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THE SPIRIT OF HAGAR: LIVING IN AN UNFRIENDLY HOUSE

“Revolution is a serious thing, the most serious thing about a revolutionary’s life. When one commits it must be for a lifetime.”

Angela Davis¹

Introduction

The word “revolution” may appear too radical for a discussion of clergywomen and their call to serve as pastors! Yet, in the socio-political context what can be more violent, war-like, or tyrannical than the oppression and marginalization of women clergy in male-dominated pulpits, churches, and institutions? What can be more violent than the humiliation of being declared unworthy to serve God’s people? What is more war-like than having to fight for an appointment to a church for which you are more than qualified, while less qualified males receive choice assignments? What is more tyrannical than having the desire, the gift, and the call to preach the Word, just to be told that in the pulpit, “Women must remain silent?”² Nothing is more unjust!

Clergywomen consistently struggle both inside and outside the African-American Church. We are relegated to the vestiges

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¹Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 162.

²See Paul’s First Epistle to the Church at Corinth, 14:34 (also, First Timothy 2:11). Many fundamentalists and other like-minded critics of females as clergy interpret this to mean women should not preach or pastor.

of its inner sanctum. We face a variety of oppressive, separatist, and disenfranchising traditions that place our call, and ultimately our beings, in jeopardy. Our story is not unlike the story of the slave Hagar, who endured the subjugation of her owners—themselves people of God. Today, it is again, people of God; that is, male clergy who often place us in Hagar-like positions.³ Despite the fact that we are well-educated, fully experienced, and quite capable of leadership, we are pressed into theoretical enslavement masked in theological rhetoric.

We exist in an unfriendly house, serving under compromising circumstances that threaten our survival. Among our own people (where we expect some semblance of sensitivity to discrimination), we face narrow-mindedness and egos blinded by power. We are constantly resisting attitudinal and stereotypic barriers. Our foes are stubborn in their rigid sexist mindsets, and they simply do not accept us. We are occupants in a house where there is no welcome mat and where we are not invited to stay. The question is, then, when women are faced with the reality of living in a house that is unfriendly, to whom do we turn? What do we do, and where do we go?

To Go or To Stay: Surviving in Mainstream Denominations

One would think that people, who serve God and view God as just and loving, would be that way toward each other. Yet, there is a general consensus among informed observers that the Church Universal fails in its responsibility to embrace women as

³While acknowledging that women are sometimes the perpetrators, this essay responds to discrimination emerging from the dominant male-driven group.

equal partners in leadership.⁴ As “servants” of God, we simultaneously become slaves of men. Some churches allow us to preach, but not in the pulpit; others do not allow us to preach at all.⁵ In the denominations where we are ordained, we cannot preach for special church services, because we are needed elsewhere (conveniently) in less visible positions. We cannot share the pulpit during important ecumenical celebrations, because too many males must be accommodated. We cannot be appointed to a well-established church, because popular, but less qualified males want the assignment. When powerful committee chairs are available, when trustee boards, deacon boards, or finance committees are developed, we are still underrepresented, despite the fact we overwhelmingly fill the pews.

According to Delores Williams, author of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Black women’s challenges are comparable to a “wilderness experience.”⁶ That analogy describes the kind of challenge women clerics face today attempting to serve as pastors in a male-dominated environment. It helps one to visualize parallels for all women, but in particular for Black women who struggle in their call to ministry against odds that relate to gender and ethnicity. It is like a revolution. This “wilderness” is akin to the

⁴See Rosetta E. Ross, “Inverting the Pyramid: Exploring Where We Have Been and Where We Are Now Regarding Problems of Violence, Racism, and Xenophobia in the Lives of Women,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXVI (1998): 124-125.

⁵The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) still does not ordain women as preachers or approve of them as senior pastors. In one conversation with a COGIC male seminarian, his attitude is: “If Christ did not have female disciples, then why should the church ordain female clergy?” See Church of God in Christ, *Official Manual of the Church of God in Christ* (Memphis, TN: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1973), 10.

