From the Pew to the Pulpit - African American Women's Struggle to Gain and Maintain Leadership Positions within the Church

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FROM THE PEW TO THE PULPIT - AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S STRUGGLE TO GAIN AND MAINTAIN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS WITHIN THE CHURCH

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

By

CHARLOTTE B. CHINN
B.S. Capital University, 2001

2014
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE PROJECT PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Charlotte Chinn ENTITLED From the Pew to the Pulpit: African American Women's Struggle to Gain and Maintain Leadership Positions within the Church BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF HUMANITIES.

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis will explore how African-American women adopt a negotiated reading of the Bible and the church in order for reconciliation of their contradictory experiences as ministers. The personal stories of Black women preachers, who were interviewed for this project, will reveal how a negotiated reading allows them to reconcile the sexism within the structure and practices of the Black church with the significance of the church as a site of personal fulfillment and spiritual liberation. In order to explore how African-American women adopted this negotiated reading of the Bible and the Church, this essay will examine the significance of the black church in the African-American community, the background of the Baptist denomination, the role of women in the church as well as the theoretical framework of womanist theology. The key to womanist theology is their emphasis and commitment to the survival and wholeness of the entire community.
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I.  INTRODUCTION

“...nor is there male or female for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28 NLT

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophesy.” Joel 2:28 NLT

“If a 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.” — Jarena Lee

The church, while an anchor in the African-American community, is also a source of frustration for black women who aspire to move beyond the pew into positions of leadership. Men, who are typically the leaders of the church, have continued to lead from a patriarchal viewpoint that refuses to accept that woman can be their equal in all aspects of the church, including the pulpit. This patriarchal system put in place by the dominant society that uses it to justify their own racism continues to be perpetrated by the black men it was intended to be used against, who do not see the contradictions of not welcoming women into the ministry. Despite this fact, women continue to work side by side with the very men who refuse to acknowledge them as equals. It is true that women have many roles and are often able to make decisions regarding certain aspects within the church except for one area: the pulpit. Despite this non-acceptance, women have not allowed this to deter them from pursuing their calling as preachers. The women highlighted in this thesis used references from the Bible such as the ones listed above as
proof that not only did they receive the calling to preach but they have a right to fulfill that calling.

While it is true that women have made progress towards receiving ordination in recent years, there remains reluctance from some male clergy to ordain and there still remains a lack of support from fellow women and family members who are hesitant to see women in the pulpit. Of the denominations within the black churches, the Baptist has been the most reluctant to embrace women in the pulpit. Yet despite these obstacles, women still embrace the church while at the same time seek new ways to reread the biblical text that has been used against them. What keeps them from giving up completely on the church and their calling? This thesis will explore how African-American women adopt a negotiated reading of the Bible and the church in order for reconciliation of their contradictory experiences as ministers. The personal stories of Black women preachers will reveal how a negotiated reading allows them to reconcile the sexism within the structure and practices of the Black church with the significance of the church as a site of personal fulfillment and spiritual liberation. In order to explore how African-American women adopted this negotiated reading of the Bible and the Church, this thesis will examine the significance of the black church in the African-American community, the background of the Baptist denomination, the role of women in the church as well as the theoretical framework of womanist theology. The key to womanist theology is its emphasis and commitment to the survival and wholeness of the entire community. Womanist theology stresses the importance of working with not against men
in order to help the whole community. Part of the survival for black women involves confronting issues such as sexism that tend to separate the community.

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

The church plays a crucial role in the lives of African-Americans in general and African-American women in particular. For African-American women, the church provides a place to form “valuable community networks that foster mutual support, nurture individual gifts and validate individual identities” (Frederick 4). Unfortunately, the same church that has been a refuge for women has also been a roadblock for progress. Why do women continue to stay in churches where the clergy continue to view them as unequal and promote sexism by their silence? To answer this question, it is important to examine the significance of the church within the African-American community. The church is more than a religious institution; not only is it a place of spiritual renewal it is also “the most powerful institution of racial self-help in the African-American community” (Higginbotham 1). C. Eric Lincoln, in his book The Black Church in the African-American Experience cautions us not to overlook the fact that “many aspects of black cultural practices and some major social institutions such as schools, banks and insurance companies, have religious origins; they were birthed and nurtured in the womb of the Black Church” (7). In addition, many of the black institutions of higher learning have Baptist origins and maintain Baptist affiliations such as Benedict College in South Carolina and Morehouse College in Atlanta.
From the time of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, the church served as an agent where men and women work together to defeat racism and poverty. It was where men and women worked together to combat social injustices. It was a gathering place for participation in activities denied by laws that were enacted to prevent access to public places such as parks, restaurants and libraries. Every large meeting from “political rallies, clubwomen’s conferences and school graduations were held at the church and was the one space that was truly accessible for the black community” (Higginbotham 7). The church is a mediating force for the black community. That is, the church stood “between individual blacks...and the state with its racially alienating institutions” (Higginbotham 9). The church was a sanctuary against discrimination and social inequities and met both the spiritual needs of the community, as well as encouraged political and social activism. It is for these reasons that the church has a significant place within the black community as a place for strength and empowerment.

The focus of this thesis project is on Baptist women preachers, therefore it is important to understand the history of the Baptist Church. The first independent black Baptist congregation was organized during the last half of the eighteenth century at a time “when blacks were struggling to carve out a religious space in the midst of the southern plantations that defined their lives as slaves” (Lincoln 20). Although, before the 19th century, it was not uncommon for African-Americans and whites to worship together, nor was it uncommon for black ministers to pastor white Baptist churches or black churches to have white pastors. Because the black Baptists were not permitted to form
associations of their own, they sought and were given permission to join with “existing white Baptist organizations” (Lincoln 20).

However, as tensions between blacks and whites grew over issues of slavery, there was a split between the northern and southern Baptists around 1845. This split was a “protest against unequal and restrictive treatment” (Lincoln 25) though not because of a disagreement in doctrine. Separating from the northern Baptist and the white Baptist churches was made easier because of Baptist polity (Lincoln 25). In other words, contrary to the Methodist denomination, each local church is an independent group of churches that can join together to form conventions and associations. The earliest all black association to form was the Providence Association. This Association organized in 1834 in Ohio and was very active in the Underground Railroad (Lincoln 29).

The National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc. (NBC), which operates apart from the white Northern Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention, was formed in 1880 and is now known as the “largest and most representative sample of the black church going population” (Higginbotham 6). The main purpose of the NBC was to create a forum where black people could voice the spiritual, political and economic concerns they faced. The convention leaders equated “racial self-determination with black denominational hegemony” (Higginbotham 6). In addition, the NBC was active in speaking out against racial violence and held campaigns against segregation in public accommodations and discrimination in the armed services, education and places of employment (Lincoln 30). The African-American Baptist denomination represents the
largest attempt to “counter the debilitating intent and effects of American racial
exclusivism and thus their story broadly characterizes the black church and black
community” (Higginbotham 6). While it is true that by the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century most denominations established their own community racial self-help
institutions, it was the Baptist church where this philosophy originated.

The National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA) was formed in 1915 as a
result of a split within the NBC. The NBCA is the second largest of the three black
Baptists conventions. The Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) is the
smallest of the three National Baptist Convention (Lincoln 37). It was formed in 1961 as
a result of conflict within the NBC, USA. The PNBC was actively involved in the “civil
rights movement, supportive of the black power movement and was one of the earliest
groups to publicly oppose the war in Vietnam” (37). Its recent involvement has included
black political development, economic development, education and job training as well
as strengthening the black family (37).

Even though the National Baptist Convention is the largest black Baptist
denomination, it still does not recognize the ordination of women at the level of national
policy (Williams 160). Instead, they leave the ordination of women to local churches and
associations. NBC has not reported any women pastors of churches except for three
women who took over churches after their husbands died unexpectedly (Lincoln 44). The
attitude of ordination of women varies depending on the church or association. For
example, The Baptist Ministers Conference of Baltimore has admitted a number of

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women pastors to its membership since 1979 (Lincoln 44). However, the conference in Washington, D.C. cut off ties with the Baltimore Conference because of their action of ordaining women (44). In Ohio, there are several Baptist churches that ordain women and others that are strongly against the practice. On the other hand, the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), which is the third largest black denomination, is more open in their policies about ordaining women. Because Baptist churches operate independently and each church and pastor cannot be challenged by a denominational authority, it has been helpful for women to obtain clergy positions. It should not be implied, therefore, that all Baptist churches disapprove of the ordination of women as preachers.

III. THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

What role or roles did women play within the church? Women’s roles within the church were determined not by the willingness of men to share leadership roles but by their own willingness to create spaces where they could express their voices. Women learned how to “move beyond the problem and limitations of the church, not because the church is perfect; for them their faith is real; complicated but real” (Frederick 4). For the most part, black Baptist men recognized the importance of women’s support within the church particularly as it related to fighting racial issues, developing self-help and self-reliance programs. However, their “male-based traditions and rules sought to mute women’s voices and accentuate their subordinate states” (Higginbotham 3).
The black church adopted society’s definition of and Scriptural references such as 1 Corinthians 14:34-35: “the women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak” (English Standard Version 1 Cor. 14.34-35) as justification for the positions women could maintain in the church. These positions assigned to women limited their involvement in the important decision making within the church (“Black Women in the Church” 141) and promoted the belief that women should be kept quiet. This is contrary to the roles of African-American women before coming to America. In African culture, women were “priestesses, queens, midwives, storytellers and were as prominent as men in the conduct of religious affairs” (Lincoln 277). Black male church leaders “adopted and instituted the patriarchal order of the white church and its reading of the Bible” (An End to this Strife 107). However, they failed to see the “contradiction between white Christian’s attitude towards blacks and their own attitudes towards black women” (An End to this Strife 163). Men sought to retain the manhood rights that were often denied them by the racist society in which they lived.

