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---FEATURES

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Miss Merion Johansson:
An "Ordinary" Pastor

by Theo Sommerkamp
Director, European Baptist Press Service

AVESTA, Sweden (BP)--The congregation finishes its opening hymns, the ushers collect the morning offering, the Scripture selection is read. Then the pastor, wearing a clerical garment, rises.

Instead of launching into the sermon immediately, the pastor sings a solo. Following the message, the pastor sings again before the benediction.

A pastor singing a solo as an integral part of the Sunday morning worship service would startle some Baptists, but in Sweden it is done frequently. Sometimes the pastor also plays a musical instrument while singing.

The clerical garment, acceptable to Baptists in Sweden as in numerous other areas, is equally unacceptable to another host of Baptists.

But there is a more distinctive aspect here. The clerical garment is a knee-length black dress, its collar fringed in white. The voice belongs to a woman.

Miss Merion Johansson is pastor of two small Baptist congregations, one in Avesta about 100 miles north of Stockholm, and the other in nearby Krylbo, Sweden.

She considers herself "nothing extraordinary or unusual. . . . just an ordinary pastor doing the same thing that pastors everywhere are used to doing." And she says she feels no prejudice from her congregations because she is a woman.

On a world-wide basis, Baptists are generally wary of women pastors. They listen eagerly to a woman missionary talk of her work in darkest Africa, or often call a dynamic woman to challenge their young people, under male pastoral supervision.

Such, in fact, is the case within the world's largest Baptist group, the Southern Baptist Convention, in the United States. Women can lead other women, they can teach Sunday School, they can even speak in the pulpit in infrequent services on missions or women's activities. They may also edit some denominational magazines.

But for women to be ordained as pastors or evangelists in the Southern Baptist Convention is virtual taboo.

There was much negative reaction several years ago when a Southern Baptist seminary professor took part in the ordination service for a woman student who took a position in the American Baptist Convention, which permits women ministers.

Although women have been accepted as pastors in England and Sweden, the thought of such is almost unimaginable in Germany, or Holland or Southern Europe.

Erik Ruden, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Sweden, said the churches have used women evangelists "since the beginning of the century" in Sweden.

Ruden does not believe the Bible prohibits women pastors. Quoting the Apostle Paul and passages that sometimes are used by opponents of women ministers, Ruden said he could not see any objection from the New Testament point of view.

"Paul says what a good work women are doing. Women were the first to declare that Christ has risen. So it would not be improper for them to proclaim it today," he added.

"Cultural upbringing is the cause of hesitancy to have women as pastors," Ruden observes. "It is less on a biblical basis than on a non-theological factor such as tradition. The only slight objection is that a woman might find the strain of pastoral work too hard."

Sitting at her desk in the pastor's study, Miss Johansson concedes that there are indeed many stresses in the work as pastor of two churches, one with 71 members here, and the other with 45 members.

"My time is misused," she complains. "If I worked in a business, I would enjoy all this typing and telephoning." But as a pastor, she feels it robs her of the hours

she needs to go out and meet people, prepare sermons, and train members more effectively.

She feels a lot of the administrative and detail work could be done by someone other than the pastor. There seems little promise of relief for the combined resources of the two churches do not permit a church secretary.

Her work day begins at 3:00 a.m., and except for sleep, Miss Johansson seldom is at home for over a half-hour.

Her work load would also be eased if she had an automobile. In the summer, she bicycles from her apartment here to churches in both places. In winter, it is a 20-minute walk to her Avesta church, and a 20 minute bus ride to Krylbo. She preaches twice a month in each church.

Now in her early 30s, Miss Johansson grew up in a Christian home, but had strong religious doubts during her early teens. At age 19, "when I found Christ, it was the most wonderful thing to ever happen to me," she recalls.

After attending Bethel Seminary, operated by the Baptist Union of Sweden, she was a summer evangelist, and later pastor at Hagfors, Sweden, a church with 13 members. She was also a pastor in Uppsala, and studied at the University of Uppsala.

In 1965, she came to the United States as one of eight persons in all of Sweden to win scholarships to study and practice social work at the University of Chicago and the Southside neighborhood of Chicago. She lived for a time with a Negro family. After about three months, she returned to Sweden.

