

JACKSONVILLE STATE UNIVERSITY

700 PELHAM ROAD N.

JACKSONVILLE, ALABAMA 36265-9982

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

TELEPHONE: (205) 782-5632

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We Rev. Penny Ford and Sherri Jones  
(Interviewee) (Interviewer)

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Penny Ford

(Interviewee's signature)

Date 11-13-95

1219 Pointer Drive SW  
(Address)

Jacksonville, AL 36265

205-435-2208  
(Telephone)

Sherri Jones

(Interviewer's signature)

Date 10/13/95

Rt 3 Box 367  
(Address)

Piedmont, AL 36272

(205) 435-1154  
(Telephone)

## INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: Penny Ruth Ford M/F Female  
Address: 1219 Painter Dr SW; Jacksonville, AL 36265  
Phone number(s): (205) 435-2208  
Approximate age or date of birth: October 16, 1966  
Mother's Name: Peggy Simpson Ford  
Father's Name: James H. Ford  
Places lived and when: Tuscaloosa, Birmingham; Jacksonville Alabama,  
Berkeley, CA  
Education: BA Birmingham-Southern College M.Div Pacific School of Religion  
Religion: United Methodist  
Business, political and social memberships (past and present) \_\_\_\_\_  
Present occupation: United Methodist minister  
Former occupations: student  
Special Skills: fire eating  
Major Accomplishments: \_\_\_\_\_  
National Events in which interviewee has participated: International UM Clergywomen's  
Gathering, National Campus Ministers  
Local Events in which interviewee has participated: \_\_\_\_\_  
National born U.S. citizen?  Yes  No  
Naturalized Citizen: Yes/No Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Country from which he/she emigrated: \_\_\_\_\_  
Documents, photographs, and artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_  
Individuals recommended by the interviewee who might be candidates for an oral history interview: \_\_\_\_\_  
Additional information: \_\_\_\_\_

**Insight into the Problems that Are Facing Clergywomen:  
An Interview with Rev. Penny Ford**

**Sherri Jones**

**HY 436**

**12/4/95**

## Insight into the Problems that Are Facing Clergywomen:

### An Interview with Rev. Penny Ford

Almost forty years after women were given the right of full ordination within the United Methodist Church, <sup>1</sup> Penny Ford became an ordained elder. She is part of the growing number of women who are seeking a career in the clergy. Although these clergywomen must still confront theological arguments against females in their chosen profession, they also encounter certain problems in entering a field that is traditionally considered the male's domain.

Penny was born on October 16, 1966 in Memphis, Tennessee to Jim and Peggy Ford. She grew up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and was very active in Tuscaloosa First United Methodist Church her entire life. She is a graduate from Central High School in Tuscaloosa and is a 1989 graduate of Birmingham-Southern College with a Bachelor of Arts in religious studies. She also holds a Master of Divinity from Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California and is currently working on a master degree in the area of art, worship, and proclamation. Penny became an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church in June 1995 after a nine-year candidacy process. She has served as an associate minister at Christ Church United Methodist in Birmingham, Alabama where she was a part of the first cross-racial, cross-gender appointment in the state and currently serves as the director of The Wesley Foundation, a college ministry of the United Methodist Church. As the director of The Wesley Foundation, she is involved with programming, administration, pastoral duties, and fundraising.<sup>2</sup>

The most commonly mentioned problem, when discussing women in the ministry is the "stained glass ceiling." The stained glass ceiling is a religious play upon the phrase "the glass ceiling" that is used in other male oriented fields. The saying refers to an unspoken code which

prohibits many women from moving past a certain position into upper level and higher salary positions. Many feel that women are allowed into the ministry, but the best and most prestigious positions are reserved for males.

When asked about salary and appointment inequalities in The United Methodist Church, Penny responded by saying that in the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church there is a base salary for male and female ministers with a seminary education. But she also commented that:

there are some studies being done that would suggest that men often move up into higher salary appointments faster or in larger numbers than women do. Again it is not clear, what the reasons for that might be.