⁶See Part One of Delores Williams’ renowned book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 15. Williams gives an excellent accounting of Genesis 16 from the lens of oppressed Black women, using Hagar’s reality as the parallel for sisters who struggle today.

institutionalized sexism that we encounter, offering our services in a house under compromising circumstances. Eventually, we find ourselves struggling against coercive or permissive males who are either party to or, at best, indifferent toward our mistreatment.

In the Hagar narrative, when the slave was forced to submit to Abram (with Sarai's permission) so that he might have a son, she at once became a victim of rape and abuse. Later, when Hagar produced a son, Sarai realized the threat Hagar posed to her sense of security and so complained to her husband. At that point, Abram gave her license to mistreat the slave. Hagar was victimized all over again, and finally, as she realized how unbearable her situation was, she ran away to the protection of the wilderness.

Women clerics of the twenty-first century have two choices in their struggle for recognition and equality: they can choose to stay within their denominations and defend themselves against the onslaught of injustice that they face, or they can leave their church and define their own ministry through non-traditional venues. Staying does not guarantee any loyalty from the house. Hagar had been with her owners ten years; yet, she was treated like a stranger.⁷ Her longevity there earned her no respect or consideration. Leaving always carries risks, particularly for someone such as Hagar with little or no resources. However, history records followers of both options. While some women have gone out on their own in ministry, others have chosen to stay, fighting male domination and discrimination from within.

In the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) tradition, Jarena Lee represents a forerunner of this position. She was the widow of a preacher who stood alone among other male preachers dur-

⁷See Genesis 16:3 NIV.

ing the early years of the AME Church. She dared to ask the somber, restrained Bishop Richard Allen for a license to preach the Gospel.⁸ She never left the AME Church; rather, she stayed and fought the injustices she experienced there. Lee insisted that she had every right to preach, quoting Joel 2:28—God's sons and daughters would prophesy.⁹ She insisted that the AME Church had no right to deny her the opportunity to take the word of God to her people. Indeed, her call narrative is not unlike that of any inspired male who has claimed God's commission on his life:

Between four and five years after my sanctification, on a certain time, an impressive silence fell upon me, and I stood as if some one was about to speak to me, yet I had no such thought in my heart. But to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understand, which said to me, 'Go preach the Gospel!' I immediately replied aloud, 'No one will believe me.' Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say 'Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and you will turn your enemies to become your friends.'¹⁰

This was a struggle that Lee took upon herself, making her a womanist activist before her time. Although she did not see the church as an ally in her effort to become an ordained preacher, Lee chose to remain a part of the enemy camp. Today,

⁸Allen was the first consecrated bishop of the AME Church. See the history section of the AME Church, *Book of Doctrine and Discipline* (Nashville, TN: The AME Church, 2000), 5, for an accounting of Allen's personal career.

⁹See Lee's journal, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1836), 10. Bishop Allen granted her a license as an exhorter around 1817.

¹⁰Ibid.

some women clerics have followed in her footsteps, staying within a mainstream denomination, serving in other capacities, and suffering the consequences of being female. However, still others have chosen to leave, making their own way. These are the courageous women who saw no alternative but to seek an alternative.

Upstream Women

When one swims against the tide, it requires strength and stamina beyond the norm. It is not the ideal circumstance. However, when there is nothing downstream but danger and death, an upstream destination becomes the only viable option. In order to escape the danger of others suppressing their voices and the death of their burgeoning dreams, some women have chosen the upstream route in establishing their ministries. Evangelist Juandolyn Stokes¹¹ says, "Men will not embrace women preachers in mainstream denominations."¹² The sampling of women for this essay supports that claim and points to the reality that in order for us to find our place as pastors today, Black women clergy must consider starting our own churches. Certainly

¹¹Juandolyn Stokes of Decatur, Georgia, is a seminarian at ITC and pastors her own non-denominational church in Decatur. Also, she has served as a gospel radio announcer, speaker, and concert host. Interview by author, personal notes, 3 April 2003, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

¹²This writer looks at "mainstream" as those denominations that are connectional and represented on ITC's campus. They include African Methodist Episcopal, Baptist, Christian Methodist Episcopal, Church of God in Christ, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist, and an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America presence via The Lutheran Theological Center in Atlanta.

there are exceptions, but unfortunately, these are few.¹³ Mainstream denominations have become an upstream, against-the-tide experience that, for some, is no longer inhabitable.

