

# GOSPEL TODAY

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## THE EXPLOSION OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY!

By VANESSA WILLIAMS SNYDER

This year, Vashti McKenzie, pastor of Payne Memorial AME Church in Baltimore, MD, is a candidate for the Episcopacy in the AME church. That in itself is significant because having a woman run for bishop has not occurred in the 200-year history of the church. Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook, pastor of Bronx Christian Fellowship, is in line to become the first female president of the 8000-member Hampton University Ministers Conference.

To say that women in ministry have come a long way is putting it mildly.

As women make strides in sports, politics and almost every area of life, advances are also evident in the church.

“God affirms women in the Bible,” says McKenzie. “From Miriam, to the woman at the well, to the women at the tomb.”

McKenzie says she’s answering the call of God through her candidacy for bishop. McKenzie has worked in ministry for 20 years and authored a book, *Not Without A Struggle*. She knows what it means to confront sexism. “It’s no different from what goes on in medical schools or corporate America.”

Today, women are preaching and leading people with as much vigor and vitality as their male counterparts. Who hasn’t heard the Word as delivered by such dynamic preachers as Jackie McCullough and Juanita Bynum. But those are just two. Whether you’re listening to Wanda Turner, associate pastor of New Bethel Apostolic Ministries, or Dr. Betty Peebles of Jericho City of Praise (Landover, IL), it’s clear something’s going on in the area of ministry as it relates to women. And that “something” is sure to carry women to an even higher plateau as we head into the millennium. Even the naysayers or those who don’t believe women should be preaching would have to agree, even without looking at what’s happening in the local church. Thousands of people who are attending women’s conferences are evidence enough.

Interestingly, many of the women who entered ministry didn’t start out with the idea that it was something a woman can’t do.

When Jackie McCullough answered her “call” as a teenager, she didn’t believe being a woman was an issue, because her pastor was a woman. “I had never been in an

environment where I didn't see women in the pulpit," says McCullough. The bigger issue for McCullough was that she truly understood the magnitude of her calling. "I really understood what the call was when I was 16 and I wept. I felt the presence of the Lord very heavily at the moment. I just felt God doing something to me in my spirit to let me know that this was serious and this was a moment that would really affect my life."

Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook has mentored women in the ministry. She encourages them to be strong and not genderize their ministries. "I tell them to keep high standards and to not use femaleness as an excuse. You can't ask to come into a male game and pull the female trump card." She can remember being pregnant with morning sickness and having to still go forth.

Cook also doesn't recall having a burdensome beginning when she entered ministry. In fact, her role models were older men. And she had the great fortune to have a pastor who was willing to prepare people to accept her. "I never had to stand outside of the pulpit or on the floor. When I was 26 years old and going to my first church I knew what to expect," she says. Besides, Cook says she was raised around people who said, "You can do what you want in life. I was raised with a male viewpoint. Hung out with my Dad and he took me everywhere. It was natural that I chose a male-dominated profession. I didn't realize there was a problem until I was in it. The sexism shocked me."

McCullough, who can't admit to a lot of firsthand experience with sexism, says, "I had been asked to preach on the lower stage and it didn't bother me because it didn't matter whether I said it from the back of the church, the pulpit or the stage, it was going to be said," she says.

Rev. Wanda Turner remembers facing some challenges when she became senior pastor after the death of her husband. "Some of the women I wanted to promote actually resigned because they said they came for his vision," she said. "But it strengthened me, and I knew that God did call me."

"God has given women as many assignments as men," says Dr. Johnnie Coleman. "And I should be free to fulfill my assignment for God."

But, historically speaking, women have been relegated to lesser roles in the church. And while today most of us can't imagine any such limitations, there are still challenges and struggles for women in ministry.

The pastorship role is one such example.

“Many denominations will not consider a female applicant for a senior role without a master’s of divinity degree, but then those same churches, which run the schools (where you must earn the degree), won’t let you in,” says Turner.

“Still, congregations are slow to call a leader who is a woman,” says Cook. “Attitudinal changes have to be made across the board. The new millennium will tell where we’re going.”

McKenzie, who pastored three congregations that had never had female pastors, says that in the end congregations just want to know that you love them. “They want you to inspire them and be there for them—visit them when they’re sick, marry them and be there to do their eulogy.”

For women in ministry, it’s a matter of being focused and sure of what your call is.

“Be sure this is what God wants you to do,” says McCullough. “When He calls you He opens the door for you to be prepared for the call.” The question is, “What is my assignment. My job is not to change a male-dominated profession. My assignment is to be influenced by the Holy Spirit. You must be comfortable with your assignment.”

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