



Living the Gospel

Justice Through
Action

Mimi Haddad with Jo Anne Lyon



Mimi Haddad was privileged to interview Jo Anne Lyon—a prominent Christian with sixty years of leadership in many spheres of Christian service. The first woman elected as the superintendent of the Wesleyan Church, Jo Anne shared her memories of ministry and her mother, who spent her life working to help women use their newly acquired political voice through the vote.



Mimi Haddad: What a delight to speak with you, Jo Anne. Could you share a bit about the trajectory of your incredible life of ministry for our listeners?

Jo Anne Lyon: I come from the Wesleyan tradition; the first woman to be ordained in the United States was ordained by the founder of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, and they were also abolitionists. The first women's rights convention held in Seneca Falls, New York, was held in the basement of a Wesleyan Methodist

Church. So, it's been our tradition of understanding the Scripture that everyone was made in the image of God. Everyone could be a leader, so it was also about women, and it was about the abolition of slavery. It was all those pieces together. It didn't mean that we were just these "justice people." No, it was also about evangelizing the world. It was about evangelism, bringing people to Jesus; it was about justice for everyone. It was all of that together: a holistic gospel. That was the beginning of our denomination.

My mother was an ordained minister and an evangelist. As a single woman, she finished Bible college, and then she and another woman traveled together holding revivals. She came to Oklahoma where my father was “pioneering churches,” what we would call “church planting” today. She was preaching, and they met.

I grew up in the kind of environment that worked with giftedness. Both of my parents were preachers. I had a double whammy of that in my life. It was not unusual for me to hear women preach and see them lead. It was a part of who I was, but I did live to see this decline. I remember my dad saying to me one day in the 50s, “I don’t understand. Vera [my mother] isn’t getting the calls like she used to.” They didn’t quite understand what was happening in the greater culture after World War II, in the fifties. Rosie the Riveter went home and became a homemaker, and the church began to follow that culture. The suffrage movement and women’s rights also followed prohibition, which was led by Francis Willard and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). That became a place for many women to gather and to talk about suffrage and prohibition. The Methodist building in Washington, D. C., which is right across the street from the Capitol, was built in the late 1800s by Methodist women who were prohibitionists with the WCTU. My mother was the president or the vice president of the WCTU in Oklahoma in the fifties. I remember all these women working together in our dining room and at all these precincts with many papers spread out on the dining room table outlining who was going to take this precinct and who was going to take that precinct. We were going to put door knockers out there. I learned political organizing just by osmosis, listening to, and then participating: “You join. You’re big enough. You can help us.”

MH: Can you talk about how that may have shaped you as a strong leader?

JAL: I saw how you handle difficulties and how you handle conflict. I also saw that not everybody loves you. I think what that did in me was form this whole piece of justice as part of my discipleship, as part of my faith. It wasn’t an add-on, it was *part* of my faith. As the civil rights movement came, I began to really look at issues regarding racism and those kinds of things and then discovered the abolitionist piece of our [Methodist] history. It shaped me, and this is all part of my responsibility as a leader and a follower of Jesus. As a female leader, I’ve had people who like it, and when I was particularly in more prominent leadership, people who didn’t. There’s nothing you can do about it; God’s called you, so you just keep going.

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MH: Yes. It’s interesting to me that this intersection of being an advocate of justice was integral to following Jesus, especially on behalf of those at the margins. What about the suffrage movement: how did that factor into this work on justice?

JAL: I was just appalled, even as a young child, when I saw that women did not have the right to vote. When I began to look at it and consider how long it took from that first meeting in Seneca Falls, New York, before suffrage passed in Congress, it still bothers and touches me deeply in my heart. How could a country that claims to be free, with roots that are Christian (I know that’s up for debate now), discriminate against women? It is hard for me still to understand that.

I’ve been to Susan B. Anthony’s grave in Rochester, New York. I think how bold these women had to be because when you don’t have a voice, you don’t have anything. For them to be that bold, to be able to do this, and for people of faith to stand up and say, “Yes, that’s exactly right. You can do this.” That has impacted me hugely. It’s impacted me around the world where I’ve worked in many countries to see women who do not have rights and the discrimination against them, not only in the church but in the whole culture.

MH: Based on your wisdom, your many years of experience, and your upbringing, what role does faith tradition have on these matters of justice related to women, their advocacy, or politically their voice?

JAL: I think religion shapes our conscience. At the same time, our Christian faith should be speaking because there is no discrimination in Scripture. Christians should be the leaders in this. I’ve been invited to non-Christian countries to speak about how the principles

of Jesus build a strong society. A strong society is built when women's gifts are part of the strength of the country, part of the strength of the society, when the voices of women are heard.