Currently, no women serve as senior pastors in major churches in the North Alabama Conference. However, The United Methodist Church is considered to have fewer problems concerning salary and position, because ordained clergy are guaranteed a place to serve.<sup>3</sup> Studies, nevertheless, indicate that women in the United Methodist Church tend to move horizontally and not upward.<sup>4</sup>

Rev. Ford gave a textbook answer regarding equality in the church. Although she cited the study, she seemed to be answering to protect the church. However, Penny eventually does express concern for a lack of opportunities when asked about concerns for women entering the clergy. The way that Rev. Ford addressed this issue could be attributed to the candidacy process that she just completed. During that process, she was interviewed many times by the United Methodist Church hierarchy and became adjusted to giving an answer that would be pleasing to that hierarchy.

What are the reasons for clergywomen's lack of advancement into better job positions?

Many claim that it is <sup>f</sup>because women have not been in the profession long enough to reach those positions. Penny cited this reason for lack of advancement by saying that women are new to the field and have not had enough experience. When listening to this argument, it should be noted that women have had full rights of ordination within the Methodist Church for almost forty years and most male preachers reach high positions within that amount of time. *yet*

Penny stated that another reason for clergy women not advancing might be that ministry is just one of the priorities in a clergywomen's life. Many clergywomen are often raised to believe that a good Christian woman puts her family first and not her career.<sup>5</sup> Women also often take leaves of absence for family matters.

Another reason that women do not advance as quickly is tradition within the church. In organizations with much tradition, such as the church, the power tends to be given to the older, elite males.<sup>6</sup> Also, these traditional structured organizations fear a loss of power if women enter.<sup>7</sup> The church tends to lean toward more traditional views to please the congregations.

Another reason given for lack of promotion is that women ministers also tend to bring a different value system and are often service oriented and not career and advancement oriented.<sup>8</sup> A study by Joy Charlton about denominational structure suggested that it was the objective of female ministers to just move into an organization and not challenge it.<sup>9</sup> They also tend not to expect great rewards from their career.<sup>10</sup> This translates that clergywomen do not push for promotion, but work within in the context of the system.

Another problem that is commonly cited is the difficulties with and reactions of the congregations that a clergywoman serves. Surveys indicate that 60 percent of congregations prefer a man, while only 10 percent prefer a woman.<sup>11</sup> When church attendance is down, as the

recent trend, churches lean toward the more traditional male minister. Lay leaders also often will not hire a female to avoid any tensions and disturbances, because the motive of the church is to avoid controversy and keep attendance strong.<sup>12</sup> The greatest barrier is perhaps the problems with the congregation, because ultimately the laity has the power concerning hiring. Penny said that she has had no problems with the laity, but attributes this to the area in which Christ Church was located. She felt that the number of professional women in the church made the congregation more open to a female minister. Another reason that Penny has not encountered problems might be her newness to the field. The effect of the congregation's attitude might be greater in other denominations where the appointment system is not used.

When there is a lack of clergywomen in high positions in the church, another problem emerges. Since, there are very few achieved high positions, there is a lack of female ministers to be supporters and advocates for beginning clergywomen.<sup>13</sup> Most women entering the ministry have never been served by a clergywoman or have even seen a woman preach. Future clergywomen also lack mentors to advise them about the decision to enter the ministry and early career.<sup>14</sup>

Penny said that her role models were her sister and Kay Mudert, the choir director at her church and when asked about female clergy role models she responded:

As a child, I had never seen a woman minister before. It wasn't until I was in college. My first year of college I got a job as an assistant youth director at Vestavia Hills United Methodist Church in Birmingham and one of the ministers on staff was Rev. Barbara Harper. For the first time in my life, I heard a woman preach.

Penny also recognizes this lack of role models:

I see myself as a person that is a minister that just happens to be a woman and yet

there are a lot of women that I come in contact with that have never seen a woman minister before or a lot of women who are going into seminary, but have never had the experience of being pastored by a woman.

