

Neither Male nor Female, Jew nor Greek: The emergence of Racial/ethnic Clergywomen in Predominately-White denominations

“The tyranny of hegemonic truth will have to be abandoned by those who treasure it and are privileged by it.” Alicia Vargas¹

Everyone walks through the doors of the church with a cultural agenda that we believe to be normative. That framework colors our interaction with the sacred texts, our neighbor in the pew, and our evaluation of the entire worship service. Often the basis of that paradigm begins with our assigned gender roles and in America, the paradigm often expands to include class and race. For many of those within the dominant group, the other aspects of the framework will diminish but unfortunately, that is not the case for individuals without a dominant identity. Dual identity is the lens through which women of color see the church. This duality structures her interactions within the ecclesiastical system, choosing neither her gender nor her race as the dominant framework. The duality of her presence in leadership can present confusion to those who may not fully accept her leadership in a cross-cultural context or those who struggle with a non-male leader.²

“Can the predominantly white Christian denominations receive the new wine that women of color in leadership have to offer” is a variation of the question that Superintendent Gilbert H. Caldwell asked of his ecclesiastical brethren in 1969 around the issues of men of color leading in a predominantly white fellowship.³ Caldwell denied the myth that men of color ascend to senior levels within the administrative structure because the minority group has evolved enough to produce someone of sufficient caliber to function within that role. Instead, he posited that when men of color are elevated within the church, it is because the organization has evolved enough to

¹ Alicia Vargas *The construction of Latina Christology: In invitation to Dialogue* Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 34 4 (August 2007)

² I use the term non-male to define the woman in the context of maleness because I believe her detractors are not defining her as a woman but as something less than a man.

³ Gilbert H. Caldwell, *Black Folk in White churches*, *The Christian Century*, February 12, 1969

allow someone who is not a member of the hegemony to obtain a leadership seat. Caldwell contends that there are always members of the minority group well prepared for a leadership position that are often overlooked by the hegemony. We see the truth of those statements in the context of the ascension of Dr. Beth Grant to the Executive Presbytery. Notwithstanding her exceptional credentials, the documented history of women within the Assembly of God Fellowship demonstrates that there were other women who were equally as qualified to lead as a member of the Executive Presbytery as Dr. Grant was. We can also see the truth in the election of President Barack Obama. His ascension to the office of the Presidency should not imply that there were no other men of color that preceded him who were as qualified he to hold the office, but rather that it was not until the twenty-first century that the United States had evolved enough to be comfortable with a man of color at the helm.

In these two examples, we see predominantly white institutions embracing a new type of leader within their systems, a Caucasian woman and an African-American man. However, strikingly absent is the person of dual identity ascending to significant senior leadership within these structures. Where are the Latinas, the African-American sisters, and the Asian women? More specifically, where are the women of color in leadership positions within predominantly white institutions?

“And the church increased daily”...because of women and minorities

According to the statistics from the Assembly of God US Ministers Report dated 2008, there were no women serving as district officials, and only eleven women serving as district presbyters. Of the 6,502 women who were credentialed within the fellowship, 1,316 of them stated that they were either retired or semi-retired, just over 5000 women serving actively as a

minister of the Gospel. These numbers stand in sharp contrast to the number of female adherents. The data states that 56% of the adherents of the fellowship are women and of the 2.8 million people who identify themselves as members of the Assembly of God fellowship, over one million of them stated that they were non-white (Asian, African-American, Latino, native American, or of mixed heritage).

The complexion and gender ratios are changing within the pews because they are changing within the country. Women represent 50.7% of all people living in the United States according to the US Census Bureau⁴. In 2008, the US Census Bureau released a press release that stated by 2042 white Americans will be the minority and by 2023, the majority of school-aged children will be children of color.⁵ The statistics from the Census combined with the internal data collected by the Fellowship in addition to other denominations should signal a sea change to the Protestant church leadership. We must encourage our young women of color to answer the call.

