

(An old-fashioned term for a pastor or chaplain)

Sky Pilot

Heather Murray Elkins

It was worth the wait: this high-altitude sighting of the first woman elected bishop of The United Methodist Church. I'd risen early to get a seat in the balcony overlooking the high pulpit in the chapel. I wanted to hear Bishop Marjorie Matthews preach for the West Virginia Annual Conference. I was hanging on by my fingernails in my first appointment and had gotten the notion that being in her presence would somehow strengthen my grip.

Bishop William Boyd Grove introduced her, taking care to convey the depth of respect for his colleague in Christ, but his height and her body brevity prompted spontaneous laughter. Such a small woman. Even learning that she had set a world record in having her rulings challenged in conference and then sustained by the Judicial Council didn't change the skeptical mood of the house.

As Matthews ascended the high steps of the pulpit, I leaned over the balcony edge to get a better view. She laid her Bible open, lined up her notes, lifted her head, and took off. Clear,

quiet tones began to drift heavenward. After several minutes I scanned the house. Those who required high octane to fuel their hearing had settled back into neutral. Those who wouldn't be driven by any high-speed rhetorical device were leaning forward ever so slightly.

What was the bishop's text? I don't remember. What I've never forgotten was her context: in *Almost Heaven*, a woman called by Christ, consecrated by our church, committed to scripture, had broken the sound barrier. No fear of flying would keep her down.



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The gift of the morning's service was doubled when I was asked, at the last minute, to take her to the airport. I didn't have time to panic, although I do remember apologizing several times for the pitiful state of my vintage VW bug. Her smile made everything better. Since she looked tired and the time short, we traveled in silence. The trip was nearly over before I risked asking the question I'd pondered for months. "Was there any sign, any hope that another woman would be elected in the coming quadrennium?" I remember she sighed

first, then reminded me that there's always hope even if there aren't any signs.

It's been the perfect answer for women who are called into this business of linking earth and heaven and describes what I saw firsthand as the worship designer for the conferences that gave us Susan Morrison and Violet Fischer. Always hope; don't ask for signs.

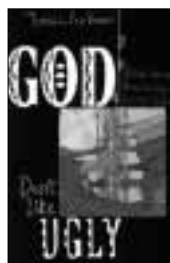
When we reached the small, rural airport in Clarksburg, I carried her bag and a sudden burden. I wanted a blessing. It might be years before I heard or saw another like her. I needed a blessing so I could carry on. I wanted the only living woman called by Christ and the church universal to be Servant of servants to lay hands on my head and call down the Spirit. The burden got heavier the closer we got to the only gate. I knew how ridiculous it would look, how strange I would sound. I placed her bag on the scanning table and turned around. "Would you bless me?" I asked. "Here and now. So I can go the distance?"

Maybe the bishop was used to such requests. Maybe she'd done this a hundred times before. Whatever. She smiled, nodded. I went down on my knees in the middle of the waiting area and waited. Even when I knelt, she was no more than one head higher. I closed my eyes. She put her small, strong hands on my head and blessed me down to my bones. Then she helped me up, picked up her bag, and walked to the plane with the other four passengers. The plane turned on a dime and was gone. I watched until it cleared the first line of what we in *Almost Heaven* call the mountains. Marjorie Matthews: one small woman in a small plane. Such a good pilot, such a big sky. □

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FAITH Of Women JOURNEYS In the Church



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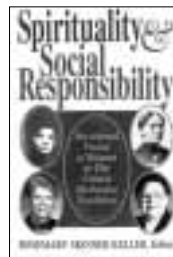
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