

Tempered Radicals: Black Women's Leadership in the Church and Community

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Abstract

This study of historical and contemporary Black women and their experiences within churches in the United States suggests that Black women continue the legacy of their past, confronting the stained glass ceiling in pursuing their call to ministry and in identifying strategies for leading in the face of resistance. Today, Black women ministers confront the same socio-cultural and exegetical-hermeneutic arguments their predecessors faced, intended to keep them from the pulpit. Yet, centuries of perseverance have evolved strategies of tempered radicalism that help Black women ministers lead in the Black church despite opposition, by bending, breaking out of and circumventing the stained glass ceiling. The study ends with recommendations for further research on Black women's experiences with negotiating the stained glass ceiling and their strategies for leadership effectiveness in the church.

The Challenge of Women's Leadership

Women have been under-represented in positions of leadership in most arenas, including corporate, education, government and the non-profit sector around the globe. This under-representation has been described as the glass ceiling; a term coined by the Wall Street Journal to denote the apparent barriers that prevent women from advancing to the top of corporate hierarchies (Weiss 1999). The subject of women and leadership has received a lot of attention, particularly in the last two decades after the area of study was initiated by Rosabeth Moss Kanter in her incisive book about men and women in corporate America (Kanter 1977, 1997).

In the religious sector, the issue of the ordination of women has divided many churches and resulted in many conflicts. Most mainline protestant denominations in the United States (US) did not begin to ordain women until women's voices were initially heard following on the heels of the American civil rights movement, as women demanded equality of access. As Sullins (2000) found out, whereas some protestant denominations had in theory accepted the ordination of women as biblical and acceptable, it took several decades before this theory matched their practice both in the US and other parts of the world.

There is, moreover, a disparity between formal acceptance and actual status of women clergy in those denominations that ordain women. Empirical findings suggest that “the more responsible, prestigious, and superordinate church positions in virtually every female-ordaining denomination fall disproportionately to men” (Sullins 2000, 244). This phenomenon is referred to as the *stained glass ceiling*: those apparent barriers that keep women from attaining positions of authority within religious institutions, subordinating women to lower levels and/or smaller, financially strapped congregations (Williams-Gegner, Gramby-Sobukwe and Ngunjiri 2010).

Carroll and Washington (2006) indicated that, whereas Black women in the U.S. make up a large majority of Black church membership (up to 70%), they are only a tiny minority among its recognized spiritual leaders. The Black church lags far behind mainline protestant denominations in both formally ordaining as well as recognizing the spiritual authority of women in their ranks. 11% of those self-identifying as clergy in the 1990 census were women; however, in the Black church, only about 3% of clergy were women. Yet, women have played important roles in providing leadership for the Black church throughout its history, as evidenced by the lives and stories of phenomenal Black women, many who provided leadership without becoming formally ordained and/or recognized (Carpenter 2001).

Tempered Radicalism

Intersectionality is the interpretive framework undergirding this exploration of Black women’s experiences within the Black church who, because of their gender, race, and other social identity markers, find themselves at odds with the dominant culture. An intersectional paradigm indicates that the intersections of race and gender, sexuality and social class, shape Black women’s and other minority groups’ experiences within the US (Collins 1996, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991). As Alston (2005, p. 677) argued, “this concept helps to account for the complexity of the Black woman’s lived experiences, recognizing that race, class, and gender are markers of power creating intersecting lines or axes used to reinforce power relations and forms of oppression”.

Collins argued that Black women in the US have historically produced knowledge, but that knowledge is subjugated in the academy. Black feminist thought, an intersectional and critical theory, aims at exposing and dislodging the injustices faced by African Americans in the US, and increasingly, it is being extended to look at Black women’s experiences globally (Collins 2009). We uncover the historical, social and cultural factors that, combined, form the ‘matrix of domination’ (Collins 2009, 21) affecting Black women’s experiences in the church and limiting their access to the pulpit.

In addition to utilizing an intersectional paradigm, this study uses tempered radicalism as the thread connecting Black women's experiences within the Black church from the pioneers to contemporary moments. Tempered radicalism (Meyerson and Scully 1995; Meyerson 2001) explains the persistent involvement of Black women preachers as leaders in church and community, even in the face of resistance and discrimination. Tempered radicals seek authenticity, even as they live with the duality of a commitment to the institution along with an abiding disagreement with the organization's values and/or ideology. They struggle in institutions either because of their social identities, or their value systems, or both (Meyerson 2001). As radicals, they want to bring about change; pragmatically, such changes have to be brought about from within the organization – rocking the boat without falling out (Ngunjiri 2010, 147). The paradox tempered radicals face daily is not uncommon among racial minorities (Alston 2005; Kirton and Greene 2007; Meyerson 2001) and women (Meyerson 2007; Ngunjiri 2010) in the workplace. In this case, however, Black women's tempered radicalism occurs in their own communities and churches; from an intersectional paradigm, this would be because the source of their oppression is not just race in wider society, but also gender, and in their own communities (Collins 2009; Crenshaw 1991).

From a leadership perspective, “tempered radicals reflect important aspects of leadership that are absent in more traditional portraits. It is leadership that tends to be less visible, less coordinated, and less vested with formal authority; it is also more local...more humble than the activity attributed to the modern-day hero. This version of leadership... depends on patience, self-knowledge, humility, flexibility, vigilance and commitment” (Meyerson 2001, 171).

