

Feminist gains: The Century and women

by [Mark Toulouse](#) in the [December 20, 2000](#) issue

In the late 1980s, Barbara Brown Zikmund lamented the failure of churches prior to the 1960s to understand and help working women, women who had first moved into the workplace during World War II. The indices of the *Century* during the '40s and '50s demonstrate how little attention mainline religion gave to women's issues during those years. A lone mention of "women in ministry" appeared in 1947, and the topic did not resurface for over a decade. A reference to "women in churches" appeared in 1941 and another in 1948, with multiple references coming in 1949. The entry resurfaced again in 1952-1955, and finally became more or less regular after 1957. Many of these later entries were written by Margaret Frakes, an editor associated with the *Century* from 1944 to 1969 who modeled a woman's career in religious journalism when few women were found in the profession.

Throughout this period, mainline Christian editors remained reluctant to support women's working outside the home. The *Century* feared two developments: 1) women might take jobs needed by ethnic minorities (a legitimate concern because American industry in the 1950s might have preferred women to minority employees); and 2) women working outside the home would likely have an adverse effect upon the family life of America. New devices had reduced the time required for housework, but at the same time had increased family expenses. "So the wife is compelled to labor outside the home in order to pay for labor-saving devices for use in it" (April 3, 1957).

Editors asked why United Church Women had said nothing about this "industrialization of women." Cynthia Wedel, national chair of United Church Women, responded with a 1957 essay that defended the right of a woman to work outside the home, while noting that "no normal woman will neglect her children unless forced to do so by economic circumstances." The clergy and the church, she warned, were still trying "to force women into a mold." That behavior had to stop, not only because it was inappropriate, but because "more and more women just will not be forced" (July 10, 1957). By the mid-to-late 1960s, 17 states still had no laws on the books to protect women from wage exploitation. The *Century* affirmed the

right to equal pay for equal work, especially since women working for lower wages might actually either displace men altogether or force them to work for lower wages (May 1, 1963).

Though the *Century* overlooked the formation of the National Organization for Women in 1964, its awareness of the plight of women increased after 1963 largely due to the publication of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* and the response of women within the church to it. Friedan explained the existence of a mystique in post-World War II life that expected women to find their complete fulfillment in their female roles of wives and mothers.

The *Century* called upon readers to help them publish the names of women theologians, lecturers and educators who could help to break that mystique by lecturing on college campuses and elsewhere. Under the title "There Are Women Theologians," editors listed 61 women, the majority of whom were college or seminary teachers, or women active in denominational life. Only four worked in the parish ministry—two as associate ministers, one as a part-time minister in a downtown congregation, and one as a director of Christian education. While supporting the professional work of all these women, the editors reflected the cultural bias against them by identifying 10 percent of the list first as wives and then by their professions. Another was identified as a "widowed mother of four and thus—of course—skilled in interpersonal relations" (August 28, 1963).

Early in 1964, the *Century* published an excerpt from Helmut Thielicke's latest book that defined the "vocation of the woman to be lover, companion and mother." Even when a woman remained unmarried, she fulfilled "her calling in accord with the essential image of herself only when these fundamental characteristics, which are designed for wifehood and motherhood, undergo a sublimating transformation but still remain discernible" (January 15, 1964). But other essays supported Friedan's perspective. Hannah Bonsey Suthers, identified as the "wife of an Episcopal minister," argued that Christian women faced a more devastating problem: they had to escape a "Christian mystique," which "sells woman short . . . by producing theology that claims that women are 'mysteriously different'" and "by limiting women's church work to housekeeping-teaching-calling functions and omitting capable women in the policy-making, executive or liturgical areas." "All of which," Suthers concluded, "adds up to a failure to see women as persons" (July 21, 1965).

The *Century* did not say much editorially about women's rights issues until 1970, when "women's rights" finally appeared as a separate index entry and the Senate considered the Equal Rights Amendment for the first time. Editors offered clear and unwavering support for the ERA and for women's rights from that point on (for example, October 25, 1972).