Therefore, women are choosing to seek alternatives, rather than stay within the confines of a denomination that offers no way out. These preachers often begin ministries with no official denominational connection¹⁴ or tradition and start their churches from the ground up. They choose non-traditional ways of doing theology and innovative ways of viewing themselves. They validate themselves as women of God, not through a limiting, sexist context, but rather a liberating, sustaining context. Fighting all the way upstream, they realize that although the security of a church connection is sacrificed, the independence and autonomy that results are worth the effort.

Stokes is founder of Deeper Life in Christ Ministries in Dekalb County, Georgia, and has opened a satellite location of her church. Her ministry has grown as she has coupled a gospel radio announcer career with that of evangelizing and pastoring. She admitted having to make a choice of going out on her own because of resistance within her network of male clergy.

In addition to Stokes, Cynthia Hale of Decatur, Georgia's Ray of Hope Christian Ministries, and Shirley Caesar of Durham, North Carolina's Mount Calvary Holy Church are both examples of women who have been successful as pastors on their own. Rev. Cynthia L. Hale¹⁵ is the founding and senior pastor

¹³For example, Bishop Vashti McKenzie is bishop of the AME Church (117th Jurisdiction), but she is the first after over 200 years of the church's history.

¹⁴Refers to those denominations with organized, structured systems throughout a region, national or international connection (African Methodist Episcopal, United Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.).

¹⁵Constance Jackson, interview by writer, 10 April 2003, personal notes, Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, Georgia. Jackson is a member of the staff at Ray of Hope and is the 2003-2004 president of ITC's Student Christian League. Rev. Hale is the only one in this study who is a part of a connection—Disciples of Christ.

of the Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, Georgia. Beginning with only four persons meeting for Bible study, 6500+ persons have joined Ray of Hope in the last fifteen years. They acquired a larger facility due to expansion. Caesar is in ministry and pastors in Durham, North Carolina with her husband, but she began Caesar Outreach Ministry independently.¹⁶

These preachers sought alternatives and some did so with the understanding that they were moving upstream against the tide of mainstream denominations. Somewhere along the way, most of them found themselves fighting against males who would not release the reins of power. This authority may be the reason dominate cultures (men clergy and lay leaders within the church) seek to oppress and control any group that may offer resistance.

Power, Power: The Weapon of Choice

"...[R]ecent critiques of feminist/womanist and liberation analyses have enlarged the general understanding of violence to include explorations of power....violence [is the] abusive use of power."¹⁷ Womanist thinkers and liberationist theologians agree that power is the weapon used against women as a way of controlling and limiting their participation in influential roles. This holds true for public and private spheres. The institution of sexism as it lives and breathes today is fueled by the misappropriation of power; and when it is used to deny access, to abuse vic-

¹⁶See Eileen Daily, "Biographical Essay of Shirley Caesar," in *Contemporary Black Biography*, v. 19, ed. Shirelle Phelps (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1998), 25-28.

¹⁷Ross, "Inverting the Pyramid," 120. Ross is persuasive in her argument about violence as a non-physical phenomenon when it surfaces through the abuse of power.

tims, or to protect wrongdoing, then that power becomes a vehicle for discrimination and a weapon for oppression.

Specifically, three observations can be made about the issue of power to help clarify the status of women as clergy in the church. First, power (especially in a male-dominated culture) is a commodity that is not shared, but rather controlled (or possessed).¹⁸ And so it is with the Black pulpit. When women are not allowed to share in the power of bishoprics, presiding elders, senior pastorates, deacon and trustee boards, financial offices, executive positions, moderators and other lay forms of leadership, they have been excluded from the opportunity to contribute. Connectional church bodies and powerful committees exist today that either have no women or only one who serves as an appeaser. During special AME services or high profile ecumenical events, for example, men still outnumber women in the pulpits, and the women who are present are rarely worship leaders.¹⁹

As a slave, Hagar was simply performing her duty, as she was obliged to do. Nevertheless, despite her loyalty, she was treated as a piece of property. She had no power; she was faceless. One cleric points out that Hagar is worth little to the couple, and in fact, they never call her by her name during their conversations

¹⁸Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 104. Throughout the book, Riggs does an exceptional job explaining the role that males play as gatekeepers of sexism in the Black Church.

