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Introduction

The female part of every congregation have, in general, an influence which, while it cannot be defined, cannot, at the same time, be resisted.

Samuel Miller, *Letters on Clerical Manners and Habits*, 1827¹

If there was one universal law of Christian megaministry, it was found in the book of Genesis: “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”² He should not be alone. She will do him some good.

In almost every spiritual empire, there was a “she.”

She may be the one on the main stage, smiling into the spotlight, telling a lightly worn anecdote as she sets her dog-eared Bible on the podium. She might be seated in the darkened first row, a wide-brimmed Sunday hat nodding up and down, or behind the stage in the green room clucking at her kids to mind their business. She could be the mother, silvered but stately, the matriarch of a charismatic son and the symbol of her bygone generation. She might be the daughter singing an extra solo with the choir, avoiding the curious gazes of those who suspect that, if there is no son, she would inherit her father’s mantle. A few upstarts would take to social media to stoke a cause or take an institution to task, swatting away questions about whether there was a *he* who supported what *she* does. But most often, she was the slender wife at his side, their fingers lightly interlaced as he calls her his “better half” and his sweetheart again, this and every Sunday morning. This was the presumed order of Christian megaministry, the yin and the yang.

These women lived with many forms of power. They populated network television lineups, megachurch main stages, SiriusXM radio stations, Barnes & Noble bookshelves, and stadium events in every major city. They went by many names: pastors, co-pastors, bible teachers, authors, speakers, executive directors, or, more commonly, pastors’ wives, and they pitched their expertise in any number of ways, from women’s ministry directors to teachers, preachers, singers, bloggers, advocates, nutritionists, parenting experts, sex therapists, prophetesses, life coaches,

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and television hosts. The biggest stars topped the *New York Times* best-seller list and garnered some of the highest rates of Christian television viewership in the world. Some grew so famous that they, like Oprah, need only one name. Beth. Joyce. Victoria. Jen. Their stars had risen so high that almost any churchgoing woman in America would call them celebrities.

The heights of spiritual superstardom in America—what I call “megaministry” (see Glossary)—was a tangled series of networks of the largest evangelical and pentecostal churches, denominations, parachurch organizations, Christian publishing companies, record labels, and television and radio networks. Megaministry was an overwhelmingly conservative Protestant phenomenon (which I often, imperfectly, simply call “evangelical” in character). Size was the most dominant feature of this modern ministry. There were more large churches than ever before: the number of churches with more than two thousand members (called megachurches) has grown by 3,000 percent since 1970.³ Christian television programming measured its potential broadcast audiences by the billions.⁴ Secular media conglomerates owned and acquired evangelical imprints to launch their own Christian nonfiction titles onto the bestseller lists.⁵

Christian celebrity was a tricky category to define because, to the average American, its stars were almost invisible. Though there were megachurches and leaders in almost every state,⁶ most of the largest crowds and organizations made their home in the urban sunbelt. The industry of megaministry seemed more like NASCAR than the NBA, a regional and specialized market with millions of devoted followers, but not a national and omnipresent attraction. I use the term “celebrities” here with an asterisk, a wink that says you must know where to look to find them. Jen Hatmaker, whose career soared so high that she starred in her own Target commercial, playfully referred to herself as only “low-grade Christian famous,” not an A-list celebrity but “D-minus level, enough to get recognized in airports, but not enough to really have any true advantages.”⁷ These were not household names in the same way as those of a politician, actress, or athlete might be. But in evangelical and pentecostal Christian subcultures, these women garner the level of adoration (and scrutiny) and more often are associated with the entertainment industry.⁸ They must hire assistants to help

them navigate gawking crowds or keep book signings from becoming therapy sessions as fans turned to them as gurus on marriage, parenting, miscarriage, singlehood, and faith.⁹ Whatever they are called, they are not to be underestimated. Politicians court them as powerful brokers of public trust, and retail giants like Walmart, Costco, and Target kept their books in stock. *Forbes* recently appraised the collective income of America's pastor-personalities at an eye-popping \$8.5 billion a year.¹⁰

Women like Victoria Osteen live their entire ministerial careers in megaministry's bright spotlight. To America's largest church, the forty-thousand-member Lakewood Church, she is the statuesque blonde beside her leading man who spearheaded their megachurch's ministry for women and preached weekly sermonettes about the divine good life.¹¹ To the seven million weekly viewers of their television show, she is a celebrity, a life-coach, and the author of such spiritual chick-lit as her *New York Times* bestselling *Love Your Life*. If she fell, she fell hard. Her Lakewood message that churchgoers obey God for the sake of their own happiness ignited a media firestorm, as did the 2005 accusation—later ruled false—that Victoria had assaulted a Continental Airlines flight attendant over a stain on her first-class armrest.¹² Blogs debated everything from her likability to the height of her heels. When she sat down for an interview with Oprah in the Osteen family's Texas mansion, there was little doubt that, loved or hated, she was a new kind of pastor's wife. She lived a world away from the plain face in the front pew expected of evangelicals a generation ago.¹³ Tucked into Joel's arm, she rules as one of megaministry's first ladies.