The Legacy of Black Women's Leadership in the Black Church and Community

While Black women preachers of the 19th century often did not receive formal recognition as clergy, they were influential preachers and leaders, authoritative in their proclamations and prophetic voice. Further, historically Black women served as critical organizers and leaders within the Black church and community. Yet, Black women found resistance and vast opposition to their leadership, in social movements and in the church, for socio-cultural and theological reasons (Williams-Gegner, Gramby-Sobukwe and Ngunjiri 2010).

We refer to Black women preachers of the nineteenth century as tempered radicals. They were tempered in that they shared with their male counterparts a common commitment to Christianity, yet the women also represented, by their very presence as “preaching women,” a new interpretation of scripture, which threatened not only the power of men but the social priorities of the Black community. Further, early preaching Black women were radical in their commitment to consistent egalitarianism and social justice within the Black church and community as well as society at large. To advance both missions simultaneously, Black women deployed tactics that sustained their relationships within the Black community while overcoming the obstacles institutional hierarchies presented.

Early Tempered Radicalism in the Black Church

The history of Black women’s leadership within the Black church includes important stories of famous women leaders such as Julia Foote, Zilpha Elaw, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, and Harriet Tubman. These pioneering Black women preachers were tempered in that they were toughened by their experiences in the Black church; they were composed and resisted reactions that would break ties with the church; yet, they were courageous and passionately committed to fulfilling their call to ministry. Thus, more than twenty Black women were known to have preached in the 19th century (Collier-Thomas 1998, 4). These trailblazing women struggled and made sense of their calling after experiencing God through dreams, visions and other mystical experiences, eventually getting emboldened to accept the call and endure great opposition as Black female preachers (Andrews, Lee, Elaw and Foote 1986; Collier-Thomas 1998).

The earliest known Black female preacher, Elizabeth, was born into slavery in 1766 and won her freedom in 1796. She experienced her conversion and call to preach at the age of 12, and upon earning her freedom, traveled “still more extensively in the work of the ministry” (Collier-Thomas 1998; Riggs 1997, 5). Reportedly, when Elizabeth met opposition from the state of Virginia, and officials questioned her authority to preach, even threatening to imprison her, she replied, “Not by the commission of men’s hands: if the Lord has ordained me, I need nothing better” (Keller and Ruether 1995, 293). Elizabeth traveled the country, primarily in the Southern states, and preached for more than 60 years. She died shortly after the Civil War ended in 1867.

Jarena Lee’s autobiography was the first Black spiritual autobiography; she was the first Black woman to seek the authority to preach in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church in 1809. She initially was denied that authority (Anderson, Lee, Elaw and Foote 1986). Lee eventually gained some level of recognition and authority, in 1818, when Bishop Richard Allen allowed her to hold prayer meetings in her home and serve as worship leader when licensed male ministers preached (Collier-Thomas 1998).

After this endorsement, Lee commenced itinerant preaching, beginning in Philadelphia, and moving through the Mid-Atlantic and North Eastern states, eventually getting as far as Ohio. In 1836, Lee published her autobiography, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Andrews, Lee, Elaw, and Foote 1986). In *Sisters of the Spirit*, William Andrews (1986, 2) asserts that Lee's book "... launched Black women's autobiography in America with an argument for women's spiritual authority that plainly challenged traditional female roles as defined in both the free and the slave states, among whites as well as Blacks".

Zilpha Elaw, a contemporary of Lee, was born free in Pennsylvania in 1790, and was raised by pious parents; she joined the Methodist society in 1808. Her marriage to Joseph Elaw was a source of strife in her life. When she began to realize that she had been called to public ministry, Joseph was not supportive. He died young of tuberculosis, freeing Elaw to engage in public ministry, as she felt called. Elaw never affiliated with a church (Andrews, et al., 1986). Elaw considered the whole idea of racial prejudice and discrimination an insult to the intelligence of those who claimed to be Christians. She wrote, "The pride of white skin is a bauble of great value with many in some parts of the United States, who readily sacrifice their intelligence to their prejudices..." (Riggs 1997, 16) Elaw would later go on to recount how she traveled the South, ministering among the slaves and even traveling to England, in her autobiography published in 1845, *Memoirs of the life, Ministerial Travels and Labours of Mrs. Zilpha Elaw: An American Female of Colour*. Elaw risked being sold into slavery in the South and risked her marriage for the cause of the gospel.

As these daughters of thunder (Collier-Thomas 1998) paved the way, others followed. Julia Foote was the first woman to be ordained a deacon in 1895 and the second to be ordained an elder in the AME Zion church in 1900. Julia Foote's *A Brand Plucked from the Fire* (1886) records her experiences of conversion and engagement in public preaching ministry. Born in 1823 to former slaves in Schenectady NY, Foote desired formal education but the racial prejudice of the era kept her away from schools. Instead, taught herself by reading the Bible. When she was 15 years old, she joined an AME church in Albany NY and upon marrying and moving to Boston, she joined an AME Zion congregation and proceeded to tell others about her sanctification experiences. Her husband attempted to dissuade her from preaching just as Minister Jehile C Beman of the AME Zion church in Boston opposed Julia's preaching. In response, she held meetings in her home. Soon after these experiences in Boston, Foote met other pioneering Black feminist women in Philadelphia, where they rented a hall and held meetings that she presided over (Andrews et al, 1986).

