

The Woman's Coffeehouse of Spirit

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The Changing Role of Women
in North Carolina Protestant,
Catholic, and Jewish Congregations
over the Last Forty Years

A Readers Theatre Presentation

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The Woman's Coffeehouse of Spirit

Cast of Characters:

A = Anna, African Methodist Episcopal	B = Barbara, Baptist
E = Elizabeth, Episcopalian	J = Jessica, Jewish
L = Loretta, Lutheran	M = Monica, Moravian
P = Priscilla, Presbyterian	Q = Queenie, Quaker
R = Ruth, Roman Catholic	U = Ursula, United Methodist

This Readers Theatre presentation is a script to be performed by a group of women in a sanctuary, fellowship hall, or classroom. Eleven women (one narrator, ten religious representatives) is an ideal number of readers, but a smaller number is possible. Microphones could be helpful in larger spaces or with older audiences. A standing mike with two music stands might be a helpful prop. Some stage business (coffee-drinking, knitting, for example) is indicated, but readers can bring to the performance whatever tasks they are most likely to be doing when they chat with other women (scrapbooking, drawing, reading a paper, rolling bandages). Some of the speeches might allow for photographs to be held up and passed around.

The entire script, read with vigor and without breaks, takes approximately one hour. Allowing time for answering the questions posed by the narrator after each scene will lengthen the performance time. Some groups might wish to do one scene at a time, over a period of a day's retreat or as part of a weekly meeting. This would allow extensive time for discussion of the questions.

The Readers Theatre text is essentially the words of women themselves who were interviewed in small group settings by members of the North Carolina Council of Churches Task Group on the Impact of the Women's Movement on North Carolina Congregations. Questions were formulated under the direction of the UNC Oral History Project, which will also be the repository of the taped interviews and transcripts. The Readers Theatre is the Task Group's effort to share the fruits of those interviews with a broader audience of interested persons of faith.

The Task Group included: Bobbie Armstrong, Nancy Brown, Judith Dancy, Connie Gates, Lehoma Goode, Bett Hargrave, Deborah Houser, Bridget Johnson, Raachel Jurovics, Lois MacGillivray, Melissa Malami, Evelyn Mattern, Marguerite Robinson, Amelia Stinson-Wesley, Jeanette Stokes, Melinda Wiggins, Doris Yeattes and others.

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Scene 1
Acolytes and Kitchen Help:
Becoming Aware of Gender Differences

Ten women sit at two tables. All of them face the audience. Two coffeepots and cups for each woman are on the table. Every now and then, as they speak, one of them pours for another, or some take sips from their cups.

Narrator: Let's listen in on this conversation among North Carolina Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish women. We've asked them to talk about the time they became aware of gender distinctions in their congregations.

P: We started going to the Presbyterian church when I was in sixth grade. I loved it, everything about it. I knew early on that I wanted to work there. I can remember late at night preaching sermons as I went to sleep and, when the minister was preaching, saying things in my head, finding ways to say it better than he did.

B: In my Baptist church the boys got the good parts. They got to carry the flag, the girls got to carry the Bible. Men took up the offering, but the women did everything. At eight or nine, I wanted to be a preacher, but my mother said that only men could be preachers. In my mother's rural church, back then all the men and boys sat on one side, the women and girls on the other.

R: I grew up in the Catholic church, where only boys were altar servers. Boys became priests, and girls became nuns. I thought priests had the better jobs. I remember playing priest with my brothers. I always had to be the congregation. My younger brother was an altar boy, but when we changed parishes I found out I could be a collector. I don't even know what you call it, but I collected the money. I had a little nametag. I was an usher. I went up and down the aisles and collected the money for the offering.

Q: George Fox, founder of the Quakers, was pushing equality for women and men back in the 1600s. We have examples like Charity Cook who traveled as a missionary or traveling Friend both in and out of this country for years and years. However many children she had, nine or ten, they were at home with her husband and whoever else cared for them. She did that with the support of the meeting she served as a recorded minister. So I don't think we have as many issues as other churches do in this regard. There were separate men and women's business meetings, but that was not so much to keep people separate as it was to give women a real voice. The fear was that in the general business meeting, their voices were lost in the voices of men's leadership.

U: My family has been United Methodist for several generations. I went to seminary back in the 1940s, but growing up it was clear that men were pastors and women were heads of religious education. The women were in the kitchen preparing the food and setting the tables for the fellowship meals. You know the dichotomy. In my early twenties, I went to a friend's wedding, and she had a female pastor. I thought it was one of the weirdest things I'd ever seen.

R: In my Catholic school, the ultimate authority was the priest, even though the woman principal was well qualified. He was the disciplinarian who sent students home, for example. You stood as one when the pastor came in the room, but the principal came and went quietly.

I asked my mother if I could be an altar server, and she said, "That's for boys." She also didn't want me to play ball. Being told I couldn't play the drums because it was a boy's instrument, I ended up playing the trombone! I helped my mother clean the church and played

priest and watched my brother serve mass. I didn't question it except that I did play priest—with Necco wafers.

M: I didn't grow up in the Moravian church. I grew up in the Plymouth Brethren. They took very much to heart St. Paul's admonition that women should keep silent, and so we wore gloves and we wore stockings and we wore hats and we did all the work. But the men ran the church. They thought they were telling the women what to do. My mother had gone to Salem College and was a person, not simply a reflection of my father's wishes, although I can remember some clashes at home over that. So it was strongly ingrained in me that women were just as good as men and could do anything a man could and have babies on top of it. We joined a Moravian church because of what we perceived to be a different attitude toward women.

U: My father was a minister, and his father was a minister, and all six of his brothers were ministers. People always said to my brothers, "Which of you are going to follow in your father's footsteps?" As a third grader, I remember I felt like I was screaming on the inside, "That is me, me, me," but no one ever addressed that question to me. I loved being in church, but the language was always "he, he, he." I felt left out of what was going on because it wasn't language about me.

