

A Pilot Study of the Impact of Sexism on African American Women Ministers in Methodism: 1980-2000

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Over the past ten years, African American women ministers in the United Methodist denomination have increased considerably, but not without a struggle. Undoubtedly, sexism is one of the driving forces behind the issues women are coping with. Women (particularly African American women) ministers are coping with issues that are causing grave concern. As I shall argue, the (contemporary) ordination and leadership of women is one concrete way in which problems manifest themselves. It is sufficient to say that the struggle of women in the church is not only one of political process of ordination or leadership, but it involves, as we shall see, theological issues, such as, are women called to preach? And are they capable of fulfilling the roles men have dominated since the inception of Christianity?

Therefore, this research is an attempt to clarify and or uncover the issues women ministers face in the United Methodist denomination, and provide solutions to these problems. This study will support and or establish that (a) women are treated as subordinates, (b) women (although highly qualified) are denied equal access to leadership roles in the church, and (c) the primary issue women in leadership roles are faced with. Finally, it can be argued that women's subordination in the church is merely a reflection of their struggle for full equality in society in general.

Due to the above reasons, women are insisting that they are heard and their struggles are addressed. There are large numbers of women (the denomination and age factor has no boundaries) who will no longer accept the former role set for women in the church as second-class citizens. As a result, some have begun independent ministries while others have chosen to remain in their denomination to fight for women's rights. For these reasons we must determine what are the issues facing African American women in the United Methodist denomination today. Can a study of the Bible and the Church organization assist to significantly improve perceptions regarding inclusions of women in ministry of the church? What solutions can eliminate women's feelings of alienation and discontent in such a way that they can be empowered, assume unlimited roles, and perform ministry for and within the Kingdom of God.

During the 19th century African American women played key roles in the Methodist Church, such as, Jarena Lee, Amanda Berry Smith,-----, Ida B. Wells, and Dr. Anne Streaty-Wimberly. African American women emerged as preachers in the Methodist tradition before their white sisters did, evidenced by autographical accounts of Jarena Lee between 1809 and 1816. Jarena Lee was born February 11, 1783 at Cape May, New Jersey. At age seven she was taken from her parents and sent to live as a servant maid with Mr. Sharp, some sixty miles away from home. Interestingly, her parents are not responsible for her knowledge of God. In 1804, it so happened that Lee went with others to hear a missionary of the Presbyterian order preach. The words she heard struck her to her heart, and made her feel in some measure, the weight of her sins, but still she was not compelled to receive this gospel as truth. Three weeks later she attended a service where Rev. Richard Allen (a United Methodist preacher) was speaking and her soul was gloriously converted to God.

Approximately, five years after Lee's conversion to Christianity a voice said to her "Go preach the gospel." Two days later she told Rev. Richard Allen that she felt called to preach. He suggested she consider exhortation or holding praying meetings. But as to preach, he said, "the Methodist discipline did not call for women preachers." Jarena Lee was encouraged to do more and many thoughts entered her mind:

O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church, government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as seemingly as it may appear now days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper, for a woman to preach? Seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as the man.

If a man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman? Seeing he died for her too. Is he not a whole Savior, instead of a half one as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear?

Did not Mary first preach the risen Savior, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity – hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel? For she preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God.

But some will say that Mary did not expound the Scripture, therefore, she did not preach, in the proper sense of the term. To this I reply, it may be that the term preach, in those primitive times, did not mean exactly what it is now made to mean. Perhaps it was a great deal more simple then, than it is now: - if it were not, the unlearned fisherman could not have preached the gospel at all, as they had no learning.

Lee's argument is for the right of women to preach. She argued, the Savior died for the women as well as for the men. The crucifixion was for universal salvation, not just for male salvation; therefore, Christ died, no less for the woman as for the man. Lee perceives that there is an ontological issue at stake. If Christ was a Savior of men then it is true the maleness of Christ would be paramount. But if Christ is a Savior of all, then it is the humanity – the wholeness – of Christ, which is significant. Lee argues that the significance of Christ is not his maleness, but his humanity. The most significant events of Christ were his life, his ministry, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. God becomes concrete not only in the man Jesus, for he was crucified, but in the lives of those who will accept challenges of the risen Savior the Christ. For Lee, this meant that women could preach.