By 1845, Julia Foote began to travel in upstate New York, preaching in Methodist pulpits at the invitation of AME ministers. Her itinerant preaching reached most of the East Coast and all the way to Ohio. On 20th May 1894, Julia Foote became a missionary for the AME Zion church; she was ordained an elder in 1900, just before she died Nov 22nd, only the second woman to hold that position in the denomination. As such, in terms of gaining official recognition and credibility, Julia Foote was more successful than either Elaw or Lee, her predecessors (Williams-Gegner, Gramby-Sobukwe and Ngunjiri, 2010).

Seeds of Radical Social Action

As evident from these descriptions, most Black preaching women were forced to become mavericks. Black women desired to serve in local church ministry; however, for most, their requests to serve in leadership roles were categorically denied (Riggs, 1997). This did not stop women from working in the church, however. Some contented themselves to sponsoring events that raised money for the churches, and others became missionaries. Though they tried to preach in the church, opposition would force many Black women from the church and into traveling ministries that led them to camp meetings and to foreign soil so that they could be heard and respected.

In their response to this inconsistency between expectations and opportunities, Black woman modeled the historic themes of Black theology: perseverance and faithful commitment to liberation, justice and service. Many Black women became front-line workers for social change. Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) and Harriet Tubman (1821-1913), prophetic Black voices, became legends for their fearless commitment to improving the lives of Black people, especially women. Sojourner Truth, born Isabella Baumfree, was a formidable woman whose legendary sermon, “Ain’t I a Woman Too?” still resonates with us today. She is best known for challenging the definition of Black women as “Work Ox” and “Brood Sow” and proclaimed that Black women were just as human and in need of justice as white women, if not more so. She proclaimed,

Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work and eat as much as any man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman? (Riggs 1997, 22).

Harriet Ross Tubman, the legendary “Black Moses” and preeminent conductor of the Underground Railroad, relied on her close relationship with God to help lead over 300 slaves to freedom. She literally would not move, unless she felt led of God to do so. Under God’s leadership, Tubman had astounding success leading people through the dangerous Underground Railroad, even after the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act, which made the journey even more perilous than it had been, because of the monetary reward that accompanied the return of a slave.

Indeed, Tubman was such a threat to the institution of slavery that at one point, slave owners offered \$40,000 for her capture. Tubman became a Civil War nurse and spy and is credited as the only woman in American history to lead a military attack (Keller and Ruether 1995). She also founded a home for the elderly before her own death in 1913. Other Black women joined Tubman in using their prophetic gifts to stir up society and call the United States into accountability for their treatment of African-Americans. Maria Stewart was one such clergywoman. Stewart, known as America’s first Black female political writer, was a preacher and school teacher, who engaged in political debates with men as she advocated for economic and social independence for African-Americans. Further, Maria Stewart was the first American woman documented to give public speeches and leave texts of her addresses (Giddings 1984, 50). Stewart challenged patriarchal interpretations of scripture especially the Pauline texts (Giddings 1984).

‘What if I am a woman?’ Stewart declared. ‘Did [God] not raise up Deborah to be a mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead?’ (Giddings 1984, 52).

Others established and worked through community organizations. For example, Black women’s clubs, formed as a way for African American women to assert their humanity, racial identity, and address issues unique to the African American community (Johnson 2006, 1) and they opened the door to numerous other community organizations established and led by Black women. During the civil rights and Black Nationalist movements, Black Christian women were also central organizers and the primary labor force in most Black churches. The Black Church was the most cohesive institution in the deep south and most capable of reaching the masses (Bechtel and Coughlin 1991; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; McAdam 1988; Pinn 2002). When the church took on the responsibility of mobilizing the Black community for marches and demonstrations, it was women in the church who were responsible for making telephone calls, stuffing envelopes, feeding, nurturing and coordinating (Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Savage 2008).

Similarly, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Power Movement relied chiefly upon women (Giddings 1984; Robnett 1997; White 1999). Women represented moral and social authority and thus were able to push male church leaders to open churches to the movement. Further, women like Ella Baker who convened and organized the youth who would found SNCC, relied upon experience and skills gained from church work, as well as strength and courage derived from their faith to thrive as leaders in spite of racism in the wider society and sexism in their own communities (Williams-Gegner, Gramby-Sobukwe and Ngunjiri 2010).

In general, Black women were involved in nurturing the Black community at every stage in the Black community's struggle for freedom. They participated in acts of resistance to slavery (Hine 1994), in teaching, nursing and social work professions (Giddings 1984; Hine 1994) and as community and movement organizers (Collier-Thomas and Franklin 2001; Giddings, 1984; Robnett 1997; White 1999). Their professional participation was made possible by the blood and tears of slave foremothers and the pioneer Black female abolitionists/preachers who fought for access to freedom and equality.