During slavery, black men were not able to serve as protectors of women and children as white men were able to. However, according to Jacqueline Grant, a womanist theologian, it was only natural that “the post-emancipated black man would view it as a primary importance the reclaiming of their property - their women and children” (Black Theology 325). The racism Black men faced in society diminished their authority outside the church walls. Grant further argues that the black man’s acceptance of the patriarchal model is both logical and to be expected (Black Theology 323). This is problematic in
that the same patriarchal views the black man found troubling were the same ones they were willing to accept when it came to the subject of women’s rights. Unfortunately, by adopting these patriarchal views, they did not recognize they were offering women separate and unequal status (Higginbotham 3). As Grant argues, “how can a white society characterized by black enslavement, colonialism and imperialism provide for a normative conception of women for black society?” (Black Theology 325) As long as women remain in roles assigned them they do not “threaten to remove power over the organizational structure of the church from the men’s hands” (Haywood 73). However, when they express a desire to preach they are now “crossing the gender divide and that was not a role men were willing to give up readily” (Haywood 74). Women’s preaching undermined the authority of the man because it “brought with it the authority and public visibility generally associated with masculinity” (73). However, until black men in the church deal with the patriarchal views they have adopted, women’s voices will continue to remain silenced and unbalanced.

Research into the distribution of the work within the Black church reveals most women worked in positions behind the scenes, such as the kitchen, Sunday school teachers, secretaries, cooks or cleaners; these roles were typically considered caretaker roles. Grant notes that Black women have continued to be considered “the backbone of the church” (Black Women in the Church 141). This identification as “the backbone” may sound like a compliment, but the label actually implies that women should be relegated to the back of the church and into the background. Although in the church,
African-American women's voices were often muted, they refused to be silent and submissive or view themselves as "fragile or helpless, in the way that the larger society portrayed white women" (McKenzie 30). In fact, they saw their role not as one that was separate from men but rather as allies with them (30). Therefore, women sought to "develop their own voice and pursue their own interests" (Higginbotham 8). They began to form their own organizations such as the Women's Convention. The Women's Convention was formed as an auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention to give women a voice. Women governed and created their own agenda by challenging "many of the real and symbolic barriers that white Americans as well as black men sought to impose upon them in the church and larger society" (8). Nannie Helen Burroughs, the organization's second president, was able to open a school in order to educate African-American women and girls to become self-sufficient and self-reliant.

Women learned to negotiate and "fashion important and necessary roles for themselves" (Gilkes 129). In addition to carving out their own roles, they also had to overcome the gender and racial stereotypes. During slavery, black women were seen as cheap labor and breeders. Overcoming such stereotypes as Mammy, the nurturing black woman for white women's children, and Jezebel, the oversexed black woman, was difficult because black women's self-image had suffered damage. Black women sought to combat these stereotypes by becoming the "ideal black woman [who] embodied the genteel behavior of the cult of true womanhood, as espoused by the larger society" (Carlson 61). The Cult of True Womanhood for a black woman stressed morality and
keeping of the home in addition to the education of her children. However, unlike the larger society, black women did not believe that they should confine themselves to the home or the private sphere. Black women encouraged each other to participate in the women’s clubs because they played an “important role in helping the race, particularly in improving education for blacks” (Carlson 63). It was important that black women were educated and their intellect was applauded by the black community. A black woman’s sphere could encompass both the private and public domains without causing her stature as a true woman to be jeopardized. She could conform to the larger society’s role of being a lady, modest, pious and domesticated, yet she could also appeal to her African cultural roots, remaining intelligent, outspoken and an activist.

While it is true women have made progress in becoming ordained at different times during the history of the black church, those who do receive ordination are often merely tolerated. In other words, they are not encouraged, nor do they receive the same benefits of mentorship as their male counterparts. In addition, they continue to face opposition not only from men but black women as well. Some women, according to Bishop Vashti McKenzie in her book Not Without a Struggle, feel men are the only ones who can direct their spiritual development and will be “attentive and responsive to them in a crisis” (36). Others believe their “ear” is trained to hear only a male voice preaching or do not want women in the pulpit simply because it represents a change in tradition (McKenzie 36). Finally, others believe women are not able to “preach a weekly schedule as well as manage a pastorate and a family without either one suffering” (McKenzie 35).
McKenzie, who herself made history by becoming the first female Bishop in 2000, counters this argument by suggesting that if a male pastor had major surgery, another minister would carry the weight of the congregation until the pastor returned (35). McKenzie insists the fight continues for women to gain and keep positions within the church.

As women continue to fight these barriers they also struggle with an experience that the preacher and civil rights leader Dr. Prathia Hall likens to “being perpetually pregnant” (Fry Brown 4.). Hall compares women’s struggle to preach to a birthing room filled with women waiting to deliver the word for which they were called to speak. Women who are stifled or otherwise prevented from proclaiming the word they believe God has called them to preach, begin to lead a life that is void of purpose. On the other hand, there are others who will “negotiate the pain of giving birth at times without prenatal care or midwives” (Fry Brown n.p.) In other words, they find creative ways to live out their ministry without waiting for the approval of their peers. The reluctance to granting women leadership roles in the church does not have any theological or biblical basis and continues to hinder the progress of women leading from the pulpit.

IV. WOMEN PIONEERS WHO PREACHED DESPITE BEING DENIED ORDINATION

Although the complete history of Black women as preachers and evangelists remains unknown, recent discoveries of spiritual autobiographies reveal Black women have been preaching and evangelizing in the United States since the early 1700s. Women faced oppression in two forms when it pertained to preaching. First, women were often
denied ordination. As Bishop Vashti McKenzie states, earlier women responded to their
calling “without official ordination and were often unlicensed and ignored or
unrecognized by their denomination” (34). During the early period of the Black Church,
these women defied the words of men, and instead showed their “commitment and
dedication in ministry without official recognition, title or ordained status” (McKenzie
32). They continued preaching whether they were invited to a pulpit or not because of
the strong conviction that God had called them to preach. Each of the women learned to
use Scriptures to justify their calling, such as Joel 2:28: “After this I shall pour out my
spirit on all mankind/your sons and your daughters will prophesy” (New International
Version Joel 2:28). In addition to using Scriptures to defend their right to preach, they
also used them to refute both “gender and racial ideologies that suggested women should
not and could not preach or work in a capacity outside of domestic church positions”
(Haywood 14). Even though being ordained was considered a legitimate recognition of
one’s calling, these women refused to allow the lack of support from their male
counterparts to hinder them from doing what they considered God’s work. Their choices
were to start their own independent churches or be forced to accept secondary leadership
roles (McKenzie 34). Furthermore, even when women announced their calling, they were
questioned as to the authenticity of that calling. The women highlighted below represent
a bravery and willingness to preach, despite attempts by men to silence them or question
their calling from God, as well as a history of defining their place and resisting their
limited roles within the church.
Jarena Lee was born a free woman in Cape May, New Jersey and began preaching during the late 1700s. She was the "second black woman of historical record known to preach" (Williams 163). Lee felt that despite "doctrinal rules and regulations prohibiting her from preaching, her purpose was more than just to hold prayer meetings and teach Sunday school" (Haywood 3). In her memoirs Lee recalls receiving the call but also understanding there would be those who would question her call. She recounts hearing a voice telling her "Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends" (qtd. in Williams 163). She expressed her calling to Richard Allen, who would later become the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) and was told "our discipline knew nothing at all about it – it did not call for women preaching" (qtd. in Williams 164). Lee countered by using the example of Mary Magdalene in the Bible who was instructed by Jesus to tell the disciples about His Resurrection. While Mary may not have "expounded on a text," she did proclaim the good news that is fundamental to all Christian belief: the Resurrection of Christ. Additionally, Lee argued, the fishermen, who later became apostles, did not have a formal education, yet their preaching of the gospel is accepted without question. Even though Allen acknowledged Lee’s call by giving her permission to hold prayer meetings, he never officially ordained her to preach. Despite Allen’s lack of support, Lee continued preaching firmly believing that her call was not from man but instead was a mandate from God. She would eventually be the second woman to be ordained as an elder in the AME denomination.
Julia Foote, a member of the AME Zion Church, was born in 1823 in Schenectady, New York (Williams 168). She too ignored the popular viewpoint of the day that women were to be silent and not speak in public. In addition, she ignored doubts from her family, including her husband, who tried to discourage her from preaching because of their objection to women preaching (Haywood 73). To justify their opposition to her preaching they were adamant that “the Bible supported and substantiated any protests against women preaching” (Haywood 73). Just as her male counterparts used Scripture to refute her ability to preach she countered with Scriptures to solidify her position. She cited the Joel prophecy quoted in Acts 2 and Galatians 3:28 as well as reclaiming the voices of women in the Bible who held leadership positions. These women included Phillip the evangelist’s four daughters who were prophetesses (King James Version Acts 21.8-9), Priscilla who Paul called his helper or fellow laborer and Phoebe was referred to as a minister (King James Version Romans 16:1-3). For Foote, the Galatians Scripture stressing that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (King James Version Gal. 3.28) put an end to the debate about whether or not women were called to preach. Foote was adamant that women should be allowed to preach and encouraged other women to “not let what man may say or do, keep you from doing the will of the Lord or using the gifts you have for the good of others” (Williams 170). Foote recalls in her memoir of being asked to produce credentials during a sermon. The requirement stated that in order to authenticate her calling, she would be required to
perform a miracle. Foote argued that if women were required to produce these credentials in order to preach, then the brethren should also be required to do the same (McKenzie 56). Despite doubts about her calling, Foote continued to preach while traveling through the Mid-Atlantic States and New England.

