deal.

Microaggressions work through repetition.

Gunilla Olsen
This issue also becomes clear in the story of Gunilla Olsen.

She was the first woman to serve as a pastor in a Norwegian Methodist congregation. She was accepted as provisional member in the Annual Conference in 1964 and appointed to Odal and Kongsvinger. In 1965 she was appointed to Kragerø, where she served until 1968. She was received into full connection at Annual Conference and ordained deacon in Bergen in 1967 under the previous system.

However, she was never ordained elder. In 1968 she entered a localized relation to the Annual Conference. In a letter to the Board of Ordained Ministry that year, she wrote that if part-time employment could not be arranged, she requested withdrawal from Annual Conference. That is what happened.

When I presented Gunilla with a Certificate of Appreciation on behalf of the church earlier this year, I said, among other things:

> *What happened to Gunilla reflects a pattern, not only in the Methodist Church but also in other churches: women with families often did not reach the finish line, while single women did. This is not about anything she or the church said or did. Rather, it is about the fact that she left ministry during the years when she had young children. In contrast, Jorunn Wendel pointed out that not having a family was a necessity for her ministry.*
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> *Exactly how communication took place, what was said or written, and what was left unsaid is ultimately secondary. What matters is the larger pattern in which opportunities opened more easily for women without families, while the path was more complicated for women with family responsibilities, both in relation to themselves and to the church as an employer.*

We also recognize that the times were different in the late 1960s. This situation would very likely have been handled differently today. Today, the church would have accepted a part-time appointment if that were necessary for her to remain in ministry.

Nevertheless, Gunilla, you have exercised a lifelong ministry in the church. Even if not formally as a pastor, you have in practice carried out the work of a pastor. The church wishes to express its gratitude for that. In this congregation and regionally and nationally, you have served a wide range of roles and responsibilities. You have carried them out with great love and with a desire to serve. You have been, and continue to be, a role model for many, and many give thanks to God for you and for what God has done through you.

As I said, if what happened to you in the 1960s had occurred today, the story would have turned out differently. It did not happen as you had hoped, and that cannot be undone. Nevertheless, or perhaps because of that, I have the privilege today, on behalf of The United Methodist Church in Norway, of presenting you with a Certificate of Appreciation. It is given to you as an expression of gratitude for your faithful service as a servant of Jesus Christ, as a sign of love and deep respect, and as an expression of the church's profound thankfulness.

Gunilla represented a generation of women who entered ministry during a period when it was structured around men's life situations. When she sought arrangements that would make it possible to combine ministry and family life, no such provisions existed. Her story illustrates that equality is not only about access to ministry but also about the practical conditions that make ministry possible.

This is precisely the kind of issue the concept of microaggressions helps us recognize. Not because anyone intentionally wished to discriminate, but because organizations develop expectations over time that favor certain life situations over others.

No one necessarily set out to exclude women. Even so, the system had consequences that affected women more severely than men. This reminds us that structures can be exclusionary without anyone actively intending them to be.

Why Are Microaggressions So Visible in The United Methodist Church?
One of the most interesting questions raised by the book is why microaggressions become so visible in a denomination that has come so far in its work for equality. Equally important is the question of why examples continue to appear even today.

Paradoxically, the explanation lies in the church's own successes and in the difference between formal and cultural change.

The book's central point is that microaggressions become especially visible in churches where overt conflicts have largely been resolved. It is easy to assume that the problem has therefore been solved and that the struggle for formal rights has been won.

Yet when formal barriers are removed, cultural and unconscious mechanisms become more visible.

Rules can be changed through decisions. Culture changes much more slowly.

When a woman is still treated as an exception, traces of the old culture remain. When women must defend their calling more than men do, traces remain. When family responsibilities affect women leaders more strongly than male leaders, traces remain. Ideas about leadership, authority, and the pastoral role are shaped not only by regulations but also by traditions, habits, language, and expectations.

The most important lesson from *Visible and Invisible* is not that The United Methodist Church has failed. On the contrary, the book demonstrates how far the church has come. The legal and theological battles have largely been won. The stories of Agnes Nilsen Howard, Gunilla Olsen, and Jorunn Wendel remind us that The United Methodist Church helped pave the way for women in ministry long before many others. We have every reason to celebrate that.

Precisely for that reason, however, the remaining challenges become more important. Female Methodist pastors rarely encounter direct discrimination within their own denomination, although many report such experiences in ecumenical settings. More often they encounter microaggressions that suggest the underlying assumption that the "real" pastor is still male.

The book therefore challenges us to continue the work. The church's task is not only to open the door but also to ensure that everyone who walks through it is met with the same recognition, trust, and respect.

Equality is not only about who is allowed into the pulpit, but also about who is heard when they speak. It is not only about who may be elected to leadership positions, but also about the expectations they encounter when elected. It is not only about decisions, ordination, and job descriptions, but also about culture, language, and everyday experience.

Therefore, the struggle for equality is never only a struggle about rules. It is also a struggle about culture.

That is why the message of *Visible and Invisible* is especially important for The United Methodist Church today. That is why the work continues to build a church where no one is invisible.

Microsoft Copilot was used to identify key themes in the book and to refine the wording of certain key concepts. All analyses, evaluations, and conclusions are the author's own.

Photo captions:

Agnes Nilsen Howard.

Jorunn Wendel was celebrated at the Annual Conference in Norway in June 2026. Photo: Karl Anders Ellingsen.

Gunilla Olsen together with Helen Byholt Lovelace and Knut Refsdal when she was presented with a Certificate of Appreciation in June 2026. Photo: Karl Anders Ellingsen.