However, Black women's many responsibilities and roles did not mitigate the experience of sexism (Savage 2008). Even in the church, Black women confronted patriarchy. As Black churches developed, their leadership structures became increasingly hierarchical and male (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Further, the church and especially the pastorate were typically the only route to even a shadow of masculinity for Black men. Thus, for Black women to pursue clergy positions they would come into direct competition with Black men. Frazier (1974, 133) notes the resulting tendency in the Black Church to affirm men's interests and authority in the family and church. Black churches, therefore played a role in keeping Black women "in their place."

Patricia Hill Collins explains in *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), that the Black Church tends to support conservative ideals when it comes to gender and sexuality, and a division of labor that is more suitable for middle class White Americans than African Americans. Rooted in the African-American experience and culture, the Black church has provided the motivation as well as organizational resources and leadership to advance Black communities' efforts to overcome oppression. As the Black church and its theology evolved, Black Christian women played a leading role in operationalizing Black theology. Indeed, the Black church, community and family have been dependent upon the Black woman for implementing the actual work of the church, for collaborating in social change activities and for sustaining families when men were unavailable. Yet, the discrimination Black women experienced within the church and community restricted them from formal leadership positions in the church, required that they defer to men in community activism (Collins 2004) and even then, Black women were often criticized for sustaining families in the absence of their husbands (Moynihan 1965).

The theological arguments that the Black church raised against women preaching suggested that women are meant to be subordinate to men in general, either by original plan and or because woman was a temptress and thus cursed (Griffin 1993; Mitchell 1991). These arguments strikingly contradict Black theology's emphasis on resisting oppression and egalitarianism. Although Black theology historically rested upon a foundation of liberation and egalitarianism, social conditions, especially racism and sexism, it also supported theological arguments that restricted Black women from clergy and other ministerial leadership roles. Specifically, given distorting social pressures on the Black family, the church sought to restore balance and to create a safe place for the development of family and community. Thus, men and women avoided disunity or the appearance of disorganization in the midst of major episodes in social movements for freedom and justice. Further, the Black church sought to reverse the impact of racism on Black men by prioritizing and promoting them. Ultimately, differences and claims for women's justice were stifled for the good of the larger community (Collins 2004).

Contemporary Stories from the Trenches

An open-ended survey posted online and completed by twenty-three respondents from various denominational backgrounds in the Philadelphia area, as well as a focus group with eight women clergy in Memphis, TN, highlights the contemporary experiences of Black women serving in ministerial positions. Like their predecessors, many of these Black women have been a part of serving God and serving others through the church, and where this was not possible, they served as itinerant preachers and evangelists. The experiences of these 31 women ministers, in various levels of leadership, helps to contextualize the contemporary discussion of the stained glass ceiling to experiences of women who are currently serving in churches in different parts of the United States. Their experiences provide current examples of strategies tempered radicals use to affect change within organizations, mostly from peripheral positions/margins.

Over 60% of the women were in the age group 46-60 years, and most of those in this group had experience outside of church work, such as in healthcare, public service and education. The next large grouping was those 30-45 years old (37%) while just a few were either under age 30 or over age 60. The age diversity of the women made it possible to hear diverse viewpoints about the history of women's participation in church leadership, and how far we have come (or not) since some of them were in their youth. Interestingly, some of their experiences and challenges were directly related to their social identity not only as women, but also whether they were married or single, younger or older, etc.

First, challenges connected to marital status emerged. The demographic breakdown of the women participants is shown in Figure 1. One of the challenges related to their marital status had to do with the struggle to enter into, and serve as women in ministry. The single women found that their credibility as ministers was suspect because both the church leaders and the congregants seemed stuck on the issue of sexuality. In Sarah Sentilles (2008) candid book, single women talked about how the congregants seemed overly obsessed with who they were relating to and how – Did she have a boyfriend? Was he of their denomination? Would he be her husband? What did he think of her choice to become a minister? Was she sleeping with him outside of marriage? Similarly, the women in our study shared their struggles with this aspect of their social identity.

For those who were married, their struggles were slightly different. For example, both during their ministry training and once they were given leadership positions in the churches, married women struggled to balance their responsibilities in the church, and their roles as wives and mothers. On their journey towards ministry leadership, they too had to respond to questions about their spouses – What does he think of your decision to become a minister? Does he approve? As with the historical figures Elaw, Foote and Lee, whose public ministry grew wings once they were widowed, contemporary women struggle with balancing leadership with home life, and the opinions of congregants about women’s roles in the home (Williams-Gegner, Gramby-Sobukwe and Ngunjiri 2010).

