

THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF THEOLOGICAL MANSPLAINING ON WOMEN IN  
RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP:  
MAGDALENE ROOTS AND RE-MEMBERING IN COMMUNITY

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

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Madison, New Jersey  
May 15, 2026



## ABSTRACT

### THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF THEOLOGICAL MANSPLAINING ON WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP:

#### MAGDALENE ROOTS AND RE-MEMBERING IN COMMUNITY

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This project examines the harmful effects of theological mansplaining on women in religious leadership. I begin with the broader context of mansplaining, then move into the case study of women in religious leadership. I contend that there is healing to be found in identifying the problem and by sharing stories of harm to be heard and seen in a sacred space. This hearing and seeing took place in gatherings that I conducted to bear witness to the voices, stories, and leadership of women within my specific context.

Mary Magdalene and her roots have been deeply entrenched in theological mansplaining, serving as an example for women to connect to and be empowered by. Christian nationalism and the erasure of the divine feminine are major factors in silencing our voices, disempowering our leadership, and stealing our stories and those of Mary Magdalene. These larger social realities will shed further light on the harmful effects of theological mansplaining on women in religious leadership.

I use Mary Rose D'Angelo's term re-membering, bringing stories out of the shadows of the past, putting women's leadership back together, and bringing it back into

community in a new way<sup>1</sup> as a tool for the healing path for the women who shared their stories. To conclude the research and gathering, the data collected using the research method autoethnography, and the reclaiming of the story of Mary Magdalene alongside the clergywomen gathered, there is an Epistle, a letter to the church symbolizing the healing and liberation for women specifically.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Re-membering Jesus: Women, Prophecy, and Resistance in the Memory of the Early Churches," *Horizons*, 19, no 2, 202-203.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I began this journey with three other incredible women in my cohort. I am grateful for their encouragement, passion, and support all along this journey. One of our greatest inspirations, both as a cohort and personally, is the Rev. Dr. Althea Spencer-Miller, an incredibly wise teacher and mentor. I acknowledge the support and care of my congregation, Saratoga Springs United Methodist Church, and their understanding as I worked diligently on my dissertation. This project would not be possible without the participation and openness of my female colleagues in the Upper New York Annual Conference and the other scholars who lent their voices to my work and heart.

Deep gratitude to my faculty advisor, Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Quick, for her continued support, which contributed countless hours of editing, lifting, and encouraging my work every step of the way. Her force was an anchor and inspiration when I needed it the most. I also want to thank my professional mentor, Professor Linda Loomis. I knew I wanted to choose you for this work because of your creativity and advocacy for my ministry over the years. For my husband, Loren, and my family, for their persistent encouragement and patience while I focused on my dissertation work.

## INTRODUCTION

For centuries, women in religious leadership have struggled against the ways traditional clergymen and male theologians have interpreted biblical narratives to exclude voices, misrepresent stories, and disregard women's leadership. Patriarchal institutions, the church included, codify these narratives about women in harmful ways.<sup>1</sup> Ancient biblical stories like those of Mary Magdalene, of the woman caught in adultery, and of the woman at the well, to name a few examples, are misrepresented throughout centuries, resulting in the Christian community disregarding the leadership and authority of women generally, and clergywomen specifically.<sup>2</sup> These three biblical women (Mary Magdalene, the woman caught in adultery, and the woman at the well) have been subjected to patriarchal interpretations that have over-sexualized and dismissed their presence in the Gospels, as their roles in the ministry of Jesus were devalued. These three women, who have often been reduced to a single story of Mary Magdalene, dared to raise their voices, live into their authority, and claim their value, whether named or not.

Like ancient women, contemporary women who dare to raise their voices, claim their value, and assert authority in the Christian community have often had their leadership devalued by a patriarchal ideology that has systematically rendered their role as objects within their community rather than protagonists of their own stories, often

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<sup>1</sup> I use binary gender language throughout this dissertation to research the harm to women in religious leadership. I acknowledge that my research does not address the experiences of nonbinary persons. The dualistic language of the men/women-male/female binary reflects the operating worldview of the patriarchal reality of the church. I work within that worldview to address how problematic and harmful such a worldview is.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 8: 1-3, John 8:1-11, & John 4:5-42.

oversexualized and dismissed. Patriarchy organizes institutions such as the church in oppressive ways, making men the ones holding the power and women as the ones subjected to their seemingly inherent power. The harmful effects of centuries of devaluing female leadership, discouraging their voices and presence, and suppressing their stories have made women question their value and authority within religious institutions. This harm continues to disempower women in religious leadership today.

I contend that women suffer harm in the church through experiencing theological mansplaining, which fosters an environment that controls who is heard and whose authority is valued. Theological mansplaining, as I explain more fully below, is a way that gendered power dynamics are used to silence women within the realm of religious thought, practice, and institutions.<sup>3</sup>

Mansplaining, broadly, is a term coined anonymously in an online comment as a response to Rebecca Solnit's 2008 essay, "Men Explain Things to Me."<sup>4</sup> Solnit's essay resurfaced a few times before she expanded upon it in a book with the same title. Her essay struck a chord with readers, as Solnit gave words to describe the patriarchal realities women face. In public, as well as in private discourse, mansplaining finds its way to yield power over women, Solnit writes, by:

the narrow end of a wedge that opens up space for men and closes it off for women, space to speak, to be heard, to have rights, to participate, to be respected, to be a full and free human being. This is one way that, in polite discourse, power is expressed - the same power that in impolite discourse and in physical acts of intimidation, and violence, and very often how the world is organized - silences

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014)

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "The Serious Side of 'Mansplaining' Has Been Lost. That's Where the Harm Begins," *The Guardian*, February 9, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/feb/09/mansplaining-word-problem-rebecca-solnit>.

and erases and annihilates women, as equals, as participants, as human beings with rights, and far too often as human beings.<sup>5</sup>

As Solnit describes situations in which mansplaining occurs, I find myself nodding in agreement, recalling my own similar experiences. As women navigate conversations, particularly in church settings, the men with whom they converse often presume unwarranted expertise or act to silence dissenting female voices to uphold the status quo. Mansplaining abuses power dynamics, reinforcing violent social mechanisms that support a patriarchal ideology. For instance, as I have witnessed in my own context, when women step out of their assigned roles as caretakers and supporters of male authority, they are met with consequences such as a lack of leadership opportunities and unwarranted and unwanted pastoral appointment changes. Social mechanisms, undergirded by a patriarchal ideology, adhere to strict gender roles and are used against women who dare to step outside those defined roles and into traditionally male roles. When women assert themselves in meetings, “take positions away” from their male counterparts, or question male authority, they are engaging in male ego-threatening behaviors.

Women are far too often subjected to the devaluing of their authority, as their male counterparts retell their stories, interrupting women’s voices and silencing women’s telling of their own truth. To demonstrate the harmful effects of theological mansplaining, I examine stories that have been stolen, such as the biblical narrative of Mary Magdalene and the contemporary experiences of clergywomen in my current ministry context. I demonstrate how their particular voices have been silenced and how their leadership has been disempowered.

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<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me*, 14.

Within these pages, I explore Mary Magdalene's story, along with the stories of clergywomen in my context, to build a deeper understanding in three key areas: First, I document examples of the stealing of women's stories, which have been retold and interpreted through a misogynistic lens; second, I explore the silencing of women's voices through hermeneutical violence and an enforced cone of silence on those who witness or experience said violence; and third, I describe the specific harm experienced by women in religious leadership: their disempowerment through the tactics just described and through patriarchal policing and enforcement.

The specific stories that anchor my work are situated within my context. I serve as an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church (UMC), pastoring a local church within the Upper New York Annual Conference (UNYAC), a regional body of the larger denomination. To support my research, I conducted virtual and in-person gatherings intended to provide space for clergywomen in my context to reclaim their voices, share their stories, and empower one another, while re-membering Mary Magdalene's voice, story, and leadership.<sup>6</sup> I assert that together in community, clergywomen can share and reclaim our stories alongside Mary Magdalene's, affirming our voices and leading to healing, transformation, and empowered leadership. Weaving together both Mary Magdalene's story and the voices of clergywomen in my contemporary context, I offer a creative way to give voice to the healing I believe is possible in community. Despite the devaluing women have experienced in the church, I argue that women can find healing and transformation within the traditionally patriarchal institution, the church, by acknowledging the source of the harm and by sharing stories in sacred spaces.

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<sup>6</sup> I explore the meaning and purpose of the term "re-membering" later in this work.

### My Ministry Context

I am a clergywoman serving as the pastor of a large suburban congregation. My ministry context is set within the Upper New York Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church. In 2010, the Western New York Annual Conference merged with North Central New York Annual Conference and the New York state portions of Troy Annual Conference and Wyoming Annual Conference to become the Upper New York Annual Conference. The geographical location expands over 48,000 square miles in 49 of the 62 counties in New York state and contains over 677 local congregations and new faith communities.<sup>7</sup> The UNYAC comprises large and small congregations, ranging from rural to urban and suburban, with diverse theological expressions and political affiliations.

The creation of this new and expanded Annual Conference was a contentious one, shaping the direction of local churches for the last 15 years. Two of the Annual Conferences, Wyoming and Troy, had to split, with many clergy and congregations becoming part of the new formation in the state of New York. Along with this physical divide, the theological differences further created a divisive atmosphere as everyone tried to accomplish ministry together on the Annual Conference, district, and local church levels. Furthermore, the former Annual Conferences were much smaller, but were now part of a larger grouping, making it increasingly more challenging to build trust, foster new connections, and maintain existing relationships.

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<sup>7</sup> United Methodists of Upper New York, "About Us," accessed January 22, 2026. <https://www.unyumc.org/about/about-us>.

During the formation of this new Annual Conference, we all went from having two separate female bishops (presiding over the former smaller regions) to having one male bishop overseeing the whole area. The bishop holds the episcopal office that oversees the churches within a specific geographic region as assigned. The bishop works with a cabinet composed of district superintendents, appointed at the bishop's discretion, who supervise the churches and pastors within their districts. There are six districts in our Annual Conference.

At the early stages of this new Annual Conference, the bishop established a Conference Leadership Team (CLT) and appointed its members. The CLT is a small executive decision-making group with enormous power. In the new structure, other committees and teams at the Annual Conference level were either dismantled, or they lost power and influence in favor of this new Conference Leadership Team model. This restructuring marked a significant shift in culture and in the consolidation of power within the confines of the Annual Conference. The CLT had the power to set the vision and make important decisions and changes between our large yearly meetings. The consolidation of power set the direction for the Annual Conference as a whole with the then-current bishop at the helm.

During the last 15 years, the leadership of the Annual Conference has shifted dramatically, and women have been underrepresented within its key positions. In the years following the creation of the new Annual Conference, the majority of the district superintendents were men, as was the assistant to the bishop, the directors of most of the

Conference's camp and retreat centers, the Director of Connectional Ministry, and the Director of New Faith Communities.<sup>8</sup>

I am a White, cisgender woman serving a wealthy suburban church in Saratoga Springs, New York. This is my fourth ministry appointment within twenty-five years of serving as a pastor. During this time, I have served on many boards and committees at all levels of the church structure. At the time I began this research project, I was the co-chair for the Order of Elders and served on the Board of Ordained Ministry (BoM).<sup>9</sup> These are significant roles within my denominational structure. With them comes the inherent ability to voice concerns to the bishop and the cabinet. During the eight years I held these roles, the ability to navigate my positions with autonomy shifted. I had been able to lead effectively and independently until the power dynamics shifted. Suddenly, I was required to run my decisions by the bishop in charge. This change was swift and took the autonomy out of the position of co-chair for the Order of Elders. I have had a place of

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<sup>8</sup> According to The UMC's official website, bishops "provide spiritual leadership to almost 10 million persons in a broad range of settings on four continents, including North America, Europe, Africa and Asia. In the United Methodist tradition, bishops are not "ordained" as bishops, but are clergy elected and consecrated to the office of bishop. Historically, bishops play an important leadership role in ordering the life of the church and helping set the direction to fulfill its mission in the world. All bishops share in teaching, equipping, and encouraging mission and service. They serve as shepherds of the entire church, providing a prophetic witness for justice and unity. All bishops are members of the Council of Bishops, which collectively is charged with the general oversight and promotion of the temporal and spiritual interests of the entire Church. Bishops are specifically assigned to preside over the work of a regional area." The United Methodist Church, "Council of Bishops," accessed January 22, 2026. <https://www.umc.org/en/content/council-of-bishops>.

<sup>9</sup> The Order of Elders is a covenant community of Elders (those ordained to word, sacrament, order and service within the United Methodist Church) to offer mutual support, care and accountability. "Boards of Ordained Ministry (BOMs) are responsible for identifying, supporting, and credentialing candidates and clergy. Their work includes recommending individuals for licensing and ordination, establishing standards for ongoing formation, and conducting regular evaluations." General Board of Discipleship, "Board of Ordained Ministry Library," accessed May 2, 2026, <https://www.gbhem.org/bom-library/>.

privilege within my context, but my position has increasingly been harnessed by systematic misogyny, examples of which I will describe further in this work.

### Research Method: Autoethnography

I employ autoethnography as my primary research method. Autoethnography, the study of self and culture, lends itself to the study of a specific context within a cultural reality that includes the researcher's personal experience.<sup>10</sup> Storytelling is key to understanding the culture being studied. Therefore, participants in autoethnographic research are invited to share their personal stories, and they will be encouraged to do so by having the researcher sharing her story openly as well. Education scholar Heewon Chang, in her work *Autoethnography as Method*, writes about three interconnected concepts, the building blocks of autoethnography: culture, self, and others.<sup>11</sup> These important elements of autoethnography frame the areas I study: the culture that nurtures theological mansplaining, its harmful effects on me and other clergywomen, and the perpetrators of such harm. The relationship among all three elements weaves together to form my hypothesis and, ultimately, the research and its results.

