

Protestant female clergy seen overcoming obstacles

The Rev. Joan Campbell, speaking to the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue, described herself as "a rarity within the Presbyterian Church — a black woman minister."

MRS. CAMPBELL is pastor of St. Paul's Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, Mo. The church is aligned both with the United Presbyterian Church, mainly a Northern denomination, and the Presbyterian Church, U.S., primarily a Southern denomination.

The minister said she is one of 621 ordained women in the United Presbyterian Church and 184 ordained women in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.

She listed for her audience the number of ordained female ministers in several other Christian denominations: American Lutheran Church, 90; Lutheran Church in America, 210; Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), 304; Episcopal Church, 438; United Church of Christ, 735; American Baptists, 249; Southern Baptists, 100; Moravian Church, 7; Unitarian Church, 130; and United Methodist Church, 1,316.

MRS. CAMPBELL, WHO has been ordained since 1978, said, "The irony of this ordained thing is I'm not really doing much more than I was doing before I was ordained."

"I don't think I'm breathing any differently. I don't think I'm praying any differently. I just have a few more privileges in the decision-making processes — maybe — than I did."

THE MINISTER said, "I believe, in fact, that women have been about the business of ministry even before they ever thought about walking into the church or into the synagogue."

"Any moment that a woman reaches out to care for a loved one, be it her man or children or parents or relatives or a friend or a neighbor, that is ministry. It is the ability to reach out and care for another and try to make a difference in their lives."

"**MORE AND MORE** women of faith want to put that sense of caring and concern in a legitimate sense into the resources of the church."

Women, Mrs. Campbell said, "make up a majority of membership in every congregation in every denomination. There would be no church if it were not for women."

The Missouri pastor talked about some ways women "are naturally caring" for others in unofficial ministry: providing shelters for abused women and their children; providing rehabilitation and support for the mentally ill; providing support systems for women who increasingly are experiencing mastectomies, or breast-removals; caring for alcoholics and drug addicts; working in jails.

SHE SAID, "There are the 'isms' — racism, sexism, classism, age-ism. We find ourselves busy working to do something about them."

One reason why "crime, drug addiction, the problems and the aches and pains of people tend to be on the increase," the pastor maintained, is that the church, along with society, has allowed "new gods to be concocted: technology, arms development, political gains, most of all economic clout."

THESE GODS, Mrs. Campbell said, divert the attention of the church from "being the people of God or claiming something that is transcendent."

Speaking about roles of men in the church, she said, "We have said to men within the church that if you are a man you somehow have an automatic right to be ordained. You have an automatic right to run for office or to be an elder in the Presbyterian Church or to sit on the vestry within the Episcopal Church because men can be rational, and you get a group of women together and they're going to take longer to do any kind of business."

She added, smiling, "Now I'm quoting, ya'll." **CONTINUING, SHE** said, "I want to stop and have you consider something for just a moment. I really believe as I look at the Women of the Church, the official women's organization of the Presbyterian Church, that they were the ones who taught me what it meant to be about parliamentary procedure. They were the ones who taught me about bookkeeping and making reports and making me feel that I had what it took to stand in front of a group and to speak my mind and to speak the truth as I knew it."

Mrs. Campbell presented the view that "some of the best theologically informed persons within the institutional church are women because they take the time to read and discuss through their circles and through their small groups what are some of the pressing issues, not just of their denomination and their city, but of the entire world."

WHILE WOMEN ARE ordained as ministers in many Protestant churches, "over and over again I hear the stories of my sisters in ministry who tell how long it took them to go through their ordination exams," Mrs. Campbell said.

Her own trial was prolonged, she said, because "they weren't quite sure I could handle the theology."

She cited an example of a question asked her: "The passage in Paul that says women are supposed to be submissive to their husbands — how are you going to interpret that to your congregation?"

SHE SAID, "I quickly urged the brother who asked me the question to read a little bit further because it goes on to say men, you must be willing to put your lives down for your wives. You understand if a brother is ready to put his life down for me, I can be submissive to you...."

"But there's a mutuality in that, and the whole point is that we tend to be biblical literalists. We believe in biblical inerrancy rather than understanding the setting in which the Scriptures were written and understanding that Paul was really not down on women."

"**IN FACT, HE** liberated women. He said you have a right to the good news, too. Come any ol' way you can. If you have to keep your mouth shut, put a veil over your face or whatever you gotta do, come and hear the gospel."

"That's the main thing. That was revolutionary, let me tell you, for that era and for the people to whom he spoke."

"**IT IS IMPORTANT** for us as women to hold our heads up, I believe, and not to allow the kind of foolishness men put on us to in fact exist."

Women and men of the institutional church, according to the speaker, must be about the task of bringing human dignity to "the lowliest"; bringing servanthood sometimes to "the highest"; helping carry other persons' burdens; becoming involved humanly — in mind, body and spirit — in helping to diminish pain within homes, churches and synagogues.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS, the speaker said, must "point to divinity. Everybody is made in the image of God, and even though we're different, somehow Jews, Protestants, Roman Catholics, blacks, whites, browns, reds must claim that transcendent something in themselves, working at the balance, and that does take dialogue."



(Mobile Press Register photos by Dave Hamby)

Joan Campbell