Jarena married Rev. Joseph Lee (an AME pastor) in 1811 and moved to Snow Hill, New Jersey. Six years later Joseph died leaving Jarena with 2 children and her determination to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. In 1849, Rev. Richard Allen publicly acknowledged Jarena's gift; this acknowledgement inspired her to preach throughout the northeastern region. Lee would prove to be a pathfinder and encouragement for future women ministers.

Amanda Berry Smith (1837-1915) was the most well known African American female evangelist during the 19th century in the United States. Born in slavery on a Maryland farm Amanda was the daughter of Samuel and Marian (Matthews) Berry. She gained her freedom as a small child when her father bought the family out of slavery and moved them to Pennsylvania. She received her entire education at home by her parents, and became a washerwoman and domestic servant until becoming a full-time evangelist.

Amanda's first marriage to Calvin Devine, resulted in the birth of a daughter, Maggie. Calvin Devine listed in the Union Army but never returned home after the Civil War. Amanda's conversion occurred after Calvin's enlistment in the army and before her second marriage to James Smith. Amanda's second husband died just as she received her direct commission from God: her purpose in life is to pursue a vocation in ministry.

Amanda B. Smith's call to preach came as vividly in a vision as had her experiences of conversion and sanctification, which was a confirmation of the path on which God had set her. Two years later, as Smith set in the Fleet Street African Methodist Episcopal Church in Brooklyn she experienced a supernatural encounter, which she describes as "My Last Call:

I was sitting with my eyes closed in silent prayer to God, and after he had been preaching about ten minutes, as I opened my eyes, just over his head I seemed to see a beautiful star, and as I looked at it, it seemed to form into the shape of a large white tulip; and I said, "Lord, is that what you want me to see? If so, what else?" And then I leaned back and closed my eyes. Just then I saw a large letter "G." and I said: "Lord, do you want me to read in Genesis, or in Galatians? Lord what does this mean?"

Just then I saw the letter "O." I said, "why, that means go." And I said "what else?" And a voice distinctly said to me "Go preach." The voice was so audible that it frightened me for a moment, and I said, "Oh, Lord, is that what you want me to come here for? Why did you not tell me when I was at home, and when I was on my knees praying? But his paths are known in the mighty deep, and his ways are past finding out.

On Monday morning, about four o'clock, I think, I was awakened by the presentation of a beautiful, white cross – white as the driven snow... . It was as cold as marble. It was laid just on my forehead and on my breast. It seemed very heavy, to press me down. The weight and the coldness of it were what woke me; and as I woke I said: "Lord, I know what it is. It is a cross.

I arose and got on my knees, and while I was praying these words came to me: "If any man will come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." And I said, "Lord help me and I will."

For Amanda Berry Smith, conversion was primarily a matter of the will: giving up selfish desires and taking on the purposes that God had for her life. She surrendered her life to a vocation of ministry during a time when female preachers were not fully acknowledged.

Ida B. Well (1862 to 1931) was born in slavery, at Holly Springs, Mississippi – her father bought the family's freedom when she was three years old. Well's mother, Lizzie Bell, the child of a slave mother and an Indian father, had come from Virginia. Ida's father, James Well was active in reconstructive politics and introduced her and her siblings to leading African American politicians. Ida matriculation at Rust College was interrupted when her parents and one sister died in a yellow fever epidemic. To support her five sisters and brother, she became a public school teacher.

Wells soon questioned her devotion to the vocation of teaching public school. During this time she wrote for black newspapers – she began protesting against the social conditions to which African American peoples had been subjected, particularly poor education and lynching.