Amanda Berry Smith was born in 1837 in Long Green, Maryland. Like her counterparts, Smith preached without receiving ordination from male clergy. Smith was adamant that “her ordination was by God and that humankind did not need to affirm what had already been done” (McKenzie 33). Like Lee, Smith faced reluctance to being ordained. Several bishops within the AME denomination were convinced that Smith was “blessed with the Spirit of God” and were willing to invite her to preach at various congregations. (Chatelain 41). Unfortunately, these invitations did not bring appointments to any local churches as a pastor nor did she receive the right to be ordained. Smith went overseas to England to spend two years working with churches in that area. Smith then went to India for almost two years before going to Africa where she spent eight years doing missionary work. Upon returning to the United States, Smith moved to Chicago. Her concerns for children led her to open the Amanda Smith Orphanage & Industrial Home for Abandoned Destitute Colored Children (Chatelain 41). Smith was celebrated by middle class and elite women’s circles, both African American and Caucasian. They saw her as “a model of piety and service” (42). Praise for her efforts came from noted activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who stated “Everybody knows how Amanda Smith has taken care of the waifs and strays of the Negro race” (Chatelain
Smith was able to negotiate her gender identity working in the orphanage, which showed her nurturing capacity, yet at the same time created a space for her to manage the running of a business, which was considered a masculine position. Additionally, her religious background served as a role of humility and piety, yet she also demonstrated strength that helped her to sustain the orphanage despite lack of education and resources (Chatelain 42). Smith’s work reflected her belief that despite efforts to restrain her from receiving ordination, she believed her calling was from God and therefore she was not required to answer to man.

Maria Stewart began preaching in 1832 and began incorporating political-religious oratory and activism during a time when it was deemed inappropriate for women to do so. During this time period, women did not speak in public, especially regarding issues dealing with politics or civil rights. Not to be deterred, Stewart spoke out, feeling she was an “instrument in God’s hands” (Williams 165-66). Arguments against her speaking in public included using what is referred to as the Pauline passages. These passages refer to the Scriptures in which Paul is supposedly exhorting women to keep silent and not speak in public. However, Stewart countered with examples of women in the Bible, such as Deborah who was a judge in Israel (New International Version Judges 4.4-9), Queen Esther who saved the lives of the Jews (Kings James Version Esther 5), and finally Mary Magdalene who was first to proclaim the resurrection of Christ (New International Version John 20:18). Stewart was believed to be the first black female preacher to lecture in defense of women’s rights. Her controversial
speeches were meant to encourage women to speak out against the issue of slavery that was prominent in the south. She called on black women to “develop their highest intellectual capacities to enter all spheres of the life to the mind” (Stewart xiv). Stewart felt women should participate in all activities including religion, education, politics and business “without apology to motions of female subservience” (Stewart xiv). Stewart’s willingness to speak out, despite it being considered unconventional, places her in the “forefront of a black female activist and literary tradition only now beginning to be acknowledged” (Stewart xiv). Women began to shift the focus of their message from one that dealt with only religious conversations to one of combating social injustices.

Women’s participation in activism continued with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement. By the turn of the 20th century, black women were responsible for organizing local and national clubs to fight for women’s rights and the elimination of the Jim Crow laws. With the experience of living in a society that oppressed black women, activists “used their knowledge and experience to challenge the racist and sexist traditions that circumscribed their lives” (Crawford 13). The church played a crucial role in the development of the civil rights movement. It served not only as a meeting place but as a recruitment tool to obtain volunteers for the movement. As with the church, women formed a large portion of the participants within the movement. Women made the decision to join the movement mainly because of their religious beliefs. Their faith “in the Lord made it easier to have faith in the possibility of social change” (Payne 6). Joining the movement was not an easy decision. Many black women lost their jobs,
were victims of violent threats and harassments or were evicted from their homes for participating in the movement (Crawford 14). They began their organizing efforts by community building and self-sufficiency efforts to “free blacks from the severe economic dependency on whites” (Crawford 14). One of their efforts was the establishment of cooperatives. Cooperatives were based on the idea that if poor people could pick cotton and clean for white people, they could learn to make things with their hands (Crawford 15). Women learned to sew and sell their products to the local outlet store. For black women who were used to being harassed and threatened with the loss of their jobs, having their own jobs provided them with a sense of “pride and self-empowerment, as well as, a sense of positive self-esteem” (Crawford 15).

Even though black women played a major role in the Civil Rights Movement, just as with women preachers, very little is documented. Instead the focus is on the male black clergy who served as officers of the organizations, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Leadership Christian Association (SCLC). Women took on roles such as “leaders, organizers and strategists who helped to mode and shape the direction the movement should take” (Crawford 13). Unfortunately, as with black women preachers, “the minister’s sexism and authoritarian views of leadership prevented women from assuming command of any of the movement organizations” (Standley 184). However, women exercised considerable influence “both formally and informally as spontaneous leaders and dedicated participants” (Standley 184). Many of the historical narratives about the Civil Rights Movement protests give credit to the black ministers, yet these
protests were often initiated by women. For example it is Martin Luther King, Jr. who is credited with having started the Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, it was Jo Ann Robinson and the Women’s Political Council, a women’s group she headed, that started the boycott (Standley 184). Additionally, black women did not accept the “halfway measures towards eradicating Jim Crow practices” (184). It was the courage of these women who made up the majority of the minister’s congregations and their consistent and constant “pressure that forced the ministers and the other movement associations to persist in the face of white opposition to their demands” (185). Again, despite being excluded from organized leadership positions women refused to allow the lack of a title to discourage them from continuing to fight against the injustices that would benefit not only them, but the black community as a whole.

The black women who worked as activists fought for the oppression of racism, sexism and classism. Their desire was to move from a state of oppression to one of liberation. Their leadership abilities were again stifled or pushed to the background, which was perceived as their proper place, but they refused to accept that the “debilitating, oppressive structures of patriarchy and sexism” could hold them back (“A Source for doing Womanist Theology” 40). Women who preached, as well as those who fought in the civil rights movement wanted one thing: true liberation for the African American community as a whole. Women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights worker and vice chairperson of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, understood that God could not be separated from the notion of true freedom. They also understood
that until black men of the church acknowledged that oppression extends beyond racial issues to also include gender, true liberation and unity could not be obtained.

V. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WOMANIST THEOLOGY

Noted theologian, James Cone states that the goal of black liberation theology is to “analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of the oppressed black people...bestowing on them the power to break the chains of oppression” (Guy-Sheftall 324). The focus of black theology is to liberate the black community from the oppression of racism. Unfortunately, black men often seek to “liberate themselves from racial stereotypes and the condition of oppression without giving due attention to the stereotypes of oppression against women” (Guy-Sheftall 324). Racism and sexism are interrelated, yet oftentimes, black theologians focus on the issue of racism without addressing sexism. Sexism is a form of oppression that black women have suffered from white males as well as black males. According to bell hooks:

No other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or a present part of the larger group 'women' in this culture ...

When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black men; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on white women. (qtd. in King 45)

As Jacqueline Grant states, black theology must ensure its message reflects the true message of liberation: “If the liberation of women is not proclaimed, the church’s proclamation cannot be about divine liberation; if the church does not share in the
liberation struggle of black women, its liberation struggle is not authentic” (Black Theology 325). In other words, the church must do its own self-test to see if its message reflects the actions. If women are denied or hindered from achieving positions of leadership, true liberation is not taking place. For example, in the early nineteenth century, Rev. Richard Allen felt it was unjust when blacks were relegated to the balcony and restricted to a special time to pray but saw no injustice in preventing women from moving from the pews to the pulpit. Black liberation “cannot treat black women as if they are invisible on the outside looking in” (Black Theology 331). In order to deal with all issues of oppression, Black clergy must begin to include sexism when it speaks of oppression.

Women recognized there was a need to “re-think Christian theology and biblical interpretation in order to reorient Christianity to be a true force of liberations in an oppressive world” (Collier-Thomas 7). Thus, it was important to “fight to overcome social structures that perpetuate evil in the form of mass oppression” (8). While women are still willing to stand next to men in the fight for racism, they realize men must acknowledge their role in supporting sexism and realize that in order for women to experience a sense of liberation black men will have to commit to the advancement of black women.

As women begin the task of rethinking the message of the Gospel, they must, as Katie Canon, a womanist theologian, states, explore issues such as “discouraging realities-discrimination, racism, few role models and mentors, isolation, competing
personal and career demands, and shifting social norms and expectations” (Floyd-Thomas 135). These roles originally defined for them by society, both within their own community as well as the dominant society, are now being questioned as women begin to speak for themselves. The goal is to redefine themselves in terms of these roles. As part of re-evaluating the Gospel, they look at the roles assigned to them by their family as well as the dominant society, including “the persistent stereotypes about black women, the combination of race with gender and recognition of diversity among women” (Mitchem 23). This is an empowering experience for women as they begin to act as agents on their own behalf by “setting new orbits, creating new fusions, conjuring new possibilities” (Floyd-Thomas 130). By giving this theology a name, Black women give themselves power; power to rename and define and redefine the world in which they live (Floyd-Thomas 130).

