

The Search for Pastoral Equality for Women Through Spiritual Empowerment

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Ordaining women to the ministry appears to be commonplace now. However, appointing them or using them in the church as senior pastors or in other leadership roles is still a tug of war, a real struggle. In my denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC), women continue to answer their call to the ministry, they are allowed to study with the Board of Examiners which prepares them for ordination over a five-year period. Following ordination, some women are appointed to churches. However, more often than not, they remain at their home church with duties that have been relegated as women's work—Church school teacher, Bible study leader, Christian Educator, Children's Church/pastor, visiting the sick and shut-in—all under the watchful eye of the male senior pastor. The acceptance of women as Christian educators and associate ministers appears to be an obvious attempt to limit the rights of clergywomen. While these are significant roles, women's calls should be taken as seriously as men's with the understanding that they, too, can be senior pastors leading congregations. There appears to be a great deal of concern over ordaining women, when in fact, it is a mere formality for the majority of women in ministry in the AMEC. The experiences and contributions of women as administrators, managers, nurturers, caregivers and biblical and theological scholars speak volumes to the ability, skill and expertise of women. Women are very capable of being senior pastors in churches that are led by men who are less and less skilled.

The question is whether this symbolic display of support for ordaining women or the resistance to appoint them to pastoral charges is legally mandated or is it a matter of normative expectation? This is of importance because, regardless of the answer, neither has succeeded in significant attitudinal change on the part of clergy or lay. Women are still seeking equality in pastoral ministry.

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In 2004 some 45.45% of all persons ordained itinerant elder were women in the Atlanta North Georgia Conference. That year there were fifty ordained clergywomen, and yet only fourteen female clergy were appointed pastors.² The disparity is great and continues year-to-year, appointment-to-appointment. These inequities drive one to seek methods, and strategies that will empower clergywomen to be strengthened to speak up and “act up” for changes within the church. By design this should encourage other women and men to pursue the changes that will challenge the status quo. At the very least it should bring about interest in engaging in conversation concerning pragmatic leadership roles for women. Women in this conference, clergywomen and lay, are a numerical majority. What, then, keeps them from pastoral equality?

Therefore, the dissertation project leading to the Doctor of Ministry degree for this writer focused on introducing *spiritual empowerment* as a survival strategy and a force for women in ministry to initiate equity in the pulpit.³ The writer hoped that this study would enable women, who are a numerical majority in our church, to experience the power that is of God, which will lead toward personal wholeness. It is the female clergy who must begin the work of transformation—in attitude and praxis. Attitude, because while some women are in favor of women as senior pastors, a great number of women are opposed to the idea or the reality of women as senior pastors. Praxis, because it is obvious that men are not willing to be fair in their assessment of and recommendation to bishops of women for pastoral appointments to larger congregations. So it is women who must take up the cause.

One can look at spiritual empowerment as that inner force that knits humanity and divinity into oneness so that one has a deeper understanding of God’s love in one’s life. This should be evidence through the ability to help others achieve spiritual growth. Here it is used as a term to indicate the gaining of spiritual power and control over one’s life by oppressive groups. If this can be comprehended then one can begin to

² Minutes of the 129th Session of the Atlanta North Georgia Annual Conference held at Big Bethel AME Church, May 25-28, 2004.

³ Cassandra Mercy Hill, “Spiritual Empowerment for Pragmatic Leadership in Pastoral Ministry: The Case for Equality of Clergywomen in the Atlanta North Georgia Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church” DMin. diss., Interdenominational Theological Center, 2004.

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understand that equality of the sexes, in whatever genre, is a necessary means for survival.

Men will not give up what they conceive to be *their* power without women staging a strong and determined struggle. In this instance, men's view of power is filled with misconceptions. Nonetheless, Frederick Douglass understood power and stated, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."⁴ So we do not expect by any stretch of the imagination that equality will be freely given. We do expect that people, in general, and the AMEC, in particular, will begin to deal honestly with the realities of women's issues and their search for equality in pastoral ministry.

We are confronted with the social construct of patriarchy in this church. Patriarchy assumes that males are superior to females; it assumes the value of women and their role in society, among other things. It assumes that power is a male "thing." While this social construct, like race and gender, is nothing real (of course the biological is factual in race and gender), it is a socially agreed upon contract that these are proper values. It is a dominant way of talking or doing something so that it becomes real in our minds.⁵ One is left to understand that in a male-dominated church—in authority only—women cannot take what belongs to the man, after all man has a family to feed and bills to pay. What a novel concept for women—who have families to feed and bills to pay?

