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Harriet Jackson Scarupa

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Women in Ministry: Challenging Old Assumptions

6 By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

"God speaks with a feminine voice and with a masculine voice. God speaks to women and to men in their particularity, and in their commonality as well. After all, preaching is the telling, interpretation and application of God's story. It is more than proclamation alone; it is a 'conversation with the crowd' that is consummated when the crowd hears and bears witness to that proclamation. And as long as that crowd includes both women and men, there will be a need for God's story to be proclaimed in ways that embrace the experiences of both genders . . .

"Sometimes the voice of God thunders, and at other times God whispers. If the Creator of the wind and the earthquake and the fire can choose to speak in a 'still small voice,' then that same God can surely give utterance in the voices of women as often as in the voices of men. For God calls daughters and God calls sons . . . to be heralds of the same living Word of truth."

And so Cheryl J. Sanders, an assistant professor of Christian ethics at the Howard University Divinity School, concludes what has been a fact-laden scholarly lecture on "The Woman as Preacher" with a homiletic flourish of her own. The homiletics comes naturally, as does the topic of her lecture, for in addition to being a professor she is an ordained minister in the Church of God.

The next Sunday, dressed in one of the trim business suits she favors, she more formally embraces the preaching role as she delivers a guest sermon before the



pulpit of a large, neoclassic, columned A. M. E. Zion Church in the District of Columbia. Here she uses a Biblical passage about Jesus' encounter at the well with the woman of Samaria to bring home some contemporary truths.

When Jesus' disciples saw him talking to the woman, they made "racist and sexist assumptions" about the encounter, Sanders says, questioning why he would talk to a woman, and one from a different ethnic group at that. "But custom and convention do not make these sentiments right."

Sanders then speaks of how the Samaritan woman had recognized Jesus as the Messiah ("He told me all that I ever did") and how she went out to evangelize her neighbors. Evangelism is the planting of seed so people will seek Jesus for themselves, she says. It is hard work. But there is a joy that comes from sowing and reaping God's harvest. "The harvest is ready, waiting for laborers," she calls out, her gestures getting broader to match the crescendo of her voice. "Where do you stand this morning?"

Another Sunday, across town at Michigan Park Christian Church, a woman wearing a black gown topped by a white stole embellished with two large crosses stands before another congregation and asks some other questions. She is Delores C. Carpenter, an assistant professor of religious education at the Divinity School, and she shares the job of pastor of the well-maintained brick church with her husband, Anthony Carpenter, a military chaplain.

"Where are you this morning?, she asks as she faces the well-dressed parishioners before her. "Where are you in response to the call of God? Are you in hiding? There's no hiding place. Are you on your knees confessing? That's a good beginning. But we must do more. We must move from confession to commitment. Are you curious and just seeking? That's good, but not enough. Where ought we to be? Following

Jesus. Each one of us must answer according to our own lives."

This, in synopsis, closes her sermon and after a choral interlude she next prepares to administer communion.

The sermons at the two Washington churches are not all that different from those heard anywhere in the land on a Sunday morning. What is special is the voice delivering them; that feminine voice of which Sanders spoke in her lecture. Women ministers are not a new phenomenon, true. In 1927, the Congregational Yearbook listed 100 women ministers in full standing, many serving as pastors of local congregations. Within the Black community, there have been women preachers since slavery, most notably in the Pentecostal and Holiness Churches whose adherents' joyous notes of worship have long enlivened many otherwise bleak ghetto landscapes.

What is new in the last decade or so has been the entry of large numbers of women into the ranks of the ordained clergy, women who have received formal theological training. Their entry into what has traditionally been a male domain has been called "one of the most important developments" in the history of American Protestantism. (See "Women of the Cloth: A New Opportunity for the Churches," Harper and Row, 1981.)

"Women of the Cloth" cites statistics showing the increase in the number of women clergy in all religious bodies in the U. S. from 3,276 in 1930 (2.2 percent) to 11,130 (4.2 percent) by 1980. Because these figures include religious traditions which do not ordain women, such as the Roman Catholic Church, they tend to obscure the sharp increase in the proportions of women ministers in major Protestant denominations in recent years. To draw attention to this, "Women of the Cloth" cites data compiled by the National Council of Churches on clergywomen in

individual denominations. Between 1977 and 1981, for instance, women clergy increased by 416 percent (from 18 to 93) in the American Lutherans, by 352 percent (from 94 to 425) in the Episcopal Church and by 312 percent (from 319 to 1,316) in the United Methodist Church, which has the largest number of clergywomen.

Figures from the nation's theological schools, often considered the gatekeepers to the ordained ministry, indicate that women will make up an increasingly larger proportion of ordained ministers in the years ahead. Consider these from the 1984-85 Fact Book on Theological Education published by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada:

□ In 1972, the nation's divinity schools enrolled 3,358 women (10.2 percent of the total) in all degree programs. By 1984, that number had jumped to 14,142, with women accounting for 25 percent of the enrollment.