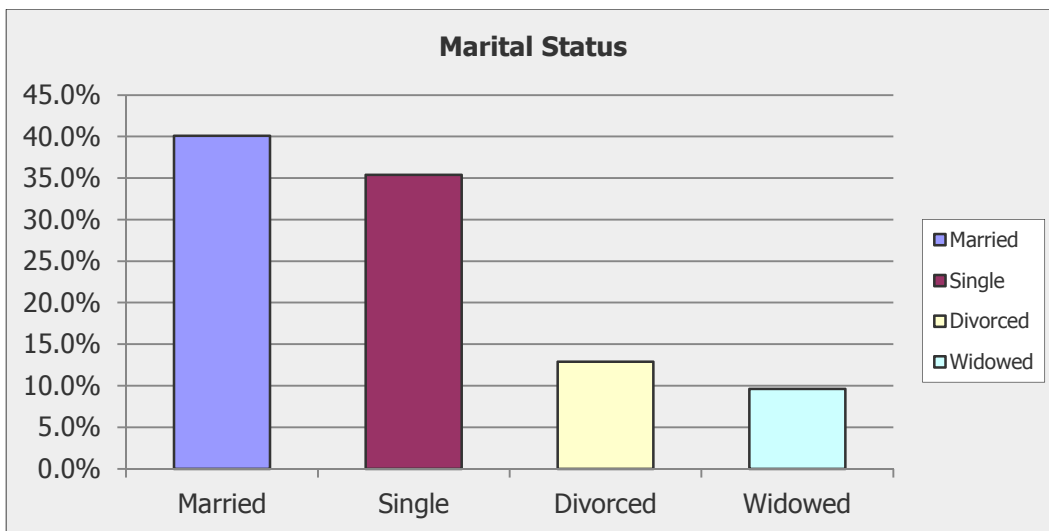


Figure 1: Marital Status

Structural Barriers

One of the challenges that women experience in the broader American church, as discussed by Sarah Sentilles (2008) is the hoops they have to jump through in the ordination process. Sentilles demonstrated through several stories, her own included, that the path to ordination is fraught with difficulties that men do not necessarily face, including sexual advances that women ministerial candidates, particularly single women, have to contend with from their male senior pastors. Family and church leaders question whether their call to ministry is genuine and they all contend with the fact that many churches are still unwilling to accept women as their pastors.

Similarly, the women in this study talked about the struggles they endured on the road to ministry leadership. For many, they continue to face struggles because most of them are not yet ordained (only one participant was from a denomination that does not ordain women – the Southern Baptists). While the issue of dealing with sexual advances was not as pronounced in this sample as it was in Sentille’s study, several women did discuss the need for young female ministers to learn how to manage these experiences.

Struggles with the Call

Several women shared stories about their struggle with responding to their call into ministry from a personal perspective, and with how others responded to their call. As explained in the historical accounts of Black women ministers, they experienced the call to ministry – sometimes dramatically, sometimes in quiet but persistent ways. Yet in every case, Black women responded to God’s call upon their lives to serve in, around or sometimes outside the church (Myers 1994). In this study likewise, women described how they were called. Some met with resistance while others were applauded and supported. In some of the cases, the call was a response to a felt need as these examples illustrate –

“When I met children who were not going to church, I felt led to start a children’s program for them”

“I have always had a desire to help people and leaned towards broken women. About ten years ago, I started a women’s ministry to help set women free from abuse and different bondages”

In most cases, the call into ministry was a combination of the cumulative experience of serving in the church for many years, beginning with childhood and youth ministries, and later an appointment by a senior pastor:

“The senior pastor of the church saw [my] leadership ability in the way that I carried on in various meetings...”

“I grew up in the church...always active in the church, attended [Vacation Bible School] VBS, Sunday school, taught the same...eventually served as assistant pastor to my then husband”

“I served as president of youth ministry in high school, which eventually led to ministry in undergrad...I discussed my calling with my pastor and assistant pastor, which led to me preaching my initial sermon my junior year of college at 20 years of age”

“I began in the church with youth ministry. I have served in leadership for over 20 years with the women’s ministries. I was licensed to preaching ministry on March 9, 2003 in the Baptist Church...”

“I was an active lay leader, my pastor saw gifts for ministry and began the conversation...I have since served on staff of congregations as minister of Christian education, associate minister, associate pastor, and pastor, as well as on denominational staff at national and regional levels for American Baptist Churches...”

In several of the cases including the examples above, the actual experience of the call came long before their involvement in active ministry, some indicating they experienced that tugging as children or teenagers:

“I felt the call when I was in high school. My parents, sisters and friends were supportive...”

“When I was 10 years old, and I was watching a woman preaching at the church I was raised at; and I said within myself; “I want to do that” not realizing at the time what I was saying...”

“When I was 19 years old...”

“When I was in college...”

“I was 17 years old and away from home at college when I experienced and responded to the call to preach...”

For these women, many years of experience and exposure to ministry opportunities as children, youth and young adults, combined with seminary education made them highly qualified to serve in leadership positions in the church. Their struggles with the church hierarchy were not because they did not have the requisite experience and education; rather, the socio-cultural barriers within congregations and theological arguments church hierarchies engage keep women subjugated and away from positions of ministry leadership. In this study, more than half of the participants held graduate degrees, the others had earned bachelor’s degrees and only two had ‘some college’. These educational attainments suggest that, a dearth of qualified, educated candidates would not be a reason for the limited numbers of women serving in senior leadership positions in churches.

Similarly, the stories of Lee, Elaw and Foote described earlier demonstrate that there was a sense of struggle to accept the call – perhaps in part because those pioneering women as with the contemporary ones, often did not have a female figure who they could look up to in the church. Lee, Elaw and Foote describe in their writings their struggles with the call personally but also the rebuffs that came from spouses and church hierarchy. Yet they persevered and found a platform within or beyond the church walls in which to live out their callings.