Then the acolytes were boys, and I wanted to light those candles so bad. This was in the early 1970s, late 1960s. I think my father just wanted me to shut up, but he finally let me light the candles, wear the little robe, and walk down the aisle. And then girls just came in droves wanting to do it.

L: In my catechism class, a girl a year older than me asked our Lutheran pastor why she couldn't be an altar girl the way her brother was an altar boy. The pastor made fun of it, laughing and saying, "We always have boys." My older sister became a Presbyterian minister, and my father—who was very conservative himself—was offended that she was never asked to come to our home church and preach.

R: My three sisters and I attended Catholic Vacation Bible School and pestered the priest until he let us serve during one of the weekday Masses. We were so excited. Of course we didn't have any training, but we knew the format of the Mass and did the best we could. What I remember most is the ribbing that we took from the boys after that Mass. "You looked so silly," "You did this wrong," "You left the book up there when you left," "That's why boys are altar boys and not altar girls!" Never mind that they had had training and we hadn't.

J: When I was a child, only boys went to Hebrew School. I thought of Hebrew as mysterious. Men were the leaders in the Temple. There were few opportunities for women to be involved, but my mother was president of the Sisterhood. We celebrated Shabbat at home, but only my father and grandfather went to synagogue. I do remember when I was eight years old, the boys and girls davening together, you know, praying. Once, during the last week of camp, the boys didn't show up and the girls led the services.

R: I had three daughters who all wanted to be servers, especially when they saw the boys on the altar horsing around and jiggling each other. They felt they could do better. Around the same time, I served on the diocesan liturgical committee and saw that the nuns, who had the degrees and experience, were not given the respect that the priests were given.

U: I remember sitting in the pew, looking up there and thinking I could do what that preacher does. When I was seventeen, I really surrendered all of myself to God and said, "I am yours, however you wish to use me." Yet I had to swallow hard because it meant that I would be a Sunday School teacher the rest of my life.

P: First I thought, "I'll need to be a minister's wife, that's what I'll need to be. I'll have to go find me a minister to marry." Then it became, "Oh, I'll be a missionary, because women can be missionaries." I saw women missionaries. Then our church hired a Director of Christian Education, so I was going to be a Director of Christian Education. That's about where I was when I went off to college. In college, our campus Director of Christian Education went to seminary, and I also met my first associate female pastor. Immediately, I said, "That's going to be me."

R: I don't think I felt the difference as a real ache until 1970, 1972, when I was principal at a Catholic high school and negotiating a higher salary for the nuns there. For the first time I realized that the brothers got a higher salary than the sisters for the same work. That really hurt. Around the same time, a new bishop was installed, and men were at the center of the ceremony. There was no inclusion of women. I remember standing there weeping, not knowing why I was weeping, and it was clear to me afterwards that I knew I didn't belong to that church anymore.

E: For three years I represented the Episcopal Church Women on a board of the national Episcopal church. And it was all men. And they were not only all men, they were like little Bobbsey Twins. They all dressed alike, looked alike, talked alike, thought alike. I couldn't even believe it. I just kept asking, "Where are the women? How can you represent the church when you are all white old men?"

Q: When I first met Quakers, in college, I learned that women in the Quaker church had had a ministry for several hundred years, but I didn't see that in Greensboro. I have been pleased to see that North Carolina has opened its doors for more female pastors than they had at one time, and as I look back, I remember there was a female pastor in our county, so I have known of female pastors all my life.

U: A few years after I decided to give my life to God, I had a vision that I would go to seminary and I laughed, just like Sarah. I laughed to have imagined it. And it was probably five or six years later that I went to the senior pastor at a large church in Dallas where I worked and said, "I know that I can never be a preacher but I keep having this longing to learn more and do more and give myself more." He asked, "Why can't you be a pastor?" and I said, "Because the Bible says so, and who has ever heard of a woman pastor anyway?" And he said, "Why don't you go to seminary, and then we will talk about it." And he paid for my books and tuition and child care and gave me time off work to go. Imagine this impossible thing! I was probably twenty-five at the time.

L: In Tulsa, I was the first woman on our Lutheran church's Council, and a new minister said about me, "I know I am going to have a hard time with her." And I had a terrible time with him. It was an elected position, and the men stood up for me, thank goodness. Later, when I confronted the minister, he apologized and said it was because of some woman in his last church who "was a real bitch," and he was glad I didn't turn out to be like her.

R: For a while I was a contemplative Carmelite nun, and I asked my Jesuit professor if I could study Scripture. He asked, "Well, have you read the Bible yet?" I told him I had not sat down to read it cover to cover but had heard or read most of it. "Well, Sister, go read the Bible and then come back to me," he said. He was basically cutting me adrift, patting me on the head and saying, "Run along, Sister."

E: Even in my adulthood, women were still in the church kitchen. We prepared meals and did not serve on the vestry and certainly on nothing in the diocese. We were patted on the head and told what a wonderful meal it was. We also kept the altar linens nice and everything polished! The main way Episcopal Church Women raised money was with bake sales, handicrafts, and

bazaars. But we decided to have another kind of fundraiser. We had a wine and cheese tasting and made just as much money and had a lot less work. Actually, we made more money and have never stopped having the wine and cheese tastings.

A: My mother and father were active in the church we attended. My mother was the Superintendent of Sunday Schools, but the minister was always a man and only men were allowed to hold a trustee position. During services, the minister was in the center, the male officers were on one side, and the female stewards were seated on the other side. The women in an AME church could do anything except lead a congregation. There were only men in the Amen corner.

Narrator: (to audience) Tell us when you first became aware of gender differences in the church. (Allow the audience some time to speak to this. For a small group, it could be five minutes. If a large group, take time to break into small groups for discussion.)

Scene 2
What Changes We Have Seen

The women may move to chairs or to a sofa and chairs away from the table. They could have in their hands a book, drawing pad, knitting, a cup or coffeepot, or other appropriate prop.

Narrator: We asked the women to tell us the changes they've seen in their congregations.