□ In 1976, women constituted 11.5 percent (2,905) of students in programs leading to the Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees. By 1984, they had become 19.7 percent (5,733) of the total. During that time, the numbers of men enrolled in these programs stood virtually still.

□ In just seven years, between the 1976-77 and 1983-84 academic years, women graduates of Master of Divinity programs increased 168 percent (from 462 to 1,238) while male Master of Divinity graduates rose by only 2.3 percent (from 5,158 to 5,277).

□ As for the enrollment of Black women in divinity schools, while they numbered 92 in 1972 (8.7 percent of the total) by 1984 their numbers had risen to 735 (25.2 percent of the total.) Seemingly startled by its own data, the Fact Book elaborates: "To state the statistic a bit differently, in

11 year interval black men [in seminaries] have increased in number by 125.2 percent; but Black women's numbers have risen by 698.9 percent!"

The situation at the Howard University Divinity School reflects these national trends. In 1972, there were 4 women and 68 men enrolled in the school, with women accounting for a mere 5.5 percent of the total. In the current academic year, women make up 29 percent of the enrollment (52 out of 129).

What's behind all these numbers? Why are more women following the call to the ministry? What does it mean for the women themselves, the church, the society? What are its theological, sociological and psychological reverberations? What does it mean, more specifically, for the Black church and the Black community?

Finally, how are some of these women fairing in a profession that has been so traditionally imbued with a sacredly masculine image? What are their problems, their joys, their hopes? What is the future outlook for the unshackled expression of the feminine voice of God?

Among reasons advanced to explain the increase in the number of women drawn to the ministry are the impact of the feminist movement which has pushed for changes to benefit women throughout society, including the churches, and raised women's consciousness about what they can and cannot do; the passage of federal civil rights legislation and the institution of affirmative action programs which have opened more doors of opportunity to women as well as to racial minorities; the overall increase of women in the work force; the rising educational levels they have attained. . . . But these reasons also could help explain why more women today are drawn to law or medicine or any number of other professions. What is unique to the ministry as a profession is that it involves a call from God.

In the past, with the path to ordination almost completely blocked, women who felt this call tended to channel their response to it through volunteer work in the church, as religious educators or deaconesses or in the helpmate role of minister's wife. But with the changing attitudes in society about women's prescribed roles, it seems only natural more women would be driven to seek full participation in

the life of the church by becoming ordained ministers themselves.

The changes in society with regard to women's expanded roles have dovetailed with another trend which Howard University Divinity School Dean Lawrence N. Jones describes as "a kind of evangelical revival in our society." "Increasing numbers of young people (and others) are having significant personal religious experiences of conversion — some of them dramatic, some not so dramatic — which have led them to question whether or not full-time service in the church is a viable thing for them," he says. "A lot of the involvement of women in ministry has its genesis in this kind of religious experience. Because of these experiences women are pursuing the ministry despite the fact that they are aware the church community as a whole has not been hospitable.

"And I think many of them in the conventional sense have been called to preach. I always speak of this as a strong inner nudging. You feel yourself being pushed all the time and once you kind of make that decision [to pursue the ministry] you are home."

For women, though, making that decision can be stressful.

Delores Carpenter remembers being very troubled between the ages of 14 and 16 as she struggled with her call to the ministry. "I wanted to give my life to God and it was in the process of giving my life to God that I got this feeling, something inside my head saying, 'Preach.' And that was when resistance came because I did not think that would be an appropriate role for me to play. It was as if I were saying, 'No, I can't do this. If I did, no one would listen to me.'" Having one woman tell her it was "the devil" who told her she wanted to preach didn't help.

A woman assistant pastor at Carpenter's church [then St. Paul Free Will Baptist in Baltimore] had a similar vision of Carpenter as minister, the Howard professor says. When this assistant pastor died, Carpenter spoke at her funeral on behalf of the church's youth and it was then and there that she made a commitment to follow through with her calling instead of attempting to resist its pull. "Once I decided it would be all right to be a minister, things began to change for me," she recalls. "I was able to feel better about myself."

Carpenter preached a trial sermon when she was 16, attracting a full house of worshippers drawn by the novelty of witnessing a teenage girl in the pulpit. Two years later she was ordained. Thus began her entry into the ministry, but her formal theological training and the chance to pastor her own church were to come much later.

For others, it was less an incident than a process which served to solidify the decision to seek the ministry.

Mary L. Myers, a former Justice Department lawyer who is now a Master of Divinity student at Howard, describes her call to the ministry as "an unfolding." "I can't tell you I heard a voice out of the sky," she remarks. "I didn't see any words written or anything like that. The decision to seek the ministry came gradually as I saw it unfolding. For me it was more of just following an inner urge for what I knew I was supposed to do."