The motivation for this project began sixteen years ago as another Annual Conference passed and women were not given appointments. Five years into the system, the writer, now an itinerant elder, was not appointed to a church. After going from building to building with the Bishop and other ministers, the humiliation turned to tears and the tears turned to anger. It was difficult to comprehend how anyone, including the writer, could put themselves through such anguish. Yet year after year they did. Unless there was some glaring reason, the males eventually received appointments. The women who were overlooked and not recommended by the presiding elders were observed by this writer as useless and unfit to

⁴Frederick Douglass. (n.d.). BrainyQuote.com. Retrieved November 5, 2015, from BrainyQuote.com Web site:

<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/f/frederickd134371.html>.

⁵ Forum Module 3 and 4 by Carolyn McCrary and Makunga Akinyela in Atlanta in *DIVAS Forum* on 3/27/2004. This forum was designed to engender conversation concerning the pastoral inequity of women in the AMEC.

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be leaders of congregations. One dared not say anything (unless asked) for fear of retaliation. This observation stood in stark comparison to the men who received appointments. Men, who had less education, were older and some seemingly in ill health received appointments because the male presiding elder recommended them. So the writer entered this project with the venom of a cobra. It was realized, however, that what was needed was spirituality that would bring in the divine. Attitudes can be changed, but it takes far more power than any human being has. It was cathartic to explore this subject with earnest and with the spirit that lives, or should live, inside of people. Talking with other women and journaling was very helpful. It is obvious that much is needed in the way of bringing humanity and spirituality together. It is a heavy carry—but not to worry, this writer's attitude changed through prayer, conversation, journaling and observation of the AME Church system.

Now the same feelings that are present as an African American reaches into gender reality. In the writer's journal, those feelings of racism from the minds and hands of white people leap over into sexism in the minds and hands of black men.

In a journal entry in November 1998, the writer wrote the following:

[...Life as an African-American woman in the AME Church is humiliating, painful, sad, excruciating, sad, painful, sad, painful humiliating, sad, and painful. It is dehumanizing and tormenting to see people oppress you because of patriarchal power and you want to scream "No!" but because you're only one and you have been conditioned that this is a man's church, you remain silent as the tears roll down your cheeks—but you can't let them see you cry because "they" would use that as another reason not to appoint you to a church. This is a damnable way to treat anybody!!]⁶

Bishop Vashti M. McKenzie, the first female bishop elected in the AMEC, in her book *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry* states the concern this way:

One of the greatest sources of frustration for women of African descent in America is having the door shut in our faces twice.

⁶ Cassandra Mency Hill, journal entry, November 1998.

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The door of education, economic empowerment, career advancement, employment opportunity, and achievement is shut once for the color for our skin (racism) and again because of our gender (sexism). Further the frustration is greatest when it is a member of our African American family who shuts the door the second time. It hurts most when the door is slammed by the ones with whom you have worked side by side for equality.⁷

Letty Russell also resonates with this feeling as she states that although white women and women of color share in the oppression of patriarchal structures, the double or triple layer of oppression experienced by women of color, who are often also poor, means that their experience is as different from that of white feminists as “purple to lavender” or Hagar to Sarah.⁸

The frustration and disrespect that is felt caused this writer to want to examine the church in which she had grown up and the conference to which she belonged. How can a black man discriminate against anybody, but particularly his sister, when discrimination is much of what he has known?

The writer used a survey to sample attitudes about women as senior pastors with the laity and clergypersons. The writer’s journals were also used, as well as a sister group that met at varying times during conference meetings. Finally, a forum that was designed to desensitize women and men to the realities that exist in the church and to generate a conversation for the purpose of educating, inspiring and liberating clergywomen with the desire that they would become empowered to empower others. The forum had five modules, besides the opening and closing. The first module aimed at helping the group to understand the spiritual empowerment issue and why it was important. The second module was designed to keep this from becoming a session that put men down. The third module was a dialogue between the presenter and the group. This helped the group to understand their internalized oppression.

⁷ Vashti M. McKenzie, *Not Without a Struggle: Leadership Development for African American Women in Ministry* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996), 119.

⁸ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 27.

