



# MENNONITE WOMEN'S HISTORY TIMELINE



- 1868: [Wadsworth Institute](#) opened (GCMC) and local women's societies furnished bedding and linens. The first women were enrolled at the school in 1876.
- 1880s-onward: Many local women's mission groups formed in Mennonite contexts.
- 1889: Virginia Shank Showalter [ordained as a deaconess](#) to the Middle District of Virginia Mennonite Conference. Although they were an anomaly in the (old) Mennonite Church, around 28 women were ordained as deaconesses in the Middle District between 1861 and 1962.
- 1893: Women were among the first students to enroll at the new Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. Women were also enrolled at its predecessor schools (Emmatal and Halstead) beginning in 1883.
- 1895: Phoebe Funk Kolb and Almira Ferris became the first two women (on written record) to teach at the Elkhart Institute (later Goshen College).
- 1896: [Bertha Elise Kinsinger Petter](#) graduated from Wittenberg College in Springfield, Ohio, possibly the first Mennonite



woman to earn a college degree in the United States. She later served as a missionary among the Southern Cheyenne and Arapahoe in Oklahoma and the Northern Cheyenne in Montana (1896-1963).

- 1897: Clara Lemmon became the first woman to teach at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas.
- 1899: [Helena Penner Hiebert](#) graduated from Wesley College (later renamed University of Winnipeg), becoming the first Mennonite woman to graduate from a university in Manitoba.
- 1900-onward: Congregations across the United States and Canada continued to form sewing circles and “sisters” groups; Middle District reported a women’s mission society in every church in 1900.
- 1901: Rena Belle Leach became the first woman to teach at Bluffton College, as an instructor of instrumental music.
- 1908: The [Bethel Deaconess Hospital](#) and [School of Nursing](#) opened in Newton, Kansas. Sister [Frieda Kaufman](#) was the first superintendent, Sister [Catherine Voth](#) was director and instructor of student nurses, and Anna Janz was the first enrolled student. Sister Ida Epp was ordained as a deaconess in the same year.
- 1905: [Martha Richert](#) became among the first four women to complete [deaconess](#) training in the General Conference Mennonite Church. In 1909, she married Peter Penner and traveled to India, where she served as a medical missionary until 1941.
- January 1911: [Ann Jemima Allebach](#) became the first Mennonite woman on record to be ordained a minister by Mennonites in North America at First Mennonite Church in Philadelphia.
- 1915: First general meeting of sewing circle women held at MC assembly in August.
- 1916: [Mary Yoder Burkhard](#) began as the first president of the Mennonite Women’s Missionary Society, a precursor to the Women’s Missionary and Service Auxiliary. [Clara Eby Steiner](#)



was also instrumental in its founding and served as general secretary.

- 1917-1918: Elizabeth Heatwole and Marion Charlton become the first two women to teach at Eastern Mennonite School (later Eastern Mennonite College). Charlton had been considered for the role of principal in 1914 but was not chosen because she was a woman.
- 1920: [Geneva Mercomes](#) became the first African American woman enrolled at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. She was honored with the Bethel College “Distinguished Alumni Award” in 1965.
- 1935: [Bertha Ruth Leaman](#) graduated from the University of Chicago with a Ph.D. in history, becoming “the first North American Mennonite woman of Swiss-South German heritage to earn a Ph.D. degree.”
- 1943: [Juanita Lark](#) became the first African American student to graduate from Goshen College.
- 1943: [Roberta Webb](#) became the first African American to join a Mennonite church in Harrisonburg, Virginia.
- 1944: [Alta Elizabeth Schrock](#) graduated with a Ph.D. in biology from the University of Pittsburgh, becoming the first (old) Mennonite woman to earn a Ph.D. and retain her membership in the Mennonite Church.
- 1945: [Mary K. Oyer](#) began teaching music and visual arts at Goshen College. She earned a doctorate from the University of Michigan in 1958 and in the 1960s she became the first woman to serve on the Mennonite Church hymnal committee.
- 1948: [Ada Webb](#) enrolled as the first full-time Black student at Eastern Mennonite College in 1949. She later transferred to Hesston College, after experiencing racism at Eastern Mennonite College.
- 1950: [Ruth Brunk Stoltzfus](#) started *Heart to Heart* radio broadcast for women. She was ordained in 1989 at the age of 74, the first woman to be ordained by Virginia Mennonite Conference.
- 1954: [Peggy Webb Howard](#) became the first African American student to graduate from Eastern Mennonite College.