Different clinicians have used autoethnography to highlight the relationship between the field of research, the researcher, and the subjects. For example, independent researcher Arthur P. Bochner, in his work “Heart of the Matter: A Mini-Manifesto for Autoethnography,” writes, “The ‘field’ of our fieldwork necessarily includes the

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<sup>10</sup> Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography As Method: Developing Qualitative Inquiry*, (New York: Routledge, 2016): 49.

<sup>11</sup> Chang, *Autoethnography As Method*, 29.

observer; it is a context of interactions and intersubjectivities.”<sup>12</sup> In the context of interactions, I glean a personal perspective of the harmful effects of theological mansplaining on my female counterparts within our shared context. As a researcher, my lens is a part of any observation, and with autoethnography, I claim its role in my work.

Chang outlines other benefits to using autoethnography, highlighting the transformative value of this approach:

The benefits of autoethnography lie in three areas: (1) it offers a research method friendly to researchers and readers; (2) it enhances cultural understanding of self and others; and (3) it has the potential to transform self and others to motivate them to work toward cross-cultural coalition building.<sup>13</sup>

A research-friendly method is highly beneficial, as I have personal connections with most of my research participants. Autoethnography enables my participants to be coauthors of the work, allowing for a more fluid interpretation of the narratives I collect.

Understanding the cultural context at a deeper, more personal, and vulnerable level opens up the potential for healing and transformation.

The research-friendly method of autoethnography allows for the space for vulnerability to be mutual between the participant and the observer. Vulnerable conversation requires the building of trust. Marriage and Family Therapy scholar Jessica ChenFeng speaks in a podcast interview about mutual vulnerability and its necessity in

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur P. Bochner, “Heart of the Matter,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 10, no. 1, (Spring 2017): 69.

<sup>13</sup> Chang, *Autoethnography As Method*, 52.

building trust in relationships.<sup>14</sup> I will return to the important work of trust building in Chapter Four, which covers the results of the clergywomen's gatherings I conducted.

Cultural understanding and the articulation of our experiences within that cultural reality are foundational to reclaiming our stories, lifting our voices, and living into empowered leadership as clergywomen. As the researcher, autoethnography gives me the space to journey with the participants through various levels of personal, interpersonal, and cultural realities that shape our experience and ultimately our leadership. Scholars Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner shed light on the powerful dynamic at work in the autoethnography method:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal and the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience, then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations.<sup>15</sup>

The cultural realities of misogyny and the traditional realities of Mary Magdalene will be aspects of our personal experiences examined in my research.

Narrative research is foundational for my project. I have collected stories from clergywomen around the Upper New York Annual Conference. In sharing our stories that have been misinterpreted and even stolen, clergywomen can find healing and

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<sup>14</sup> Pam King, "The Gift of Mutual Relationships, with Dr. Jessica ChenFeng," produced by producer Jill Westbook, With and For, Podcast, 1:10:53, <https://thethrivecenter.org/episodes/the-gift-of-mutual-relationships-with-dr-jessica-chenfeng/>.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd Edition, eds. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2000), 739.

empowerment. During the sharing of these stories, I have also recorded my own experience and observations. According to scholar Tony Adams, narrative research emphasizes experiences in their natural setting, incorporating the voices of the researcher and the participants, collecting data in informal and creative ways, and providing investment and accountability for the researcher.<sup>16</sup> I have collected narratives during a clergywomen's gathering that I designed for this project, as well as during two Zoom sessions. The first Zoom session included four clergywomen whom I invited to share their personal experiences with me before I gathered a larger group. I initiated the conversation as groundwork for my project. I needed confirmation of what I was hearing and experiencing. This conversation began with an introduction to my project and a reading from the Gospel of Mary.

After a brief discussion centered around Mary Magdalene and her disempowered leadership role, which I discuss in Chapter Two, the participants began to open up regarding their personal experiences and the harm they have experienced from the systemic misogyny that plagued our Annual Conference. They spoke freely about how they felt targeted by an episcopal leader who refused to allow women in leadership to step out of their patriarchally-governed roles. If they questioned or disagreed with the male leadership, they were excluded from the conversation. If they asked questions to address the ways clergywomen were treated differently from their male counterparts, these women experienced swift consequences.

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<sup>16</sup> Tony Adams, "The Art of Autoethnography," Educational Research - Lancaster University, March 22, 2021, video, <https://youtu.be/2-CyUBLhk6Q?si=SrmWn2fTFnfbpoH7>

I then gathered clergywomen from the UNYAC for a one-day in-person retreat, and collected additional stories via email and phone conversations from those who could not attend but wanted to share their experiences. My approach examines the influences and harmful effects of theological mansplaining from the individual's perspective, the local context, and the broader social and cultural realities of our day. These cultural realities and the nuances of how participants' female identity impacts their narratives are critical in understanding the harm and the impact on their leadership within the church. Examining the specific church culture of The United Methodist Church in Upper New York and the broader patriarchal social context will demonstrate the influence theological mansplaining has on the authority of clergywomen within the church structure.

Another element of the autoethnographical aspect of my work was a trip to Sainte-Baume, France, the location of a cave which is now a sanctuary run by a community of seven Dominican friars. Legend says that Mary Magdalene spent the remainder of her years after the resurrection of Jesus in this cave on a hillside. I traveled to Marseilles, France, to experience the cave and the Basilica of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine, which reportedly houses the relics of Mary Magdalene. The Basilica is also known as the third most important tomb in Christianity. The legends surrounding Mary Magdalene's time in France will be discussed later in this work. I kept a journal during my travels, and my written reflections will be creatively woven into the conclusion of my project. These methodological approaches provide a creative space for my voice, as the researcher, to analyze some of the sources gathered on the harmful effects of theological mansplaining on women in religious leadership.

## Summary of Chapters

This introduction defines and briefly explores the problem of theological mansplaining and the direction of this project. I outline my current context, especially as it influences understanding of theological mansplaining within the larger context of my Annual Conference, which will later be examined at a more granular level through individual stories.

Chapter One takes a deeper look at theological mansplaining as a way to examine how the stories, voices, and leadership of clergywomen are often harmed and devalued, both in general and more specifically in my context. I look at the larger social condition of Christian Nationalism that has contributed to the repressive social conditions for women in general and the erasing of the divine feminine as a way of disempowering female roles in the Christian community.

As I examine the church and the social conditions that Christian Nationalism perpetuates, I analyze both the macro and micro levels, drawing on my personal experience and reaction as I research and write. In her book *Taking on Practical Theology: The Idolization of Context and the Hope of Community*, practical theologian Courtney T. Goto presents the various approaches to context, the observer's and participants' positions within that context, and how they relate to one another. According to Goto, in the critical subjective approach, the researcher looks to that locus of concern or the “one tree amid the forest of trees.” Grotto writes:

Particular faith contexts (as in sites) are assumed to be a theological expression, iterations, or versions of culture, have an additive effect by filling out an increasingly complex understanding of what theology or culture is.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Courtney T. Goto, *Taking on Practical Theology: The Idolization of Context and the Hope of Community*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 97.

Keeping my own biases in mind, I use autoethnography as my primary research method. As a participatory observer, I explore the results of re-membering Mary Magdalene in community while telling our own stories.

In Chapter Two, I examine the Magdalene roots that have relegated Mary Magdalene to the shadows of history, silencing her voice, misinterpreting her story, and devaluing her leadership in the Christian tradition. Her story is further impacted by the erasing of the divine feminine and the role of women in religious leadership, specifically. I then dig deeper into the harmful effects of theological mansplaining on women in religious leadership in Chapter Three, using a case study of women I have gathered stories from who have participated in this study. Chapter Four, *Re-membering in Community*, brings Mary Magdalene out of the shadows of history with new scholarship, including some myths and legends, and then puts her back together again in community with the results of the gathering of clergywomen as a new way forward for us.

All this work leads to the conclusion, which takes the form of an Epistle, a pastoral letter in the style of the canonical Pauline letters, written from the perspective of Mary Magdalene. The epistle, based on my research and alongside the voices of the clergywomen with whom I work, centers Mary as a role model for healing and transformation.

CHAPTER ONE  
THEOLOGICAL MANSPLAINING

My project draws on the work of feminist scholars, such as philosopher Kate Manne. In Manne’s work *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, she extensively outlines an understanding of patriarchal ideology and misogyny, which I, in turn, apply to my context within the structure of The United Methodist Church. Manne writes, “I propose that, at the most general level of description, misogyny should be understood as the ‘law enforcement’ branch of a patriarchal order, which has the overall function of policing and enforcing its governing ideology.”<sup>1</sup> Manne asserts that “misogyny is moralistic and the patriarchal order has a hegemonic quality.”<sup>2</sup> The church is a moralistic institution. The moral judgments on the role of women have been influenced by a patriarchal ideology filled with governing norms and expectations that are meant to keep both genders (patriarchal ideology is extremely binary) in clearly delineated roles. The biblical foundation used to govern the lives of those within the community has been historically subject to the interpretation of white male church “fathers.” Therefore, it is fair to say that the institutional church has been influenced and shaped by a patriarchal social order. The influence and shape of the church as an institution governed by the gender barriers of

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Manne, *Down Girl*, 20.

patriarchal social order were a result of centuries of predominantly white male church leaders seeking to control the social order by way of domination over women.<sup>3</sup>

The governing norms and expectations of a patriarchal institution, like the church, are defined by the way that authority (in this case, the male church leaders) has interpreted and misinterpreted women's roles and narratives within the biblical text. This misinterpretation has been used to demonstrate the necessity of male authority and misrepresented the lack of female presence within the Jesus movement. In this work, I also further examine how theology concerning the image of God and the narrative of Mary Magdalene have contributed to these norms and expectations, perpetuating a pattern of dominance.

Manne argues that social structures benefit from the domination pattern that subordinates women and uses a wide variety of platforms to promote their patriarchal ideology:

I take it that a social milieu counts as patriarchal insofar as certain kinds of institutions or social structures both proliferate and enjoy widespread support within it—from, for example, the state, as well as broader cultural sources, such as material resources, communal values, cultural narratives, media, and artistic depictions, and so on. These patriarchal institutions will vary widely in their material and structural, as well as their social, features. But they will be such that all or most women are positioned as subordinate in relation to some man or men therein, the latter of whom are thereby (by the same token) dominant over the former, on the basis of their genders (among other relevant intersecting factors).<sup>4</sup>

Applying Manne's thinking to the church context, the domination of men over women within the church structure operates by silencing any voice that counters the

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<sup>3</sup> There are other groups that are dominated by the White, cis, Christian male leaders outside the scope of this project. There is intersectionality in the domination of the "others" by patriarchal structures.

<sup>4</sup> Manne, *Down Girl*, 45.

subordinating narrative of women in their rightful place, as defined by a system of patriarchy. There is widespread support within the church to uphold such communal values and expectations. It is evidenced in the silence and acquiescence to unjust decisions that the powerful make that change the direction for those on the margins without full voice and representation. The church as an institution supports the status quo and makes sure that the power balance remains in a traditional direction. Whenever the direction in the church sways and women or other marginalized groups gain influence and leadership roles, they face the backlash of not living up to those communally held patriarchal expectations. The backlash occurs when women take traditionally male-led positions, including, in some places, the clergy position in a local church or the head of the board of trustees. For instance, in my current context, when a woman takes the senior pastor appointment, which is often held only by men, other male leaders push to make her experience more challenging.

To describe the backlash against women, power imbalance, and patriarchally defined leadership roles as misogyny may be seen by some as too strong or overreaching. According to Manne, however, this dismissing of women's experiences is in fact misogyny at work. Misogyny can be regarded lightly and dismissed in a variety of instances, resulting in a sense that what women are experiencing is not based on their gender and is not hostile at all. She argues that misogyny does not just describe *one* misogynist. It also describes the whole system of control. She writes, "... misogyny, though often personal in tone, is most productively understood as a political phenomenon. Specifically, I argue that misogyny ought to be understood as the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's

subordination and to uphold male dominance.”<sup>5</sup> This understanding of misogyny is essential to my work as I look to the effects of theological mansplaining for women in religious leadership. This system of control, which has impacted women within the church and especially within its leadership, has sought to police and enforce women’s subordination and to uphold male dominance. Manne asserts that misogyny can be the hatred of *all* women or the hatred of *specific* women who dare to live, work, and assert themselves outside their defined role within patriarchal ideology. It can be a one-to-one occurrence, but most pervasive and destructive is the systematic misogyny that upholds male dominance. Manne concludes that misogyny can be defined by its effects on the victim.<sup>6</sup>

I contend that one of the tools of systematic misogyny explicitly employed within the church structure in which I am a leader is that of theological mansplaining. Theological mansplaining’s goal is to silence the voices of women, control their narratives, and, by consequence, disembodiment their leadership from the church hierarchy in systematic ways. As I demonstrate in my research, clergywomen within my context have experienced a form of disembodiment. I use the term "disembodiment" to describe the feeling of no longer being part of the body of Christ, the body of the church structure.

I first encountered the term ‘theological mansplaining’ in an article that resonated with my experience as well as the experiences of other clergywomen I know. In the 2015 article, “Father Knows Best: Theological Mansplaining and the Ecclesial War on Women,” Natalia Imperatori-Lee lays the foundation for understanding the harm that

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<sup>5</sup> Manne, *Down Girl*, 33

<sup>6</sup> Manne, *Down Girl*, 20.

results when male religious elites engage in actions that undermine the authority women embody as they enter theological discourse and leadership. Imperatori-Lee elaborates upon her claims as follows: “The ecclesial war on women religious and theologians reveals a dynamic of mansplaining, where male religious elites, threatened by the encroachment of women speaking with authority, react with hermeneutical violence toward those women.”<sup>7</sup> Imperatori-Lee is explicitly speaking of the condemnation of Elizabeth Johnson’s 2007 text, *Quest for the Living God*, by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (USCCB) 2011.<sup>8</sup> Johnson’s description of God brought on an ecclesial investigation that concluded that “she distorts the Catholic concept of God, does not recognize divine revelation as the standard for Catholic theology, and she differs from Catholic teaching on essential points.”<sup>9</sup> Her book was subject to much scrutiny three years after its publication, and without due process from the church hierarchy.<sup>10</sup> This experience of the devaluing of her authority is just one example of a contemporary woman in religious leadership whose voice is being silenced and devalued within the Christian community. Theological mansplaining occurs within religious conversation, thought, and practice.