Ida B. Well's life-turning experience came at age 22 while on a train trip from Memphis to Woodstock - she was ordered to relocate from the women's cart to the smoking cart with the other blacks. Ida refused to move, and three men tossed her off the train when it stopped at the next station. Ida sued and was awarded 500 dollars in damages. As faith would have it, The Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad appealed, and the decision was reversed in its favor. Conversion and a call to minister were central to her response, as she petitioned God to direct her life so that she could address social outrage:

O God, is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us? Thou hast always fought the battles of the weak and oppressed – come to my aid at this moment and teach me what to do, for I am sorely, bitterly disappointed. Show us the way, even as thou led the children of Israel out of bondage into the promised land.

Wells did not speak directly of a conversion experience. Rather, she assumed her conversion and purpose as she wrote in her diary on January 3, 1887. "God help me to be a Christian. To so conduct myself in my intercourse with the unconverted." Immediately (at age 25) she felt called to teach Sunday school class for young African American men. She stressed that their moral and vocational development was essential to enable the black community to rise in its standard of living.

Ida B. Wells married Ferdinand Barnett (a Chicago lawyer) and assumed the last name Well-Barnett. Ida's life as a homemaker was shortened by her desire to fight against the atrocity of lynching. Wells-Barnett campaigned throughout the North and England to mobilize support. However, she remained active in the court, never wavering or compromising her responsibility in her calling from God. Ida follows in the footsteps of many women in expanding the vision and contributions of women to ministerial leadership.

Dr. Anne Streatly - Wimberly (1950-2000), the daughter of Rev. Robert Harold Streatly, Sr. and Mrs. Veleska Cunningham-Streatly is a devoted United Methodist minister. Anne met Edward Powell Wimberly at Boston University in October 1965 and eight months later they married. After experiencing three miscarriages and one still born (a two day old baby girl), Anne heard God's voice say, "You will have many more children than you could possibly have biologically." Anne and Edward Wimberly are thankful for the many spiritual children they have in many different countries.

Today, Dr. Anne Streatly-Wimberly is associate professor of Christian Education and Church Music and has been the coordinator of the Gerontology in Seminary Education Initiative at the Interdenominational Theological Center for the past ten years. She received the Bachelor of Science in Education degree from Ohio State University and a Master of Music degree from Boston University School of Fine Arts.

The Ph.D. degree in Educational Leadership with a cognate in Gerontology was received from Georgia State University. Dr. Wimberly has been an educator for thirty years, teaching music in both public and private schools. She was a faculty member in Christian Education at Oral Roberts University School of Theology and an adjunct faculty member at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary. *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education, Honoring African American elders* is only one of the five books she authors.

Dr. Anne Streaty-Wimberly enjoys playing the piano, singing, and reading spiritual books during her leisure time. At the tender age of four she began playing the piano and by age twelve she was playing hymns for the congregation and teaching Sunday school. It was her parents and the elders of her Methodist Church (in Anderson, Indiana – her birthplace) who encouraged her to pursue ministry as a vocation. Her parents and the church's motto were: whatever you do in life ought to be in ministry in the service of Jesus Christ. In addition, her parents encouraged her to pursue the highest education possible and to use it for the uplifting of Christ. Dr. Wimberly's life is proof African American women can excel in ministry, education, and professional endeavors despite the obstacles that are ever present.

I interviewed Dr. Wimberly (she often refers to herself as Dr. Anne) on Monday, November 13, 2000 at the Interdenominational Theological Center located in Atlanta, Georgia. She has much to say about African American women ministers:

It is a difficult journey for Black female pastors. They have a difficult time going through the ordination process. Black women tend to get the smaller churches and assisted positions more so than men.

There are women like myself who are seminary trained but chose not to take the ordination route. But who are in ministry and are teaching in seminary and are teaching in higher education institutions and other kinds of discipline – they are doing ministry in various religious as well as, secular professions.

However, in my own situation, I have chosen not to go the ordination route; I get very interesting attitudes from ordained pastors. Although, I am teaching in seminary, I have a tendency to be excluded for all kinds of activities. For example, in the United Methodist Church I am not typically called on to speak to United Methodist pastors because I am not a pastor. But I am called on to do so with lots of other pastors in other denominations... .

That is one of the drawbacks of being a woman in ministry in light of emphasis on ordained clergy. I might say the opportunity for being a Black woman in ministry is so many because the need in our community is so great.

