

Heritage Sunday: May 23, 2021

LOIS STAIR: FIRST WOMAN GA MODERATOR

In 1971, after a close vote that went to three ballots, Ruling Elder Lois Harkrider Stair became the first woman elected as moderator of a Presbyterian General Assembly. The UPCUSA commissioners, 89 percent of whom were men, chose Stair to lead their denomination during a tumultuous year.

The precedent-setting election drew national news coverage. As a former moderator of Milwaukee Presbytery and the Synod of Wisconsin, Lois Stair (1923-1981) was well-qualified to serve at the General Assembly level. But it was her gender that drew the most attention initially. Press reports described her as “vivacious” and “pretty,” and one article even discussed the “special problems” faced by a woman moderator such as what to wear when traveling and how to keep her hair under control and her weight down.

Stair discussed being the first woman moderator with good cheer, but she also addressed the tumultuous issues roiling the country and the UPCUSA. As moderator, she wanted to lead congregations away from their “cozy comfortableness” and toward diversity. She called for reorganizing church programs to emphasize such issues as equality and the protection of minorities.

“We must be able to face differences and be honest about them,” she said at the conclusion of her term. As moderator, Stair modeled the bravery and confidence to listen, reflect, and speak forthrightly about Presbyterians following Christ during challenging times.

You can hear audio of Lois Stair’s 1972 address to United Presbyterian Women by visiting www.history.pcusa.org/hs

Heritage Sunday is a day of celebration set aside by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). To celebrate and learn more about the history of Presbyterianism in America visit:
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