The dynamic of theological mansplaining, described by Imperatori-Lee as hermeneutical violence toward women, lies at the heart of the disempowerment of many

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<sup>7</sup> Natalia Imperatori-Lee, “Father Knows Best: Theological “Mansplaining” and the Ecclesial War on Women,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 31, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 89.

<sup>8</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Bishops Criticize Nun’s Book,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/31/nyregion/31fordham.html>

<sup>9</sup> Imperatori-Lee, “Father Knows Best,” 93-94

<sup>10</sup> Imperatori-Lee, “Father Knows Best,” 95

women in religious leadership over the centuries of Christian tradition and practice.<sup>11</sup>

From the systematically misinterpreted narratives of Mary Magdalene, to my own contemporary experience over the last ten years as an ordained elder in the UNYAC, this harmful reality of theological mansplaining negatively impacts women in religious leadership by diminishing their authority in theological conversations.

Authority in religious conversations has systematically been ascribed to men through the patriarchal institution of the church. In her work *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*, Manne explains the powerful tool of mansplaining and how it is used to exert authority over and against women:

In particular, I believe that mansplaining typically stems from an unwarranted sense of entitlement on the part of the mansplainer to occupy the conversational position of the knower by default: to be the one who dispenses information, offers corrections, and authoritatively issues explanations. This is objectionable when and partly because he is not so entitled: when others, namely women, happen to know more than he does—and he ought to anticipate this possibility rather than assuming his own epistemic superiority from the get-go.<sup>12</sup>

The harmful effects of theological mansplaining, of taking the position of superiority on any given issue, whether warranted or not, can be traced through the women who have had their stories stolen, their voices silenced, and their power dismembered from the community of faith. Hermeneutical violence, driven by a patriarchal quest for domination, devalues the role of women in the Jesus movement, minimizing the importance of Mary Magdalene both in the scriptures and in subsequent interpretations of Mary's contributions. As I will explore later in this work, Mary Magdalene's story has

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<sup>11</sup> Imperatori-Lee, "Father Knows Best," 89.

<sup>12</sup> Kate Manne, *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2021), 140.

been torn to shreds by theologians guided by the patriarchal agenda, which questions and disempowers the authority of women within the Christian community. This patriarchal agenda implies that the account of an oversexualized Mary Magdalene is the only story, making sure this modified story, which oppresses Mary's true and complete story, is the only one firmly planted in Christian memory.

Male theologians through the ages compartmentalize biblical women into a single story or into stereotypical roles like servant, mother, or whore. I, along with my female peers in ministry, struggle with the oversexualization of women in leadership within the church. In a patriarchal system, our bodies, much like the body of Mary Magdalene, are up for interpretation to make us either Mary the Blessed Virgin or Mary Magdalene, the repentant whore. Hermeneutical violence against women continues to interpret their stories for the sole purpose of devaluing their presence and leadership within the community of faith. This devaluing occurs repeatedly when women in religious leadership dare to be individuals rather than conforming to the stereotype of the blessed virgin mother within religious circles. For instance, I have heard clergy make sexualized comments when a woman receives a "good" pastoral appointment to a desirable church, such as, "Who did she sleep with to get that appointment?" The false interpretation and overt response from male counterparts who hold positions of power have the platform to explain the circumstances of appointment changes and disciplinary actions against clergywomen. In my Annual Conference, the bishop was able to explain away some appointment-changes that were detrimental to women's leadership and create alternate narratives that suppressed many clergywomen's leadership. For example, appointment changes that harmed women were attributed to accommodating women's requests for

family or maternity leave, with women being assigned to new smaller or less well-paying appointments when they returned. The bishop and cabinet created the false narrative that appointment changes were the result of women's personal choices. In these situations, the men in authority within the church controlled these narratives of false information regarding clergywomen and the reality of their experiences in order to hold onto their power. Clergywomen were also disciplined for publicly expressing views that conflicted with the Annual Conference leadership's messaging through negative appointment changes, but when confronted about these appointments, the decision-makers - the bishop and cabinet - would engage in "gaslighting," trying to make women feel that appointment changes were not punishments at all. Then, under the guise of maintaining the "covenant of confidentiality" to which clergy are expected to commit, clergywomen experiencing harm were forced to keep their stories secret under the cloak of silence. When women have been sexually harassed and stalked by colleagues or parishioners, clergywomen are made to bear the responsibility of making it go away by quietly attending to the matter without making too many waves.<sup>13</sup>

Controlling the narrative, holding on to power, and silencing the women in religious leadership who are being harmed results in shame and secrecy, a form of policing women's presence in the church community as a whole. When women dare to raise their voices to engage in theological discourse in a historically male-dominated sphere, like church leadership, they are often met with men correcting their information.

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<sup>13</sup> I draw these accounts from the Clergy Women Gathering Focus Group I facilitated in February 2025. I further describe this gathering later in this work.

Theological mansplaining is one tool in the controlling and policing of women in religious leadership.

Scholars have demonstrated how women have been systematically silenced by devaluing their authority, and their stories of impact and influence have been discredited and marginalized. The church has done so by eradicating the presence of feminine authority from biblical roles of value, thus erasing potential models for future generations. Discredited stories are stolen through misinterpretation and exclusion from Christian narratives that govern faith expression and the church's life. Cultural historian Ally Kateusz, in her book *Mary and Early Christian Women*, traces the historical censorship of these narratives regarding women like Mary Magdalene in ancient writings:

Over many centuries, the redaction of markers of female authority from both art and early Christian narratives slowly continued. This effort has been largely successful in silencing some of the oldest memories of biblical and apostolic women who held central ritual and community leadership roles. The silencing extends to memories of the women named in the canonical gospels.<sup>14</sup>

This silencing of women and their memory from the Christian faith story is further evidence of theological mansplaining and its negative consequences for the women in religious leadership. Mary Magdalene's narrative has also been subjected to theological mansplaining. Author Susan Haskins, in her book, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, concludes from theologians such as St. Augustine and St. Gregory that the image of Mary Magdalene was solidified in the imagination of the Christian tradition:

And so the transformation of May Magdalen was complete. From Gospel figure, with her active role as the herald of the New Life - the Apostle to the Apostles - she became the redeemed whore and Christianity's model of repentance, a

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<sup>14</sup> Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 184.

manageable, controllable figure, and effective weapon and instrument of propaganda against her own sex.<sup>15</sup>

In the enforcement of patriarchy, Mary Magdalene was managed and controlled in an effort to silence and discredit future women in their roles within the Christian community. St. Augustine and St. Gregory interpreted the biblical account of Mary Magdalene to support their interpretation of women from the Garden of Eden and beyond. Mary became a weapon used against women in religious leadership. The misrepresentation of her narrative has had consequences for women in religious leadership who also find their stories misrepresented and their leadership disregarded.

Feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, author of *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, further articulates how the diminishing of the accounts of women in the biblical narrative excludes them from places of authority in the wider Christian tradition:

Whereas Matthew, John, and the Markan appendix credit primacy of apostolic witness to Mary Magdalene, the Jewish Christian pre-Pauline confession in 1 Cor.12:3-6 and Luke claim that the resurrected Lord appeared first to Peter. Since the tradition of Mary Magdalene's importance in the apostolic witness challenged the Petrine tradition, it is remarkable that it has survived in two independent streams of the Gospel tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza gives evidence of the historical extent to which the institutional church has served the patriarchal agenda to silence Mary's voice, discredit her witness, and disempower her leadership.

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1993), 96-97.

<sup>16</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 332.

This reworking of the resurrection account in the gospels is just the tip of the iceberg for the stolen story of Mary Magdalene, a topic to which I return in a later section. Understanding how we arrived at this reality of limiting both Mary's voice and the voices of contemporary women in religious leadership will require understanding the lack of the feminine divine in traditional representations of the image and personhood of God. Understanding the very narrow patriarchal conceptions of God that have dominated Christian history directly relates to the devaluing of women in religious leadership. I further discuss how this plays out in my current context and how the patriarchal social order has had a hegemonic quality, systematically erasing both the Divine feminine as an aspect of the image of God and the role of Mary Magdalene as a leading disciple of Jesus.

### The Silencing and Devaluing of the Authority of Women in Religious Leadership by Christian Nationalism

One current cultural influence causing harm and contributing to repressive social conditions for women in religious leadership, as well as shaping narratives and causing harm, is that of Christian nationalism, unifying around the need to establish religious and cultural authority as it works towards an agenda that glorifies patriarchal rule.<sup>17</sup> Patriarchal authority and its hostility towards the divine feminine are experienced by women in religious leadership and theology, causing harm. Christian nationalism is one of the influences that plagues our current religious landscape, as many women experience

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<sup>17</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, New York: Liveright Publishing Corp., 2020), Kindle Edition.

hermeneutical violence as they rise to leadership positions in relation to the impact of Christian nationalism.

Both my specific vocational context and the larger context of the social milieu of Christian nationalism cause harm to women in religious leadership. Christian nationalism embodies, therefore legitimizes, and promotes toxic masculinity that serves to empower the “whitemalegod,” a phrase psychologist and theologian Christina Cleveland uses in her writing. Whitemalegod is the heteronormative, version of God, grounded in toxic masculinity and white supremacy. Cleveland seeks another image of a god in which she can find her reflection, a quest she undertakes alongside many others who find it hard to relate to a colonizing, patriarchal god figure.<sup>18</sup>

Christian nationalism is not a new phenomenon, but has gained a lot of traction, and by November 2016, its characteristics are clear.<sup>19</sup> The need for Jesus to be more masculine and less like the attributes of care and compassion that are traditionally associated with the female gender is an underlying desire of those who wish to claim this nation back for the “whitemalegod” of the “good old days.” In an effort to more deeply examine this reality, historian and gender studies scholar Kristin Kobes Du Mez, in her book *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, highlights the cultural roots that gave rise to Christian nationalism and the harmful effects Christian nationalism has on the lives of women. She states that, “For conservative white evangelicals, the 'good news' of the Christian gospel has become

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<sup>18</sup> Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman* (New York: HarperOne, 2022), 35.

<sup>19</sup> Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*: Introduction, Kindle Edition, 4.

inextricably linked to a staunch commitment to patriarchal authority, gender difference, and Christian nationalism, and all of these are intertwined with white racial identity.”<sup>20</sup> She demonstrates that the oppressive environment in the church lands squarely on the side of patriarchal authority. In her work, Kobes Du Mez traces the movement in Christian circles to “a return to 'traditional' gender roles and the reassertion of (white) patriarchal authority.”<sup>21</sup> Patriarchal authority not only needs a masculine God, but they also need their savior, Jesus, to be tough in the world, in relationships, and in the church. This tough version of Jesus is required to explain the ongoing oppression of others and the subordination of women.

Christian nationalism influences mainline denominations and emboldens male-identifying leadership, also found in political arenas to enforce patriarchal authority among other militant perspectives. In the book *Taking America Back for God*, sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry discuss the social consequences and influence of Christian nationalism. According to Whitehead and Perry, “Christian nationalism is, therefore, ultimately about privilege. It co-opts Christian language and iconography in order to cloak particular political or social ends in moral and religious symbolism.”<sup>22</sup> As Christian nationalism influences and even co-opts the language and symbolism of the church, it continues to work to control all narratives, silencing the “other,” suppressing stories and narratives that do not fit its moral agenda, and tearing down the leadership of those who do not comply. The privilege of those in power

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<sup>20</sup> Kristin Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 6

<sup>21</sup> Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, Introduction.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God* (p. 153). (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), Conclusion, Kindle Edition.

influences other leaders who ascribe to Christian nationalism, creating a fertile ground for others to assert the same authority over minoritized groups. The patriarchal force of theological mansplaining engages the same mentality, the same abuse of power, and the same misogynistic pressures as a Christian nationalist ideology.

In speaking of Christian nationalism, I must give attention to the political reality that embodies and emboldens such an atmosphere. Christian nationalism has expanded in the early twenty-first century as part of a political agenda to take the United States back to its so-called “Christian” roots, so that “America” can be great again through, in part, “saving” Jesus from the “soft” political left. Episcopal priest and licensed psychotherapist Pamela Cooper-White aptly writes in *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*:

He [President Donald Trump] tapped into a deep and broad reservoir that has been accumulating for decades: a large pool of Christians who feel they are being persecuted and are called by God to rise up and defend themselves against their enemies. And not only must they regain equal footing with others in society, many believe, but they must dominate and be in control—and all this in the blessed name of Jesus. This growing movement of desperate would-be Christian conquerors is referred to as Christian nationalism.<sup>23</sup>

This Christian nationalist agenda reaches into theological circles and seeks to sustain the position of power for the straight, white, Christian male at the cost of all other groups. To dominate and control, the voice of the divine feminine and female authority and autonomy must be silenced and interrupted. Women are just one of the many enemies Christian nationalism must defend against. Christian nationalism resonates with the positional arrogance described in the practice of theological mansplaining and plays a

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<sup>23</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), Introduction, Kindle Edition.

significant role in most institutions in the United States of America. For instance, there have been women in some Christian denominations who have found their role as pastors in a new or renewed precarious place of being questioned, such as within the Southern Baptist tradition, where women's ordination has been suppressed.