At first glance, the celebrity of women in megaministry was completely baffling. After all, most of the largest denominations in the country did not consider women fit to be pastors. The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the country,¹⁴ waged fierce wars in the 1980s against women's spiritual leadership—and won. Female pastors in the denomination were kicked out or driven away as Southern Baptist leaders drew a hard line. Looking at the fifteen hundred or so megachurches dotting the country as a whole,¹⁵ it becomes apparent that most congregations were not only opposed to women's pastoral leadership in theory but also in practice. (See Appendix V for a fuller account of this phenomenon.) The largest megaministries usually grew from



Victoria and Joel Osteen, who lead the country's largest church, are an iconic pastoral couple and an example of the heights to which a pastor's wife can climb. Forsythe Photography/Crown Media United States, LLC.

conservative traditions¹⁶ that did not ordain women or, if they did, rarely promoted them.

However, the success of women in megaministry showed how women—especially conservative women—had negotiated places for themselves and re-made popular religion into a woman's playground. One of the most famous Christian women in America sprang from the hard soil of Southern Baptist life. Her name is Beth Moore, and she routinely outsold and outperformed her fellow evangelists¹⁷ as the singular attraction of one of North America's largest spiritual conferences.¹⁸ What we see in her career is what we find in so many others, that her popularity began as a delicate dance between professed submission to men

and implicit independence from them.¹⁹ She promised that she was under the authority of male pastors and that she sought to be a leader only of other women, but her constant presence on television made it impossible for her to maintain the appearance of teaching an all-female audience.²⁰ Her power could never lie in the wooden pulpit of a brick-and-mortar church. Instead, she was a traveling evangelist whose products—books, speaking tours, and bible studies—were among the largest money-makers for LifeWay, the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.²¹ Without a church, she ruled a theological kingdom.

This book is an exploration of the public lives of America's Christian female celebrities. It tells the story of women's search for spiritual authority in an era of jumbotrons and searing stage lights. Using abundant materials drawn directly from megachurches, parachurches,²² publishers, television networks, and music producers—as well as over a hundred personal interviews with Christian celebrities and industry veterans—I show how the women of megaministry carved places for themselves out of the hardwood of American complementarianism. Their successes prompt us to ask two simple questions: What kinds of roles are they permitted? What do these women gain and lose in order to be market-ready?

The central narrative of this book shows how, alongside the rise of megaministry in the 1970s,²³ a cluster of unlikely women became stars of American Christianity. They were theologically conservative, far less equipped and encouraged than their liberal counterparts, and confined to a small number of eclectic roles that largely rested on the fame and institutions of others. Boxed in by high expectations of modern Christian womanhood, these women both broke the rules and played their parts, winning wide recognition as the spiritual go-tos for millions of Americans. In effect, conservative women were driven into the marketplace because of the restricted organizational roles they could occupy in their home churches.

The public lives of Christian women were shaped in large part by two powerful forces: first, the complementarian theologies that prescribed a limited set of feminine virtues and capacities; and, second, the industries that sustained their careers, which had their own rules about leading women. These two forces occasionally collided. For instance, as we see in a later chapter, female preaching was often renamed “bible teaching”

The image shows the cover of the September/October 2005 issue of Christianity Today magazine. The cover features a black and white photograph of Beth Moore, a woman with short, wavy hair, smiling and wearing a dark, button-up shirt with a cross necklace and a dark skirt. The magazine title "Christianity Today" is at the top, with "womankind" in large letters below it. The date "SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2005" is in the top right. Several headlines are visible: "Bible study teacher BETH MOORE Catch her PASSION for God's Word. PAGE 30", "9 Ways to Help Your Child THRIVE in Public School", "TOUGH LOVE Learning to forgive someone who doesn't say 'I'm sorry'", "6 WAYS to find more time for prayer", "DISCOVER God's Gift of Rest (It's waiting for you NOW)", "FLEX APPEAL! LIFTING WEIGHTS IS GOOD FOR YOUR BODY AND SOUL", and "NEVER SAY NEVER coma survivor's take on FAITH and END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS". There are two large white rectangular redactions on the cover. At the bottom left, there is a barcode and the price "\$3.95 Canada \$5.50".

