

**Alpha&Omega OuTreach – Ministry Under the Purple Tent:  
Exploring the Impact of Women-Led Alternative Ministries in Local Communities  
through Family, Faith, and Financial Literacy**

A dissertation submitted to the  
Theological School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Ministry

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## ABSTRACT

Alpha&Omega OuTreach – Ministry Under the Purple Tent:

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This dissertation examines the systemic marginalization of women in mainstream denominational ministry leadership. It explores the emergence of alternative women-led ministries as both a theological response and a form of structural resistance. Drawing on feminist theological scholarship, sociological theories of institutional power, and historical analyses of women in Christian leadership, this study investigates how formal ecclesial hierarchies continue to restrict women’s authority, recognition, and vocational fulfillment. Although women have historically sustained congregational life through service, teaching, and community care, access to senior leadership roles remains disproportionately limited within many denominational structures.

Through a qualitative case study of Alpha&Omega OuTreach, a grassroots ministry founded under a symbolic “*purple tent*,” this research combines personal narrative with broader ecclesiological critique. The purple tent functions not only as a physical space of community engagement – providing food, clothing, and spiritual support – but also as a theological metaphor for dignity, healing, and reclaimed authority. By situating this ministry within the broader landscape of women-founded alternative

ministries, the study argues that these initiatives are not acts of rebellion but adaptive responses to institutional exclusion.

Using interdisciplinary analysis – including feminist theology, organizational theory, and narrative methodology – this dissertation asserts that alternative ministries represent emerging models of collaborative, community-centered leadership that challenge patriarchal structures while embodying ecclesial renewal. The findings suggest that women-led grassroots ministries serve as transformative spaces where marginalized voices can reclaim agency and reimagine leadership beyond traditional hierarchical constraints.

Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing discussions about gender equity in ministry by demonstrating that institutional exclusion often fuels innovation. The rise of women-founded ministries signals not fragmentation but reformative potential, offering new paradigms for leadership, inclusion, and community impact within Contemporary Christianity.

## **DEDICATION**

### **To My Mother, Mary Petree-McCormick**

Mom, I wish you could be here to witness my third graduation. Your words still resonate in my ears: *“You can always achieve your goals if you don’t give up!”*

### **To My Father, Teddy Westley Petree, Sr.**

Dad, it seems incredible to believe that I am the first doctoral student in our family, a remarkable achievement indeed. I couldn’t have reached this milestone without your constant humor, love, and support when I needed it most. Thank you for always being a guiding presence in our lives. You are our **#1Dad!**

### **To My Beautiful Children (Mikisha, Terrence, Maribella, and Emmanuel) and My Grandchildren**

Looking back on my life as a single mom raising four wonderful children feels surreal. I remember times when the challenges I faced seemed overwhelming. However, seeing all of you as successful adults reassures me that my efforts were not in vain. I pray that you continue to strive to become everything God has destined you to be. Remember, life is filled with highs and lows, but you are all resilient and destined to overcome them all.

**~ A Mother’s Love**

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Non-Government Organizations	(NGO)
TP Is My Hero Foundation	(TPFNDN)
United States	(U.S.)
Winston-Salem	(WS)
Winston-Salem State University	(WSSU)

## GLOSSARY

**Alpha&Omega OuTreach:** A community-centered outreach ministry created to address spiritual and practical needs through initiatives such as food distribution, prayer, fellowship, and community engagement.

**Alternative Ministry:** Initiatives that function outside traditional denominational or institutional leadership structures while still providing spiritual care, outreach, and community service.

**Contemporary Christianity:** The adaptation to modern culture is marked by the emergence of global, tech-savvy movements, often characterized by evangelical or charismatic elements. This approach highlights experiential worship, social justice, and active engagement with contemporary issues. However, it faces challenges posed by secularization and theological debates. Key trends include digital outreach, the rise of mega-churches, and diverse worship styles.

**Community-Based Ministry:** Activities conducted within local community settings, rather than exclusively in church buildings. These efforts often focus on meeting both practical and spiritual needs through outreach, relational engagement, and service.

**Ecclesiastical Exclusion:** The restriction or limitation of individuals from leadership roles within church institutions due to official policies, theological interpretations, or cultural practices.

**Institutional Sexism:** Systemic practices, policies, or cultural norms within organizational or ecclesiastical structures that lead to unequal opportunities, recognition, or authority for individuals based on gender.

**Patriarchal Power Structures:** Organizational systems where authority, leadership, and decision-making power are primarily concentrated among men, often reinforced by theological interpretations, institutional traditions, and cultural expectations.

**Relational Leadership:** A leadership approach that emphasizes collaboration, mentorship, community care, and shared participation rather than hierarchical authority.

**Purple Tent Ministry:** The outreach model used by Alpha&Omega OuTreach, where ministry activities take place under a visible purple tent in the community. This symbolizes hospitality, dignity, and accessibility while providing practical and spiritual support to individuals and families.

**Women in Ministry Leadership:** Women who serve in roles that involve spiritual guidance, teaching, pastoral care, or ministry organization within religious communities.



# I. INTRODUCTION

Within my denominational context, qualified women are frequently denied prominent leadership roles or removed from appointments due to systemic resistance to female spiritual authority, even when they have demonstrated effectiveness in ministry. The persistent silencing of women in ecclesiastical structures is rooted in longstanding patriarchal interpretations of scripture and institutional practices that suppress female leadership. Eileen Campbell-Reed's research shows that, although women represent a significant proportion of seminary graduates across denominations, they remain markedly underrepresented in ordination, pastoral appointments, and denominational leadership.<sup>1</sup> This dissertation poses the guiding question: How can the exclusion of women from patriarchal church offices be addressed through the emergence of alternative ministry models led by women? By analyzing these dynamics, this study seeks to validate the callings of excluded women, illuminate innovative forms of ministry beyond traditional structures, offer a liberating model to challenge patriarchal norms, and empower marginalized voices to foster more inclusive ecclesiastical practices that reduce poverty through family, faith, and financial literacy.

First, this research identifies institutional sexism by analyzing the cultural, theological, and sociological patterns that perpetuate marginalization. Second, it

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<sup>1</sup> Eileen Campbell-Reed, *State of the Clergywomen: A Statistical Update*, 2018, accessed June 28, 2025, <https://eileencampbellreed.org/state-of-clergy>.

reexamines doctrines and restrictive hermeneutics, emphasizing the impact of women in historical justice movements and drawing on feminist and womanist theology to frame women's ecclesiastical exclusion as part of broader systemic oppression. Third, it highlights the resilience of women who, despite institutional silencing, establish innovative ministries outside traditional structures. Fourth, it affirms the callings of excluded women by providing marginalized voices with transformative ministries centered on justice, inclusion, and pastoral care. Finally, the study demonstrates that denying women equal leadership opportunities is neither scripturally, theologically, nor socially defensible. Women-led ministry models are presented as Spirit-led alternatives that embody an inclusive and liberating gospel. Through this analysis, this dissertation contributes to academic discourse and ecclesiastical practice by challenging the notion that institutional certification is an unreliable measure of faithfulness. The discussion of what it means to be faithful is nothing new; the church has been grappling with this notion for centuries. The underlying thinking here is that only God is all-knowing concerning the mission and nature of the church. Therefore, it is highly improbable that we can fully embody what we know and believe about the church. Yet, as women, we continue our pursuit to seek and understand this great mandate to which we have been called. Perhaps, the insights that lie within women concerning what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ are the essence of what is missing in the body of Christ as a whole. Quoting Letty M. Russell, "It may well be that the insights of women into the meaning of faithfulness for all Christians will one day make it no longer necessary for women to gather apart to give an account of the hope that is in them."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Letty M. Russell. *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 44-45.

## II. SYSTEMIC BARRIERS AND EXCLUSION IN MAINSTREAM DENOMINATIONS

### SYSTEMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

#### **Institutional Sexism**

When women receive God's call to move forward in ministry, they often have no idea what awaits them. All they know is that they want to fulfill God's will in their lives. Therefore, they take that next faithful step. Sooner or later, they realize the systemic barriers women face when seeking to lead in male-dominated religious institutions. This form of institutional sexism is embedded in practices, structures, and cultural assumptions within religious organizations that privilege men's leadership while marginalizing women's gifts and authority.<sup>3</sup> Unbeknownst to many, women are up against systemic policies and traditions designed to suppress them through unequal access to ecclesiastical power. As feminist scholar Mary E. Hunt observes, "the structures of church are not neutral; they are organized in ways that sustain male dominance and female subordination."<sup>4</sup> This reality is more prevalent than one might imagine in mainstream denominations, whether they permit male-only ordinations or allow for the ordination of women. Regardless, some women are often relegated to marginalized roles,

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<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 17-18.

<sup>4</sup> Mary E. Hunt, *A Guide for Women in Religion: Making Your Way from A to Z* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 121.

where opportunities for equal pay and leadership remain scarce. Despite their training and diligence in fulfilling their assigned tasks within the local congregation, they are still overlooked.

For example, from 1998, women have comprised approximately half of the overall student population in the largest mainline seminaries (44-49%) and half or more of the Master of Divinity students (46-52%). During this same 20-year period, the number of women leading the church increased to 32% of the clergy and 27% of the pastors. The difference between the enrollment and exit rates for pastoral leadership indicates a systemic disconnect between vocational training and leadership opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Also, Duke University reports that only 11% of congregations in the United States (U.S.) are led by women, a figure that has remained virtually unchanged since 1998.<sup>6</sup> Such statistics reveal what sociologists call the “*stained-glass ceiling*,” whereby women may enter ministry but are systematically prevented from attaining significant leadership roles. To illustrate the human impact of this “stained-glass ceiling,” consider the story of Reverend Mareé. Despite graduating at the top of her class in 2005 and demonstrating exceptional leadership throughout her seminary years, she struggled to secure a senior pastor position within her denomination. For years, Reverend Mareé had to contend with limited opportunities, frequently being overlooked for roles that were often given to her male counterparts with similar or lesser qualifications. Her story underscores the personal and professional challenges women face in ecclesiastical structures and adds a poignant personal dimension to the stark statistical realities.

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<sup>5</sup> Campbell-Reed, *State of the Clergywomen in U.S.*, 6-8.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Chaves, *National Congregations Study*, Duke University, 2015, accessed June 28, 2025, <https://today.duke.edu/2015/12/chavesstudy>.

Concealed institutional sexism also manifests in less formal but equally powerful ways: unequal mentoring opportunities, resistance from congregations unwilling to accept women pastors, and denominational cultures that frame women's leadership as "exceptional" rather than normative.<sup>7</sup> These subtler forms of exclusion can be understood through the lens of "symbolic violence," where cultural norms and practices perpetuate inequality without overt coercion. This ongoing cycle of marginalization undermines women's preparation, calling, and gifts, leaving them unable to participate in the church's mission in their fullest capacity. Yet they press onward.

### **Cultural Resistance to Female Authority**

As women step into pastoral ministry, they often encounter resistance, primarily from males, but also from females who have been conditioned to believe that women cannot take the lead. When women speak out and seek change, they are often rendered invisible and voiceless through denominational policies and cultural resistance, even at the congregational level, which further reinforces exclusion. Many church members internalize patriarchal interpretations of scripture that frame male leadership as divinely ordained. Consequently, female pastors often face challenges to their authority or outright opposition. As Letty Russell argues, theology is not only intellectual but also practical – it involves working with others to transform the daily practices of faith within faith communities.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, women called to lead must be willing to meet current challenges with grace and faith, and be determined to change cultural systems that have hindered their advancement. The underlying truth remains that these archaic models of

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Lummis, and Patricia Mei Yin Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 87-88.

<sup>8</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 36.

leading ministries will persist until denominational institutions choose to dismantle or reinterpret antiquated readings of scripture that perpetuate cultural resistance to women's leadership, despite denominational polity permitting it.

A further compounding of cultural resistance is gender stereotypes that associate women's physiological investment with the biological process of reproduction only, confining them to traditional women's roles of nurturing and domestic labor instead of welcoming them in areas that would enhance their role as individuals with equal ability to male collective power in the social sphere.<sup>9</sup> This patriarchal thinking shows up when men are seen as natural leaders, while these same individuals hold women to a different standard – one where they must prove their competence to lead. Women in ministry have encountered this treatment as they watch their less-qualified counterparts being elevated simply because of their gender. These cultural dynamics often have a subtle, diminishing, and removal effect on women, discouraging them from pursuing pastoral positions, limiting their tenure in leadership roles, and driving them out of religious organizations, which often leads them to form alternative ministries where their gifts and abilities can be fully affirmed.

This line of thinking prompts one to ask the question: If the marginalization of women is an institutional construct, how can denominational institutions dismantle the trend of devaluing women in ministry? As a woman of faith, the hope is that any trend can be dismantled through various methodologies: changing the policies and procedures to become more diverse and transparent, male clergy advocating publicly in support of women's leadership, assigning women to congregations where they can receive salaries

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<sup>9</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983), 72.

that are equitable to men in pay and size, and doing the theological and cultural work through preaching and teaching that is inclusive of all with regards to the calling, gifting, and authority imparted by the Spirit of God upon humanity to go, preach, teach, save, and disciple the growing population outside the four walls of the church. However, these suggestions are the result of patriarchal entrenched models that refuse to change for women. So, women must be creative, move forward in step and in alignment with the call of God upon their lives, and develop alternative means of doing ministry.

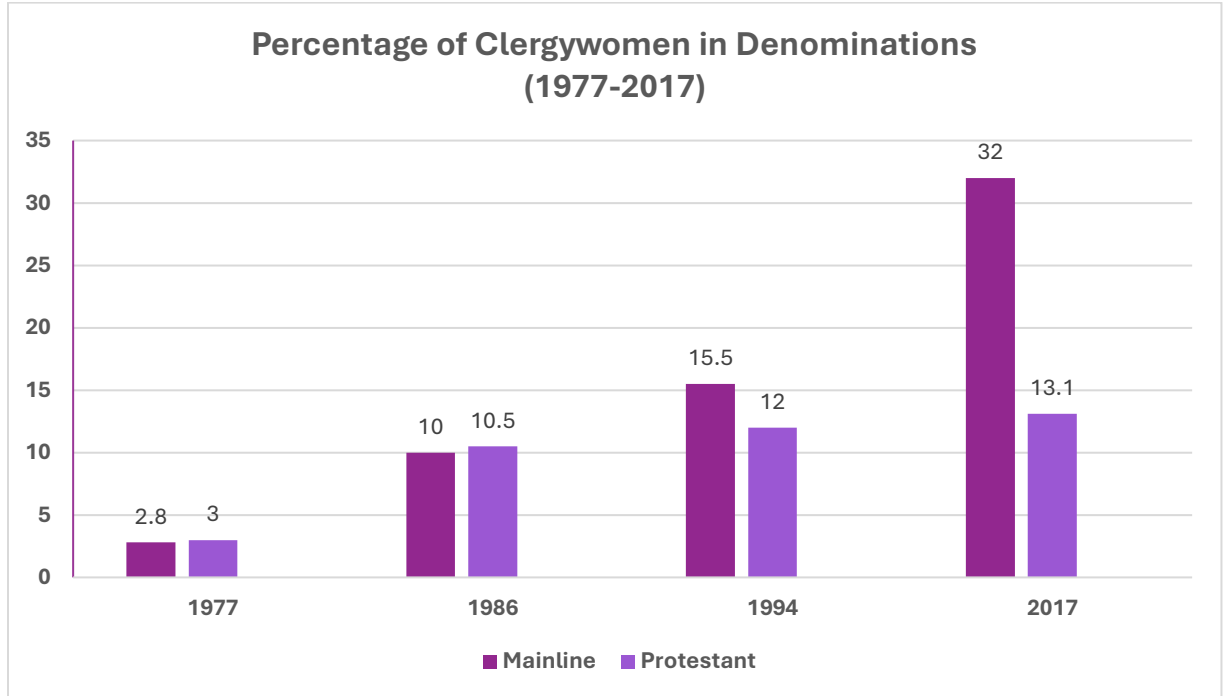
Then, if research is correct, what is the rationale for taking such a position? The overwhelming evidence supports this perpetual trend of the patriarchy, with women in the U.S. representing approximately 2.3% in the 1960s, not all of them pastors. By 1970, the ordination of women was allowed and has continued to rise throughout the next four decades. By 2014, women constituted 15.8% of the clergy in America and led 10% of U.S. Congregations. By 2016, a census conducted by the American Communities Survey reported that women accounted for 20.7% of the professional clergy in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, mainline denominations from 1977 to 2017 show increases from 2.8% in 1977 to 10% in 1986, 15.5% in 1994, and 32% in 2017. Even more so, in Protestant denominations from 1977 to 2017, there are smaller increases: from 3% in 1977 to 10.5% in 1986, 12% in 1994, and 13.1% in 2017.<sup>11</sup> While the numbers have increased over the last forty years, showing improvement, there is still no equitable proportion of women to men in ministry.

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell-Reed, *State of the Clergywomen in U.S.*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

**Table 1. Clergy Data in Mainline and Protestant Denominations (1977-2017)**



**Mainline Denominations** (combined totals): American Baptist Churches USA (ABC-USA), Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA), Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church USA (PC-USA), United Church of Christ (UCC), United Methodist Church (UMC). **Protestant Denominations** (combined totals): African Methodist Episcopal (AME), Alliance of Baptists, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Baptist General Association of Virginia, Baptist General Convention of Texas, District of Columbia Baptist Convention, National Baptist Convention, Progressive National Baptist Convention, The Foursquare Church, Mennonite Church, Reformed Church in America.

These percentages are even more alarming considering women continue to be the backbone of the church, holding congregations together. Therefore, creating alternative models for ministry offers women another avenue to be faithful to their calling and encourages women not to become stagnant amid resistance to women in leadership. Instead, women must utilize their courageous leadership skills, as the many great women who have gone before us have amid this changing culture, by developing women-led models that demonstrate legitimacy, impact, and community engagement. This stance

will shift the focus of thinking, encouraging institutions to either recognize women's impact in ministry leadership or become onlookers to what God is doing outside the four walls of the church.

Do you stand by these findings? My answer is profoundly, yes! If the systems are unwilling to change, then we must change to meet the needs within our surrounding community.

## THEOLOGICAL AND INTERPRETIVE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR EXCLUSION

### **Patriarchal Interpretations of Sacred Texts and Traditions**

An innate tension confronting women in ministry is whether God intended them to lead. Assigning women to pastoral leadership roles in congregations requires them to contend with congregants who do not believe women should hold positions of authority over them. This view of women's roles in society and the church has its roots in patriarchal interpretations of the scripture and ecclesiastical tradition. As congregants sit under clerics who only read and teach the sacred text from a masculine perspective, they gain an understanding of justification for the exclusion of women from holding leadership roles in the church. Therefore, as women take the helm of the church, they face the task of reconstructing the traditional narrative about women. Several passages of scripture are used in patriarchy to support this line of thinking. The main text used as a deterrent from women preaching is **1 Timothy 2:11-12**, "*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is*

to keep silent.”<sup>12</sup> Historical interpretations of this scripture suggest that the text means “**have authority**,” while others read this text as implying that men should “**dominate**” women rather than “**exercise authority**.”<sup>13</sup> Such interpretations raise hermeneutical issues because they tend to lead women to view their position in the church as one of subordination rather than as one that extends into areas of authority and leadership. Interestingly, these same clerics disregard the context of this passage, residing in a set of letters that is known to address a congregation where false teachers were targeting women. This is explicit in **2 Timothy 3:6-7**, “*For among them are those who make their way into households and captivate silly women, overwhelmed by their sins and swayed by all kinds of desires, who are always being instructed and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.*” Also, **1 Timothy 5:13**, “*Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house; and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say.*” This text speaks of widows who were spreading “**nonsense**.” Reading these passages in their proper context makes sense, given that at the time, false teachers needed homes for house churches. The most theologically vulnerable homeowners were widows who own homes and had minimal training because of their gender.<sup>14</sup> Another passage that is generally used alongside for further support is **1 Corinthians 14:34-35**, “*Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman*

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<sup>12</sup> Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible.