The current larger context of Christian nationalism and my specific ministry context bear witness to the effects and consequences of exterminating the voice of divine femininity. From my personal experience, the harmful effects have led to many women experiencing trauma that misogyny has woven into the fabric of their being. Christian nationalism set the stage for the toxic masculine leader to thrive through its insidiously subversive movement against all those who do not fit into its agenda. The influence of Christian nationalism contributed to an environment that not only encouraged but legitimized the systematic underrepresentation of women in leadership in my Annual Conference. The thriving of such an ideology happens at the expense of women in religious leadership and seeks to dismantle the divine feminine's role in our communities.

Cleveland articulates the context that enables Christian nationalism to flourish: "Indeed, the god of America is a whitemalegod whose identity lies at the fatal intersection of white supremacy and toxic masculinity."<sup>24</sup> The "whitemalegod" of the United States and the emblem of Christian nationalism empowers theological mansplaining, and the silencing and disempowerment of all other voices and faces that do not reflect this whitemalegod image of the Divine. The "coopting of Christian iconography," the very symbols of the Divine, creates a robust climate for the church to

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<sup>24</sup> Christena Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*, 13.

treat women in religious leadership in harmful ways with impunity.<sup>25</sup> Women in religious leadership serve as a threat to the power of the “whitemalegod” designed in the image of Christian nationalists who advocate for a return to the patriarchal order of life and family.

Toxic masculinity, “making America great again,” and saving Jesus from the political left together create a perfect storm of patriarchal ideology that pervades the sacred and secular spheres. As this invasion of patriarchal ideology in institutions, the leadership that is valued represents the values of such an ideology. This toxic ideology in both church and culture impacts women in religious leadership, as they work to serve the church that is marred by the systemic sin of misogyny. Women are often the targets of plans to “fix” America and get back to what made America great, a United States where everyone knew and kept their god-given place. For clergywomen, the church can be a hard place to navigate under such an ideology that seeks to keep them in submission.

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<sup>25</sup> Christena Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*, 14.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MAGDALENE ROOTS

The Magdalene roots of theological mansplaining and its harmful effects are seen in the cultural memory of the Christian tradition that has for centuries sought to eliminate Mary Magdalene's role as a leader in the Jesus movement, an essential seed of Christian tradition, and a key figure in our current faith communities. The cultural memory of the Christian tradition has shaped Mary Magdalene's identity through narrative retelling in texts, imagery, and ritual. By examining cultural artifacts (sermons, images, biblical and noncanonical sources), I identify how her story has been stolen, her voice silenced, and her power disembodied from the very community to which her love and witness gave rise.

For much of Christian history, Mary Magdalene lingered in the shadows of history, playing a diminished role, a sharp contrast with the prominence granted to male disciples, especially Peter.<sup>26</sup> Her story has been told and retold under the patriarchal structure of Christian tradition from the beginning. In this patriarchal retelling, Mary's voice and other voices whose narratives differed from that of the disciples were seen as heretical. Mary's voice is suppressed both when her story is simply dismissed at best and when Mary is portrayed as an over-sexualized prostitute at worst. Intentional misinterpretations and mansplaining of Mary's story dismissed and devalued her place

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<sup>26</sup> For example, as I discuss further later in this work, in the Gospel of Mary, Peter is recorded as questioning Mary's presence and authority: "Peter responded and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior, 'Did he really speak with a woman without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and all listen to her? Did he choose her over us?'" The Gospel According to Mary 9:4.

within the Jesus movement and disempowered her leadership in the community of faith that was forming, while simultaneously favoring a more orthodox and male-centric model for the church. This chapter will explore all three aspects of the harm that theological mansplaining has inflicted on the role of Mary Magdalene within the mainline Christian tradition: the ways in which her story was stolen and how Mary has been misrepresented throughout the centuries, how her voice has been silenced, and how her role as a leader within the Christian movement has been negated.

In researching Mary Magdalene, I found that her story was suppressed by centuries of narrative control that stifled the truth and covered up the leadership of this first apostle. I use the title “first apostle” because Mary Magdalene was the first one sent to proclaim the resurrection, as indicated in the resurrection narratives of Jesus in three of the four gospels.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, over the centuries, the role of “first apostle” is not the leadership role afforded to such a woman by the institutional church. Taking narrative control of women’s stories is a tactic still used today, experienced by women all over the world.

Scholarly research unearths Mary’s story as one of importance in life-giving ways, as I will explore further in this work. Evidence of Mary’s significance can lead to a path of empowerment as Mary Magdalene is re-membered in a new way for a new generation of women in religious leadership. The ways in which Mary Magdalene has been remembered, evaluated, and managed under the power of patriarchy make the process of unearthing her story a difficult one. In order to engage the biblical and non-canonical sources, alongside feminist criticism to uncover a nugget of truth, all the

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<sup>27</sup> John 20: 11-18, Matthew 28: 1-10, Mark 16: 1-7.

internalized misogynistic lenses imposed by the forces that uphold patriarchal order and that impact the majority of us in known and unknown ways need to be acknowledged.

According to theologians Jane Schaberg and Melanie Johnson-Debaufre, “Mary represents women’s prophetic power both inside and outside Christian Tradition. The difference is how that power is remembered, evaluated, and managed.”<sup>28</sup> Schaberg and Johnson-Debaufre point to the misinterpretation of Mary Magdalene’s story and her leadership role in the Jesus movement, but also move into rediscovering the prophetic power of Mary Magdalene. In *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*, biblical scholar April D. DeConick wrestles with the misrepresentation of Mary’s story, explaining,

Groups in power tend to use their commonly held memories to support and maintain their own dominance, often at the expense of other groups and their alternative memories. We certainly find this to be the case with the Magdalene, who emerges after Nicaea from the counter-memory battle with the face of a repentant whore rather than an apostle equal in stature to Peter or Paul.<sup>29</sup>

According to DeConick, we inherit these altered stories that then become part of our shared memory. The story of Mary as a repentant whore comes to us alongside the struggle of other untold stories that captured the imagination of those outside the powerful at the table of early church councils that were setting official doctrine. Other stories and alternative memories about Jesus and the earliest disciples, carried by fringe groups, did not become part of the mainline Christian tradition. Included in these groups

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<sup>28</sup> Jane Schaberg with Melanie Johnson-Debaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, (New York & London: Continuum, 2006), 12.

<sup>29</sup> April D. DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*, (New York: Continuum, 2011), Chapter 8, Kindle Edition.

were those who believed that Mary Magdalene was an important leader in the Christian movement. In contrast, the Christian tradition that survived chose to remember, evaluate, and manage Mary's story, and thereby her leadership, in more negative ways, in favor of emphasizing the stories of male disciples in the gospels. DeConick concludes, "By reframing certain elements of her old story and inserting new elements within it, [Mary's] prominence is marginalized or replaced by the male heroes and leaders of the movement when the gospels were written."<sup>30</sup> The egregious theological mansplaining that rendered Mary as a repentant whore took years to unravel, as feminist scholars began to pull at the threads of this wayward interpretation. Schaberg further illustrates:

If Mary Magdalene the Whore did not exist, people interested in the history of man's idea of woman would have to invent her, as a compliment and contrast to the Virgin Mother. Generation after generation has used her to explore fundamental questions concerning sexuality and the spirit, guilt, and love. They have found their own thoughts in her, created for their own needs.<sup>31</sup>

The needs that led to the theological mansplaining that took hold of the memory of Mary Magdalene were influenced by the patriarchal order of the day, in which women were too subordinate to men to lead and teach within the church. This subordination transformed Mary's image from one that challenged men's misogynistic assumptions, as evidenced in the Gospel According to Mary, to one that confirmed them. The harmful effects of theological mansplaining for the story of Mary Magdalene continue the patriarchal ideology that women are not of equal stature or authority to their male counterparts.

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<sup>30</sup> DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, Chapter 8, Kindle Edition.

<sup>31</sup> Schaberg, *Mary Magdalene Understood*, 33.

We find further evidence of theological mansplaining in the sermon of Pope Gregory in 600 CE. In an Easter Sunday sermon, the Pope conflated two stories in the Gospel of Luke: the sinful woman (whose sin is traditionally understood to be sexual in nature), and the healing of Mary Magdalene that follows.<sup>32</sup> Collapsing these stories into one, the Pope preached a sermon on the repentant whore. According to Pope Gregory, the clear biblical message focuses on the depth of Mary's sin and the ability of Christ to forgive after faithful action. The account of a sinful woman in the Gospel of Luke 7:36-50 interpretation is another example of the codifying of the interpretation of Mary Magdalene not as an apostle, disciple, or follower, but rather as a repentant whore who anointed the feet of Jesus. In Luke's account, Mary's life, witness, and leadership are devalued. Christian history has also conflated of two separate stories: one from Luke 7:36-50, when a sinful woman washes Jesus' feet, and another from Luke 8:1-3, when Mary Magdalene enters the scene:

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.<sup>33</sup>

This quotation from the Gospel of Luke is distinct from another scene of Jesus moving from a house to new cities and villages from Luke 7: 36-50 with the woman who anointed Jesus's feet. The narrative of Jesus's anointing in the previous chapter of Luke

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<sup>32</sup> Luke 8: 1-3

<sup>33</sup> Luke 8: 1-3

has no link to this passage about Mary Magdalene. The only link is that both women are acknowledged by Jesus.

Mary is also present in noncanonical sources and early Christian writings such as the Gnostic Gospels of Mary, Phillip, and Thomas. These non-canonical sources give Mary Magdalene a more significant role in the theological discussion of what Jesus intended for his followers to do once he departed from their sight. For instance, in the Gospel of Mary, we hear and witness the leadership role she embodies in the wake of Jesus' departure:

But they [the followers of Jesus] were pained. They wept greatly, saying, “How shall we go to the nations and proclaim the good news of the Child of Humanity? If they did not spare him, how will they spare us?” Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, and said to her brothers and sisters, “Do not weep and be pained, nor doubt, for all his grace will be with you and shelter you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us Humans.” When Mary said this, she turned their heart to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.<sup>34</sup>

This quote from the Gospel of Mary, along with other non-canonical readings, speaks of Mary's role as an apostle, teacher, and preacher. When canonical and non-canonical writings are taken together as a whole, Mary's role is significant even amid attempts to silence her voice, suppress her story, and disempower her leadership in Christian tradition. Turning to other ancient sources, we find a Mary Magdalene who has a more significant role, as indicated by the Gospel of Luke in identifying her as one “who provides for them out of their resources.”<sup>35</sup> In the Gospel of Mary, we find Mary

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<sup>34</sup> Hal Taussig, ed., *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-first Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013,) Gospel of Mary, 224.

<sup>35</sup> Luke 8: 3

Magdalene still providing for and caring for the disciples after the resurrection as a leader among them:

Then Mary stood up. She greeted them all, and said to her brothers and sisters, “Do not weep and be pained, nor doubt, for all his grace will be with you and shelter you. But rather let us praise his greatness, for he has prepared us and made us Humans.” When Mary said this, she turned their heart to the Good, and they began to discuss the words of the Savior.<sup>36</sup>

Here, Mary Magdalene serves as one who cares for the needs of the other followers of Jesus and stands among them to speak words of assurance. Standing up to be heard is an example of Mary Magdalene engaging in a leadership role at the beginning of the Christian movement, following the resurrection and departure of Jesus.

The canonical gospels provide conflicting testimony regarding the presence and importance of Mary Magdalene at the resurrection, and yet there is a consistent thread of her presence in all four gospels. Her presence at the death and resurrection of Jesus is consistent, as is her role as a follower or supporter of Jesus during his ministry. The fact that she was present at the resurrection of Jesus is significant enough to be mentioned in all of the canonical gospels. The divide between Mary Magdalene and Peter and their authority in the early church is further visible in the Gospel of Luke, which asserts that it was Mary who first told of the resurrection. Peter and the other disciple who heard Mary’s testimony at first thought it was an “idle tale,” until Peter saw for himself. In Luke, there is no charge to Mary and the other women from Jesus or any angels at the tomb to share the good news with others.<sup>37</sup> The women share their experience anyway,

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<sup>36</sup> Taussig, ed., *A New New Testament: A Bible for the Twenty-first Century Combining Traditional and Newly Discovered Texts*, Gospel of Mary, 224.

<sup>37</sup> Luke 24:11-12

but they are not believed. Peter runs to the tomb for himself to see and then believes. The followers of Jesus have their hearts and minds opened on the road to Emmaus in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.

In the Gospel of Mark, in its shorter ending, Mary Magdalene and the other women present at the empty tomb receive a charge to go and tell the others about what they had seen, but they are terrified and say nothing to anyone.<sup>38</sup> In the second, longer ending for this gospel, Mary Magdalene responds to the commission from the angels to “go and tell,” but those who heard her account of what she had seen did not believe.<sup>39</sup>

The Gospel of Matthew depicts more interaction between Mary and the resurrected Jesus, similar to the Gospel of John. In Matthew, Mary Magdalene, who named and present at the resurrection, and “the other Mary” were told to go quickly and tell the disciples of the resurrection. The women go to tell, and they encounter Jesus on the road. Seeing Jesus, they take hold of his feet to worship him. Here, Jesus simply tells them, “Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee and there they will see me.”<sup>40</sup>

In the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene and the resurrected Jesus have a full conversation. In this gospel, Mary Magdalene is weeping at the empty tomb, and supposing Jesus to be a gardener, she does not recognize him until he calls her by name.<sup>41</sup> According to New Testament scholar Esther de Boer, “It is the witness of Mary

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<sup>38</sup> Mark 16: 8

<sup>39</sup> Mark 16: 9-10

<sup>40</sup> Matthew 28: 7-11

<sup>41</sup> John 20:11-18

Magdalene that provides the basis for the proclamation in the Gospel of John.”<sup>42</sup> The Gospel of John culminates in the Christological confession of Jesus. This statement is the one that proclaims that Jesus is divine, the very embodiment of God on earth. The words of Mary Magdalene, therefore, are paramount to the theological understanding of this gospel.