She, too, initially resisted the call. "I really didn't have any female role models as far as ministry was concerned" she says. "But that wasn't my biggest hang-up. My biggest hang-up was that for a long time I could not conceive of myself as a minister. 'No, Lord,' I thought. 'Maybe somebody else. But not me!'"

That many women, and even more men, cannot envision women in the ministerial role is not surprising given what feminist theologians have called the "patriarchal bias" of traditional Christian theology. As Rosemary Ruether, a leading feminist theologian who formerly taught at Howard, writes in a recent article in *Christianity and Crisis*: "Starting with the basic assumption that the male is the normative human person and, therefore, also the normative image of God, all symbols, from God-language and Christology to church and ministry, are shaped by the pervasive pattern of the male as center, the female as subordinate and auxiliary."

To such theoreticians, not only does traditional Christian theology support the subordination of women in the church, but it actually fosters an attitude of misogyny. [See Ruether's chapter "Is Christianity Misogynist? The Failure of Women's Liberation in the Church" in her book, "Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power," Paulist Press, 1972.]

Feminist theologians cite those who view the Biblical story of the fall of Adam

The Divinity School Response

"The Feminine in Religious Traditions" was the title of a series of four lectures held in the chapel of the Howard University Divinity School last fall.

Featured were Delores S. Williams, a doctoral candidate at Union Theological Seminary, speaking on "The Color of Feminism;" Cheryl J. Sanders, assistant professor of Christian ethics at Howard, on "The Woman as Preacher;" Cheryl Gilkes, assistant professor of sociology at Boston University, on "Women in the Sanctified Church;" and Delores C. Carpenter, assistant professor of religious education at Howard, on "The Professionalization of the Ministry by Women."

The lectures, which were made possible through a special grant from The Links, Inc., will be featured in an upcoming issue of *The Journal of Religious Thought*, published by the school.

"We wanted to make sure that the whole area of women and religion would get scholarly attention which would not be restricted to the mere issues of morality and justice," says Divinity School Dean Lawrence N. Jones in explaining the rationale for the lecture series. "At the school we feel we are a good way along to a consensus that women have as much right in the ministry as males, but we have to move beyond that. So we deliberately shaped the series so it would have its own scholarly integrity. In addition, we wanted to provide a place where young emerging female scholars could have a platform to express their ideas and reflections."

The well-attended lecture series was but a visible example of how the Howard University Divinity School has responded to issues attendant its expanded female constituency.

In a position paper dated August 27, 1980, the school's faculty and administration formally affirmed the legitimacy of the feminine quest for full participation in the life of the church and committed itself as an ally in that quest. "All sons and daughters are of unique and equal worth because of their creation in *imago Dei*, the paper stated. Following from this, it stated:

"The goal of the Howard University Divinity School is to rid itself of sexism, so that a true community may evolve in which equality of persons in word and deed is realized. . . . It is therefore the policy of the Howard University Divinity School that each component of its academic life must address the issue of women and men in community."

The school has introduced courses with a feminine slant — "Women in Ministry" (taught by Carpenter) and "Seminar in Feminist Ethics and Theology" (taught by Sanders.) But it has sought to reflect a sensitivity to the feminine experience not only through such specialized courses but throughout its curriculum as well as in its library resources, lectures, committees, instructional language — and its faculty.

Of the nine full-time faculty members, two are women, Jones notes. That there have never been more women on the full-time faculty than this, he attributes to the facts that only in recent years have women (particularly Black women) been earning advanced degrees in theology and related fields and that women candidates have not always been available for the fields in which the school has had openings. "When vacancies occur," he says, "we've made a conscientious effort to seek out women. In fact, our last two vacancies were filled by women."

Having women on the faculty has been important both in raising the consciousness of the school's men and in providing role models for its women, he points out.

Consider the remarks made by Ray McKissic, a Doctor of Ministry student at Howard, at the conclusion of Sander's lecture on "The Woman as Preacher." "This program proves women are just as capable as men and they have their own contribution to make to the proclamation of the Gospel," he said. "As women progress in the ministry I would like to see increased cooperation between male and female ministers. The doors will open quicker if we who are male ministers will help our sisters."

Those sitting in the pews of the chapel of the Howard University Divinity School found his words especially compelling. For in addition to being a student at the school, McKissic is a Baptist minister (assistant pastor at Second Baptist Church) in a city (Washington, D.C.) whose Baptist churches are generally known for keeping their doors closed to women ministers. □

and Eve as evidence of woman's innate sinfulness and justify woman's subordination as her punishment for causing evil to come into the world. Mary Daly, in her feminist classic, "Beyond God the Father" (Beacon Press, 1973), quotes Tertullian on this point. It was this Latin church father who told women: "You are the devil's gateway. . . . How easily you destroyed man, the image of God. Because of the death which you brought upon us, even the Son of God had to die."