Women's Responses to the Stained Glass Ceiling

Consistent with the characterization of a stained glass ceiling in business and other sectors, Black women who have been called into ministry are often rebuffed due to either socio-cultural factors and or narrow interpretations of biblical passages aimed at reducing the roles that women can play. In this survey, women indicated that resistance to their ministry leadership came from both men and women – an indicator that socialization continues to forestall women's roles in public religious leadership. Pastor Royce who has been in ministry for 19 years (since her call), and who serves as a senior pastor for a church that she started, shared a story that goes to the heart of this matter:

During a visit to one particular church, I received a note from the usher as I was sitting at the front with the pastor of this congregation, waiting for the moment when I would go into the pulpit to preach. I opened the note, and this is what it said: 'you will go to hell coz your knees are showing.' I folded the note, and handed it over to the pastor. He read it, folded it, and put it in his pocket. We did not talk about it. When the usher realized what the note said, she was flabbergasted – it had been handed to her to bring to me.

This anecdote helps to shed light on the kind of treatment that women preachers face – that the resistance sometimes comes from those one would expect to give support and be excited about seeing a woman in the pulpit. Other women in the focus group noted that, sometimes the resistance comes from the least expected source – other women ministers. Irrespective of the source of resistance, the point is that, women continue to face difficulty, especially in relation to pulpit ministry. Contemporary Black women ministers respond to the difficulties of the stained glass ceiling as tempered radicals, by bending, breaking out and bypassing the ceiling.

Bending – Quiet Resistance

One form of resistance that women ministers still face today has to do with churches that may invite them to preach, but will not allow them to preach from the pulpit. In response, participants in the focus group indicated one of two responses: the first is to choose humility and preach from the floor, because those walls will eventually break down as the hierarchy and congregants begin to recognize that women are indeed called and equipped to preach. Such women continue to work within the confines of the male authority in their churches, quietly resisting and attempting to slowly bend the boundaries – rocking the boat from within while being careful not to fall out of the boat. So agreeing to speak from the floor instead of the pulpit, or as in the historical examples, being willing to minister only after the male preacher has preached as was required of Julia Foote becomes the way to bend, though not fully succumb to the whims of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This form of tempered radicalism, what Meyerson and Scully (1995) regard as *quiet resistance* is expected to reap the rewards of demonstrating to the congregation and the church hierarchy that women are effective ministers – even if they can only preach on mother’s day, and that only from the floor (not the pulpit). Such women hope that eventually such barriers will break down and they will receive the authority to more fully exploit their gift. However, this strategy goes beyond quiet resistance, to also choosing their battles wisely (Ngunjiri, 2010), recognizing what they can win and what they cannot, at least in specific church contexts. Yet, as with the historical examples of Lee, Foote and Elaw who also started by submitting to the male hierarchy at home and in the church, after a while, eventually some women preachers break out of the strongholds, selecting strategies that involve more radical action.

Breaking Out of the Bonds

Another response, one that some of the senior women have employed involves overt resistance, such as a refusal to accept preaching engagements in churches that will not allow them to preach from the pulpit. As Pastor Royce indicated, when she is invited to a congregation, she immediately asks where she will stand to preach. If they indicate from the floor as opposed to the pulpit, she declines such invitations. Similarly, a pioneering woman minister Mary Moore, who had been appointed to be the first woman at the helm of the New Salem Missionary Baptist Church in South Memphis said in a newspaper interview that she no longer accepted invitations to churches that do not allow women in the pulpit – (<http://www.texnews.com/1998/religion/ministry1212.html>). Such women argue that, it is about time that women ministers resisted subjugation and demanded equal treatment with male colleagues.

Breaking out of the confines of the church may not be the response that all women called to the ministry will utilize; some may choose quiet resistance and working within the boundaries instituted by the church as discussed previously. However, for a few, it is imperative to break out in order to fully exercise the calling and gifting upon their lives. Historically, breaking out started with women like Julia Foote speaking to other women in camp meetings, or holding meetings in their own homes. In tempered radical terms, this strategy is *turning personal threats into opportunities* (Meyerson 2001; Ngunjiri, 2010) whereby the refusal to be recognized in one church or denomination leads to seeking opportunities elsewhere. In the contemporary examples, breaking out includes Black women preachers' decision to leave a church that is not supportive of their calling, and join up with one that is willing to let them exercise their calling. In many instances, women leave their denominations, as have women interviewed for this study, who left the Southern Baptists who will not ordain women, and joined the United Church of Christ or the Disciples of Christ, denominations where they can be ordained, preach from the pulpit and not be limited by virtue of gender.

Black women also break out of the confines of the Black church by realizing that their call to ministry and preaching is not limited to the concrete walls and stained glass buildings. Instead, they resolve to serve God wherever they can – as university chaplains, as hospital chaplains, and in other religious institutions. In this way, Black women are redefining what it means to be a 'minister', refusing to be limited by the traditionalist understanding of ministry only existing within the church, and recognizing that there is even more to be done outside of those concrete walls. They are turning the personal threat of being limited within the church, into an opportunity to lead in other organizations. This does not mean that they do not face the glass ceiling in religious institutions outside of the church – but it does mean that they are not limiting themselves to only serving God within it. Many of those religious institutions have similar conservative viewpoints about women's roles; but most, such as Christian universities have women serving in leadership positions all the way to the college presidency.