I asked Dr. Wimberly what are the issues facing African American women ministers – this is her response:

What was accepted in Western theological circles was also accepted in Black American circles... . In our history black women has always been higher in terms of professional attainment than black men. There has been a disparity that we need to recognize. This maybe the reason why the pulpit has been reserved for black males. Black women could succeed in professional ranks outside the church. It was the primary place Black men could say, "I am somebody, and I can excel." That is one part of the equation of tradition, sexism, and chauvinism.

Today, black women and men now have opportunities we didn't have before. I think we do need to look at the whole picture. On the other hand, although black women excel in societal realms there are still many numbers of black women who are still at the domestic workers level.

In Methodism there is a history of female leadership. Jarena Lee is a great example of black women ministers. Women should be allowed full partnership in all leadership roles. However, the challenge is women are often hindrances to other women. Negative attitudes of women toward women are something we need to address as well as sexism.

Dr. Anne Streaty-Wimberly vividly paints the struggle of African American women ministers as a challenge worth fighting. She stresses that sexism is not totally to blame for the issues women face in ministry. One of women's major struggles is the barrier they create for themselves – negative attitudes toward the women who dares to step outside the traditional norms. Negative attitudes toward women need to be eliminated and women need to unite and demand equal opportunities within the church. Women have fought an up hill battle gaining ordination and decision-making positions. This effort peaked in the 1920 General Conference Episcopal Address, which recognized the inclusion of women in ministry.

Following this meeting the General Conference authorized the granting of license for women who desired to be local preachers. The Upper Mississippi was the first black Annual Conference to grant a local preacher's license under this new ruling. That same year (1920), the Greenwood District approved a license for Mrs. Mary E. Jones. In 1926 Laura J. Lange was ordained a local deacon and a local elder in 1936. This made her the first black woman to be ordained in any black Annual Conference. Further advances in clergy rights for women would not be made until 1956.

United Methodist women ministers are not alone in their struggle for inclusivity and equal access to decision – making positions. What is the experience of Baptist women ministers and how similar or different is their journey in comparison to United Methodist women ministers? The 19th century was not the best of times for Baptist in America – the Civil War, challenges surrounding Reconstruction, and the growing frustration of women's desire to vote and to play a more significant role in ministry. Uncertain about the growing influence of women, Baptist leaders were weary of the complications of any change in the traditional role of women. Baptist churches, schools and conventions allowed women to participate only in restricted and supporting roles. Please understand I cannot speak for all Baptists. I will only give a general assessment of the issues Baptist women ministers' cope with and how similar and or different their struggle is in comparison to United Methodist women ministers.

Baptist women who feel called to ministry places strong emphasis in three doctrines: the priesthood of the believer, the authority of the scripture, and the autonomy of the church. The priesthood of the believer holds each believer responsible for going directly to God in prayer, for being accountable to God, and to obeying God. Therefore, many Baptist women believe she does not need permission from any other source to preach the gospel. Neither a minister nor a denomination can determine the call of a woman —only she is account able for fulfilling her purpose in ministry. Traditional Baptist doctrine does not address leadership in Baptist churches because men were usually the church bishops, pastors, and elders. This tradition has not deterred women from pursuing the priesthood seriously.

Using scripture as their authority, women claimed the call to ministry – both Methodist and Baptist. Using scripture as their authority opponents' clamed that women are not called to minister. For a woman called to ministry, Baptist autonomy can be both an asset and a liability. Local church autonomy means that no one is capable of placing a woman and her supporters from opposition within or from area churches. Male leaders opposed to women in ministry agree that inspite of Baptist doctrine or Methodist doctrine, only men can lead since Jesus had only men among the disciples. Based on this information alone, women could never be ministers of the gospel.