The church must prepare for racial and ethnic clergywomen in a deliberate and intentional manner.⁶ Using the AG Fellowship as an example, there exist several affinity groups for people of color based on a variety of ethnic distinctions. Additionally, the Network for Women in Ministry provides a valuable resource of data, encouragement, affirmation and literature for women who passionately pursue the call of Christ. It was rather impressive to see

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. Data derived from Population Estimates, Census of Population and Housing, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, State and County Housing Unit Estimates, County Business Patterns, Nonemployer Statistics, Economic Census, Survey of Business Owners, Building Permits, Consolidated Federal Funds Report

⁵ <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>

⁶ This point is to acknowledge that the professor discussed in the class the feminization of terms usually requires a diminutive addition to the word such as adding the suffix 'ess' to the word prophet or the word deacon and the fact that such terms should be eschewed in favor of gender-neutral terminology. However, given the nature of the topic of a dual identity for women of color in ministerial leadership, the term clergywomen did not appear to the writer as diminutive but specific. Moreover, the language of the few scholarly articles on the subject used the phrase racial ethnic clergywomen to identify the subject matter.

the deliberate manner by which the speakers represented a plenary view of women in ministry; however, the lack of diversity among the attendees of the 2008 Conversations conference was rather striking. It would be interesting to examine the number of women of color who attended Conversations, the number of women who attend conferences for the affinity groups for ministers of color, and the qualitative responses of the women to better understand how each environment ministers to their needs. These affinity groups should be promoted by the local districts to clergy aspirants as a manner by which they can find affirmation and build collegial relationship with others who share an aspect of their duality. Without these relationships, racial/ethnic clergywomen, not unlike visitors at a church service, may become isolated in an unhealthy manner and subsequently, leave the field in pursuit of other more comfortable surroundings.

Inasmuch as I am called to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry, (but I could use some help.)

Senior leadership must examine what institutional supports are necessary for cross-cultural and female appointments. The discussion of this subject appears almost non-existent in the academic literature. More often than not, the discussion revolves around three topics: assisting ethnic male leadership in cross-cultural appointments, helping women in leadership survive and thrive in their appointments, or supporting women of color as they navigate gender politics within their intra-ethnic congregations. As the national ethnic demographics shift towards a browner society and women begin to enter seminaries and bible colleges in increasing numbers, the leadership of predominately-white ecclesiastical institutions must begin to address

the needs of racial/ethnic clergywomen from a dual identity perspective and prepare their institutions for this new group of leaders.

The Washington Post published a story about clergy of color leading predominately-white congregations in 2004.⁷ The article highlighted pastors in Maryland and Virginia of Black and Asian descent who were leading white congregations. The overwhelming response of the male pastors, one African-American and one Asian, indicated that they believed that they were doing God's will and that because of globalism parishioners were becoming more responsive to their leadership. However, the response of the women pastors signified a stronger perspective on the subject. The Asian woman echoed her brethren's comments that she was accepting this charge as a missionary and a bridge builder for the Lord to the white community. However, she acknowledged that her congregants embraced her leadership more slowly than she had anticipated. The African-American female pastor expressed her frustration of being the only person of color her parishioners know and stated that although she recognized the purpose of her work, she was simply tired of the arduous task of being the bridge.

Fortunately, the African American woman and the Asian woman are part of a denomination that possesses an active agenda to foster the role of racial ethnic clergywomen. In the manner in which Dr. Beth Grant has pioneered a path for women in ministry for the Assembly of God Fellowship in the 21st Century, Dr. HiRho Park has led the charge for women of color clergy in the United Methodist denomination. Dr. HiRho Park serves as the Director of Continuing Formation for Ministry for the United Methodist Church and the conference chair of the Commission of Race and Religion. In her role as director, she helped disseminate a study of racial/ethnic clergywomen with the United Methodist Church in 2004 specifically designed to

⁷ Phuong Ny, "Minority pastors preach diversity," *Washington Post.com*, April 4, 2004

help the church better understand the relationship between women of color clergy and the church.⁸

