

Halden, May 2006

Kirsti Solberg Liland

*The Norwegian Baptist Women's Union celebrates its 90th anniversary. As we want to give our readers an understanding of its history, we choose to make use of pamphlets published in the past, the book *Norwegian Baptists 100 years, annuals for The Norwegian Baptist Union, and the journals of The Women's Union.**

*To give a complete account of all the women's contributions through 90 years would be an impossible task. We therefore confine ourselves to some glimpses from the start of the work, as well as a little from more recent years. We view it as important to preserve our history, while at the same time looking to the future with a continued vision of **DOING GOOD.***

The board wants to encourage all of you and remind you of the important work performed by The Women's Union, for the national as well as the international mission.

Jubilee pamphlet for the 90th anniversary of The Norwegian Baptist Women's Union.

A fruitful 90-year-old

Looking back on Norwegian Baptists' history, it becomes obvious that women have played an important role from the very beginning.

Four women were present when the first Baptist church was established in 1860. Travelling our straggling country, the first itinerant preachers and evangelists put up at private homes, and the women waited on them. But in addition to the "Martha-tasks," they also followed the example of Mary as they sat down and concentrated on Christ's spiritual inheritance. We know that in the beginning many services were held in private homes, in spite of strong opposition and a lot of abusive language: "*What a shame not to baptize the children - paganism pure and simple.*"

In many places the women came together for mission meetings in their own homes, and these meetings became spiritual powerhouses in the environment. Money was collected either for the local work, or simply to support the preacher.

History reveals but very little about the wives of the pioneering evangelists, although we know that they stood by their husbands, giving them spiritual strength when difficulties accumulated. At that time women used to stay at home to take care of their children and the housework. Today we can see the results of their faithful prayers.

The first women's club was founded in Tromsø in the year of 1870, and in 1876 yet another was founded in Bergen. These women were zealous missionary women, working faithfully for God and the denomination they had joined. In many places where churches exist today, there were from the beginning just a few women who met for prayer and reading of the Word.

With a growing Baptist Church, the women's clubs also had to undertake ever greater and more demanding tasks, and a cooperation between the different clubs was suggested. The church leaders actually encouraged the women to constitute a separate association. At the annual Baptist's conference in Bergen in **1912**, J.M. Sellevold preached a sermon on the following theme: *"The place of women's mission in the Christian work. How can it be of most use to our country?"*

A resolution was passed: *"We gratefully realize that the women's mission in our churches has had a considerable effect on the wellbeing and growth of our denomination. This conference therefore suggests that our sisters keep discussing the possibility of a practical, common organisation which might even more effectively be of aid to all the branches of our missions' work."*

At this same conference, Anna Solberg, Trondheim, was elected general cashier for the women's missions.

At the conference in Halden in **1915**, Pastor P.P. Overgaard delivered a speech on women's importance in the church. He praised the ingenuity of the women when the church was short of funds and their pastor or the districts missionary was waiting for his salary.

"Oh, yes, it can be done. The women let themselves in for a big part, then the men get ashamed and join them, and the whole thing is fixed."

He called on the women to get education, in order to play an active role as evangelists, and he encouraged "our own school teachers" to give them a hand. To deal with the plans of a possible women's association, Pastor P. Stiansen suggested the appointment of a committee.

These women became members of the committee: Oline Stensland, Balsfjord; Anna Solberg, Trondheim; Lina Knutsen, Bergen; Nellie Øhrn, Oslo; Dora Øie, Oslo; Maren Øhrn, Rjukan; and Elin Carlsson, Halden.

The Women's Union was born in 1916 during the conference in Trondheim, and the event is put down in the book *Norges Baptister 100 år (Norwegian Baptists 100 years): "An important decision was made during the annual conference – the constitution of Norwegian Baptists' Women' Union. Nelly Øhrn was elected chairman of the union."*

19 clubs were reported to join this national union:

Tromsø, Sommarøy, Balsfjord, Harstad, and Hadsel.

Trondheim, Værdal, and Melhus.

Stavanger, Gjesdal, and Bergen.

Risør, Langesund, Skien, Drammen, Oslo 1, Oslo 2, Halden, and Tistedal.