MH: Yes. And the UN has shown repeatedly that when an individual anywhere in the world has a life challenge, they do not go to their political leader—they go to their faith leader for help.

Once you were an adult and moved out on your own, how was the conversation around women leaders and activists in a country that now tolerated or permitted suffrage? Your denomination also supports women as pastors; where was the power of support for women compared to what you received in the church and what you saw out in culture?

JAL: I was the first female to be elected the head of the denomination, and that did not happen until 2008. That means it was around 150 years from our founding before we could see a woman with power. Our culture still has problems with women with power and authority. We will let women get to a certain place, but we have difficulty ultimately with women at the top with power and authority. I think that's where the church today still has that problem. When I was the general superintendent of the Wesleyan Church, at that time there were only four

or five other denominations, and across the board, that had women leading their denominations. Out of how many denominations do we have in this country? So, it still said something about women, and I think we still have to wrestle with that.

MH: Activism, suffrage, was motivated by Christian women, right? What were the social issues, do you think, in the back of their minds as they struggled for the vote, what captivated them the most? I know that you mentioned suffrage and prohibition were intertwined because women were suffering at the hands of alcoholic husbands. What was in their minds when they were fighting for suffrage as Christian women?

JAL: I think it came from the Scripture of all people are created in the image of God. I think it also came from Jesus, his teaching and how he lived, how he respected women. The examples of the women that were around Jesus, and then from the Old Testament, the whole justice piece, were part of the motivation. I always connect in Amos, "let justice roll down like a river and righteousness is never-failing stream." It is justice and righteousness together. Separately, righteousness can just be individualistic, and justice can just be politics. But when they are together, that's the power of God at work! It was always about prayer. There's lots of prayer that went into all the work that they did as suffragists.

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MH: The temperance movement, suffrage, abolition, and evangelism were the four pillars of the WCTU. That's a foundation that's fairly unshakeable and propels one into serious action. Talk about that intersection of temperance, suffrage, abolition, and evangelism. Why those four projects?

JAL: I think that they saw evangelism as a way for people to follow Jesus. Then they would automatically be part of the suffrage movement, be part of the temperance movement, be part of abolition. When you look at the foundation of the second great awakening with Charles Finney, it was about that. People signed up, came to Jesus, and then they had to sign almost a piece of paper that they were going to be abolitionists.

It was part of how all that says, “Oh, you're a follower of Jesus. Okay, sign here because you're going to be an abolitionist.” I'm making that up a little bit, but it was also so intertwined with that that I think that's how it was seeing how you live out your faith. “Okay. This is following Jesus, so you live out your faith in this way.”

MH: Looking at the intersection of faith and women's political activism—suffrage—gaining groundwork on social issues, what do you see growing in our country? Women are not gaining the political seats we had hoped they might have after suffrage.

JAL: We're not making any progress as far as the church is concerned, in those top leadership positions. I guess we have to ask, do women want to lead a denomination? Do women want to run for Congress? I don't know. The worst thing is for a woman to be put in a position because she's a female. I've seen this happen—I remember way back in the seventies and eighties, I would see women put in positions, and then I would hear in the back room, “Well, we're going to program her to fail.” That's it. That was a prominent term then. They put a woman in the position where she couldn't do it or didn't have the capability to do it. They put her in there and she failed, so that “proved” that women can't do these things.

MH: She was used as a model of why women shouldn't be leaders. Where are the Susan B. Anthonys? Where are the Lucretia Motts? Where are these great leaders who bring their faith as inseparable from their leadership in any sphere but politically? The UN has shown that women are granular to the real pain in society. They're in touch with the women, they're in touch with the children. You think about the crises around the world, this is where women are the boots on the ground. Jimmy Carter would bring women leaders of all faith traditions to the Carter Center and ask, “What do you see?” They're the ones who saw ISIL¹ long before it became a powerful force. But very few people in Washington wanted to listen to these women. They were deaf to them. The heartbeat of human thriving—human *flourishing*—is to hear women and to give them a voice.

JAL: I was just recently with a woman who was captured by one of the ISIS groups there and listened to what she experienced. I thought, did our Senator ever talk to her? She's free. Did anybody bother to listen to what she had to say?

MH: The voice of women still does not have credibility.

JAL: No, they do not. We've got a long way to go. I feel strongly, too, that we have backslidden in some ways.

MH: We have lost our confidence in the teachings of Scripture; we moved beyond it and have let go of the power of the “Spirit in the text,” as Gordon Fee used to say. That hurts women in every conceivable social way.