R: As Roman Catholics, we have to measure changes with a 200-year ruler. It takes so long to move this huge institution. We've had female altar servers for seventeen years. We are also pastoral associates and lectors and distribute communion. Women are finally on the altar and not cleaning it.

In our parish I haven't gotten the sense that there's somebody who wants to be something you can't. Except for the ordained male, everybody seems equal. But I recently began to wonder if our female associate might not want to be a priest. In her position, I might want to. As it is, women can do almost anything, but they do it only because the priest allows it. They are excluded from decision making.

J: As a youngster I would go to Rabbi Kirschblum. He gave two speeches, one political speech about who to vote for, and one about why women shouldn't be rabbis. My dad encouraged me to study to be a rabbi anyway, and one of the first women cantors was in my Temple. Seeing Judaism through her eyes influenced me. The president of our Temple is a woman, and there are more women rabbis now, except in the Orthodox tradition.

U: One change among Methodists is that I am in seminary because we got a female pastor in our church. Two other women and a man also went, but the man didn't finish. I guess he needed a good male role model!

L: I remember when Lutheran women were first ordained. I didn't think it was a big deal. I do remember our pastor wanting to call a young woman as an associate. He was really worried about it, checking around with every member of the congregation to see if they'd accept a woman. And they did. But how many times since then have I heard that the woman gives a wonderful sermon "even though she is a woman?"

R: By the time I got to college, I would make it to the second floor of the student union but not be able to make it through the chaplain's doors because of the two formidable priest chaplains. Then they hired a laywoman, and all of a sudden there was a woman up there who in my eyes had equal pay and was equally or more articulate and had much more connection with the students and indeed far more credibility. Finally, there was a woman in a position of power in my life that I wanted to be like.

B: What started the change was courageous and open men, especially male ministers who saw the value women bring to the church. The minister at my church stepped aside to share the pulpit with a woman. He always used inclusive language and images of an open God. On the other hand, I worked at a women's college where the male chaplain had been there for thirty-plus years. He "preached to the girls." When he retired, they hired a woman chaplain who included the women in the services by inviting them to help.

E: It was two male ministers, Lex Matthews and George Reed, who talked me into taking a year off from my job to travel the state and talk with women in the churches about supporting the Equal Rights Amendment. After the Amendment did not pass, Lex asked me to be involved in the Episcopal Women's Task Force. And after that, I ran for County Commissioner and won!

I credit Episcopal Bishop Bob Estill with encouraging me to think about the priesthood. I went to him to discuss ordination to the diaconate. I was married with a bunch of kids, and had never finished my bachelor's degree, and didn't have any money for education. I said, "I'm called, but I can be a deacon because I don't have to go away to school and stuff." He looked at me and said, "Your call to the priesthood is so obvious, why are we talking about this?" I said, "Well, I just can't do that." He just sat there and waited. He really was a catalyst, and he paid for my education and said, "I'm doing this because I want ordained women like you in the diocese." So that was wonderful.

But there wasn't a lot of other support. The Commission on Ministry kept asking me about my kids. I hardly ever got questions about me. The guys who were going through the process got asked a whole different set of questions. Nobody cared about my theology. Nobody cared whether or not God had called me. They wanted to know if my husband and my children were supportive.

M: We came to the Moravian church at just about the time that the official roles of women were changing: women on the board of Elders, women as chairpersons of committees, women as ordained ministers, our first female bishop just last year. It was once considered that ushers were men, and to see a pregnant usher in shorts serving last summer was really an interesting experience.

I had the experience of serving with two male pastors mentoring a seminary student while he did an internship in a nursing home. I was the only one who brought literary resources for this student to read and the only one with suggestions for him about structuring his work, but I was never listened to. Everybody would politely listen to what I had to say, and then there would be this silence. They would talk a little bit, and then one of the male pastors would come up with the same idea I had just previously given. Then it was accepted. I know that still goes on, but I think the difference now is being able to confront it in a way that people can hear.

P: My boyfriend, later my husband, and I were in seminary together and did our internship at the same church in Tennessee. I did it one year, and he did it the next. We were both studying feminist theology, and we had the exact same job title, exact same pay, everything. I was put under the direction of the associate pastor who was a female and a great mentor to me, and of course I was put in charge of the youth group. I did very little in the pulpit and went on some home visitations with her but not much. At the end of the summer, I was given a beautifully hand made card, with pictures of me and the youth group, and a T-shirt.

The next summer, my boyfriend, doing the same internship, was put under the care of the senior pastor—a man, so it was not totally inappropriate—but that also meant that he was in the pulpit every Sunday. And he did visitation with the senior pastor. And he did a little youth work, not nearly what I did. At the end of the summer he was given an official letter of thanks from the session. How we were reinforced in that same position was very curious. I got the warm fuzzies but nothing formal or official. He didn't get the warm fuzzies but got the formal. We thought about how we would both have liked both kinds of affirmations. Later, when we were married, even serving as co-pastors, we saw those kinds of reinforcements over and over.

E: When it came time for me to finish seminary, nobody wanted a woman. The first job I had was in a parish where the rector told me he could not hire me because the church would never accept a woman. Then months later, after being unable to hire a man for the job, he was sent back to me and said, "The bishop is forcing you down my throat." I had to go through an elaborate process that none of the other candidates had to go through before I was actually hired. And I met with all kinds of opposition, except in places like the Women's Issues Commission where women were saying, "We are going to see to it that you get through."

This past year, our diocese went through the process of putting together a slate of nominees for bishop. I was nominated early on but, after much prayer and consideration, took my name

out of the process. There were a number of reasons for that, but mainly it had to do with a sense of personal safety and need for protection. Somewhere in my gut I knew that a woman would not be elected and that the process would be very arduous and painful. When the slate was announced, it was all male—one African-American and four white men—and none from this diocese.