¹⁹Numerous bulletins and orders of worship will bear this out. However, it should be noted that things are improving in Georgia at this time under the leadership of Bishop Frank C. Cummings. For example, in 2002 he insisted that three women be appointed to the powerful Judicial Committee of the AME Church for the Sixth District. (See the Atlanta North Georgia Conference minutes, May 2002, Saint Mark AME Church, Atlanta, Georgia.) This kind of advocacy for women by male leadership, however, is an exception.

about her.²⁰ So it is with Black women preachers who are denied power that has been possessed and harnessed by males. We have no name, and we are faceless before our congregations.

The second aspect of power that causes women to be mistreated within the Black Church is abuse. Too often, Black women are ignored for advancements in denominational settings unless we are willing to yield to sexual innuendo and advances from our male counterparts. In some cases, we are blatantly told that we must perform sexual favors if we expect to make progress. Institutional sexism has become a reality for us. Just as Hagar endured the harsh reality of slavery and the abuse of her body temple, likewise, we must endure the outcomes of the marginalization that we face day in and day out. Our lives are "extremely difficult," especially in the face of a resurgent wave of preferred male leadership and female subjugation in the church.²¹

Whether it is psychological or physical, abusive power is destructive. It is used to annihilate, humiliate, and devastate. It comes in the form of words and language.²² It manifests itself in the form of gestures and bodily expression. In the hands of a dominant gender over another, it is sexual harassment—it is wrong. In the Black Church it poses a threat to the spiritual and

²⁰See Rev. Neal R. Sadler's "Women of the Old Testament: Hagar" [sermon online] (Delivered at St. Matthew United Church of Christ, Wheaton, Illinois; accessed 2 December 2003); available from <http://www.stmatthew-ucc.org/sermon-Hagar>; Internet. Sadler's comment makes the point about Hagar's anonymity well: "In many ways, Hagar is even a person without a name. Interestingly, as we read this account in Genesis we see that Abraham and Sarah never refer to her as Hagar, simply as that 'slave-girl' or 'slave-woman.'"

²¹See Deborah Austin, "In the Middle of Everyday Life: The Spaces Black Clergywomen Create," in *Perspectives of Womanist Theology*, ed. Jacquelyn Grant (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 209.

²²Womanist scholar Jacquelyn Grant, in her lecture, spoke of the power of language to limit and inhibit. From notes on "Language As a Theological Issue," ITC, Atlanta, Georgia, January 27, 2004.

personal well-being of its victims. When a woman is called to preach, but cannot get past her pastor's couch, not only has an injustice been done to her but also to the church and to God. When a laywoman is so traumatized by an elder or another trusted church leader that she can no longer perform in her ministry, that ministry has been traumatized, as well as the victim. How many of us have given in and given up on our call, because of the acts of sexist, abusive men who frustrate our every move?

In addition to power being harnessed and abused in order to suppress women, it can be used to permit or protect wrongdoing from various sources. In other words, it acts as a shield, protecting the perpetrator. Power by permission is manifested in the form of an indifferent church leadership that allows various forms of discrimination against women. It is not unlike the problem Hagar faced when Sarai began to abuse her, while Abram looked on. When power is used in this manner, those who are either peers of the person in control or the victim are permitted to discriminate. For example, when a deacon can molest an under aged female and remain in office or when the male senior pastor remains silent, as church members or other clerics disrespect his female assistant pastor, then, like Abram, he says, "Do with her whatever you think best."

Ignorance can play a role, as well—the third way in which power is abused. For whatever reason, males who are adamant about the horrors of racism and the destruction it brings the race seem to completely dismiss sexism and the degradation it perpetrates on women. Even in seminaries, where women should feel protected from such discrimination, the sin still exists. One such woman spoke of her horror story.