Christianity Today

REAL STORIES • REAL ISSUES • REAL FAITH

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2005

Bible study teacher
BETH MOORE
Catch her **PASSION**
for God's Word. PAGE 30

TOUGH LOVE
Learning to forgive someone
who doesn't say "I'm sorry"

6 WAYS
to find more
time for prayer

DISCOVER
God's Gift of Rest
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FLEX APPEAL!
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NEVER SAY NEVER
coma survivor's
take on **FAITH** and
END-OF-LIFE DECISIONS

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74470 80971 5

Beth Moore is the most famous leader in contemporary Southern Baptist life, despite having no formal denominational role. Reprinted with permission from *Christianity Today*, www.christianitytoday.com.

owing to the enormous market for it. Or consider the pressures a woman on stage might feel to have a facelift, despite the fact that there was nothing terribly virtuous about it. Again and again, theology and capitalism came to some kind of understanding, and the women in this business were often proof of it.

The women who ruled, first ruled the market. No matter how faithful a celebrity might be—and most of the women I interviewed were deeply altruistic—popular ministry was governed by the whims of a fickle marketplace, which might lavish praise one moment and cold opprobrium another. The shrewd learned to treat audiences as customers, anticipating their needs and predicting their hungers as trends evolved. They inured themselves to the breathless pace of the self-promotion: the turnstile of speaking engagements, bible studies, video series, and all of the accompanying products to keep revenues hovering above costs. They made bargains with their loved ones about when to be on the road or burn the midnight oil meeting deadlines and launching new products. Though the saintly among them hoped that the industry was a benign medium by which theological goods were delivered, almost everyone I interviewed acknowledged her unease with how (and to whom) the Christian industry meted out rewards.

There was no smooth path to God's house for a Christian woman celebrity, no steady march to equality or easy gains. Rather, there were a few common roles that women adopted and adapted to achieve a place of prominence. As each chapter follows the evolution of a particular role—preacher, mother, performer, counselor, beauty—we see that there was nothing particularly stable about them. These roles were perches—sometimes narrow, sometimes wide—on which to rest the weight of female authority. At first blush, these roles seem unflinchingly subservient to the dominant patriarchal evangelical subculture. Serita Jakes, the first lady of the country's largest African American church, claimed only to complement her husband's ministry with her vast debutante program and her books with titles like *Beside Every Good Man*. In the same city, Debbie Morris led the women's ministry for her husband's twenty-eight-thousand-member Dallas megachurch under the banner of "Pink," dedicated to helping women steward their influences as wives and mothers.²⁴ However, these gentle performances of docility often masked a nuanced negotiation with the categories they were given.

There are two other subplots that must be noted from the start. The first centers on race. The dominant account of women in megaministry in these pages is that of white women, not only because they were typically the best-known stars, but also because there has always been a much larger print industry to promote them and a marketplace to reward them.

The narrative largely reflects the statistical breakdown of the races of the megachurches profiled in this study: white (67 percent), black (23 percent), Latino/a (2 percent), Asian (1 percent). As each chapter will show, this book is also an account of how African American (and, to a lesser extent, Latina and Asian American) women in megaministry embodied the same roles as white women, but with different constraints. While white women, for instance, eventually wriggled out of the expectation that they constantly announce their submission to their husbands, black women did not. They bore the additional burden of modeling womanhood in a society that denigrated them. Long after it fell out of fashion in the white middle class, they would embody God's divine order for the black family in American life.

This book's analysis of the women *on* stage—the women whom the market rewards—must be viewed while keeping a keen eye toward those who are *off* stage. Though there are many women of color who are notable pastors, scholars, activists, and speakers, there was nothing like a megaministry “pipeline” to develop and support new and existing talent among ethnic minorities. Having studied hundreds of conference advertisements from the 1970s to the present, I identified a few consistent trends: evangelical stages remained overwhelmingly white, while pentecostal stages were platforms for black, white, and (to a lesser extent) Latina women, though typically they appeared before segregated audiences.²⁵ Indigenous women almost never found inroads into the industries that marketed Christian women, and whose own complicated relationship with being evangelized had to grapple with the burdened inheritance of colonialism.