In Avesta, one of her best opportunities comes through a newspaper column she writes nearly every Saturday for a daily newspaper here, she believes. Called "Saturday Chat," it contains homespun philosophy, jokes, observations from life, an illustration often with a moral or spiritual point, but seldom pious utterances. The column uses her picture, but is signed only "The Pastor."

Seeing that "people have understood the message" makes her happiest, even if someone else is doing the preaching. She's most troubled "by church people who don't want to try to find the will of God for their lives."

How does she, a single woman, handle marriage and family counseling? "I would like to compare it with other situations where I have little or no experience," Miss Johansson replies. "I don't know what it's like to be drunk," but that doesn't keep her from trying to counsel with an alcoholic.

Marriage is not in her immediate plans. "I wouldn't have time to marry and have a family and still be a full-time pastor," she says. "I know God wants me where I am now."

Although quite attractive, Miss Johansson points out that she wants to "be listened to, not looked at," especially when she is preaching. Thus she wears no earrings, bracelets, or necklace while preaching. After services on Sunday, she changes to a street dress (preference often red) before leaving the church building.

All the other pastors in Avesta are men, but Miss Johansson is chairman of the local church federation.

There are at least four full-time women pastors in the Baptist Union of Sweden, according to Ruden. The pastorate of the union, with 470 churches, is still male dominated.

One of the women pastors "has almost changed the neighborhood by the force of her personality," Ruden observes. She serves a 40-member church in a small community.

The Baptist Union further relies on about 25 women as reserve preachers, supplying for pastors who are absent. The union also has one woman pastor who is married and has a family, though she does not devote full time to the church.

A considerable number of women pastors serve in the Swedish Lutheran state church, but Miss Johansson says that Lutheran women pastors have sometimes faced "hard opposition" and pressure, much of it from their male colleagues. "We have nothing similar in the Baptist union," she adds.

Neely Resigns As President
Of North Greenville College

GREENVILLE, S.C. (BP)--Thomas L. Neely, president of North Greenville Junior College for the past seven years, has resigned effective June 30.

Neely told his board of trustees in a prepared statement that he would give his time "to preaching in series of meetings, leading prayer retreats and deeper life conferences, speaking at Bible conferences, and writing."

"For more than a year I have felt that God might be leading me into a different ministry," Neely told the board.

A former Southern Baptist missionary in Colombia, South America, Neely returned to the United States as pastor of the Holly Springs Baptist Church in Spartanburg, S.C.; a church he had served before going to Colombia.

He became assistant to the president of North Greenville Junior College in 1958, and stepped up to the presidency in 1962.

A 1936 graduate of the Baptist school he has headed for seven years, Neely earned degrees from Woffard College, Spartanburg, S.C.; and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth. Furman University here conferred on him an honorary doctor of divinity degree in 1964.

North Greenville Junior College, founded in 1893, faced a serious problem of accreditation several years ago, but the school under Neely's leadership gained recently a 10-year renewal of accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The school last year had an enrollment of about 375 students.

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Billy Graham Associate
Joins Texas Evangelism

1/15/70

DALLAS (BP)--Gil A. Stricklin, public relations director for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association for the past five years, had been named staff associate for personal evangelism in the Baptist General Convention of Texas' evangelism division.

Stricklin was elected to the post in a called special session of the 1.3 million member convention's Executive Board in Fort Worth just prior to the state evangelism conference.

The 35-year-old evangelist returns to his native Texas after directing publicity and promotional efforts for the Graham evangelism team since 1965.

A graduate of Baylor University, he received a masters degree in journalism from Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, and a divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth.

He was pastor of several churches in Texas, South Carolina and Georgia, and was staff writer and religion editor for the Fort Worth Star Telegram, 1963-64. He also worked briefly as a consultant-editor for the Texas Alcohol-Narcotics Education agency in Dallas.

While a member of the Graham organization, Stricklin directed communications activities for the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin, Germany,

He replaces Ralph Neighbour in the Texas evangelism division. Neighbour currently is pastor of the West Memorial Chapel in Houston, an **experimental** church.

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