When I was in seminary—oh God—the various things that happened there. It was interesting to see the reaction of

my brothers at Union. It was a liberal place, but I would be in class—liberation theology—learning to identify oppression and what the word of God says, and walk out of class and have a black male say something very sexist. You wonder, did we come out of the same classroom, and you realize they were not seeing sexism as being as evil as racism. Sex(ism) and racism are two sides of the same coin—sin.²³

As women push forward to deal with sexism in the Black Church, we should be aware of the enemy whom we must fight. Unfortunately, as story after story will show—that enemy is someone who is a part of us—someone who sits next to us in class—someone who eats with us in the fellowship hall—someone who should be our partner in Christ, our friend in ministry. When clergy use power to subjugate and oppress other clergy, it is an unholy war. The physical, psychological, and verbal abuse must stop; it is something that women in ministry must continuously resist.

Male Domination: God's Dominion

In generations past, women were thought of as property—literally. Today, that literal definition translates into vivid imagery within our consciousness. Although we may not be called property or violated as such in the legal sense, the way we are viewed by men who suppress our existence as free and whole persons makes that status a reality.²⁴ In both public and private

²³Union Seminary graduate Rev. Barbara Headley is referenced. See Deborah Petersen Swift, "Rising Above Bias for Her Faith's Sake" [article online] (*The Hartford Courant* 1999; accessed 2 December 2003); available from <http://courant.ctnow.com/projects/women/loud15.stm>; Internet.

²⁴For a full treatment of the issue of internalization of violence and stereotypes, see Carolyn McCrary's "The Wholeness of Women," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXV, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 258-294.

domains the cycle lives on, and it is perpetuated when socio-political conditions, such as sexism and discrimination, render us helpless to break free of its strongholds. This is true in the church, which reflects society, and nowhere is it more visible than in the pulpit.

Data strongly suggest that male domination prevails in positions of power in religious institutions, where Black women comprise over 70 percent of their congregations, yet hold less than 10 percent of senior pastorates.²⁵ For example, in the Sixth Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), out of seventeen presiding elders, only one is female. Also, the AMEC did not elect its first woman bishop until the year 2000.²⁶ In the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME), there is still no female bishop. These statistics alone suggest that in order for us to fulfill our aspirations as pastors, some of us do need to move out and establish our own ministries and preach in our own pulpits.

Maria Stewart, an avid activist for social change, said, "From the moment I experienced the change, I felt a strong desire...to devote the remainder of my days to piety and virtue, and now possess that spirit of independence that, were I called upon, I would willingly sacrifice my life for the cause of God."²⁷ She made this bold statement in the early 1800s when women had begun to have their struggle validated through publications and public discourse. Stewart made it clear that it was her service to

²⁵Austin, "In the Middle of Everyday Life," 210.

²⁶Statistics according to the 2002 records. See African Methodist Episcopal Church 2002 District Directory, Sixth Episcopal District, *Family of Faith: Doing God's Work God's Way!* (Atlanta: African Methodist Episcopal Church, 2002), 11. Vashti McKenzie was elected at the General Conference of the AMEC in August 2000.

²⁷Maria W. Stewart, *America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches* (Bloomington, IN: University Press, 1987), 29.

God that drove her, not her gender or any other human characteristic. "How long," she asked, "shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?"²⁸

In the eyes of God, there is no distinction made between man and woman; the only important distinction in God's eyes is that of servant. That legacy began with Hagar, possibly the first woman slave known to have escaped from her captivity,²⁹ and reverberated through the generations of sisters in biblical times. From there, the torch was passed to Jarena Lee and many others who carried it into today's generation where voices cry out for the same freedom. These women understood sacrifice; they understood independence; they understood defiance. Most importantly, they understood faith and how to use that faith to push forward amidst the storm. They understood the power they possessed within their spirits, a power that comes out of knowing everything is possible for those who believe.

Using Grit, Using Gifts

As we grasp our destiny, we will be required to call on all the inner strength that God has given us to sustain our work. Needless to say, in all that we do, prayer and meditation should precede decision-making. We need to be guided by the Holy Spirit. From there, we press on toward our objective by allowing our determined minds and divine talent take us over the last milestone pass those who would suppress our progress.

In each of these ministries, the women have either used cre-

²⁸Ibid., 38.