Today the association comprises 60 clubs that gather under this motto:

LET US DO GOOD

The purpose of the union is to strengthen the fellowship and stimulate to active work for the local churches and the different branches of missionary assignments.

Through the years, The Women's Union has been given a variety of tasks, in accordance with the current needs. Supporting newly established work was important in the early years, and also the backing of small congregations of weak financial capacity. By and by the range of tasks widened, and the women were left to decide which needs were of greater importance.

Gradually The Women's Union undertook particular tasks like paying for a nurse at the Fishermen's Home in Honningsvåg.

After some time nationwide fund-raising was initiated. Among other objectives, the following have been supported through this initiative: a Hospital in Congo, The Baptists' schools in Bærum, pastor's housing in Mo i Rana and Honningsvåg, Langesund Bath Guest House, and a church building for the congregation of Oppdal and Lønset.

Nationwide fund-raising for a hospital in Congo was first suggested at the annual conference in 1948, and the decision was made in 1949. The job was finished in the course of five years, and NOK 139 000 was presented to the Kongo Mission at the annual conference in Fredrikstad in 1953.

Shortly after this successful collection, a new assignment was suggested: fund-raising for the projected Baptist School. This time the result was a sum of NOK 70 000. The money was used to furnish the students' rooms.

At the conference in Oppdal, 1973, the association was able to present NOK 100 000,- for the projected Pastors' School in Congo. Part of this money was intended for the education of the wives of evangelists and pastors.

Money has always been collected with great ingenuity, for instance through the sale of bobeches, candles, napkins and cards.

In addition to the regular offerings and sales, a Christmas sale for the mission was suggested at the conference in Skien in 1951. The different clubs were to produce various sorts of handiwork, suitable as Christmas presents. Smaller clubs were encouraged to join with neighbour churches, or to send their products to a central sale in Oslo. The first sale of this kind, arranged in Oslo in 1953, yielded a profit of NOK 10 000.-

In 1955, a Christmas sale was arranged by ten different clubs all over the country, with a total earning of NOK 20 000.

Through the following 50 years, great amounts of money have been collected for the mission and for the local churches. We know that certain clubs keep working all the year to prepare for the Christmas sale.

The annual meeting in Drammen, 1974, resolved that the profit from a sale of cards should be used to encourage small groups or churches of weak financial capacity. This first year NOK 5000 was delivered to Honningsvåg, and since then, this kind of gifts has increased with every year. Administration expenses have always been kept low.

The intention of the gifts is to encourage economically weak groups and individuals. The sums have been steadily increased, as one can see from the fact that NOK 100 000 was delivered in the year of 2002.

At first, the support for missionary work, concentrated on the Baptists' existing work in Kongo. But when the church enlarged its engagement, the women kept up with the growth. Worth mentioning is the support for Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, Kamerun, Rachel Trovi's work in the slums of Manila, and fund-raising work in different European places.

In addition, The Women's Union has always been strongly involved in many Norwegian projects.

The proportions of the work can be seen in the annual reports of The Women's Union through 90 years, behind which, are all the clubs of the country. Through their humble, patient contribution year after year, these clubs lay down a very significant work.

Although their strategies may vary, the aim and purpose of all the groups is the spreading of the gospel at home and abroad, and up to this day they keep coming together for bible study and prayer, social gatherings and work.

As early as 50 years ago, one faced the problem of recruiting younger women. But a report from 1984 reveals that many clubs rejoiced at young women joining the work.

A generation change took place in the late 1990s, when several younger women were elected to the board. But times have changed, and today there is still a desire to get the younger women involved, as most women have an employment and strive to meet all the demands made on them.

The Women's Union still views their assignment as challenging and important, and therefore strongly appeal to their fellow sisters to take on the legacy.

In addition to considerable financial contributions, The Women's Union also meets a demand for spiritual fellowship. Through the years the many conferences have imparted inspiration and edification.

In 1947 The Women's Union organized a conference for women at Langesund Bath Gjestegård, a guest house which turned out to become an important meeting place for women. In 1990 the union bought shares in the property for NOK 100 000, and when it was sold in 2005, their profit was more than NOK 1.1 million.

Besides, conferences have been arranged in different parts of the country – for instance in Harstad up north and in Sirdal in Western Norway.

