

**SUPPLEMENT  
to The Blue Book Report**

**COMMITTEE ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN  
Executive Council  
The Episcopal Church USA**

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## **Fundamentalism challenges ECUSA**

Fundamentalism “represents a kind of revolt, or rebellion, against the secular hegemony of the modern world...a widespread dislike and disenchantment with modernity,” theologian Karen Armstrong explained during a presentation at New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, shortly after September 11, 2001 brought the concept of “fundamentalism” into America’s vernacular. [*Trinity News*, Spring 2002].

Fundamentalist movements in all faiths are “rooted in a profound fear” and their advocates must be taken seriously, Armstrong believes. American fundamentalists fear an “elite cabal, out to destroy the Christian family and Christian values, confiscate everyone’s guns and revoke our liberties...” This group is determined to “take back America” and reshape it as it used to be.

At the heart of the problem regarding traditional morality is authority: “Who decides how things are supposed to be? Who decides what is orthodox?” Dr. Elizabeth Proctor-Smith asks. In a patriarchal culture “men are allowed to represent everybody...Women are not.” [Address to Episcopal Women’s Caucus, Fort Worth, TX 1994]

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## **Targeting women**

Women have become the centerpiece for the right wing, which uses race and gender to oppose civil rights, affirmative action, reproductive and equal rights, and thus reduce the “place” of women and minorities in American culture. Anti-abortion politics mask an agenda of religious oppression by defending the rights of the fetus. Fundamentalist organizations oppose the 1994 Violence Against Women Act, and most vociferously, the 1972 Title IX which prohibits sex discrimination in any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. Over 80 percent of American schools are still not in compliance with Title IX, which requires institutions to offer male and female students equal opportunities to –among many other things-- allocate scholarship funds equitably and treat male and female students fairly in all aspects of athletics. Probably no issue is more important than educational opportunities for women, therefore no legislation more important than Title IX. Over the past 30 years, Title IX has

begun to change how boys see girls and thus how men see women—in very positive ways.

Yet Christian fundamentalist groups exhort women to forego leadership roles and submit to men as leaders in family, church and society. They aim to limit women’s freedom, power, authority and voice while imposing their own cultural and religious values. They press for a renewal of biblical “orthodoxy” (as they define it), and a more central role for faith in society. They capitalize on people’s ignorance of the Bible and the life of Jesus

to achieve their aims.

## The rise of fundamentalism in mainline denominations

“Conflicts over women’s leadership, homosexuality, the status of the Bible, interfaith relations, and theological diversity severely destabilized all the mainline churches in the 1990’s” and continue “to slowly and subtly reshape mainline positions on abortion and sexual abstinence,” claims Lewis C. Daly, Senior Program Associate of the Institute for Democracy Studies (IDS). The fundamentalist religious right, he believes, “would like nothing more than to be able to rely on Episcopalianism as a bulwark for their cultural warfare.”

According to IDS, the struggle began with the take-over of the Southern Baptist Convention, which soon reversed its position on the ordination of women and required women to be submissive to their husbands. Currently the Presbyterian Church (USA), the United Methodist Church and the Episcopal Church are all “confronted with vigorous efforts to reshape their historic and vital role...in preserving and extending democratic values and institutes.”

Beginning in the mid-1960’s in the other two denominations and the mid-80s in the Episcopal Church, right-wing organizations resolved to overturn gains won by women’s organizations in the Church over the past century. Extremely well financed, they strive to “dismember agencies of the church committed to social justice in the United States and in the world...to take over the leadership in church governance and to have a long term focus on the fiduciary assets of the church,” according to IDS. Legal challenges to authority in the Episcopal dioceses of the Central Gulf Coast, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, East Carolina and Washington, DC are expensive examples of such revisionism.

*The Christian Women’s Declaration*, promulgated by The Ecumenical Coalition on Women and Society, seeks to “reverse detrimental cultural trends”--- many instituted by Episcopal women, beginning with Elizabeth Cady Stanton 150 years

ago. To deny women’s rights for the sake of cultural preservation is a denial not only of women’s humanity but also of the strength of the American culture. Yet that is precisely the stated aim of an alliance of conservative groups, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), with a budget in excess of \$3 million, sponsors the Ecumenical Coalition on Women and Society. IRD is a “non-profit organization determined to reform the Church’s social and political witness and to build and strengthen democracy and religious liberty, at home and abroad. Its committees also work to achieve renewal and

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reform in the Episcopal, Presbyterian (USA) and United Methodist churches.” [*Faith & Freedom*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Winter 1997-1998]

IRD targets “the general conventions of the major mainline churches on multiple legislative fronts in the social policy arena,” according to Daly. In addition to being president of IRD, Episcopalian Diane Knippers is director of IRD/Episcopal Action, which works for the Church’s “revival” and reaches into Episcopal households by distributing *Episcopal Action Briefing*. IRD’s political know-how and deep financial reservoir were obvious at the 1997 and 2000 General Conventions as well as the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops in 1998. Knippers is also a leading force in the American Anglican Congress (AAC).

### Women and religion

Religion can be a liberating force in women’s lives or it can be a weapon for their oppression, as recently seen in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, India and even some dioceses within the Episcopal Church. Religion has been the single most important shaper and enforcer of women’s image and role in many cultures. It has provided the rationale and moral energy for female subjection, sexual apartheid and violence by men against women.