Womanism is part of that shift where Black women refuse to look to others for their liberation and instead look to themselves and do more; as Audre Lorde states, they “dismantle the master’s house, they build a house of their own” (qtd. in Floyd-Thomas 2). With the changing mindset, in terms of looking at their own experiences, women “could bear truth to their own surroundings and situations” (3). This has brought about a new epistemology, which womanists define as the “unction to search for truth, interrogating the foundations upon which truth is established and reimagining truth in a world that denies its existence” (3). This new epistemology for black women is an important part in the process of naming and redefining themselves.
The emergence of the term womanist was first coined in 1985 by Alice Walker in her desire to provide a definition that could be used by women of color to delineate themselves from the white feminist movement. "Womanism appears to provide an avenue to foster stronger relationships between black women and black men" (Collins 11). In other words, "womanist theologians want to maintain the connection to black men and remain faithful to the church traditions" (Coleman 6). They need a space to begin to name their experiences and "reflect theologically and ethically on concerns that affect them" (Johnson 198). Womanists differentiate their theology with black male theologians and white feminism. Black male theologians discuss the black experience on the basis of men and boys without discussing the oppression of black women. On the other hand, white feminists often view the personal as political as a cause for sexual inequality. Yet they tend to limit this to the self-interests of white women, failing to take into consideration racial disparities. Black women see and experience the multiple issues of race and sex. As bell hooks states, "racism is not an issue simply because white women activists are individually racist. They represent a small percentage of women in this society. They could have all been anti-racist from the outset but eliminating racism would still need to be a central feminist issue" (131). Furthermore, hooks states that racism is a feminist issue because of its interconnectedness to sexist oppression (131). However, along with many second wave feminists' "assumption that the family is by definition patriarchal, the privileging of an individualistic worldview, and the advocacy of female separatism" (King 304) are not in line with the goals of black women and thus
they do not fully embrace the idea of feminism. This does not mean, however, that black women reject feminism or that they are not single-mindedly committed to some of the agenda that made up the women’s liberation movement (King 304).

Womanism denotes a woman who is “independent, determined to be her own woman-person, to be her own mouthpiece and therefore to speak her mind” (Burrow 162). Womanist theologians challenge issues in society that prevent women from leading the full lives intended by God and seek answers by exploring “the rigor of experiences of African-American women and the diversities found within black womanhood and the larger African-American community” (Townes 196). They view the Gospel as a message of liberation for all who are oppressed. The best way to begin this journey is by embracing a new form of theology that fosters the true meaning of the Gospel: liberation for all. Therefore, womanist theology is the “courage to think theologically, independently of white men and women and African-American men” (McKenzie 57). This courage is necessary and often difficult as Black women begin to confront the issues that continue to keep them from stepping outside the confines of the patriarchal system that perpetuates a theology that stifles their voices.

The power of womanist theology allows Black women the ability to name and define how “it ought to be as a womanist way of being in the world.” (Floyd-Thomas 131). According to Grant, womanist theology constructs a world free of oppression of any form (Black Women in the Church 142) Grant further contends that a “holistic approach is needed; the various prisons that have been built for us and which are
perpetuated to hold us must be destroyed” (142). As black women construct a world free of oppression, they develop a holistic approach to theology. They understand that “God exists in places where the word of God is not necessarily mentioned” (Johnson 201). In other words, they reject the idea that there is a difference between the sacred and the day to day living. They are capable of feeling God’s presence during everyday chores as well as when they attend Sunday services.

VI. RECONSTRUCTING AND NEGOTIATING THE TEXT
As womanist theologians reflect on the theological issues that concern them they agree that the use of the Bible in a white, male-dominated society has reinforced the oppression of women as well as condoned other forms of oppression such as slavery. They also agree that the hindrances of their voices being heard stems from the “misrepresentation and misuse of Scripture” (McKenzie ix). Often the understanding of the biblical text and Christianity has been shaped by how it has been interpreted. In order to embrace the Bible as life-giving, healing and authentic, it is important to rescue it “from the misuse and misinterpretation that has disadvantaged faithful followers of Christ, especially women” (Dube 215). Womanist theologians must “search for the voices, actions, opinions, experience and faith of women whose names sometimes slip into the male-centered rendering of history” (Williams n.p.). While women have always interpreted the Bible, it is often “within theological or spiritual frameworks articulated by men” (Fiorenza 20).
Womanist theologians acknowledge that staying in a patriarchal-church that continues to rob people of their “dignity, hope, self-worth, and God-given creativity is a struggle to maintain spiritual freedom against violence, ignorance, poverty, greed, exploitation, domination and control” (Dube 214). According to Renita Weems, a theologian, women preachers need to have a critical awareness of how the Bible is used against them. Once this awareness is created, they can reject “antagonistic readings that denied them their own definitions of subjectivity” (qtd. in Haywood 79). They must seek ways of liberation from these oppressive beliefs and seek new ways of viewing the Scriptures in order to deconstruct the text. Deconstructing the text argues that what the Bible says is “no more than what patriarchal scholarship would have it say” (Rutledge 3). Therefore women must begin to “develop alternative sources and/or interpretations of sources” (Grant 3). Weems suggests women should learn to “read and hear texts for themselves, with their own eyes and ears in spite of the voices surrounding them that try to dissuade them” (Brown 6) from making their own interpretations. Thus a feminist or womanist biblical interpretation requires several approaches that help women accomplish this reading and hearing for themselves.

The first approach, called “story linking,” is used by Anne Wimberly, a Biblical scholar. Wimberly suggests this approach as a way to resurrect and give new life to the marginalized voices that have been buried by the dominant society (Howell 87). Using their “women-centered imagination to explain upon the biblical texts,” women begin to name unnamed women in the Bible (Gilkes 113) who have not been highlighted.
Unearthing women whose stories are silenced creates a “fertile ground for a critical feminist reading, particularly given our expanded historical imagination of women’s lives during this period of time” (Howell 89). For example, feminist readers question the possibility that the audience Jesus preached to not only included men but women as well.

Typological (gyn)esis is another approach of re-reading the text. In other words, black women preachers “refer to the bible for visible women figures to establish a genesis or a beginning point that locates women as either preachers or active participants in ministries” (Haywood 81). For example, using the scripture quoted in Joel 2:28-29 (cited earlier), women establish a beginning point from which they can dismiss the gender-restrictive viewpoint and confirm that God intended for both men and women to preach. Additionally, women use this approach to seek Biblical women who played a role in the ministry of Jesus. Reviewing the Four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) one notes that the texts reflect the culture at that time, which tended to “devalue women and the feminine” (Haywood 81). However, the roles of women “still managed to come out through the words of Jesus Christ” (84). As noted earlier, Mary Magdalene was the first after Jesus’ resurrection to declare the good news to the disciples. Additionally, Jesus first reveals He is the coming Messiah to the woman of Samaria (King James Version John 4). She was considered a social outcast because of her lifestyle and during that time, Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other; notwithstanding the fact he was a man and she was a woman. Both examples support readings of the Biblical text that argue Jesus “trusted in women’s ability to effectively carry out his mission” (84). These
stories of women in the Bible contradict the belief that women were silent and they “establish women’s roles in biblical history, thus giving women preacher’s precedents from which to claim authority to carry out their obligation to God” (85).

Whatever approach is used in the re-reading of the biblical text, it is important to note that traditional readings of the Bible have concealed rather than revealed the vitality of women’s roles within the community (Howell 88). Therefore, womanist theologians must reconstruct their previous belief system in order to formulate a new understanding of the text. Part of the reconstruction involves “tearing down a formidable edifice that has been built over an extensive number of years” (Thomas 42).

The women highlighted below were participants in this thesis’ creative project and they represent women preachers of the twenty-first century. They too have faced opposition to and questions regarding the authenticity of their calling. They have each learned to re-read the Biblical text in order to confront those who oppose their calling. They stand on the womanist theology that true liberation does not include sexism as a form of oppression.

VII. STORIES FROM THE PULPIT: AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN PREACHERS TELL THEIR STORY

The purpose of the creative project, entitled “Stories from the Pulpit,” is to highlight African-American Baptist women preachers who describe their journey to gain their positions as clergy. In exploring how women adopt a negotiated reading of the church and the Bible, it was my hope that this project would reveal how Black women have learned to “accept some of the generated meanings and reject others” as well as
learn to “mediate between the truths” in order to develop their own sense of fulfillment (Collier-Thomas 79). By interviewing and exploring what keeps these women in the church, I wanted a clearer understanding of my own calling to the ministry. Like the women profiled in the early church history, I witnessed resistance from male clergy and some women who do not accept that women are called to preach and was unsure I wanted to pursue this journey. Like the women I interviewed, the church was a foundation in my life. Many of my friendships were established at church. I was a member of the Sunday school as well as a choir member. It would be difficult to abandon the church altogether, although I did stop attending an organized established place of worship for several years. I never abandoned my spiritual faith and was comforted by the words that God is present in places where the Word of God is not mentioned (Johnson 201). Like the women I interviewed as well as the women highlighted earlier, I love what the church represents in my life, but I do not love the contradictions that have been established. If I were going to embark on this journey, I want to know how these women survive. What keeps them going? Like the women pioneers before me, much of my struggle is linked to my awareness of the sexism that still exists within the church, the sexism I am afraid I may face if I become a minister. Thus, this project will not only contribute to the existing scholarship on Black women in the church, but also serve as a source of personal empowerment as I come to terms with how Black women ministers have negotiated their conflicting experiences within the church.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research methodology was the best method for this project. A questionnaire was administered to five of the women preachers who agreed to participate in the project. The questionnaires were sent in advance of the interview to allow participants time to prepare. Using the questionnaires helped to create a framework for the women to begin telling their stories. An unstructured interview process worked for this project because it created a safe, creative space for women whose stories and experiences have for too long been deemed to be of little or no importance (Thomas 37). Drawing upon the experiences of other researchers, a set of pre-determined questions was used (Appendix A) to “prompt self reflection about their aspirations, relationships and experiences” (Gatenby and Humphries 93). Because I was aware of the sensitive nature of the topic, I wanted to ensure the women that I was a trustworthy confidant. Each participant was guaranteed confidentiality during the entire process and was given the opportunity to review a draft of their story.

