

# Facing a Frozen Chaplaincy

*One ordained Southern Baptist woman's dilemma.*

RACHEL COGGINS

**S**NOW COVERED THE GROUND OF THE STILL SLEEPING GERMAN town as I trudged toward the chapel. Stepping swiftly, more from fear than from cold, I arrived safely at my destination: a beautiful, gray stone church built nearly 200 years ago. It was the United States Army's Community Chapel in Aschaffenburg, Germany.

The giant wooden door creaked as I pushed it open, then locked it behind me. Walking through the sanctuary on the way to my office, I stopped to sing a prayer. The acoustics in the stone cathedral-styled church were magnificent, and the sound of the sung praise reverberated from the high ceiling and stone walls. As light began to peep through the stained-glass windows, I felt the presence of God. I felt the pain of mothers weeping for their sons fallen in battle, and I felt the peace that had sustained me through this very trying period.

The following Sunday, military guards carrying M-16 rifles stood on each side of the entrance to the chapel. They checked people as they arrived for worship services that morning. Saddam Hussein had promised to rain terror on Americans in retaliation for air strikes. The threats were effective: We were terrorized.

## Called to duty

Two months earlier the United States Army had called me to active duty. I was one of a group of thirty-three army reserve chaplains assigned to support army posts in Germany. Most of the soldiers on these posts, including their chaplains, were on the front lines of Operation Desert Storm (1990–91). Left behind on the installations were the families of those soldiers, who, with few exceptions, were women and children.

Of the thirty-three chaplains, I was the only female, and the only one with a spouse also deployed. My husband, a U.S. Air Force chaplain, was also in the war area. When I said to the women at Aschaffenburg, "I understand," they listened, for they knew I did. I understood the intense loneliness and the gripping fear of being left behind in a foreign country while your spouse goes forward to a battlefield from which he may never return. In ways that my male counterparts could not do, I held the hands of the women who were there and offered God's care. I was not better than the men but I was unique, and this uniqueness was a gift from God.

Chapel attendance tripled during those difficult months, and from the pulpit God enabled me to bring inspired messages of comfort, courage, and challenge. This powerful experience deeply affirmed my call-

ing from God, and my ministry as an army reserve chaplain.

## Opportunity denied

Twelve years after this cold February morning in Germany there came a chilling statement from the trustees of the Southern Baptist Chaplain's Commission. That endorsing agent had voted to freeze the opportunity for Southern Baptist women to serve as military chaplains. "We will refrain from endorsing ordained women to the office of chaplain,"<sup>1</sup> the statement read. Since ordination is mandatory for military chaplaincy,<sup>2</sup> this will prohibit women from entering military chaplaincy through the Southern Baptist Convention. The trustees say they will work with the military and with other organizations that require ordination—suggesting that the organizations will change *their* standards to accommodate the new SBC policy. Whether this will actually work remains to be seen, but this writer, for one, is doubtful.

When I began seminary at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (SEBTS) in 1980, we were beginning to feel the undercurrent of a movement that would drastically change the SBC. The movement was fueled with inflammatory statements implying that people who did not believe or follow the Bible were teaching in and leading our seminaries and convention. The typical Southern Baptist church member was outraged at the thought of heresy afoot. I remember my relatives speaking passionately about this, saying, "We have to get back to the Bible!" Unfortunately, the tragedy that would follow, with the manipulation of these words, could not be seen, and is still not seen from the vantage point of many church members.

## Serving with pride

When the doors opened for me to join the army reserves, I asked the Home Mission Board (HMB; today called the North American Mission Board) to endorse me. They did. For years, there remained within the chaplaincy department a strongly supportive team. Whatever was happening at the convention level, the chaplaincy division remained somehow set apart and supportive.

In 1996 my husband, Mike, and I were even chosen to represent military chaplaincy in an HMB video study entitled *Going Where Others Cannot Go*. At that time my husband was chaplain for the United States Air Force Thunderbirds, based at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas. An HMB camera crew came out to film us. They took some great shots



**For God and country:** Chaplain (Maj.) Rachel Coggins, USAR, with her U.S. Air Force chaplain husband, Mike, and their son, Nathan.

of the planes in flight, then added Mike's passionate remarks about praying for and being with the team.

Then came my story. The theme was centered on a full-time mom who turns Weekend Warrior. I dressed in my skirted green uniform and went off to the hospital where my army reserve unit worked. They filmed me holding a baby and offering prayer and support to the parents. "One day I want to be a chaplain too" was a typical response found in the more than 2,000 letters we received from young people all across America who saw and were inspired by the video. Many of these were young girls who wrote to me and said they wanted to be a chaplain.