Women of color spoke frankly about how difficult it was to gain national exposure when there were so few opportunities. “If we are going to get invited by a white woman to join her stage, it feels like there is always room for just one of us,” said Kathy Khang, whose book, *Raise Your Voice*, argued for the need for a more diverse cast of theological voices.²⁶ The almost uniform whiteness on national platforms was tied to the twisted racial logics of a marketplace calibrated to the desires of largely segregated churches. The particular reasons for this were inextricable from the histories of each community. Kathy aptly summarized the distinct set of obstacles Asian American women faced breaking into the celebrity circuit.

We aren't white but the myth of being the model minority also comes into play. We are both exotic and assimilated, in part, because some of our cultural norms do not emphasize standing out as individuals and seeking fame for ourselves. And in the United States, there isn't a strong sense of what the Asian American church and its voice *is* in comparison to the white evangelical church or the black church and I think that sort of distinction is required in a celebrity world.²⁷

In the marketplace, women of color found themselves locked into a narrow set of racial roles and, as a result, often locked out of the market itself.

Further, there were many ethnic-minority megachurches—Chinese, Korean, and Spanish-speaking in particular—that were unlikely to encourage female celebrity. There might be several explanations. First, as outlined in Appendix II, there was a very close connection between famous wives being called into leadership and the congregations' relationship to the marketplace. First-generation immigrant pastors and their wives were likely to be focused inward, on the needs of the community, rather than on building their national platforms.²⁸ Second, some interviewees noted that first-generation immigrant megachurches (particularly Korean American churches) were strongly hierarchical and placed constraints on elevating women into leadership.²⁹ Third, as Pastor Gail Song Bantum observed, second-generation Asian American women who succeeded in megaministry had already left the immigrant church and married non-Asians, thus becoming bridging figures in white or multi-ethnic contexts. Their leadership in first-generation churches was constrained not only by patriarchy, but also by the essentializing immigrant identity of churchgoers fearful of losing their connections to their homelands.³⁰ On the whole, the mere existence of ethnic-minority megachurches did not elevate women of color to leadership positions.

A second significant subplot follows the status of women in the Protestant mainline denominations. This book begins with a short, broad history of women seeking institutional power in American churches as leaders of the missionary enterprise and, later, as pastors and priests. After World War II, women in the cluster of denominations that comprise the mainline (or what academics often offhandedly call "liberal" or "progressive" denominations),³¹ challenged their exclusion from



Pastor Gail Song Bantum, Executive Pastor of Quest Church, is one of the only Asian American women who serve in senior leadership at an American megachurch. Image courtesy of Gail Song Bantum.

ordained leadership and re-made these denominations into some of the largest religious bodies with both sexes in the pulpit and behind the altar. At one level, their success in ordained ministry was suggestive of remarkable gains since the first American woman was ordained more than a hundred and fifty years ago.³² But as their experiences will show, very few of the women in any spiritual orbit were scripturally, doctrinally, and ecclesiastically supported in their ambitions. There were always caveats, and a vast gap remained between having rules in place that support the ordination of women and actually putting them in pulpits, particularly important ones.³³ Drawing on fresh interviews with many of the leaders of mainline megachurches and entire denominations, I show how these women's careers became a wedge issue and a convenient way of testing agreement on questions as lofty as scriptural inerrancy and as practical as skirt hemlines. Christian ministry was still overwhelmingly a man's world.

THE PREACHER'S WIFE

Under the church's website banner, Ed and Lisa Young were smiling at the camera in matching denim, her hand lightly touching his chest and

his arm around her back. “For just a moment, forget everything you’ve ever thought of when it comes to church,” reads the caption beside them. “Imagine a home for all who are looking for hope. This is Fellowship Church!”³⁴ Though in their mid-fifties they looked a cool decade younger, which did not hurt sales for *Sexperiment*, their *New York Times* best-selling guide to sex that had the couple spending twenty-four live-streamed hours in a staged bed on the roof of their church. She was the founder of “Flavour,” the women’s ministry for their twenty-five-thousand-person congregation, and the author of a few books on marriage, beauty, children, and a cookbook, *A Dash of Flavour*.³⁵ Together, they were the branded image of the largest Southern Baptist church in the country, which met at seven different locations throughout Texas and Florida or via the streaming of Ed Young’s “Fifty Shades of THEY” on Netflix.³⁶ Everywhere one looked for Fellowship Church, the two of them were pictured smiling and inviting all to join them next Sunday for the latest sermon series like “Shark Weak” or “Espresso Yourself.”³⁷

In the world of modern megaministry, a pastor’s wife was the welcome mat. She was the smile, the open arms, and the “Hello! Won’t you come in?” to a church experience with a dizzying array of ways to participate. With multiple services and a half dozen campuses, a pastor’s wife like Lisa Young could not simply stand by the door handing out bulletins and greet people as they entered. The country’s largest churches had outgrown any leader’s capacity to know the majority of their congregants. Every megachurch wife I spoke to described what it was like to look out over a flood of attendees and not recognize a soul. Although she may not always know them, they know her; somewhere in the sea of digital and in-person experiences of a single ecclesial community, the pastor and his wife were anchoring figures. If there was a billboard on the side of the highway advertising a church, she would be there, leaning over her husband’s shoulder or slipped under his protective arm. And on megachurch websites, a photograph of the pastor and his wife was the most common advertisement for the church.