Circumventing the Ceiling

Finally, Black women circumvent the stained glass ceiling. The stories of resistance from male ministers colored many women's experience. As one woman, Victoria, at the focus group explained, "sometimes the men ministers support women not expecting them to rise up to high levels." Victoria explained that in her experience, "the men who raised me up in the ministry couldn't accept my ministry...that grew me up something fierce!" Instead of succumbing to the resistance, Victoria and other women ministers find ways to circumvent the barriers that are placed in their way and live up to the calling that they had received.

In certain instances, the women ministers explained that the challenges and resistance from men came because men and women communicate differently, and often in cross-gender ministry teams, the men did not seem to know what to do with the women. This calls for a strategy that involves *intercultural boundary spanning* (Ngunjiri 2010, 159), whereby women recognize the challenges and cross the divide to break communication barriers. Intercultural boundary spanning is a strategy they employ to work in otherwise hostile environments (Alston 2005). Sentilles (2008) addressed this issue in her book, arguing that women posted to churches as assistant and associate pastors, sometimes found themselves given roles that were not only subservient, but that did not really help them in learning the 'ropes' of ministry leadership. In such cases, the women (often ordination or early career candidates) would end up having to leave such positions for better working environments. In some cases, this resulted in accepting positions in poorly financed, often rural or urban churches where they could be the senior pastors of struggling congregations. Intercultural boundary spanning leadership in such environments enabled them to succeed despite the odds. Their success proved that they could lead a struggling congregation to eventually thrive. As such, what was meant as 'being thrown in the deep end' would then work out for their benefit, as they would finally be able to lead with freedom, creativity and resourcefulness.

Another way of circumventing the stained glass ceiling involves women preachers starting their own congregations, a move that Pastor Royce has made. She left her last church and formed her own congregation under the Disciples of Christ denomination, where she is the senior pastor. In this environment, she does not have to deal with some of the limiting barriers placed against women; now she has the opportunity to help others break the stained glass ceiling as a role model and mentor. In that environment, intercultural boundary spanning as a tempered radical enables her to succeed, in spite of the threat that being a woman at the top may hold for both men and women in the congregation. Women clergy serving as senior pastors such as Pastor Royce have to develop a leadership approach that is affirming to both men and women, who as we mentioned before, are socialized to expect their senior pastors to be men (Collins 2004). Their success as senior pastors is dependent on effective leadership that builds bridges, resourcefully solves problems, leverages their outsider-within positionality, and demonstrates maturity (Ngunjiri, 2010).

Three Steps Forward, Two Steps Back

Ultimately, there has been progress in the status of women in ministry leadership in the historically Black denominations and Black congregations of mainline denominations (e.g. United Methodist Church), yet it feels like three steps forward, two steps back. As participants in the focus group observed, the church is far behind other organizations and institutions as far as gender parity at leadership levels is concerned. The women continue to experience patriarchy in the church, particularly the Black church and Black congregations. As Patricia Hill Collins argued, "...the Black church has shown strong support for patriarchal family, claiming that men should be heads of the church, that women should not preach, and that men should rule their families" (2004, 183). In this scenario, women find that they have to engage in coping and survival strategies to lead and become successful in congregations.

As discussed in the focus group, contemporary Black women ministers have to be bridge builders, not the dynamite that blows up the bridges. Intercultural boundary spanning leadership is a lot about building bridges, often with hostile 'others'. Tempered radicals are wise to build those bridges, even if their experiences of subjugation in congregations may lead them to step out and institute their own churches. As tempered radicals, being able to make steps forward often requires *collective action* (Meyerson 2001; Ngunjiri 2010, 157) such as becoming a part of a group of women ministers in the denomination, community, nationwide or globally in order to bring about significant change. As individuals, Black women ministers can only go so far. When they collectivize, they have power in numbers, they are able to embrace a collective identity, and they can be empowered to act. We found evidence of such collective action done as women ministers' conferences, networks and inter-denominational groups that provide support and activism.

The women indicated that how one views the status of Black women in Black churches and congregations depends on whose history is being told – not only from congregation to congregation, but also because of the differences in denominations. At present, rather than continuing to fight for legitimacy in resistant denominations, women are choosing to serve in those denominations that would give them room to serve God. As such, some women have moved from the African Methodist Episcopal Church to United Church of Christ, and from National Baptist to Disciples of Christ or United Methodist churches. In other words, women ministers recognize that there is no need to hang on to a denomination – that, their calling is to be ministers of the Gospel and servants of the people, not to a denomination but through whichever door will open. Just as their predecessors Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw and Julie Foote, sometimes these women have to lead from the margins, until such a time as the barriers break down sufficiently for them to lead from the center. Sometimes, they lead from the margins their entire lives.

Women clergy also indicated that there is progress even in terms of numbers – that now there are more and more women found in church hierarchy than in the past. Even though most are still in assistant and associate positions and only a few in senior pastor positions, these women do not think that every woman has to strive for a senior pastor position. Instead, as long as they have access to the pulpit or to the fulfillment of their calling, they push through, in spite of the challenges. Further, the women felt hopeful because of the large numbers of women to be found in seminaries and divinity schools these days, indicating that even there, a change had occurred. Stories about pioneers such as Katie Cannon indicate that, in the 1970s and early 1980s, women in seminaries were still a rare phenomenon and faced a lot of discrimination (Cannon 1995).