<sup>13</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 20-21. Kindle.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. Kindle.

*to speak in church.*” However, using this text to support women’s silencing is also problematic for several reasons: first, it seems to address a particular kind of speech, “**asking questions.**” This text certainly cannot restrict public prayer or speaking God’s message according to **1 Corinthians 11:4-5**, “*Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head, but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head – it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved.*” Here, Paul notes that women may pray and prophesy with their heads covered. This understanding of women and leadership goes against traditional readings of patriarchal texts that entirely silence women from speaking on behalf of God. Notwithstanding, these interpretations have been canonized in doctrinal traditions that equate male authority with divine will, thereby naturalizing the exclusion of women from preaching, ordination, and leadership within denominations.<sup>15</sup>

Feminist theologians have challenged these interpretations by exposing the cultural and historical contexts that shaped such texts. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for instance, argues that patriarchal biblical interpretation reflects a history of “*kyriarchy*,” which is a system of domination and subordination that is based on the power and rule of the lord/master/father that benefits men while it silences women.<sup>16</sup> According to Fiorenza, to read the Bible faithfully requires a “*hermeneutics of suspicion*” toward interpretations that reinforce oppression and a “*hermeneutics of remembrance*” that recovers the silenced voices of biblical women.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Phyllis Trible’s work on “*texts of terror*” demonstrates that the Bible itself preserves stories of women’s suffering

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Timothy 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (NRSV).

<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1983), 32. Kindle.

<sup>17</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15-18.

under patriarchal systems, which must be acknowledged rather than spiritualized.<sup>18</sup> All too well, women have felt these oppressive clutches embedded in the patriarchy within congregations with great indignation.

Notwithstanding, patriarchal interpretations are not inevitable; instead, they are chosen hermeneutics that reflect the experience, opinion, or perspective of the individual male writer, but not the historical reality and authentic experience of women. The formal canons of codified patriarchal law are generally more restrictive than the actual interaction and relationship of women and men and the social reality that they govern.<sup>19</sup> The perpetuity of these interpretations across generations reveals how theological reasoning can be mobilized to sustain institutional sexism—all the while, disguising human power structures with divine authority.

### **Theological Tension: Conflict Between Divine Calling and Human Barriers**

Yet another theological tension that demands serious scholarly attention is the internal struggle of women who dare to say “yes” to God’s call on their lives and the human barriers they must overcome to step wholeheartedly into leadership. Women testify to being called by God with the same clarity, conviction, and fruitfulness as men, yet quickly discover that their call alone does not protect them from systems that deny ordination, restrict appointments, or silence their voices. This tension exposes the gap between a Spirit-led theology of calling and a leadership theology still constrained by patriarchal traditions.

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<sup>18</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 1-5.

<sup>19</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 297. Kindle.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a Roman Catholic feminist theologian, underscores this contradiction when she writes, “Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive and must not be presumed to reflect the authentic relation to the divine.”<sup>20</sup> Ruether insists that theology must be judged by whether it affirms women’s humanity; if ecclesiastical structures suppress women’s gifts, they contradict the very gospel they claim to uphold. Ruether’s theology is rooted in women’s experiences of self, the divine, community, and the world. Protestant theologian Letty Russell integrates tradition and women’s experience. Likewise, she argues that theology must lead to transformative praxis: the Word of God in the world must empower communities to reflect Christ’s justice and inclusivity.<sup>21</sup> In this way, theology is both intellectual and practical – a form of praxis that understands God leads one to action. She grounds her theology in the Christian tradition and the concept of the “*communion of saints*,” emphasizing that theology should lead to transformative change in alignment with the Word in the world. Therefore, when theology instead legitimizes exclusion, it ceases to serve God’s liberating purpose and becomes an instrument of oppression.

Women’s divine calling is not just a theoretical idea, speculation, or tension; it is profoundly personal, theological, and pastoral in nature. Therefore, a woman who has a relationship with God and understands their calling to serve in ministry often finds themselves questioning whether exclusion is God’s will or a result of human resistance. This unjust struggle emphasizes the need to reexamine doctrines of call, church, and leadership in ways that affirm women’s gifts, talents, and authority.

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<sup>20</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 36.

## SOCIOLOGICAL DYNAMICS

### **Key Concepts: Institutional Sexism and Patriarchal Power Structures**

From a sociological perspective, women's exclusion from ministry leadership is sustained by institutional sexism and patriarchal power structures. Institutional sexism refers to the systemic privileging of men within organizational structures, often masked by seemingly neutral policies and traditions. These differences in ecclesiastical settings include ordination processes that disadvantage women, appointment systems that funnel them into less visible or less prestigious roles, and pay disparities that undervalue their labor.<sup>22</sup>

Symbolic and cultural practices further reinforce patriarchal power structures. Particular dynamics, such as preaching style, leadership style, and family gender roles, often emerge when women take the lead. In many instances, the very things that people praise men for doing are critiqued in women. Moreover, if women are perceived as strong and assertive, they are often not viewed as feminine. Furthermore, if they are passive and unable to withstand attacks, they are viewed as weak and are usually dismissed from leadership. All too often, these things are used to maintain the status quo, which frequently shouts, "We've always done it this way; there is no need to change it now."

### **Analyzing Power Structures and Organizational Dynamics**

Documentation in the sociology of religion has persistently cited how organizational dynamics perpetuate inequality within churches. Max Weber's analysis of this modern bureaucracy highlights how ecclesiastical institutions operate through clearly

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<sup>22</sup> Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang, *Clergy Women*, 71-81.

established systems of super- and subordination, in which higher offices supervise lower ones.<sup>23</sup> In denominations, this often means that men—who already dominate senior positions—control ordination committees, appointment boards, and doctrinal councils. As a result, patriarchal power is maintained through what Pierre Bourdieu terms “*symbolic violence*”: understanding ‘*symbolic*’ as the opposite of ‘*real, actual,*’ people suppose that symbolic violence is a purely ‘*spiritual*’ violence which ultimately has no real effects.<sup>24</sup>

This dynamic is evident in the phenomenon known as the “stained-glass ceiling”. While allowing women access to entry-level ministry roles, the lingering effect of “the Old Boys’ network” systematically prevents them from reaching the highest levels of leadership.<sup>25</sup> Women are disproportionately appointed to small, financially struggling congregations, while men are given larger, more prestigious pastorates. Even when women demonstrate effectiveness, their career advancement is curtailed by both explicit and implicit biases within denominational structures.

Sociological analysis thus reveals how systemic exclusion is not simply a matter of theology but of organizational power. “Men maintain their power in organizations through their unification, often unconsciously, influenced by dominant sexuality, violence, privilege, political power, shared interests, and cultural values.”<sup>26</sup> Patriarchal systems reproduce themselves by training congregations, clergy, and leaders to view male authority as normative and female authority as exceptional. Over time, these dynamics

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<sup>23</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 1745. Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 34-36.

<sup>25</sup> Lucinda Joy Peach, ed., *Women in Culture: A Women’s Studies Anthology* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 287.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett, eds., *The Masculinities Reader* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press/Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 153.

create a culture in which women’s exclusion seems natural—even inevitable—unless intentionally disrupted. However, Pierre Bourdieu argues this fallacy associated with “false consciousness leads one to expect the liberation of women to come through the immediate effect of the ‘raising of consciousness,’ forgetting – for lack of a dispositional theory of practices – the unreceptiveness and indifference that stem from the embedding of social structure in bodies.”<sup>27</sup> His theory of social order highlights how individuals develop new practices when access to institutional authority is limited.

### **III. RE-EXAMINING FOUNDATIONS: THEOLOGICAL, BIBLICAL, AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Theological claims, biblical interpretations of scripture, and dependence on patriarchal traditions have often justified the exclusion of women from significant ministry leadership in many Christian traditions. Yet, these justifications are not the only way to interpret Christian faith. When examined closely, both the biblical record and Christian history demonstrate a far more expansive vision of women’s calling and authority. Re-examining these foundations creates theological and practical openings for women to exercise leadership in alignment with their divine callings.

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<sup>27</sup> Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 40.

## THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

### **Reinterpreting Doctrines of Call and Leadership**

Although discerning God's call upon one's life takes on many forms, one thing is central: it is beyond human control; God chooses. This call heightens the doctrine of vocation, which holds that God calls individuals into service through the gifts of the Spirit. Traditional church structures often affirm this concept in principle but, in practice, limit its application to men. This contradiction raises significant theological questions about the integrity of a doctrine of calling that excludes half of humanity.

Feminist and womanist theologians argue that any theology that ignores the Spirit's gifting of women undermines the universality of the gospel. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza frames this as a hermeneutical challenge: "to rethink the structures of the church in ways that dismantle cultural-religious kyriocentrism and socio-political kyriarchy with the radical democratic vision of self-determination in all areas of socio-cultural and religious life."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Delores S. Williams, a leading womanist theologian, emphasizes that doctrines of redemption and liberation cannot be divorced from women's embodied experiences. She points out that God's gift to humans, through Jesus, was to invite them to participate in this *ministerial* vision ("whosoever will, let them come") of righting relations. Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection and the kingdom of God theme in Jesus' *ministerial* vision provide women (black) with the knowledge that God has shown humanity how to live peacefully, productively, and abundantly in relationship. Jesus

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<sup>28</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 57. Kindle.

demonstrates this vision through right relations between body, mind, and spirit.<sup>29</sup> Hence, God's call to ministry is one of inclusivity, not exclusivity.

## BIBLICAL REFLECTION

### **Challenging Restrictive Hermeneutics**

In **John 4:24**, Jesus declares, “God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and Truth.” The Greek word for “spirit,” πνεῦμα (pneuma), denotes breath or wind and represents divine transcendence. Jesus emphasizes sincere, spiritual worship, not confined to any particular physical location. While the New Testament often uses masculine language for the Holy Spirit, the Hebrew word רֹחַ, as seen in **Genesis 1:2**, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” is grammatically feminine. Similarly, in **Genesis 2:7**, God breathes life into man – the Hebrew root נָפַח conveys a divine act transcending gender. These texts invite a broader theological understanding of God that includes masculine and feminine imagery. Despite this, most cultures emphasize a masculine view of God, contributing to the exclusion of women from leadership. Denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention exemplify this exclusiveness, while others, such as the AME Zion Church, although not formally exclusionary, often operate in a paternalistic manner. This culture creates unequal expectations, where women are to follow orders and serve without the same standards or support granted to male clergy. Such disparities drive many women to develop alternative ministries such as Alpha&Omega OuTreach.

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<sup>29</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 165-167.

First, numerous biblical figures embody women's leadership. Deborah served as a judge, a charismatic leader, and a prophet over Israel. In **Judges 4:4-5**, Deborah is identified as 'ēšet lappîdôt, which may mean “woman of [the town] Lappidoth,” “wife of [the man] Lappidoth,” or “woman of torches” (that is, “fiery woman”).<sup>30</sup> Although scripture does not record how she became a judge, why she is called a “prophetess,” or how she received her divine directives, it states that Deborah is the only female judge and is also identified as a “prophet.” Moreover, she is a key figure in the defeat of the Canaanites.

Phoebe is identified as a deacon in Cenchreae and commended by Paul as a benefactor and leader. In **Romans 16:1-2**, Phoebe means “bright, radiant,” from Greek Phoibtē; in the masculine form, it is an epithet of the Greek god Apollo. She is identified as *diakonos* of the church of Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth. This title is sometimes translated as “servant” or “deaconess,” and sometimes defined as informal service or limited ministry to women or to the sick. It is the same title used by Paul without gender distinctions when referencing himself and others engaged in the ministry of preaching and teaching as seen **1 Corinthians 3:5; 2 Corinthians 6:4; and Philippians 1:1**. The term signifies a leadership role for the entire church, suggesting a recognized office that was not yet as clearly defined as it later became in later church history in **1 Timothy 3:8-13**. Phoebe is thus a church official, a minister of the church in Cenchreae.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Carol L. Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, associate eds. Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 66. Kindle.

<sup>31</sup> Meyers, *Women in Scripture*, eds. Craven and Kraemer, 135. Kindle.

Priscilla, alongside her husband Aquila, taught Apollos “more accurately the way of God” (**Acts 18:26**). Priscilla means “venerable,” from Latin *priscus*, “belonging to former times,” hence venerable; Prisca is the feminine form of the common Roman surname Priscus (masculine); Priscilla is a diminutive Prisca (called “Priscilla,” a diminutive of Prisca, in Acts). She is mentioned six times in the New Testament: **Acts 18:2-3, 18-19, 24-26; Romans 16:3-55; 1 Corinthians 16:19; and 2 Timothy 4:19.**<sup>32</sup> Although Priscilla is always mentioned alongside her husband, it does not diminish her role as a highly important, well-traveled missionary and church leader whose paths occasionally intersected with Paul's.

Junia, described by Paul as “prominent among the apostles” in **Romans 16:7**. Junia means “*a woman of the gens, or clan, Junius*” in Latin. Since Paul acknowledges Junia alongside Andronicus, this shows that a woman exercised apostolic authority in the early church. Junia’s role as an apostle aligns with female leadership positions, such as heads of the synagogues or elders in ancient Judaism and Greco-Roman religions.<sup>33</sup>

Second, restrictive hermeneutics fail to account for the New Testament’s radical vision of equality expressed in **Galatians 3:28**, “*there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” Scholars such as Craig Keener note that Paul’s apparent prohibitions must be read in the general sense of what was acceptable within the prevailing societal norms of his time, rather than as timeless restrictions.<sup>34</sup> With this understanding, a faithful reading of the sacred text does not endorse the silencing of women; instead, it acknowledges their Spirit-empowered gifts.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 136. Kindle.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 107. Kindle.

<sup>34</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives*, 111-115. Kindle.

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

These gifts are evident in several key historical and social justice movements for women's inclusion in ministry, which have challenged patriarchal structures and advocated for women's leadership in faith communities. Reexamining church history reveals that women's exclusion has never been absolute. On the contrary, these movements over centuries often created spaces for women in leadership, even if those spaces were later suppressed. Understanding these pivotal movements is crucial to women's empowerment and causing change in today's world. Each movement, from the fight for suffrage to the transformative power of the Social Gospel and Pentecostal movements, signifies a continuum of women's resistance and leadership. The suffrage movement laid the groundwork for redefining women's public roles, a process expanded by the Social Gospel movement's focus on social justice and community service, and ultimately led to the Pentecostal movement, which provided spiritual spaces where women's leadership was recognized.

### **Historical Movements**

#### *The Women's Suffrage Movement (19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century)*

Introduces the voices of Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage, who describe the movement as “*the Anti-Slavery struggle in this country.*” During these years, women were treated as chattel, but the color of their skin determined their worth. Black women were forced to work and give birth to children in slavery. In contrast, white women were not as restricted as black women or men who were enslaved; they still had no rights to leave their homes, disobey orders, profit from their own work, speak in

public, have custody of their own children, own property without a guardian, or affect the patriarchal laws that governed their lives.<sup>35</sup> Gage states this movement marks a time in history when African American and white women developed skills (e.g., conducting meetings, agreeing to disagree with others, public speaking, fundraising, and taking all forms of action – from petitioning to facing down mobs).<sup>36</sup> These skills would be utilized a decade later, as women organized to fight for their rights, expanded public perceptions of women's authority, and influenced both the church and society to reconsider women's leadership roles in churches and other institutions. There are many notable suffragists, including Isabel, a former African American slave who, with God's help, transformed her destiny to become Sojourner Truth, affirming the close relationship between God and woman. She testified during a women's rights convention in 1861 of her reliance upon Jesus to support her as she bore the pain connected with being a slave mother: *'And ain't I a woman?... I have borne thirteen children, and seen 'em mos' all sold off to slavery and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?'*<sup>37</sup> Sojourner Truth is a product of the black church Godforce, the black denominations that founded schools for black people, built houses for the poor, birthed great civil rights movements, and birthed black salvation bearers.<sup>38</sup> Also, Frances Willard, a mainstream reformist feminist who pioneered women's reform movements, suggests that the emancipation of women fulfills Joel's prophecy, in which the pouring forth of the prophetic spirit upon women will usher in the final era of world salvation.<sup>39</sup> These great

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<sup>35</sup> Sally Roesch Wagner, ed. (forward Gloria Steinem), *The Women's Suffrage Movement* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2019), 14. Nook.

<sup>36</sup> Wagner, *The Women's Suffrage Movement*, 22. Nook.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>39</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 134.

women were deeply rooted in their Christian faith and argued for women's right to serve in ministry.

*The Social Gospel Movement* (late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century)

Ushered in increased female participation, as women began shaping ministries of education, poverty relief, and public health. Women-led settlement houses and missionary societies addressed the community's needs (social justice concerns, inequality, and labor rights). Two great activists and women of faith, Jane Addams and Dorothy Day, played key roles in this movement, often challenging traditional church leadership structures. People witnessed firsthand how Christianity and God's sovereignty could be used to expand the gospel message and inspire action among working-class individuals and the disenfranchised. Theologians such as H. Richard Niebuhr supported the idealism of the Social Gospel through sustained analyses of human nature and its predicament, drawing heavily on the ideas of Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard. The point is a conception of the human creature being both finite and free. Therefore, they are dependent upon nature, upon other persons, and above all upon God.<sup>40</sup> Women were now breaking through barriers and inviting others to rethink their traditional views of the gospel, which are God-centered and focused on humanity, rather than being gender-specific.

*The Holiness and Pentecostal Movements* (19<sup>th</sup> century to present)

Offered alternative spaces for women to preach and pastor, recognizing the belief in the Spirit's call over the formal ecclesiastical system of selection or promotion.<sup>41</sup>

Women during this time were effectively mobilized into service as ministers and

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<sup>40</sup> David F. Ford, ed. (with Rachel Muers), *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 207.

<sup>41</sup> Estrela Y. Alexander and Amos Young, eds., *Philip's Daughters: Women in Pentecostal-Charismatic Leadership* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 3. Kindle.

founders. Women leaders such as Aimee Semple McPherson, a Canadian-American Pentecostal evangelist and pioneering preacher, who single-handedly built the most prominent Pentecostal meeting place in the world at the time and established a flourishing Pentecostal denomination in 1927, the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, which centers on Jesus as Savior, Baptizer with the Holy Ghost, Healer, and King.<sup>42</sup> Also, Phoebe Palmer, known as the *'Mother of the Holiness Movement,'* became a prominent figure, demonstrating that women could lead large, impactful ministries. Phoebe Palmer writes concerning women's rights and preaching, "Ordinarily, these are not the circumstances where women can best serve her generation according to the will of God. Yet facts show that it is in the order of God that woman may occasionally be brought out of the ordinary sphere of action, and occupy in either church or state positions of high responsibility; and if, in the orderings of providence, it so occur, the God of providence will enable her to meet the emergency with becoming dignity, wisdom, and womanly grace."<sup>43</sup> Women were finding their voice and exercising their gifts and abilities as born-again leaders.

#### *The Civil Rights Movement (1950s and 1960s)*

Provides a parallel: just as African Americans challenged structural racism in church and society, women continue to confront patriarchal ecclesiastical structures. Womanist scholars such as Katie Cannon argue that women's survival strategies in oppressive contexts embody forms of resistance that anticipate liberation theology.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 604.

<sup>43</sup> Phoebe Palmer, *The Collected Works of Phoebe Palmer: Six Books in One* (Yuma, CO: Jawbone Digital, 2015), 16398. Kindle.

<sup>44</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 26-28. Kindle.