Different faiths have sanctioned --or remained silent about-- rape, female genital mutilation, polygamy, economic and educational inequality, sex trafficking. They have prevented women from having authority through tradition and custom, as well as by secular laws with fearsome penalties like stoning or burning. Yet in many parts of the world, women are transforming their religious traditions, denouncing patriarchal traditions, raising up significant holy stories that present a different position, introducing more inclusive metaphors and language for God and new interpretations or translations of Scripture that liberate women from second class citizenship and oppression.

**Does equality before God translate into equality of access to church leadership roles?**

In the Episcopal Church, full baptismal parity for women is a key stress point revolving around issues of women’s ordination, consecration, holding office. There are still some dioceses—especially in the South--with no women serving in diocesan leadership positions such as Standing Committee, Commission on Ministry, Finance Committee and so forth. There are only a few dioceses in which only a few women have been called as rectors of large churches in affluent neighborhoods. It seems to be easier for a black male or a woman of any color to become a suffragan bishop than a “cardinal rector.” These facts surfaced in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Survey recently administered by the Executive Council’s Committee on the Status of Women.

**What a turn-about**

Mainline traditions in North America have sought for well over a century to transform society and in the process, they have made significant contributions to the life of this nation. In fact,

“religion’s finest hours have been the times when intense belief led to social transformation. Yet some of its darkest days have entailed the translation of intense belief into the ruthless imposition of orthodoxy.... Thanks in good part to the Mainline tradition and despite many

outbreaks of prejudice and nativism and self-congratulations, the history of the United States is largely a history of religion’s role as a prod to social justice, inclusion and national self-criticism.”

-- E.J. Dionne, *Finding a New Voice: The Public Role of Mainline Protestantism*, Aspen Institute, 2001.

“The voice of Mainline Protestantism, that group of American denominations that came to occupy the cultural center of America during its first two hundred years,” is definitely changing.

Researchers for this major project, encompassing the six largest mainline Protestant denominations, discovered a “distinctive commitment to the greater good that is frankly inspiring—and more needed than ever.”

[James P. Wind, President, The Alban Institute, *Finding a New Voice*. The Aspen Institute, 2001]

It has been the ecumenical women’s movement over the past 15-20 years that has provided much of the leadership for church-based, social justice advocacy. But under acute attack, it has been virtually dismantled in some denominations. Because of the significant role churches play in shaping societies and because of the integral role women of faith have played in social justice movements globally, this attack on the faith-based women’s movement is a threat to every denomination as well as to movements for justice, peace and liberation everywhere. The fundamentalist cause prefers charity to change; mercy over justice. Women, lesbians and gays are the focus of attack in every denomination.

In the face of fundamentalism’s unprecedented political power, it is

imperative that the Episcopal Church bring a stronger, more united voice to the nation’s public debates on justice and morality. It must strive not only for equal

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opportunity and economic justice for all, but for the freedom and rights of all people to fully participate in the life of the Episcopal Church at all levels. To begin with, women who are priests and bishops must be included in all ecumenical relationships, especially in conversations with the orthodox churches and the Vatican.

## **Is God Doing a New Thing?**

“For the first time in its history, the Episcopal Church in the United States is on the verge of schism between those who see the faith as absolutely once delivered and those who see God doing a new thing...” according to Dr. Verna Dozier, preaching at the 1992 consecration of the Rt. Rev. Jane Holmes Dixon, third female bishop in the Anglican Communion.

Today American women stand at an unusual crossroad. They face the promise of unprecedented advances, “of God doing a new thing”---even as they confront deeply entrenched barriers to equality and the rise of a fundamentalism that would limit or repeal their hard-gained rights. Which road the Episcopal Church and the nation will take depends on our “gendered imagination.”

Gendered imagination shapes the boundaries of the politically plausible. Every society molds its members’ psychological and social development according to that society’s definition of the character and conduct believed appropriate for each sex. Culturally conditioned gender instructions---from what clothing to wear, what career to pursue, even how to walk and sit---constitute the baggage of every human being. Together with racial-ethnic and class factors, gender conditioning directly influences the development of biblical exegesis, systematic theology, scriptural and liturgical language, church canons, educational materials, and music.

The Committee on the Status of Women has a dream of a better future for our daughters and sons, a dream that overcomes the misogynist dictates about gender advanced by the forces of extremism in the US and around the world.

Baptismal parity in the Body of Christ means equity, not sameness. We affirm that, in God’s love, females and males are equal -- and equally called to full personhood, to full development of their gifts. Women and men are equally valued by a loving Creator. They equally bear the image of that Creator. Every person is equally called to develop his or her gifts and free to follow where God may be leading. And each is called according to her gifts rather than her gender.

The Episcopal Church must actively help its members understand the theology that informs and inspires the vision of this denominational family as a community of equals. Many of the faithful do not feel competent to grapple with conflicting messages about women found in Scripture and espoused in the Church’s history, tradition and practice. Clergy and laity alike need the Church to back up their convictions with equal access, unabashedly inclusive language and worship, and expressions of our delight that the Holy Spirit has resolved to draw the Body of Christ deeper into God’s truth.

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