



Called

# “To Set the Captives Free”

## A Woman's Experiences Facing Sexism in the Church

by *Desiree Guyton*

In college, I remember very clearly sitting in my Bible class and listening to my peers answer basic Bible questions, quoting Spurgeon, Calvin, and Luther, all of with whom I had no familiarity. They discussed the various mission trips and areas around the world where they had served the poor. I wasn't jealous. I was troubled because the African American church experience did not have the Christian education development that offered African American Christian youth the same exposure. God used this experience to begin to shape my call to ministry. I changed my major from computer science to Christian education.

During the summers, I worked and lived with inner-city Christian teens to develop their spiritual and academic lives for Christian college. God used this program to open my eyes to urban culture and the different life circumstances of inner city teens. In the African American culture there is a term called “slave mentality,” meaning that African Americans are free from the slavery that our ancestors endured, but mentally and physically are still thinking and living like slaves. I became burdened for teens and young adults to experience the freeing love, grace, and guidance of God

After college, I served as a part-time youth director at a local church for several years. It was a progressive African American community in an urban setting. It was a great experience and I learned a great deal about an urban youth ministry, church structure, and social justice. However, I felt the call to full-time ministry. I did not have any mentors or pastors within my culture to give me guidance and found it difficult to find a full-time position within the African American context. Urban churches did not want female youth ministers. So I worked in the computer field to support myself and volunteered as a youth director for about ten years.

**A**s I reflect on my call to ministry, my heart and mind take me back to the book of Exodus, when God calls Moses to deliver his people out of Egyptian slavery. I identify with the Exodus story because of the deep burden and calling that God has placed in my life to guide his people out of slavery and the trappings of this world's philosophy into his guiding way of life that is grounded in God's son, Jesus Christ, and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

My call to ministry began with the universal call to all believers to accept that I was a sinner in need of a savior and that Savior. At the age of fourteen, I attend a youth event where I heard the gospel message of Jesus Christ's love and salvation which I accepted in my life. My friends and I began meeting in the school cafeteria for Bible study and holding sleepovers to talk about God. During this time, my life took a painful turn with my parents getting a divorce, a major shoulder injury that was impacting my sports dreams, and my closest brother suffering, then dying, of cancer. I started to slip into depression, and I contemplated suicide. God met me one night as I was walking home and spoke to my spirit that, “I am with you and you are not alone. Trust me and I will guide you.” I felt a joy and peace in the midst of so much pain that words could not describe. My commitment to my faith became so real and strong.

After working long hours for a large software company, making a lot of money, and quickly climbing the corporate ladder, one early morning in Germany God spoke to my spirit. God said, “Enough! It’s time to do what I called you to do.” It was a struggle. I was at the peak of my career. The temptation was strong to continue on the career path. I was flourishing financially and traveling the world. However, my peace and joy were shaken. My heart was burdened for the church I was attending, which was large and had the resources for effective ministry yet lacked clear vision and leadership for its youth department. I wrote a fifty-page proposal on restructuring the church’s children’s and youth ministry. My pastor ignored the proposal for two years. They hired another youth pastor to oversee the youth ministry.

During the same time, I wrote my resignation from the computer company and enrolled in seminary. My pastor’s wife contacted me after cleaning her husband’s home office and found my proposal for the youth ministry. She set up a meeting with her husband and me. My pastor offered me the full-time position as youth director—not youth minister or pastor, but director. All the males who held the position were called youth minister or pastor. Even so, I was overjoyed. And, after being hired, I enrolled in a local seminary.

Because of God’s blessings and successful redesign of youth discipleship and programming, I started overseeing all Christian education for this 7,000 membership church. It was amazing! God used my corporate, college, and seminary experiences for his kingdom development. It was exciting to watch the Lord move. The teen ministry went from twenty-five participants in Bible study to over 300. The children’s ministry grew to over 500. I loved taking youth on mission trips, watching them share their faith with their peers, and experiencing the radical changes in their lives.

But, after several years of working at the church, the sexism was becoming very evident to me. My first serious incident happened when I was preparing for a youth service in the main sanctuary. I was walking on the pulpit and a deacon called to me and stated, “You should not be on the pulpit.” I laughed it off, but he made the statement again. I laughed again, thinking he was just old-fashioned. Later that week, I was joking with the pastor’s wife, who was an executive at a major corporation before taking a position at the church as chief administrator. She stated that it was true, “Women are not allowed on the pulpit.” She began to laugh with me.

About a year later, the pastor’s wife and I were redesigning a discipleship program at the church, based on our research and ideas I had implemented with the youth. The third week after the program began, I received a call that one of the teachers was stuck in the airport and, since I wrote his class material, I was needed to cover the class. I rushed to the church and entered the classroom of about thirty people. After opening in prayer, I was signaled to enter the hallway by one of the associate ministers. He proceeded to inform me that I couldn’t teach the class because I was a woman. I was stunned and did not believe him, so I went back into the classroom and thought no more of it. I had been teaching Bible study since I was a teenager and had never faced this type of comment.

At our next staff meeting, the pastor stated he had heard that the minister confronted me about teaching the class. I was certain he was going to make a joke about it or discuss this old fashioned belief, but to my amazement, the pastor stated it was true. Women could not teach men. I had worked for this church for three years and had never seen the fact that women were not teaching men. The adult classes where women were teaching had only women or were co-taught with men. I was overseeing Christian education and did not know that was built into the structure. I could not believe what I was hearing. I

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taught the ministers to teach the curriculum that was designed by all women, but I could not teach the curriculum in the discipleship program because men were in the classroom. The pastor continued by saying it was all right in this case because he gave permission for me to teach the class since the male minister could not make it. *He gave me permission.*

After the meeting, the pastor must have seen my expression. In trying to make me feel better, he stuck the knife further into my heart. He said, “You are awesome. You are the most talented and gifted person on this ministerial team. You are the only woman on this team. If you were not a woman, you would have been my assistant pastor.” Reality hit me. I had not recognized that I was the only woman in the ministerial position. The other women on staff held administrative titles.