JAL: I think what's happened is that we treat that as an option, like it's an option whether we believe in justice and whether we believe in justice for women. It isn't an option, it's the core. It's all the gospel.

MH: Now for the suffragists, abolition was key and huge, and evangelism for them was critical. But suffrage and temperance, of course, were big because they had an immediate effect on the lives of women and children.

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JAL: You're exactly right. Just a funny little story: My parents moved to Illinois which was a "wet state." My mother was really upset that it was a wet state, but she knew she couldn't change it. She looked at laws that would protect people and one of the laws that Illinois had was a "clear view law." It meant that taverns had to have windows that you could see in, to have a clear view in the tavern, I guess so you could see if terrible things were happening inside. So my mother would put me in the car—I was twelve or thirteen then—and we would drive around this little town in Illinois. She would have me look in the taverns if I could see through the windows. If I could, then she checked them off that they were obeying the law. Those I could not see through, she reported that they did not follow the "clear view law." Law enforcement would check it, and my mother had all these tavern owners calling her all the time saying, "Miss Close, can you come back and check? We've changed it. Put us on the good list!"

MH: Oh, wow. This is so much fun. Now tell me, do you remember hearing your mom talk specifically about how women had to get the vote?

JAL: The vote came in 1920 when she would have been six years old, so she grew up with the vote, but she would fight for people to use their ability to vote.

MH: What were the qualities you valued the most about your mother? What really touched your heart the most and inspired you as a leader?

JAL: Her courage. She had people who didn't like it, and her courage was that she still moved ahead. I remember times when she was very discouraged and people were fighting against her, but my dad was always right beside her. He encouraged her a lot with this. It would come up again because people didn't like "bossy women," but my dad always supported her. He was strong too, so they were quite a team.

I think what came through to me the most was her courage to speak out when it was post-World War II when women weren't speaking out as such. I remember her talking about Margaret Chase Smith (1949- 1973) who was one of the first Congresswomen, and Clare Booth Luce (1903- 1987) [the first woman elected to the House of Representatives]. She didn't know them, but I think they gave a model for her to say, "Well, we can speak out, we can do this." Then she looked at biblical women also as her model and that gave her courage. I think that's what we need today. I think we still need women to speak out. There's the spiritual side: it isn't just anger. It's the Spirit of the Lord on them. It's an activism that is rooted deeply in the presence of Jesus in one's life.

MH: There's a need for a revival around a deep and consistent engagement with the Spirit of God in the Word. You mentioned the revival that took place with three very prominent Christian women who basically upended Charles Taylor and his cruelty. We need to preach more about these women and teach more about them.

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JAL: You're talking about Liberia and Leymah Gbowee. I've done a lot of work in Liberia; I was there during the war too. She just said, finally, "We've had enough." We were in a little Sunday school class and she began to get these women. What a work of God. When you think how powerful that was, again, it was a woman who just stepped out and said, "We've had enough. We're not doing this anymore."

MH: It's wonderful. She was a woman who did this extraordinary, courageous works of justice by the Spirit, but she's just a human being created in God's image.

JAL: She just stepped out and said, "I don't know where the next step is. I have no roadmap ahead. God does not want any more of this evil." There are lots of places for that today. I believe God's calling women, and part of it is the courage to step out.

Notes

1. National Counterterrorism Center, "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)," <https://www.dni.gov/nctc/groups/isil.html>.



To watch the interview in its entirety, scan the QR code.



Rev. Dr. Jo Anne Lyon, General Superintendent Emerita of The Wesleyan Church

Jo Anne Lyon served as the General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church from 2008-2016. Having previously founded World Hope International, a relief and development agency which continues to work in twenty countries. Prior to this she had thirty years of ministry in the local church as well as adjunct professor in Church and Society at Asbury Theological Seminary and Indiana Wesleyan University. As an ordained minister, she serves on the board of directors of many organizations including the National Association of Evangelicals. She is the author of "The Ultimate Blessing," as well as many guest chapters and articles.

Dr. Lyon holds a master's degree in counseling psychology with continued Graduate Studies in Historical Theology and has been granted five honorary doctorates. She is the recipient of various awards among of which are 2016 World Methodist Peace Award and National Immigration Forum 2017 Keeper of the American Dream Award. She has participated in various multi-faith dialogues over the past years including the Abrahamic Dialogue with Religious Leaders of Iran and most recently the first Multi-Faith Conference in Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Lyon and her husband, Rev. Wayne Lyon, live in the Indianapolis area. They have four children and 10 grandchildren.

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