The long tradition of such sentiment, not to mention the very language of Christianity with its "God the Fathers" and "Man of Gods" and "Hims" (which led Daly to contend "women have had the power of *naming* stolen from us"), helps explain the opposition the very *idea* of a woman in the pulpit stirs up in some quarters. "Just the fact that we are standing up there is a contradiction," acknowledges Carpenter. "Just by standing up there we are upsetting things."

Among those who have been most intensely and vociferously opposed to women in the pulpit have been some Black Baptist ministers and this fact, in turn, has led to charges of "Sexism in the Black Church," as a recent *Washington Post* column by Dorothy Gilliam was headlined. Some of these ministers adamantly refuse to ordain women. Some have excommunicated other ministers who have participated in the ordination and installation of women ministers. Some won't even consider inviting a woman to deliver a guest sermon. Some have made disparaging remarks about everything from the commitment to the sexual orientation of women ministers. Some refuse to address a woman who has been ordained with her rightful title, "Reverend," preferring the more condescending, "Sister."

Diane Williams, a 1979 graduate of the Divinity School who was installed last fall as pastor of the small New Genesis Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., believes she may be the only woman pastoring a Baptist Church in the city. "My church happens to be unique," she says. "The decision of the congregation to appoint me was unanimous and I've had no problems. The church I'm in just loves me and the church I came from (Welcome Memorial Baptist Church) is still supportive. But they are exceptions.

"There are a small segment of men [in the Baptist Church] who are supportive and are willing to make a public statement. But, by far, the Baptist Church in this city is still closed to women [as ministers.] For the most part, I have no relationship with the Baptist community of ministers in this city."

Williams says she knows of many women who were raised as Baptists but left to join the Methodists or other denominations that appear more receptive to women ministers. "Staying in the Baptist tradition is just my own stubbornness," she acknowledges. "I don't like being run out of things, told what I can't do. I was determined that if I was going to become a minister I was going to do it in the church I've grown up with. And I like being in the Baptist Church."

Carpenter points out that in the branch of the Baptists in which she grew up, Free Will Baptist, ordination was not closed to women. "It's a stereotype that all Black Baptist churches are against women ministers," she says. Adds Dean Lawrence Jones, "Baptist groupings who oppose ordaining women get the most notice. But the policies of Baptist churches around the country vary so greatly it's hard to make a statement about them that would be applicable in all places and at all times."

When pressed, most who oppose the entry of women into the clergy justify their opposition on scriptural grounds. Typical is the view of the Rev. Carey E. Pointer, pastor of the 600-member Providence Baptist Church in northeast Washington, a former president of the city's Baptist Ministers Conference and a current vice president of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc.

Women should neither be ordained nor licensed as ministers," he insists. "As I see it, the Bible is against it. From the time of the patriarchs and before that man is priest in his own home, the leader in religious affairs. It has nothing to do with equality. All of us are equal before God. It has to do with role assignment by God.

"If God had made it clear that women should preach, then I would spend the rest of my life supporting that position. But that is not their role as assigned. I can give you numerous Scriptures that show women ministers were never intended: e.g., *1 Timothy 2:12-15* ('I permit no

woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor;'); e.g. *1 Corinthians 14:34* ('As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says.').

"And if that's not good enough for you, remember that after Christ ascended on high and left the church in the hands of

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—Delores Carpenter

those he had prepared to carry on his ministry in the world, it happened that Judas Iscariot, the betrayer, committed suicide. That left a vacancy. There were now only 11 men [disciples.] This would have been a *mighty good time* for the early church to select a woman [as a disciple]. Instead of doing that, they cast lots and voted for another man by the name of Matthias . . .

"Now there are some Scriptures that refer to women as being prophetesses and receiving revelation from God. There's a passage which says there will come a time in the later dispensation following the church age that women will indeed be prophesying and filling this role. But that time is not yet."

As far back as 1836, a Black woman, the Rev. Jarena Lee, seemed to be answering such a viewpoint when she observed:

"For as unseemly as it may appear nowadays 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?"

Modern day women ministers, feminist theologians and other supporters of women's full participation in the life of the church use a variety of tactics to confront those who would oppose women in the clergy on scriptural grounds. Some, such as Mary Myers, like to point out that even those who claim to take the Bible literally, in practice, don't. "For those who say the Bible says that women are not supposed to preach, I say, 'Wait a minute. Do you have a church clerk?' They say, 'Yes.' I say, 'Does she read announcements?' And usually they say, 'Yes.' Then I say, 'If you're taking the Bible literally, then *even you* are not doing what the Bible says. The Bible does not say women are not supposed to *preach*; it says women are not supposed to *talk* in church.' And, of course, they never have a response.

