

Methodist Lee Harris, in 1891, she thought that being a preacher's wife would satisfy her calling. His untimely death in 1894, however, left her with a young Holiness denomination to guide. While preaching across the central South and the Southwest, she met her second husband, evangelist Henry Cagle. Back in Milan, Donie Mitchum became pastor of the home church. When she told her husband, Edwin, a successful businessman, that she was called to preach, he bought her a revival tent. Eventually they settled in Memphis, and from there she conducted meetings in Arkansas and Missouri.⁶⁵ In 1905 there were enough such stories across the South that Fannie McDowell Hunter could write the volume *Women Preachers*. While the appeal of their gifts as preachers drew people to these women in the spirit-centered Holiness Movement, the support and "co-ministry" with spouses was a significant legitimizer. The endorsements of both God and man were important if a woman wanted to stand up and be heard.

Rocking Back and Moving On: Women and Religion in the Contemporary South

The mythic southern Mary still haunts women in the South today, but her shape is shifting. The persistent paradoxes of active passivity and unacknowledged leadership in religious settings are met primarily with old strategies and models, revised in light of changing social realities. But women in the South across religious divides are articulating a growing impatience with models that do not fit their lives or spiritual needs. While many stay in place, uncomfortably agitated and agitating, a growing number are acting on their restlessness—sometimes prompted by an inner voice and sometimes prompted by personal or institutional change. More often than not, however, moving on means rocking back in some way. Southern women are confronting and embracing an increasingly multifaceted Mary. Thus the story of women and religion in the South only grows more complex.

Perhaps the most significant challenge to the traditional image of the southern religious female is women's ordination in almost every major denomination. This was long in coming, and the battles for acceptance and equity are far from over. While Methodists recognized women's full ordination in 1956, only forty years later did the Southeast jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church elect its first female bishop, Charlene Kammerer. In those forty years many a small, rural Methodist parish experienced the ministries of women. Fewer large churches have been given that opportunity. Female pastors are far more likely to be assigned to positions that barely offer a living wage with little chance for advancement. A 1998 study of the Virginia Annual Conference

revealed that women clergy felt “underutilized” and “insufficiently supported.” While the statistics show southern Methodists lagging slightly behind, the experience of Methodist women in the South is not particularly atypical of the rest of the country or of other mainline denominations.⁶⁶

Two things do seem to make the ministries of ordained women in southern churches all the more difficult. The first is the degree to which codes of female “style” conflict with pastoral authority within their churches. (See the article on Episcopal priests later in this volume.) The second is that the “mainline” isn’t dominant in the evangelical South; the Southern Baptist Convention is. The general religious climate makes acceptance more difficult for women ministers. The Methodist pastor or Episcopal priest often finds herself the only female minister in a town dominated by the “big men” of the larger, conservative churches who oppose women’s ministry. One Episcopal priest related typical experiences. Her own parishioners requested that she “put up” her hair when she celebrates the Eucharist, while her participation in the local clergy association prompted the pastors of the largest Baptist churches to withdraw. This is not the whole story, however. This priest’s parish is growing, attracting a number of seekers who no longer fit in the churches of their childhood, including several single and divorced women, single mothers, and even teenage girls seeking new models.

The Presbyterian Church (USA), or PC(USA), recognized women’s ordination in 1964, and its statistics on women’s ministry bear out comparably to those of other churches nationwide.⁶⁷ But Presbyterians in the South are divided over women’s roles. The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) began in Birmingham when 260 churches voted to pull out of the PC(USA) in 1974. It now claims 1,450 member congregations, largely concentrated in the South. It formed in protest to what its members saw as “liberalizing” tendencies in the PC(USA), specifically its stance on women’s ministry.⁶⁸ The PCA, however, has not been able to avoid tensions over women’s roles within its own fold. Over the last two decades, it has undertaken an international mission initiative that has commissioned scores of women as well as men. In 1999 a senior pastor in Knoxville, Tennessee, was rebuked by his presbytery for allowing a female missionary to speak from the pulpit on two Sunday evenings the previous year.⁶⁹ Her mission abroad is encouraged, but she is not allowed to “teach” men from the pulpit or elsewhere. Her name generally goes unmentioned in reports. The silencing of this woman has extended to media coverage of her experience.