Cannon argues, “the moral agency of Black women must be understood on their own terms rather than being judged by essentially abstract external ideological norms and squeezed into categories and systems that consider white men the measure of significance. Lives of Black women cannot be fully comprehended using analytical categories derived from white/male experience. Oftentimes, such concepts covertly sustain a hierarchy of white supremacy, patriarchy, and exploitive power.<sup>45</sup> The spiritual-political connection in the experience of black Christian women transcends the historical figure of the female Moses, known as Harriet Tubman, who defied the law physically and spiritually to nurture hundreds of black people from bondage in the South to freedom in the North, into the lives and works of women such as Ida B. Wells Barnett, who if she had not monitored the lynching of black people in the country, there would not have been a complete record. She also spoke of the immoral models of male leadership at the helm of too many of the black denominational church, where collusion often exists between some black male preachers and the political forces in America designed to oppress black women and all black people, the sexual exploitation of black women by some preachers, the tendency of the proclamation and teaching of the denominational churches to be so spiritualized and ‘heaven directed’ that women parishioners are not encouraged to concentrate on their lives in this world and to fight for their own survival, liberation, and productive quality of life – instead they are indoctrinated to be self-sacrificing and emotionally dependent upon males including male gods sacralizing the male image and making the feminine in Jesus invisible, the failure of African American denominational churches on a consistent and large scale, to pool their resources in order to deal

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<sup>45</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 61. Kindle.

effectively with the poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, hunger, and health problems often denied, such as AIDs in the black community, leadership encouraging homophobia, the emotional exploitation of black female parishioners as ministers provoke emotional reactions to proclamation and ministry rather than thoughtful questions and responses, and the building and purchasing of elaborate church edifices while thousands of black people live in poverty – buildings which only serve the community on Sunday, prayer meetings, and mid-week Bible study – buildings that fail to offer viable programs to meet the needs of black women and the black community.<sup>46</sup> Also, Rosa Parks, who sat down so that Martin Luther King, Jr. could stand up. She encouraged black people to endure in the face of genocidal white oppression, as an act of defiance, a revolutionary act.<sup>47</sup> Another was Fannie Lou Hamer, who perfected the art of connecting with the people and with the relevant social, political, and religious structures that could contribute to the educational, political, and spiritual well-being of African American people: women, men, and children. Also, Septima Clark, whom Martin Luther King, Jr. called *'The Mother of the Movement,'* founded The Citizenship Schools in 1957 to teach practical, political, and economic literacy to African American adults throughout the South, enabling them to become politically empowered voters. All these women were deeply connected to their faith and played key roles in advocating for civil rights. Their leadership in the movement also highlights the importance of women's voices in ministry and community leadership. This movement would also usher in a new theology that emphasized the feminine perspective of the gospel as sexist and destructive of women's consciousness.

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<sup>46</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 208-209.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

### *The Feminist Theology Movement (Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century)*

Introduces challenges to the Bible as a weapon in the liberation struggle. It claims that the God of the Bible is the God of the oppressed. Feminist theology builds upon the broader framework of feminist theory, which stems from a feminist consciousness that acknowledges the systemic oppression of women. Feminist theory encourages women to name their oppression and ponder its sources (e.g., sexuality, socialization, production, reproduction). Feminist theology supersedes traditional theory by analyzing the construction of “woman” and by offering its own theoretical reflections grounded in scripture.<sup>48</sup> Feminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza have questioned patriarchal biblical interpretations and traditions that exclude women’s leadership, advocating for a reimagining of theology that embraces gender equality and offers new frameworks for inclusive leadership. Ruether asserts that “feminist theology is rediscovering the prophetic context and content of Biblical faith itself when it defines the prophetic-liberating tradition as norm. In this way, feminist theology and other liberation theologies strip away the ideological mystifications that have developed in traditional biblical interpretations, thereby revealing the liberating content of the biblical text. The prophetic advocacy of the poor and oppressed, and the denunciation of unjust social hierarchies and their religious justifications, become clear when one assumes a stance of social justice rather than collaboration with unjust powers. The entire Bible message becomes radically transformed in meaning and purpose when the full implication of the Church’s social advocacy for the oppressed is grasped today.” Moreover, Fiorenza states that “feminist theology as a critical theology of liberation must

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<sup>48</sup> Pamela Dickey Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology: In Search of Method* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 12.

defend itself on two sides: While liberation theologians are reluctant to acknowledge that women are exploited and oppressed, radical feminist thinkers claim that feminist consciousness and Christian faith are contradictions in terms. Furthermore, solidifying her belief, when her daughter was born, she announced her baptism with the following statement: “*She is born into a world of oppression; She is born into a society of discrimination; She is reborn into a church of inequality...*” This statement demonstrates how Christian faith and the Church are destructive of women as persons who struggle against sexism for liberation. Ultimately, the question feminist theologians must face is a foundational theological problem concerning the Bible and biblical revelation: Is being a woman and being a Christian a primary contradiction that must be resolved in favor of one to the exclusion of the other? Or can both be kept in creative tension so that my being a Christian supports my struggle for liberation as a woman, and my being a feminist enhances and deepens my commitment to live as a Christian? Considering the Bible was and is used against women’s demand for equality and liberation from societal, cultural, and ecclesial sexism, it can attempt to formulate a hermeneutics of liberation.<sup>49</sup>

### **Contemporary Movements**

#### *The Ongoing Women’s Ordination Movements (Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to Present)*

Across Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions, there are persistent calls for ecclesiastical change. Many Protestant denominations, such as the Episcopal Church (1976) and the United Methodist Church (1956), began ordaining women, marking significant progress in institutional recognition of women’s leadership.

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<sup>49</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 53.

*The #MeToo and #ChurchToo Movements (2017 to Present)*

Exposed systemic abuse and silencing within churches, underscoring how exclusion is not only theological but also ethical and pastoral.<sup>50</sup> These broader conversations have sparked movements that have galvanized new generations of women and men who insist that church leadership must empower women, embody justice, foster transparency, and enforce accountability.

Taken together, theological reinterpretation, biblical precedents, and historical movements present a consistent witness that the exclusion of women is neither inevitable nor faithful to the gospel. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the early church embodied a “*discipleship of equals*,” a vision that directly challenges the notion that not all members had the same power or leadership.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, Letty Russell extends this critique: “the presupposition is that the experience of communities of struggle against patriarchy and injustice is the prism for understanding and interpreting scripture and tradition, as well as the test of whether a particular methodology makes sense or is seriously imaginable.”<sup>52</sup> At the same time, these movements expose the persistence of patriarchal structures and underscore the ongoing need for advocacy within ecclesial contexts. Recognizing these realities invites institutions not merely to reexamine inherited interpretive frameworks but to reconceptualize models of leadership in light of the New Testament’s inclusive and Spirit-guided vision.

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<sup>50</sup> Ruth Everhart, *The #MeToo Reckoning: Facing the Church’s Complicity in Sexual Abuse and Misconduct* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 18-21.

<sup>51</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 59. Kindle.

<sup>52</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 25.

## IV. WOMEN'S RESPONSE: THE EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE MINISTRIES

### MOTIVATION FOR EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE MINISTRIES

Despite the persistent marginalization of women in religious institutions, their sense of divine calling has not diminished. Instead, throughout history and into the present, women have transposed their exclusion into creative, alternative ministries free of traditional restrictions, where their gifts and abilities can be used to embody the Spirit's inclusive vision of leadership. These ministries demonstrate *resilience, authenticity, liberation, and validation of calling*, carving out spaces where women can answer God's call in ways that meet the pressing needs of their communities.

#### **Resilience**

Women have, throughout history, served as models of resiliency – not merely as survivors of exclusion, but as theological resisters who transformed constraint into innovation. When denied institutional authority, women did not retreat from ministry; instead, they adapted, reimagined leadership, and persisted in response to divine calling. Resiliency, therefore, must be understood as a spiritually grounded act of resistance rooted in conviction rather than compliance.

Historical research reveals that women's leadership frequently emerged in contested spaces. Catherine A. Brekus demonstrates that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female preachers proclaimed the gospel despite clerical opposition, public

ridicule, and their own fears of appearing radical and deviant.”<sup>53</sup> Women have always been creative in defending their right to preach. Many refused to remain silent because they believed that obedience to God superseded obedience to social restrictions. Their endurance illustrates that resiliency was not passive endurance but active fidelity to vocation.

Similarly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes Christian women’s history as one of “creative survival” within patriarchal systems.<sup>54</sup> Even when official structures denied recognition, women exercised influence through teaching, prophecy, hospitality, and community formation. Leadership often flourished outside formal hierarchies, demonstrating that authority can be enacted without institutional sanction.

In theological dialogue, resiliency is further demonstrated through the rejection of the sacralization of marginalization. Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that feminist theology emerges from women’s experience, which has been almost entirely excluded from theological reflection.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, theology requires an understanding of women’s ability to sustain congregational life while simultaneously challenging theological frameworks that have justified their exclusion. This is not rebellion against the faith; it is resistance through an open protest against distorted interpretations of what faithfulness embodies. Faithfulness to Christ calls us to be constantly open to those who are marginal in our own church communities and in the wider community and to ask critical questions

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<sup>53</sup> Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5. Kindle.

<sup>54</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 33. Kindle.

<sup>55</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 13.

of faith and practice from the perspective of the margin.<sup>56</sup> This is the faithful work of the church.

Moreover, resiliency has generated alternative ministry models. Letty M. Russell contends that marginalized communities of faith and struggle understand their calling as Christians in light of the struggle for justice and full humanity for all women together with men.<sup>57</sup> When excluded from hierarchical systems, women often develop relational and collaborative forms of ministry that reshape the church Jesus constantly preached about. A church that had an open invitation to those who are rejected by society, those who are on the margin, to come and share the feast of God's new household.<sup>58</sup> Resiliency then becomes reproductive, producing new expressions of church and community rather than merely enduring old traditional ones that often isolate and divide.

Research confirms the persistence of this pattern. Eileen R. Campbell-Reed observes that clergywomen continue to lead despite inequities in assignments and pay. These ordained women continue to lead specialized ministries as volunteers and earn their income outside of the ministry setting.<sup>59</sup> Such endurance is often sustained by theological training and communal networks, indicating that resiliency is cultivated both collectively and individually.

Taken together, these scholars reveal that women's resiliency is neither incidental nor episodic; it is structural and historical. Women have preached when forbidden, organized when unrecognized, and sustained congregations while excluded from formal power. Their persistence reflects attentiveness to divine calling that transcends

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<sup>56</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 25.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Campbell-Reed, *The State of the Clergywomen in the US*, 8.

institutional gatekeeping. As Howard Thurman reminds readers, Jesus' message "focused on the urgency of radical change in the inner attitude of people, with an emphasis on the inner life of the individual."<sup>60</sup> It is the 'inward center' that determines one's destiny, a summons that many women in ministry have followed despite opposition.

Thus, women throughout Christian history have modeled a resilient faith that resists erasure, reclaims authority, and reimagines community. Their witness challenges contemporary ecclesial systems to reconsider whether exclusion reflects divine mandate or inherited patriarchy. Historically, whenever women have been constrained, they have responded not with silence but with transformative persistence.

### **Authenticity**

These alternative ministries arise as authentic responses to God's divine calling. Authenticity here refers to the alignment between one's inner sense of vocation and outward ministry practice. Because institutional resistance often forces women to suppress or compromise their gifts, creating new ministries allows them to minister with integrity and fidelity to the Spirit's leading.<sup>61</sup>

As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues, women's lived experiences become a locus of divine revelation; when women claim their ministries without patriarchal validation, they affirm their identity as bearers of God's Spirit.<sup>62</sup> These authentic ministries do not reject tradition wholesale but reinterpret it through lived faith, demonstrating that true authority comes from the Spirit rather than denominational endorsement.

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<sup>60</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2022), 11. Kindle.

<sup>61</sup> Zikmund, Lummis, and Chang, *Clergy Women*, 101.

<sup>62</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 26.

Historically, when women were denied pulpits, they found other platforms. In the 18th and 19th centuries, women such as Jarena Lee, the first authorized female preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, defied societal norms by preaching in public spaces, despite resistance from male leaders. Lee declares, “in my wanderings up and down among men, preaching according to my ability, I have frequently found families who told me that they had not for several years been to a meeting, and yet, while listening to hear what God would say by his poor female instrument, have believed with trembling – tears rolling down their cheeks, the signs of contrition and repentance towards God.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Liberation**

Freedom is a powerful reason women create alternative ministries. Since women in ministry often suffer in silence, they seek safe spaces to heal and find support. These liberating environments act as a healing force for both them and others. Liberation, in this sense, is both personal and collective: women are free from the silencing imposed by male-dominated hierarchies, and communities are free to experience leadership that affirms equality and justice.

As women increasingly embrace their femininity and spiritual roles within the home, they recognize their capacity to reach out to others through evangelism. Conservative church leaders often attempt to control women’s involvement by confining them to evangelical responsibilities within the domestic sphere, encouraging them to support their families and organize prayer groups. However, Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that when women are empowered, their evangelistic efforts frequently extend beyond the confines of the home. Prayer groups can evolve into revival meetings, with

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<sup>63</sup> Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Miami, FL: Hard Press, 2017), 12. Kindle.

women taking on roles as organizers and preachers. Additionally, benevolent societies may transform into women-led home and foreign missionary societies, with budgets managed by women.<sup>64</sup>

Theologically, women's creation of alternative ministries reflects the Holy Spirit's work in raising leaders where institutional churches have failed. As Letty M. Russell argues, "The church is not defined by hierarchy but by hospitality—the radical openness to the gifts of all God's people."<sup>65</sup> Alternative ministries embody this radical openness by refusing to replicate exclusionary models and instead cultivating communities of inclusion, service, and liberation.

Furthermore, these ministries are eschatological signs. They point to the in-breaking kingdom of God, where barriers of gender, race, and class are dismantled or reinterpreted. In this way, these ministries serve as sites of resistance, living protests against church failures that have denied women's leadership, while simultaneously modeling inclusive communities. These ministries serve as visible reminders of God's promise that "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (**Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17**). The verses declare that the gifts of the Spirit are bestowed upon all humanity alike and have historically provided women with the justification and freedom to preach. By establishing ministries outside exclusionary systems, women embody a liberative praxis that affirms the fullness of their humanity and challenges the legitimacy of patriarchal dominance.

### **Validating Callings**

Finally, alternative ministries recognize and celebrate women's callings by providing concrete environments where their gifts can be acknowledged and put to use.

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<sup>64</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 198.

<sup>65</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 56.

Denominational exclusion often leads women to question the legitimacy of their calling. By establishing new ministry spaces, women not only affirm their own sense of vocation but also show their communities that human barriers do not limit God's call.

Letty Russell emphasizes that theology must lead to praxis: the Word of God at work in the world must produce communities of transformation. She employs bell hooks' terminology of "*talking back*" to claim that women's voices are at the center of the church as interpreters of what it means to be followers of Christ in contemporary society. "The liberatory voice will necessarily confront, disturb, and demand that listeners even alter ways of hearing and being."<sup>66</sup> Women-led ministries do precisely this by creating visible, Spirit-empowered models of leadership that validate women's callings and inspire others to pursue ministry with courage. In doing so, they reclaim authority as a service rather than a form of domination, redefining ministry itself.

## CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF MINISTRY

### **Community-Based Outreach Ministries**

The Sanctified Church, which is overwhelmingly female, has been central to the development of the Black Church since the era of slavery, through church planting and the empowerment of voices for change among both men and women. Although their contributions are often overlooked within broader religious systems, their impact is transformative and necessary for strengthening communities and society.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>67</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 76-91.

## **Digital and Media Platforms**

The use of technology for religious identity demonstrates how digital media, with their increased use for self-expression, self-understanding, and social interaction, enhance personal expressions of religion. The main difference between online and in-person lies in how this development is interpreted in relation to religious identities. Individuals around the world are now engaging in social media, online worship, blogging, and podcasting. This access, enabled by technological advances, has given women new pulpits unconstrained by denominational barriers.<sup>68</sup>

## **Non-Denominational and Independent Fellowships**

Women have consistently received support from outside organizations and sororities to advance women's leadership. An increasing number of women have established independent schools and ministries in which they exercise full leadership authority, often drawing those disheartened by traditional churches.<sup>69</sup> These expressions reveal both continuity and innovation, reflecting a balance between historical patterns of resistance and the application of modern tools and strategies.

# **V. INNOVATIVE WOMEN'S MINISTRY MODELS AND THEIR IMPACT**

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<sup>68</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 45-47.

<sup>69</sup> Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 101-104. Kindle.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF ALTERNATIVE MODELS

### **Expanding Pastoral Care Beyond Restrictive Institutional Norms**

Alternative ministry models expand pastoral care beyond traditional dynamics by reaching out to the broader community, often left out of our traditional settings because of their outward appearance. However, a closer look at Jesus reveals someone interested in all of humanity, regardless of socioeconomic status. If they could get to the source of all power, Jesus, then they could receive what they needed to live a transformed life. Not only did Jesus change their status in the community, but he also taught them how to live out their newfound way of life. Throughout the history of the church, pastoral care has been viewed as an inward concern for the well-being of individuals within a particular organization. While it has expanded its reach into modern pastoral care, which provides care in hospitals, schools, and the military, it does not reach those outside the norm. Those who may/may not have shelter, food, clothing, and employment. What does the community do for and with these individuals within society? We often write them off as unproductive contributors to society, unworthy of assistance, thus creating a sea of marginalized, ostracized, and categorized individuals who still need the same care as those within traditional organizations. This model of pastoral care provides nurture and concern for those who would otherwise be without a spiritual covering.

Pastoral care, then, is understood through a contemporary pastoral-theological lens and is not limited to individual acts of counseling but is a communal, interpretive, and transformative practice. In her book *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, Mary Clark Moschella defines this pastoral practice as attentive, contextual listening in which ministers seek to understand how faith is lived and practiced within a particular

community, emphasizing listening itself as an act of care oriented toward communal transformation.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, this understanding of pastoral care resonates with Delores S. Williams's womanist theology, in which she insists that theological reflection and ministry must arise from the embodied experiences of marginalized communities. More importantly, the plight of Black women as they navigate survival, resilience, and faith amid oppression.<sup>71</sup> For Williams, the emphasis is on lived experience as a primary theological source, providing ethical grounding for Moschella's pastoral methodology, which holds that pastoral care must attend not only to spiritual narratives but also to the social, historical, and material realities that shape them. Communally, Moschella and Williams frame pastoral care as a practice rooted in deep listening, embodied experience, and justice-oriented engagement with communal life.

So, what does pastoral care beyond institutional norms entail? While it is like pastoral care within organizations, it differs in that it is available to the community at large. Unlike traditional organizations, these innovative ministry models are free of the constraints of church buildings and provide care to the less fortunate.

### **Fostering Safe, Inclusive, and Healing Spaces in the Community**

Mary Clark Moschella brilliantly underscores the transformative power of active listening in our service to congregations and the surrounding community. This form of pastoral ethnography necessitates active engagement and the invitation of others' perspectives as an agent of individual growth and pastoral transformation. As Moschella aptly puts it, "Even highly gifted and talented individuals run into the predictable barriers

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<sup>70</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2023), 3-6.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 11-12.

of institutional life: interpersonal conflict, economic constraints, and dogged resistance to change.”<sup>72</sup>

Moschella further underscores how pastoral care is intricately woven into this exceptional research, known as ethnography. Ethnography is a research method employed by anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and theologians. It is a powerful tool for understanding human lives in their social and cultural contexts.<sup>73</sup> It involves the study of culture—the socially acquired set of practices, norms, and values a group of people lives by.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, conducting ethnographic research necessitates active participation in the communal life under study. Furthermore, it requires us to acknowledge the diverse dynamics within the culture we are studying, both personally and communally. Recognizing one’s theology in the observed environment is crucial in formulating the right questions to guide everyone toward a holistic approach within the community.

