

# Introduction



The concept of the glass ceiling is not new. In the secular realm, the glass ceiling represents the barrier that prevents qualified individuals from excelling beyond a certain level due to their race, gender, or orientation. For those of us who serve in the sacred or religious realm, we know it as the stained glass ceiling, referring to the barriers imposed by churches. About five years ago, during the Speak Until Justice Wakes conference (2008, ABCUSA) Rev. Kasey Jones, senior pastor of the National Baptist Memorial Church in Washington, D.C., and I began comparing notes about our experiences as female senior pastors. Out of that discussion grew a desire and decision to learn more about how other female clergy are faring as they pursue ministry opportunities or serve as senior pastors. We wanted to hear their stories—their challenges, victories, testimonies, and words of wisdom. In *Beyond the Stained Glass Ceiling: Equipping and Encouraging Female Pastors*, we celebrate the good news that God has opened the eyes of some congregants regarding the legitimacy and divine prerogative of God to call females to the holy vocation of pastoring. However, there is still much work to be done.

Contrary to some reports, female clergy have not yet arrived. While a few denominations such as United Methodists, the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and American Baptist Churches USA have accepted and called women to serve as senior pastors, many qualified and

well-equipped sisters still struggle to have their gifts of preaching and pastoring recognized. Among those who have become senior pastors, remnants of the stained glass ceiling persist.

According to the Barna Group, women represent just 5 percent of all Protestant senior pastors. According to a 2008 *Christianity Today* article, this number has risen slightly to 9 percent.<sup>1</sup> However, female pastors are much more likely to be seminary-trained (86 percent have a seminary degree, compared with 60 percent of male pastors); are more than twice as likely to have been divorced (31 percent, compared with 12 percent among male pastors); have less experience in the pastorate (nine years in full-time paid ministry, compared with a median of seventeen years among men); last less time in a given church than do men (three years per pastorate, compared with almost six years among men); and receive much lower compensation.<sup>2</sup>

Historically, women have faced a variety of obstacles preventing them from being placed in the role of senior pastor. Theologically, women seeking to fill leadership roles in the church have been pummeled by misinterpretations of the writings of the apostle Paul. Paul's words to Timothy state: "Women should learn in silence and all humility. I do not allow them to teach or to have authority over men; they must keep quiet" (1 Timothy 2:11-12, GNB). This Scripture is a favorite tool of oppression. When used out of context, it appears to justify denying women leadership roles over men in general and pastoral roles in particular.

However, many Scriptures speak to the fallacies of this unfortunate use of the verses. For example, the army commander Barak would not go into war without the guidance and company of the judge and prophetess Deborah. In her position as judge, Deborah clearly had authority over women *and* men. Judges 4:4-9 (NIV) attests to this fact:

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Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: ‘Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.’”

Barak said to her, “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”

“Certainly I will go with you,” said Deborah. “But because of the course you are taking, the honor will not be yours, for the LORD will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.”

Jael is the woman spoken of in Judges 4:9, and her story is found in Judges 4:18-23. The Old Testament writer of the book of Judges emphasizes the leadership roles of these two women, Deborah and Jael.

Other verses also show God’s divine favor and endorsement of women in roles leading males and females. In Proverbs 31:1, King Lemuel’s mother taught him with words of wisdom and guidance regarding selecting a wife: “The sayings of King Lemuel—an inspired utterance his mother taught him” (Proverbs 31:1, NIV). After the resurrection, Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9) and the other Mary, who went and told the disciples.

The apostle Paul wrote about Phoebe: “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the

benefactor of many people, including me” (Romans 16:1-2, NIV). “Deacon” in this context refers to a Christian servant who works with the overseers or elders of a church. Similar uses of the term may be found in Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. The same term is applied to men serving in the deacons’ ministry. No distinction is made between male and female servant-leaders. All of these scriptural examples make the interpretations forbidding women to teach or lead men inaccurate.

**Today, female senior pastors can say, like James Weldon Johnson, “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.” However, women pastors do have reasons to rejoice.**

From a sociopolitical and cultural standpoint, women face opposition not only from men but also from other women. The comments of several female pastors we were privileged to interview bare this unfortunate fact (see chapter 3, “What Stands in Our Way?”). Today, female senior pastors can say, with echoes of James Weldon Johnson,<sup>3</sup> “We’ve traveled over a way that has been watered with tears.” However, women pastors do have reasons to rejoice.

During the process of identifying female pastors of freewill denominations, I encountered several who serve large (500+), mid-sized (250+), and smaller congregations. The ranks of women serving as senior pastors are growing slowly. Their journeys are varied, their testimonies are compelling, and their insights are provocative.

So the questions arise: What can be done to shatter the stained glass ceiling for women clergy? What can we learn from those who have successfully burst through the barriers? How can we equip and encourage those who are seeking to become senior pastors?

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What strategies should we develop in order to provide clear paths to success?

First, we must examine the lay of the land. In an attempt to identify and learn more about female pastors who have already broken through the stained glass ceiling, I developed and launched a survey of senior female pastors. (Although the many challenges and responsibilities of ministry caused Rev. Jones to decide to withdraw from the project, her initial work and partnership provided invaluable support to this effort.) I also conducted personal interviews and small-group sessions in which I asked specific questions related to the survey. The sample size was 150 female pastors. The research was limited to free will or autonomous denominations:

- American Baptist Churches USA
- Progressive National Baptist Convention
- National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.
- Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
- Southern Baptist Convention
- Full Gospel
- United Church of Christ
- Disciples of Christ
- Church planters/nondenominational

The survey, interviews, and small-group questions identified eight areas of examination: (1) personal information; (2–4) the ministry contexts in which women have been called as senior pastor; (5) the unique challenges that female clergy face personally and vocationally while pastoring; (6) personal stories that could give insight, encouragement, and cautions; (7) suggestions on how to increase conversations among clergy, laity, local congregations, regions, and denominational leaders regarding the acceptance of female pastors; and (8) suggestions about realistic strategies for

increasing opportunities for female ministers to break through the proverbial stained glass ceiling.

*Beyond the Stained Glass Ceiling* speaks to female clergy who are seeking or are established in senior pastorates. It is also the hope to engage supporters and advocates in this conversation who will equip, encourage, support, and strategize on behalf of the women of God, seeking to “serve the present age, [their] calling to fulfill!”<sup>4</sup>

### Notes

1. Jennifer Riley, “Charismatic Christianity in US—Myths Exposed,” *Christianity Today*, January 8, 2008, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/charismatic.christianity.in.us.myths.exposed/16054.htm> (accessed November 20, 2012).

2. “A Profile of Protestant Pastors in Anticipation of ‘Pastor Appreciation Month,’” September 25, 2001, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/59-a-profile-of-protestant-pastors-in-anticipation-of-pastor-appreciation-month> (accessed November 20, 2012).

3. James Weldon Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” in *Complete Poems* (2000).

4. Charles Wesley, “A Charge to Keep I Have,” in *Short Hymns on Select Passages of Holy Scripture* (1762).