The need for clergywomen role models can be seen strongly in Rev. Ford's story. Penny felt a calling to work for the church, but did not even feel that ordained ministry was an option for her. Penny thought that she would work in church programming and worship. It was not until she reached college that she actually began even considering the ordained ministry. She began considering ordination around the time that she was worked with Barbara Harper, the first woman that Penny heard preach. This illustrates what a strong influence that older clergywomen can be.

With the previous information, it can be concluded that if there are few upper level clergywomen then often male ministers are often the great influence on females considering the clergy as a career. This lack of female role models and mentors means that women have no female guides and have had to create their own style or adapt it from male ministers. When asked about the influence of male role models, Penny responded by saying that "male ministers were a strong influence on my life." This influence of male role models is very evident in Penny's career. Penny attended Tuscaloosa First United Methodist Church during a creative and artistic time at the church. The senior pastor, Rev. Joe Elmore, was a poet and the associate pastor, Danny Roundtree, was a professional artist. The men were very artistic in worship and their use of art in worship influenced Penny in her choice of seminary and her choice of master degree studies.

Often, family pressure is cited as a major problem for women in the ministry. Although one parent is usually very active in church and raised the daughter in the church, this does not



translate into support. Lack of family backing often causes females to enter the seminary or pursue ordination at a later date than males. Women often must turn to friends for support regarding career choice.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the majority of women entering the ministry, Penny claims to have had the support of her immediate family during her process of becoming a minister. An unusual comment from her mother does, however, show some contradiction to her claim:

My family was very supportive. They thought it was a little weird (my major). My mom, when I told her that I was going to major in religious studies in undergraduate school, also wanted me to get a degree in education so that I could fall back on a teaching career. I think my mom had a glimpse of how difficult it might be for a woman in the ministry, and I think she kind of wanted to protect me.

When asked about the feelings of extended family, Penny commented that religion is not discussed much with her mother's family, and she even has an aunt <sup>who</sup> ~~she~~ said that it was fine for Penny to join the ministry, but she would not attend a church with a female minister.<sup>16</sup> These examples show that verbal and emotional support do not always translate into agreement with beliefs.

Another problem for women in the ministry seems to be the seminary or education experience. A contradiction arose from different sources regarding the level of satisfaction in seminary. One study by the United Methodist Church reported that most women describe a dissatisfying seminary education<sup>17</sup> and another study reports high satisfaction with the seminary experience.<sup>18</sup> This contrast could be attributed to the diversity of seminaries theologically and also gender make up within each particular school. Studies show that nondenominational seminaries, such as Penny's alma mater ( Pacific School of Religion), are more receptive to

women and provide a more satisfying experience. In contrast, denominational seminaries, tend to produce a less satisfying experience. Due to the diversity of the various seminaries, the satisfaction probably varies from school to school.

Penny had a very supportive seminary education. She decided to attend Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. She chose that school, because of an integrated art program in the school of theology and the diverse student body. Also, she was attracted to the school being interdenominational and including centers for the Dominican and Jesuit orders, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Buddhists, black urban studies, and others. Another factor for selecting Pacific was the fact that 60 percent of the students were women. Penny said that she “wanted to go to a seminary where gender was not a factor.” The school also had a large population of women faculty. When asked about the large number of female students, Penny attributed it to the type of programming offered and not recruitment.

The receptiveness of women and the problems that they face varies greatly from denomination to denomination. Penny explained that The United Methodist Church is on the forefront of women in the ministry and that they were very receptive to the call of women into ordination. She also noted that many denominations are not as receptive and supportive. The problems such as lack of mentors, the “stained glass ceiling,” laity reaction, seminary experience, and family support are probably at as many levels as there are denominations. The women that have achieved ordination have come a long way when considering that there are many religious groups that do not even ordain women and the EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) does not govern churches’ clergy policies<sup>19</sup>.

Many women ministers often form support networks to help deal with these issues. The

clergywomen in the United Methodist Church do provide a supportive network for facing the problems of entering field that is a traditional male profession. Penny mentioned:

The women of this conference are a very supportive group. We meet quarterly to talk about what is going on in our local churches (and) our ministry settings to support each other. We are very different, but we are supportive of each other, because we do have one thing in common and that is we are all women in ministry.

