

# 'Ecclesiastical apartheid' holding female ministries back

African-American Michael Eric Dyson is a minister with a big vocabulary. And according to Dyson, "Ecclesiastical Apartheid" is a serious problem in the black church. Translation: Black women are at least 60-70 percent of the church attenders. Nevertheless, they are in most cases barred from the highly-prized office of MIC: Minister-in-charge. Many white churches face that exact same problem.

A National Study in 2001, which included all races that attend Protestant denominations, reflected Rev. Dyson's remarks – but on a larger scale. The data showed that nationwide attendance was 61 percent women and 39 percent men.

It may sound like something from colonial times, but actually in recent years at least 100 white female preachers have been forced out of their denomination's churches. Evidently, not everyone interpreted Acts Chap. 2 verse 17 ("... I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ..."). Or, maybe the patriarchal "glass ceiling" is unbreakable.

Yes, this is the 21st century. And yes, women are forbidden to teach in some seminaries. And yes, 50

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percent of the women who do graduate from Protestant seminaries are assigned to the "poor churches" that male clergy don't want to pastor.

When I started counting and realized that I know at least 11 female ministers, I was pleasantly surprised. Some are black, some are white. They are ministers who have "overcome," who have survived the struggle; pastors who talk the talk and walk the walk. Where could I find better company?

The Eleven: Grace Whitehead, Kokomo; Jan Dubois, Evansville; Karen DeVasher, Avon; Marge Woods, Boonville; Ida Easley, Rushville; Gladys Maina, Muncie; Deborah Grady, Indianapolis; Karen Altergott, Kokomo; Karen Sureck, Boonville; Lilian Elias, Kokomo; Gloria Carter, Kokomo.

From Bible Times and into the 21st century, devout, devoted

*"The place of women in the life and work of the Christian Church was distinctly foreshadowed in the part they played in the Resurrection Story; they were last at the cross and first at the tomb."*

— "Endless Line of Splendor"

By Halford E. Luccock

women have been equal to the task of pastoring and preaching. The late Halford E. Luccock's book, "Endless Line of Splendor," is a book of vignettes about significant Christian experiences including the activities of Christian women in the Early Church.

Luccock wrote, "The place of women in the life and work of the Christian Church was distinctly foreshadowed in the part they played in the Resurrection Story; they were last at the cross and first at the tomb."

He continued, "Recall the beginning of Christianity in Europe. When St. Paul saw a vision of a man saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us,' he set sail for Troas across the little stretch of water that separates Asia from Europe. But when he arrived he did not see any man waiting. (Men sometimes have a way of disappearing on important occasions!).

"What St. Paul really found was an active local women's organization. And with that he began. That was enough to serve as a foundation for Christianity."

It is interesting how closely Luccock's words in 1950 so timely fit with the words spoken by Bishop McKenzie earlier this month. Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie is the first woman in the history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME Church) to reach the level of this Episcopal office.

Bishop McKenzie echoed Luccock's words when she agreed, "Women have been a part of the historical legacy of the church from the very beginning."

In America, in pre-colonial times, when there were no churches and the major denominations were still in Europe – it was women who gathered in prayer groups in homes, said the Bishop.

"It was women who started the

churches – without confirmation and ordination." It was women who went walking and preaching beyond their homes, said Bishop McKenzie, walking thousands of miles spreading the Gospel.

It may come as a surprise that some of those women who started churches from the prayer groups in homes were former slaves and free blacks. There were laws in many areas that prohibited them from conducting religious meetings, but they would not be stopped.

Zilpha Elaw was one of those pioneering preachers. In 1827, she began preaching in chapels and homes in Philadelphia, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, Virginia, Maryland and Wash. D.C. She was even invited to preach in England.

Julia Foote was the fourth child of former slaves. As a woman preacher, she faced a lot of opposition but continued preaching for 20 years.

From bible times, through slavery times, and into the 21st century, "Women are still taking care of the Body of Christ," said Bishop McKenzie. "For years, women have been the unsung heroes and heroines of the Church."

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