The study conducted by Jung Ha Kim and Rosetta Ross examined the demographic information such as age, length of time in placement, health, education, and marital status. Thematic issues such as race and gender consciousness, salary and compensation in comparison to their brethren, and their ability to ascend the denomination ladder were examined also. The findings demonstrated that the married clergy experienced less aloneness and isolation than the single counterparts experienced and thus, experienced greater overall satisfaction. However, unlike their single counterparts experienced greater tension and critique regarding the dual commitment to ministry and their family. Often when being interviewed for credentialing, the married clergy were asked to rank their priorities between the ministry and their family, a question that many clergy did not believe was being asked of their male counterparts. Both single and married clergy expressed dissatisfaction with their pay but they were uncertain if the pay discrepancy was due to gender or if it was due to race.

The clergy relayed several heartbreaking examples of gender and race bias that would make any Christian lachrymose at the thought of such repulsive and solipsistic attitudes. One Asian woman pastor discussed her shame when that the ordination board required her to take accent reduction classes before placing her in a church. Her shame did not originate in the request, but upon the discovery that her Asian-born male seminarian peers were never required to take any type of speech therapy to reduce their accents. She assessed that the additional obstacle the ordination placed in her path was due to her gender.

⁸ Jung Ha Kim and Rosetta Ross. "The Status of Racial and Ethnic Minority Clergywomen in the United Methodist Church." (Paper presented to the General Board for higher education and ministry. The United Methodist church 2004)

Another Latina pastor indicated that her assignments were limited to mission-style church plants or churches with limited resources. She believed that her assignments were related to her race. It appeared to her that only Anglo men were assigned to larger suburban church with Anglo parishioners. There seems to be a desire on the part of the racial/ethnic clergywomen to serve in cross-cultural congregations, even with the challenges, as long as adequate support is present.

One of the ways the United Methodist church supports its racial/ethnic clergywomen is through the Women of Color Scholars program.⁹ The program designed in response to the lack of women of color teaching as faculty in the United Methodist seminaries. The scholarship has provided 26 women the opportunity to complete their PhD's. A consultation of racial and ethnic clergywomen was held in 2008 as an occasion to learn from one another and share with the overall denomination. The result of the consultation was the development of a multiethnic affinity group for racial/ethnic clergywomen. The women expressed a need for a synergetic space to share ideas and concerns with other women of color. Out of that affinity group grew a mentoring initiative titled the Mary-Elizabeth mentoring program.¹⁰ As the name implies, an older woman in ministry would mentor a younger woman. One on one mentoring for women in ministry can provide the guidance one needs after accepting the audacious call to ministry.

One additional source of assistance was a conference specifically for pastors of color who led predominantly white congregations.¹¹ The conference attendees included both male and female pastors in addition to seminarians who anticipated receiving a cross-cultural assignment.

⁹United Methodist Church General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Women of Color Scholars program. http://www.gbhem.org/site/c.lsKSL3POLvF/b.4862847/k.242C/RacialEthnic_Clergywomens_Consultation.htm; Internet; accessed Dec 2009.

¹⁰United Methodist Church General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Clergywomen's News. http://www.gbhem.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=lsKSL3POLvF&b=5569805&content_id={FE421700-6784-4C8E-BC67-49DB9AE24CEF}¬oc=1

Identifying fellow sojourners in the body of Christ can mitigate the feelings of isolation for those in Christian leadership. However, there are those pastors who never experience any issues with cross-cultural appointments, but those pastors tended on average to be male pastors who were crossing a racial boundary or white female pastors who were crossing a gender boundary.

As for me and my house...we will look for opportunities

Certainly, the Assembly of God fellowship embraces racial/ethnic clergywomen and endeavors to bolster support for these pioneering women. The Network for Women in Ministry strives to demonstrate the diversity among its ranks of credentialed women as evidenced in the speaker selections during the conversations conference as well as the diversity of authors on the web newsletter. The National Black Fellowship, the affinity group for African-American clergy, has two women represented at the district level and none on the executive board. The 21st century Assembly of God Fellowship is reexamining its roots and learning that the church possesses a rich history of women of color at the helm.

