
I Must Represent Jesus

Lea Joyner, with Carolyn Smith

“No one wanted a woman preacher and they didn’t have one little nook to put me in. I was finally sent to Monroe Mission: a piece of ground with weeds taller than my head. Even the district superintendent said, ‘Lea, this church will never grow; you have no money, no one to provide leadership. My child, you do not know what you are doing.’ With no money, no support, no encouragement, and almost everything against you, what do you do but fall on your knees and beg God to help you get up and go to work each day? Strangely enough, it didn’t seem so hard!”

Few ministers of either gender experience what this small lady preacher has. Her unique and compelling story bears retelling.

Lea Joyner remembers moving to Grayson, Louisiana—a town of 400 that looked metropolitan in the eyes of an eager 12-year-old. Grayson offered farming opportunities for her family when no other work was available. Her father, however, was not much of a farmer. “We all knew we were going to starve to death,” she recalls. After two years the small family secured other employment: her mother took in “all kinds of work” and learned to make do with scant provisions; her father walked three miles to his new job; and Lea found employment in a local store, earning ten dollars a month.

At 15, Lea gave her heart to the Lord and immediately sensed that God had a job for her to do. She broke with her parents’ Baptist faith, joined the Methodist Protestant church and awaited God’s leading.

College seemed out of the question, until an acquaintance with the president of Techuana college opened a closed door. “Bring \$35.00,” he told Lea, “and I’ll help you get a job.” She did, and he kept his word. Soon she found herself keeping house for a local family and attending school. Tasks were often unpleasant, but her

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goal was clear. “You can never imagine the jobs she gave me...but there was always that drive, that great desire: I must keep going, I must represent Jesus; I must get through and be ordained as a preacher.”

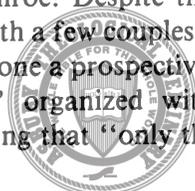
It proved to be an elusive goal. In those days, ordination of women was resisted by the organized church. The would-be preacher found her ordination blocked on three occasions. Finally, convinced that she must receive ordination before the church merged in 1939 and formally ruled against women in official relationship, she was recognized. The Methodist Episcopal Church south held her ordination in a small church of only 22 members. The Rev. Lea Joyner was the only woman in full connection with the denomination and remained so for ten years. But, her goal was accomplished, at least in part. Now, duly authorized by the denomination, she was entitled to a church assignment.

Even then, resistance persisted. Her first assignment would have broken a pastor of lesser determination: the Columbia circuit consisted of five churches spread across a radius of 150 miles. “I taught school to pay expenses and pay back money I borrowed to go to college. I had no car...thank God for the Greyhound bus! I would go as far as I could on the bus and then some member of the church would take me on to the home that had promised lodging for the night.

“Sometimes I preached to as few as three people, but numbers did not matter. I just wanted to preach the word.”

In 1944 Lea was sent to Monroe, Louisiana, to serve as assistant to Dr. Adrian Serex at First Methodist Church. Responsibilities were demanding: visiting in hospitals and homes (“not less than 50 families a week”), getting new members, assisting in the youth program, teaching Sunday school, speaking on the radio and other smaller tasks. Her first love, preaching, was not in the job description. Many times she found herself saying, “If only I could have my own church.”

The opportunity finally came in 1952, when she was assigned the vacant lot in south Monroe. Despite the discouraging prospects, Lea saw possibilities. With a few couples assisting, she surveyed the town and declared everyone a prospective member. Within months the “Monroe Mission” organized with 125 charter members. Meeting in an old building that “only the Lord could have found



acceptable,” and using borrowed robes for their 5-member choir, services commenced in style.

What follows is a chronicle of the Southside Methodist Church and the activities of its pioneer preacher: a woman, used by God in a unique pastorate in Methodist history.

We had to have a better meeting place, so we borrowed from a loan company with no collateral except a woman preacher and a group of people willing to work. During the next few weeks I signed more official papers than anyone could imagine, and the contractor built our first little building in thirty-two working days. Then came many expansion programs. We have only once built “large” during these years, but we’ve gone through 16 smaller building programs.

This church has been unusual from the beginning. We are located in an underprivileged area, and we have done everything to raise money except cakewalks and bingo. We have had nineteen persons from the congregation go into the ministry during these 32 years.

The staff is small. I have one full-time secretary who has been with us for 28 years, two part-time lay staff members, a janitor, and this year we were assigned an assistant by the conference. Most of the work of the church is done by volunteer help. The choir directors and choirs are unpaid. Volunteer office help comes in each week. The yard is kept up by two ladies and one man. Many other jobs are done without pay.

The work of the lay people is outstanding. We have a group of men who visit the prospects of the church weekly. The “Shepherds” program, which divides the membership of 2,250 into ninety areas, is most helpful. The church is organized with all major committees and most minor committees following the outline of the Discipline—with a few others needed to carry on the local work. Being a woman, I have tried to maintain male lay leadership.

We distribute 2500 pieces of literature each month to the local convalescent homes, hospitals and jails. In addition, we make 6,000 Christmas booklets each year to give out to various groups.