Moschella reminds us, “Religious practices constitute the shared religious life of a community. They function to hold traditions in place – and they play a key role in innovation and change.”<sup>75</sup> We identify ourselves with different denominations, each with particular religious practices that signify what we believe, as an organization. However, what comes to mind is how we get so entangled with the organization’s religious practices that we often forget the living organism that holds it all together. Nonetheless, prioritizing religious practices over relationships reinforces the customary observance of traditional values within our churches and communities, leaving us bound and stagnant. “Yet the gaps between belief and practice suggest that real, transformative change – what

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<sup>72</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

pastoral theologians call empowerment or liberation – involves personal and communal experience and desires.”<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, this rich body of research developed within our environments becomes crucial to personal and communal growth. It reminds us that intentionality must take center stage in all we do, whether individually or collectively, to effect change. This quest to be courageous leaders in this changing culture requires us to become a part of the environment we want to change. It entails being willing to grapple with one’s practices and dispositions, to face challenges in one’s theology and boundaries, and to convey this evolving listening paradigm as a practice for engaging others in this continuous dialogue. This form of active listening models the act of love that leads to a new, vibrant, and evolving community that represents everyone.

Ultimately, Moschella’s understanding of pastoral practice emphasizes the intentional creation of relational spaces where people can speak honestly about their lives and be received with care, respect, and theological seriousness.<sup>77</sup> This approach requires attentive, communal listening, an act of pastoral care that fosters healing, accountability, and transformation within the community. This pastoral visualization coincides with Letty M. Russell’s feminist theology of ecclesiology, which frames the church as a “community in the round” structured by radical hospitality and shared authority rather than domination.<sup>78</sup> Russell argues that authentic hospitality is a practice of justice that creates space for those historically silenced to speak without fear, thereby making healing and inclusion structural commitments of the church rather than optional ministries.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 5-8.

<sup>78</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 19-23.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 91.

Combining Moschella and Russell's ideology presents a compelling theological framework in which pastoral care and ecclesiology converge: healing communities are formed when churches intentionally cultivate safe, inclusive spaces through practices of deep listening, shared power, and mutual transformation.

Personally, reflecting on ethnographic research within our outreach program and among those we serve offers a sense of building something that reaches out to those who are disadvantaged, allowing grace and space for all involved to grow and expand beyond what is familiar. Moreover, actively listening and observing without interjection is a practice most, if honest, will affirm is a continuous work in progress. Furthermore, pastoral ethnography is needed to create transformative ministries impacting the surrounding community.

This mindful engagement compels one to grapple with two intricate questions concerning pastoral ethnography within community settings:

- When most are individually driven to do what is in their own best interest, how can we reframe this narrative to prioritize community involvement over self-advancement?
- What would our communities look like if Pastors became intentional about conducting ethnographic research within their contexts and among those directly affected by their ministries?

### **Prioritizing Justice and Inclusion**

Mary Clark Moschella's approach to pastoral practice emphasizes justice and inclusion as essential elements of faithful ministry, as these entail careful attention to power dynamics, social location, and the silencing of excluded voices within

congregational life.<sup>80</sup> Moschella asserts that pastoral care that overlooks systemic injustice fails to embody the gospel's communal implications. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reinforces this perspective by arguing that biblical interpretation and ecclesial life should serve to liberate those excluded by patriarchal and hierarchical organizations.<sup>81</sup> Fiorenza maintains that theology must act as a resource for both liberation and resistance to oppression, rather than as an instrument of control. Together, Moschella and Schüssler Fiorenza advance a significant theological claim: justice constitutes a defining characteristic of authentic Christian community, necessitating both pastoral attentiveness and structural reform.

## COMMUNITY IMPACT

### **Meeting Unmet Needs within the Community**

Faith communities emerge in response to unmet social, spiritual, and economic needs. Mark Chaves notes that congregations function not only as worshiping bodies but also as providers of social services, observing that American congregations are deeply involved in social service and charitable activity.<sup>82</sup> This involvement is often most visible where institutional systems fail to meet local needs. Similarly, Nathan O. Hatch argues that American Christianity has repeatedly democratized religious authority by responding to marginalized populations through grassroots ministry initiatives.<sup>83</sup> Such movements demonstrate that community-based ministry frequently arises not from institutional

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<sup>80</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 7-9.

<sup>81</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 66-67.

<sup>82</sup> Chaves, *Congregations in America*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 162-168. Kindle.

abundance but from necessity—addressing gaps in care, advocacy, and spiritual leadership.

Womanist and feminist theologians further clarify that meeting unmet needs is not simply charitable but theological. Delores S. Williams insists that theology must emerge from the survival strategies of Black women and the realities of those navigating oppression experiences of relation, loss, gain, faith, hope, celebration, and defiance.<sup>84</sup> For Williams, any ministry that ignores the suffering of women culturally and historically fails to reflect God’s sustaining presence in the wilderness. Likewise, Letty M. Russell frames the church as a community structured by hospitality and justice using the idea of table talk to constitute Pentecost and the corresponding cataclysmic results that followed: breaking of bread and the sharing of the apostles’ teaching and prayers of Acts 2:42. Moreover, arguing that authentic ecclesial life embodies glad and generous hearts who create room at the table for those who have been excluded.<sup>85</sup> Meeting unmet needs, therefore, is not peripheral to ecclesiology—it becomes a structural expression of shared authority and inclusive community.

### **Transformative impact on individuals and communities**

The transformative impact of such ministry extends beyond immediate relief to reshaping communal identity and power structures. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza contends that Christian communities are called not merely to care but to engage in “discipleship of equals,” a model that dismantles hierarchical domination.<sup>86</sup> Transformation occurs when inclusion becomes the norm rather than the exception.

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<sup>84</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, xiv.

<sup>85</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 20.

<sup>86</sup> Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 59.

Similarly, James H. Cone asserts that God’s liberating activity is present wherever communities resist oppression and affirm dignity, declaring that “theology must arise from the concrete historical situation of the oppressed.”<sup>87</sup> When faith communities align their practices with justice, they become sites of both spiritual renewal and social reconfiguration.

At the pastoral level, Mary Clark Moschella argues that attentive, communal listening fosters healing and accountability within congregational life.<sup>88</sup> Such practices cultivate spaces where stories of suffering and resilience are honored, thereby strengthening communal bonds and spiritual discernment. Community impact, then, is measured not only by services rendered but by transformed relationships, shared leadership, and renewed theological imagination. When unmet needs are addressed through justice-oriented inclusion and deep pastoral engagement, both individuals and communities experience lasting transformation.

## CHALLENGING PATRIARCHAL NORMS AND EMPOWERING MARGINALIZED VOICES

This alternative way of doing ministry is open to anyone seeking to fulfill God’s calling on their lives. Initially, there is that period we all grapple with at some point or another in ministry, where it feels as if we are dying, stagnant, or simply at a roadblock. This model of doing ministry is intended to get you out of your comfort zone. It compels individuals to venture into the unknown, unsure of what awaits them on the other side. Recall in **Matthew 8:18**, “*Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders*

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<sup>87</sup> James H. Cone, *The God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 21.

<sup>88</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 5.

*to go over to the other side.*” The disciples, not knowing what awaited them on the other side, got into the boat. Similarly, this is where ministry and opportunity come to a precipice. Many of us have reached this point in institutional settings, but because we are familiar with the organization’s terrain, we choose to stay in our comfort zone. Not because everything is going as planned, but because we fear what is on the other side of taking that next faithful step into the unknown. This fear is not a quiet storm; no, it is loud. It sometimes paralyzes us, leaving us stuck in situations that won’t change. Jesus speaks of this in **John 10:10**, *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* This requires hearing the noise while allowing God’s voice to call us by name and lead us out. Here, we find ourselves at a pivotal point in ministry. Do I stay and continue in this place that is leading me nowhere, or do I heed the voice of God and begin to move forward through the guidance of the Holy Spirit? The hope is that we all desire to be in the place where freedom reigns and not remain in the grip of the fear of bondage. Once we move forward, we will see the difference maker on board with us. In **Matthew 8:23-24**, *“And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep.”* Similarly, the storms of life will blow, but we can take comfort in knowing that even if we must do it afraid, we can make it to the other side because of who is in the storm, this venture, this new ministry, with us.

This period will draw us into a deeper state of communion and fellowship with God. It requires a willingness to fast and seek the will of God for one’s life. It requires having people in our circle who see our struggle, yet instead of talking about what is going on, they are willing to join us in praying for God to turn our situation around

through fresh insight and clarity of vision. Intentional prayer time is paramount at this stage because God honors our faithfulness in prayer. Scripture support is found in **Romans 12:12**, where we are encouraged to *“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.”* Also, **Philippians 4:6-7**, which reminds us, *“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* At this point, we are encompassed in a period of waiting, hoping, and praying for direction. This period is necessary so that when God speaks, we are ready to act.

In my case, this pivotal moment occurred during the 2020 pandemic. God directed me to start a virtual ministry to meet people’s spiritual needs. At a time when everyone was in their own spaces, churches were trying to remain open, people were getting sick and dying all around us, yet God was instructing me to begin this online ministry. Knowing very little about broadcasting anything online, I found this a welcome new challenge. With a few family members – my sisters, brother, my children, and my cousin – we started a Bible Study. Our meetings were on Zoom at 7 PM every Thursday. This time was a specific directive from the Lord for this ministry, enabling me to remain present in my local congregation if my services were needed. I did not include members of the denomination at this time to avoid drawing people away from the church. So, we did it, but not without challenges. We had audio, connection, technology, and hacker issues to contend with, but we were persistent. We would invite friends to the Bible study via Facebook, and some accepted the invitation. We were now on our way to building something great for God.

Having a social media ministry presents you with many things, including people who may oppose what you are doing and mock your efforts, but you must keep moving forward; don't look back! There may be times when you are on, and only two or three are attending; keep teaching. These are the growing pains. It is as if you are giving birth to this new thing as spoken of in **Isaiah 43:18-19**, *“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”* This season is very tedious and challenging because you are going against the traditional model of ministry. The loud noise of people's perception of what you are seeking to build will come into question. Many will discredit you because you are not moving in alignment with how things have always been done, but if you are assured of the voice leading you, you must keep pressing. Many will not associate with you because it appears as though you are alone in your endeavor. Now is the time to learn the power of encouraging yourself in the Lord. Those old classics that still speak volumes even in the 21st century capture the essence of what it truly means to walk with the Lord. Songs like “I'm Still Holding On,” by Luther Barnes & the Sunset Jubilaires, and “Safe in His Arms,” by Rev. Milton Brunson & The Thompson Community Singers were two that ministered volumes during this growing season. Knowing that God is holding on to you, establishing you, and protecting you in this new venture is both exciting and weighty. Yet, holding onto the promise by faith strengthens one's resolve. Similarly, other contemporary women-led outreach initiatives, such as Rivers of Living Water, have shown resilience and creativity in the face of societal pressures, inviting a broader perspective on how different models can successfully transform communities.

At this point, you are like the disciples on the boat with Jesus in the middle of the lake, and the winds and waves are blowing, just as they did; we are beckoned to the feet of Jesus during our turbulent times. **Matthew 8:25**, *“And they went and woke him up, saying, ‘Lord, save us! We are perishing!’ And he said to them, ‘Why are you afraid, you of little faith?’ Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a dead calm.”* Herein is a great lesson everyone must learn – how to call on the source of all power. Although Christ, the Savior, is always near to us, we, like the disciples, become so engulfed in what is transpiring around us that we forget to cry out to the only one who can help us and turn our situations around. It is in these moments that our fear speaks louder than our faith until we get close to Jesus. Notwithstanding, our faith must rage even louder than the innate fear gripping us. Quoting scripture is a great encouragement in times of distress and anxiety. Decreeing and declaring **Psalm 34:4**, *“I prayed to the Lord, and He answered me. He freed me from all my fears.”* Also, **2 Timothy 1:7**, *“God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”* Understanding the power entailed not only in quoting scripture but also in believing the Word works in the life of the believer enables one to stay the course until we eventually reach the other side of life’s greatest challenge.

During these moments of great challenge, one begins to understand what happens when one is willing to step out to do anything good for God. This resonates with anyone seeking to follow the call of God on their life: a clear understanding that storms are not just about the physical elements we face; they also signal the spiritual opposition to the fulfillment of God’s divine plan for our lives. We will all encounter physical storms in this life; it is a natural tendency, but we will also face spiritual storms that have no

identifiable horizon. The similarity between the two storms is the revelatory knowledge that Jesus has all power and authority over both.

So, if we are on the Lord's side, we can take confidence in knowing that God has it all under control. Christ can comfort us in our storms and has the authority to command them to subside. Amid the veracity of storms we all face, the tendency is to shrink in fear, when God intends that we find revelation of Christ on new levels we had not known before. Ultimately, we must understand that life's challenges do not come to take us under; they arise to ignite a fire in our faith as we grow deeper roots in Christlike character and nature. Here, we gain insight into the fact that God is not the author of confusion but our peace amid it all. Revelation that it's often people, places, and things that seek to control us, to usurp authority over us, that are the loudest voices in our minds that confront us with words and images that will keep us in a subservient role; when in fact God is still speaking, calling, and leading us to embrace our authentic gifting and calling. Moreover, take note that fear arises to force compliance with the world's hierarchical system, but precise knowledge of whose we are enables us to finally realize that we, plus God, equals the majority.

It is our faith in God that unlocks the door to our divine destiny. Therefore, when we have tried it man's way and found that it is tied to bureaucracy and politics, and we come to the saving knowledge that our only way to get out of this space governed by fear is found in our ability to learn how to exercise our faith in Christ, which can triumph over all of our worries. God will allow what seems overwhelming to reveal Christ as the all-powerful one. Every fear we face then becomes a passageway for us to deepen our faith. Understanding **Romans 8:31**, *"If God is for us, who can ever be against us?"* Also,

**Psalm 27:1**, *“The Lord is my light and my salvation, so why should I be afraid?”*

Ultimately, when fear arises in our lives, we must learn how to introduce our greatest fears to a greater faith in the one who can do exceedingly and abundantly above all that we are asking or thinking, according to the power we allow to work within us. So, no matter what challenges we are facing today, if it is emotional, allow Christ to bring peace, if it is spiritual, know Christ has all power and authority, if it is financial, understand Christ is our Jehovah Jireh, our provider, if it is ministry pressures of being excluded, ostracized, or marginalized, remember Christ will sustain us through it all, if it is uncertainty, hold onto the promise that Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God will not change up on us, though situations and circumstances may change. Fear paralyzes us and keeps us stagnant, but faith mobilizes us, showing us that when one door closes, God opens new opportunities for those who desire to fulfill the call of God on our lives. So, we must not allow our trauma to keep us bound; instead, we must allow our faith in Christ to allow us to soar above it all. Hold onto **Isaiah 40:31**, *“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”* This reminds us that fulfilling our calling is not a promise of life without storms, but it is a promise of victory in them. Having faith doesn't prevent storms, but it does position us above our storms. Now and then, along this pilgrim's journey, we must pause, reflect, and pray for the strength to overcome life's challenges.

A prayer that will strengthen one's faith: *Lord, when fear rises, allow my faith to rise higher. When storms are raging, let Your voice speak louder. Lord, calm every fear,*

*strengthen every believer, and remind us that You are still the God who commands the wind and waves. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

## **VI. FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEW (QUALITATIVE DATA)**

This section reports findings from in-person and Zoom interviews with five women who have served in ministry leadership across various contexts. These participants were selected for their diverse backgrounds, years of leadership experience, and active roles in different non-traditional settings, providing a broad perspective on female ministry leadership. Their narratives highlight the realities of female leadership within church structures and reflect broader patterns of spiritual calling, role navigation, and ministry innovation. Through iterative analysis of their recorded video transcripts to identify recurring concepts, five themes emerged as the most consistently supported across interviews. These themes include the call to and embrace of ministry despite institutional resistance and gender-based barriers; personal reflection and spiritual formation; the emergence of alternative ministries; and authentic relational models of leadership.

**Table 2 Participant Overview**

(Participant Release and Consent Form, see **Appendix B.**)

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Ministry Information</b>
<b>Lady Million Marviette</b>	Founder Phenomenal Woman Phenomenally You 17 years in ministry
<b>Dr. Tracey Staley</b>	Pastor Calvary Restoration Outreach Ministries 13 years in ministry
<b>Dr. Cynthia Dixon</b>	Founder and Senior Pastor Rivers of Living Water Global Ministries, Inc. 32 years in ministry
<b>Apostle Gloria Samuels</b>	Pastor Greater Commission Community Church, Inc. 50 years in ministry
<b>Lady Shannon Jessup</b>	Co-Founder S. Jessup Com-Unity Project 13 years in ministry

A careful analysis of these interviews will add another layer to this crucial research of what institutions are and are not doing. The hope is that these findings can be instrumental in empowering other women to launch out into the deep, knowing that others are experiencing similar obstacles and overcoming them by developing independent ministry fellowships. (Interview Questions, see **Appendix C.**)

### Theme 1: The Call and Embrace of Ministry Despite Institutional Resistance

Theme One demonstrates that women’s callings are experienced as divine vocation, independent of institutional approval, thereby challenging traditional ecclesiology, in which ordination or appointment validates ministry.

**Lady Million Marviette’s** call developed gradually while serving as a Pastor’s wife for over 20 years, married to a Bishop in the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World.

Yet she began to wonder, “What is the rest of me?” For her, being a Pastor’s wife did not mean Co-Pastor. She felt that role would leave no room for her husband to share what was burdening him, because they would both be carrying the same weight. So, she sought God specifically about her role as the Pastor’s wife and serving the congregation. She knew that her calling was not to preach, although God was calling her toward broken women, to empower them. God instructed her to bring application life from the Word to the membership. She recalls members saying, “Pastor brought us the Word, but you brought us life.” She settled on this call because oftentimes churches don’t teach you: now that you’ve prayed and spoken in tongues, how do you apply the Word to your daily life?

**Dr. Staley’s** recognition of her call was revealed during a Mother’s Day service at their home church, where she was speaking. After the service, her grandfather, who was Sunday School Superintendent at Mount Calvary Holy Church, affirmed her call, declaring she was just “a bootleg preacher.” In that moment, she chose to surrender to God’s divine call on her life. Eventually, she became Co-Pastor and transitioned to Pastor. As a mathematics professor at Winston-Salem State University (WSSU), she taught Bible Study and ministered regularly in the classroom and in her office.

**Dr. Dixon** describes her calling as a searching for God, a desire for a deeper relationship. She recalls God started giving her sermons. She was actively involved in Youth Church and New Members Ministry at her Baptist church. However, on 12/18/1994, she heard God asking, “Will you surrender to your call?” Afterwards, she went to her Pastor, who affirmed, “I already knew it, I was just waiting for you to come.” Then she heard God saying, “I am sending them, and no one was taking care of them.” It

was through these riveting words that God instructed her to develop a New Members Ministry curriculum that quadrupled church membership and strengthened retention.

**Apostle Samuels** recalls knowing she had spiritual gifts, yet she chose to pursue her own path early on. At a point in her life, she realizes God's protective covering was upon her. She remembers her grandmother's words after praying for her. She said, "If you continue doing what you are doing, your life will be shortened." During her junior year at North Carolina A&T State University, she had a conversion experience on 10/1/1975 at 9:09 PM at First Emmanuel Baptist Church in High Point, NC. This was a pivotal moment in her life. Afterwards, she yielded to the call on her life and has been serving in ministry for 50 years.

**Lady Jessup** describes accepting the call to the ministry approximately 13 years ago at Second New Bethel Baptist Church, while resisting the pressure to conform to anyone's perception of her as a Pastor's wife or minister. She refuses to conform to the roles people try to impose on her; instead, she embraces her authenticity and pursues ministry in ways that align with her personal calling from God. She says, "I don't fit into anybody's mode, as a minister or first lady." She believes people really appreciate authenticity; they value people being real and consistent.

Across the narratives, the participants describe distinct experiences of a clear sense of calling that precedes institutional recognition. Their stories align with the research of Letty Russell, who states, "the call to ministry is not an option. It is basic to the existence of all Christians as they seek to live together as partners in Christ's service."<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Catherine Brekus argues that women throughout Christian history

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<sup>89</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 50.

have often exercised their authority to minister through lived practice rather than ecclesiastical approval.<sup>90</sup> This underscores that God's call is independent and personal for anyone who embraces it, reinforcing the theological claim that vocational callings originate with God rather than with human authority.