During a districts meeting at Borkenes in 1955, a separate association was founded for the clubs of Northern Norway.

In a festschrift to the 40th anniversary of The Women's Union in 1956, Rachel Iversen points out:

The world is getting smaller and people seem to get closer to each other. Events that take place thousands of miles away are known to everybody on the very same day. Such are modern times. The Baptist women have also been brought closer together. Our sisters in the USA came together to discuss the possibility of bringing help and support to European Baptist women. They then hit on the idea of raising money for some of the leaders from every country to come together to get to know each other and debate their common tasks and problems.

This was the beginning of the European Baptist Women's Union. A special meeting for women took place in London in 1948 at a difficult time for European women. A world war had lately come to a close, and all of Europe bore the marks of it. Women from eight European countries were present, among them Gurli Øhrn Prøymer from Norway. One woman stood and recited Joh 3,16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." The reading of this Scripture marked a new beginning, as the eight countries started the work with EBWU. By the year of 2006, fifty countries have joined the union.

European Baptist Women's Union is connected to Baptist World Alliance Women's Department.

Through the years, delegates from The Women's Union have been present at European conventions and World conventions.

The Women's Union plays an active part in the Baptist Women's International Day of Prayer that takes place every year on the first Monday of November.

This day, with women all over the world coming together to pray for a common subject is of great importance.

In 1955 a proposal was made to take on Rachel Iversen as a paid worker. At first she got her salary from The Women's Union and the Baptist schools. In 1956 she went to the USA to attend meetings and conferences and to study the work that women performed in the churches. During her stay, The Women's Union received an offer of a yearly financial support for a period of five years. This was meant as a help to stabilizing the women's work in Norway, on the condition of the employment of a fulltime worker. In 1958, The Women's Union therefore engaged Rachel Iversen as secretary on an annual basis. At the annual conference in Trondheim 1963, it was resolved that the position of secretary should be made permanent.

Else Øhrn was engaged as secretary in Oppdal in 1973. This same year Rachel Iversen left her position on reaching the age limit.

Else Øhrn also served one period as president for EBWU.

At the annual meeting in Bærum 1991, Liv Rise was elected unpaid secretary. At that time she had been in charge for five years.

The same year the term “chairman” was changed into “leader” in The Women’s Union.

From the very beginning the women actively worked to further the Baptists’ cause in Norway. But a long time went by until they were invited to take part in any of the planning committees.

In 1945 The Women’s Union passed a written request to the Board of mission and The Annual Meeting in Trondheim, to give women entrance to the different committees. The proposal was accepted, and Rachel Iversen was elected to the Board of mission. Since then, women have been members of all the boards.

The Women’s Union has always wanted to be regarded as a branch of spiritual importance to the Norwegian Baptists – not only a financial one. The women have a desire to participate in the strategic planning, and this is also a clearly expressed wish from the denomination.

In 1996 the Norwegian Baptists held their first meeting in the Collaboration Council. Every year since then, The Women’s Union has been represented by their leader and secretary and is allowed to present their plans.

“The Ecumenical Women’s Decade” marked its beginning in 1988. It was initiated by The World Council of Churches. Denominations all over the world were encouraged to focus on women’s positions and activities within the Christian churches over a period of ten years. The slogan was to be: “Churches in solidarity with women.”

An Ecumenical Women’s Forum was established, and The Women’s Union was represented by Ingjerd Rise.

Even today we are listed as members of NØKK, Norwegian Ecumenical Contact Forum for Women, which serves as an extension of this work.

In October 1989, a TV-sent fund-raising campaign was arranged by NRK (the Norwegian National Broadcasting) to the benefit of women in the Third World. NOK 1 600 000 was entrusted to The Women’s Union for the drilling of wells in Congolese villages. The Baptist women had begged from door to door, arranged lotteries and stands and made an invaluable contribution. 46 women’s organisations fought shoulder to shoulder in this project – in spite of evident dividing lines – a unique historic event!

This was the very first beginning of the organisation “Fokus”, forum for women and developmental questions. On November 23th, 1997, The Women’s Union joined this organisation as a member.