- 1958: [Bertha Fast Harder](#) became the first female faculty member at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (AMBS). She later became the first woman elected to a major Mennonite denominational board, serving as a member of the Commission on Education (GCMC) for 18 years.
- 1960: Eunice Bass became the first person of color to integrate the pre-nursing program at Eastern Mennonite College.
- 1962: First women's retreat in Lancaster Conference (now [LMC](#)).
- 1970: Betty Epp (WMA board president) became the first woman elected to Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) board.
- 1972: [Tina Block](#) began as the first woman on the Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission board.
- November 1972: Women's Caucus following MCC Peace Section assembly in Chicago.
- 1973: Angie B. Williams became the first African American woman on the executive committee of the Women's Missionary and Service Commission, serving as vice president.
- April 1973: Maria Bustos, Lupe Bustos, and Maria Rivera Snyder organized the first Spanish-speaking Mennonite women's conference in Moline, Illinois.
- July 1973: [Emma Richards](#) became the first ordained female pastor of an MC congregation.
- October 1973: Consultation on role of women in the church held at Mennonite Biblical Seminary.
- 1974: GCMC resolved "Neither race, class, nor sex should be considered barriers in calling a minister"; MC left the issue to area conferences.
- 1975: Eglia Birmingham became the first African American woman to serve as a staff person for Mennonite Board of Missions.
- 1975: Rose Covington first African American appointed to Mennonite Publication Board, serving ten years.
- 1976: [Carolyn Charles Wenger](#) began as the first paid director of the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society (LMHS) and served until 2001. During this time, she launched and edited the *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* quarterly and grew the LMHS

into “the largest grassroots Mennonite history organization in North America.”

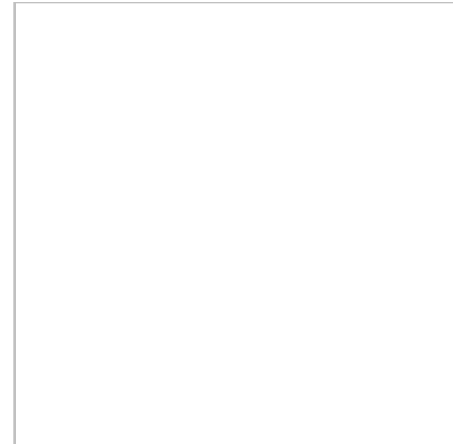
- 1976: First Women in Ministry conference (inter-Anabaptist).
- 1976: Marilyn Miller became the [first ordained female pastor](#) of a GCMC congregation. Rosie Epp and Anne Neufeld Rupp were ordained shortly thereafter.
- 1977: Frances Jackson organized the first African American Mennonite women’s retreat.
- 1977: Sylvia Dyson appointed as the first full-time director of the Cross-Cultural Relations Center at Goshen College.
- 1980: [Wilma Ann Bailey](#) became the first African American woman licensed for ministry in the Indiana-Michigan Conference at Grace Chapel, Saginaw, Michigan.
- 1982: Joy Lovett became Associate Secretary for Black Concerns in the (old) Mennonite Church.
- 1983: [Anna Mae Bowman](#), professor of social work, founded the women’s studies program at Goshen College.
- 1984: [Dorothy Jean Weaver](#) named an instructor at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in Harrisonburg, Virginia, the first woman to hold a full-time position. She was promoted to assistant professor in 1987 after receiving her doctorate in New Testament from Union Presbyterian Seminary (Richmond, Virginia).
- 1985: [Anna Kreider Juhnke](#) was elected as the first woman chair of the Bethel College faculty. She also served for 12 years on the board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the on the executive committee of the Mennonite Central Committee U.S. board.
- 1987: Lena Horning Brown became the first woman in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference (now LMC) to receive credentials for pastoral ministry, serving as a deaconess at Slate Hill Mennonite Church. She was named associate pastor in 1996.
- 1987: [Anne W. Stuckey](#) began as pastor at First Mennonite Church in Iowa City, Iowa. She was ordained in 1988 and was later appointed as Minister of Congregational Leadership for

Frances Jackson



the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries.