Jessica Faye Carter wrote an enlightening article outlining some of the contributions made to the Assemblies by women of color.¹² She highlighted women of African, Asian, Latino and Native American descent, each with their own story of pioneering in response to the call of God. Each of the women faced the twin obstacles of gender and racial/ethnic discrimination, but they persisted in their pursuit of Christ. For example, Pandita Ramabai established a home for widows and translated the bible into Marathi, the 4th most spoken language in India, Cornelia Jones Robertson pastored a California church for 30 years, being one of the first African-American credential holders in the Assemblies, and Maria de Fatima W. Gomes became the

¹² Jessica Faye Carter, "*Women of Color and the Assemblies of God*," Assemblies of God Heritage, Vol 28 2008

general superintendent of East Timor, possibly the only woman to have ever served as the head of a national fellowship. There exists a phenomenal legacy on which to build.

It should also be noted that these doorways to leadership expand due to receptivity on the part of senior leadership. In the article, *Liberated and Empowered*, Gaston Espinosa remarked that the increased numbers of Latina ministers could be attributed to the encouragement of Jesse Miranda.¹³ George Wood has received the same approbation for his role in electing a woman to the executive presbytery. The broad-mindedness of the presbytery provides a pattern for tolerance among the district-level clergy.

The overarching need to supply racial/ethnic clergywomen will increase as the population of the nation shifts. As the parishioners begin to reflect the demographic shift, church staff should become reflective of the congregation. In the interim, our predominately-white congregation and leadership structures must prepare themselves to embrace, once again, sisters who represent different cultures, languages and customs. As the institutions endeavor to become inclusive, let them review the history of the Pentecostal movement, which is flush with women of color. Let that history serve as a landmark that points the movement in the direction of scripture. The word states that our first allegiance is not to a gender or a race, but to unity in Christ.¹⁴ Let us persevere to embrace that truth.

¹³ Gaston Espinosa, *Liberated And Empowered: The Uphill History Of Hispanic Assemblies Of God Women In Ministry, 1915-1950* , Assemblies of God Heritage, Vol. 28 2008

¹⁴ Gal. 3:28, All scriptures are taken from Today's New International Version.

Bibliography

Carter, Jessica Faye. "Women of Color and the Assemblies of God," *Assemblies of God Heritage*, Vol 28 2008

Caldwell, Gilbert H. *Black Folk in White churches*, *The Christian Century*. February 12, 1969

Espinosa, Gaston. "*Liberated and Empowered: The Uphill History of Hispanic Assemblies of God Women in Ministry, 1915-1950*," *Assemblies of God Heritage*, Vol. 28 2008

Kim, Jung Ha and Ross, Rosetta. "*The Status of Racial and Ethnic Minority Clergywomen in the United Methodist Church*." (Paper presented to the General Board for Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church 2004)

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, "Clergywomen's News." United Methodist Church

http://www.gbhem.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=lsKSL3POLvF&b=5569805&content_id={FE421700-6784-4C8E-BC67-49DB9AE24CEF}¬oc=1; Internet; Accessed Dec 2009.

General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, "Women of Color Scholars Program." United Methodist Church.

http://www.gbhem.org/site/c.lsKSL3POLvF/b.4862847/k.242C/RacialEthnic_Clergywomens_Consultation.htm; Internet; Accessed Dec 2009.

U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. Data derived from Population Estimates, Census of Population and Housing, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates, State and County Housing Unit Estimates, County Business Patterns, Nonemployer Statistics, Economic Census, Survey of Business Owners, Building Permits, Consolidated Federal Funds Report; internet; accessed Dec 2009.

U.S. Census Bureau News. An Older and More Diverse Population by Midcentury. Aug. 14, 2008, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/012496.html>; internet; accessed Dec 2009.

Vargas, Alicia "The construction of Latina Christology: In invitation to Dialogue." *Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Currents in Theology and Mission* 34 4 (August 2007)