## Theme 2: Experienced Gender-Based Barriers

Theme Two highlights how women often encounter barriers in both ecclesiastical settings and cultural contexts. Their testimonies demonstrate that barriers are not only doctrinal but also reinforced by cultural expectations, institutional policies, and informal assumptions regarding women's roles in ministry.

**Lady Million Marviette** expressed that while she did not experience gender-based barriers in a ministry setting, she did in the corporate environment. By profession, she worked in the corporate Information Technology (IT) department (dept.), which is predominantly male and Caucasian-dominated. She expressed how in the IT dept., there is no way a woman can be a project manager. Like a ministry setting, in the IT dept., the women have to work harder, almost be overachievers, and go above and beyond to have their work noticed. Even when it was noticed, the men would sometimes try to take the credit. She points out that women have to understand how to play the game. Let them take the credit! You come up with all the ideas, make them think they came up with them, and then the men will push and promote them. Otherwise, the idea can be so amazing, but because it came out of your mouth, it goes nowhere. So, she learned in this corporate setting that, who cares about getting the credit, it is not worth fighting over it because it is

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<sup>90</sup> Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, 4. Kindle.

not going to change. She emphasizes, “Just as there is the good old boy system in a ministry setting, the same holds in the corporate environment.”

**Dr. Staley** states that there were some places where people would specifically call and request that her husband preach rather than her. It was apparent that some ministries did not respect women preachers. Moreover, they would call her an evangelist and a minister but would not acknowledge her as a Pastor. In her denominational setting, she recalls “A woman who wanted to be a Bishop. Many of the men in the organization voted against it. For their denomination, it was not recognized that a woman could be a Bishop. Later, when someone else became the leader, they accepted women becoming Bishops.” She affirms, men were treated differently; they were accepted. She thought of it as “the good old boys club.” The standard for their organization was “we are going to accept the men; they are going to be leaders. Now, you can follow, you can help in ministry, but the man is going to hold the dominant role.” Leadership opportunities were limited for women: they could pray, serve on the altar, work with the youth, serve in the kitchen ministry, serve as nurses, and serve as ushers. They viewed women as helpers and nurturers rather than leaders. Even when women were going before the board in the Holiness Church to become evangelists or ministers, they were appearing before a room full of men who made that decision. Women were not allowed to have a say in those decisions concerning women’s elevation.

**Dr. Dixon** says there was so much resistance by the Deacons in the Baptist Church towards women ministers. Even on the day she was to deliver her initial sermon, she recalls that her Pastor thought it necessary to give a 30-minute teaching titled “Women are Indeed Called.” Then, after his teaching, she was called to the podium, and

the Lord used her mightily. Afterwards, she recalls one of the older Deacons from the church approaching her. He declared, stretching forth his hand, “I recognize the anointing, and then he said welcome.” His words spoke volumes, as she was the first to be called a daughter in the ministry. After she entered ministry, many women followed her into their calling. She attributes her access to ministry under her Pastor to being very open to the gifts of women being used in the house of the Lord. She offers a stark reminder that “everyone seeks affirmation from their father in the ministry.” However, as she poignantly adds, being used by God and receiving validation in her calling led her to face jealousy within the church, which became another challenge.

**Apostle Samuels** points to the realization that she didn’t feel that any roles were inaccessible to her. She was given many opportunities to serve as a Pastor in both the Methodist and Baptist denominations, but she chose to do ministry alongside her husband. Furthermore, she states that although she didn’t experience institutional resistance, her husband got all the backlash. He felt it was his assignment to affirm what was in her, and therefore, he pushed her to be all she could be for the Lord. Early on in ministry, she learned that you have very few friends in ministry, that leadership has nothing to do with titles, that it is important that we live a balanced life, and that we do not allow others to prostitute our gifts. However, she did once experience gender bias in a leadership environment. She was invited to an event; God instructed her on how to behave and what to wear. When she arrived, she noticed she was sitting amongst a table full of capitalists. At that moment, she realized she was there to operate in the office of the prophet. During this event, everyone at the table had an opportunity to speak. She began praying and talking to God about what she was to say. When God told her what to

say, she sat there in awe of what God had spoken to her to share with those at the table. When it was her time, she stood and spoke, “The Lord says, the person elected was coming to chastise America for wanting what they did not need,” and she sat down. She recalls receiving another letter, this time stating her presence was no longer needed at the table.

**Lady Jessup** describes two institutional experiences. During their first pastorate at Second New Bethel Baptist Church, there was allegedly discord spread through a single family. However, this escalated into a physical incident in which she was pushed and confronted, and leadership allowed it to happen. She views this assignment as a learning ground. During their second pastorate at Friendship Baptist Church, systemic problems arose. There was a group of men, ringleaders in all the conflicts. It was a board-run culture (all-male leadership) in which the Pastor was expected to “just preach.” He was not to be involved in the church’s decision-making, which was the board’s responsibility. Many initiatives they introduced were blocked because they weren’t the board’s ideas. She recalls being told to stay in the office except during pulpit time because of problematic congregants who were not being addressed. Her husband resigned shortly after her husband’s seventh anniversary because the ministry was taking a toll on his physical health.

These experiences reflect broader scholarly observations regarding gender disparities within ecclesiastical leadership. David S. Schuller argues, “When any group maintains order by fear, intimidation, and brutality, it does so at the cost of essential humanity.”<sup>91</sup> Letty M. Russell argues that patriarchal church structures have historically

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<sup>91</sup> David S. Schuller, *Power Structures and the Church* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), 63.

limited women's access to leadership authority, while Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza critiques the theological frameworks that reinforce such exclusions. Together, these scholars highlight how institutional patterns continue to shape opportunities for women's ministry.

### Theme 3: Personal Reflection and Spiritual Formation

Theme Three emphasizes the importance of personal reflection and spiritual formation in sustaining women's ministry leadership. The participants consistently described spiritual disciplines such as scripture meditation, prayer, discernment, and personal reflection as essential to understanding and sustaining them in their callings.

**Lady Million Marviette** finds solace in **Psalm 34:18**, "*The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.*" Reflecting upon 20 years of marriage and enduring the devastation of divorce and seeing women close to her going through catastrophic situations, losing their minds, or having a nervous breakdown, she went into her sacred space. In this space, she declares, "You don't have to have words, you're entering in travailing, crying, weeping, and wailing, but all the time you are in a familiar space, and God is already there." This discipline of prayer must be in place before you get hit. She describes this as doing the hard work, the inner surrender, the reduction of yourself, and dying to the flesh daily. You may enter broken, but it is more about how you come out, and you can show up, and people are confused. Her declaration became, "Not the God I serve, you cannot tell me that He is going to let me crack up." She emphasizes that an effective prayer life fosters resilience.

**Dr. Staley's** role as a first lady helped her develop a prayer life before becoming a Pastor. She speaks of often being misunderstood. So, she had to pray and ask God to help her, so as not to scatter the sheep. She points to her focus on the women in the Bible who we know were called by God: Priscilla, Aquilla, and the prophetess Deborah, who were used as women preachers, as what has sustained her in ministry. She stands on this proclamation, "If God could use those women in the Bible, certainly God can use us in this day and time."

**Dr. Dixon** calls prayer her "superpower." This spiritual discipline is how she garners enormous strength. She describes prayer as the connector between God and us, allowing the oil to flow. Experiencing rejection, she describes it as pain on another level. She speaks of the intimacy of partaking in Christ's suffering in **Philippians 3:10**, "*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the sharing of His sufferings by becoming like Him in His death.*" This pain led to her transformation through much prayer, which developed into a deeper relationship with God. Moreover, she quotes two scriptures that have sustained her in ministry: **John 15:18-19**, "*If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.*" Also, **Jeremiah 1:8-10**, "*Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*" Dixon points out that there is an emotional toll in ministry because "You always have to be ON," even when no one is

ministering to you. Therefore, time spent alone with God enables her to care and be present for others.

**Apostle Samuels** expresses that she is sustained in ministry through **Matthew 6:33**, *“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* She further states that this scripture has brought her through some major places, having buried two husbands. She describes the power of praising God through dance as a practice that will get you through everything. This text reminds her that “My Father loves me.” Knowing how much God loves her gives her confidence that “she can trust God even when she cannot feel Him.”

**Lady Jessup** says she is sustained through life challenges by **Galatians 6:9**: *“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.”* She believes, “Turning everything over to the Lord in prayer will produce a harvest in its due season.” She says, “Knowing who you are, what you believe, and knowing yourself is all developed in prayer.” She believes people really appreciate authenticity and value people being real and consistent.

The participants’ emphasis on spiritual formation reflects theological insights offered by Howard Thurman on the sustaining power of inner spiritual life for those engaged in ministry. He states, “A man’s (woman’s) conviction that he (she) is God’s child automatically tends to shift the basis of his (her) relationship with others.”<sup>92</sup> This ‘inward center’ determines one’s destiny. Similarly, Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that “only by experiencing one’s anger and alienation can one move on, with real integrity, to another level of truth.”<sup>93</sup> She highlights the role of spiritual consciousness in

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<sup>92</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 41. Kindle.

<sup>93</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 188.

empowering individuals to challenge unjust structures while remaining rooted in one's faith.

#### Theme 4: Emergence of Alternative Ministries

Theme Four demonstrates how women leaders frequently transform institutional limitations into innovative forms of leadership that address community needs often overlooked by traditional structures. These women become what scholars call religious entrepreneurs (e.g., marginalized leaders who create new ministry spaces).

**Lady Million Marviette** recalls a time when she was earnestly seeking God. As she walked into her new role, she wondered, "Where did this hit come from?" The theme that emerged was awakening: "How do women see themselves in a season of brokenness?" Her response, "they still need to see themselves as a phenomenal woman, as the daughter of a phenomenal God," and that's how the ministry, "***Phenomenal Woman Phenomenally You,***" was birthed. She points out that this understanding comes from knowing who you are. If God has allowed us to experience a divorce and to establish these ministries, it indicates that God has a powerful purpose for us. We need to silence the distractions around us. She recognized, as she started visiting the Homeless Shelter, that somewhere along their journeys within, the women she encountered were not built. So, she started this ministry outside the church to teach women that they are so much more than the blow life has dealt them. Therefore, her ministry trains, educates, and exposes how women can expand the kingdom by uncovering their God-given gifts and using them to create their own wealth.

**Dr. Staley** states that the emergence of Calvary Restoration Outreach Ministries was a manifestation of her husband's desire to provide a space where women could demonstrate their gifts in ministry. Recognizing that many people have experienced hurt in traditional churches and are hesitant to return, they decided to start a home church as a place where those attending could feel more relaxed and comfortable. In the process, they discovered many people associate the church building with pain and are more willing to join a less formal gathering. Additionally, being outside of a church building allowed them to reach a broader audience. Students and community members are more likely to attend, especially since it's more accessible to those without transportation, as they can walk to the home church. This ministry, which began in the home, has expanded into a feeding ministry and a street ministry, providing clothes to the community.

**Dr. Dixon** describes doing ministry outside of traditional structures as stepping out on faith. She speaks of how doing ministry within the traditional setting became labor-intensive. Although she was teaching Bible Study and was the only female on the Board making decisions, she felt grace lift as she stayed in a place God was transitioning her out of. She was doing the work of an Associate Pastor, without being acknowledged as one. She points out that timing is of the essence, as God informed her that this was her set time. She wrote the vision, put the legalities in place, and set a launch date for *Rivers of Living Water Global Ministries, Inc.* Dixon sensed that the people, the church, or her Pastor were not ready for her departure. However, the words of Paul resounded louder in **Acts 5:29**, "*But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority.'*" She views this move as one that has broadened her influence within

the community, as she now serves in several capacities as a chaplain to the WS Police Department and the WS Preachers Association, and has earned community trust.

**Apostle Samuels** describes the emergence of *Greater Commission Community Church, Inc.* as God giving her husband the vision through a dream. One day, in 2006, they entered a vacant building, and he asked her to prophesy the dream forth. Their congregation was in the process of purchasing another building. Unfortunately, her husband of 35 years passed away in 2011, leaving her to continue pursuing the dream. The congregation ultimately decided not to proceed with the purchase of that property. She remembers revisiting that still-vacant building, eight years later. Only this time, she was without her devoted partner in ministry by her side. With determination, she would lead the congregation as their Pastor, carrying the vision forward in purchasing the building in 2012, moving in December 2013, and paying it off in 10 years, as she had asked God by 2024. She attributes the birth of this church to the Nehemiah Global Network, Inc. (NGN), a synergistic alliance of ministries, businesses, entrepreneurs, and community leaders committed to the vision of community empowerment, both locally and globally. This global ministry now aids the staff at Mineral Springs Elementary School and feeds people experiencing homelessness at the Women's Shelter one to three times per month.

**Lady Jessup** describes the emergence of their ministry as the 'Church has left the building' at the Jessup house. They are no longer doing church the traditional way. She recalls this initiative as beginning with 'First Lady Friday,' an opportunity to connect and serve the women within the congregation. This gathering evolved into 'First Lady Fellowship,' where she introduced a book study. This book study group was the origin of

what is now known as the *S. Jessup Com-Unity Project*, a nonprofit, non-denominational ministry established in 2023. They aim to reflect Christ’s model of service, love, and discipleship, rather than tradition.

Sociological perspectives help explain why alternative ministry models often emerge as a response to institutional limitations. Max Weber’s analysis of bureaucratic institutions suggests that rigid organizational structures can restrict innovation. He argues that “it is from accepting conditioned regularities as psychophysical reality that the concept of ‘natural norms’ arises. The inner orientation towards such regularities contains within itself very tangible inhibitions against innovation, a fact we all witness in our daily experiences, and constitutes strong support for the belief in those binding norms.”<sup>94</sup>

Similarly, Mark Chavel states, “the dominance of the routinization model in the sociology of religion is not the result of careful comparison and considered rejection of the ecological model. It is, rather, the result of neglecting to consider ecological processes as potential sources of religious change.”<sup>95</sup>

## Theme 5: Authentic Relational Models of Leadership

Theme Five highlights authenticity and relational engagement as defining qualities of the participant’s leadership approaches. Rather than emphasizing hierarchical authority, these women leaders described ministry as a relational practice grounded in compassion, mentorship, and community connections.

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<sup>94</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 715. Kindle.

<sup>95</sup> Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 153.

**Lady Million Marviette** states we tend to believe and lean on what God is going to do, but what God needs us to do is own and embody who we are in Him. When we understand this, our confidence is high; we do not care what anyone else is saying; we take on the mindset: this is what I am doing. Couple this mindset with “I am praying God’s will be done in my life,” “I am living a surrendered life,” and “I am already living a life of alignment.” Then, what is the barrier? She further states that we know Jesus through our sufferings. Whatever we are about to try, we have to expect barriers. The difference for us is that we are walking with hope, with a God who is guiding us and will tell us the direction to move in. Moreover, we can only see barriers this way if we know who we are and embrace what we are carrying.

**Dr. Staley** recalls arriving at WSSU and entering her office to find a student waiting for spiritual guidance amid life’s challenges. This approach to doing ministry is called Ministry in the Marketplace, a term used to describe the integration of Christian faith with one's professional work as fertile ground for growth. She says love was the theme that compelled them to do this work. They loved people and didn’t want anyone to be without knowing and experiencing God’s love. More importantly, she says, “They had to fulfill the call of God to go, teach, preach, and disciple people that they might be saved, healed, delivered, and set free.”

**Dr. Dixon** believes you have to know for yourself what God wants you to do. She states, “while doing ministry is harder for women, we must possess our vessels in honor.” She points to **Numbers 27:7**, “*The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying: you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them.*” Therefore, we must understand that

we, too, as women, are entitled to our inheritance. We do not have to prove anything to anybody. Just stay true to the call because when our ways please the Lord, everyone will know the tree by the fruit it bears. Once people see a high level of respect, they, too, will admire who you are. Therefore, as women leaders, we must endure hardship as good soldiers, realizing that “Your love walk is how you elevate.”

**Apostle Samuels** describes walking in your spiritual authority as knowing why you were called, knowing who you are called to, and then you will not fight your assignment. She further states that women need not defend their calling. They must do the work because God called them to do it and not because it is glamorous, recognizing that there is nothing worse than an insecure minister. She believes “the ministry must be a solid system designed to train everyone, with a full revelation of the five-fold ministry at work in the body of Christ, as it should be.” Therefore, her model for ministry involves training and releasing individuals to carry out their assigned work.

**Lady Jessup** believes in a servant culture that prioritizes hands-on work over chasing the “next hot word.” Their primary focus is on serving others. She discusses the inherent challenges of volunteering, noting that most of the work is done by women, which makes it difficult to consistently recruit men. She describes this period in their ministry as a pruning season, where they are shaping a core group of dedicated servants. She emphasizes substance over spectacle, expressing concern that the church has become a performance; some services prioritize emotional highs over clear preaching. Even the music used during these services tends to be more contemporary gospel and, at best, inspirational, with little explicit reference to God or Jesus. She believes the fruits of their efforts will become evident by the end of 2026.

These relational models of leadership reflect insights from feminist theologian Mary E. Hunt, who argues that women’s ministry practices often emphasize collaboration, empathy, and community engagement. Pointing out that “stimulation of working collaboratively, though not regarded as highly as the Lone Ranger, is well worth the occasional aggravation.”<sup>96</sup> Such leadership models challenge hierarchical assumptions and highlight the transformative potential of relational ministry. Their narratives reveal an alternative understanding of authority rooted in spiritual calling and communal impact rather than institutional position.

**Table 3. Sorting Interview Data**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Experienced by Participants</b>
The Call and Embrace of Ministry	5 out of 5 participants
Experienced Gender-Based Barriers	4 out of 5 participants
Personal Reflection and Spiritual Formation	5 out of 5 participants
Emergence of Alternative Ministries	5 out of 5 participants
Authentic Relational Models of Leadership	5 out of 5 participants

Taken together, the narratives of these five women reveal consistent patterns that illuminate the broader dynamics examined throughout this study. First, across the interviews, each participant described their ministerial journeys as responses to a profound sense of divine calling that often emerged before any formal institutional recognition, reinforcing the theological claim that vocation begins in God rather than in denominational approval. Second, the interviews confirm that women frequently encounter structural and cultural barriers within ecclesiastical institutions, including restricted leadership opportunities, resistance to female authority, and male-dominated

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<sup>96</sup> Hunt, *A Guide for Women in Religion*, 24.

decision-making structures. Third, despite these challenges, the participants demonstrated remarkable spiritual resilience, drawing upon prayer, scripture, and community support to sustain their ministry commitments. Finally, the emergence of alternative ministries among these women illustrates how exclusion within traditional institutions often precipitates innovative forms of leadership and service. Rather than abandoning ministry, these women transformed marginalization into opportunity by creating safe spaces where their gifts could flourish and where communities could experience pastoral care, empowerment, and spiritual renewal. Their experiences provide qualitative evidence supporting the central argument of this dissertation: that women-led alternative ministries function as Spirit-led responses to institutional barriers, offering transformative models of leadership that challenge patriarchal norms while meeting the pressing needs of local communities. In this way, the lived experiences of these women demonstrate that when institutional structures restrict women's leadership, the Spirit often moves beyond them to raise new forms of ministry that embody justice, inclusion, and community transformation.

## **VII. CASE STUDY OF ALPHA&OMEGA OUTREACH – THE MINISTRY UNDER THE PURPLE TENT (SPIRIT-LED RESPONSE TO ECCLESIASTICAL EXCLUSION)**

This section will examine Alpha&Omega OuTreach, a Spirit-led ministry that emerged in response to ecclesiastical exclusion. Founded by a woman whose ministerial calling was marginalized by the denomination's structure, this ministry illustrates how alternative leadership models can develop outside institutional validation. By examining their origins, leadership practices, and community impact, this study demonstrates how women-led ministries challenge patriarchal norms while expanding the meaning of church in contemporary contexts.