Because of Baptist doctrines and opponent oppositions, Baptist women find effective ways to minister within Baptist circles. The greatest contribution Baptist women have made to ministry in the Baptist denomination is in the areas of missions. As the 19th century was coming to an end, men assumed the responsibility of hiring pastors and conducting the business of the church. Women assumed the responsibility of mission, education, and support. In the Baptist arena, the missionary was considered the highest held office by women. Teaching is the most common ministry of Baptist women. During the early twentieth century, Baptist women were fighting for recognition and ordination privileges while their Methodist sisters were moving forward in ministry. Perhaps, the most radical point to be made in reference to women in ministry is May Daly's dynamic worldview:

This much needed theology will recognize that the relationship between the sexes evolves, that its forms must change according to the conditions to individual differences. It will reject any conception of the common good, which would diminish the potential of one sex for the sake of the other. It will place value in personal liberty and growth, which must be seen not as opposed to, but as essential to love and commitment. Rejecting the old obsession with sex roles, it will be concerned with the problems of persons in relation to others. It will be honest enough to admit the ambiguity of concrete reality, which the theologian's abstractions cannot fully clarify or encompass.

Historically, Methodist and Baptist women ministers have been subjected to similar barriers, such as, sexism, slow ordination process, and the denial of equal access to decision – making positions. Nevertheless, some progress has been made. For instance, American Baptist ordained Edith Hill in 1894. By 1925 about 12 of American Baptist women were ordained. However, it was another fifty years before the Southern Baptist ordained a woman. In 1964, Addie Davis was the first Southern Baptist woman to be ordained, but she could find no Southern Baptist Church to pastor.

Durecillar Fordham became Southern Baptist first woman pastor and also its first black ordained female pastor. Since 1970s increased numbers of Southern Baptist and National Baptist women ministers have increased considerably. As of January 1995; the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. ordained 225 women; the American Baptist ordained 831 women; Southern Baptist had 1,130 ordained women ministers. While some strides for women have been made – statistics reveal women are usually offered associate pastor or support staff positions.

The Black Methodist for Church Renewal is only one of the many organizations that has been founded for the sole purpose of enforcing and maintaining equal rights for black people and black women within the United Methodist Church. The Black Methodist for Church Renewal (BMCR) vision persistently urges the Church to develop a social consciousness more consistent with its spiritual ideas. The United Methodist Church does have a tremendously large white constituency, but it is undeniably a multicultural denomination. The creation of BMCR was both necessary and essential for the assistance of African Americans to reconcile their status inside a predominately white denomination. It has been helpful in enabling African Americans to cope with the many forms of racism – personal, political, institutional, and otherwise. BMCR has been successful in helping many maintain integrity while remaining faithful to the demands of the gospel. BMCR has remained clear about the African American agenda and the agenda for the inclusivity of black women ministers.

The efforts of BMCR help the denomination increase the participation of its Black members in decision-making within the Church. They believe the whole Church benefits from inclusive program development and enhancement through annual conferences and general agencies. BMCR is needed to strengthened the Black church and to assure women's rights for the 21st century. Serious attention is being given to congregational development, outreach, and leadership development and ministerial recruitment. BMCR dispels the concept that Black people can succeed in the church only if they are shaped in the image of white middle-class people. Since its inception, Black Methodist for Church Renewal has been the voice of the Black church and an advocate for its growth and development. It has been instrumental in creating programs and agencies for the benefit of the Church. BMCR's full potential has not been realized. However, it has made great accomplishments, but the struggle has not been won. BMCR's efforts are still in demand today. It faces a great challenge of responsibility in the empowerment of Black Methodist. BMCR's aim is to equip leadership and strengthen local churches for evangelism, stewardship, and effective outreach. BMCR will continue to challenge and confront racism, and strengthen the black constituency for empowerment and development, and defend women's rights in the local churches.

Women in the United Methodist denomination received the right to ordination in 1956. Unfortunately, the structure nature of sexism in the church had meant that still women did not share equality in the program and policy making channels of the church. By 1968 the Women's Division of the Board of Missions petitioned the Methodist Church for the creation of a study of the extent to which women are involved at all structural levels in program and policy-making channels and agencies. The 1970 General Conference approved this study commission and thankfully, its work commenced. The study commission functioned within the following purpose:

1. To create a study to which women are involved in program and policy-making decisions at all levels of the United Methodist Church.
2. To review The Book of Discipline in the light of the issue of the role of women in the denomination.
3. To develop an awareness of the issues of women's involvement of the denomination, the factors involved, and the changes needed.
4. To formulate recommendations that will enable and facilitate the involvement of women in the work of the church.