I immediately began to get calls from around the diocese asking why I wasn't doing this. I ultimately figured out that I was being called into the process. So I put my name in, but as soon as I did, I had other people call and ask, "Why are you doing this? Is it just because you think there needs to be a woman on the slate? Why bother?"

At one of the dinners during our "dog and pony show" where we trot around to various places, one of the other nominees was sitting beside me and said, "You know, Elizabeth, I really want to take this opportunity to tell you how much I respect and admire you for allowing your name to be put into this process, knowing as you must that there's no way you can be elected." I was so stunned to hear that from another nominee, it was all I could do to keep my face flat and return to my lasagna. I had thought I was well enough known and respected that I could be considered in the process as a person instead of as a woman. And it simply was not true. I was the woman candidate and we are not going to elect one yet.

P: After I participated in the installation of a pastor in our town, one woman came up to me and said, "It was really neat to see a woman up there. You know when you were up there, I thought, one day maybe our church should try to have a woman associate." And I said, "Oh, I look forward to the day when you have a woman head of staff." You would have thought I had hit her in the face. Her smile dropped, she took a step back, and the conversation finished. She walked away as if I had insulted her. It was as if there was only one box for a woman to be in.

E: I started as an assistant, but the second job is really hard to get. We are still steered into, "Wouldn't you consider being a chaplain at a school? Have you thought of hospital chaplaincy work?" Or, "We have this small struggling congregation out here in east Podunk that we can't get anybody for" (that is, we can't get a man because the salary is too low). My last job I worked seven years below diocesan minimum because I had to take the job and they couldn't pay me more. Eventually I managed to get the church to a size where they could pay me minimum. But women will tell you about these jobs all over the country.

A: When I graduated from my Ordination Class in New York, I remember that out of the seventeen people in the class, fifteen of us were women. We now have our first woman AME bishop. I feel this is a move in the right direction. The way it was before, a Presiding Elder had to be really sick, almost dead, before retiring—this meant that no openings were available to be filled by women. The men would not retire and give women the opportunity to advance within the established hierarchy. Now, you're forced to retire at the age of seventy. So there's room for women to move up.

U: I remember our former Methodist District Superintendent trying to appoint a woman to a small rural church about eight years ago. They said they weren't going to have a woman because women don't visit. He asked, "What do you mean they don't visit?" "Well," they said, "You know that they can't see to drive at night! I have to drive my wife everywhere she goes cause she can't see at night. You put a woman in here, and she won't get out at night."

P: In seminary you get asked this question in Pastoral Care Ethics class. You're a pastor, and you're called to go to the hospital in the middle of the night. One of your parishioners has just come back from Africa with a very, very contagious disease. You need to minister to this person, but there's a high risk of the disease if you're in the same room. They warn you. Then they ask

what you'd do. The men always said, "Of course I'd go." The women always said, "You've got to be kidding. Endanger myself and my whole family?"

U: We had some people leave the church last year partly over welcoming other sexual orientations and partly because they just went out the door saying, "A lot of this would never have happened if we hadn't had a woman pastor." One of the oldest members was ninety-one when I came and had been sort of the "first lady" of the church because her husband had been pastor here about forty years ago. She wielded a lot of authority in the church. Some said, "You need to go see Elsie right away and befriend her," because she had put out the word that she didn't think this church was ready for a woman minister. And I went to her home and shared my faith journey, and she shared hers, and within two hours we were both crying and praying for each other and feeling like we were cut out of the same cloth. Once she was willing to accept there might be a woman standing in her husband's pulpit, a lot of the congregation agreed.

But there was a chair of the board who couldn't figure out what to call me. He said, "Well, do I call you Brother Coffman or Preacher Coffman, or who are you?" He just couldn't think about how I fit. Finally he said, "I will just call you 'preacher lady.'" And that's what he always called me—or Miss Preacher. At board meetings and in public, he would say, "This is Miss Preacher." He came back from a trip one time and brought me a trinket that says, "When God created man, She was only joking." I knew that was his way of trying to soften the distance that he just couldn't seem to get across. Yet he also is no longer a part of this church. He doesn't think women ought to be pastors. But I think that is somewhat of a smoke screen for some people. There are other issues, and it is easier just to target my gender than to deal with change, its theological implications, homophobia, racism, and all kinds of things that would have stayed the same if we hadn't had a woman.

L: Another change is in language, inclusive language in the liturgy, even though it seems that sometimes women are fighting the changes. I do think the males in the hierarchy are trying to change their own minds, catching themselves when they make a mistake in language. But it takes a long, long time. There is so much power in words.

P: I don't think this is necessarily limited to women. There's the whole sense of renaming and redefining the traditional things of faith. It's the whole Re-imagining issue. Someone in our congregation made a really interesting point. We had a blow-up about inclusive language. This is a church that has been doing inclusive language for years, and it is still a battleground. One of the things she pointed out was, "Our language is not really inclusive. We either use neutral or male. We don't use female imagery." I've never thought about that, but she is right. We say it is inclusive, but it isn't, or we would be more comfortable with both.

R: I do hear better language, "brothers and sisters," although many lectors and pastors don't use it. Last week we had a Justice Pledge at church, and the leaflet read, "as often as you do this to the least of my brothers..." I emailed the pastor immediately, and he agreed to send those leaflets back.

My children are now four and six, and they do skits, saying "Body of Christ" and giving out communion. We talk with God as both male and female and explain that God is neither. My son refers to God as she, but the girl, who's older, has already come to the realization that referring to God as male is more conventional and she is comfortable with it, which is fine with me as long as she knows that God is not male. Jesus is male. God is not male. She did ask me a few weeks ago, "Why do we say Amen?" I was still trying to figure out what she meant when she added, "Why not Awomen?"