"Or I ask, 'What about that line in the Bible about servants being obedient to your masters? [*Colossians 3:22*: "Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not with eyeservice, as menpleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing the Lord."] Do you think we're still supposed to be slaves to white people?' And, of course, they say, 'No.' So I say, 'What's the difference?' And, again, they never can answer."

Another tactic used to affirm the validity of women in ministry involves using Scripture to fight Scripture by drawing attention to those passages in the Bible which do seem to support the full inclusion of women in the life of the church. A favorite is that famous line in Paul's letters to the *Galatians 3:28*: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

But supporters of women in ministry often go beyond looking at individual lines of Scripture, bidding us instead to look at the larger context of the Bible and the culture in which it was written. "If you want to take the point of view that women should not preach and should not have a voice in the church there are texts in the Bible you can find to support that view," acknowledges Sanders. "But if you read the Bible in its entirety, especially if you read the Gospels, and you watch how Jesus related to women and you watch the roles women played in the ministry of Jesus, you cannot sustain that view. In other words, you have to give weight to the whole of Scripture and not one particular text."

Adds Carpenter: "Women were involved in the ministry of Christ, but the recorders frequently left women out or put them in a postscript because the culture that existed during the time of Jesus was very male oriented. Some people have called Mary Magdalene a disciple of Jesus. As you know, it's how you write the story. What I say to people is, 'Look how Jesus treated women. He never put them down. He always brought them in closer. He frequently championed their cause.' So I say, 'Look at what Christ did and he was a feminist through his actions.'"

Such arguments are likely to lead those who tend to interpret the Bible literally to cry hogwash. "We have to take into consideration the fact that these men who wrote the Bible were under the influence of the Holy Spirit," argues Pointer. "If we change the rules of interpretation to suit our whims then we would end up knocking the foundations from under everything the church has been built on all these many years."

The movement of women into the pulpit, in Pointer's view, has no scriptural justification whatsoever, but simply is a response to "what is in vogue at the moment. Becoming a minister is the *in* thing to do now — along with women's liberation."

But many women can't help but wonder if some of the scriptural arguments advanced by the Pointers, et al, aren't just a smokescreen to cover a wide range of fears: fear of change; fear of losing turf; fear that the churches, whose membership is already predominantly female (the estimate for Black churches is 2/3) will take on an indelible public image of femaleness; fear of loss of status for those working in the church — and of loss of membership — if this happens; the fear of some women that the entry of professional women into the church will appear to belittle their traditional contributions as volunteers; the fear of some women that their husbands will find a woman minister *too* attractive; the fear of some men that their wives will find the model of independence a woman minister seems to embody *too* attractive; the fear of some women that having a woman minister will deprive them of a father figure, a role model for their children, even a sex symbol (something few, of course, would admit).

No wonder, as "Women of the Cloth" states, "it has not been easy for churches to pull down barriers to women's ordina-

tion, nor is it easy to offer full acceptance to women in clergy roles once they have been ordained." No wonder the whole issue of women in ministry tends to stir up such a complex caldron of emotions. And probably even more so within the Black community.

For the Black church historically has been the one institution in society in which it has been possible for a Black man to play the dominant role. This is something Black women in-

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- Cheryl Sanders

involved in the church — whether they consider themselves feminists or not — have long recognized. And it helps explain why Black women's concerns about sexism in the Black church have tended to be expressed with more hesitancy, caution and in a more low-key manner than is the case with white feminists, Carpenter believes. It also helps explain why Black women involved in the church have not accepted white feminist theology uncritically, often faulting its adherents for ignoring racism as a key cause of oppression. As Delores S. Williams, a recent speaker in a Divinity School lecture series, writes in an article in *Christianity and Crisis*:

"When Anglo-American feminist theologians advocate transformations in social and religious institutions only on the basis of their gender oppression, these theologians inadvertently reinforce another evil that continues to prevail . . . the evil of white supremacy."

Speaking of the special stance toward feminism taken by many Black women in the church, Carpenter says: "We are sensitive to the repressive structures under

which the Black male has to work. It's not as simple for Black women to say that all their problems are created by [Black] males — because there's always the intersection of racism that must be accounted for. Then, too, so many Black families are headed by women and these women have a strong desire for a male model for their children and to relate to themselves. The church is the place where they've always been able to have that model and I think women feel good about being able to be in a place which makes that possible. While I understand this, I think the day has come when the issue of sexism must be confronted. I think the '80s is that time."

Slowly, painfully, there is some evidence that that process is occurring. Perhaps just recognizing the problem is the first step. Consider the confession made by James H. Cone, a leading proponent of Black liberation theology whose writings have influenced many Black ministers and church activists. In his latest book, "For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church" (Orbis Books, 1984), he writes:

"I regret very much that we black theologians missed a great opportunity by failing to relate the problem of racism to sexism. We were confronted with the issue by the presence of so many women in our churches and so few in leadership positions. We were also confronted with the problems of women in the ministry and the society through the emergence of feminism in the white community. But most black males in the ministry labeled women's liberation as a 'white thing.' I can remember my reluctance to even consider the issue, and I am greatly embarrassed by my silence and by the sexist language of my early works on black theology."