The findings of the study revealed women were in fact neglected and restricted to traditional women's areas of work rather than top leadership positions of the church. It reported:

Women in executive positions in the United Methodist Church agency structures tended to be concentrated in the Board of Missions currently has the highest ranking women executives in the denomination on its staff. The participation of women in the structures of the denomination still reflects the traditional patterns to a large extent. Women were found in the membership and on the staffs of agencies, which relate to missions and education, the "historic channels" for women's work.

This was true of the membership of the annual conference agencies as well. The largest proportion of women was found on the annual conference level, were largely reserved for men. This was true of annual conference commissions on World Service and Finance and The Program Councils and their national counterparts. Activities having to do with some aspect of the professional ministry, boards of ministries, pension activities, education, and recruitment of clergy, were almost exclusively the domain of men.

On the local church organization level, the same was documented. Women were ascribed to education, missions, and the Council on Ministries. Men predominated in the Administrative Board, the Committee on Finance, the Board of Trustees and the Pastor Parish Relations Committee, all of that are crucial in determining policy for the local organization. Now it is clear that a problem exist within the church. Although the rights to full ordination were granted in 1956, the right to full participation in the professional ministry has not become actualized. The study revealed the following:

A number of researches report have indicated that women clergy face obstacles in their professional careers which are not placed before men. There is an underlying prejudice against having women as clergy, particularly in the parish ministry. Women are harder to place because many congregations do not want a woman as pastor. In relation to recent research project, the bishops of the United Methodist Church were asked to comment on issues relating to the appointment of women. Twelve of the thirty-eight respondents indicated that problems arouse because of the history of male domination in professional ministry. Twelve pointed to the special problems, which related to the placement of married women clergy. The bishops also indicated that many congregations are unwilling to accept a woman minister. Supporting evidence of this type of bias can be found in almost all studies of the professional ministry, which have dealt with the topic of women clergy.

The study made specific recommendations for the advancement of women in the church. The recommendations ranged from reform in legislation to reform in language. This study and the actions that have since followed are a result of the first woman bishop, Margaret Matthews being elected in 1980. In addition, Leontyne Kelly (African American woman) was elected bishop in 1984. By 1980 the United Methodist had elicited a total of eight women bishops. In 2000 the United Methodist Church elected six African American female bishops. There are now female administrators, district superintendents, and women serving in almost every compassity of the denomination. It is evident that significant strides have been made, but at the same time differences based on race, class, and sex is complicating the ordination process. The struggle for liberation and full participation continues in an effort to maintain success and to make further advancements, for example, the elimination of sexism.

To be a woman, black and active in religious institutions in America is to labor under sexism. My topic has one principal term – sexism. It will be the burden of my argument to make clear the depth of its impact and the issues it creates for African American women in ministry. Sexism is a prejudice or discrimination based on sex (usually against women). Consequently, these attitudes and conditions or behavior foster stereotypes of social roles based on sex. Accepting this definition as truth, we can no longer disregard or deny that sexism exists and that we live in a sexist society. It is a fact that women in America, though in majority statistically, are generally in inferior positions. Economically, women are at the bottom of the ladder in terms of political office, corporate executive positions, and clergy positions. Women comprise more than fifty percent of the church's membership and have consistently superseded men in terms of financial contributions to the church. Black and white, male and female, Catholic and Protestant must unite to establish laws that govern and enforce equal access to all qualified persons – in the work place, in the church, in the political arena, etc. Unity among women is a major key in the elimination of sexism.