U: Something I've seen change is our theology, our understanding of God. It always bothered me that I am called a "son of God" or that God is a man and Jesus is a man and the pope is a man

and the preacher is a man and the disciples were all men. Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and anybody who did anything great in the Bible was a man. Jesus didn't have any women that followed him, apparently. But having women clergy has made us rethink that whole language bit. I missed choir practice Thursday night, and the choir changed the wording of a hymn from "men's applause" to "world's applause." So now we are humanity instead of mankind, and it has changed how we think the world looks. It's not that we're trying to turn the hierarchy upside down, but we are trying to flatten it so it is a circle that says we are all in this together.

P: My daughter is eight years old. She has grown up in a church where male and female images are both used for God. We are reading through Matthew at night, a few verses at a time, and the other night she said, "Mama, we don't know Jesus was a boy." And I said, "Yeah, we do."

"No, Mom, Jesus can be a girl or a boy." I told her, "God can be a girl or boy, and Jesus could have been a girl or boy, but in fact if you become human, you have to be one or the other. And it just so happens that Jesus was a boy."

"No, Mom," she said, "It says what child is this? Child doesn't mean it is a boy." What she understands is that there is a generic he out there, that he doesn't necessarily mean a boy.

Q: I have a seven-year-old son and a nine-year-old daughter, and when they refer to God in the masculine, I often will add, "Or her." And they will go, "Mom," although they won't argue with me that God is both. They do feel that the God presented to them in the Bible and in the hymnbooks carries authority, and that's a masculine God. I know their Sunday school teacher uses masculine language for God.

I try to use inclusive language myself. I've heard people say that one reason they don't like to hear God referred to as Father is because their image of a father is not loving and kind. I grew up with a loving father, and it's not hard for me to picture that, but I try to be sensitive to other people's feelings.

When I was teaching young people, junior and senior high, in the skits we did for meeting for worship, I tried to get them to take different parts. I recall in one part we did have the female voice offstage speaking as God. People snickered a little bit, but then they went right on with it. It is important to get beyond that.

Narrator: (to audience) Have you seen changes in your congregation other than those already mentioned?

Scene 3
Surviving in Hope

The women could return to the tables again, with coffee cups and other props. Someone could be arranging flowers.

Narrator: Where do you get your support to be able to keep on practicing your faith?

R: My husband and I talk over a glass of wine at the end of the day. We both know we try to live in the image of God, even though God may not be mentioned. It nourishes me. I confess to my husband, who's a good person and sets me straight again. Together we have the faith that we will get through it. I don't think anything could hit the two of us now that we couldn't get through.

We also belong to a small Christian community, a group within our parish that meets every other week, and we set our own agenda. We watched a series of tapes on the contemporary church and discussed those. We have gone through a book on sacraments. We do community outreach projects together, and we sit around and gripe and share. It's been a tremendous source of strength for us for more than three years now. When I leave there, I feel the grace of God upon us and thank God so profoundly for that community that raises my spirits and gives me hope.

Q: I definitely find community within my Sunday school class. We have been together a long, long time. We agree or disagree, but we continue to care about each other. We do Bible study but talk about other things as well, people's health and what we need to do for them.

J: I think at the moment I am most comfortable with my faith in Jewish Renewal, but I slither between many communities. My friends are in the Chauvaura, and that gives an outlet for creative energies and a sense of family. What's also nice about the Chauvaura is that it is OK to express faith or the lack thereof. I also enjoy my friendships with Orthodox Jewish women. They educate my children, and I understand them.

R: My husband and I meet with a small group, we call it a house church, not all Catholics, every other week. I do centering prayer every morning, a good discipline for me. In the last few months I feel like we're Bible freaks all of a sudden, we read it so much, and we read other books together. But I think that the base of my support comes from the Catholic Worker movement, a community gathering with other Catholic Workers. They challenge me. I don't know where I'd be without the Catholic Worker movement, as well as my husband and other people who sustain us spiritually.

We do all sorts of different things, and they come mostly from the church. We do Liturgy of the Hours, then we reflect on the gospel, and then we sit for fifteen minutes. I also have this asset. I feel like I am cheating. I am a doctor, and I get to spend all my day smoothing troubled children's brows and easing people on their journey. It's just such a tangible privilege, and it puts everything into perspective.

P: I'm still most comfortable in my own faith journey with small groups of clergy. And, interestingly enough, not all of them are people I necessarily agree with. I have one very good friend who's quite a bit more conservative than me, theologically, but is someone who is very open-minded and sees that I have a very alive and active faith, even though it may not match his all the time. And so I get to share a lot with him.

We debate issues, and it's very fun and very invigorating. We are a little bit spoiled with having a Presbyterian Council in our town, because it means our clergy have gotten to know each other. Some of us have gone to Haiti together; I think that was a big step, cementing some relationships that allow for those conversations.

U: I have a community that I have been a part of for about six years with seven other clergy, including a retired pastor. We get together to share our struggles and ministry, holding each other accountable. We saw that there were a lot of peers falling by the wayside in the ministry. There are a lot of snares that preachers particularly are predisposed to, so we come together to hold each other up and hold each other faithful. It has been a real good place for reality testing.

E: The Episcopal Women's Issues Commission polled all the Episcopal churches to find out what issues women were interested in. And the number one issue was (Can you believe it?) managing multiple roles. The second one was stress, the third one was world peace, the fourth was women's role in the church. Don't you love it? I remember we had workshops for all of those and added ones on Women and the Economy, Women and the Law, and How to Use a Power Structure.

A: The Keepers of the Word Women's Bible Study is led by women. This is an excellent opportunity to grow spiritually. The message every Sunday allows you to grow, but every Friday our Women's Bible Study allows us to grow through discussion. It has developed a sisterhood between us. We have gone through trials and tribulations through the Scripture and through life experiences. Now there is a connection, a sisterhood that no one will ever take away.

P: There's not much I can't do in terms of worship and liturgy with my little rural congregation. I've had a ten-year relationship with them. They are the craziest, and they don't even know how radical they are. They're just out in the middle of nowhere, population 600. When the new hymnbook came through, they didn't bat an eye. We even studied the human sexuality document, and they were fine about it. You know, we didn't emphasize the homosexuality stuff. I went over it, and several of them disagreed, but that wasn't the emphasis. The thing they really got into was the stuff about the elderly (because a lot of them have aging parents) and how there should be privacy for elderly people and some understanding of their sexuality.

