

REMEMBERING HER

". . . what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."
Matthew 26:13



Article 24

Retrieving Women's Histories

The Minister's Wife

Throughout most of history formal ordained leadership in the Christian church has been male, and the majority of active laity has been female. In the 20th century that pattern changed dramatically.

Some sociologists argue that the increase in the numbers of female clergy is the result of external social changes and stimulated by secular developments. Women with more education and experience in the world aspire to be involved more directly in church leadership. At the same time an argument can be made that the rising numbers of Protestant women clergy in the late 20th century relates directly to the evolving role of the minister's wife since the 16th century.

Until the Protestant Reformation there were no minister's wives. Male priests were officially celibate, although many of them maintained scandalous relationships with mistresses and fathered numerous bastard children. Furthermore, the importance of the Virgin Mary and theologies emphasizing carnal sins related to sexuality gave marriage a lesser status for both men and women.

In the 16th century, when many Protestant Reformers (such as Martin Luther and John Calvin) rejected celibacy, attitudes about marriage began to change. Protestantism emphasized the importance of the Christian home. The wives of the Reformers struggled with the role of the "minister's wife." Who was she? How should she relate to the church and to her spouse?

In 1983, historian Leonard I. Sweet wrote an important book—*The Minister's Wife: Her Role in Nineteenth Century Evangelicalism* (Temple University, 1983). In that book he suggests that four models for clergy wives have emerged over the past 500 years: the

COMPANION (a ministering angel who held up her husband's hands supporting him in his sacred calling); the SACRIFICER (who clasped her hands in pious resignation, asking little from her husband, financially or emotionally, and "hindering him not in his work" by staying out of his way and raising the family on her own); the ASSISTANT (who became her husband's right arm, sharing many pastoral responsibilities and functioning as an extension of his ministry); and the PARTNER (who ministered with both her own hands, developing a ministry alongside her husband, and often serving as the pastor's pastor). These models reflect four types of spirituality available to women. [pp. 3-4]

In early colonial America there are good examples of minister's wives who were wonderful companions. We do not know a lot about them, but funeral sermons celebrate their silent behind the scenes support. By the 18th century the importance of women's spiritual strength is seen as a virtue, enabling her to sacrifice personal gain for her husband's ministry.

With the spread of revivalism on the 19th century frontier, people came to believe that women were spiritually different, even superior, to men. As keepers of home and family they had responsibility and power to nurture religious faith. Whereas men were tainted by the expanding corruptions of public life, women could cultivate religious freedom and responsibility within the domestic sphere. This so-called "cult of domesticity" emboldened women to be assistants for their husbands, especially in their work with women and children.

Professor Sweet notes that by the 19th century "home" and "mother" and "heaven" had become sacred words pointing to new freedoms for women. Women's "place" went beyond assisting her husband, to exercising the God given authority of women as "guardians of morality, custodians of conversion, and cornerstones of society." As agents of moral transformation, women soon became actively involved in movements for cultural transformation in partnership with their clergy husbands. By the mid 19th century when young women said that they felt called to "some sphere of Christian usefulness," they simply married a minister. By the early 20th century being a minister's wife was a "passport to influence, deference and power." [Sweet, pp. 6-8]

Even today, it is no accident when retired male clergy remember their years of service in terms of "our" ministry, rather than "my" ministry. They remember their years in ministry in terms of "partnership," even when the church rarely recognizes or pays their spouse. This history is both an embarrassment and a gift. Minister's wives have strengthened and

enriched the church. They have often made it possible for female clergy (a few years later) to move into situations of leadership with minimal resistance. At the same time minister's wives have been misused and taken for granted by the church. They have found it difficult to find their own voice, or to nurture any independent vocational identity. Today the church needs to find new ways to support both the traditional marriages of church leaders (female and male) and to strengthen the ministries of female and male leaders living as singles or in non-traditional family patterns.

[August 2007]

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