Women can also solve the problems by providing support and opening the doors for future clergywomen. Penny would like to be a mentor for others entering the ministry in the future. She stated that she wanted to give back what others have given her. She also had this advice:

My advice would be to go into the ministry with your eyes wide open and also into the ministry that God is calling you to do. Sometimes it's easy in systems to get side tracked or to get funneled into certain ways of ministry as if you had to do ministry in this place or this way with this model and one of the thing that women bring is a different perspective. My advice would simply be for a woman to claim all the gifts that God gave her

Rev. Penny Ford gives insight into the clergywoman's experience of today and the problems associated with that experience. Her lack of female ordained role models and lack of ability to see female ordained clergy echoes a major problem for women entering the ministry today. She, like many other clergywomen, was greatly influenced and molded from a male oriented profession. Penny has, however, been able to gain peer support and she also had the opportunity to attend a unique seminary with a large female enrollment and these factors have given her a more positive experience. Her story gives a view of a woman entering a traditional male field with many obstacles for women.

## Notes

1. Fredrick A. Norwood, The Story of American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) 352.
2. All quotations and information regarding Rev. Penny Ford are from a personal interview with Rev. Ford. Penny Ford, personal interview, 13 October 1995.
3. Judith L. Weidman, Women Ministers (San Francisco: Harper and Row: 1985) 3.
4. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 111.
5. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 20-48.
6. Martha Long Ice, Clergy Women and their World Views (New York: Praeger, 1987) 80.
7. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 41.
8. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 133.
9. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 134.
10. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 134.
11. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 123.
12. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 140.
13. Carol M. Noren, The Woman in the Pulpit (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 31-45.
14. Carol M. Noren, The Woman in the Pulpit (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992) 41.
15. Jackson W.. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 67.

16. Penny's family on her mother's side is more fundamentalist denomination and not as receptive to women ministers.

17. Judith L. Weidman, Women Ministers (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985) 7.

18. Jackson W. Carroll, Barbara Hargrove, and Adair T. Lummis, Women of the Cloth (San Francisco : Harper and Row, 1983) 204.

19. A phone call to the EEOC revealed that they do not govern churches in religious matters, such as ordination. However, they do govern employment practices of unordained staff members of churches with more than fifteen employees

Proposed Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your religious background and upbringing?
2. Who were your female role models? Did you have any female religious role models growing up?
3. Tell me about your call to preach.
4. Was your family supportive of your decision to become a minister? *supported*
5. Was your home church supportive of your decisions? *now, financial, gifts*
6. What seminary did you attend and why? *aim to recruit women faculty women campus min.*
7. Do you think it is easier or more difficult to find funding and grants being a female minister?
8. Are all seminaries receptive to female applicants and students? Discuss.
9. What discrimination did you face from fellow students and professors at seminary?
10. Why did you decide to return to North Alabama? *recruit*
11. How do people from this area react to you being a minister?
12. Have you faced any problems at churches you have served due to your gender?
13. What unique opportunities have you had as a minister?
14. Where would you like women go in the church?
15. Do you think the Methodist church is supportive of women ministers?
16. How many women ministers are in the United Methodist Church in the North Alabama Conference? Is this a unified and supportive group?
17. Tell me about your experience of being a campus minister. *explain candidacy process what is the job description.*
18. Do you see yourself as a role model for women entering the ministry ~~and women on campus?~~
19. What advice would you give to women entering the ministry?

*instructed  
obtain  
interview with  
Excellent  
questions  
who do you  
see as important  
women in the  
church?*

*Where does  
she place herself  
w/in the context of  
feminist theology?*

*Rosemary Radford Ruether  
& others?  
Do you still see  
women as the  
backbone of the church?*

**Insight into the Problems that Are Facing Clergywomen:  
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## Word List

Kay Mudert

Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Barbara Harper

Joe Elmore

Danny Roundtree

Mike Stewart

Duncan Hunter

Berekley, California

Charles Betts

Charles Lee

Leontine Kelly

Mary Ann Swenson

Kelly Clem