U: I need structure, and one of my struggles is that I miss the structure of seminary, although while there I felt I had two worshipping communities—seminary and my home church—and that left me with a sense of being slightly outside the group. One structure I've found helpful is the renovare movement, which sets the stage for discussing spirituality and how it is manifested in our lives. I like groups that include women my age with similar life situations.

P: A group of women in our church has been meeting together as a spirituality group for a year. They said, "We want to do this. What committee do we need to be under?" I said, "Are you asking for anything? What's the deal?" And they said, "No, we've met through the church, and we want to do this." Now these women all happen to be very involved with the church, but they are enhancing their outward journey with their inward journey.

And the best Sunday school class we've got going is one that said, "We want to do this Bible study because when we were growing up, that is not what the church was doing." To me, they are the strongest symbol of what the church should be because they do Bible study together, and they are very involved in each other's lives. They start with joys and concerns, and they put the tough stuff out there, like, "I'm thinking about leaving my husband." In how many churches do people put that out there?

B: There is a level of intimacy in small groups of women.

R: I've met with a small group of women for six years that was originally formed out of discussion group with men and women. We begin with prayer, take ten minutes of quiet, discuss a book, and then end with prayer. I try daily to do "growth reading" also. Especially living in a male household—with a husband and two sons and a male cat—I feel more comfortable in

women's groups. We women are wired differently, more nurturing. I've been in art groups also where we quickly weeded the men out.

U: I was part of a women's spirituality study at Duke University a few years ago. It brought together women who were Christian, Jewish, and others faiths as well. That was a real world opening for me because I began to see how similar the journeys are of people from many walks of life who want to understand God and have a life of prayer and meditation. It helped me celebrate the uniqueness of my faith without thinking I need to convince the whole world of it.

M: Where I get community is a women's religious group in town that meets once a month. For a while we had a Unitarian, and we have some nuns off and on, but it's not an agenda group. We have a meal and enjoy time together and share our worst horror stories or just what's happening in our lives.

Also, the women of Gemeinschaft have really become a core group of support for me. It's a uniquely Moravian program that deals in a small group with spiritual matters, developing a great deal of spiritual discipline in the process. It has been interesting to me also to incorporate our daughter into the group and faith. I can remember the first time she said, "I really think you need to pray about that a little longer."

R: I meet God best when I am with the poor and serving the community there. Since high school when the youth minister had us going to the soup kitchen one week and then reading a book on Francis of Assisi next, this has always been the way for me. Now I go to the Wilmington Street Shelter and Wake Interfaith, where I meet with other people of faith to do service. Just doing church ministry isn't enough; it leaves me feeling sterile. I've lived with homeless people, and suddenly there's no one around who's ever even missed a shower!

I have an intense feeling of being strengthened by groups that are threatened as a group because of who they are. I seem to gravitate toward indigenous people in Central America and to be awed or encouraged by their hope in the face of devastation. The other side of the experience of being in a place like Chiapas, an experience so heavy and such a gift, is having a community of faith to talk to about it and act together on it. Here at home I don't have such a defined community yet. I really need to pray and to listen with one. I do have friends that keep me sane or insane. I cherish working with the group in the parish that's preparing to be baptized Catholic, and I associate with groups like People of Faith Against the Death Penalty and Call to Action, a group that works for justice in the Roman Catholic church.

Narrator: (to audience) Think for a moment about where you get your support in faith and hope. Perhaps you could share your thoughts with the person next to you.

Scene 4
And What of the Future?

Women still at the kitchen table continue their stage business.

Narrator: And what are your fears and hopes for the future?

P: There does seem to be some backlash going on. Some people are living by law, and their law is narrowly based on a few verses out of scripture and some traditional dogmatic positions. They are resisting any new expression of who we are and who God is and how we are all related. In the Presbyterian church, they are very, very vocal. And it's this desire—I don't know, I don't understand it fully—it's this sense that if they could nail everything down and get it all defined, life will be okay. And that's just not true.

R: I see that happening a lot in the Roman Catholic church in a lot of different ways with the hot topics: women's ordination and married clergy and inclusive language. People just react out of fear, people who have been harmed by the structures, people who are afraid of change. The rhetoric just increases, and it's so hard to meet in the middle. When they are reacting out of fear, their ears shut down. The hierarchy is reacting out of fear too, pulling power to itself and trying to protect things that shouldn't be protected.

U: There are more and more women in church and less and less men. The men are in positions of authority. Men in the hierarchy of the church are feeling threatened. They soon may not be in control, and so they are taking a strong hold on power and in some cases becoming exclusionary in order to maintain their positions. So for women going into seminary or ministry, there will be churches that open up, have had a change of heart, where you are welcome to the Christian assembly as pastor, and there will be a lot of hostility and resistance as well.

Our church has said we will be open to people of color and we will be open to women. I think the barriers are barriers of heart. You can make the laws in 1954, but you still have people in the year 2000 who in their hearts have not done the work. I think as you look historically, there is always someone who has been the "other" who we have wanted to leave out. And that impacts women.

L: Being African-American myself, I am more concerned about black males in the Lutheran Church than I am about anything. I think that they are more limited than the females in what they can do. We have women at every level, including bishop, and the head of Lutheran World Relief is female. I don't think that the powers that be fear the females as they do the African-American males. The church reflects society in this.

U: I regret that I was not able to empower the men in my congregation more. We tried to elect them to office. We tried to ask them to serve in lots of ways, but it seemed like my presence there, in the presence of strong women, sort of diminished the church so men didn't feel needed or useful or important or something. And I tried everything. I thought, "Do I need to be going to sports clubs with them? Do I need to learn to talk business language? Do I need to subscribe to the Wall Street Journal? Do I need to know the players' names in the schools around here? What can I do that will help me get on their page?" And there was nothing I could do any more than I could change my skin color if I were a person of color. I can't change being a woman, and I bring different gifts partly because of my gender.