Before this church experience, I worked for the fourth largest software company in the world, which was 95% male. I climbed the corporate structure with no problems. I never faced the sexism there that I was facing in my church. Because I was a woman, I was not allowed to be licensed in the church or to utilize my speaking gifts outside of youth and women’s ministry. I became angry and a fighter. I sinned in how I left the church. I was ruled by my anger.

I moved onto ministry at another church, and, once again, the Lord blessed by growing the teen ministry from ten participants to over 100 in the first couple of years. Toward the end of my last year in seminary and the transition to this new church, God pressed on my spirit that he did not call me to youth ministry alone but to all God’s people, “to set the captives free.” God made it clear that I needed to utilize my speaking gifts of preaching and teaching; to stop being afraid. I had been regularly doing both without the official title or ordination. After several years, to my surprise, my pastor decided to license me, as a minister, which allowed me to preach, teach, and service communion. This was huge! My pastor took a lot of pressure from congregational members and other pastors for licensing me as a minister. But he refused to take the sexist approach that

Those who face marginalization in the church often describe their journeys as a kind of grieving process. Here, author Desiree Guyton shares how she journeyed through the Kubler-Ross stages of grief:

### **Denial (this isn't *happening* to me!)**

I felt the injustice, but I couldn't deal with the sexism. I couldn't face the biases in my culture, church, family, and even myself.

### **Anger (why is this happening to *me*?)**

I have to admit that at times I got angry with God. Why did he create me as a woman?

### **Bargaining (I promise I'll be a better person *if*...)**

I had to face the fact that I always work so hard to be better than my white male counterparts. My father taught me to fight racism by being better: "Work harder and smarter because, in the end, the white race cares more about the color of green (the dollar) than the color of your skin." I was bargaining with God. I will work harder than my male counterparts, and then I will be equal.

### **Depression (I don't *care* anymore!)**

I hate to admit that I was starting to feel like I just did not care. I didn't care about ministry and the direction of the church. When we are angry at God about an injustice, our sinful response is to feel unappreciated and unimportant. The person feeling the injustice can begin to start thinking in a distorted and selfish manner.

### **Acceptance (I'm *ready* for whatever comes.)**

I learned to accept the journey but not the injustice. Racism and sexism may always be a part of our experiences, but, with God's help, we learn how to confront them, to educate others, and to change policies. God gives us the strength to fight this fight, in his ways, with his grace, love, peace, and hope.

many churches in our association were doing by calling women evangelists, not ministers, and by allowing us to speak only on the floor instead of the pulpit. I was the church's first woman minister. Ordination at the time did not cross my mind because, as I look back, I had no real women models to guide me.

During the licensing process, conflict arose in my family. I have four brothers who are pastors and a sister who is ordained. For years, I heard from my brothers and other church members to disregard my sister's ordination since she was a woman and, in their opinion, her doctrine was inappropriate. Because my sister was very loud and angry, I distanced myself from the women's ordination issue. I did not want to be like her. I did not want to be an outsider within my family circle. But now I was taking steps to be licensed and becoming the conversation piece. I felt the immediate pain of my decision. One of my brothers whom I talked to every other day stopped returning my calls. He did not show up to the licensing service. But God reminded me to trust in him alone, and to love in the midst of all the hurt. I didn't have to defend myself. God called me, and he is my lawyer.

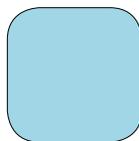
Even though my congregation licensed women as ministers, the association and the church did not ordain women. The church leadership used women's gifts to fullness but, because of our gender, did not treat us as equals.

During the association's last ordination service, one male minister who was licensed with me and another who was licensed a year after me were ordained. These men are great brothers who had limited ministerial experience and no higher Christian education. The other woman minister and I have master degrees from seminary and over fifteen years of ministerial experience each. I am convinced that if I was a man, I would have been treated differently. I would have been encouraged long ago to pursue ordination and seek full-time service. Instead, I was asked to wait, left to find mentors outside of my family, denomination, and cultural context. The pain was deep. A church and association that I had served for over six years was not going to ordain me. Even as I am writing this, tears fill my eyes with the reality that I was left out because *I am a woman*.

How was I to respond? It would have been easy for me to confront conflict and get into the fight. Yet God wanted me to work through my anger. He wanted me to face the women's issue, to feel the pain but to go through the struggle with his grace, love, and hope. As I reflected on my experiences, I found myself on a familiar journey. As an African American, I experienced this struggle before, with racism. The feelings of dehumanization, of being second-class and not equal, were very real. Through my family and church community, I was trained to face racism. I was trained to respond correctly. I was taught how to articulate the hurt and the fight for justice. However, I was not prepared for sexism because I was not prepared to fight it within my own family, church, and culture. It hit me that I was grieving the loss of my safe places.

What I have learned is that I must accept the journey but not the injustice. I learned to accept that racism exists and that it will always be a part of my life. But I learned how to communicate it to the offenders. I learned to sit on committees and to change policies and curriculum to address racism. Now, I have to learn to do the same with the issues of sexism. I have to learn to see the injustice, learn the language, and communicate it to the offenders to help open their eyes, re-write policies, and become change agents.

Through it all, I rest assured that God has a plan for me, and that part of this journey is to fight the injustice I have faced as an African American woman because of my race and gender. Even though I fall to the ground many times, God's strength through his son's resurrection gives me the strength to stay in the fight. I am fighting God's way, in God's strength, for God's future daughters and sons, and for God's glory.



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