To those who are concerned that if Black women take on the pastoral role they will deprive congregations of strong positive male role models, Sanders has a ready response: "I think the Black churches represent one of the greatest opportunities to have a *community* of role models. In Boston, yes, I was the minister [from 1982-84 at the First Church of God] but there were lay people in my church — males — who were positive role models for young people in that church.

"One of the things I'm concerned with is that we elevate the ministry, especially the one pastor, to a status that perhaps should be shared by other people in the

congregation. It was important to me to debunk the idea of the minister being on a pedestal. Being a minister is not to ascend to some pedestal and spout off some proclamations from God and to cause people to be in a subordinate relationship. It's not that at all. Ministry is orchestration, because it is the body that ministers; it is not the individual who ministers. So there is leadership to be developed within the body. There are positive role models — male and female — in the church whether they are preachers or not."

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Rev. Delores Carpenter

As for whether having more women ministers will lead to "female domination" of the church, Sanders is equally emphatic: "The key is in that word, 'domination,' in the idea that we should pattern our churches according to a model of domination and subordination. We need to rethink that model. What good will it do for women to play the same role, to have a church where the woman is the dominant figure? I'm saying, 'Let's try to think of the church as a ministering body, an inclusive community, where everyone is valued and everyone has a role to play and if there is leadership it is an enabling leadership and not a dominating leadership.'"

Meanwhile, women who have followed the call to the ministry must carefully, sensitively and pragmatically make their way over what is in many ways still an uncharted field. This is especially true for the woman pastor. While she seeks to

Two Who Followed the Call

For Delores C. Carpenter and Cheryl J. Sanders the call to preach came early. For both, the call was strong. Both took a seemingly roundabout path to become the minister-professors they are today. Both seem to have settled into these dual roles with a sense of homecoming. Their stories:

"In the church in which I grew up [St. Paul Free Will Baptist in Baltimore] no one went to seminary as a prelude to ordination," explains Carpenter. "I knew when I went to college [Morgan State] that I wanted to be a minister and even as a college student I was already an assistant pastor of a church and did a lot of ministerial things and preached in a lot of different churches in the area. But no one ever raised the issue of seminary with me."

After her graduation from Morgan in 1966, she did decide to go to seminary, enrolling in Howard's divinity school with the initial idea of working in Christian education and preaching on the side. She was the only woman student in the Master of Divinity program at the time.

"I felt very accepted by the faculty even though it was hard for me to set goals for myself because I didn't have any role models," she recalls. "As far as the students, some accepted me and some didn't. I remember once going away to represent the school at a religious emphasis weekend at a Black college and some of the other students felt it was inappropriate to send a woman to represent them."

Among her classmates was Anthony Carpenter, the man who was to become her husband, and she also remembers that some of the students who questioned why she wanted to be a minister "absolutely couldn't understand why he would want to marry me."

Carpenter, herself, still had doubts about whether she would ever be able to carve out a viable career for herself in pastoral ministry. Following her graduation from Howard, she earned other degrees — M. A. in sociology from Washington University and an Ed.D. in the sociology of education from Rutgers University (which she expects to be awarded early this year). But she always tailored her studies around her interest in religion. Her dissertation, for instance, is on Black women graduates of Master of Divinity programs.

Through the years she held a variety of jobs in counseling, social work, community development and higher education (most recently as an associate dean at Essex Community College in Newark) which were supplemented by continuing work in the church. She frequently assisted her husband in the churches he pastored, an experience that led her to leave the Baptists to join his denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), transferring her ministerial status as well. But assisting began to feel less and less fulfilling and increasingly she felt the call to a pastorate of her own.

In 1982 when her family moved to the Washington area so her husband could serve as a Navy chaplain and she could teach at Howard, she accepted the invitation to fill in as an interim pastor at a Silver Spring, Md., church. And then, last January, both Carpenters were appointed co-pastors of Michigan Park Christian Church in the District of Columbia. (Recently, Delores Carpenter also was appointed chairperson of the board of directors of the division of higher education of the Christian Church.)

Finally, it seems to her, all the threads of her life have come together. "I'm trying to blend teaching and pastoring," Carpenter says. "I can draw upon my ministry as I'm teaching and my teaching when I'm ministering. It feels a regular fit." "The big problem, of course," adds the mother of two, "is time management. But because the church's lay leadership is very good, it's not as demanding on the minister."

Cheryl Sanders is currently on the ministerial staff of the Third Street Church of God in Washington, D.C., a church where her family roots reach deep. Her grandparents on both sides were members. Her parents were married there and are still active in its programs. As a child, she spent many happy hours in the church and in 1975 she preached her trial sermon there, becoming fully ordained by the denomination six years later.