²⁹Williams, *Sisters*, 19.

ative financing, sheer determination, or a combination of both to get started. Both Hale and Caesar are gifted musically. In Caesar's case, according to her biography, as she performed professionally, she contributed her income to fund 50 percent of the budget for her outreach ministry. When Hale moved to a new location to accommodate her growing ministry, she negotiated assertively with the pastor and secured the new church for considerably less than the asking price.

Stokes asked personal friends to contribute to her start-up costs. She had a plan that she had envisioned, which she shared with persons who supported her. After identifying a modest space within a business complex, she was able to conserve resources. Now, she has a satellite ministry, reaching a new population in DeKalb County.

Each of these women demonstrated at least two skills that enabled them to meet their goals—they were determined to take the risks to succeed, demonstrating the strength (or grit) to do what had to be done; and they used intuitive, creative strategies and talent (or gifts) to accomplish necessary tasks. This use of grit and gifts illustrates how we can lay the groundwork, get started, and maneuver our way through financing, capital campaigns, growth, and development. Each of these women of God dared to face the risks of starting a ministry from the ground up. They were not afraid to swim upstream. They utilized sound organizational skills, effective networking strategies and planning, just as any astute businessperson, and they identified ways to achieve financial goals through perceptive business acumen. This represents only half of the challenge, however, that they faced. There is another process that parallels the business side of our journey. As we achieve outward success in our work, we must look inward to sustain our inner selves. Once we have attained what we want, we must find ways to maintain what we

have by remembering who we are and whose we are. This is not just a cliché but an actual process to nurture ourselves while moving on toward the greatness God has in store for us.

Moving Toward the Spiritual Summit: A Path of Three

When Hagar was forced to take her son and go into the wilderness alone, her soul was in anguish. With her meager resources, she knew she could not go far. She sobbed. She could not bear to watch her son die. Then, just at the moment when she thought the end was near, the angel of God spoke to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." (Gen. 21:17-18 NIV)

The moment Hagar heeded the words of the angel, her life changed, and indeed, her son did inherit a great nation. This simple story of obedience points to a clear message for us. It says that as women who feel led to pastor independently, there is a path that we must take. This path involves three spiritual "movements" that demonstrate the relationship we must maintain with God. This path of resignation, resonation, and realization depicts our inward preparation as we simultaneously negotiate the outward progress of our work. They go hand in hand, but it is this part that often escapes us long after books and consultants have taught us the rest.

Resignation

In one context, to resign means to give up something. In the context of this approach, it means to give in to something

(the act of submission). When our circumstances are larger than we are, we must learn to resign ourselves to God's power in our lives. It is when we have reached our most destitute terrain that we should turn our situation over to God, moving toward a clearer vision of the Creator's divine will.

Hagar ran away from the horror of her captivity twice.³⁰ She was exposed and helpless when she heard from the angel of God the first time that she was in the wilderness. She was fearful for her safety and had no desire to return to her enslavement. However, despite her misgivings, she resigned herself to do as the angel asked. Perhaps she felt as if she had no other choice, but it was her obedience that opened the path she was to travel as she met her destiny.

When we resign our work to God, and it should not be because we have no other choice (although our willfulness can interfere at times), we demonstrate that we are committed to placing God first. Whatever decisions we make, they should be tempered with our God-given wisdom and personal talent. We cannot be afraid to explore alternatives, but as we do so, we should wait prayerfully for God's answer. Although we may stumble and fall and may find that our lives are not going according to plan, let us realize that there may be a message somewhere in our disappointments. Although others may not share our vision and make us feel as if we have hit a brick wall, that might be the point the Spirit is trying to make through our hurt. It is at these moments we turn our situation over to God and wait for directions on what to do next. It is when we are the most uncertain, that we must move with certainty even closer toward God—out of our circumstance.

We may be afraid of the challenges that lie ahead in our

³⁰Based on acceptance of the interpretation of Hagar's two separate flights from captivity in Genesis—one in Chapter 16 and one in Chapter 21.

journey. This is particularly true if we face other barriers, such as ageism or handicappism.³¹ We may find ourselves struggling against monsters with two or three heads instead of one. Nevertheless, we should embrace the struggle, not turn from it. We should look forward to the fight despite our pitfalls; it is when we are at our worst that God is at God's best.³²

Resonation

Moving toward the message (the act of declaring availability) means that we must be ready to hear and act on what God has in store for us once we have submitted to God's will. Exactly what is God's plan for us? What is the destiny that God has made ready for us? What gifts do we have in order to serve God's people and what resources do we have to begin our ministry? Who can help us? God will tell us, show us where to go and who to see. Once we have given ourselves over completely to God and become as empty vessels, our answers will come, full of creativity and innovation! They certainly did in the cases of these women of God.

