

4 Clergywomen Reflect on Their Calling

Memories *and* Dreams



Fear Not!
—Barbara E. Welbaum

Hold onto your joy in
Christ!
—Mamie A. Williams



Be Bold!
—Patricia Farris

Keep preaching the
Kingdom!
—Katherine Paisley



Erik Alsgaard

As the fiftieth anniversary of full clergy rights for women is celebrated this year, *Circuit Rider* magazine asked four clergywomen for insights on the ongoing challenges of being both clergy and female today. We also wanted to know what advice, hopes, dreams, and fears they had for clergywomen today, and for those who will celebrate the one hundred anniversary in 2056.

“We’ve come a long way in fifty years,” said Katherine Paisley, pastor of Belshire United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, and a doctoral candidate in homiletics at Vanderbilt Divinity School. “But there is a long way to go.”

She knows what she’s talking about.

Her grandfathers were both ministers, and their spouses did a lot of the ministerial work, she said. Paisley’s “Mema” both preached and did visitation; her “Nana” did “anything she set her mind to, and did it with finesse. Her husband applauded.”

Her mother was in high school when famed evangelist Dr. Harry Denman, invited her to go on a mission trip to Cuba. But when she fell in love with Paisley’s dad, who wasn’t going into the mission field, she redirected her call to serving as a traditional minister’s wife for many years, she said.

Paisley’s youngest daughter, Carol, is currently in seminary, so her hopes, dreams, and fears are specifically for her.

“I was able to go to seminary in my generation, but I have been the first woman in every appointment I have served,” said

Paisley. "I hope our Carol will face less prejudice and struggle than I have."

One example of that struggle, she recalled, was the time she was up for ordination. "One of the issues under discussion was how many women ministers the conference could really place," she said. "I hope the next generation will be seen and valued for who they are and for their gifts in ministry, not by their gender."

That kind of gender-neutrality was evidenced for Barbara E. Welbaum, pastor of Newburg United Methodist Church in Livonia, Michigan. She told a story of a young son of a clergy colleague who was once asked what he'd like to do when he grew up, and whether he might consider becoming a pastor. "To which he replied, 'No way. That's for girls.'" Of course, the ministry is for all people and the boundaries and roadblocks extend well beyond the questions of gender, but what a wonderful turn of events, hearts and minds, to imagine a world in which ordained ministry for women is as acceptable as it is for men," Welbaum said.

"My great hope for clergywomen today is that we will find our voice," said Mamie A. Williams, executive director of the Northeastern Jurisdiction Multi-Ethnic Center, located in Columbia, Maryland.

By "voice," Williams means many things: "A voice that does not mimic men nor think in the competitive ways that have colored their paths; a voice that truly represents men, women and children of every hue at the table and speaks of the 'beloved community' because of the assurance that it can and will exist; a voice that speaks the truth in love and respects one another instead of attempting to tear down and covertly destroy; a voice that sees and understands the world as God's handiwork of which we are stewards; a voice that loves in spite of whatever is occurring; a voice that is calm in the midst of storms; a voice that speaks to issues and is sometimes quietly reflecting; a voice that is 'in tune' with God's Word."

Patricia Farris is senior minister at Santa Monica First United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, California. She said her greatest hope for clergywomen today is that they would continue to utilize the gifts God has given them. "My hope is that we will continue to offer women's ways of knowing," she said, "women's ways of relating and working, women's ways of being the Body of Christ—all as gifts in God's church."

And while these clergywomen outlined many hopes, they also addressed many fears for themselves and their sisters in the faith.

"I fear that we will set our sights too low and content ourselves with too little," said Farris. "I fear that we will focus too much on the inward things and on self, rather than on the mission of the church and the imperative of the gospel for justice and peace."

The issue of respect or, more specifically, a lack of respect, was mentioned in many ways.

Welbaum recalled a time in her ministry, years ago, when she

was talking with a member of her community. The resident asked her what she did for a living, and Welbaum responded. "She then asked where the church was and I told her," Welbaum said. "And her response was, 'Oh yes, I heard they had one of those there.' To my face, no less!"

Respect, she said, is a rare commodity, even to the point where qualifying the word "pastor" with the modifier "woman" suggests this dichotomy.

"I fear most that lack of respect will continue to disempower and discourage sisters from following their hearts and God's calling," Welbaum said, "and that they will miss out on meaning and wholeness for their lives because of norms and expectations that conflict with the Spirit's sweet call."

Williams, who served as a superintendent in the Baltimore-Washington Conference from 1998 to 2005, said that her biggest fear is that clergywomen would become their own worst enemy "by the unreasoned choices that we make in the moment.

"I fear," she continued, "that we will not test experience and genuine leadership, but jump onto popularity trains that lead nowhere. I fear that as gifts and graces are measured for leadership, we will tend to lay them aside for the politics of the day."

—Patricia Farris Paisley outlined two fears, both touching on respect,

both touching on dependence on God.

"I guess my greatest fear is that as the church becomes more accepting, that (clergywomen) not lose the dependence on God that comes with hard times," she said. Paisley told the story of her first appointment in rural Tennessee. People were "suspicious of education" and one church was without running water.

"I was told on my arrival that they couldn't decide what was the worst thing, 'that you are a woman, a Yankee, or that you had been to Vanderbilt.' My very existence was confrontational to their understandings of life and the church. I didn't actually have to do anything to be confrontational, just showing up on Sunday morning to preach did it."

Paisley said this culture shock for her caused her to rely on God and God alone.

"Those two years were the closest thing in my experience to literal prayer without ceasing," she said. That experience was priceless, she said, and it shaped her. And while she wouldn't want anyone to duplicate that experience, the dependence on God was foundational.

Another fear for clergywomen today, Paisley said, goes in another direction: retaining women for ministry.

"I'm afraid that if ministry remains a hard road, particularly for young women who want to have families, a number of women may just give up," she said. "We are seeing a large number of women who leave the pastoral ministry as our

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—Patricia Farris

churches become more demanding” and the pressures of family life add to the mix.

And what would this group of clergy say to women who are clergy in 2056?

“Fear not,” said Welbaum. “Be a contagious carrier of the good news. No one else can do it like you can do it.”

“Be bold,” said Farris. “Be true to your calling and your vision. Who knows what

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God will need the church to be by then? You have the gifts to discern how to serve and how to lead. Go for it!”

A sentiment echoed by the others.

“Hold on to your joy in Christ,” responded Williams. “Let nothing or no one take that day of revelation regarding your call and the joy you experienced when you fully surrendered to God’s will away from your presence. You may need to tap into that reality often, so keep it close to your heart.”

“The one thing I am certain about fifty years from now is that people will still need to hear that God is acting to bring about healing and redemption,” said Paisley. “Keep preaching the kingdom.”

And one more thing probably won’t change between now and then, she noted.

“You can be in ministry, do graduate school, and have children, but you may not be able to do everything at once. Timing is crucial.” □

Erik Alsgaard is director of News and Information of the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

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