

A Church of Her Own: What Happens When a Woman Takes the Pulpit

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In Review



A Church of Her Own: What Happens When a Woman Takes the Pulpit

Sarah Sentilles
Harcourt

Sarah Sentilles opens *A Church of Her Own* by proclaiming that 11 o'clock on Sunday morning is "the most sexist hour" in America. Drawing on interviews with an undisclosed number of ordained women, Sentilles exposes the disregard and exclusion that women have suffered at the hands of other Christians and the disappointment and pain that results.

A number of studies document the structural obstacles that women clergy confront. Newly ordained women wait longer than their male counterparts for their first assignment, with African-American women waiting longer than white women. Female clergy are paid less than male clergy and are disproportionately assigned to serve as associate pastors or to lead small, struggling congregations. Even after some 40 years of women's ordination, the stained-glass ceiling remains.

These are mostly painful stories: the gifts of Sentilles's informants were disregarded or refused by church leaders, senior clergy or congregations who alternately challenged their authority and burdened them with inflated and unrealistic expectations. With insight and empathy Sentilles portrays the special pressures borne by young single women, African-American women, lesbian women and transgendered clergy. She also presents the testimony of a few Catholic women who are advocates of women's ordination or are irregularly ordained.

I have no doubt that sexism is pervasive in the church, and for readers like me these stories provide grim confirmation of its damage. Readers who are not already convinced of Sentilles's larger claims, though, are unlikely to find her assertions compelling. She does not explain how she selected or shaped the narratives, and she provides little connective tissue to link the individual stories with her larger claims. There's an off-putting lack of proportion in her exposition; Sentilles presents the "fashion issue" of the collar and conflicts over toenail polish with the same intensity with which she recounts the excruciating history of a lesbian who struggled for 15 years in her denomination's ordination process. She risks her credibility with overstated claims such as this one: "The mainline drain can be traced directly to the failure of churches to tap the deep resources of women called to ministry who could revitalize the church"—an assertion that at once oversimplifies the causes of mainline decline and exaggerates the power of women to overcome it.

Sentilles's own personal narrative frames this study. A 1995 graduate of Yale University, she spent two years in an inner-city classroom in Compton, California, as

a participant in Teach for America, an experience that is the subject of her first book, *Taught by America* (Beacon). While working there she discovered All Saints, an Episcopal congregation whose warmth and spirit inspired her to enter candidacy for ordination and to enroll at Harvard Divinity School, where she received her M.Div. in 2001. Sentilles ended up withdrawing her candidacy, but she doesn't explain why. She summarizes the situation tersely: "To be ordained, I had to survive the ordination process. This proved impossible." Disillusioned with the institutional church, Sentilles now eschews Christian worship, practicing yoga on Sunday mornings instead, and she is unsure whether to call herself Christian.

Sentilles's theological perspective is a blend of popular Gnosticism and liberal individualism. She longed for a church that felt "like home," with a "theological language that worked for me." In classic American Protestant fashion, when she didn't find this in an existing church, she started her own, WomenChurch, at Harvard Divinity School, "a feminist space where women gathered and used their imaginations to enact rituals that provided healing and fought injustice, a democratic space shaped by whoever attended." She describes other such efforts as well, including the Church of Craft, an organization celebrating women's creativity through knitting and other crafts. Sentilles admiringly quotes one of the group's cofounders: "There is no reason you cannot just proclaim it a religion and make that happen. . . . What makes something real or true is if you believe in it."

Such impoverished ecclesiology and theology offer little in the way of resources for renewal of the church; rather, they are a formidable obstacle to that renewal. The desire for a church where one is comfortable is common to many American Christians, and ironically it is a longing that often sustains the very conformity and conservatism that Sentilles rightly deplores.

As Paul Sullins has observed, Protestant denominational polities have consistently led rather than followed the local congregation when it comes to greater inclusion of women, and structural changes (such as allowing women's ordination) have been more readily accomplished than cultural change at the congregational level. Although Sentilles does find some evidence that bishops and other leaders have failed to support women clergy, her informants have suffered most immediately from the resistance and sexism of their congregations. Sullins has provocatively suggested that one factor retarding the greater acceptance of women is a congregational culture shaped by familial norms, in which the loss or disaffection of any member is to be avoided at all costs. In such a system, groups are reluctant to

take any position that might generate conflict, and this ethos strongly favors the maintenance of the status quo. Sentilles's ideal communities have the same potential to suppress difference and enforce conformity, albeit to a more liberal ethos. Either way, we risk forgetting that what we most need is not "a church of our own" but Christ's own church, where we encounter and are transformed by his life-giving love.

We stand in urgent need of a book that deeply explores sexism and its pernicious effects on the body of Christ. *A Church of Her Own* is not that book, but the disappointment, pain, hope and yearning expressed in these women's stories may move others to engage in such a life-giving project.