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The participants were led in externalizing oppression and internalizing liberation. Internalized oppression was defined by Dr. Carolyn McCrary as the acceptance of the oppressors' understanding of the oppressed, which largely serves the interest of the oppressor and may or may not be based upon truth regarding the oppressed⁹. Module four asked the question Now what? What is needed now that women are being empowered to access equality in pastoral ministry? Finally, Module five was a lively, informative discussion wherein the group used the strategic planning method of *SWOT to analyze* the denomination. It aimed at identifying the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.¹⁰ It helps to understand who we are, what we face and how we can *fix things*. The closing's objective was to motivate and encourage further forums and then to pass the torch on to others so that spiritual empowerment becomes real throughout the conference. The success of the forum depends on getting the right people to do each module. Modules three through five *must* have professional, expert presenters trained in people skills and psychology. Somehow people have to remember how racism is fought and apply the same grit to sexism. It is only when the top leadership in the AMEC becomes involved that real change is possible. Therefore, it is highly recommended that this forum begin in earnest with the bishops of the church. This forum has been utilized in varying forms with its leaders in each of the churches that the writer pastored (each congregation had less than 50 members). However, it has led to better communication and more spiritual leaders who are strengthened to empower. More time should be encouraged in the development of the project and methodology thereby ensuring the success of the project when bringing together theory and research. The urgency of this cannot be minimized.

There are many challenges that face DMin students; but all of them begin with the courage to be oneself. Then they can take advantage of every door that *cracks* and walk through with the confidence in their call and the ability to empower others to be who they were created to be, in whatever genre—woman or man. The DMin program at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, Georgia did this for the writer. There is a need for the development of more precise critical

⁹ Carolyn L. McCrary, "The Wholeness of Women," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* XXV (Spring 1998): 258-294.

¹⁰ Albert S. Humphrey is credited with the strategic planning method of SWOT-ing.

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thinking. Here at ITC the writer was afforded the resources and tools by many scholarly professors who would not allow for failure. The diversity of denomination, faculty and student body at ITC made for a wide range of learning experiences. This is where the writer belongs.

When the writer initially began the journey at ITC in 1972: working toward a Master of Divinity degree, there were approximately 20 females in all of the school of nearly 200. In fact, at that time, the schools were looking for females to attend. Looking back now, it was difficult to even think of being a pastor and so that was never a consideration. Twenty-seven years later, the call became so great it was impossible not to answer. Nevertheless, the same barriers existed for females going into the ministry of pastoring—gender bias being the largest to overcome. The writer was always up for a challenge. The motivation may not have been the most noble, but that would come. Women seemed to have the need to try harder and seeking out a doctorate degree seemed to be the best thing to do. Since the writer was employed by one of the denominational constituents at ITC, this was a natural fit. Taking advantage of this opportunity made more sense than not utilizing the opening. The writer had been a church school teacher, Bible Study leader, Christian Educator and, finally, an assistant pastor under the supervision of the male senior pastor. When you're number two, you must try harder—so the DMin degree was the next step to trying to be a senior pastor.

The womanist program at ITC is second to none. Through the work of Dr. Jacquelyn Grant, Founder and Director of Black Women in Church and Society (BWCS), it was an empowering experience to have access to various womanist resources as well as to one of the founders of womanist theology.¹¹ BWCS was founded in 1981 with the express purpose to encourage and to facilitate the inclusion and full participation of women in the life and work of the Church and the larger society. For nineteen years, Black Women in Ministerial Leadership, which is one component of BWCS, has provided a viable primary paradigm for Black women's leadership, rooted in a commitment to spirituality, morality, equality and justice; as well as funds to strengthen the economic realities of more than 300 women seminarians. It also gave funds to male

¹¹ Jacquelyn Grant, *The Office of Black Women in Church and Society: 2015 Report to the Board of Trustees of the Interdenominational Theological Center* (Atlanta, GA: Black Women in Church and Society, 2015).

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seminarians.¹² Therefore, because of the research and study the writer aspired to, Interdenominational Theological Center was the right and only place to pursue the knowledge and degree needed to compete, so the writer thought. It was the right place to begin the struggle for equality in pastoral ministry, but competing was another thing. So to borrow the words of the late Ted Kennedy: "...the work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives, and the dream shall never die."¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Edward M. Kennedy, "1980 Democratic National Convention" (New York City, New York, August 12, 1980), accessed June 30, 2016, <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/tedkennedy.htm>.

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