Ideas for growth come from unlikely places. They may be in the words of a prophetic sermon or the story of an unsuspecting stranger. They may come from colleagues or cousins, scholars or students. As upstream women, we cannot afford to

³¹Ageism is defined here as any age that makes a person unacceptable for a certain appointment; for example, persons over 50 in the AME Church cannot be ordained as itinerant clergy. Handicappism is any physical challenge that causes a person to be denied access (either intentionally or unintentionally) to a position for which she is qualified.

³²From a quote often used by James L. Davis, pastor of Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Davis's pulpit, interestingly, is 50 percent female, something still unusual in other churches of comparable size within the same local district.

be afraid of the non-traditional, unexpected, or unusual. Our foremothers found ways to make a lot out of a little, and they have passed that unique talent on to us. When we use special gifts and take advantage of unique opportunities, we begin to see our way out of the personal ruts we are experiencing. We see new possibilities.

Can your ministry work to address social justice issues or community needs and find funding for that effort? Of course it can. Ask Pastor Caesar. She has an outreach ministry personally funded from her successful music career. Is there an alternative site (other than a traditional "church" edifice) that can be rented until a suitable space is found? Yes, there is. Ask Evangelist Stokes. She began her ministry in leased space in an office complex (funded in part from friends' contributions, as already noted). This allowed her time to find a site, while still growing her congregation. Both of these preachers placed divine inspiration in action and saw rewarding results.

Realization

Hagar's realization was her son's great nation. Jarena's was her license to spread the Gospel as an exhorter. The women noted in this discussion had the realization of their own ministries and their own pulpits. Ours will be whatever it is that has been ordained for us. As we resign ourselves to our helpless dependency on God and allow God's message and will for us to resonate within our beings, we should prepare ourselves for victory!

It is safe to say that there are few successful leaders (and I would assert, no successful women) who have not experienced setbacks at one time or another.³³ Yet, they keep going. While

³³For a full treatment of this issue, including the struggle of women in other denominations, see Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 109-111.

coming from a long tradition of a documented history of conflict with patriarchal suppression and male domination in her denomination, Baptist minister Trudy Trimm³⁴ became pastor of her late husband's church, New Testament Baptist Church in Chicago, tripling its membership. She did this despite the criticism, ridicule, and lack of support from her male peers of neighboring churches. Also, though one does not hear about it much today in academic and church history circles, the holiness tradition gave birth to our first black woman bishop, Elder Ida Robinson.³⁵ Her influence was well known among her people; men and women alike respected her.

These preachers pressed on. Our job is no different. We must move toward victory, knowing it is ours. This last movement of realization is probably the most daring and difficult, because it needs to be uplifted and believed, even when others doubt us. It is something we must embrace knowing that no human being can keep it from us, once God says it is for us. There is an apropos story that an AME Board of Examiners' instructor told to her class about her first church appointment.³⁶

This clergywoman was excited about preaching for the first time at her new church. It was a happy occasion when she arrived that Sunday, but walking into the church, there was no one there to greet her! Not one person sat in the sanctuary. Although tremendously disappointed, she began worship, ful-

³⁴In 1965; for discussions on firsts among Black women preachers, see Anthony Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 122. Pinn notes that in June 1984, 14.1 million delegates of the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution to exclude women from senior pastorates.

³⁵Pinn, *Black Church*, 122.

³⁶Debbie Grant, AME minister, comments during her lecture "Pastoring." North Georgia Board of Examiners' admissions class of the Sixth Episcopal District, Atlanta, Georgia, 17 February 2002.

filling each part of the order of service, as if the congregation were present. Then, standing to preach, at her foot was a column of ants proceeding across the pulpit! "I decided right then and there, to preach to those ants," she told her class, "after all, they needed to hear a word, too." Little did she realize that someone had slipped in during the sermon, and that someone became the first person to join the church. She had a member! Soon, her church grew, attracting a diverse group of worshippers from different ages and backgrounds.