In her article “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm,” Dr. Linda Thomas challenges us to ask “How might we see the world differently if we acknowledge and value the experiences and thoughts of those who have been excluded?” (Thomas 43). I am aware of the importance of the stories of Black women ministers within the history of the Black church and the future of Black women within the church. I was careful to give these women’s stories the care they deserved. During my interview process, I was aware that although each of the women interviewed
came from various socioeconomic statuses and were at various phases of our careers, we had a common bond in that we were all African-American and women. I knew that “sharing certain identities was not enough to presume an insider status” (Few et. 207). Therefore, I did not want to assume I would be granted insider status. I was also aware of my own bias and subjectivity that I brought to the interview process. As an African-American woman, however, I found myself relating to the stories the women told about their experiences in the church.

The method of interviewing provided an opportunity for the women to tell their stories since “Stories and storytelling which are rooted in the oral traditions are the cornerstones of qualitative research” (Banks-Wallace 410). Stories help us to “answer questions about the meaning of life in general and of our lives in particular” (411). In this case, each of the women who told their stories was able to answer my questions about how they were able to negotiate between a sexist environment and their calling to the ministry. Their stories not only provided an outlet for them to express their frustrations but a window for me to understand the strength they possessed to endure in the ministry.

My use of ethnographic and conscious-raising methodologies required a willingness to listen carefully as a subjective researcher. I entrust the women’s stories to the reader with the hope that “truths will emerge, transformations will take place and readers will learn from those not usually given voice” (Thomas 40). Shining the light on these women “provides a model for today’s women and reveals that even in the face of
the most oppressive obstacles, women leaders have been powerful forces to reckon” (Collier-Thomas 8).

**DATA COLLECTION**

For this project, I relied on the gatekeepers, such as friends and colleagues who knew the women I was trying to reach. In addition, using the snowball effect, I relied on referrals from those who suggested I could contact so and so. The ages of the women ranged from 23-62. They were all college educated. Two of the women grew up in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. A total of 15 women were contacted through phone calls and emails. I received positive responses from five of the women. Most did not respond. One woman said she had already told her story and did not want to retell it as she was working on writing a book. Another woman stated she would have to ask her pastor. When I gave her some of the questions I would ask, she mentioned she did not face sexism within her church. I questioned why she had to obtain permission and her response was that all issues go through him (referring to her Pastor).

The questionnaire contained 24 questions and each participant was given the same set of questions. The exceptions were questions that did not apply to the women who were not Baptist. The questions were developed to obtain responses about women’s experiences growing up in the church and how those experiences influenced their decision to both stay in the church as well as answer their call to preach. The questionnaires were emailed to the five women two days in advance of the scheduled
interview to allow time for preparation. Interviews were conducted both over the phone and in person. Each participant was informed that the initial process would take no longer than two hours. However, each of the women was willing to talk and all except the interview with AG lasted more than an hour.

The questions were semi-open ended and served as a guideline for further exploration of the topic. Once the interviews were completed, the notes were compiled into story format and each participant was emailed a copy to revise. There were advantages and disadvantages to this approach. The main advantage was to ensure accuracy of the stories. The main disadvantage was that several of the women changed their minds about including some of the information they initially discussed. Because they were very open about their experiences during the initial discussion and shared information they had second thoughts about during the review of their work, they may have felt that while they were critical of the issues, like the women of the civil rights era who “criticized the male activists for their condescending attitude towards women [they] did not hold them responsible for their sexism“(Standley 198). This silence could imply that even though they are sure in their calling, they are unsure in the treatment they will receive from their male or other female counterparts.
SUMMARY

The interviews proved that women continue to fight for their place in leadership positions. Like the earlier pioneers, the women interviewed for this project were confident in their calling. This did not mean they were not discouraged, or even frustrated; however, they refused to let it deter them from doing what they adamantly believed God called them to do: preach. There were several common themes among the women.

The first theme was the male pastor’s response to the women who expressed a desire to preach. For example, K and DG both received the call and upon discussing it with their pastors were discouraged. K’s pastor’s response was to encourage her to go into teaching. DG’s pastor “gave her work to do.” Although CM did not receive opposition from her Pastor (who also happened to be her husband), he did suggest that her calling was that of a Prophetess. She seemed to accept this word from a man who was so sure of her calling as opposed to her own belief that she was called to preach.

Another theme was the struggle the women had with others accepting their initial call to preach. K discussed how difficult it was to have her father-in-law and her husband question the authenticity of her calling to preach. As with the women of the early church, men had a difficult time accepting their calling and expressed a reluctance to ordain them. ABG was disturbed by the fact that the most educated pastors go along with the idea that women should not preach simply because it is tradition. They agree despite having studied the theological concept of the Biblical text. Additionally, K discussed
being called to various churches only for Women’s Day events. This mediocre acceptance of her ability as a preacher does not stop her from accepting invitations but is a source of frustration.

The third theme was the conviction of the women who were called to preach. They were adamant that they had been called even if no one would accept that calling. They discussed how they learned to re-read the text for themselves in terms of how the Scriptures speak to them as women. These women received confidence from their calling to speak out against the sexism that existed. DG refused to accept the job as a Christian Education teacher because she was firm in her belief that she was called to preach. Each woman brought a womanist perspective to help in her reconciliation of the contradictions she faced within the church. For example, DG discusses how she reviews the Bible from a black female lens.

I was disheartened because several of the women appeared to placate to the men by almost excusing their behavior. For example, CM said that her husband allowed her to teach when that was not her initial calling. It also seemed as if he doubted her calling and instead of her being upset with him, she pointed to God stating He (God) was using her husband to teach her a lesson of independence. I found myself becoming frustrated that CM did not have enough confidence in her calling to allow her husband to place her as a prophetess. Did he feel threatened because she was actually a pastor? Was his chauvinistic attitude coming forth with this move? It was discouraging that although many of the churches asked her to preach, it was initially as a women’s day speaker, thus
marginalizing her voice

I was also surprised that the women did not form bonds with each other through mentoring groups. Most of the women preferred to meet one-on-one with women of their own choosing. In order to break the cycle of creating spaces inside of churches that are slow to dissolve the sexist ideologies, women must begin to create their own spaces where they are free to discuss their issues and provide mentorship for each other. I found that while more women are becoming ordained, they still have to choose between doing what they are called to do and respecting or following the authority of the man who leads the church. None of the women interviewed have started their own church. While one of the women is involved in a church where there are many women ministers, their function within the church is limited; in other words, they are not the leaders of that church.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Women are the backbone of the church and the backbone of the movement to uplift their community. Perhaps while men meant for women to remain in the background, they have shown that they actually have a backbone. They are willing to face opposition from their families, from their church and from their own peers in order to advance the ideals they strongly believe in. Whether it was the call of God to preach or the call of the Civil Rights Movement to eradicate from their community the evils of the Jim Crow laws, women have shown tremendous courage in the face of adversity. It is doubtful that women will leave the church, the foundational support system of their lives,
but they have learned to negotiate a space for themselves. They can still remain in the church but create for themselves spaces that allow them to utilize the gifts they believe God has given them. Because their faith is strong alongside their understanding of themselves as women, they believe their call from God does not need validation from men. How do they negotiate between the Church that has always been such a part of their lives and their call to ministry? They do so by realizing that their gifts are not determined or denied by men, but rather by God. They realize that despite man’s objection to their calling, they have a duty and obligation to God to use their gifts to preach the gospel. Seeking permission from men is second nature to answering the call. They realize in their re-reading of the biblical text that true liberation does not include oppression of any form, racial, gender or otherwise. Women preachers despite their initial disappointment continue to march on in the face of opposition from men. They must not forget the importance of telling their own histories and experiences. This legacy will help those who wish to answer the call but are afraid of the opposition from those who continue to want them to remain in the pews.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Name	 Age
1. Name of church where you pastor/minister
2. Tell me about your early religious experiences
3. **(For those who are not Baptist)** Where you ever in the Baptist denomination? What made you leave?
4. How has your early religious experiences influenced the way you currently think about the church?
5. How do you think the religious beliefs and practices you had while growing up influenced how you felt about your call to the ministry?
6. Did your religious training or your experience of worship suggest anything to you about what your role in the church should be?
7. Were there any factors that caused you to change your beliefs about women’s role in the ministry?
8. Have you ever doubted your religious beliefs? If so, what made you feel doubtful? What effect do you think questioning these beliefs had in the long run?
9. How do you think your present religious beliefs and practices influence how you feel about yourself as a minister/pastor?
10. The church and/or the Bible speak about women in various roles. Did these beliefs have an influence on your willingness to declare your call to the ministry?
11. Do your church teachings include restrictions on women in the ministry? How do you feel about that?
12. What is your personal opinion of women in church leadership positions such as ministers? Does it differ from your church stance? If so, how?
13. Have you ever felt that your religion didn't treat women the same way as men? If so, what was your reaction?
14. Is the role of women in your religion/congregation currently an issue for you? If so, in what way, and what is your response?
15. Do any church activities focus on women’s issues? Are you a part of these activities? If no activities focus on women’s issues, what are some areas of focus you would like to see emphasized?
16. How do you deal with the contradictions of the church teachings that minimize women’s roles within the church?
17. How do you negotiate between your love for the Church and the teachings that oftentimes do not include women in leadership positions?
18. Have you ever been tempted to leave the church? What kept you from leaving?
19. Which church duties are women/men currently in charge of?
20. Do you feel that women within your religion/congregation have control over the direction of the church? If so, how is this accomplished?
21. Are there any groups that you belong to that help mentor you as a woman preacher?
22. What women would you consider to be influential in your life? Why?
23. Are there any Biblical women that you relate to or that inspire you?
24. If you had to teach a group of girls about women in the ministry, what words of encouragement would you offer?
APPENDIX B

STORIES FROM THE PULPIT: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN TELL THEIR STORIES

Five women tell their experiences with coming to grips with accepting their calling in a church environment that is slow to recognize women in the ministry.
I have always been the lone girl hanging with the guys. I dated and eventually married a pastor’s son and so I have spent a lot of time around my father-in-law’s preacher friends. Every now and then, we would be at dinner after a revival with my father-in-law with some of those friends and they would make comments about women—right there with me sitting at the table. And they were okay with it—and expected me to be. I remember a lady in our church who, though she never called herself a preacher, had a powerful spirit, and was always able to proclaim a word when called on. She finally left the church.