I really have regretted the loss of men and the loss of men's leadership. An interesting thing is happening in the church now that the church is becoming more and more welcoming to gays and lesbians. We had the Triangle Gay Chorus come and sing for us this spring, and so we had thirty strong men's voices. They have come back to attend, one by one, and they brought their

friends, so we now have this masculinizing of the congregation again, and yet it's feminine men. They are ones who will bring casseroles and who paint the chapel pink and who don't mind wearing a choir robe and don't mind making coffee in the morning. We have men in the church again, the same number of male bodies in the seats.

L: With women, it's where the race situation was in the 1950s. There were people made principals who were black, but the racism was still there. What bothers me is that this is not what Jesus would have done if he were here. We wouldn't have had these power systems. We would have had inclusiveness. When our female pastor answers the phone and it's someone asking for money, she tells the other pastor, "Jesus is on the phone."

I would like to see the church have practical learning on relationships and talk about equality. I think it has to be pre-kindergarten stuff, conflict resolution, how we treat each other. The churches are not empowering, the Lutheran church and other churches. They should encourage us to struggle with our questions. We are given too many pat answers, and we don't talk about that. Doubting is part of learning, and I think a lot of people go away from the church because they are not allowed to do that.

P: We're seeing a decline in churches, at least denominational ones. Groups like Women of the Church and Presbyterian Women are declining rapidly now because some aren't interested. The older folks are saying, "Been there, done that." And the younger women aren't coming in because they're working, it doesn't fit their time schedule, or they want to be with a gender mix and people their own age and they're not willing to buy into trying to support this older group. Also, with everybody working, fewer people are stepping forward to take roles of responsibility in the church, and so it's beginning to be, "Let's hire people to do this." Whereas I think it is the participation that makes us a church, a body, and at least in our congregation, I'm seeing that less and less.

R: I've encountered so many lay people who have PhD's, who are doctors or lawyers and can do all kinds of things in their fields, and you talk about the faith, and they don't want to go there. They don't want to go to a place where they feel incompetent. They want to be adults, and they want to know, and they don't want to go to a place where they don't know. So if I could have just one wish for the church in the next thirty years, it would be that we have a real revolution of adults who know, who experience faith. Who know God. That's not just my bag. If it's not your bag, then what are you doing here?

In terms of knowledge, many of the women in parishes start out with a support job, and pretty soon they are in charge of evangelization. How did they get trained? How competent do they feel? They are told, "We need you, so come on, step in here, do this job." It's true, you can go to a conference. But I meet these women and know how they refer to themselves as not being prepared. It seems to me a justice issue.

M: I am wondering how the church is going to rethink. I mean, we are doing the same things we have forever: we have circles, we've got a women's retreat. I don't know how we are going to face the complexities of faith with women. Women are working full time, women are divorced and raising children on their own, women don't have much time for church and are just worn out. I'm not sure how, but if we have been doing it for fifty years, something has got to change. If everything is changing, this needs to too. I would like to see more lay leadership in worship. We pastors think we know what it is, and at my church worship can be dozy, kind of boring. Ideas will have to be lay led, seeing where women take and reshape them. Women are much more attentive spiritually than men are. I mean, they go to spiritual workshops. When they have retreats, they are not just an excuse to fish or golf. I see men learning from some of the ways women have found. I'd love to see some integration between male and female spirituality. There is hunger generally in the population, but we do not know how to address it.

A: There is a need in the land, in the world; and we as women need to work here. We have a singles ministry, a marriage ministry, and the Keeper of the Word ministry in our church. There's something for almost everyone, but there's still a group that falls in the cracks. Women are on drugs; some are coming off drugs. Women are incarcerated; they're either just coming in or just going out. We don't want to lose these women. We don't want women to leave the church and stay in abusive situations. We need to keep them here, worshipping.

R: To me it's important that we use inclusive language at church because that's a reflection of who we believe God is. If we believe God is exclusive, whether male or female, then that would be reflected in how we celebrate together as a community. And if we believe that God is powerless, and we come together as a community of powerless people to share a meal with people on the margins of society and ourselves on the margins of society, that's where we find true power. That's where we find God.

Also, the vast majority of the world's poor are women. So I think relinquishing power and seeking common ground together will make a more inclusive church and ultimately help the atmosphere for women as well as men.

U: We've got to be more diversified. We feel so comfortable with each other right now. We maybe need to get to the place where at times we are not so comfortable. For me it is very much a feminist model that you are able to disagree openly. Which is much more real than pretending, where we clench our teeth about each other. I find great hope in the feminine leadership of the church. It is a place where I think women have traditionally been able to be a community in a way that maybe men haven't been able and maybe yearned to be. I don't know what it is like to be a man and carrying all of that around. I have great hope because of women's leadership in churches.

R: I just saw an article about bishops having to approve theologians. It felt backwards, but I guess it's about control. There will probably be more controls, it will get worse until the "Berlin Wall" comes down. I guess there is hope in the fact that the bishops might think they are losing control. Like the Good Samaritan story, where the man was "near death" before he would receive the help of the outcast Samaritan. The church may have to be near death before it can accept the help of women.

Jean Houston uses the image of the guardian at the gate protecting from change. They have a role to play in preparing us to cross the threshold to the new. That gives me hope; the bishops and the right are scared but may have a role in preparing us.

P: I've had several times now when I've gone to bat for particular women to be in particular positions or to be nominated, and then the women say, "No." And then my other colleagues will go, "What happened?" The hard part we all struggle with, I do, is to show up or not, but when women clergy are complaining things aren't happening but then can't show up, then a few of us are left. If there is an expectation that we are going to have different kinds of roles, we have to be there to be building them.