Because the Church of God does ordain women, Sander's decision while in college to seek the ministry was not considered particularly odd. Still, some might consider her path to the ministry oblique. With a bachelor's degree in mathematics from Swarthmore College, she spent eight years (1975-83) working as a mathematical statistician for the Department of Transportation. "I didn't see ministry as being inconsistent with mathematics," she says. "Even when I was in college I had taken only a minimum of religion courses and wasn't too convinced that majoring in religion or going to seminary were necessarily the thing to do in terms of preparing for the ministry. One thing, I wasn't necessarily thinking about full-time ministry. Also, my church does not require seminary for ordination."

But after taking a few evening courses at Howard's divinity school, she changed her mind, opting to become a full-time divinity student, with campus ministry as a possible career goal. She decided to transfer to the Harvard Divinity School and there earned both the Master of Divinity and Doctor of Theology degrees, writing her thesis on "Slavery and Conversion." In 1985, when she received the Doctor of Theology from Harvard, she became the second Black woman to ever earn the degree from the school. (The first, Rena Karefa-Smart, also has taught at Howard.)

"At Harvard, for me the critical identity issue was racial rather than sexual," says Sanders who is married to Alan D. Carswell, a consultant to an accounting firm who is a former assistant director of admissions for the Harvard Business School. "I didn't feel discriminated against as a woman as much as I might have felt that way being Black. It wasn't a question of particular incidents of discrimination from teachers. It was more that in terms of what was taught and what was presented, the Black experience was totally absent. And maybe that's a more insidious type of discrimination than any overt stereotyping of a student. It was a forced assimilation into a very lily white, Western, upper middle class way of studying and experiencing religion."

At the same time, exposure to white feminists at Harvard and reading feminist literature helped her see "how *both* sexism and racism have an impact on Black women and how Black women are in a unique position to be able to identify with both kinds of discrimination and take a stand."

The way she personally has experienced sexism in the church stems primarily from her gut feeling that "generally if I were male and everything else were the same in terms of my education, training, experience and preaching I would have lots more opportunities to be called to pastor than I do." She adds what she calls "a caveat of sorts," namely that she never has actively sought to become a pastor. (She did once accept the interim pastorship of a Boston church.) At this stage of her life, she feels that combining divinity school teaching, leadership in her home church and guest preaching at a variety of churches best meets her needs.

"One thing that happened when I was at Harvard was that I experienced the frustration and dilemma that a lot of my friends who are students felt: that there are many people teaching in seminaries who have no connection with the church, whose orientation is so academic that religion is treated solely as a field of academic study," she reflects. "I felt I would have been much happier if I had had more professors who were pastor-teachers — who were members of churches, who went to church every week, who were involved in the ministry on more than just a teaching level. That became a goal for me: to see if I can combine ministry with teaching in a way that I can relate to my students both as a minister and as a professor. To combine the scholarly with the spiritual is an important concern I have." □

stamp her ministry with her own uniqueness as a human being, she recognizes that many tend to regard her simply as a symbol. While she seeks to meet the special needs of her parishioners who are female, she knows she must be careful not to alienate her parishioners who are male. While she seeks to project an image of femininity, she is cognizant of the need to avoid the "overly emotional" label so frequently paired with that image. When the pastor is a woman even decisions about seemingly minor matters — what to wear,



Rev. Cheryl Sanders

whether to wear makeup and, if so, how much, how to greet a member of the congregation (with a handshake? a kiss? simply a smile?) — take on an added dimension.

One of the prerequisites for coping with all of this and more is to have a good sense of humor, says Carpenter whose pastoral duties at Michigan Park Christian Church include preaching, counseling, conducting services at weddings, funerals and baptisms, visiting the sick, developing, administering and evaluating programs. As she touches on some of her experiences at the church she co-pastors with her husband, she frequently breaks into a smile:

"One of the members once told me, 'Well, it's awfully nice having you here. If you get bored with the sermon, at least you can look at the minister.' And when I

"I don't like being run out of things, told what I can't do. I was determined that if I was going to become a minister I was going to do it in the church I've grown up with. And I like being in the Baptist Church."

—Diane Williams

was being interviewed people asked me how I was going to baptize people. One woman said, 'I assume Rev. Anthony Carpenter will do all the baptisms.' I said, 'No, because he might not always be here' and I told them I was very much looking forward to doing my first baptism by immersion. That created a whole lot of conversation and joking that I'm sure wouldn't have happened with a man, people asking, 'Rev. Carpenter, did you get those boots out yet?', that sort of thing." When she describes what she wears for those baptisms, she can't help laughing about herself. "You could call it a frog suit — a water repellent one-piece rubber thing with feet that you wear under your robe. I will say this: it keeps you very dry."