It was spring 1997. I was delivering a keynote address during a staff retreat at Sinclair; everything was flowing and I remember saying to myself “you spoke well today” and very clearly, I heard God say, “No, you preached today.” I definitely ignored it. Called me to preach. Really? I am the daughter in law of the pastor of one of the largest black churches in the city – are you kidding me, God? But the nudging, the urging, the burning wouldn’t let up and finally, I told the pastor, my father-in-law. As I look back, I think he knew then, but his comment was “I don’t need any more preachers, I need some teachers.” And I responded saying that any good preacher ought to be a good teacher. I continued to share and we talked about school. I had been thinking about
doing a master’s program in organizational development. He then told me, “You need to
go to seminary.” I smiled, but this was just the first of numerous debates and
conversations about whether God called women to preach. And then there was his son,
my husband. He was struggling as well; raised Baptist all his life; heard that women
don’t preach all his life and he just wasn’t sure.

And so on the advice of my pastor, I enrolled in Payne Theological Seminary in
the fall of 1997. Seminary was a watershed experience for me; Payne pushed me and
made me contemplate my faith. It challenged my ideas through countless discussions
systematic, liberation and womanist theology. It was difficult but was powerful and it
gave me my voice. It validated me in ways I could not ever have imagined.

There was never a time that I doubted my calling to preach the gospel. There are
some things that you just know. The call on my life was like that—a knowing. God
called and I accepted. It was everyone else who found my decision difficult. I am in
seminary on my father-in-law’s advice and he was still raising issues like “why weren’t
there any female disciples?” Which there were. He would ask me questions to make
sure I was sharp. To make sure when I needed to answer, I would know what to say. He
wasn’t condescending about women preaching but he wasn’t convinced that women
belonged in the ministry.

It was in the early morning of January 1, 2000. I had flipped on the TV after
coming home from watch night service…couldn’t sleep. T.D. Jakes was on. I heard him
say stop trying to convince people who called you. Stop arguing about it and be who He
called you to be. I immediately shut off the television, processing what God had just spoken to me through the man of God. I realized it was not my job to convince my pastor father-in-law or anyone else, including my husband, to accept my calling. I didn’t have to continue to debate with my father-in-law as he offered me suggestions about how to name this calling (exhorter, speaker, etc.). It was not something else, the call was to preach and from that moment, I told God He would have to work this. I knew I needed to stop trying to convince my husband. God would have to work things out for both of them, just like God had worked it out in me.

It was 2002 and I was preparing to graduate from the master of divinity program at Payne. I was preparing to preach my senior sermon. My father-in-law announced it at church that Sunday and to my surprise, two church vans full of people came. And my pastor, my father-in-law was right there in the front row, along with my husband.

Tradition is a powerful tool; it can give life to religious experience, but it can also kill the same. My father-in-law struggled with my call because of his traditional Baptist upbringing and it was a few more years before he fully embraced my call to ministry. The week he died, he ran into my husband and talked to him about our ministry. He talked to me as well and shared that he wasn’t sure that our church could handle the ministry that I was going to have because it was going to be much bigger than anything I could imagine.

I have spent much time reflecting on those early years, those experiences that really prepared me for ministry, those experiences that taught me patience and
compassion while at the same time fueling the fire to do ministry—fully. I remember sitting in the middle section, second row for 12 years, watching men go back and forth, in and out of the pulpit, watching my pastor not use me, but using men who often had less passion, less preparation and less power. I was preaching everywhere else but at my home church. Every now and then my pastor would show up when I preached elsewhere. He allowed me to preach at home a few times, under the guise of it being a special message, black history month, women’s day. Somehow I know he was trying, but I didn’t want special treatment, a special opportunity. I just wanted to do what God had called me to do.

The pastor we had right after my father-in-law died wanted to give me a license but the church leadership would not allow him to do so. However, in a final act of defiance before he left in 2010, he licensed me. In the time our church was without a pastor, I had to conduct the worship service which was not ideal for many of the members, but there were no other options. Even though the church had other associates, there were a number of times when the start time for service arrived that there was no one in the pulpit but me. God is pretty funny! The deacons and others would have meetings and discussions about “sitting me down” or question whether or not the license was valid. People began to see that God had gifted me, whether they liked it or not. And as they saw that there had also been a humbling as well as a gifting in my spirit, the majority of the congregation was won over. And by the time the leadership tried to call a meeting with the church to discuss the issue of women in ministry, they couldn’t make it happen.
The preaching ministry is still a difficult vocation for women. My first preaching experiences were in Methodist churches and while they embrace women, these women still have the smallest churches and do not advance like the men do. As male preachers and pastors have done more critical, in-depth study of the various texts, a number have changed their positions on women and ministry and I have had the opportunity to preach at some Baptist churches as well as non-denominational churches.

I have preached at my home church a number of times. One of the members who did have an issue said they did not believe women should preach until they heard me. At one of the Methodist churches, as people were leaving this man walked up to me and said “Did you say you was Baptist?” I said yes. He said “But…Baptists… don’t have women preachers…” I responded to him “Well sir, many churches embrace women preachers and some don’t.” I smiled, shook his hand and walked away.

This experience has been like Joseph in the pit one day and in the palace the next, but the adversity has made me the person I am. As a matter of fact, one of the deacons who got up and walked out when I was licensed is one of my best supporters now as is my husband. The turmoil was for my good.

My church did not teach on women in the Bible. By the time I announced my calling, the only woman who made an announcement about her calling had left. There were times I felt like leaving, and even though I knew what the doctrine of our church was and that was not how things were done, I felt God saying to sit still. So, I may have wanted to leave, but I had to be obedient to God.
When asked how I negotiate between my love for the Church and the teachings that oftentimes do not include women in leadership positions; my response is that I wish I knew the answer, because I love my church; I wouldn’t be anywhere else. I am always having conversations with church members who have questions about women preaching or women in leadership. “Should you really be preaching like that?” Meaning I preach in the same style that many men use and in light of that, it’s sometimes a bit too much for some folks. It is difficult for women to find their voices, to find God “in the soprano” so to speak. God speaks through us, His vessels, so women have to be careful that they don’t take on masculine tendencies in the preaching moment because that’s what they think is expected. Whatever your voice is, you have to find it within yourself. This generation of women in ministry understand more than ever that preaching is ministry, not just a Sunday morning “tune and a hoop” but it is the proclamation of a living Christ to a dying world. And that happens every day of the week. Although many of us pattern ourselves after preachers we like, we have to take the time to find out how God wants to speak through us. For me, substance is critical in the preaching moment. There must be a substantive unpacking of the text, one that peels back the layers like an onion, showing the eternal, powerful, loving nature of the God we serve. I’m a lover of words and phrases, but these must never become more important than the congregation seeing God when I preach.

Preachers are still the owners and proprietors of their own boys club...changes in that tradition will mean that men will have to change their language, change their
posture, and change their assumptions. Until then, women will always be in the margin. In the margins, where lack of knowledge abounds. Simple things like pulpit etiquette, how you walk into a church and know where to go and what to do. Is my blouse too low or my skirt too short? Pants can still be an issue. Can a woman preacher simply walk into the pastor’s office? We can never assume that we can sit in the pulpit or assume we are part of the preaching crew.

I am a part of an organization for women in ministry, the IMWA (Interdenominational Ministerial Women’s Alliance) that brings women together across denominational lines to affect change in the community. However, what is still missing is women preachers coming together for each other. It’s about developing relationships and we have to be alright that we are not part of the boys club. I am thinking of inviting women to dinner. Just to come together in a sharing and supportive role for each other. It’s important to have someone help you preach from the pew. Every young woman needs to have an older woman to mentor her. Our experience as women in this ministry is unique and even if you have a supportive pastor as I now do, who fully embraces women in ministry, there are some things he cannot share but it is not his experience.

If I had to teach a group of girls about women in the ministry, my words of encouragement would be from an author named Gary Zukov, who would talk about “one thing I know for sure…” We must know for sure that God has called us. It is important to hear God and not allow the noise of the world to distract us. It is critical that we as women we embrace what God is doing in us but also take every opportunity to develop
our preaching skills. Even though I was gifted at speaking, I still needed to hone my skills. This is not just motivational speaking; this is preaching the living word of a living God and holding the lives of the people you preach to--in your hands.
Prophetess CM

Age 62

In the structured church

Joshua Christian Ministries Inc.

Dayton, Ohio

I grew up in the AME church. We were active in the church. The AME church is known for its structure and it takes on the form of the US government. My home church was in the 13th Episcopal District of the United States. I grew up working in the youth department and served as officer. My parents were active and held district positions; my father was the President of the lay organizations and my Mother was a past President of the West Tennessee District Missionary Society. She became a life missionary member of the general church. I grew up in a denomination where women were active; however, I am not certain if they were active in the pastoral or governmental role.