Women also made gains in church life during these years, especially in the number of women serving in ordained ministry and defining the church's theology. The *Century* had written approvingly of the actions taken in 1956 by both the Methodist and Presbyterian churches to extend ordination to women (January 23, 1957). Editorial sympathies in this regard remained consistent in the one or two brief mentions of women in ministry throughout the 1960s. In March 1970, a young public health nurse named Jeanne Richie urged *Century* readers to help end the "sex-caste system" defining "women's work" in the church. Her analysis marked the beginning of more serious attention to issues surrounding women as clergy (January 21, 1970).

Feminist theology began in earnest with the publication of Mary Daly's book *The Church and the Second Sex* (Harper & Row, 1968), but the issues raised by feminist theology did not begin to show up in most journals until a few years later. The earliest essay critiquing patriarchal theology appeared in the *Century* in late 1970. "The church must repudiate once and for all the unchristian formula of male superiority-female inferiority," wrote Sheila D. Collins. She called upon the church to reclaim some of the stronger women in the biblical tradition, the Deborahs and the Miriams, "for we have had too many Ruths and Marthas" (December 30, 1970).

The *Century's* first mention of "feminist theology" appeared in 1971. The short news piece emphasized feminist criticism of "male-dominated theology." Quoting Mary Daly, the editors registered the feminist complaints that God is referred to by male pronouns, that Catholic theology has emphasized both a male incarnation and the role of Mary as a "sexless" mother, and that the Genesis story is utilized in the church to proclaim Eve responsible for sin in the world (May 26, 1971). The item also noted that the new feminist theology already had "at least one male critic," James Hitchcock, a theology professor at St. Louis University.

Interested in ameliorating the polarizing tendencies present in American society during the 1960s, the *Century* invited essays from both Hitchcock and Daly. These essays were published in the fall of 1971, and together they represent the first discussion of feminist theology truly accessible to mainline Protestants. Hitchcock

defended his criticisms of “ecclesiastical women’s lib” by stating that they equally applied to movements led by men (other forms of liberation theology). Both practiced a form of “secularization theology” and served mostly political ends (September 22, 1972).

The shift toward the use of inclusive language in the *Century* began between 1970 and 1972, especially when feminists were doing the writing. By the late 1970s, the argument on behalf of inclusive language had established a definite foothold in mainline Protestantism and in some corners of neo-evangelicalism. The *Century* published articles that examined how male images in language affected women in the church (Casey Miller and Kate Swift, April 14, 1976), how generic terms exist in the English language and need to be better utilized in the church (Rosa Shand Turner, March 16, 1977), and how translations of scripture added prejudicial meanings not contained in the original languages (James F. White, December 13, 1978). Over the next two decades, essays in the *Century* urged better use of feminine images for God to counterbalance the habitual use of male pronouns and symbols for God, and the liturgical use of the trinitarian formula (e.g., Pamela Payne Allen, April 23, 1986; Ruth C. Duck, May 19-26, 1993; Amy Plantinga Pauw, November 17-24, 1993).

Feminist developments in church life also led to a new emphasis on exposing and dealing with issues of clergy sexual abuse. Prior to the mid-1980s, articles that dealt with the topic of clergy sexuality focused on adultery involving the pastor and did not examine what happened to the women who were involved. Marie Fortune, long-time executive director of the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence in Seattle, was the first to use the term “sexual abuse” to apply to clergy sexual involvement with parishioners.

In an essay examining the literature about the subject in 1988, Ann-Janine Morey reported that church magazines tended to blame the woman involved rather than the pastor (October 5, 1988). Other substantive essays also appeared in the *Century* (Pamela Cooper-White, February 20, 1991; Marie Fortune, August 26-September 2, 1992). By the end of 1993, the exposure given to numerous cases of pastoral sexual abuse throughout that year led the editors to name clergy sexual abuse as its top story of the year, up from number four the year before.

The *Century* has not necessarily taken the lead in feminist issues, but it has opened its pages to the contributions of those who have. A rereading of the *Century* brings to mind the remarkable changes of the past few decades, as women have moved

from the margins to the center of theological endeavors and the life of the church. Their work has forced a renewed understanding of the value of human experience in theology. The women who entered the ministry during these years have had to challenge prevailing assumptions and model new alternatives more congenial to the gospel. These are qualities that usually make for a mighty good preacher.