That story told in 1996 is similar to the life I have today. I have remained a full-time mom and give support to my husband while working as a reservist two days a month. Yet somehow, even this is too liberal for the new SBC.

### Pertinent questions

Must I now say to Southern Baptist girls, "Sorry; you cannot be a chaplain like me"? The Army Chief of Chaplains, Chaplain (Maj. Gen.) Gaylord T. Gunhus, says that mentoring those who would be chaplains is a number-one priority. He has written: "The motivation for mentoring is directly connected to our motivation for ministry—in short: we have a calling to be mentors!"<sup>3</sup> I would be going against the directive of the chief if I did not mentor women who will follow me. But how can they follow me if they are denied the opportunity to be a chaplain?

Here are other questions to ask concerning the trustees' statement. *Is there no longer respect for the decisions of the local church?* The process to my ordination was a very long road. All along the way Southern Baptist churches voted to affirm my calling. A Southern Baptist church in Louisiana voted to send me as an HMB missionary; a Mississippi church voted to send me to seminary; a North Carolina church licensed me; and a church in Massachusetts voted to ordain me. When my endorsement needed to be reaffirmed two years ago, leadership in SBC churches in Georgia and North Carolina affirmed my calling and mission. Were these churches wrong?

*Is this issue about what the Bible says, or is it tradition?* The statement by the trustees says, "The Bible does not clearly set forth a detailed description of the practice of ordination as it is commonly observed today. However, Southern Baptists, following scriptural principles, have developed a rich and meaningful tradition."<sup>4</sup> It says further that the *tradition* is about "ordaining God-called men into the ministry."<sup>5</sup>

*Are they revising history?* The statement negates the many *God-called women* that Southern Baptists have already ordained. I should know, I'm one of them. As Sojourner Truth would say, "Ain't I a woman?"<sup>6</sup>

*Why can't women be content with "caring" roles?* The trustees tried to express support for women by saying, "They are called and gifted to serve in many caring roles."<sup>7</sup> I know about these caring, volunteer jobs. Most of my min-

istry is in caring, volunteer roles. The army reserves pay me for two days a month; is this asking too much? Chaplaincy has been an oasis for women in professional ministry. Military chaplaincy is one of the few jobs where women and men are paid equally.

### The bottom line

George Barna's research tells us that women lead in all aspects of spirituality and are the backbone of the church, making up 60 percent of the membership. While he is optimistic about this, Barna also states that women are paying a high price for carrying the load. He warns: "We may continue to see tens of thousands of women leaving the church unless there is a widespread, aggressive, thoughtful approach to recognizing and appreciating women."<sup>8</sup>

The statement of the NAMB trustees is both a show of nonrecognition (of my ordination, my calling, my ministry) and a lack of appreciation. I thank God for men like Ed Beddingfield of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, who wrote in the North Carolina Baptist *Biblical Recorder*: "We not only accept women who are ordained; we welcome them gladly, celebrating their calling, their commitment and their contribution to the ministry of Christ."<sup>9</sup>

*Pro Deo et Patria: For God and Country.*

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### Notes

1. "NAMB Will No Longer Endorse Ordained Female Chaplains," Baptist Press <<http://www.bpnews.net/query/Date.asp>> (Feb. 8, 2002).
2. For a list of requirements for U.S. Army chaplains, see the U.S. Army chaplain Web site: <<http://www.usarmy-chaplain.com/require.htm>>.
3. Chief of Chaplains newsletter (March 2, 2002): "To All Members of the Unit Ministry Team."
4. Baptist Press (Feb. 8, 2002).
5. Ibid.
6. Sojourner Truth was a slave and an evangelist. Her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech can be viewed at <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.html>>.
7. Baptist Press (Feb. 8, 2002).
8. "Women Are the Backbone of the Christian Congregations in America," <<http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=47&Reference=DStudy>>.
9. "CBF 'Gladly' Welcomes Ordained Women," *Biblical Recorder*, Vol. 168, no. 10 (March 30, 2002); p. 3. The author, Ed Beddingfield, is chair of the CBF Council on Endorsement.

**News Note:** The Associated Press reported on June 12 that two delegates to the SBC gathering in St. Louis made motions to "rescind an order for missionaries to affirm in writing the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message." That statement, amended in 2000, prohibits women from serving as pastors and directs wives to "submit graciously to their husbands." The AP said, "The convention voted to refer the missionary motions to the SBC's missions boards."