I think my early religious experiences were foundational to my family; we were active in church so from a biblical worldview, I was having a religious experience without a relationship with Christ. As a black professional, I aspired to attain the American dream; good job, marriage, family and church. Because my church was my role model, I became active in the church without any biblical understanding of redemption, salvation, or justification. In the organized AME church, the church discipline was the rule of order and in many cases, as the Bible says, the tradition of men made the word null and void. So my religious experience was the foundation for my
moral beliefs and it gave me a moral compass by which to navigate life beginning in college. Also, there were certain things I just would not do. My religious beliefs growing up did not have anything to do with my call to ministry.

My motivation from within was that I wanted to be an independent, free woman having grown up in Memphis, TN during the Civil Rights era. I grew up knowing education was the key to freedom; I was there when King died. My motivation to be an independent free woman also came from witnessing how my mother’s sisters were being exploited by men. I decided I did not want to depend on a man. When I finished college, I got married and my marriage was rocky, infidelity, lies, etc. and so in my home my esteem had been crushed. I sought my worth and significance in my career. I began the upward career move on the fast track. It seemed that I was always in the right place at the right time for promotions. My path led me through municipal government, nonprofit management and then juvenile justice professions.

I would say the pivotal moment that led to my calling was when I was at the apex of my career. My marriage situation led to misplaced priorities and I was driven by ambition and overachieving and it led to poor decision making in my job that caused me to lose my job. It played out in the media. My career was everything. It was who I was. I felt I had lost everything. One day, I wanted to medicate and not think about my loss when I had an experience with God at that moment. It started my journey to a relationship with Christ. I left the AME and went to a spirit led church and I began studying God’s Word and there was an awakening within. I heard God talk to me and I
was ordained a minister. There was no opposition to my ordination because this was a non-denominational church.

I began ministering one on one with people who were hurting, especially women. I would give them biblical principles that would help them. I grew in my relationship with God and my husband also became a pastor in 2000. We started Joshua Ministries in September of 2000. In the last couple of years, we have operated using the five-fold ministry gifts under apostolic order.

My husband grew up a chauvinist. However, I had enough wisdom from the Word of God to know that I had been called as a woman. The greatest attribute I could have is humility and God was dealing with me especially in the issues of independence. My husband allowed me to teach and then the more he heard me the more he knew I had a calling as a prophetess and that’s what he anointed me to be. (The pastor role was an extension of my husband as his helpmeet in ministry. The Prophetess role is speaking forward a word of wisdom or knowledge from God about the present or future.)

I realize I am more of a teacher. When I teach, I look at the Hebrew text and what the implications are for what the word means to us today. I flow in the prophetic – which means that God may give me a Word he wants said during the process of my teaching that agrees with His written word.

My religious training steered me to teaching. I learned public speaking skills very early on. These were disciplines I learned that contributed to my ministry today. Because we had female Presiding Elders in the AME and later on a female bishop, I never had a
notion about women not being in a pulpit. I experienced a different view of women’s roles when I first went to speak at Baptist churches. They would not let me stand in the pulpit. Despite this, I have never doubted my religious beliefs. Growing up, we had women in the pulpit in the AME church, so I did not feel that women were treated any different than men until I visited Baptist churches.

The greatest Scripture that speaks to me about the role of women is in Galatians where Paul speaks that in the church there is neither male nor female in Christ. In Acts, it says God made all nations one by the blood of Jesus, and finally the one in Joel; so I knew that Jesus came to set the women free. I am happy that my husband has come a long way and there are no restrictions about women’s roles in the ministry today.

Our church focuses a lot on women’s issues. We teach God’s heart in real time, even if it’s as simple as unbelief, poor relationships, guilt, and dating. We believe our mandate is racial reconciliation. I would like to see the empowerment of women emphasized. The empowerment piece allows their mind to be renewed. The frame of reference is based on your experiences and then you can see yourself as God see yourself. He created woman equal with man but each has a role. We were created to walk in our destiny. God is gender neutral.

I would like to see women having knowledge and understanding of their roles and how they can impact life issues such as abortion which is contributing to black genocide. It is affecting the population growth of the black community. I would also like to see women teaching biblical principles to live by; I believe women are unstoppable, even if it
is to be the Ambassador for life you have to stay focused so you can fulfill that purpose.

I negotiate between my love for the Church and the teaching that sometimes do not include women by realizing that the church became a pathway of liberation of women and all from slavery. We become so engrossed in the social issues that we have lost focus on the Biblical world view and principles that truly liberates you.

There were several women who have mentored me either directly or indirectly. For example, Dr. Jerrie McGill who has since died was my Dean of Students at College. I watched her life over the years. She was instrumental in grooming me. I have had mentors from afar. The advice I would give those women thinking of going into the ministry is to search the Scriptures. If you feel that inner prompting to become a minister purpose it with passion even at the cost of being rejected because God does not make a mistake. In Romans it tells us that whosoever you yield yourself to; that is whose servant you are. You have to purpose to be servants of the true and living God.
I grew up in the Baptist church and joined with my sisters at age 8. In fact, we got baptized together. My early religious experiences heavily influenced the way I think about church. They formed me with an imbedded theology. We were formed by the people, sights and sounds of the church. I was involved in church as an usher, in the choir and in the Guild girls.

My religious beliefs and practices I had while growing up influence how I felt about my call to the ministry. It took me a long time to figure out what my call was because of how the teaching in the church discouraged women from aspiring to be preachers. When I felt like I was called at 18; I knew I was called but I did not know what that meant. I was in the National Baptist and no one was helping me think about what that meant. I never saw any women that were in ministry because we only fellowshipped with those churches who belonged to The National Baptist (Convention). There were women who were the heads of the missionary department, but it was not talked about in the same way.

When I told my pastor that I had been called, he did not say anything, he just gave me “work to do.” I did everything in that church because he knew there was a call on my life. He understood my value in every aspect but the ministry; it was as if he
knew how to keep me from verbalizing the actual call. In spite of everything, I learned so many other things by being involved in other aspects of the church. However, it left me wondering what I was supposed to be doing, when you don’t have anyone helping you out, you are left wondering the whole time: “ok God what am I supposed to be doing?” There was one lady that I worked with at a local youth center in Dayton and when she asked me why I wasn’t preaching, I said because women aren’t preachers. She could not convince me any differently. I was so grounded in what I had been taught. I did not realize I had not been taught to be open to the Spirit of God.

My religious training and my experience of worship taught me women’s roles did not involve being in the pulpit. I only saw men, deacons (all men), in the pulpit, and women were only allowed to do certain things. It was even in their constitution that “no women shall be honored or say that she is a preacher or get into the pulpit.” As time went on, they had to take out the honored part. I thought about the seminary but there was one lady I knew who had been trained in the seminary. However, I think she was reluctant to talk to me because she did not want me to experience what she went through.

I changed my beliefs about women’s roles in ministry once I went to seminary. In my first year, I did not really understand the meaning of my calling; I thought maybe it was being a Christian Education Director, in my mind that was what they (the church) would let me do. At the seminary there were teachers who helped me to formulate the idea that it is okay to say that God called women into the ministry. I could not take it because of my engrained theology. I thought that if I just went cut and got a regular job
that I could say I was doing ministry at my job. I kept doing that but I kept thinking maybe I should go to seminary. Finally, in 2005, I went to Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta. I studied the Constitution while I was there. Seminary is tough. You are supposed to struggle with what they are telling you at seminary against what you have been taught. The struggle then becomes your liberation theology not your embedded theology. I came back after I received my Master’s Degree because a pastor here told me he would make me the Christian Education Director. However, I told him there was a call on my life to the ministry. He belonged to the National Baptist Convention and said no, he would not be able to accept my call to the ministry.

I am licensed but not ordained. I am currently in the process of becoming ordained. Ordination gives validation for entities so when someone is looking for a preacher to fill their pulpit they are looking for people who are ordained.

The struggle to accept women preachers continues within my church. The new pastor wanted me to be the Christian Education Director, but the people in the church felt someone older was needed. So the pastor put me as the Christian Education Director over the young people. A year later he offered me the title of Director over the young people. Typically, this position is a Youth Minister. I thought about it and said I would not do that. I started visiting churches, I was not going to sit in the back and act like I don’t have what I have (a call on my life). I realize it’s not me it’s the church.
The whole time I was at the church I was doubtful about my religious beliefs. We never talked about women such as Mary Magdalene being the first one Jesus told to go tell His disciples He was alive. Nor did we talk about Deborah. I never heard them, even when I did read it, it didn’t faze me because no one had enlightened that part of the scripture for me. It was always from a male perspective. I learned that women could read from their perspective, it gave me new meaning.

I am the Youth Pastor at my current church. At my old church, they do not acknowledge my title. They still call me Ms. D. The first time the pastor said Minister D, there was a gasp in the church. In our conversation he explained it was not his belief that women should not be in the pulpit but it was the teaching of the church. My mother is very supportive, my one sister had trouble at first accepting me as a Minister, because she did not agree with women being ministers, but she is always supportive.

Initially, I was reading about the role of women through different lens. There are a number of books out there, but we don’t read them. Many times the readings are of the same people such as T.D. Jakes instead of reading books by Black feminists such as bell hooks. When you start talking the Bible from a womanist perspective and from a black perspective, people shut down, they are all about the western idea of theology.

As far as women’s issues that I would like to see emphasized in the church, I think my whole thing is to become an advocate for women so they could become leaders. I want to teach them not to be shrinking violets, it’s important for their health, mentally and spiritually. They have to be bold enough to walk in their ministry. It’s a holistic
approach. I want to teach women about the women in the Bible and help them to see them from a different lens.

One of the ways I deal with the contradictions of the church is by having open conversations with my pastor. My approach is from a womanist theologian’s point of view and I discuss issues I have with the pastor when I feel he is being a male chauvinist. Womanist theology is studying God from a black woman’s perspective based on her experiences. It is redressing the bible through a black female lens. It is about the betterment of all people and working for that betterment. I’m very much pro woman in everything I do, even when I teach Bible study or work with young people, or even when I pray I throw in my womanist theology. I tell people you have to determine what you believe for yourself about God. While I have not been tempted to leave the church, I did leave a particular church. Once I went to seminary and met these dynamic women, I knew there were churches that would accept women. All my friends are AME women preachers.

