

Young clergywomen blaze new trails

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By Maria Mallory White*

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The Rev. Audrey Warren poses with parishioners at Branches United Methodist Church, Florida City, Fla. A Web only UMNS photo courtesy of Audrey Warren.

After a recent worship service at Branches United Methodist Church in Florida City, Fla., the Rev. Audrey B. Warren returned to the sanctuary to turn off the lights. There, draped in Warren's stole and with the microphone in hand, was 4-year-old Cassandra.

"I didn't catch what she was saying, but I have to believe that she was 'playing pastor,'" Warren recalls. "If that is not progress ... I don't know what is. How amazing for young girls to dream of being pastors."

At 26, Warren herself belongs to a distinct minority: young women who are lead pastors.

Reflecting a hopeful trend, these clergywomen—navigating denominational bias, interpreting the biblical role of women, and resisting age- and gender-based stereotypes—are leading churches.

In the process, they are swimming against the ecclesial tide. Female clergy lead only about 8 percent of U.S. churches, reports Mark Chaves, professor of sociology, religion and divinity at Duke University in Raleigh, N.C.

Twenty-seven percent of all United Methodist clergy are women, even though the denomination's membership is nearly 60 percent female, said the Rev. HiRho Park, director of continuing formation for ministry at the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry in Nashville, Tenn.

"It is only logical to me that leaders should represent the constituency that they are serving," Park said.

'If you were a man'

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The church the Rev. Elizabeth Evans Hagan serves is radically different from her Southern Baptist upbringing. "I think I developed a relationship with God, or a sense of spirituality, that I knew was going to be completely different from that of my parents, and even the church I grew up in," she says.

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Her congregation at Washington Plaza Baptist Church in Reston, Va., where she was installed as senior pastor March 1, 2009, includes a large African-American, Chinese and growing Hispanic representation. It is welcoming and affirming of all people, and a church where seekers feel at home.

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The Rev. Elizabeth Hagan prepares to baptize parishioner Steve Robinson. A UMNS photo by Don Rees.

However, the Chattanooga, Tenn., native even faces opposition at home: Her father, a pastor, does not endorse women in ministry. According to Chaves, half of American congregations are either in denominations that do not permit female clergy, or independent churches that do not allow female head clergy.

When Hagan was growing up, she often led activities with her youth group. "People would come up to me afterward and say, 'If you were a man, you'd make a really good preacher.'"

It wasn't until she was a student at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., that Hagan heard a woman preach. While attending Duke Divinity School, she clearly grasped her vocational path. "It was an overwhelming sense that God was saying, 'You are here to learn how to be a pastor,'" she says.

Hagan started the search-and-call process for a pastoral post nine months before graduation. "I still didn't have a position by the end of the next summer," she says.

But Hagan remained determined and focused. Recalling one naysayer who argued that she would be forced to start her own church, Hagan muses, "Ironically, I became the pastor of the church he served as interim pastor."

A heart for urban ministry

Into the multicultural urban mix that is Florida City, Fla., the Rev. Audrey Warren is shocking people, too. "You don't have a boyfriend?" one youth asked.

Romance isn't a priority for Warren these days. As the only paid clergyperson on staff at Branches United Methodist Church, she takes just one day off each week. Not making time to mingle – because dating someone in the church is out of the question – makes meeting someone difficult.

"I think even single males will agree... loneliness is a risk" for young pastors, Warren admits.

At least for now, Warren wouldn't have it any other way. Fluent in Spanish, Warren requested a pastoral assignment in the Miami region. She says she wanted to serve where HIV/AIDS, poverty, crime,

unemployment and teen pregnancy are high, while church growth and influence are low.

"A lot of the churches are not thriving because they don't know how to deal with [this diversity]," she says. "I have a heart for urban ministry and see those churches as being in places where they really can do a lot and bring people into relationship with Jesus Christ."

'There are other options'

As a youth, Warren attended a Leesburg, Fla., United Methodist camp, first as a camper, then a counselor. "In sixth grade, my life was changed by the church ... [through] the family I found in the youth group," she says.

That "family" would play a significant role in Warren's faith journey. She recalls telling her youth leader, "I want to do what you do—lead people to Jesus Christ."

Her youth leader's response was, "Great, but I think you'd be a good pastor." It wasn't that Warren didn't think she could become a pastor, but she had no model. At 18, she preached her first sermon under the camp's auspices, and she went on to major in religion at Florida Southern College before attending Duke.

Today, Warren is the role model. Living conditions are harsh in Florida City, a community that is largely a Haitian and Hispanic mix. The traditional and customary roles for women, many of whom become single mothers as teens, involve work on farms or in the hospitality industry.

"Seeing a young, single, professional female has made them think, 'Wow, there are other options than having babies and depending on my husband – who may be selling drugs most of the time – to take care of my babies while I'm at work,'" she says.

And while 4-year-old Cassandra is playing pastor, older girls at Branches are determined to graduate from high school and perhaps eventually from college.

"I would like to call it incarnational ministry," says Warren. "I think the biggest transformation comes when we are in relationship with the people we live around and decide to be with them no matter what – just like Jesus is with us."

*White is a freelance writer and associate minister at New Mount Zion African Methodist Episcopal Church, Tallahassee, Fla. This article originally appeared in the Winter 2010 DIVINITY, the alumni magazine of Duke Divinity School.

News media contact: Joey Butler, Nashville, Tenn., (615) 742-5470 or newsdesk@umcom.org.

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