

Other Plans

God Had *Other Plans* for Her

An Interview with Bishop Leontine T. C. Kelly

You don't win a battle by leaving a battlefield. This lifetime motto of eighty-six-year-old Bishop Leontine T. C. Kelly helped her evolve from being a schoolteacher to becoming the first African American female bishop in a major denomination. She adopted this maxim from her father, a minister who was ordained in the Methodist Church in the 1900s. He said this in response to the establishment of the segregated Central Jurisdiction in 1936 as he remained in the denomination to fight segregation.

In 1969, Kelly was content as a high school social studies teacher, wife, and mother. She and her United Methodist clergy husband had just relocated to a small town near the Chesapeake Bay area in Edwardsville, Virginia. While serving a small African American congregation at Galilee Church, Kelly's husband learned he had cancer. Six months later James David Kelly died.

As Kelly began her life as a single mother to four children, her district superintendent invited her to succeed her husband as interim pastor of Galilee Church until another could be found. "I was really lamenting to the Lord at the time," she said. "I missed my husband, and I didn't know if I should be a preacher in addition to my teaching job. But I had come to love that congregation. I was always happy and smiling there. As a lay speaker, I agreed to serve until my replacement."

In August 1970, she had planned to take a class at a United Methodist Women School of Missions meeting. "I was searching for answers to my life, and was looking forward to taking the 'Inner Life' class to help me," she says.

But, she says, God had other plans for her. Instead of her being a student, Kelly was asked to be the teacher. As she taught



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the course, Kelly says she clearly heard and accepted the call to ministry.

"One of my former students summed my life up best by saying that I went from 'preaching in the classroom to teaching in the pulpit,'" Kelly says.

She commuted one hundred miles from Galilee Church to attend Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C., for the Course of Study. In 1976, at age fifty-six, she graduated with a master's of divinity degree from Union Theological Seminary (Presbyterian) in Richmond, Virginia.

Though there were few women studying for the ordained ministry and even fewer African American women, Kelly says she did not experience much discrimination while in seminary.

"I think the civil rights movement opened the doors to having women in ordained ministry," she says. "Not much discouraged me as I was taught that we are all children of God and that racism and sexism have no business being in the church of Jesus Christ."

Kelly notes that she grew up in "the very racist city" of Cincinnati along with her seven brothers and sisters. Her parents did their best to treat her and her siblings equally and build their self-esteem despite their societal limitations.

After pastoring Galilee for seven years, Kelly served for two years on the bishop's staff in the Virginia Conference in social action. Then, Kelly served as pastor of Asbury-Church Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond from 1977 to 1983, when she was appointed general secretary of evangelism for the General Board of Discipleship in Nashville.

In 1980 and 1984, Kelly was nominated by the women of her annual conference for the episcopacy. In 1984, when it was apparent that she would not receive a sufficient number of votes

to be elected bishop in the Southeastern Jurisdiction, she was invited by the women of the Western Jurisdiction conference to come to Boise, Idaho, where she was elected a bishop of the church.

"I understand that in 1984 I was the first person to have my name entered into the episcopal nomination process in all six jurisdictions," she says.

"At that time, women greatly needed the same training as their male peers," she says. "Because of sexism, most women could not obtain the traditional jobs—like district superintendent or president of an educational institution—that often lead to the episcopacy."

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In her assignment to the San Francisco Area, Kelly served as chief administrator and spiritual leader of more than one hundred thousand United Methodists in the California-Nevada Annual Conference. She retired from the episcopacy in 1988.

"Fifty years ago, many in our church did not want to have women in the pulpit, yet my father (who was a district superintendent at the time), was among the first to sign a woman's license to preach," she says. "Today, many women still abandon their dream of becoming a pastor because they are not accepted. Yet, we have the opportunity to do as my father did and encourage them to follow their dreams."

"When clergywomen began meeting as a group and when the Commission on the Status and Role of Women began, the push for gender and racial equality strengthened," she says. "Though ghosts of inequality and invisible ceilings for clergy women still survive, I feel as if our denomination is on the right path toward greatness."

"Many United Methodist congregations have accepted and praised the leadership of women pastors," she explains. "Seminaries are encouraging women and opportunities for preparation for the ministry are growing too."

This August, some fifteen hundred clergywomen will celebrate the fiftieth

anniversary of full clergy rights for women in the Methodist Church. Kelly will be among those at the August 13–17 meeting in Chicago.

Scheduled to participate at the anniversary event, Kelly will encourage women clergy to "continue to reach out and support each other because the ministry can be lonely.

"It takes faith and guts to break down gender and racial barriers," she says. "The Bible is filled with stories of unlikely people chosen to lead. Women do not need to be manly to lead. Women should embrace their femininity, such as sensitivity and a passion for fairness and harmony."

Kelly adds that male clergy should be especially concerned about discrimination or failure to accept their female colleagues. "Male and female clergy should work together to acknowledge that when male and female clergy have both been called to the ministry and have met the same educational and vocational requirements, they should be given the same vocational and financial opportunities."

She notes that more churches and more ministers are "needed for the challenges of today's world." She also adds that as clergywomen are beginning to retire, more clergywomen will be needed to replace them.

Kelly has four grown children and five grandchildren. Kelly's late brother was, and her son John and his wife are, United Methodist pastors. Her daughter, Angella, is director of loans and scholarships for the denomination and the author of *Breaking Barriers*, a book about Kelly's family. □

Heather Peck Stahl is a freelance journalist from Nashville, Tennessee.

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