Another sign of the times is the fact that there are now more women instituting their own congregations, often in response to closed pulpits. In the Philadelphia area alone, we had the opportunity to visit several women-led churches, some that were quite large. Amongst the participants in the study, Pastor Royce, who was previously mentioned, was one such woman who after leading as an associate pastor in a different church for several years, planted a congregation in Memphis, TN 9 years ago where she continues to serve as senior pastor.

The women also discussed the fact that these days, they are more likely to be considered seriously as candidates for senior pastor positions than in the past. A shift is taking place, though it has been slow and is not at a critical mass yet. In addition, as the single women in the study observed, it is no longer as important as it has been historically for women to be married or have children to be considered for positions in the church hierarchy. Even more importantly, women no longer need to give up their femininity to be successful – they can dress and preach as women – with the caveat that they have to figure out their congregation’s expectations and deal with them.

Making Sense of it All: Theological, Sociological and Cultural Explanations

The great paradox of the U.S. Black church in relation to Black women is that although Black church theology consistently emphasizes Christ’s message of deliverance, equality and justice for the oppressed, much of this same Black theology reflects a characteristic Christian male dominance and patriarchy that continues to limit Black women’s leadership within Black churches. In a large study conducted by Lincoln and Mamiya (1990), the researchers interviewed clergy in the seven historically Black denominations in urban areas. 1009 clergy were asked the question, ‘would you approve of a woman as the pastor of a church?’ forty nine percent of them approved, 51% disapproved; only 14% strongly approved, whereas double that percentage (28%) strongly disapproved.

As Carpenter (2001, 23) notes, “not only did the majority disapprove, but the intensity of their disapproval was greater than the intensity of the approval. Of the fourteen percent who strongly approved, two percent were the female clergy in the sample.” The statements regarding approval and disapproval revolved around denominational restrictions, biblical exhortations, as well as apparent physical limitations of women (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Several of the pastors interviewed referred to what women do as teaching rather than preaching, and insisted that women can be pastors’ helpers, but not pastors themselves, even if they have the educational ability. Amongst those approving of women pastors, Lincoln and Mamiya report that some made the analogy between racial discrimination and sexual discrimination, and many of them had direct personal experience with women preachers and pastors (Carpenter 2001).

William Myers dedicated one chapter of his book on the call to ministry within the Black church to ‘women, the Black church and the call to ministry’(Myers 1994). Herein, he argues that exegetical debates will continue to divide the Black church on the issue of whether or not women should preach. Myer’s observed that

What is self-evident in the stories on which this study is based is that all the narrators, male and female, ultimately accepted a call to ministry not because of someone’s polished exegetical apologia on their behalf; on the contrary, they became convinced of its authenticity because of a process that focused primarily on a personal (inner call) divine-human encounter as well as a corporate (congregational call) human-human encounter among a community of believers. (229).

In the study, Myers found that whereas there were similarities between how men and women were called to ministry, the differences lay in women’s response to the call based on social factors. That is, women struggled with whether they were worthy to be called, whether to give up certain freedoms or preferable careers, and with families that think they can do better. Like men, women also resist because they do not see adequate role models in ministry. As far as Myers could tell, women’s greatest struggle with the call to ministry arose from their gender “women encountered resistance from family, friends, parishioners, peers, and pastors strictly because of their gender...the one structural difference in women’s narratives when compared with men’s is the amount of space devoted to gender discussions” (231).

Women continue to be left out of pastoral roles – sometimes they are called evangelists and missionaries rather than pastors, because congregations and denominational hierarchies are resistant to opening up the pulpit ministry to women. Women still face many unnecessary constraints to their authority as ministry leaders, in spite of the fact that God has called them and they are adequately equipped educationally and otherwise to lead and serve.

One of the issues the women in this study raised as important going forward is the need to continue to educate congregations and male clergy on the role of women as clergy – whether from a justice perspective or simply because of the requirement to continue advocating for gender equity in the pulpit. Socialization plays a strong role in keeping women out of the pulpit, as both men and women congregants as well as church hierarchies have developed within cultures that mandate leadership for men and subservience for women.

In addition, there is a need to challenge not only the socio-cultural explanations, but also the exegetical-hermeneutic explanations used to keep women from the pulpit. The women in this study recommended further exploration of certain areas that have remained unresolved and sometimes unnamed within studies of churches, Black or white. There needs to be more scholarship on the experiences of Black women clergy and wider discussion of the theological debates that shape these discussions. Further, there is insufficient exploration of the experiences of single women, as the experiences of single, child-free women are unique particularly within the Black culture.

Finally, this study has demonstrated the tempered radical strategies that historical and contemporary Black women in ministry use to survive against the stained glass ceiling, a phenomenon that is intersectional in its explanation keeping women from positions of leadership due to gender along with other social identity markers. The intersectional paradigm and tempered radicalism specifically appear to be both theoretically and practically useful in explaining and dealing with the stained glass ceiling in Black churches. At a minimum, women aspiring to minister within the church and religious institutions can resist quietly; more often than not, this is just the beginning. The continuum towards radical action involves both individual and collective responses. Further studies are needed to explicate other strategies that women use to break the stained glass ceiling, in order to provide materials that young women ministers can use to sustain and encourage themselves, and learn strategies for success.

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