It is true – women can be their own worst enemies. The institution of sexism is so sullen, ancient, and ingrained in the minds of women that some of them are unaware they are supporting it. They have regarded it as the natural order of things. Moreover women are often resentful of other women who step out of prescribed feminine roles, such as, fundraisers, missionaries, and bake sale organizers. Envy is a powerful destructive emotion of women, and equally destructive are the actions that follow such attitudes. These behaviors have a tendency to foster fear of another's success, self – pity, insecurity, and identification with a clearly defined subordinate social role. If the barriers that separate women from one another prevent women from seeing the truth of our common lies, lives, and struggles – then we must first remove those barriers that separate us – feminist from non – feminist, womanist from non – womanist, liberal from conservative, and white from black. This is what the women's movement was about.

Women coming together to give one another strength to accomplish what we had despised of doing individually – being the president of the United States of America, being a bishop, being a professional boxer, and the list continues. Those are non – traditional endeavors that women have partially excluded themselves from pursuing in times past. One of the hardest truths to face is that women themselves can and have been barriers for other women. It is sometimes difficult to convince women there is a need for equality between the sexes. Nevertheless, it is crucial that women start overturning the barriers that separate them. It is evident that social class, race, and religion separate women. If women are to conquer these barriers they must (a) set aside issues that divide them, (b) overcome envy, (c) focus on things that unite them, and (d) they must focus on commonalities and strengths that support their endeavors.

Women's exclusion from leadership or even visibility imposed on them in the name of traditional religion has lasted for many centuries. Today, the silence is being broken as decision – making positions are being challenged. No more silence – says the women who organize the bake sales, plan church programs, and faithfully pay tithes. No more silence – says women who seek ordination and decision – making positions. No more silence? Say the women who are determined to fulfill their God given purpose.

As a woman, as an African American, and as a minister – I join many others who are saying no more silence. We unite (theologians, historians, liberals, high school dropouts, black and white) and proclaim a shout of victory instead of a retreat / defeat of silence. The silence is being broken so that everyone may have equal access to decision – making positions in the church and in society in general. Women are screaming no to being kept in an inferior place because of class, race, and sex. We are saying enough! Women have begged and pleaded for justice for too long. Now hear our cries of distress and consider our spiritual gifts and callings as sacred commissions from God. Consider our contributions as pure gold. Open your hearts as we convey godly knowledge to the masses. Watch as we display understandings of biblical principal for the sake of the gospel.

As a Christian we should find it necessary to look for resolution of conflict in the teaching of Jesus Christ. Therefore Christians who see the inferior status of women as an issue of justice believe that their struggle for equality is a prophetic struggle. Christ is saying, “ I commissioned women to carry the good news just as I commissioned Martha to tell the disciples Jesus is risen.” It is easier for one to attack a system's imperfections than it is to provide solutions that everyone will respect, accept, appreciate, or even consider. For these reasons (and more) some people would rather ignore the problems that exist. They even believe that they will eventually fade away. Too often, we are forced to deal with issues that we have allowed to worsen over time. Issues that could have been resolved long before grave havoc has taken its roll. The time has come to deal with the issues women in leadership roles cope with on a day to day basis within the church. We can not afford to be silent any longer!

Sometimes the hardest people to convince that women and men are equal are women themselves. Women must examine their behavior for passivity. They must take responsibility for their own lives and stop totally depending on men to make all the decisions. Women must demand to share whatever power they have over domestic, political, and religious decisions. Barriers separating them from other women must be overcome and existing differences of opinion tolerated. As women we should encourage women to step outside of traditional roles and set precedents and paradigms, if not for ourselves – for the generations to come.

During the transition of male dominance men have a role to play. It is necessary for men to be open to the possibility of change in power and status quo. Men are expected to listen to what women are proposing and should be willing to value their expertise. The transition that is surely to come will be a smooth one if men stop thinking of women as subordinates. Allowing women the opportunity to prove their integrity, ability, and strength is a major step toward oneness in the body of Christ. Unity among women is a significant key to eliminating the barriers (of envy, traditionalism, and strife) that separate us. Racism, classism, and sexism can not be overlooked. Age and sexual preference is no longer an acceptable excuse for avoiding the issues that have plagued us. Women must be included. Women must be allowed equal access to positions in all American institutions. Women will not be silent any longer. Women are determined to reshape, redefine, and restructure the sexist American institutions of today.

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