Women are allowed to teach other women in PC(USA) churches. One popular teacher, Jani Ortlund, is a prime example of how some women claim leadership in fundamentalist churches like the PC(USA). The wife of the senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia, she speaks

to other women from a position of privilege within the church, all the while emphasizing the “servanthood” of women and pastors’ wives particularly. Ortlund not only embraces the boundaries, but she also defends them in the militant tenor permissible to women when they are defending patriarchal privilege and “family values.” According to Ortlund, women have a lot to lose by straying from traditional roles. In her book *Fearless Femininity*, she proposes a “model of God’s plan for womanhood” for those “who are confused by feminist ideology.”⁷⁰ Ortlund represents the conservative backlash to secular feminism and women’s ministry. Complaining that “the image [of Christian womanhood] has almost faded,” she encourages other women to return “fearlessly” to a model that “seek[s] to express itself in appropriate, godly ways as we nurture, affirm, and receive the resources of masculinity surrounding us.”⁷¹

While Ortlund writes and teaches to revive the image, others envision it on television or through the Internet, cloaking their ministries with an often-exaggerated femininity (most vividly illustrated currently by Jan Crouch of Trinity Broadcasting in Nashville) and by being the wives and cohosts of ministers. Conservative Protestant women are not the only ones acting within such boundaries on television. Perhaps the most influential and visible Roman Catholic woman in the South of late is Mother Angelica, founder of the Eternal Word Broadcasting Network in Birmingham and host of the popular primetime show *Mother Angelica Live*. In a devotional posted on her website, Mother Angelica holds up an image of Mary shared by Catholic and southern traditions: “She was humble, hidden, sorrowful and afflicted. . . . She is all things to all men that she might understand their failings, though she failed not. She is compassionate with their falls, though she fell not. She followed in the Master’s footsteps in order to experience all the sufferings that poor human nature is subject to.”⁷²

Mother Angelica, once a formidable presence on screen, tragically has come to embody that image of Mary-Christ. Having suffered a stroke that has affected her speech, she now ministers by “bearing her Cross” in silence in a convent in Hanceville, Alabama. Her Mother Vicar reports with confidence that “her suffering is doing great things for the Church.”⁷³ Viewers of EWTN may still see “the best” episodes of “Mother Angelica Live” as they pray for her recovery and return to the airwaves.

Jani Ortlund, Jan Crouch, and Mother Angelica hardly stand for all or even a majority of women in religious organizations that reject women’s equal status with men. Less than an hour’s drive from the founding site of the PC(USA) in Birmingham and ten miles from Mother’s Angelica’s convent in Hanceville is the city of Cullman, home to the Benedictine Sisters of the Monastery of the Sacred Heart. While grounded in the traditions of community and prayer, these Catholic women lead lives of activism reminiscent

in some ways of the earliest nuns who came to the South. Deeply involved in work on behalf of social justice and peace, the sisters include canon and civil lawyers as well as social workers, teachers, and health care professionals. The community is best known for its retreat center, which advances the traditions of hospitality and spiritual practice into new areas, integrating traditional Christian prayer with yoga. One of their most popular workshops is “Woman Spirit Rising,” which focused in 2002 not on Mary but on Joan of Arc, the “warrior hero,” as a model for women today.⁷⁴

As in so many historical instances, women today step into the breach, exercising “masculine” roles, testing boundaries as they pick up the slack. Catholic women religious and lay professionals are sustaining a church suffering from clergy scandal and a lack of priests. While this “helping” ministry satisfies some, others work with much-tried patience, unable to fulfill their calls to priestly vocation. In Arkansas one woman with whom we spoke left another profession to become a parish assistant. “I have felt a call to the priesthood all my life,” she reasons. “This is as close as I can get. And with the limited presence of priests, it does at least feel like I am pastoring the people most of the time.”⁷⁵

(Not So) Gracious Submitters, Brides of Christ, and Adulterous Women: The Baptists

Nowhere do we see the range of women’s participation, and the challenges and paradoxes that have come with it, more than in Baptist life in the South. Although (a few) Southern Baptist churches had been ordaining women for at least twenty years, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) officially condemned women’s ordination in 1984 as unbiblical. A number of Baptist churches have ignored the statement and ordained women that they found called, fit, and capable. Despite the fact that the SBC reaffirmed its position in 2000 of prohibiting women from the pastorate, some women still serve in SBC churches as associates in specialized ministry, in educational institutions, or as chaplains.⁷⁶ The career path of one of the most stalwart of Baptist women pastors, however, illustrates what is likely to happen today. Nancy Hastings Sehested, the daughter and granddaughter of SBC ministers, was ordained and served as pastor in the 1980s at the socially progressive Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia. In 1987, after she was called by Prescott Memorial Baptist in Memphis, the Shelby County Baptist Association expelled the church from its membership. Sehested persevered at Prescott until 1995, affiliating with the American Baptist Church. Now living in North Carolina, Sehested is no longer a pastor. She is shaping her own ministry,