

Greetings, beloved in Christ! In Luke 24:9-10, we hear about that first Easter morning. Luke writes, "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some other women were the ones who had gone to the tomb. When they returned, they told the eleven apostles and the others what had happened. The apostles thought it was all nonsense, and they would not believe."

As we celebrate Women's History Month, it's important that we hear how the women on that first Easter morning were diminished and we reflect on how those same practices creep into our world and in our churches. Those indirect or even unintentional ways of diminishing a marginalized group has a name... we call it microaggressions. I hear stories from clergywomen all the time of how they've pored over a scriptural text, prayed without ceasing, and crafted and delivered a sermon that they sensed was a gift from the Holy Spirit. And people coming out of church diminish the sermon or their leadership by saying something like, "hey, I like your shoes." Or, "you should wear a dress instead of pants when you preach." Those words and actions are iterations of the first preachers, the women, on Easter morning.

Let's admit that it's always hard to be the first. Churches and districts and conferences continue to be shaped by the first woman leading in a particular context. During this Women's History Month, let's reflect on the powerful women who have shaped the ministry and the mission of the North Carolina Conference. Today, we celebrate the pioneering women who, through their courage, faith, and commitment to God's call, have broken barriers and paved the way for those who have come after them.

In 1975, two remarkable women, Rev. Helen Crotwell and Rev. Gladys R. Williford, made history as the first women ordained as elders in the North Carolina Conference. These women of faith opened doors for future generations to follow, and their courage continues to inspire us today.

Rev. Helen Crotwell, in addition to her ordination, became the first woman appointed as a District Superintendent in North Carolina, and one of the first in the Southeastern United States.

And in 1988, Rev. Edith Gleaves made history as the first African-American woman to be ordained as an elder in full connection in the North Carolina Conference. Her commitment to justice, equality, and ministry has paved the way for many others, and her leadership continues to shape our church and our conference.

She also made history in 1987 when she was the first woman to be appointed to a cross-racial appointment in the NC Conference, at North Raleigh United Methodist Church. Let's also remember that Rev. Gleaves was the first ordained woman of color to serve as conference staff when she became the Director of Multicultural Ministries in 1990.

Fast forward to 1999, when Rev. Carolyn Cummings-Worriax became the first Native American woman to be ordained as an elder in full connection in our conference. Her ordination is a reminder that God's call across all boundaries—cultural, racial, and geographical—and that the diversity of our callings strengthens the body of Christ.

And in 2002, Rev. Lily Chou became the first Asian woman to be ordained as an elder in full connection in the North Carolina Conference. Rev. Chou's ministry continues to be a testament to the power of inclusivity, and her work in our conference reminds us that the Kingdom of God is vast and beautiful in its diversity.

In 2006, Rev. Rosanna Panizo made history as the first Hispanic woman to be ordained as an elder in full connection in the North Carolina Conference. Her ordination reflects the growing diversity of our church and the ways in which God is calling leaders from every culture to serve in ministry.

And in 2012, Rev. Donna Banks became the first African-American woman to be appointed a District Superintendent in our conference. Her leadership has broken new ground, and her faithfulness to God's call has made a lasting impact on our churches and communities.

In 2004, North Carolina's own Rev. Hope Morgan Ward was elected a bishop in the Southeastern Jurisdiction and assigned as the first female bishop to the Mississippi Conference, and in 2012, she was assigned the first female bishop of the North Carolina Conference.

These women, and so many others, have not only broken barriers—they have built bridges. They've shown us that God's calling is not confined to any one race, ethnicity, or gender. Their stories are testimonies to the strength, perseverance, and faithfulness of women who have answered God's call, and who continue to shape the church for generations to come.

As we celebrate Women's History Month, let us give thanks for these trailblazers—these women who have gone before us, who have answered God's call with courage and conviction. Let's honor their legacy by continuing to support and uplift all women in ministry, ensuring that the church remains a place where all are welcome and all can serve.

And to support women in ministry today, I want to highlight the work of the North Carolina Conference Commission on the Status and Role of Women and the Center for Leadership Excellence. Every month, they publish an email called *Encouragements*, a special resource designed to uplift and encourage women in ministry. If you haven't already, I encourage you to sign up and join this community of support and inspiration.

May we continue to be inspired by the examples of women as we strive to live out God's calling in our own lives. Thank you for being part of this journey, and may God bless each of you as we celebrate the powerful and transformative work of women in the life of the church. So be it.