John’s Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to hold on to him, which some church fathers have interpreted as a directive to prevent Mary from touching Jesus. In contrast, Thomas is invited later in the same chapter of John to touch the wounds of the resurrected Jesus.<sup>43</sup> I argue that patriarchal motivations influenced the church fathers to claim that it is because of Mary’s gender that she is not permitted to touch the resurrected Christ. Subsequent interpretations of this text throughout Christian history reiterate the belief that women were not spiritually able to touch Jesus, and, by virtue of this prohibition, are also not able to lead in the church in the ways their male counterparts were. This interpretation and reasoning are not explicit in the text. Jesus, in fact, gives a reason to Mary in the text, saying to her: “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”<sup>44</sup> His explanation to Mary indicates the need to continue his journey, rather than an indictment of her female status. In all the gospels, the resurrection of Jesus is made known to Mary Magdalene and the women. How they are witnesses to the resurrection, who was present, what they did with the news, and what

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<sup>42</sup> Esther de Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up: The Sources Behind the Myth*, (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 64.

<sup>43</sup> de Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up*, 64.

<sup>44</sup> John 20:17.

occurs next after the gospel account differs from text to text. Patriarchal bias influenced all these resurrection stories, and, according to de Boer, reinterpreted them, arguing that Jesus appeared to the women to show his humility, rather than to make women the first evangelists.<sup>45</sup>

After looking at all four gospels and Mary Magdalene's consistent presence, I am left wondering why Mary Magdalene plays such a diminished role in Christian tradition and how her story was subsequently remembered, evaluated, and managed. De Boer sums up the gospel narratives:

According to the earliest text in which Mary Magdalene appears, the Gospel of Mark, she is the only person who is a witness to both Jesus' crucifixion and burial and to the empty tomb, with the revelation that he is alive. Although she is associated in turn with different women, according to Mark, Mary Magdalene is the only constant factor. According to Matthew, together with another Mary, she is the first to encounter the risen Lord. According to John, she is the only witness to the new revelation that the risen Lord gives at the empty tomb. Thus, according to first-century sources, Mary Magdalene is an important witness, not to say the key witness, for the content of Christian faith.<sup>46</sup>

It is clear that Mary Magdalene was a key witness, whether believed or not. Her faithfulness to stay at the crucifixion and return to the tomb, the place of Jesus's burial, to bear witness to all of it, makes her a key figure in the death and resurrection of Jesus. She is the constant amid all the other changing factors. Her witness was cut short by church fathers who sought the way of patriarchy that made the testimony and witness of women suspect based on their gender.

In the Gospel of Mary, which scholars such as historian Karen King date as early as 120 CE, we hear Mary's voice and see the struggle between Mary Magdalene and

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<sup>45</sup> de Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up*, 111.

<sup>46</sup> de Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up*, 124.

Peter, as I alluded to earlier.<sup>47</sup> The Gospel of Mary sheds light on the authority of women in early church leadership and on the essential goodness within all of humanity, rather than focusing on the fallen nature of women in particular. Mary's voice in these pages reveals a secret conversation with Jesus that moves in a different direction from traditional theology and a traditional understanding of the nature of humanity. In the Gospel of Mary, the text focuses on how one becomes truly human in a clearer way than in the canonical gospels. According to Mary Magdalene and her revelations from Jesus, becoming truly human is grounded in embracing the fullness of one's humanity, rather than understanding one's essential nature as sinful and shameful.<sup>48</sup> The language in the Gospel of Mary is similar enough to that of the four canonized gospels that it should be regarded as an important find for the Christian tradition.

The hope and power of Mary Magdalene's story persists even as the culture of patriarchy seeks to make her story fit the narrative that women should be silent, that they do not have the ability to teach, and that they certainly cannot lead over men. The church has traditionally chosen to weigh in on the side of misogynistic interpretation, leaving women to exist in the shadows of history by reinforcing such distorted narratives of Mary Magdalene. Throughout the church's history, women have been categorized according to this misinterpretation of Mary Magdalene. The over-sexualized rendering of her story had negative impacts on women within and outside the church. For example, from 1860 to 1864 in England, a periodical, *Magdalen's Friend and Female Homes Intelligencer*, was

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<sup>47</sup> Karen King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*, (Oregon City, CA: Polebridge Press, 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Taussig, *A New New Testament*, 217-218

published by a clergyman and “devoted to the cause of the Fallen.”<sup>49</sup> In her book, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, scholar Susan Haskins writes that the periodical’s “title, and monthly address, show how Mary Magdalen had once again become extrinsically linked to the ‘sinning’ woman, to the point where euphemistic terms for the latter, in medical and legal writings of Victorian England, was now ‘Magdalen.’”<sup>50</sup> The nineteenth century Church in England understood its calling to be rescuing women from the “sin” of prostitution, which became synonymous with a misguided rendering of Mary’s story.<sup>51</sup>

### Erasing the Divine Feminine

The harmful effects of theological mansplaining are couched in a larger context, linked to a harmful reality of how we see God. Christian tradition systematically perpetuates an exclusively male image of God. This patriarchal interpretation of biblical texts renders this male image of God as theologically sound. In contrast, the female image of God has been eradicated from cultural memory in much of the Christian tradition.

I turn to Christena Cleveland’s exploration of the divine feminine as she “examines the relationship among race, gender, and cultural perceptions of the Divine.”<sup>52</sup> Her work highlights the need for the sacred feminine in responses to the hostile effects of

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<sup>49</sup> Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen; Myth and Metaphor*, (New York: Harcourt and Brace Co., , 1993, 316.

<sup>50</sup> Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 318.

<sup>51</sup> Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 318-319

<sup>52</sup> “About Christena Cleveland PhD,” Christena Cleveland, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.christenacleveland.com/about>.

white supremacy on our imaging and understanding of God. In *God is a Black Woman*, Cleveland takes the reader on a journey, writing, “For centuries, toxic masculinity has colonized our understanding of God by exterminating the voices of divine femininity.”<sup>53</sup> Traditional Christian understandings of God are very binary and rooted in the church’s patriarchal systems. God must be either male or female, and in the Christian tradition, God is quite specifically male. In contrast, Cleveland describes divine femininity as the maternal characteristics of God.<sup>54</sup> Cleveland offers a divine feminine image of God that can be seen, heard, and experienced in the feminine realm of humanity. Without a trace of feminine characteristics in understandings of God’s nature, it is difficult, if not impossible, to see how God can be embodied in our world through women. Christian tradition teaches that those who are created in the image of God carry that image into the world. If God, then, is solely identified as male, then only men fully bear the image of God into the world. The embodiment of the image of God would belong distinctly to men and male leadership. The erasing of the feminine from the image of God affects not just women as carriers of divinity, but also women’s standing as leaders in the church. The institution of the church bases its leadership on the nature of God, who works through human agency.

The struggle for female leadership in the church has persisted through the centuries. Pope Francis, for example, called on Petrine tradition during his tenure, in which the apostle Peter alone is the first leader of the church and all leadership thereafter is to be modeled after his male authority, to reinforce women’s exclusion from ordination

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<sup>53</sup> Christena Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*, 42.

<sup>54</sup> Christena Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*, 42-43.

in Catholicism. In a 2022 interview published in *America Magazine*, he explained why women cannot be ordained in the Catholic tradition: “And why can a woman not enter ordained ministry? It is because the Petrine principle has no place for that.” He continued, “The ministerial dimension, we can say, is that of the Petrine church. I am using a category of theologians. The Petrine principle is that of ministry.”<sup>55</sup> Patriarchal church leadership consistently disregards the feminine work of God through female disciples and apostles, not only in leadership but also in voice. Cleveland reminds readers that the extermination of the voices of divine femininity leads to a silencing of women within the Christian community.<sup>56</sup> As I worked with the clergywomen in my study, it became clearer to me how they were experiencing this silencing. One participant cried as she shared her pain of not being heard for so long.

Cleveland’s work resounded within me as I explored American feminist artist Judy Chicago’s art installation *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Chicago’s installation. The installation consisted of huge banquet tables with artwork that became the tablecloths, napkins, and placemats. The artwork continued as each place setting represented a female character that helped shape the world. There, I saw the beauty of the divine feminine in the life-giving table set for the women who brought healing and transformation into the human story. There, I heard the voice of the divine feminine as I read the nine hundred ninety-nine names etched into the “heritage” floor. These names, these voices, and these images represent the aspects of the divine feminine

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<sup>55</sup> Zelda Caldwell, “Pope Francis Explains to *America Magazine* Why Women Cannot Be Ordained Priests,” *Catholic News Agency*, November 30, 2022, <https://www.licas.news/author/cna/>.

<sup>56</sup> Christena Cleveland, *God Is a Black Woman*.

embodied in our world, a visual representation of the systematic result of patriarchal power in the lives of women. The names and the table reminded me of loss experienced in the Christian community as we have failed to embrace the feminine voice, leadership, and very divine image.

The works of feminist theologians like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and others have explored the feminine image of the Divine and have brought light to some of the harmful effects from the church and from theological reflection that have sought to exterminate the divine feminine. The authority of women has been devalued, moving women who dare to raise their voices to the shadows of history; I encountered so many of these voices at *The Dinner Party*. The harmful effects of theological mansplaining have sought to erase the stories of the divine feminine, silence the divine feminine in all its expression, and disempower the female leadership that bears Her image. I left the installation imagining ways that women can find healing and transformation within the patriarchal institution, the church, where we, along with the divine feminine, have experienced the harm of theological mansplaining in the name of God.

The name and image of God matter. They shape our very identity within the Christian community and undergird the theology behind leadership and power. If the only names for God are masculine, we are not only limiting the nature of God but also the function of God in the world. This divine influence has harmful effects, as divine power is wielded only by men upholding the ideals of patriarchy and the true image of God. This divine male providence furthers the ability for theological mansplaining to thrive in communities and plague the leadership women seek to embody.

The harmful effects of theological mansplaining are a current reality for many women, and through empowering one another, we can bring into religious leadership our voices that echo the sounds of the divine feminine who refuses to be erased from our cultural memory, no matter how hard patriarchal forces try. There can be healing from theological mansplaining even in the patriarchal institution that has sought to erase the sacred feminine at work in the community and in the world.

Biblical examples can remind Christian communities and women in religious leadership of the persistence of the divine feminine, even despite oppressive patriarchy and its tool of theological mansplaining. For instance, in her provocative work, *In Memory of Her*, feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes:

Although Jesus pronounces in Mark: “And truly I say to you, wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done with be told in memory of her” (14:9), the woman’s prophetic sign-action did not become a part of the Gospel knowledge of Christians. Even her name is lost to us. Wherever the Gospel is preached and the eucharist celebrated, another story is told: the story of the apostle who betrayed Jesus. The name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of the faithful disciple is forgotten because she was a woman.<sup>57</sup>

Any expression or embodiment of the divine feminine, as seen in the woman who anointed Jesus' feet, has historically been silenced or misinterpreted to stabilize the patriarchal rule that moved such historical evidence to the shadows of the institutional church.

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<sup>57</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xiii.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEOLOGICAL MANSPLAINING: A CASE STUDY

It has been very difficult to navigate the reality of systemic misogyny that made many women in my Annual Conference, including me, survivors of a misogynistic time of exclusion and disempowerment. In my first ten years of my ministry, episcopal and regional leadership in my context nurtured all clergy, including clergywomen, and sought to include divergent voices to expand the perspectives of the conference leadership. The bishops and conference leaders from my early years in ministry recognized the giftedness in the tapestry of voices, leading the Annual Conference to include theologically diverse ideas and leaders. As stated earlier, I held many different leadership positions during this time, and like other progressive clergywomen - and clergywomen in general - I found my leadership nurtured and valued.

The climate of the Annual Conference began to shift substantially during the last ten years of my ministry, after a dramatic shift in the size of the Annual Conference due to the merger I described in the Introduction, and due to changes in episcopal leadership. Our Annual Conference, since its inception as a result of the 2010 merger, has felt divided. The divisions that lingered from former conference boundaries and conference theological identities were exacerbated by the leadership, sowing divisiveness and competition rather than unity. The episcopal offices, for example, were located physically in the central part of the new Annual Conference, leaving those on the edges of the new area feeling disenfranchised. More theologically progressive members of the conference, particularly from the former Troy and Wyoming Annual Conferences, now sit at the

farthest edges from the center of the Annual Conference. The western part of the Annual Conference was formerly the Western New York Annual Conference, the most theologically conservative region. The episcopal leadership team began reappointing more progressive clergy, especially women, to the peripheries of the new conference boundaries, while moving the more conservative clergy men from the western edges to the geographic center, placing them in leadership roles either in the Annual Conference office or in large, centrally located churches. This movement of progressive and conservative clergy led to a climate of uncertainty and distrust of the leadership and of one another. Clergywomen who have been reappointed or who fear reappointment to churches on the outskirts of the conference feel a sense of risk, therefore, in sharing their stories with one another openly in such a climate.

Many progressive clergywomen in the UNYAC, including me, experienced a sense of insecurity under new leadership. As the climate began to shift, I asked to meet with the bishop to share my concerns that he was devaluing, silencing, and erasing female voices from leadership, shifting away from the theological narrative of inclusion that had previously governed the Annual Conference. In our meeting, I questioned his use of primarily male biblical and cultural role models in his preaching and teaching, his promotion of books solely written by men as recommended resources for clergy and lay leaders to read, his invitations extended predominantly to men to speak to Annual Conference members at our meetings, and his lack of employing or encouraging the use of inclusive language for God in our conference liturgies and gatherings, all areas of change I had noted since the start of his tenure in as our bishop. Unfortunately, the bishop made no changes to the order of business, and he made no attempts to adjust the

exclusion of female representation in response to our meeting. When our conversation ended, I was left with no resolution to my concerns. Instead, the bishop rationalized or explained away the changes I described. He told me that many people, women especially, see God in masculine terms and that he needs to be mindful of that. He expressed disagreement with my assessment of the lack of inclusion for women, stating that he tries to place women in good appointments.