I feel that I should always pick up the other end of the load—no task must be too hard for me to share with the lay people of the church. If there are hard jobs to do, I really want to help. If the

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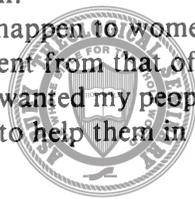
church needs cleaning, I clean. If the yard needs some work, I work. If chairs must be moved, I move chairs. If sacrifices must be made, I must be the one to start things moving by making a sacrifice of time and money. If the hour is late and yet there is work to be done, I feel that I must stay longer than anyone else. If people need me, I must never be too tired or too occupied with my problems to go more than the second mile. I have one dear soul that enjoys calling at 3:30 a.m. “just to talk.”

I work with various groups and social agencies in the city. I have worked with Alcoholics Anonymous since 1945 and find it very rewarding. There are times when people call at three o'clock in the morning asking for some type of food while they try to sober up; times when we pull someone out of the window because they are trying to commit suicide and the house is full of gas. Sometimes we go to the bars to get some big man. It seems impossible, but one fact encourages: “he may be bigger than I am, but I am not as drunk as he is.” There are times when someone calls and fails to give us the apartment number, so we knock on doors until we locate him.

All of this makes me happy because one day God said, “Whom will I send and who will go for me?” and I was able to answer, “Here am I—send me.” It’s all worth it when a little mother looks up and says, “Thank God you came when you did—I was so afraid for my children”; or when I take some food and see a little child literally grab a bite out of the box. Yes, the story goes on and on, but in reality Jesus sends us to the lame, lost, lonely and lepers; and when we serve others, we are serving Him and the Christian cause.

Sometimes the police knock on my office door as I work late to ask, “Lea, are you all right? We saw your light on and noticed someone coming from the alley. We were concerned.” There are other times that I get stopped by the police and I have to ask them to escort me places if I am in a hurry. Sometimes I get in some very tight places. Recently I fell into an open grave, but the Lord protected me and only my pride was hurt. It’s amazing what God can do when we lean on Him.

Some unusual things happen to women preachers, but basically our ministry is no different from that of men if we are truly called into His service. I never wanted my people to see me as a woman. I want to be their pastor, to help them in times of need, to lift them



up and give them a challenge to follow Jesus. People through the years have been kind to me. All of my church leaders, the bishops, district superintendents and conference leaders have been great. Lay people have upheld me with their prayers and services, and friends have been good and most generous. I do not mind asking anyone for anything for Christ and His Church, but I do not ask for myself. I asked a person from another denomination for \$75,000 when we were building our gym and he gave it to me—only because God had prepared the way for me.

Other ministers have been kind in a way. They have accepted me up to a point, though not in the pulpit. I understand this because, for most people, this is still a man's world. They may claim it if they will. I just want a little place to serve! I am not a good preacher, but I work very hard at being a pastor that people can depend on, feel comfortable with, and know that the hour is never too late, or the weather too hot or wet for them to call me to serve them.

Today "Monroe Mission" has a membership of 2,250+ and a church plant valued at \$2,500,000. We are free of debt, though I am very proud that the administrative board has voted to go back in debt and build again. The Church should always be working on something and must not "sit idly by." God has given us the privilege of service and never must we sit and wait for someone else to do the job.

I pray that God will give me the strength and power to witness for Him. I have always felt that there is no substitute for being saturated with prayer and working hard. I know that I cannot do everything, but I can do something; and what I can do I know God will help me to do if I pray and work.

God has given me good health. I have missed only two Sundays from Southside in the more than thirty-two years I have served here. At the age of 67, God gives me the strength to work 18 hours most days, preach 5 times on Sunday, visit the hospitals regularly, attend all the meetings of the church (and there are many), keep my hand on activities and know what is going on, do much community work, visit in 35 homes a week, conduct funerals (sometimes as many as 7 a week), marry people (some weeks I have as many as 5 weddings), do a little manual work when necessary, and talk to people when they need a shoulder to cry on or someone to laugh

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with. For all of this I'm grateful.

God and the church have been good to me. The path has not been easy, but the good has by far outweighed the bad. Through the years I have had to “make do” many times, but don't we all? It is a privilege to be a minister. I've never wanted to take time off to see if I wanted to continue in the ministry—I know this is my desire. As a young person, it was a little difficult to get across to the women that the only interest I had in their husbands was to lead them to the Lord—but when you are old like I am now, this is not a problem. I have had, and still have, criticism, but all of us do. Someone said to me once, “Lea, this too will pass away.” And it did! If I could start over and be asked what I would like to do, I would without hesitation say, “Please let me be a minister of the Gospel, to try to light fires in dark rooms. Yes, I want to do the best I can with what I have to serve God and others.”

My prayer is that Christ will have His way with me and mold my life into something that can help others. “Here am I Lord, send me—Here am I Lord, use me—Here am I Lord, make me—Here am I Lord, fill me—Here am I Lord, strengthen me—that I may be your person out in your world to help those for whom you died.”

