

HeRD #220 - The First Women Elders

An article in the April 1937 issue of the SIAM OUTLOOK makes the following claim, "The Leper Asylum, Chiangmai, Siam, has the distinction of having the first women elders in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Nang [Mrs.] La and Nang Kan Gao were elected to eldership in April 1925. At that time Siam formed two presbyteries of the Synod of New York. These two saintly old women went about the duties of their high office with a humility and joy touching to behold, all unconscious of the fact that they were out of order according to the rules of the Church." The article goes on to explain that the Leper Asylum was strictly divided into men's and women's areas and that while most of the patients joined together for services in the asylum's chapel there were a number of women patients who could no longer walk and weren't even strong enough to be carried to church. After long, hesitant discussion, the women patients themselves requested two women elders to minister to the most desperately crippled of their number. According to the article, Nan La herself was in the advanced stages of leprosy and died at some time before 1937. Nang Kan Gao, on the other hand, had been a church worker before she became a leper and sought treatment immediately on discovery she had leprosy. She eventually was cured and able to leave the asylum to resume her life "outside."

We must take, of course, the claim to be the first women elders of the whole Presbyterian church with a grain of salt. Roughly at this same time, Fifth Church, Bangkok, was also ordaining women elders because it was closely related to the mission girls' school there and had almost no men on its rolls. I don't remember the year, however. One has to assume it possible (likely?), however, that somewhere among the missions and churches of the PCUSA around the world (and unknown to the author of this article) women were ordained as elders prior to 1925.

Source: "The First Women Elders in the Presbyterian Church," *Siam Outlook* 13, 2(April 1937): 101-102.