## OVERVIEW

Alpha&Omega OuTreach was not born in a traditional boardroom, a denominational planning committee, or through official endorsement, but in the quiet, after years of ministerial experience within denominational structures, where opportunities for women's leadership remained limited. This relational leadership model embodies a new way to do the work of ministry under a purple tent. Although providing service under a tent is nothing new, our approach to interacting with those we serve makes our outreach ministry unique and worth replicating. Several factors differentiate us from others, including our family-friendly environment, community involvement, our approach to transformation, and replication.

### **Family-Friendly Environment**

Our family-friendly environment inspires engagement within our family and beyond. It represents what happens when families take an active role in changing their communities. Family commitment holds great cultural significance in the black community, as it is the genesis of many of our churches. Moreover, Christianity is

founded upon family and nurturing relationships with God, others, and self. Under the Purple Tent, my siblings, children, and grandchildren unite as we give back to the community and strengthen the foundation of our homes. Doing this great work collaboratively, as a family ministry, not only teaches even the youngest child about service when handing out water, napkins, or pamphlets, but also demonstrates family cohesiveness and unity.

Then, how does community engagement connect with this family-friendly environment? An example of this ministry's life-changing ability can be seen in how we welcomed our first new member, a young mother with three small children who happened to be at the recreation center seeking refuge from her abuser, through careful listening to what was transpiring in her lived experience. She was escaping a domestic violence situation in another city and happened to be in the location where we were doing our OuTreach project. She asked to join and then returned for the final day of a three-day conference. At that time, we had no surplus income and limited resources in the account, as most of the funds received went directly into the conference's overhead. Our ministry, in conjunction with one of our family members, who has access to discounts, played a crucial role in securing a room for her family at the Courtyard Marriott. We were able to cover the cost of a week's stay at the hotel. As funds were quickly depleting, we advised her to seek refuge at a shelter. She was unsuccessful in her efforts. However, through prayer and extra effort, we contacted the shelter directly, explained the situation to them, and that door was opened as well, as the director arranged for her family to be in a room with two beds. This young lady would stay in the shelter and communicate regularly with the ministry through Bible Study and Sunday Afternoon services. Eventually, she

enrolled in firefighting school and, upon successful completion, became a firefighter in Winston-Salem (WS). She now lives in an apartment and regularly supports the ministry work with her time, talent, and resources. She was recently promoted to Fire Inspector in WS. This encounter with a family-friendly environment demonstrates how socio-economic status can change. Individuals come in one way and leave these encounters empowered to face whatever life challenges present.

This encounter illustrates how the ministry's relational approach extends beyond food distribution. By responding to immediate needs with compassion and persistence, the ministry facilitated a family's transition from crisis to stability.

### **Builds Community**

Sharing a meal with family or friends is a cherished tradition that fosters connections and comfort. The Purple Tent creates community in similar ways, particularly through prayer. Before every on-site event, we gather to invite God's presence and create a supportive environment. Upon arrival, ministry volunteers and community members come together to pray. I anoint those who participate with anointing oil, symbolically inviting the Lord's protection as we serve. **Ephesians 6:12** reminds us of this when it declares, *"For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places."* Therefore, when we acknowledge God's presence onsite, we allow the Holy Spirit to handle the things seen and unseen around us. This transforms our venue into holy ground. Like when God instructed Moses in **Exodus 3:5**, *"Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground."* Therefore, our prayer and

anointing signify that we are not merely engaged in social activities; we are God's agents on a mission to minister. This practice is vital for our volunteers and creates a safe space for visitors to share struggles and seek support. Our compassionate approach inspires hope for a brighter future. Through our service, we aim to transform lives and encourage individuals to actively serve the community alongside us.

Another way The Purple Tent fosters community is through our boots-on-the-ground example. As we entered the site, many of those we serve began moving toward the site to offer help: setting up the tent, getting things ready, or assisting in any way they could to start the monthly feeding or special-occasion event promptly. The impact is far-reaching: as vehicles pass by, they catch a glimpse of what is transpiring, often stop, and open their trunks to share food, clothes, hats, gloves, hand warmers, foot warmers, or whatever they have to assist us in serving the community. This demonstrates the power of becoming a living witness in the community. Seeing for some enhances their belief that change can happen through a divine encounter in which God's agents are assigned.

The final way The Purple Tent fosters community is through our visible witness for six years. The influence of our ministry is evident as larger ministries leave their beautiful edifices and do the work of ministry to those experiencing disparity, presenting another form of ministry impact.

### **Transformation**

Our use of a Purple Tent brings a dynamic presence to an outdoor space where those who enter can receive nourishment, fellowship, and transformation. Historically and culturally, "Under the Purple Tent" appears in various contexts. Using a purple tent as a gathering place or focal point during special festivals or events symbolizes creativity

or spirituality. This phrase is sometimes used metaphorically in literature and poetry to evoke imagery of shelter, mystery, or celebration. Also, art projects or installations might feature a purple tent as a symbol of gathering or community. The phrase may appear in scripts or dialogues, even in film or television, and it can represent a specific setting or theme. Some cultures use purple at religious or spiritual gatherings to signify spirituality and may use tents during ceremonies. Most importantly, the color purple is associated with royalty, and we are Daughters and Sons of God.

### **Replication**

The potential for replication can be visualized as others renew their commitment to Christ's mission. Replication starts with finding a suitable location. For instance, the site of our outreach allows us to serve a diverse population, as it is in the heart of the city where homelessness is most prevalent. Finding areas with a high homeless population and a shortage of affordable housing is ideal. Our site is in the hub of the homeless population, with at least four shelters within walking distance. The Bethesda Center for the Homeless, Samaritan Ministries/The Empowerment Project, WS Rescue Mission, and The Salvation Army of Greater WS Area Command and Center of Hope are all within a short radius, allowing us to serve individuals who need assistance due to food shortages, lack of employment, and other unfortunate circumstances. These social dynamics are present everywhere.

Another aspect is ensuring that everyone is treated humanely. This work is an excellent opportunity for anyone who is intentional about making a lasting difference and impacting the lives of volunteers, recipients, and their communities. Throughout history, humans have been unkind to each other; however, our model believes in treating

everyone well. This humaneness brings the house kitchen into the community as we serve with kindness, compassion, and consideration. Our meal choices are purchased monthly and prepared on the day of each gathering, ensuring all meals are fresh and delicious. Often, individuals we serve share stories about the unacceptable quality of food in government-funded locations. The quality of the meals we serve is noted by countless individuals who pull up, ask how much it costs after seeing what we are serving, and we graciously respond that it is a free hot meal. Their overwhelming gratitude for the love poured into the planning and execution is rewarding for our team.

The volunteers' faithfulness in giving their time, talent, and treasure to this outreach makes it sustainable and ripe for expansion into other areas worldwide. Franchising our brand provides hope for partnerships with the American Red Cross, FEMA, World Central Kitchen (Chef José Andrés), and NGOs (non-government organizations) with the United Nations. What has been outlined and implemented in this Purple Tent ministry makes replication accessible anywhere in the world.

## ORIGIN AND LAUNCH

Alpha&Omega OuTreach's represents what happens when the church reaches out in a crisis. A closer look at the body of Christ reveals hurting, broken, and bruised individuals. Over the course of seven years, through thought-provoking conversations and shared interests, this ministry has come to fruition, presenting an excellent opportunity to serve the present age. Furthermore, our traumas often propel us into the next faithful step we may not have taken otherwise. Kat Armas, in *Abuelita Faith*, encourages us to begin this faithful work. She introduces this work as research grief, the

moment when one must become an archaeologist of one's personal history, an intersection for doing academic work. Doing this work is often difficult because, in these instances, we find that our faith and beliefs stem from those who have nurtured, cared for, prayed for, and imparted wisdom, persistence, and strength to us. It beckons us to inhabit the complex reality of Abuelita Theology.<sup>97</sup> Another challenge is doing this work in a patriarchal-dominated setting where the voices teaching offer few references to women's significance in the scripture.

Intentionally learning from the woman on the margins who has spoken and continues to speak to us today. This faithful work is about recalling the history and songs of our ancestors, revisiting the hate, pain, and oppression the cross symbolizes, and examining its impact on our lives. Armas calls this process "*deconstruction*" or "*decolonizing*" of one's faith, in which one must disconnect from the unknown god, colonial Christianity, and the imported and imperial Christ to reconnect with the one true God for oneself as sacred.<sup>98</sup> A challenge that depicts the words of Apostle Paul in **Acts 17:23-27**, as he stood in front of the Areopagus and said,

Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor, he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us."

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<sup>97</sup> Kat Armas, *Abuelita Faith: What Women on the Margins Teach Us about Wisdom, Persistence, and Strength* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 20. Kindle.

<sup>98</sup> Armas, *Abuelita Faith*, 8. Kindle.

One's lived experiences require careful deconstruction and reconstruction of one's belief system. This thoughtful, life-giving work enables us to rewrite our narratives in collaboration with the Holy Spirit's indwelling. Considering how Western, male, European Christians have historically used the symbol of the cross as a weapon. And Western Christianity is one embedded into the history of our ancestors by ethnocide – deliberate and systemic destruction of the culture of a race, genocide – deliberate killing of a large number of people from an ethnic race whose aim is to destroy the group, slavery – the practice or system of enslaving people, and forced relocation – moving to a new space to settle under duress. Situating Christianity alongside these defining characteristics becomes quite problematic because it forces us to think of our “*abuelitas*,” grandmothers, and “*abuelitos*,” grandfathers, whose parents lived through this systemic oppression. Yet they overcame their challenges, raised their children, and shared their stories so they could pass them down to future generations as sources of strength, perseverance, and hope.

James Cone, an African American theologian whose focus centers on *Black Liberation Theology* and its impact on the Black Church, reminds us of the importance of our ancestors' legacy. In his book, *The God of the Oppressed*, Cone invites us to engage the idea that all theology, the Bible, all our beliefs about God and Jesus must be understood through the lens of the Black Liberation Movement. Moreover, Cone calls upon us, as theologians, to ask ourselves this fundamental question: What does the gospel have to do with the oppressed of the land and their liberation struggle? According to

Cone, this question must be the central focus of all theological work, or one is ignoring the essence of the gospel.<sup>99</sup>

However, to evolve into this Black liberation movement, one must begin what Gloria Anzaldua calls “*nepantla*,” the journey from one place of knowledge, one way of being and knowing, to another way of understanding and seeing the world.<sup>100</sup> *Nepantla* develops as one seeks to understand Christ from another perspective, as one who is colonized, marginalized, ostracized, and muted. These people represent unheard voices in our history and theology books who constantly fight for liberation (freedom). Nevertheless, one’s quest to know this historical Jesus from a different lens requires us to look to our spiritual ancestors, our “*madres*,” mothers of the faith. This quest leads us to explore the lives of some of the greatest theologians, our ancestors, whose lived stories often go unspoken. Yet their thinking and knowledge have helped shape us into the individuals we are today. This quest, Armas calls *Abuelita Theology*, a deep and personal journey that requires us to decolonize – to decenter and recenter, to deconstruct and reconstruct, to unlearn and relearn. She informs us that this practice requires us to pause and reflect upon our *abuelas* who have poured into us, enlightened us, and led the way for us to become the individuals we are today. *Abuelita Theology* requires one to reimagine Scripture through life-giving lenses, listening, reading, and responding to spiritual disciplines by remaining focused, present, and engaged.<sup>101</sup>

Reflecting on these themes, I recognize my own positionality as both an insider and an academic on this journey. My personal history and experiences provide a distinct

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<sup>99</sup> Cone, *The God of the Oppressed*, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Armas, *Abuelita Faith*, 8. Kindle.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 83. Kindle.

perspective, shaping my interpretation of data and compelling me to engage deeply with the narratives of marginalized voices. This reflexivity reinforces the scholarly transparency of this study.

My *abuela*, Mary Emma Anderson, was the spiritual leader of the family. In the early hours of the morning, while everyone else slept, abuelita would go downstairs to pray, cook, and sew, with her middle granddaughter following close behind. This time was personal because it was only the two of us, a time filled with prayers offered on my behalf. When my abuela passed away in her mid-fifties, this marked the first tragic death of my life. As I reflect on my childhood years with her, I cannot help but wonder what she prayed for. One thing is sure: her prayers and the laying on of hands have somehow intricately shaped me into a praying woman of faith. Despite our parents making the decision not to allow us access and our inability to say goodbye, her impact still lives on today.

However, Armas offers a glimpse of solace with these poignant words: one must view the scriptures “*not only from the countless decisions made for the family but the implications of those decisions.*” Rethinking their actions at such a critical moment in their mother’s life now seems to bring a little more understanding of the dynamics intertwined in her life and the lives of those affected by her transition. This process of grief beckons the inner soul to take a gentle pause to remember, reflect, and embrace a new way of thinking about our abuelita’s last moments. This pause is significant because so much of our becoming emerges from the beliefs our abuelita passed down through eyewitness accounts of her lived experiences operating in the power and authority she possessed as a carrier of the gospel, her consistent prayer life, and her unfailing love for

her family. All qualities one holds dear in our hearts, while continuing to explore this new journey with openness and flexibility to allow room for the Holy Spirit to reconstruct, renovate, and solidify convictions that have shaped our belief system as a family.

Within these parameters, passed down over three generations, lies the engrafted wisdom of those who have gone before us. Mayra Rivera, a Puerto Rican theologian, lends a voice to wisdom by naming her Sophia.<sup>102</sup> This small yet profound imagery of this attribute of wisdom, in reference to God as female, is empowering. A closer look at juxtaposing **Proverbs 1:20-21** “*Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks*” and **Proverbs 31:10, 23** “*A capable wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels...Her husband is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land*” shed new light on these verses. Seeing the interchangeable role of women as a feminine voice proclaiming God’s truth amid a still-dominant patriarchal setting is powerful when read alongside one another.

We must begin to hear the feminine voices of our *abuelas*, *madres*, and *tias* as authoritative and wise, calling us to revive the African spiritual practices and healing methods that were pillars of our spirituality and have lain dormant in our lives. Women must find their voices amid the clamor, because within them lies healing and wholeness from past losses. Notwithstanding, one cannot ignore that when a woman speaks her truth about a lived experience, people often label her “*divisive*.” However, we must hold onto our truth, refusing to let others silence our voices. Even as young girls, our ancestors emphasized the importance of speaking up if things were not okay. Additionally, they

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 44. Kindle.

encouraged us to address issues as they arose. Yet, truthfully, in most instances, confrontation and truth-telling are viewed as harmful, even though speaking up can bring liberation rather than silence us. Armas poignantly says, *“True peace is birthed when injustice is unearthed, excavated, laid bare, exposed.”*<sup>103</sup> Mother Teresa reminds us, *“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”* Armas speaks of this peace as abuelita faith, the sacred place where we realize we belong to the Creator and everything God created. Herein lies a reason we must recall the sacred power of naming. If we are hurting, we must speak up and choose to unmute, rather than remain silent.

Echoing the words of Esther Diaz Martin: *“I honor the technologies passed down by my mother and my grandmothers, and I find their knowledge guidance that is not grounded in violence and competition but in creative love and humility.”* It is this deeply rooted, radical love of family that brings faith to life. Faith nurtured by voices, both past and present, through sayings, rituals, symbols, songs, scripture, which provide a deeper understanding and appreciation for women. Also, hearing the stories of other women as they speak their truth in risky spaces beckons us to continue pursuing our faith unapologetically, despite life’s challenges. It also brings forth the notion of leaving what is comfortable to experience God in a new, more personal way, which leads us into our exodus experience. In an exodus experience, *“ordinary people are forced to make extraordinary decisions to leave the oppressive contexts they find themselves in, in search of something better, a new reality.”*<sup>104</sup> The idea of an exodus experience resonated with me because, having been in ministry for over 30 years and viewing it through a more

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 71. Kindle.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 55. Kindle.

seasoned lens, I have become increasingly displeased with continuing to do things the same way and achieving the same results. This repetitive process is known as insanity. For this reason, sometimes, when we discern that people and institutional systems are unwilling to change their perspective, one must make the tough decision to leave the familiar space to continue growing.

My call to the ministry came with divine clarity and conviction. After completing conference studies and receiving ordination as a Deacon and Elder, I entered ministry expecting to serve faithfully. But I quickly learned that a call alone is not enough to shield women from resistance, silencing, or institutional dismissal. My journey became a mirror of the systemic barriers many women face when seeking to lead in male-dominated institutions. In October 2009, during my final year at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, I received my first pastoral appointment. I enthusiastically accepted the charge and guided the congregation toward renewed growth and community reconnection. My second appointment in 2011 also experienced revitalization. Yet beneath the surface, resistance to a female in the pulpit was present in both assignments. Then, in 2013, I experienced another tragic death, only this time it was in my ministerial calling, when I refused an assignment due to personal challenges. This marked the beginning of seven years of stagnation in fulfilling the calling to preach the good news. This season of isolation revealed a painful reality – while we may be called and equipped for ministry, we are often dismissed for nonconformity within dominant cultures. Yet human cultures have survived many threats by interpreting, adapting, and resisting dominant cultures that are more “powerful.” When a dominant culture is in place, other

voices are silenced through the process of remembering, creating, and re-creating our past.<sup>105</sup>

I recall one of the last prayers my mother prayed for me, that I would be a Pastor again. God resurrected the gift to serve others through the birth of a growing ministry, Alpha&Omega OuTreach. This fulfilled purpose proves that **Romans 11:29** is true, *“for the gifts and callings of God are irrevocable.”* It also serves as another example of God’s faithfulness in leading all human beings, both male and female, by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. One can only imagine what the scriptures would reveal if women’s voices were to emerge.

Through immense travail in prayer, fasting, and seeking God amid the grim times we were experiencing, our ministry developed. At this point, rethinking ministry was inevitable. Especially after witnessing the profound shift in ministry focus from developing a personal relationship with God to building business empires in the name of religion before the pandemic. Recognizing that the church had become overly inward, without an outward focus on reaching others for Christ, led to a more profound longing to start an outreach ministry.

Alpha&Omega OuTreach’s core beliefs are rooted in the Holy Bible as the basis for spiritual leadership. We believe that ministering comes from a deep longing to share God’s redemptive love and grace in service to others, as shown to us. In moments of isolation and out of fellowship with others, we must do all we can to meet humanity’s needs in unprecedented times. Individuals reaching out for biblical counsel over the years, seeking prayers and answers to critical challenges, and meeting people’s needs are

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 9. Kindle.

integral to our ministry's work. We believe that whatever we do in Word, action, or deed is to draw individuals back into a relationship with the Creator, Almighty God.

Ultimately, the foundation must be in Christ. Therefore, as one called by God to serve as a mouthpiece to this generation, we share God's truths with those we serve in these trying times with humility and fear of the Lord.

Theologically, **Acts 2** serves as a biblical model of leadership. We believe the actions of the early church are a part of what is lacking in ministries today. First, **Acts 1:8** informs us that the Holy Spirit works spiritually in us, empowering our ministry. We recognize that we cannot make tangible differences in our lives or the lives of others except when the Holy Spirit leads, guides, and equips us. Second, we have renovated the entire basement for ministry. Through a successful capital campaign, we purchased all the necessary items for the in-person services. According to **Acts 2:46**, we gather as a body on the first Sunday of every month for Communion and to share a meal after service. During this time, God's presence dwells among us, and we have an opportunity to meet any pressing needs anyone may have. At these monthly gatherings, there is laughter, storytelling, and generosity extended toward all in attendance. Third, our ministry believes in the importance of women's voices as instruments of God's choosing. As a female living in a masculine-driven society, we must ensure people consistently hear our voices. Because stifling the woman's voice presents a challenge, after His resurrection, He first dialogues with a woman. According to **John 20:14-19**, Jesus instructs the woman to go and share the message with the men. God still empowers women to continue making a lasting impact on future generations. Likewise, we desire to use the voice God has given us as a ministry to effect change in our homes, communities, churches, jobs,

government, and world. For too long, women have remained silent, although they have pioneered the church behind the scenes, ensuring that things run smoothly.