The church I am involved in right now is traditional but an educated church so they don’t try and shut me down. My pastor has begun to see some of the things in Scripture and began to teach the things from womanist theology. It is exciting to see him change his mind and not just be one sided. In the end, I am glad I did not back down.

As far as groups that I belong to that help mentor me as a woman preacher? I tried to be involved with the IMWA, but I found it found it very male centric and I couldn’t deal with it; it was still very hierarchal; the board is all male.
If I had to teach young girls about women in the ministry, I would show them women such as Mary Magdalene and Deborah. I have been studying the women in the Bible so I would teach them about these women. I would encourage them to read books that they have not read. Read and understand the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the women who led it. Study women like Fannie Lou Hamer and Helen Burroughs; we were not taught about these women. It is important to understand these stories and understand the historical significance of these women. As a womanist, I have been asked by one of the deacons if that is a real term or did I make it up.

Even though my church is open to women and they have been around for 142 years, they have never had a woman pastor, so I don’t think given their past history if they would accept a woman pastor. I do believe a couple women applied but they were pushed to the side. It is my belief that the only way they would choose a woman preacher was if someone who had been there for a length of time and they trusted them; and that would depend on who is on the pulpit committee. I put my application in to one of the churches (Baptist) who were looking for a Pastor and was sent a nice rejection letter.

I would like to make it easier for women by teaching, opening up a Biblical Institute. I am planning to seriously get this doctorate and begin to teach about womanist collaborative and moving beyond the veil of the traditions of the church.
I grew up in the AME church. There were women pastors there. I later joined the Baptist church when I moved to a new town, because the service was very much like the church I grew up in. My early religious experiences influenced the way I currently think about the church. My spiritual growth began after high school and college. As a young girl up through high school, I never had that spiritual experience at my church.

The religious beliefs and practices I had while growing up did not deter me from my feelings about my call to the ministry, since I was already aware of women serving as pastors. Once I began to realize I had been called, it never occurred to me that someone would say it could not be true. The church I was attending at the point of my call to ministry had seen a few women preachers so we had been exposed but there were never any on staff. The first woman minister was ordained there at about the same time I was called to the ministry around the early 90’s.

Because it was a large church, with male preachers with powerful voices, I was convinced that my role in the ministry was not to preach, but to teach. That all changed after I did my trial sermon; what a wonderful experience it was! I did not discover until after I was called that there were people who said it could not happen. However, as I deepened my walk with God, there was no doubt for me about my call to serve God as a
minister, preacher and pastor.

My call to the ministry came before I realized that people interpreted the Bible to say that women couldn’t preach. This made me want to dive into Bible study more deeply. How we interpret the Bible is near and dear to my heart. One of my first big papers was on the exploration of 1 Corinthians text “Women shall keep silent in the churches.” It has been used in a way that it did not have to be used. Once you truly understand it, it doesn’t say that women shall not preach in the church literally. So I spent a lot of time studying history and understanding and watching how Jesus interacted with women while he walked on the earth. What has happened is that a historical view that supports male domination was used to interpret the text and it has continued all these years. There are many passages that support women’s calls and leadership in the Bible. What’s most disturbing is that many of the more educated pastors understand that it is a question of how the Bible is to be interpreted, but go along because of traditions and they don’t want to rock the boat.

The churches I served are all American Baptist. They tend to hold true to traditional Baptist beliefs. Neither of the two churches I pastored had a female preacher before but they felt free to do that and I was the first female and African-American at both.

There is not a major focus on women’s issues in these churches. They easily accept women pastors. One of the cruxes of my thesis was educating African Americans congregations about Biblical interpretations relating to women’s leadership in the church.
Both of the churches where I served as Pastor asked me to do a Bible study starting with the same text in Corinthians.

I think the biggest African American contradiction is that many of the male pastors against women’s leadership in ministry did not have a problem reading and re-interpreting the texts against slavery but are willing to accept the restrictive, traditional interpretation of certain texts against women’s leadership.

The Southern Baptists came about after the split with Northern Baptist over slavery. The Northern Baptist became American Baptist. Southern Baptist was later taken over by fundamentalist group with conservative viewpoints on how to interpret Scripture. Many African-Americans churches tend to support the Southern Baptist viewpoint.

I left the church where I was the pastor because I was sure God had said it was time to move on. I wanted to focus on doing more writing, speaking and preaching. I may do some interim work; I like the short term.

I served on the Board of the American Baptist Women in Minister (ABWIM), in the neighborhood where I served as pastor of my first church. There were 5 women pastors of different denominational churches. We revived the local ministers association in that neighborhood. I would say the woman I found most influential in my life was the young woman who was the daughter of the pastor in the church where I grew up who went on to start her own church, as well as the first woman who was ordained in my church. As far as Biblical women of the Bible, I would say Deborah because she was the
boss and they came to her.

If I had to teach women or girls about the ministry it would depend on where they come from as to what advice I would give. I would definitely tell them to move forward if they believe they are called. I would tell them that God’s call is the most important thing in their lives; even though they may find it frustrating, they should know that God is still working. The leadership of the church needs both men and women. God does not call anyone without being there to support them. Finally, women must find a mentor.
Minister at Mt. Pisgah, licensed technically a Baptist Associate more with Full Gospel.

My religious experiences began at an early age. I am a product of my father who is a Baptist pastor and my mother who assists him in the ministry. I was raised in church all of my life. I have always been active, and became fully committed at age 16. I accepted the call to ministry at 18, but was not licensed until I was 21. I was at one of the largest churches in Dayton when I accepted my calling. I delayed my licensure because I wanted to be under good training. My dad was open to my call, but he struggled a lot because he was from a traditional Baptist upbringing. He prayed about it and in 2000 after the Our Preaching Sisters conference he was more receptive to accepting women preachers. There was one other woman that my father ordained before me.

Sometimes I think that my young age mattered as it relates to my calling. I grew up in the same church where I announced my calling and it was difficult for people to recognize the transition I was going through. At my current church, because it’s more of a younger crowd, they were more accepting. My early experiences in church formed my thoughts about the way I currently think about the church. Because I was involved, I got to see the good and the bad and it helped because it allowed me to be vulnerable. I was able to understand and appreciate the good of the church; the intent is pure and it makes
me appreciate it a lot more. It is hard because I was also able to see the negative. I believe the church can run good without drama.

The religious beliefs and practices I had while growing up had an influence on how I felt about the call to ministry. I think for me, it was difficult because of the way I grew up. My dad was receptive; however, neither my grandfather nor any of the other men were receptive. I had been struggling since age 15 with the thought that my calling couldn’t be preaching because every man in my family was against it. It helped me to see different denominations that embrace women in ministry, being exposed to seeing women being accepted helped me make that transition. If not, having been the way I was raised it would have been more difficult. Seeing different people helped me to embrace what my role in the church is.

I never doubted my faith in God, I doubted my call. I thought maybe I’m just being emotional, maybe it was just evangelism, it is such a high responsibility. Recently, I have been going through that...I don’t know about preaching...You have to remind yourself daily that this is your calling. So much in your life reminds you that you are a preacher. Doubt if you want but the Word will never not manifest itself.

My present religious beliefs and practices allow me to be more vulnerable and transparent in allowing me to understand what people are going through. Particularly with young people; they go through the motions because they think religion is an adult thing. I can show them that it is not an old thing; they can grow into more than what their parents teach them, not just as a religion but an established relationship.
I definitely felt that the Baptist denomination does not treat women the same way as men. I think that the Baptist has a lot of growing to do; views on women’s rights, I think the church period. It’s a patriarchal society; they have to evolve not just women, young people, race, gender, class...we need to grow and study together...we need to take on real issues. My church does takes a stance on women’s issues like rape, and domestic violence. They have a good support system and do a job of creating a safe place and good mix of people who are able to resolve the issues.

To negotiate between my love for the church and the teachings that oftentimes don’t include women in leadership positions, we have to realize we love God and our love for God should overshadow the corruption of the church, Anything that man touches will be corrupted. We love Him and then that allows us to love his people. They are still vocal about what role the women has within the church, so I have to not embrace their stupidity or ignorance but embrace them in love. Women continue to be oppressed by the way men has interpreted it. I have learned you have to study the contradictions by reading the Bible in context and reading it for its clear intentions.

I have been tempted to leave the church because I grew up in church and it’s extremely difficult to see it in the same place, and that people’s views have not changed. It has tempted me to say I can just read it for myself but my love for God’s people has forced me to stay.

There are no duties that are only geared toward one gender or another, except that the deacon’s wives take care of communion, but that is the only thing that only women
do; however, there are 8 female ministers at my church.

There are no groups that I belong to that help mentor me as a woman preacher. I know there are a lot of groups. There is no particular reason but I do gather with all the women at my current church. There are several women I consider to be influential in my life; my great aunt as well as the women in the city. They taught me that you don’t have to “act manish” or look manly. I would see some of the women whose mannerisms were manly while they were preaching; that was discouraging but there were several women, RI and K who showed me you could be womanly. I think Esther is one of the women in the Bible who inspired me because of the political stance she took.

My advice or encouragement to girls about women in the ministry would be that they can do it, it is not impossible to be a woman in ministry and a woman that God has called. I am interested in helping women be better women. That means whatever women are called to be, whether it is a greeter or a preacher. We focus on who is going to preach which is crippling because women may feel that if you haven’t been called to preach, your fit is minimal (within the ministry).