- 1987: Florence Driedger became president of GCMC, the first woman to hold the top position of a Mennonite denomination.
- 1988: Patricia Swartzendruber began as vice president of Administration and Resources for Mennonite Board of Missions, the first woman to hold a position of top leadership in the organization. Alice M. Roth began as vice president for Overseas Ministries in 1990.
- 1990: Shirley Buckwalter Yoder became the first female vice president at Mennonite Mutual Aid, leading the Health Services department.
- 1992: Brenda Isaacs became the first African American woman ordained in the Mennonite Church, serving as pastor at Calvary Christian Fellowship in Inglewood, California.
- 1993: Charlotte Holsopple Glick became the first woman to serve as a conference minister for the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference.
- 1993: [Donella M. Clemens](#) began as the first female moderator of the (old) Mennonite Church and served until 1995.
- 1994: Iris de León-Hartshorn ordained as a minister in the Western District and South Central Mennonite Conferences.
- 1995: Janeen Bertsche Johnson was named the first campus pastor of Associated (now Anabaptist) Mennonite Biblical Seminary, and continues to serve in that role.
- 1996: [Lee F. Snyder](#) became the first female president of Bluffton College and served until 2006.
- 1997: [Shirley H. Showalter](#) began as the first female president of Goshen College.
- 2000: [Judith Loganbill](#) became the first Mennonite woman elected to the Kansas House of Representatives serving from 2001 to 2013.
- 2001: [Ruth Yoder Wenger](#) was credentialed by the Lancaster Mennonite Conference (now [LMC](#)), the first woman licensed for specific ministry as lead pastor by that conference. She had already served the congregation as pastor for five years.
- 2003: Dorothy Nickel Friesen named conference minister for the Western District Conference, the first woman to hold this



position for a Mennonite area conference.

- 2003: Nancy R. Heisey named president of Mennonite World Conference, the first woman to hold this position.
- 2007: Elizabeth Nissley became the first woman to be ordained in the Lancaster District of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference (now [LMC](#)).
- 2010: [Sara Wenger Shenk](#) named president of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, the first female president in its history.
- 2011: Addie Banks became the first African American woman ordained by the Lancaster Mennonite Conference (now [LMC](#)).
- July 2013: [Elizabeth Soto Albrecht](#) became the first Latina moderator of MC USA.
- 2013: [Anna Groff](#) named executive director of The Mennonite, Inc., after serving as associate editor since 2006.
- February 2014: “All You Need is Love” [Women Doing Theology](#) conference organized by Women in Leadership Project. Regular conferences follow every two years up to the present.
- 2016: [Theda Good](#) was ordained as a minister in the Mountain States Mennonite Conference and the first openly LGBTQ person ordained in MC USA.
- 2016: Michelle Armster began as Executive Director of Mennonite Central Committee Central States.
- 2017: [Susan Schultz Huxman](#) began as President of Eastern Mennonite University, the first woman to serve in this role. She was President of Conrad Grebel University College (Waterloo, Canada) from 2011 to 2016.
- 2017: [Erica Lea-Simka](#) began as pastor at Albuquerque Mennonite Church, the “first openly LGBTQ solo pastor in MC USA.”
- July 2017: Mennonite Women USA (MW USA) centennial celebration at MC USA Assembly in Orlando, Florida.
- 2018: [Cyneatha Millsaps](#) began as Executive Director of Mennonite Women USA, the first woman of color to lead the organization.
- 2019: [Shannon W. Dycus](#) began as dean of students at EMU.
- 2021: [Sandra Montes-Martínez](#) became the first Hispanic

Michelle Armster





woman to serve as associate conference minister for the Western District Conference.

- 2021: Michelle Armster and Dona Park honored with MC USA's [first #BringThePeace award](#).
- 2022: Clara Weybright received MC USA's [2022 #BringthePeace](#) Young Peacemaker award.
- 2023: Michelle Armster, Wilma Bailey, Kim Vu Friesen, Susan Hart and Iris de León-Hartshorn were among seven BIPOC leaders honored for their lifetime achievements and service to the church at MC USA's [Hope for the Future](#) conference, Feb. 3-5, in Atlanta, Georgia.
- 2023: Sydney Leah Bontrager received MC USA's [2023 #BringthePeace](#) Young Peacemaker award.
- 2024: Marisa Smucker named first woman to serve as [executive director](#) of Mennonite Mission Network, an agency of MC USA.
- 2024: Esther Hinojosa, Maria Hinojosa and Wilma Redbird were among seven BIPOC leaders honored for their lifetime achievements and service to the church at MC USA's [Hope for the Future](#) conference, Feb. 9-11, in Dallas, Texas.

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**Abbreviations:**

- **AMBS – Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (later Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary)**
- **EMU – Eastern Mennonite University**
- **GC – Goshen College**
- **GCMC – General Conference Mennonite Church**
- **MBMC – Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities**
- **MC – Mennonite Church**
- **MCC – Mennonite Central Committee**
- **MC USA – Mennonite Church USA**
- **MWMS – Mennonite Women's Missionary Society**
- **MW USA – Mennonite Women USA**
- **WM – Women in Mission**
- **WMA – Women's Missionary Association**
- **WMSA – Women's Missionary and Service Auxiliary**
- **WMSC – Women's Missionary and Service Commission**