R: I'm not comfortable with ordaining women. I am certain women could be just as good as priests, but you'll find that 90% of priests would then be women, and it will be a very feminized church. I think that men like to be in charge. I see some hope in movements like Promisekeepers. If men had the spirituality that women have taken over in the family, it would help. I'd like to see a man teaching third grade catechetical classes. Very few of my friends (and I search them out) have husbands who share prayer, ethics, and values. Men step up in the business world but not in the spiritual area. If men respected women at home, work would be wonderful for women.

E: When women become more numerous on boards, commissions, etc., in leadership positions, then men don't want to belong anymore. Look at the pharmaceutical profession. There are more and more women becoming pharmacists, and I read somewhere that the pay is going down. When women are starting to get a foothold in something, when they are still tokens and a definite minority, a lot of men don't feel as threatened as they do when more and more women have these leadership positions. And then when you think, "Oh good, progress is being made, I can breathe a sigh of relief," then you feel a backlash.

J: I don't perceive supporting women as an obstacle in our community. We continue to evolve. Women are in leadership positions most of the time. The men could do a better job creating traditions for men, as we have done as women. We all need to understand ourselves, and we need to feel a sense of community. If we are comfortable with who we are, and this requires our searching for God and meaning in life, then the second step would be to create outreach opportunities within the community.

U: One of my hopes for the Methodist church is our structure. I know that structure can be a problem at times, but I think with women in ministry, it is part of the solution because a pastor can be appointed to a church. The congregation can grow to understand. Other systems won't send pastors if the congregation says it isn't ready. So I do think our structure has helped us with this. We can just pray for that day that the structure will help us with other issues.

I think that little girls are growing up in a very different church, and it sounds different to their ears. They don't just hear "he, he, he," and they don't just see he, he, he. They are seeing something very different than even I did. I'm not even forty yet, but in my childhood there was nobody that looked like me and there was nothing that sounded like me. I think you just can't overlook how important that is.

Q: As a woman I feel very well supported by our congregation. I think there are a few areas in our meeting that we could improve upon, having women more involved as ushers, for instance. Our ushers are all men, and that just seems to be because that's the way it has always been. And Sunday school superintendents have been the same way, and we rarely have a man as a children's Sunday school teacher. So there are some areas that we could improve. But personally, I feel very well supported as clerk in any role that I take. When my daughter recently found out that women couldn't be Catholic priests, she asked, "Why? Women do everything in our meeting."

P: One Sunday morning, I was sitting in a wheelchair at the front of the church because I had a broken leg, and I called the children forward during the service. A little girl named Emma came running up. Emma was three, and she had just begun to be brave enough to come up for this. I put my arm around her and held her next to me during the whole time. The next day her mother told me that Emma said, "I got to stand next to God." That's such an important story to me because of what it says about how children image. How is Emma going to grow up differently because early on she thought God was a woman in a wheelchair?

A church in Chapel Hill has a female head of staff and often has female interns from Duke Divinity School. One Sunday they had a male as a guest preacher. One five year old leaned over and whispered, "Mom, can men be ministers too?" Often a parent will tell me a story about a child imitating me, for example, by wearing a scarf like a stole and saying, "Look, I'm like pastor Priscilla." That may mean that little girls—and little boys too—grow up knowing not only that they could be ministers but that they could be whatever they want to be and create their own image of what that is.

E: I've learned how important it is to struggle with a woman's group, but it is more important to go back to wherever you are and find some other strong women, because we can all find and

support strong women in our church and work with them to keep making changes. And if anything comes up that shouldn't be said or shouldn't be, to just speak out on it. And we do it, we do it, we approach our rector, and we approach other people, and tell them what we think and try to get a better understanding going.

I'm hoping some women will drop the church, get on out there. I think that some women are almost afraid to do that. We ought to push them to realize they don't have to keep all their time and energy in the church. The Christian's work, to me, is out there, it's not here.

R: I have been a member of the Roman Catholic Women's Ordination Conference since the beginning in the early 1970s, and one of the ongoing discussions has been, "If you could be ordained tomorrow, would you?" A small group always says, "Yes," to transform the system from within. And another group of us always says, "No, we want to be part of a renewed priestly ministry, not a part of that patriarchal system." Some systems haven't changed, even though you do have ordained women. So it's not as simple as getting into the system. The system has to crumble, like the Berlin Wall. I think it's already beginning to happen, but more and more it will become visible.

Q: I'm currently teaching an older women's class. Yesterday we were talking about the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, and I said we could say, "Our Mother." There was just silence, and I asked, "Does it really matter what we say?" There was an uncomfortable silence, and one of them said, "I still prefer Father, but I guess it really doesn't matter." So maybe we are getting there.

I took a course from a Catholic sister, Sister Patrice, on the feminine images of God. She said she always used to ask the children, "Who really loves you? Who really takes care of you?" And the answer would often be "Grandmother." And she would say, "Well, that's who God is."

R: In my children's lifetimes I'd like to see a church on the side of the poor and powerless and being advocates for them. My sister Angela is severely mentally retarded; she's my older sister, but she can't stand up for herself, she can't defend herself, she relies on us, has faith and trust in us that we will take care of her. And we do. She would free fall, and we would catch her, and we always do. We have to be advocates like that for those who can't help themselves. There are bigger issues than hierarchy. I think the real deal is that we need to be advocates for those who can't be for themselves. That's God's message.

B: It's hard to imagine creatively what I want the future to look like when I am so grateful for what we have. Moving out of the old models, I'm not clear that a new one shows its face yet. I will love it when gender is no longer an issue, when we don't have to struggle over it. I do know that the feminist way is a different way; it offers a way not to marginalize men as men have marginalized women. It's a liberation spirituality.

I also hope the church will have a greater influence and impact on the community, be a louder voice, rather than merely following what society decides. I hope that churches become leaders in equality, in showing what women can do. We can't be quiet. I hope that one day religion will stop being used as a weapon of division, that our consciousness will shift towards a more peaceful way of being.

Narrator: (to audience) And what are your hopes for the future of your congregations and the women in them? (Discuss in small groups.)

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