Women's experiences in UNYAC were being suppressed by a controlling narrative from episcopal and conference leadership, making clergywomen feel as though they were imagining a conspiracy where there was none. Clergywomen were made to believe they were imagining that reappointment and leadership decisions were not personal as they were experiencing them, or that the consequences women experienced for punishable behavior were the same for both clergymen and clergywomen. The consequences were not equal: clergywomen were being required to surrender credentials, take forced leaves, and endure abrupt appointment changes.

Now, a few years after the former bishop left the denomination to join a newly formed denomination, most of the leadership roles are still held by men. At the time I began to conduct research for this project in 2023, the then-resident male bishop had installed like-minded male counterparts in the roles of the Assistant to the Bishop, the Director of Connectional Ministries, New Faith Communities, and Camping and Retreat Ministries (then a prominent position in our Annual Conference). He consolidated power into the hands of these leaders, along with the Conference Leadership Team, whose membership was predominantly male and, most importantly, composed of conservative and assertive male voices who would uphold and not question the bishop's agenda. When

someone on the leadership team spoke against the bishop's agenda, they were removed from the leadership team. Two clergywomen were removed from the team suddenly, and a cloak of secrecy was enforced by the bishop, prohibiting widespread dissemination of the circumstances of their departure from the Conference Leadership Team. These women's voices were absent from the table, with no explanation of how or why they were removed from their roles.<sup>58</sup>

Women in religious leadership in my current context have experienced harm from our male leadership. The circumstances and specifics vary from one story to another, with most leading to a disempowerment and even a disembodiment, a removal from the body, church structure, and leadership.<sup>59</sup> Clergywomen experienced this harm disproportionately. Even District Superintendents were affected; The bishop assigned the male District Superintendents to the more covered urban districts. In contrast, female district superintendents were appointed to the larger geographic areas in more rural locations. This affected their leadership and made them subject to inferior positions within the Annual Conference. Voices were silenced as women in ministry were treated differently from their male counterparts and faced punishment for speaking out. For example, one conference leader was removed from her position and assigned to an appointment far from family. This occurred after she spoke out about the issues facing women within the bounds of the Annual Conference, and the circumstances of her removal were cloaked in secrecy and silence. Silence is an effective tool for the men who

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<sup>58</sup> Rumors circulated indicating that it was disagreements with the bishop's agenda in a cloak of secrecy.

<sup>59</sup> I use the term embodiment in reference to the way we can choose to re-member by putting together what has been dismembered. Re-member comes from a feminist context and is used by Mary Rose D'Angelo in *Re-membering Jesus: Women, Prophecy, and Resistance in the Memory of the Early Church*.

intimidate women into not talking or who encourage women to change their stories to maintain harmony. Silence isolates victims, and it enables misogyny.<sup>60</sup>

Another clergywoman lost funding for her extension ministries position, a position that had been supported by Annual Conference funding for decades. This clergywoman challenged the bishop at a large joint meeting between the Board of Ordained Ministry and the cabinet, and the loss of her ministry funding was the result. Still another clergywoman spoke up about the districts being “gendered,” noting the appointments of male superintendents to more favorable districts, as described earlier. She was removed from the Conference Leadership Team.<sup>61</sup> The bishop also insisted on his presence or the presence of his representative to oversee any large-scale gatherings in the Annual Conference, from youth gatherings to the gathering of the Order of Elders to Annual Conference worship team meetings. I was a part of the leadership of all three areas of ministry until I was no longer able or willing to tolerate or adhere to his specific vision. Voices were silenced, and leadership was lost.

Churches and pastors suffered harm from this type of misogynistic abuse. Theological mansplaining is one way of describing the specific kind of harm women in religious leadership have endured. Theological mansplaining results in voices silenced, stories suppressed or stolen, and leadership disempowered. Those in leadership in the Annual Conference crafted the narratives of the situations I described above in such a way that the true details of any given situation were hidden or destroyed in the retelling

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<sup>60</sup> Manne, *Down Girl*, 18.

<sup>61</sup> This information was shared at my first Zoom session in conversation with four specific clergywomen.

of what transpired. Women suffered the consequences of having fewer leadership roles within the Annual Conference. Women who once held positions of authority found themselves on the outside, even being physically relocated from the center of power and leadership. Clergywomen who were reappointed were often moved away from family, friends, support systems, and potential leadership opportunities.

To share another personal illustration, I planned and led a clergywomen's retreat for the Annual Conference in February of 2014, inviting all clergywomen to come. We had approximately thirty participants gathered, and a retired female bishop came to be our keynote speaker. Attendees talked freely and openly with her and with each other about their experiences and vulnerable life situations with the then-bishop of UNYAC. The then-UNYAC bishop, however, hearing of the event, insisted that the female cabinet members should attend. The cabinet members arrived partway through the gathering, and upon their arrival, the tone of the gathering changed. The atmosphere became less open and vulnerable. The gathered clergywomen became more closed off and guarded, reluctant to share. The bishop was making it clear that these gatherings would not happen without his authority or presence (or that of his district superintendents, who acted as an extension of the episcopal office).

The more I spoke with other clergywomen, the more I became aware that my experience was not isolated. During the bishop's tenure, dozens of women expressed their concerns to me. Their stories varied from examples like those listed above, to not being heard in conference meetings, to having difficulty receiving support for maternity leaves or requests for appointment changes. This season of harmful theological mansplaining and the oppressive conference climate marked his entire tenure as leader of the Annual

Conference. The leadership team with which he surrounded himself was required to support his vision and ideology. His vision and ideology were grounded in patriarchy. The patriarchal nature of his language, decisions, and actions clearly spoke to the supremacy of male leadership in his time among us.

Doing ministry under this patriarchal structure was painful for many. Kate Manne discusses the way patriarchal forces control women's narratives. She writes, "Part of male dominance, especially on the part of the most privileged and powerful, seems to be seizing control of the narrative—and with it, controlling her, enforcing her concurrence."<sup>62</sup> This control of narrative forces women into the shadows of memory, controls and silences their stories, and labels them heretical, at best, if they dare to courageously lift their own voice or live by their own power. Along with many other clergywomen, I have found that through silencing our voices, theological mansplaining spins an alternative story, countering our experiences, and continually leading to our disempowerment as women in religious leadership. The disempowerment through shame, gaslighting, and the enforced cone of silence in the face of injustices leaves many women isolated from one another and the community.

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<sup>62</sup> Kate Manne, *Down Girl*, 11.

CHAPTER FOUR  
RE-MEMBERING IN COMMUNITY

Women in religious leadership need the power of imagination and the encouragement of community to bring to light the harmful effects that theological mansplaining has caused to our ministry and our lives. Together, we can rise against toxic masculinity, reclaim the power to shape and share our narratives, use our voices in ways that embody the strength of the divine feminine, and empower other women to do the same. In the act of re-membering Mary Magdalene, we, too, can rise, reclaim, shape, share, and empower women to embody the divine feminine that does not play by the rules of toxic masculinity.

I creatively frame my research and my writing by adopting the practice of re-membering from the work of theologian Mary Rose D'Angelo:

In brief, “re-membering” is intended to convey three ideas: (1) “bringing what has been hidden out of the shadows of history,” (2) “putting together what has been dismembered,” and (3) “making someone a member of oneself/of the community in a new way.” This constellation of meanings is particularly appropriate not only as a description of what feminists must do to recover the history of women from the gospels and the Christian tradition but also as a description of any twentieth-century and scholarly approach to Jesus in the gospels.<sup>63</sup>

This framing can inspire the imagination as clergywomen in the Upper New York Annual Conference explore the life-giving role of Mary Magdalene together, weaving it with our own ministry roles, despite the shame, gaslighting, and cone of silence that have harmfully impacted women in religious leadership. As we bring Mary Magdalene out of

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<sup>63</sup> Mary Rose D'Angelo, “Re-membering Jesus: Women, Prophecy, and Resistance in the Memory of the Early Churches,” *Horizons*, 19, no 2, 202-203..

the shadows of history, we can reclaim our stories that have been hidden; we can put ourselves, along with Mary Magdalene, back into community in new and powerful ways of leading, all the while bringing healing and wholeness to each other and to the community of faith.

As I pointed out earlier, Mary Magdalene has been relegated to the shadows of history by the theological mansplaining that took hold of her story and represented her role as one of moral ambiguity rather than as an important part of the leadership of the Jesus movement. This misrepresentation of Mary Magdalene has persisted in people's cultural memory and imagination through the centuries, capturing elements of the patriarchal interpretation of her story. Bringing her out of the shadows will shed light on her story as a powerful representation of female leadership in the Christian community and the world. This re-membering of Mary Magdalene's story, in turn, can impact women in religious leadership, exercising their own authority and finding their way out of the shadows of the church's story.

To restore what has been "dismembered," the word D'Angelo uses, speaks to the ways in which Mary Magdalene has been cut out of the Christian community in harmful ways. Drawing on imagery from the writings of the apostle Paul, the Christian community is often described as the body of Christ, and we are all members of that body.<sup>64</sup> When a member of that body is cut off from the fullness of community, their own fullness and that of the community, they are dismembered from the institution to which they bear witness. Like Mary Magdalene, clergywomen in my context have found their leadership and voice cut off from the places and spaces they were meant to inhabit,

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<sup>64</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:27

alongside clergymen. As we bring Mary Magdalene back into community in a new way, one that addresses the harmful effects of theological mansplaining, we can give new life to women in religious leadership today. By gathering clergywomen and sharing in a more trusting atmosphere, I seek to rejoin both Mary Magdalene and clergywomen in my context back into the community of faithful women church leaders, no longer threatened by theological mansplaining, but resisting and persisting in spite of the reality of patriarchal systems at work in the church.

Gathering women together for focused reflection and re-membering is a powerful act of collective imagination. In *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practice Wisdom*, feminist writer, educator, and activist, bell hooks reminds us, “In dominator culture, the killing off of the imagination serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo.”<sup>65</sup> The status quo in my current context is marred by a larger Christian nationalist context that further perpetuates the repression of women’s imagination and the voices of others by way of white supremacy and toxic masculinity. The contemporary cultural reality in which women in religious leadership find themselves suppresses the imagination and silences the voices and narratives that do not fit the theological agenda of the dominator culture. The current larger Christian context in the United States is plagued by Christian nationalism, which emboldens the leaders who assert themselves in leadership roles that expand the weight of toxic masculinity rather than the empowerment of faithful leadership. Imagination is what is needed in the healing journey in community with other clergy women. The idea that someone can share their sorrow and have others see their pain and vulnerability takes imagination in a divisive and hostile climate. The

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<sup>65</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 60.

sheer will of collective imagination and the inspiration of truth-telling is an act of resistance amid all the pressures to conform to patriarchal narratives. There is both risk and reward in such endeavors into which the collective imagination invites us.

The thread of the divine feminine is found in weaving our personal stories with those of Mary Magdalene with fresh imagination. Sue Monk Kidd's personal journey from her background as a traditional Baptist to an awakening as a feminist Christian informs her writing. She insists that each woman's experience has value. In her 1996 memoir, she writes:

Every woman's story of finding the Sacred Feminine brims with its own unique events, risks, complexities, pains, and rewards. And every story is a luminous thread that becomes part of the larger fabric, a fabric we are weaving together for the whole world, and this fabric is a thing of immense importance and beauty. It is alright for women to follow the wisdom of their souls, to name their truth, to embrace the Sacred Feminine, that there is an undreamed voice, strength, and power in us. She is in us.<sup>66</sup>

This larger fabric, Sue Monk Kidd describes, is one that weaves centuries of stories to provide healing for women, not just for the women gathered but for women as a whole. Knowing that we are all gathered in such a divine fabric provides a safe place of comfort and connection. My goal in gathering clergywomen is to enable them to experience strength and power in sharing their stories, freed for imaginative reflection.

### Out of the Shadows of History

To help clergywomen engage in imaginative re-membling, claiming their stories, I seek to bring Mary Magdalene out of the shadow of theological mansplaining. I reframe

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<sup>66</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 400.

the questions surrounding her life and ministry and strive to make her a member of my religious community in a new, life-giving way. As D'Angelo cites, “‘re-membering’ describes the interaction of historical method and feminist enterprise that guides the reconstruction - recovering the history of women from the gospels and the Christian tradition.”<sup>67</sup> To bear light upon this problem for women in religious leadership, I engage in the process of cultural bundubashing, taking a path less traveled. The process of cultural bundubashing comes from the work of theologian Pieter F. Craffert. Cultural bundubashing, “as the track of anthropological historiography will be called, [is an] alternative critical paradigm for historical Jesus research” to recover the memory of Mary Magdalene.<sup>68</sup> Craffert suggests that this off-roading perspective, taking on old and new cultural landscapes to understand the history of Jesus in particular, can give the researcher new insights, reframing the questions and looking at alternative problems. Cultural bundubashing uses sources beyond traditional narratives and sources to uncover new truths and ideas related to culture and our interpretation of events and people.

A new cultural landscape can be formed by understanding Mary Magdalene and her role in history by drawing on sources other than the canonical scriptures. I propose that this is a way to bring the voice, the story, and the role of Mary Magdalene out of the history of theological mansplaining and the extermination of her voice of divine femininity. An “off-roading” approach, looking at myths and legends, draws on cross-

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<sup>67</sup> D'Angelo, “Re-membering Jesus,” 203.

<sup>68</sup> Pieter F. Craffert, *The Life of a Galilean Shaman: Jesus of Nazareth in Anthropological-Historical Perspective*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), Chapter 3, Kindle Edition.

cultural and varied sources to lift Mary Magdalene's story out of the weight of traditional patriarchal interpretation.