In October 2005, a new TV-campaign was dedicated to Fokus, this time under the motto *The dreamcatcher, we dream of a world free of violence against women.*

Again the Baptists joined the ranks with their collecting boxes and as partakers in different tasks. The Women’s Union applied for support of a project in Sierra

Leone. *“Breaking the silence of Female Genital Mutilation and Domestic Violence.”* Our partner in Sierra Leone is The Baptist Women’s Union of Sierra Leone by Linda Koroma. The Women’s Union has been granted NOK 700 000, paid out over a period of 3 years. The project starts in 2007. (The final project-name is:

A great event in the history of The Women’s Union was the Baptists’ European Convention at Lillehammer in 1994. This was the year when Norway arranged The Olympic Winter Games, and conditions were favourable for the reception of guests from all Europe.

Ahead of the convention, The Women’s Union had a sale of handicraft in order to helping European women with transportation and accomodation. Handiwork was sold during and after the convention, resulting in NOK 96 625.

This convention created a great opportunity for fellowship with the European women, as “The Iron Curtain” was definitely gone. Through this intercourse with women from various countries, the Norwegian Baptist women were immensely inspired in a renewed consciousness of their belonging to a worldwide fellowship.

In order to stay in touch, the national as well as the international clubs have frequently visited each other throughout the years. The Women’s Union has received Baptist women from our missionary countries as well as leaders from Scandinavia, Europe, and the rest of the world. Similarly, many Norwegian women have visited foreign countries in order to watch and learn from the work in other places. By and by travelling has become easier and cheaper, and this has brought about a growing fellowship with our sisters in other countries. This mutual exchange of experience and knowledge makes it easier to maintain the consciousness of a worldwide Baptist family.

For a period, The Women’s Union carried the economic responsibility for a teaching project in Congo. The native women were taught reading, writing and sewing. Missionary and teacher, Svanhild Nyhus first was engaged in the project, before it was taken over by Gunhild Hansen.

In the course of the last fourty years, three representatives from The Women’s Union have visited Congo to gain insight into the Baptists’ missionary work. Else Øhrn went out in 1981, and following the well project in the nineties, the missionaries Else Holthe and Marit Berge went to evaluate the results. In 2005, Synnøve Gåsvær Angen and Kirsti Solberg Liland set out on a trip to watch the women’s work at close range.

In the year of the jubilee, the board of European Baptist Women’s Union and the board of Norwegian Baptist Women’s Union agreed to meet at Ålgård. Margun

Warem, who is on the board of EBWU, had invited women from Europe. It was therefore natural for the Norwegian board to also hold their meeting at Ålgård.

Many women, who made a big contribution in The Women's Union and in the mission, have gone to be with the Lord during these 90 years. In the year of the jubilee we especially commemorate two of the former leaders of The Women's Union: Ingrid Engelsen and Margrethe Dybvik. They have fought the good fight and finished the race!

We call down peace on the memory of all those who have made an impact.

With great respect we thank the women who, through all these years, have worked tirelessly on so many levels – spiritual, practical, social and economic.

The go-ahead spirit and the zeal of the pioneering women are great examples for women of today. Together we will keep on *doing good* in whatever tasks the Lord may want to give us.

Leaders:

Nellie Øhrn, Oslo	1916 – 1932
Nellie Øhrn, Rjukan	1932 – 1935
Anna Kallestad, Oslo	1935 – 1948
Gurli Øhrn Prøymer	1948 – 1952
Rachel Iversen, Oslo	1952 – 1958
Karla Mørk, Tistedal	1958 – 1960
Borghild Wang, Oslo	1960 – 1965
Kitty Idland, Ålgård	1965 – 1971
Andrea Mathisen, Oslo	1971 – 1976
Nore Karlsson, Oslo	1976 – 1979
Ingrid Engelsen, Bærum	1979 – 1981
Jorun Blix Olsen, Halden	1981 – 1983
Ingrid Engelsen, Bærum	1983 – 1986
Liv Rise, Bergen	1986 – 1991
Margareth Dybvig, Hyggen	1991 – 1995
Berit Rydland, Andenes	1995 – 1998
Margun Warem, Ålgård	1998 – 2002
Synnøve Gåsvær Angen, Trondheim	1992 –