Conclusion: Leaving the Unfriendly House—Building Our Own

The womanist struggle for justice and equity lives on. It lives in academe; it lives in society; it lives in the church. The sisters of our past were able to climb out of their despair (though not necessarily out of their circumstances) by being self-reliant in their personhood and self-assured in their struggle. Businesswomen, teachers, organizers, activists and preachers³⁷ alike made their voices heard despite the odds. They kept moving forward and swimming upstream, refusing to give in, not looking back. So must we. Our work is ministry, but it is a form of resistance, too. Therefore, our minds must be centrally focused on the inevitability of preparing for our very own revolution.

These pastors, who have been consistently successful in their ministries, each had something in common with Hagar. They were willing to defy male domination and stand on their own. In each case, whether by instinct or inspiration, they made

³⁷See Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

the choice to decide for themselves how they would serve God. From the outset, each of their decisions may have felt like a "wilderness experience," but ultimately, they walked out of their wilderness victorious as respected clergy in their own right. Despite the "politics of silence" in which they worked, they were aware that they "had a revolutionary role to play."³⁸

Stokes was correct when she said, "Women who wish to pastor have to move out of the mainstream denominations on our own, because men do not embrace us."³⁹ She offers a convincing argument that this kind of revolutionary stance is one that we must make to validate our ministry, our God-given talent, and spirit-led initiative outside the structure of male-led church institutions.⁴⁰ No exegesis of selective biblical text about our authority to speak can stop us; no failure on the part of others to recognize us as equal partners can prevent us; no misuse or abuse of power in and over our careers can preclude us once we stand on faith's firm foundation.

Black women of the cloth have a legacy to uphold, having come down to us from every "Jarena" who ever wanted to preach and was denied the opportunity. It has come down from the sisters who have embraced theology with a new understanding of our role in it.⁴¹ In upholding this legacy we must

³⁸Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 111.

³⁹Stokes interview, April 2003.

⁴⁰Actually, this can work for connectional clergy as well. Although still functioning at the pleasure of males in most cases, these women do have the option to start a new congregation rather than to accept an old one. Often, old churches carry old baggage. Starting from scratch affords more independence, while still offering the support of a connectional organization. Also, another alternative is "satellite" church pastoring, which involves leading a smaller church that functions as a branch or offspring of the parent church. It is still not typically independent, however, and does involve complex political implications.

find ways to answer the call to pastor, even when barriers of discrimination and sexism block our way. As we take our three-way path of resignation, resonance and realization, we will propel ourselves spiritually into God's divine will and claim all that God has for us.

As we resign ourselves to God's will, let it resonate within us and then let us realize it through our victory. The women who are successfully pastoring attest that this can be done. Perhaps Lee's words from her journal say it best. "If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for her also? Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear?"⁴² God's sacrifice was for us too, and that suggests so is God's call. When we hear it, we are bound to answer it. In doing so, we will find ourselves being the kind of instruments that God can use. We will find that just as with Hagar, God will build for us a "great nation" and will grant us the desires of our hearts. We will find that despite the trials and tears, the doubts and the setbacks that our territories will be increased and God will bless us indeed!⁴³ Let us all, then, we the daughters who will prophesy, declare that it was no lowly human who anointed us and called us. It was the Almighty One in whose name we do our redemptive work, and it is in that name we place our trust.

⁴¹One of the most empowering dimensions of ITC is the emergent voice in African-American women's theological scholarship—Womanist Theology. The paradigm of Womanist Theology in reconstructing knowledge avows what African-American women's unique experiences mean in relationship to God, creation, and holistic survival. As a positive affirmation of the gifts which God has given African-American women in theological discourse, Womanist Theology effects inclusivity, accenting gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and ecology. Dr. Jacquelyn Grant and Dr. Katie G. Cannon, alumnae of ITC, are two of the leading Womanist scholars in America.

⁴²Lee, *Life and Religious*, 11.

⁴³The "Prayer of Jabez," 1 Chronicles 4:10 NIV.