Feminist theologian Meggan Watterson's understanding of the traditional patriarchal interpretation of John's gospel provides an example of creative "off-road" interpretation of Mary's story. In John 20:17, Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"<sup>69</sup> The traditional patriarchal interpretation of this text concludes that a woman could not touch Jesus because his holiness could not encounter the depth of uncleanness a woman would bring or the temptation to sin that she embodied. Watterson, along with others, leans toward a different interpretation, stating, "And then Christ says the line that has confused so many for so long: *Noli me tangere*, Latin for, as many have translated it, do not touch me. A more apt translation is, do not cling to me. And this is what makes sense in the trajectory of his ministry."<sup>70</sup> Watterson's interpretation makes more sense, since we have no record of Jesus not allowing women to touch him to protect his spiritual status.

Many theological voices have sought to en flesh the memory of Mary Magdalene from the dismembered remains of theological mansplaining. Theologian Elizabeth Schrader seeks to lift the voice, the story, and, therefore, the role of Mary Magdalene in

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<sup>69</sup> John 20: 17.

<sup>70</sup> Meggan Watterson, *Mary Magdalene Revealed: The First Apostle, Her Feminist Gospel, & The Christianity We Haven't Tried Yet*, (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2019,) 113.

the artifact of an ancient papyrus.<sup>71</sup> Her work has unearthed the lengths to which male scribes and theologians have gone to remove the significance of Mary Magdalene's leadership in the community of early Christians. Schrader focuses on the Gospel of John, and she raises two valuable insights on the Christological confession of Jesus and the meaning of Magdalene. In all four canonical gospels, someone makes a Christological confession about who Jesus is. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is Peter who declares that Jesus is the Messiah. In John 11:27, it is a woman who claims that Jesus is the Messiah. Here, the work of Schrader suggests evidence that *Mary Magdalene* may have made the Christological statement. She contends that in the original Papyrus 66, the oldest fragment of the Gospel of John, some of the mentions of Martha were originally written as *Mary*, making the Christological statement spoken by Martha and not Mary Magdalene. From the gospel of John, the text read, "She [Martha] said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'"<sup>72</sup> Schrader writes,

In conclusion, I suggest that Papyrus 66 may reflect the final stages of the text form of the Fourth Gospel where the figure of Martha was being secondarily added to the resurrection story of Lazarus. I believe there is a strong possibility that this change was made in order to hamper the text's subtle identification of Mary of Bethany with Mary Magdalene, and perhaps in particular to ensure that John 11:27's crucial Christological confession was not on her lips.<sup>73</sup>

Schrader's second point is that the scribes and subsequent interpreters split the Mary of the Gospel of John into two distinct people: Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene.

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<sup>71</sup> Elizabeth Schrader, "Was Martha of Bethany Added to the Fourth Gospel in the Second Century?" *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 110, No. 3 (July 2017), pp. 360-392, 473-474.

<sup>72</sup> John 11: 17-27

<sup>73</sup> Schrader, "Was Martha of Bethany Added?" 391.

Schrader's recent scholarship has gained the attention of theologians like Diana Butler Bass, who hosted Schrader on her podcast. In Butler Bass's interview with Schrader, Schrader points out the long history of conflating different biblical women into one:

We have a record of this going as far back as the third-century church father Hippolytus of Rome. Also, the Manichaeans, a sort of heretical group in the third century, thought that Mary of Bethany was Mary Magdalene. And Saint Ambrose, the mentor of Saint Augustine, thinks that Mary Magdalene was the same person as Mary of Bethany. And that kind of became cemented in the Western tradition that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene were the same woman.<sup>74</sup>

In studying the original papyrus alongside Hippolytus and Saint Ambrose, Schrader raises some valuable questions regarding the importance of Mary Magdalene. She concludes: "Consequently, this study yields an interesting exegetical result: a Johannine text form without Martha would create a strong textual implication that Mary of Bethany was Mary Magdalene."<sup>75</sup> Schrader, along with other scholars, points to the connection "Magdalene" has in the Gospel of Luke 8:2, "Mary called Magdalene." She insists Magdalene is not meant to indicate a place, but rather to serve as a descriptor, an Aramaic word meaning "tower." This is a way of seeing Mary Magdalene not as a repentant sinner, but as a powerful follower of Jesus. With a title much like "Peter the rock," "Mary Magdalene," or "Mary the Tower" bears more weight for her role in the Jesus movement.<sup>76</sup> Her leadership role as a tower brings a powerful witness to the role of women in the ministry of Jesus.

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<sup>74</sup> Amy Frykholm, "There's Something about Mary Magdalene with Elizabeth Schrader Polczer and Diana Butler Bass," produced by The Christian Century, In Search Of, Podcast, 1:00:42, <https://www.christiancentury.org/there-s-something-about-mary-magdalene-elizabeth-schrader-polczer-and-diana-butler-bass-s3-e1>.

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Schrader, "Was Martha of Bethany Added?" 388.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew 16:18

To bring Mary Magdalene out of the shadows of history is to dig for her story amid the rubble of centuries of theological mansplaining that stole her story, silenced her voice, and disempowered her leadership in the Christian tradition. Even still, Mary remained faithful to the life, death, resurrection, and Way of Jesus. These biblical accounts, cultural artifacts, contain the truth of Mary's faithfulness and leadership, and bring us a range of possible narratives that communicate her life and interaction with Jesus.

#### Putting Mary Magdalene Back Together Again in Community for Community

During the gathering mentioned above, my plan was for clergywomen to remember Mary Magdalene's leadership in community and to draw together the collective wisdom of other clergywomen. In gathering, the stories of women's leadership coalesce, and the voice of the divine feminine resounds in each of us collectively. In the in-between places, in the storytelling, in the life-sharing spaces, and in the creativity of a living liturgy, clergywomen can be empowered outside the bounds of theological mansplaining.

Creating a space for mutual vulnerability is key to my research and the methodology of autoethnography because it lends itself to the storytelling of the participants, and also allows my own story to become a woven element of my research. I am a participatory observer. Due to my experiences and my relationships with the subjects of my study, there is a meeting place in the stories and our shared experiences. Research reinforces the importance of mutual vulnerability. In the article, "The Power of Vulnerability in Healing," the *Compassionate Healing Therapy* website states:

When we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we not only open the door to personal healing but also to connecting with others on a deeper level. Sharing our stories

can have a profound impact, not just on our own healing process but also in helping others feel less alone in their struggles. It's through this shared vulnerability that communities are built, support networks are formed, and the stigma surrounding mental health is dismantled.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, in her article “The Power of Vulnerability: Navigating The Healing Journey with Courage and Resilience,” licensed counselor Courtney Loyola provides more insight regarding vulnerability and trust as key interpersonal dynamics of building connections that foster healing and growth. She writes:

Vulnerability fosters honest expression and communication about pain, leading to deeper connections with others. This sense of connection enhances feelings of belonging and support, both of which are critical in recovering from trauma. Research shows that embracing vulnerability can enhance resilience significantly. For instance, a study found that individuals who share their painful experiences report a 35% increase in feelings of connection. By realizing they are not alone in their struggles, people often experience empathy, which can strengthen relationships and encourage community support.<sup>78</sup>

Systematic therapist Jessica ChenFeng, on the podcast With & For, speaks of the gift of mutual relationships. ChenFeng says that one of the defining characteristics of a relationship that embodies mutuality is mutual vulnerability.<sup>79</sup> Encouraging mutual vulnerability is an important aspect of my research, as I work to create a sacred space of trust that encourages women to share their stories and plant the seeds of healing for each of us gathered there.

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<sup>77</sup> “The Power of Vulnerability in Healing,” Compassionate Healing, last modified April 3, 2024, <https://www.chealing.org/post/the-power-of-vulnerability-in-healing>.

<sup>78</sup> Courtney Loyola, “The Power of Vulnerability: Navigating the Healing Journey with Courage and Resilience,” Onyx Counseling and Wellness Center, last modified December 11, 2024, <https://www.onyxcounselingandwellness.com/post/the-power-of-vulnerability-navigating-the-healing-journey-with-courage-and-resilience>.

<sup>79</sup> Pam King, “The Gift of Mutual Relationships, with Dr. Jessica ChenFeng,” produced by Producer Jill Westbook, With and For, Podcast, 1:10:53, <https://thethrivecenter.org/episodes/the-gift-of-mutual-relationships-with-dr-jessica-chenfeng/>.

Sharing our experiences, woven with those of Mary Magdalene, reminds the community of clergywomen that we are not alone. The vulnerability needed to enter a space of healing and transformation is key for the participants and the researcher who intends to engage at a personal level. The misinterpreted story of Mary Magdalene provides a helpful theological context and an entry point into the cultural context in which we try to lead. The exploration of self, others, and culture in community is a fluid process that requires an open and honest reflective position.

#### Mary Magdalene and Women in Religious Leadership: A New Way

As we gathered and learned from one another and the witness of Mary Magdalene, we uncovered a way of leading that is authentic to how we embody authority. We embody authority in community with others, in relationship, which is where many women find their strength. Together, we found the freedom and power to resist the narratives and the silence that caused distrust and division. Gathering and learning from each other gave me the inspiration and direction for this project.

I hosted four separate gatherings of clergywomen in the Upper New York Annual Conference over a period of two years. The first two gatherings inspired me to believe that sharing our stories in a trusted space could provide healing and empowerment. The first two gatherings were with four specific clergywomen who already had an existing relationship with one another. The pre-existing trust was essential for deep sharing in our gathering. During these first two conversations, I found evidence that the experiences of theological mansplaining and suppressing of my voice and leadership that I described earlier in this work were experiences shared by my colleagues.

I began our time together via Zoom by introducing my project and what I understood theological mansplaining to mean. I prayed and then asked if they would be willing to share their stories of how their voices were silenced, stories stolen, and ultimately their leadership disempowered. I asked how female voices were silenced in their experience. The first response from Participant A was to describe feeling that the “feminine energy” which was once empowered in their ministry was being consumed by a patriarchal system that participants previously felt was safe. Participant C remarked that “we were thinking the best of our leaders.”<sup>80</sup> Participant D added that we need to “understand and accept this broken trust in the system that holds our lives in order to move forward.”

The women expressed their collective experiences of the systematic silencing of their voices and the pre-shaped narrative that controlled the stories of the Annual Conference. The pre-shaped narrative told a story of the leadership as open and affirming, at the same time, dissenting voices were explained as harsh and the problem. When I asked participants how this pre-shaped narrative affected their stories, participant B responded that her story was impacted “through gaslighting” - making one believe that they are imagining a widespread pattern where “there was none” - and through “controlling all narratives,” especially those that gave witness to the widespread problem under the “cover of confidentiality.” The widespread problem is that the male bishop in leadership emotionally manipulated and disempowered many clergywomen in the Annual Conference.

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<sup>80</sup> All the quotations from this section are from participants A, B, C, and D from my first two Zoom conversations, which took place March 27th through March 28th, 2025.

As stated by Participant A, there is “theological power” behind the episcopacy in United Methodism, as well as practical power. Theological power to hold spiritual office over another with the backing of the denomination is weighty for those holding it and those subjected to it. This spiritual office comes with an assumption of care over those who serve under the one holding the office. The participants all agreed that there is a level of vulnerability and trust that is part of the interpersonal dynamic between the bishop and the clergy in their care. Bishops exert practical power in their ability to include or exclude, alongside their authority in creating narratives of “truth.”

As the conversation continued, I asked how episcopal power impacted their voice, stories, and leadership. The narratives that guided our Annual Conference were created by a select few whom the bishop directed. Participant B responded that when clergywomen challenged the exclusion or narrative that “everything was fine,” the conference leadership would respond through tactics like making changes to the conference budget, eliminating positions held by women, or making hostile reappointments, moving women from the center of power within the Annual Conference.

During this first gathering, these women taught me the power of having our voices heard and our stories “made visible,” as highlighted by Participant B, who shared that “being made visible provides an entryway for healing and wholeness.” The secrecy and silence that had become commonplace in the culture of our Annual Conference not only led to distrust of the system that perpetuated silence, but it also led to a distrust of one another. Participant D added that clergywomen found themselves unsure whom to trust, which led to further isolation, when what clergywomen need is a new “cloud of clergywomen, who are in our corner for support and to create safe connections.”

The four participants and I felt there was more hope to glean from the conversation and planned our next meeting. During our second meeting, which took place on November 19th, 2021, I asked, “What would healing look like?” Participant B responded with the word “repentance,” meaning a way for the system to repent of the harm that was caused for so long and experienced by many women. Participant C responded that our previous action of “unveiling our stories to one another was nourishing.” When our stories are “articulated in community,” she added, “we break the cone of silence and cultivate safer spaces for others to share.” Participant D spoke to the need for “communal listening” at some level of our Annual Conference.

Troubled by my experiences in the Annual Conference described earlier, such as my experience of a narrowing acceptable theological spectrum among bishop-appointed Board of Ordained Ministry members, and inspired by the value of my conversations with a small group of clergywomen about the harm done to them by the atmosphere of theological mansplaining, I sought to expand the circle and gather more clergywomen for healing and transformation. I learned how important gathering women together is from my four colleagues, through hearing their voices and making our stories more visible to each other. During our second gathering, we had a conversation around what would be helpful to keep in mind for the next gathering of other clergywomen. Participant A shared that “feeling safe meant my feelings weren’t prescribed to me or my experience, and I wasn’t told how to feel.” Participant D added that setting a context that was “worshipful” would create a “container to hold our unburdening.” Participant B suggested that the act of sharing the bread and the cup in communion would be healing, as we offer the brokenness to one another in a circle. Participants suggested components of music,

scripture and silence to create a "scaffolding" for the sharing of our stories and the "reclaiming of our leadership." Liturgy is the work of the people, and sharing our stories and voices would serve as the hard work of the gathering.