Notwithstanding, men remain the predominant voices in our churches. Often seeking to dismantle the advancement of women in congregations. Yet these tendencies suggest that men still require the support of women in leadership roles to carry out ministry work effectively.

Then, the question we are left to ponder is: Why are women still sitting, waiting, and hoping for male leadership to validate their callings? Perhaps it indicates that she is living in the archaic silence of her voice, a pervasive presence among women for generations. When she does, a careful perusal of mainstream denominations reveals that women-founded ministries, such as Alpha&Omega OuTreach, emerge as separate outreach ministries outside traditional structures. Notwithstanding, developing a brilliant idea for ministry, formulating a vision to achieve social impact, and effectively implementing that vision are distinct undertakings. It requires intentional, introspective, critical thinking, as others encourage us with comforting words like, *“Go ahead and start a ministry; I will support you.”* At this moment, one must articulate the authentic voice of God and the supporting voices of those around us. Because those words alone are not enough to step out in faith without any insight into capital funding.

Then what propels a woman to start a new mission-oriented society? The suppression of male dominance often drives women to launch out. When her passion to serve people intertwines with her faith in God’s ability to use others to meet the community’s needs, she will act. Witnessing individuals who are distraught and without

hope, marginalized and ostracized by the agency that is supposed to protect and serve, often leads to the inception of innovative, non-traditional ministries.

Grappling with many deeply rooted convictions about calling, faith, ministry, and exclusion, Alpha&Omega OuTreach was founded on March 26, 2020, through a Zoom Bible Study. Shortly thereafter, we began offering a Sunday Afternoon service on Zoom and Facebook Live. In step with God's unction to serve believers and unbelievers, our ministry seeks to encourage the people of God, reconcile the lost, and disciple the saved. The pandemic was the church's time to reach beyond the four walls by sharing encouraging words, prayer, resources, and reconciliation. As ambassadors for Christ, there is an innate longing to share God's redemptive love and grace with others. Careful reflection on our impact in the community reveals that this ministry launch was a deliberate, timely initiative that aligns with God's vision. As humble, grateful servants of God, we focus on doing all we can to empower, encourage, and motivate God's people to be their best. We accomplish this by ministering encouragement to the saved, strength to the weak, and reconciliation to the lost by demonstrating the Word in action. With this humility and fear of the Lord, we teach and preach Christ's gospel (good news).

Two years later, on **August 5-7, 2022**, Alpha&Omega OuTreach hosted its first Women's Conference using the theme **"Women, Gifted to Serve."** This setting marked our first in-person gathering as a ministry. Now, it has become an annual staple of our ministry. The second event took place from **August 4-6, 2023**, with the theme **"Empowering Voices for Change."** The third was on August 9-11, 2024, with the theme **"Triumphing Over Trauma."** However, on August 1-3, 2025, we decided to change the conference from a Women's Conference to a Family Empowerment Conference, with the

theme “**Triumphing Over Trauma – It’s Time to Breakthrough.**” This change was necessary and expedient due to the number of men attending the conference annually. Through these monumental moments, we are grateful for God’s extraordinary presence, as demonstrated by the conference's continuous growth year after year.

Moreover, these conferences are held at the Brown and Douglas Neighborhood Center, in collaboration with the City of WS’s Parks and Recreation department. This recreation center has played a significant role in our family dynamics. We lived in the vicinity of this recreation center for over 18 years, during my children’s entire school years. They frequented this center to socialize with friends in the community. So, when the city offered to let us hold our event at their facility, we were beyond amazed. It was through our partnership with the TP Is My Hero Foundation (TPFNDN) that this door of opportunity was opened to our ministry. This connection is vital to expanding the work, and it serves as confirmation of my willingness to step out in faith into the unknown to see what God will do in our midst.

To our amazement, not only did God meet us at that facility (transformed into a Sanctuary), but we also witnessed **Acts 2:47**, which declares, “*And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*” On Saturday, during our outreach day following the Prayer Breakfast, we ventured outside the four walls to distribute non-perishable items, clothing, and shoes to anyone in the surrounding community who needed them. As we were setting up, a young lady with children asked if she could join us. It was a registered conference, but of course, we welcomed her into the fold. After attending the Saturday events, she returned for our Sunday closing worship service. Following Dr. Cynthia Dixon's preaching of the Word, the invitation to Christian

Discipleship was extended to all, and the young lady and her babies came forward. Alpha&Omega OuTreach was elated at her decision to turn her life over to Christ. It was this conference that demonstrated God’s ability to grow our ministry through our numerical reach. Moreso, it becomes evident how even a small God-inspired, women-led ministry can be impactful in shifting families’ economic status. Within a day or two after the conference, we collect data from all participants on the event’s overall success. Many times, during these critical conversations, we discover that families are experiencing a crisis, and God chooses to use our ministry to meet their immediate needs. We come together as a family and gather the resources we need to sustain them until God opens another avenue of provision. Whenever support is provided through our ministry, we are intentional about maintaining regular contact via text, phone, and Zoom to support the family’s overall well-being. It is out of these monumental encounters with God that the **“Empowered Beyond Blessings”** motto for our ministry was prompted. It became clear that God’s blessings are far greater than anything we can imagine. God empowers us to do the work and provides more than enough resources to expand the kingdom.

### **Funding**

The growth we see – numerically, socially, and economically – is evident in the branches of ministry whose foundations are rooted in this first conference. We have an inherent desire to be a ministry that extends beyond the confines of a building and makes a meaningful impact on the surrounding community. This passion led to the launch of “Breaking Bread with Neighbors,” a monthly food distribution ministry. Thanks to our partners, the TPFNDN and The Commission for Global Ministries, our ministry serves over 70 hot meals to the community each month. Moreover, the focus of these feedings is

outreach. These feedings are not only for people experiencing homelessness, although the vast majority of those who come are homeless. This outreach aims to share God’s Word through gospel tracts, prayer, meeting needs, and fellowship, and to share a meal with all who stop by the “*purple tent*.” This branch of the ministry has been operational since September 2022, serving hot meals to the community each month. This effort is thriving, with the number of meals shared steadily increasing. Our outreach ministry continues to grow as we expand our reach! We believe that one day there will be “*purple tents*” going up all around the globe.

God did not simply add to our ministry; a strong desire to meet monthly also emerged from the initial conference. As we contemplated how to make this possible, our ministry continued to pray, leading to the idea of gathering once a month for a Communion Service. The only challenge was that we did not have a building. Although we were actively searching for a location, our lack of funds to support a building was a significant concern. This scripture kept coming to mind, as in **Luke 14:28-30**, “*But don’t begin until you count up the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. They would say, There’s the person who started that building and couldn’t afford to finish it!*” God instructed us to initiate a monthly food distribution program in the community. The startup cost for this ministry is \$1,800 (a detailed budget of ministry startup costs is in **Appendix A**). Furthermore, we estimated a monthly cost to support at \$500. Considering the income and expenditures of doing this magnificent work in the community, **Luke 14:28**, “count up the cost,” directly spoke to preventing us from

prematurely renting a facility. Subsequently, God gave me a vision to renovate the lower level of my home for ministry purposes. It was not until February 16, 2023, that we released the vision to launch a \$5,000 Capital Campaign to fund the purchase of pulpit furniture, chairs, and a podium for the sanctuary. Taking this next leap of faith, with the foreknowledge that God will send forth the resources if it is God's will. After all, preachers always say catchphrases like *"where God guides, provision resides"* and *"where there is a vision, there is provision."* At this point, we were venturing into the unknown, relying on faith, and waiting patiently to hear the Lord's response. Amazingly, the support of the Capital Campaign was overwhelming. Not only did we reach our goal, but we exceeded it. Because we are **"Empowered Beyond Blessings,"** the lower portion of the house has become a Sanctuary where God dwells, and people can come at their convenience to participate in in-person services. This decision to implement the vision of a Sanctuary gathering space for Alpha&Omega OuTreach and now ***"Breaking Bread with Neighbors"*** as an outreach ministry has been revolutionary. Gaining a clear understanding of kingdom assignments and institutional validation helps shift focus away from seeking denominational approval. Instead, it encourages us to be intentional about writing our vision and bringing forth our miracle story.

Additionally, family financial support comes with both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, it provides ongoing contributions of time, talent, and resources. It also ensures consistency in planning and preparing meals, as well as managing the setup and breakdown of outreach projects. However, a potential challenge is ensuring that everyone feels equally welcome to participate in discussions about outreach activities. There is also the perception that family-run entities may have a power

dynamic that limits the voices heard in decision-making, even though everyone's input is valued and appreciated in serving the community.

Similarly, there are benefits and drawbacks to receiving financial support from partners. One benefit is the assurance of sufficient resources to cover most items needed for the outreach project each month. A disadvantage, however, is that personal funds may be required to cover costs when sponsor funding is delayed. While these funds are eventually received, the initial capital often comes from personal resources. If this trend continues, resources will dwindle without a consistent influx of capital.

### **Partnerships**

A careful examination of the partnerships of Alpha&Omega OuTreach reveals the diversity among the various funders. It reminds us of the significance of understanding where our pursuit of the almighty dollar and our giving stem from. On the one hand, are we somehow capable of paying for God, as expressed by James Hudnut-Beumler? In his book, *In the Pursuit of the Almighty Dollar*, he says, "Religious people pay for God in the sense of paying to be in relation with God through religious institutions they support."<sup>106</sup> This aligns with our thoughts on funding, as we believe God blesses us so that we, in turn, can be a blessing to those we encounter. Therefore, established partnerships and collaborations are paramount to continuous success. Every entity brings its expertise to the table to ensure the whole family's needs are met. Understanding what pieces are necessary to ensure sustainability is vital.

Our first partner, **TPFNDN**, believes in giving back to the cause through its **financial literacy expertise**. This millennial-run foundation does not adhere to the

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<sup>106</sup> Hudnut-Beumler, James, *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 7.

traditional concept of tithing; however, it regularly provides financial resources and knowledge to those in need and the less fortunate. More importantly, this branch of the ministry is run by my son. He is a financial advisor, and the idea of helping single mothers with children has always intrigued him. Considering that he grew up in a single-parent environment and witnessed firsthand the struggle of raising children alone. This is where the financial literacy piece fits in. The TPFNDN was instrumental in our family's establishment of the Mary Petree McCormick "Grace Under Pressure" Scholarship, in memory of her lasting legacy. This scholarship is awarded annually to one WS Forsyth County graduating senior who exhibits grace under pressure, in honor of our mom, his grandmother. The foundation also partners with several other organizations to promote education, financial literacy, and health and wellness initiatives in the community. Petree Finance is an investment firm and initiative made possible by TPFNDN. Petree Finance is a creative approach to teaching and encouraging financial literacy. TPFNDN partners with Alpha&Omega OuTreach to provide financial literacy education to single-parent families. The financial literacy initiative feeds and provides supplies for those in need, builds and renovates basketball courts in low-income communities, offers small grants for newly married couples, sponsors the "All You Need Is Love" Valentine's Day single mother dinner, Easter GiveAway, ThanksGiveAway, and Christmas GiveAway, are all a part of TPFNDN's initiative.

Our second partner, **The Commission for Global Ministries**, is a clerically run organization whose interests lie in **redirecting funding from buildings to programs**.<sup>107</sup> This seasoned, family-run ministry believes in a twenty-four-hour, full-service approach

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<sup>107</sup> Hudnut-Beumler, *In Pursuit of the Almighty Dollar*, pg. 149.

seeking to reach the whole person. Considering this is a women-led ministry, why is there a need to form a partnership with The Commission for Global Ministries? One reason for Bishop's involvement in ministry is the educational arm that continues to feed me as the leader of Alpha&Omega OuTreach. Secondly, every effective ministry needs supporters financially to do the work of ministry. The Bishop has consented to serve as a partner, and these monetary contributions help us continue the work assigned to us. Thirdly, Bishop is a man who advocates for all humanity, including women in leadership. While he still uses more men than women, he uses twice as many as most ministries do on a regular monthly basis. Fourthly, he has been a member of the clergy whom I have always looked up to, considering I answered my calling under his leadership. Therefore, he serves as a mentor. After all, mentorship is reciprocal, although the balance of power is clear, who is the leader and who is following. Then, why not choose a female mentor? Well, the primary reason is that it is often difficult to find good female mentorship. This is because of the very system we have discussed; patriarchy is embedded because of the teaching and training received. Therefore, we often exemplify the crab mentality, pulling one another down rather than supporting one another as female clergy, and instead of rallying alongside women-led ministries to help them achieve their goals. Another reason women do not step up to mentor women branching outside traditional norms is that they do not want to be associated with anyone whom institutions have stigmatized for seeking another means to fulfill their calling. Couple this with the perception that women are too emotional and messy. These sentiments are unfortunate, but they certainly are real.

Our third partner, **Thrivent Financial**, is a Fortune 500 financial company that considers its members' investment in their financial future and is willing to give back \$500 a year to an action team focused on social impact.

Last but certainly not least are the **faithful givers and supporters**, who make up the largest share of those who give weekly or biweekly. Despite several reasons for giving, they all expressed sentiment and enthusiasm for giving to the outreach ministry and viewed their participation as rewarding.

Measuring success in ministry is complex, and every context is unique.<sup>108</sup> However, Alpha&Omega OuTreach has successfully recreated the first-century house church in the 21st century. We are good Samaritans making a social impact through courageous leadership in a changing culture, with a contagious spirit and minimal funding, yet we are quite effectively impacting lives.

## ANALYSIS OF ITS MODEL, IMPACT, AND RELATION TO BROADER THEMES

### **Authenticity in Practice: Living Faithfully to God's Call**

This exploration of our ministry model centers on a fundamental tension: the call to pursue one's divine purpose often conflicts with institutional constraints. The resulting challenge between personal calling and external expectations compels individuals to navigate their spiritual journeys with integrity.

As previously discussed, authenticity involves aligning one's calling with one's ministry practice. By establishing the ministry independently, she embodied what

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<sup>108</sup> Williams, Sidney. *Fishing Differently: Ministry Formation in the Marketplace*. (Apopka, FL: Certa Publishing, 2018), 61. Kindle.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza describes as the “ekklesia of women” or women-church, a faith community grounded in women’s experiences of God’s Spirit rather than patriarchal tradition. This interpretive model advances a critical feminist theology of liberation, emphasizing four structural elements: hermeneutics of suspicion, hermeneutics of proclamation, hermeneutics of remembrance, and hermeneutics of creative actualization. These elements are foundational to feminist biblical interpretation.<sup>109</sup> Building on these insights provides the foundation for our approach. For instance, in a contemporary women’s ministry meeting at Alpha&Omega Outreach, leaders are encouraged to utilize Fiorenza’s insights to reinterpret biblical narratives, empowering women in the community to discover their voices and agency.

To summarize the process in simple steps:

1. Begin with a *hermeneutics of suspicion* to critically analyze androcentric interpretations and question underlying assumptions in biblical texts.
2. Apply *hermeneutics of proclamation* to reinterpret texts, emphasizing theological significance and liberation for all.
3. Use the *hermeneutics of remembrance* to reconstruct women’s roles in biblical history, reclaiming their past sufferings, struggles, and contributions.
4. Engage in *hermeneutics of creative actualization* to imaginatively reformulate narratives through artistic and liturgical expression to reclaim and amplify feminist narratives, fostering a future-oriented interpretation aligned with the discipleship of equals.

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<sup>109</sup> Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15.

Applying this model begins with a *hermeneutics of suspicion*, rather than consent to patriarchal affirmation. This approach assumes that biblical texts are often rooted in androcentric perspectives that reinforce patriarchal norms. Consequently, it calls for a critical analysis of both contemporary scholarly and widely accepted interpretations, enabling the questioning of underlying presuppositions, androcentric frameworks, and implicit interests. In this way, all androcentric biblical texts must be assumed to speak on behalf of all humanity, both male and female, unless women and female aspects are explicitly excluded.<sup>110</sup> Interpreting scripture in this way involves translating patriarchal and masculine language into terms that avoid stereotyping women's roles and contributions. Thus, biblical texts must be examined through a contemporary lens to identify and address linguistic sexism.

Secondly, biblical texts should be analyzed through a *hermeneutics of proclamation* rather than focusing solely on historical factualness, recognizing that the Holy Bible continues to serve as scripture in contemporary Christian communities. This approach emphasizes the theological significance and transformative power of scripture within faith communities today.<sup>111</sup> It enables the identification of sexist or patriarchal passages and underscores the necessity of reinterpretation toward a liberating vision that offers freedom and wholeness for all.

Additionally, a holistic analysis incorporates a *hermeneutics of remembrance*, reconstructing women's roles in biblical texts through historical-critical methods. This shift from androcentric to feminist interpretations allows for the reclamation of women's

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

suffering and struggles through active “remembering of the past.”<sup>112</sup> In doing so, women can reclaim early Christian theology and history, affirming the discipleship of equals as a foundational biblical principle.

Ultimately, these reconstructions of women’s biblical history should shift from a hermeneutics of disinterested distance to one *of creative actualization*. This approach engages the women-church in imaginatively articulating women’s biblical stories and their ongoing communal significance. Unlike the historical-critical focus of remembrance, hermeneutics of creative actualization enables women to reenter biblical narratives through historical imagination, artistic recreation, and liturgical ritual. Thus, biblical interpretation becomes both critical and constructive, oriented toward the future as well as the past. This method supports the reformulation of biblical texts from a feminist perspective, amplifying feminist elements that persist within patriarchal texts. Artistic imagination, including literary creativity, music, and dance, becomes a means of revising and enlivening these narratives.<sup>113</sup>

Authenticity shapes the practices of our ministries. Rather than replicating rigid church programs, Alpha&Omega OuTreach enables ministry to develop organically by feeding the hungry, mentoring children, and offering prayer in accessible spaces where such support is uncommon. To further nurture this authenticity, leaders must identify and respond to the unique needs of their communities. By empowering local leaders to adapt Spirit-led practices to their specific contexts, we ensure that our ministry remains relevant, responsive, and truly embodies contextualized, authentic service.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

## **Liberation from Patriarchal Constraints**

Alpha&Omega OuTreach demonstrates a model of liberation that centers women's leadership outside restrictive church structures and grounds its practices in the feminist theological insights of Rosemary Radford Ruether. As Ruether asserts, understanding that “whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption” establishes a critical foundation for our liberation model and informs our ministry's practices.<sup>114</sup> Such tangible expressions of Ruether’s principle show women actively leading and participating in spiritual life, thus making abstract theological claims a lived reality. This model of liberation is not only theoretical but also visible and experiential.

This model of liberation manifests in multiple forms of ministry. It not only enables me, as the leader, to exercise my gifts fully, but also extends to the broader community, allowing them to experience church without barriers. The foundation for this approach is explicitly linked to the feminist theological framework articulated by Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose emphasis on the full humanity of women guides not only our leadership practices but also the very definition of community within our ministry.

This praxis of centering women’s leadership and enacting spiritual liberation has a significant, transformative impact on our community. Yet it also highlights persistent challenges, particularly around long-term sustainability. These challenges are directly

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<sup>114</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 19.

related to the theoretical framework articulated by Rosemary Radford Ruether, whose feminist theological principles emphasize dismantling patriarchal and institutional barriers to women's full humanity. Without the material and organizational resources of established institutions—structures that Ruether critiques for upholding exclusionary power—our ministry remains highly dependent on volunteer participation and fluctuating donations. This reliance creates inherent instability, as volunteer burnout and funding shortfalls can disrupt programs or diminish the quality of our services. Furthermore, the transient nature of grassroots organizing requires ongoing reflection on how our liberative practices, inspired by Ruether's call for authentic relation to the divine through inclusivity, can be sustained without inadvertently replicating the marginalization we resist. We continually evaluate our leadership development, resource distribution, and community engagement practices to avoid overburdening a small core of leaders and ensure that new voices are consistently being cultivated, as Ruether's framework insists on participatory and communal empowerment.