In a more serious vein, she adds: "I think women as ministers are struggling to be themselves. And what does that mean? Because in many cases women ministers have learned their ministry through men. What part of what you've learned do you keep because it's asexual; it has nothing to do with gender identification? What part do you shed because it is not congruent with your femininity? It's a hard job and I think women ministers are sorting it out.



But I think they are trying to be true to themselves and to be effective at the same time."

This is especially evident as women ministers grapple with the question of "inclusive language," which could be explained as making sure that the words used in relation to God and church and people relate to women as well as to men and that women's experience is considered equally as valid as men's as a subject for theological discourse. "I used to constantly dwell on inclusive language because I did so many Women's Days at churches," Carpenter says. "At this point in my career I want to be free of having to focus on it. I now have inclusive language expressions in my memory tape. The biggest problem, though, is with the pronoun reference to God. I've found I have stopped trying to overcome it [referring to God as 'He' in a second reference] because it detracts somewhat from my thought process.

"Also, as a woman in the pastoral role, I want men to feel included, too, I don't want to just emphasize the feminine to the exclusion of the male. What you're looking for is true inclusiveness. You try to be creative, to be an artist in your sermons. You're con-

stantly struggling with things people can identify with in an inclusive way — images, language, stories. It's a challenge. But it's fun, too."

Sanders would agree. "I'm very conscientious about using inclusive language about people," she says. "It's important to not constantly speak of 'man' and 'mankind' and 'he' and 'his' to the exclusion of women. But when it comes to talking about God, I'm not as conscientious. Sometimes I use inclusive language, and sometimes I don't. It's not as critical an issue for me and I think that's because I make the assumption that God is not exclusively male."

Mary Myers, who has struggled with words as a lawyer and as a journalist (with the Associated Press) and now as a divinity student, adds a cautionary word or two about the whole inclusive language issue: "People who become so locked into thinking, 'Well, I'll just always remember to say 'He/She,' 'God the Father/God the Mother,' sometimes start to exalt once again the form over the substance. But it's the substance we're after. It's what's beneath the words that count.

"That's what gets me with this [the feminist movement in the church] and so many other movements. You have persons who



"I think the situation for women in ministry will become much better than it is now. But I don't think it will be without struggle."

—Mary Myers

have the vocabulary — who say all the right words and phrases — but they're not really about changes within themselves or within other people. But that's the only thing to me that makes a difference. You have to have that personal revolution."

So, what's ahead? Will that personal revolution take place within more and more members of the church community? Will it lead to the unequivocal erasure of long-held beliefs which have served to restrict or block women from full and equal participation in the life of the church? What is the future for women in ministry?

The answer seems to hover somewhere in the vicinity of tempered optimism.

Says Divinity School Dean Lawrence N. Jones: "I think it really is a matter of time and of education and of experience before women will be freely accepted in the ministry. One harbinger is the fact that the Rev. T. J. Jemison of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc., has indicated in several statements that the day of opposing women as ministers in the Baptist Church is fast approaching its end. That's significant for the leader of the largest Black Baptist convention to say that."

Says divinity student Mary Myers: "I think the situation for women in ministry will become much better than it is now.

But I don't think it will be without a struggle. It will be similar to what we have experienced in the civil rights movement. That is, there will be spurts where things will go very well but inevitably there will be some backlash for awhile and then we'll have to regroup and work against that."

Says minister-professor Cheryl Sanders: "I'm very optimistic. I think what has happened is that we have cut ourselves off in the church from a wealth of talent and ability and skills and competence by brainwashing women into thinking that they can't be leaders or they can't be preachers or they can't be teachers. It's not unlike what happened to Black people in America. Blacks were told, 'Well, all you can be is just whatever whites say you can be,' instead of being told, 'Develop to your fullest potential.'

"In the church you have the opportunity to bring people from all walks of life together and to affirm people in their roles and also to present people with the possibility of increasing their potential. It goes beyond the issue of women. It goes to the issue of *people* — how do you make the church a place where people can be nurtured and affirmed and challenged and critiqued and where people can grow, where their color and their gender are not the factors that determine who they are?"

For Cheryl Sanders and Delores Carpenter and Mary Myers and Diane Williams and many others like them there seems no turning back. Even as they struggle to create a style of ministry that truly reflects their beings, even as they struggle for acceptance in the church and in the world, they are sustained by that "something within" which propelled them into the ministry in the first place.

Concluding a Divinity School lecture on "The Professionalization of the Ministry by Women," Delores Carpenter quoted an old gospel hymn to this effect:

"And if you have it, that burning desire
And if you have it, you will never tire
And if you have it, it's the Holy Ghost fire
You ought to let the world know,
There is something within."

By the time she got to "something within," her words were accompanied by soft sounds of "Amen." Feminine voices. Masculine voices. Voices of a New Day. □