I sent an invitation email to as many clergywomen in our Annual Conference as I could for our next gathering. Out of that invitation, six women attended the gathering in person, and an additional four attended via Zoom. I designed the gathering to help us re-member Mary Magdalene through the sharing of our own stories of gender-based exclusion and marginalization. I created a worshipful, welcoming environment for the women by lighting candles and placing icons of Mary Magdalene throughout the space. I began the gathering with a casual conversation to build a trusting space, then moved on to introduce the concept of re-membering. According to Mary D'Angelo's description of re-membering, the process comes from feminist praxis of countering the patriarchal process of dismembering women from their stories by bringing women's stories to the center, without the interpretive lens of misogyny. As indicated earlier, re-membering conveys together the ideas of "bringing what has been hidden out of the shadows of history, of putting together what has been dismembered, and of making someone a member of oneself/of the community in a new way."<sup>81</sup> During our time together, we would bring our hidden stories out of the shadows while building a community of trust and putting our leadership back together again.

After a brief discussion of the concept of re-membering, we read the Gospel of Mary, which was unfamiliar to some of the women who were gathered. We read Mary's words, and paused to have a conversation about her understanding of Jesus and how

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<sup>81</sup> Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Re-membering Jesus," 202-203.

skewed Mary's interpretation became. We took some time with the Gospel's interaction between Peter and Mary:

But Andrew responded and said to the brothers and sisters, "Say what you will about what she has said, I do not believe that the Savior said this, for certainly, these teachings are strange ideas." Peter responded and spoke concerning these same things. He questioned them about the Savior, "Did he really speak with a woman without our knowing about it? Are we to turn around and all listen to her? Did he choose her over us?"<sup>82</sup>

We ruminated together on the ways our voices were dismissed as Mary's was both in the Gospel of Mary and throughout the Christian tradition. The group discussed how our experiences echoed the story of Mary Magdalene in the Bible, who was not initially taken seriously by the male leaders. We also discussed the importance of listening to women's voices and recognizing their value in leadership roles. This part of the conversation ended with Participant E sharing her own experiences of navigating a divided church and the ways her voice was devalued by male leaders within the church and male leaders from the annual conference. She described that the church was divided over the "participation of a child with special needs in the life of the church."<sup>83</sup> When Participant E responded emotionally to the negative responses to the child's participation, she was "criticized for being an overemotional woman" by male local church leaders and her superintendent.

I asked the participants to describe ways their leadership felt disempowered. Participant F answered by sharing her experience with a male co-pastor that was intense and problematic. When attempts were made to have the bishop and district superintendent help find a pathway to reconciliation and healing, the two male

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<sup>82</sup> The Gospel According to Mary 9:4.

<sup>83</sup> All the quotations in this section through the conclusion are from the in-person gathering I conducted on March 27th and 28th, 2025.

leaders chose instead to remove her from her position. This unjust action resulted in severe financial penalties when she lost her pension contributions and health insurance. Participant G shared her own story of being “abused by a co-pastor, who made demeaning comments about women from the pulpit.” When she went to the district superintendent, she was told that it was her fault, and that she needed time off to “get herself together.” This experience left her isolated and bewildered at where to go next.

The gathering continued as we looked at the possible meaning of Magdalene, the tower, and the strength the tower imagery might bring to one’s heart and mind. We discussed the places where we find strength, the lack of support within the system to hold everyone accountable to a standard of full inclusion of women in leadership roles, and the need for more sacred spaces of collegiality among clergywomen. We raised topics ranging from inclusive language when describing both God and humanity, to recounting participants’ experiences of intimidation and stalking, to the sense that little accountability exists for our male clergy counterparts for abusive and oppressive behavior.

As participants grew more comfortable with sharing, each woman recounted a vulnerable truth about their painful journey in our Annual Conference within the last ten years. Some women shared personal stories of filing complaints that were ignored or dismissed by conference leadership, leaving the women feeling unsupported by the denominational hierarchy, and some shared examples of damaging behavior from our former bishop. The consensus was that there has been a lack of accountability and safe spaces to address these issues. We considered ways to gather together and support each other as an outcome of our collective sharing, and we acknowledged the need for other

clergywomen to come to a safe place to be seen and heard so that healing may begin. A positive result of this research was that the women wanted to gather again, so we joined one another via Zoom for a follow-up meeting online. The healing continued as more of our stories were shared. Plans percolated to have future gatherings to include more clergywomen in an experience of the healing presence of others centering on the voice, story, and leadership of Mary Magdalene. We considered ways to gather and support each other outside official denominational systems, recognizing the need for healing and change. The conversation concluded with a hope for future female episcopal leadership in our conference, and plans to continue meeting to share ideas for addressing these challenges.

I found that in gathering with these women and in re-membering Mary Magdalene, there was the beginning spark of healing for the women. I cannot separate myself from my research subjects; their story is my story, and our shared witness is the purpose of this project. I sought to provide space for women to have their voices heard, their stories truly seen, and their leadership empowered as we lifted Mary Magdalene.

After these gatherings, I spent time processing the stories I had heard by taking a pilgrimage to one of the sacred sites of Mary Magdalene in Marseilles, France. I found Mary's crypt in a basilica in southern France along with a grotto where legend says she spent the remainder of her life after the resurrection of Jesus. There I stood before the skull of Mary Magdalene. I imagined the muscles, sinew, and skin covering the bones. As I stood there, almost breathless, I saw a motion to my right, which momentarily took my breath away, before I realized it was simply my own reflection in the plexiglass that protected the artifacts. How appropriate that in a moment when I was imagining the flesh

and blood of Mary Magdalene, I would see my own. In her reflection, I see myself and I feel the power of knowing and believing that within me is all the hope I need, all the strength I need to make things well. Within me is the power to be the tower for another woman, the hope of healing in my hands. This powerful encounter at Mary's crypt reminded me of the strength that still is and has always been inside of me. Others, abusing their power and limiting women's voices, may choose only to see the pale reflection of who I am, not the fullness of my flesh and bones - my leadership in its fullness. They would rather have my leadership locked up and preserved like the lifeless skull of Mary Magdalene.

My pilgrimage inspired me to offer a new way to bring Mary Magdalene into community: crafting an epistle, a letter to the Church. My version of an epistle from Mary communicates the struggle women in religious leadership face, and the hope that women can find when they gather, listen, and support one another. My epistle offering reflects on what happens when we make harm visible, so that healing can begin, confident in the knowledge that we are not alone, we are seen, we are heard, our story matters, and our leadership matters.

## CONCLUSION

I write this letter to the churches in the voice of Mary Magdalene. These thoughts and feelings come from the voices of women who journey together in ministry, my pilgrimage to France, and in community with other women in religious leadership. I weave together some research and some heartfelt thoughts that come from the insights and conversations shared by clergywomen who participated in my project. I hope that in writing from Mary Magdalene's perspective, using her voice, I can convey my hope that women in religious leadership find a safe place to feel seen and heard by drawing on the ancient past - a validation of all the decades of struggle and self-doubt. The voice of Mary Magdalene provides historical roots and tomorrow's hopes and dreams for women, especially those from my context in religious leadership.

### Epistle: A Letter to the Churches

From Mary Magdalene, through the voices of subversive sisters, who dared to raise their voices, bear their stories, and claim their leadership.

Dearest church,

You have given birth to so many blessed sisters who seek to find their way through the mud of patriarchy, the mire of misogyny. Their leadership emerges from the new life of saying yes, to arise from the afterbirth, yearning for something whole, something that can put sinew on their bones to carry them through.

You, my church, have spent too much time in the mud and in the mire, flailing about as if drowning, seeking a way to the surface, so the truth can bring breath to your lungs. It is the mud of half-truths and convenient lies. The mud of those words that tell

you that because you are a woman you are not enough - the words that freeze you in moments of harm; the words that tell you it is all your fault, that you are too emotional, that you are not strong enough for such a time as this; the words that make you question your worth and value in the household of faith. That mud, that mire - you know it all too well.

My dear ones, rise to the light of each new day, and hear anew the words of the one who inspired my heart and hand to write them for you.

For me, for you, the question arises to the light: Am I who they say that I am? Am I all those words jumbled together in a mass of unworthiness? What does your heart tell you? In the quiet, hear my voice that speaks words of clarity and laughter. For so long, the millstone of words hung heavy around the necks of the ones who long to be set free and left the truth at the bottom of the sea. For too long, those millstones went unnoticed, and my children stumbled in the darkness, even as they walked the halls of the church.

“Whore,” they say. “Repentant sinner,” they say. Yet, my heart remembers despite the lies. My heart remembers the one who mattered. The very one who called me by name: Mary. I heard him whisper in that garden so long ago. Through my sobbing, I heard my name. Only through my tears could I see his face more clearly. Weeping is good for the soul, collecting all the remnants of sorrow and pain and letting them loose in the world. Jesus taught me that truth on the day he wept for Lazarus, when he wept in the garden while he thought no one could see. Weeping is not for the weak, the fairer sex, as they say. Weeping, deep weeping, is for the strong of heart, for they shall see God through their tears, and hear their name in the sobbing.

My heart still breaks for that day, remembering those last moments. Who was there, through the horrors of the crucifixion? Who, indeed, stayed through the sights and sounds that day, standing beside the breaking-open mother of Jesus? I stayed. I had to stay. My life was made complete as I learned more about the treasure inside me, the gift of peace, the hope of healing, and the joy of a love that knows no bounds. I stayed, waiting and watching. Waiting for what? I hoped beyond hope to not have to see the horrors of his death. Perhaps a miracle would await us, and Jesus would not die at the hands of the powerful. I stayed, and Jesus died. There, in front of all who dared to watch, Jesus died. No one can take this from me - not this moment, not this time and space. I stayed.

How dare I imagine the story ended there, after all we have seen and heard from the heart of Jesus - his healing and the hope, the peace and the love? How could I? Early that morning, the morning after the horrors, I willed my body to rise to tend to the body of my beloved friend and teacher. I rose early to mourn with the other women who willed their bodies to stay at the crucifixion, and now to tend to the grave. So many confusing thoughts swirled in my brain, playing over and over the final days, the years of travel, the weariness in my bones. I traveled to the tomb that day, longing to do the only thing I knew to care for the dead: to anoint his body as others had so lovingly done as he walked the dusty roads. Oh, the tombs then and now that capture life and pronounce it dead and buried!

Weeping, I stayed.

No matter what is said of me, I stayed then, and I stay now, to witness to the love of the one who set me free. I stayed in the hearts of those who chose to believe, and in the

memories of those who would rather forget - clanging around like a thought that won't leave the mind. Even when they neglected and continue to neglect the truth about me, I stayed, fully present in the world, marred by false narratives and the silencing of my voice. I stayed so that you can stay. Stay and find your place, my child. Stay like a memory that has taken hold and will not be shaken. Stay, amid the winds of rumors and falsehoods. Stand like a tall tower, a tree planted by the water of truth, soaking in all her nutrients. I stayed, so that you can stay, amid the pressures to return home with an empty story and a weary voice.

I wasn't returning home empty-hearted. And yet my hands: that is a different story. They felt empty. My hands, tending to the needs of Jesus and so many others, rough and worn, gentle and kind. My hands longed to hold onto the feet of the one who set me free, the feet that led us through the dusty soil of Galilee and Capernaum, Jerusalem, and all the places God's grace needed to touch. I was set free from all that kept me bound to loneliness and gave me back community and connection. I was made a part of the wandering family that traveled the dusty roads to set others free from the bondage of death, crafted by human hands. And now, here at the feet of the Risen One, I long to touch those wandering feet, to cling on just a little longer to all that was, and to the life I knew. The fear of letting go is overwhelming - what next, how will I stand, who will stand with me, who will I become? How can I let go of this earthly matter, let go of who he has been in my life, let go to be the redeemed creation of great love and abounding faith? I let go not because I wasn't worthy; I let go not because my gender was a stumbling block. Woe to those who become stumbling blocks, those who are so tied up by millstones that they cannot see my importance in this sacred moment in my journey

with Jesus! Remember the words of our teacher: “It would be better for you to throw yourselves into the sea than be the stumbling block for others.” God paved the way for me to be all I was created to become.

How will I honor all this giftedness? By not holding onto what was, but embracing what is about to be. I stand in the reality of being fully known and seen now, with all my wondering and longing for that next life-giving thing God is up to in my world. And here you are, my daughters, the future I hoped for, the next new life-giving thing I longed for - witnesses, towers of strength, leaders in the midst of the gathered.

What do you long for, good children? What do you seek? For the One who sent me into the world now lives in you. Do you seek it? Do you find it? Is it too far buried beneath the self-doubt and fear, the weight of the world, the gender violence that has marred your soul?

After the dust settled, and the theologians began to twist words and events to fit an agenda, I stayed the course, despite the confining places and spaces designed for and by men. I stand in the spiral pulpit. I stand in the lecture hall of the ivory towers. I stand in the shadow of every stained-glass ceiling. With and beside you, I stand. Can you see your reflection there? Flesh and sinew, love and power? My voice, my story woven with yours, chiming through the ages, can you hear the sound, feel the rhythm?

Together we stayed and stand. Together we reclaim what has been dismembered. Together, we put our leadership back together in community, a new and resounding way. In moments of doubt, I will bring you faith in your own call; in moments when the system rises against you, I will bring you strength; in moments that the church fails to

hear you, see you, and the fullness of your story, I will whisper your name, beloved; and in all moments together, you are whole.

May the Creator of things seen and not yet seen bring you wisdom and courage. By the Spirit's power, may you stay and stand for yourselves and for others seeking their way forward. And may the sound of Jesus' voice remind you of who you are and the life that you bear out of every empty, closed tomb. The holy is with you always in the depths of your heart and the truth of your story.

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