To address these sustainability issues, we are examining not only how to diversify our funding streams and strengthen mentoring for emerging leaders, but also how to embed self-care practices, shared responsibility, and adaptive planning throughout the organization. Still, these efforts raise more profound questions about the long-term viability of a liberationist ministry that resists traditional structures, a challenge central to Ruether's critique of institutional religion: Can our ministry expand its impact while remaining faithful to decentralized, inclusive principles? How do we measure the effectiveness and resilience of an alternative church model outside familiar institutional scaffolding? Reflecting on these complexities through the lens of Ruether's theoretical

contributions underscores the need for an ongoing process of assessment, innovation, and collaborative learning to foster a ministry that endures and liberates. While the liberation we pursue is practical, being present in the streets and neighborhoods rather than a church building, thereby redefining access to God's grace, it requires ongoing reflection on how to maintain communal cohesion and ensure that shared leadership does not inadvertently replicate exclusion.

The ministry embodies what Letty Russell describes as a "church in the round," where all voices are welcomed, and no one is relegated to the margins. While there may be no perfect expression of shared authority in a community, those of us who gather under the purple tent engage in faith and struggle alongside those on the margins.<sup>115</sup> We move forward with the directives we have received, trusting that Christ is present among us as we gather with those who come to serve, not to be served. This approach to ministry challenges traditional church practices, in which the focus often remains on those within rather than on reaching beyond the church walls. This presents ongoing challenges for faithful ministry, particularly as we wrestle with how to enact the servant leadership exemplified by Jesus in **Mark 10:45**, "*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give His life a ransom for many.*" Explicitly drawing on Ruether's framework, our approach emphasizes the need to sustain an intentional community in which shared leadership and mutual support uphold the principles of inclusivity and liberation, thereby marrying theory and practice.

The purple tent symbolizes liberation by providing a space where women's voices are not only heard but amplified. Within its shelter, the community's vibrant energy is

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<sup>115</sup> Russell, *Church in the Round*, 45.

palpable; the aroma of home-cooked meals fills the evening air, creating a sacred and welcoming environment.

### **Validating Callings through Alternative Ministry**

Beneath the distinctive purple tent, the air buzzes with anticipation and reverence. The soft murmur of rustling nylon accompanies the light scent of a home-cooked hot meal, creating a spiritual ambiance. A hush falls over the gathering as my sister leads the community prayer in my absence, while I attend a two-week intensive. She describes the feeling as she steps forward to anoint and pray as a weighty moment, a shared anticipation in her heart and in the hearts of the awaiting community. As she opened her mouth to pray, her voice, initially quivering, found strength in the presence of those who eagerly gathered under the purple tent. The message, conveyed through prayer, resonated not only with her words but also with her presence, serving as a powerful testament to faith and courage.

This validation extends beyond my gifts and abilities in my personal journey. Still, it also offers a model for countless other women, especially young women and girls, whose vocations have been denied because they failed to comply with the patriarchal norms of denominational-understood actions, informing them that the work of ministry is not the exclusive domain of men. Through my personal journey, other women see a woman who preaches, teaches, leads, and shepherds a community, and empowers others to embrace their vocation.

The heart of Letty Russell's argument is that theology should translate into active change within the world. She emphasizes that theology must lead to praxis, where the Word is enacted in the world through transformative communities. Each faith community

develops its own paradigm of authoritative tradition, shaped by its engagement with the broader Christian community and its theological understanding of scripture, tradition, reason, and communal experience.<sup>116</sup> This focus on communal discernment enables Christians to understand the context of the struggle for justice and full humanity for all women alongside men. However, this journey is not without its challenges. Men can advocate for women's justice within this community of struggle, but the understanding of women's oppression and liberation must be grounded in women's experiences.

Alpha&Omega OuTreach embodies a vision of ministry that affirms women's authority, empowers marginalized voices, and addresses urgent community needs. Consider the story of a sister who found her voice through this ministry. Initially hesitant and unsure about her calling, she was recognized as a sister in our outreach ministry, a custom in our denomination for those serving as exhorters (encouragers). Every fourth Saturday of the month, she would travel to WS to participate, demonstrating her commitment to the Lord and to serving the community.

A humbling moment for her was being called upon to pray in my absence. She shared, "I felt a sense of fear the first time I prayed out loud. But now, I realize that every word I speak can spark a transformation." This fear stemmed from her initial rejection of the opportunity to advance in ministry and from her leadership approach, which had eroded her confidence in her calling.

Furthermore, she stated that she would have given up on her calling had it not been for our ministry under the purple tent. She said our ministry gave her the motivation to keep going. Over time, she evolved into a confident leader and now serves as a

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 39.

licensed minister of the gospel in her church. Her transformation serves as an empowering example for other young women in the community, fostering a spirit of change. Her journey from doubt to leadership illustrates the Spirit-led validation that Alpha&Omega OuTreach strives to highlight.

### **Relationship with Broader Themes**

In many ways, Alpha&Omega OuTreach encapsulates the central themes identified throughout this study. The ministry demonstrates the persistence of women's callings despite systemic exclusion within traditional ecclesiastical structures. Its emergence reflects broader theological and biblical precedents for women's leadership while embodying the authenticity, liberation, and validation that characterize many alternative ministries founded by women. Rather than silencing women's spiritual authority, institutional barriers often catalyze new expressions of ministry that operate outside traditional frameworks. Sociological analysis of religious institutions has noted that organizational structures often rely on divisions of power. Max Weber states, "It is further possible for authoritative powers to be limited by a functionally specific separation of powers."<sup>117</sup> When such barriers persist, individuals with a strong sense of divine calling often develop innovative forms of ministry that go beyond institutional boundaries. Alpha&Omega OuTreach's existence, therefore, challenges conventional systems of church governance while offering a transformative model for doing ministry beyond the four walls of a building.

The experiences of other women leaders interviewed in this study further illuminate this dynamic. Alternative ministries, such as *Phenomenal Woman*

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<sup>117</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 657. Kindle.

*Phenomenally You Ministry*, demonstrate how women often transform personal hardship and institutional marginalization into spaces of purpose and empowerment. Lady Million Marviette describes Marketplace Ministry as an opportunity for women to walk through their experiences of pain while allowing God to birth purpose from those experiences. She emphasizes that women must approach God not with doubt or regret, not asking whether they have made the right choice, but with confidence, as daughters of the King who trust that their Heavenly Father permits only what ultimately serves their growth and calling. When believers understand that God is both the author and the finisher of their faith, they can rest assured that their lives unfold under divine guidance. As Cheryl Gilkes states, “the elders recognized that it was their movement, ‘led by women,’ that was the source of the skills and authority that made it possible for them not only to become symbolic leaders and role models, but also to exercise real power from a base of economic and political independence.”<sup>118</sup> Recognizing that God has invested unique gifts within each individual encourages women to guard and cultivate their calling with intentionality and perseverance.

Within this broader framework, the Purple Tent ministry is more than a physical location for outreach activities. It functions as a powerful metaphor for what the church can become when it goes out to do the work. The tent symbolizes an open, accessible space, unbound by traditional church walls or hierarchical restrictions, but oriented toward inclusivity, community engagement, and spiritual restoration. As Delores Williams points out, “In the vertical encounter between black women and God in the wilderness experience, transformation of consciousness and epistemological process

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<sup>118</sup> Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 67.

come together in the new great faith-consciousness this meeting bestows upon black women. This faith-consciousness guides black women's way of being and acting in the wide, wide world. Their stories tell of their absolute dependence on God generated by a faith-consciousness incorporating survival intelligence and visionary capacity."<sup>119</sup>

Therefore, women's religious leadership often emerges in spaces where community needs intersect with spiritual calling, creating ministries that emphasize care, justice, and collective empowerment. By meeting people where they are and prioritizing relational engagement, Alpha&Omega OuTreach embodies this tradition of community-centered ministry, affirming dignity and belonging.

In this sense, Alpha&Omega OuTreach serves both as a protest against the continued exclusion of women from formal leadership roles and as a constructive alternative that reimagines the practice of ministry. The ministry demonstrates that when women follow their callings despite resistance, they often create innovative forms of service that reflect the gospel's inclusive vision. Howard Thurman reminds us that "the world of the oppressed and asking how it might be possible for human beings to endure the terrible pressures of the dominating world without losing their humanity, without forfeiting their souls."<sup>120</sup> Even Jesus' message was directed especially toward those pushed to the margins of society, offering them dignity, hope, and liberation. Therefore, as a Spirit-led initiative, Alpha&Omega OuTreach embodies this liberating vision of the gospel of Jesus that affirms the voice, dignity, and spiritual authority of those whom God calls, even when institutional structures choose otherwise.

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<sup>119</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 159.

<sup>120</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, xvi. Kindle.

## CONCLUSION

Exclusion of women from ministry leadership reflects longstanding institutional and theological biases that persist despite women's evident calling and qualifications. In the 1960s, this exclusion became more visible as the gendered nature of religion underwent critical examination. These critiques challenged the sexist assumptions embedded within many traditions. Significant theological reconstruction has occurred over the past six decades; nevertheless, women continue to face structural resistance within ecclesiastical systems. In response to these barriers, women have demonstrated resilience by establishing transformative, Spirit-led ministries. These ministries redefine leadership, pastoral care, and community engagement. They resist patriarchal norms, prioritize justice and inclusion, and demonstrate that faithful service does not require institutional validation. Their work addresses urgent social and spiritual needs and reclaims sacred spaces for those who have been historically silenced or marginalized.

A community member stated, "This ministry has given me the courage to use my voice and gifts to serve where I am truly needed, without waiting for permission from those who cannot see my value." This statement illustrates the personal and communal impact of women-led ministries, demonstrating how leadership grounded in authenticity, relationship, and discernment empowers individuals and fosters a sense of belonging.

Renita J. Weems emphasizes the need to critically examine biblical interpretations to promote a more inclusive vision of participation in God's salvific work. She asserts,

“Despite sexism, racism, and inequitable access to power, we continue to work, fight, vote, advocate, march, love, raise families, pray, and have hope. There are no voiceless people, only those who don’t have a mic, an audience, a platform, or a seat at the table. Women have been and are being consistently treated unequally. All the while, our souls remained starved for a new revelation on the role of women in salvific history. Surely, God did not mean for us to be a footnote to redemption.”<sup>121</sup> Weems directly addresses the institutional dynamics constraining women’s leadership. These insights align with the narratives examined in this study. Exclusion has not silenced women’s callings but has often redirected them toward innovative expressions of ministry. Through courage, spiritual conviction, and communal support, women have dreamed, established, and led ministries that affirm their God-given authority and authenticity.

This research invites sustained dialogue between women leaders and ecclesiastical institutions. By critically engaging with women’s experiences, denominational structures may reflect on their theological assumptions and practices, fostering more equitable conditions for female clergy in the future. Meaningful dialogue can advance the Church beyond passive recognition of inequality toward intentional structural transformation. Measures such as developing inclusive leadership pathways, establishing mentoring networks, and implementing policy reforms can affirm women’s vocational legitimacy. Attentive listening to women who have experienced marginalization provides institutions with valuable insights to make ministry more collaborative, responsive, and Spirit-led.

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<sup>121</sup> Weems, Renita J. *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection Between Women of Today and Women in the Bible*. (New York, NY: Warner Books, 2007), 7. Kindle.

The emergence of alternative ministries, such as Alpha&Omega OuTreach, demonstrates that exclusion does not terminate women's leadership; rather, it often catalyzes renewal within the broader ecclesiastical landscape. These ministries embody a reimagined vision of the Church centered on dignity, justice, and communal flourishing. As women reclaim their authority, articulate their voices, and develop new ministry models, they contribute to the ongoing reconstruction of ecclesial life. This study affirms that the Church's future depends not only on institutional reform but also on the prophetic imagination of women who envision beyond inherited limitations, trusting that Spirit-led innovation can transform and secure lasting success.

Women's Spirit-led leadership exemplifies resilience amid exclusion and indicates a more just and expansive vision of the Church. Institutional responses to this witness will shape the future of women in ministry and influence the integrity of the Church's mission.

## APPENDIX A

### Budget

#### Purple Tent Ministry Start-Up Cost

(For 70-80 people)

Purple Tent	308.00
Banquet Tables (2)	110.00
Purple chairs (7)	50.00
Speaker System (w/ microphone)	300.00
Sports Chafing Set	80.00
Aluminum Steam Table Pans	20.00
Aluminum Steam Table Lids	15.00
Sports Outdoor Gourmet Fryer	200.00
Cooler (2)	90.00
Ice (2 bags)	7.00
Three-compartment trays	20.00
Silverware (combo set)	30.00
Napkins	15.00
Beverages (i.e., Sodas, Capri-Sun)	20.00
Waters (at least 80)	10.00
Dessert (cookies or cakes)	25.00
Meal cost (70-80)	500.00/mo.
<b>Total Start Up Cost</b>	<b><u>\$1800</u></b>

#### Additional needs:

**Volunteers (5-7)** – to assist with cooking, serving, loading, unloading, and clean-up

**Pamphlets (100)**

**Anointing Oil (consecrated oil)**

## APPENDIX B

### Dissertation Interviews Participant Release and Consent Form

#### **Alpha&Omega OuTreach – Ministry Under the Purple Tent: Exploring the Impact of Women-Led Alternative Ministries in Local Communities through Family, Faith, and Financial Literacy**

**Researcher:** Rev. Donna M. Petree Mareé  
Doctoral Candidate  
Drew University.  
[dmaree@drew.edu](mailto:dmaree@drew.edu)  
336-287-2095

**Faculty Advisor**  
Dr. Kimberly K. Holmes  
Drew University  
[kimberlykholmes@gmail.com](mailto:kimberlykholmes@gmail.com)

**Professional Advisor**  
Bishop Seth O. Lartey, AME Zion Church  
President/CEO for The Commission for Global  
Ministries  
[solarley@aol.com](mailto:solarley@aol.com)

#### **Statement of Purpose**

I am soliciting your participation in an interview as part of the further assessment for my doctoral dissertation research. The purpose of this project is to examine women's lived experiences in ministry leadership, including barriers to leadership roles, institutional challenges, and the formation of alternative ministry models. Your willing participation will help provide insight into women's lived experiences and contribute to scholarly research on ministry leadership and gender.

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview lasting approximately **30 minutes to 1 hour**. The interview can be conducted **in person** or **via Zoom**.

With your consent, this interview may be:

- Audio recorded for accuracy
- Transcribed for research purposes
- Used as part of the dissertation and related publications

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You have the right to choose not to answer any question or request to end the interview at any time. If you should choose not to continue with this process, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or any affiliated institution.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Your privacy will be fully protected.

You may choose one of the following options (please initial one):

\_\_\_\_\_ **I permit my real name to be used in the dissertation and related publications.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **I prefer to remain anonymous. A pseudonym will be used, and identifying information will be removed.**

All interview recordings, transcripts, and related materials will be securely stored and accessible only to the researcher and dissertation advisors. Data will be retained for academic purposes and stored securely in accordance with institutional guidelines.

There are minimum risks involved with participating in this process. However, some questions may involve personal reflection or professional experiences that can be sensitive. You can decline to answer any question you are not comfortable with.

Although there is no direct personal benefit, your participation will contribute to scholarly research, theological understanding, and broader awareness of women’s leadership experiences in ministry.

**Use of Information and Participant Release**

By signing this form, you are granting permission for the researcher to:

- Record and transcribe your interview
- Use the interview responses in the dissertation
- Include excerpts in academic publications, presentations, or educational materials
- Use identified quotations (based on your preference, denoted above)

You understand that your statements may be quoted in the dissertation and related scholarly work. Furthermore, you understand that this dissertation may be published and accessible through academic libraries and research databases.

**Participant Rights**

You confirm that:

- You are 18 years of age or older
- You have read and understand this form
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions
- You voluntarily agree to participate

**Consent Statement**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research interview and grant permission for my interview to be used as described above.

**Participant Name (Print)** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Participant Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Donna M. Petree Mareé**

**Doctoral Candidate**

**Optional: Contact for Follow-Up**

May the researcher contact you for clarification or follow-up questions? **Yes** \_\_\_ **No** \_\_\_

**Preferred contact method:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### **Alpha&Omega OuTreach – Ministry Under the Purple Tent: Exploring the Impact of Women-Led Alternative Ministries in Local Communities through Family, Faith, and Financial Literacy**

**Researcher:** Rev. Donna M. Petree Mareé

**Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ministry Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Interview Questions for Women Leading Ministries**

#### **Dissertation Focus: Women, Leadership, and Alternative Ministry Formation**

#### **Section I: Calling and Spiritual Formation**

These questions establish theological legitimacy and spiritual authority.

1. Can you provide a brief description of your call to ministry? When did you first sense it, and how was it affirmed or challenged?
2. In the call, what was God saying to you?
3. How did your understanding of God's call shape your decision to pursue leadership?
4. Did you ever feel tension between your calling and institutional expectations of women?
5. What scripture(s) sustained you in your calling?

#### **Section II: Institutional Experience (Barriers/Obstacles)**

These questions document systemic exclusion.

6. What leadership roles were available to you within traditional ministry structures? Were there roles you felt called to but were unable to access? Why?
7. What barriers/obstacles have you encountered in ministry? Was it before or since the inception?
8. Did you ever experience explicit or implicit gender bias in ministry leadership? How were male leaders with similar gifts or callings treated differently, if at all?

9. Were leadership opportunities limited based on gender, instead of calling or qualifications?
10. Were there decision-making spaces from which you were excluded? Did institutional policies formally or informally restrict your leadership?

### **Section III: Emotional, Spiritual, and Vocational Impact**

These questions establish the personal consequences of exclusion.

11. How did these experiences affect your identity as a minister?
12. Did these experiences cause you to question your call?
13. What emotional or spiritual challenges have you experienced?
14. How were you able to process rejection, limitation, or marginalization?
15. What sustained you during those seasons?

### **Section IV: Founding or Leading Alternative Ministries**

This is critically important for the Alpha&Omega OuTreach case study framework.

16. What led you to start this ministry outside traditional institutional structures? How long has your ministry been in operation?
17. Was your ministry founded in response to barriers within established churches? What unmet needs does your ministry now address?
18. How does your ministry reflect your leadership calling differently than traditional settings?
19. What freedom does your ministry provide that traditional structures did not provide?
20. How has your ministry impacted the community? How has your leadership been received in this new context?

### **Section V: Leadership Authority and Legitimacy**

This addresses theological and sociological legitimacy.

21. How do you understand your authority as a woman in leadership?
22. Do you believe women must justify their leadership more than men? Why?
23. How do others respond to your leadership now?
24. What resistance, if any, still exists?

25. Is your authority still questioned? If so, how do you navigate opposition?

### **Section VI: Innovation, Impact, and Transformation**

This establishes alternative ministries as transformative—not merely reactive.

26. What creative ways have you found to continue the work? How does your ministry differ from traditional ministry models?

27. What innovative approaches have you introduced?

28. How has your ministry empowered others?

29. What evidence have you seen of transformation in individuals or communities?

30. How do you measure the success of your ministry?

### **Section VII: Broader Reflections and Meaning**

These questions help participants interpret their own experiences.

31. What do your experiences reveal about the role of women in ministry today?

32. What systemic changes do you believe are needed?

33. What advice would you give women called to ministry leadership?

34. What does faithful leadership look like for women today?

35. Do you believe God is raising new ministry structures through women? Why or why not?

### **Section VIII: Specific Questions for Alternative Ministry Founders**

These directly support Alpha&Omega OuTreach's case study.

36. How do people respond to your leadership outside traditional structures?

37. What spiritual and practical needs does your ministry fulfill?

38. How does your ministry reflect God's calling uniquely through you?

39. How do you see your ministry contributing to the future of the Church?

40. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a woman in ministry leadership? This often produces the most powerful testimony.

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