The omnipresence of women’s images was matched only by the dearth of substantive information about them. Most churches wanted to make it clear that the pastor’s wife had no actual position on staff or, in any case, that her importance was relative to his. This made introductions into a linguistic obstacle course, because as women were presented they almost instantly disappeared. An eight-thousand-member Arkansas

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megachurch introduced its senior pastor, Rick Bezet, to online audiences in a very typical way. Next to an image of him beside his wife Michelle, were the words:

Rick & Michelle Bezet // LEAD PASTOR³⁸

Rick Bezet is the founder and lead pastor of New Life Church of Arkansas. Since starting [New Life Church] Conway in 2001, New Life has grown to include ten churches in nine cities with 20+ services, and two online services. . . . Rick and his lovely wife, Michelle, have been married for over 20 years and they have four children. They live in Conway, Arkansas.

Michelle appeared next to a title she did not possess as part of the branding for a church that may or may not employ her. In the Christian public's mind's eye, a famous wife was a block of marble chiseled mostly by the imagination. She might be the neck that turned her husband's head, the Salome that turned his heart, or the Ruth that laid herself at his feet. Her defining qualities and acts in shaping the ministry must be interpreted in gestures and shadows. Did she stand tucked behind him or sit quietly in the front row? Was she alone on stage explaining how she would give up ministry in a heartbeat if her husband simply told her to? Perhaps she sat beside him as the cameras filmed their television show, but when the credits rolled the show was in *his* name only. Sometimes I wondered if the fastest way to identify a woman's role in megaministry was to interview all of the lighting technicians on every mainstage in the country. Who would the spotlight fall on when the lights went down? Did the crowd know her face? Her role was a curious one. Whether she eclipsed everyone in the room or was an unseen partner to her husband's ministry, her mere existence sparked with power.

Assessing questions of significance and power were further complicated, as I discovered, by the ambiguity with which most public women in ministry narrated their own significance. Almost all women in the largest churches, parachurches, and on other platforms went to great lengths to hide their importance as a way of shielding themselves from criticism.

The self-presentation of Proverbs 31 founder Lysa TerKeurst was a study in deflected significance. Though she ran a multi-million-dollar

organization that reached hundreds of thousands of women every day, making her one of the most powerful women in modern evangelical circuits, she described her success as being able to: “get through the day having spent time with the Lord, exercised in some way, had a laugh with one of my kids, had clean underwear in my husband’s drawer when he needed them and made a friend smile.”³⁹ Before their marital woes became public knowledge,⁴⁰ Lysa described her husband as a loving leader and a longsuffering man, who, once a month, “simply puts up with me and my bout of the Princess Must Scream syndrome.”⁴¹ While no one expected Oprah to keep her partner Stedman’s underwear drawer stocked, these audiences were keenly attuned to indications that Ter-Keurst grounded her identity in relationship, motherhood, and wifehood. Superstar Beth Moore was quick to assure audiences that her husband, Keith, wore the Wranglers in their relationship, while televangelist Joyce Meyer continually invoked her husband Dave’s benevolent approval of her media empire. As icons of the middle class, these women were expected to embody its trials and triumphs. They must be hard-working but not competitive, polished but not fussy, wholesome but not perfect. And as famous women, they must do what all famous women do and pretend to be average, subject to the acid test of “reliability.” Their stories should be peppered with mishaps—they broke the eggs bagging their own groceries, put their shirts on inside-out, and ruined their children’s Halloween costumes.

Some of these women were particularly formidable given that most cobbled their skills together on their own, without men in ministry’s equivalent pastoral education. As we will discuss in Chapters One and Four, women had rarely been expected or encouraged to be theologically credentialed. As a result, most never sat in classes to learn systematic theology, scriptural exegesis, counseling, Christian history, or preaching. Instead, they assigned their own reading, honed their own preaching skills (often before female audiences), and earned their place in the Christian industry without the benefit of formal training. They were queens of self-mastery.

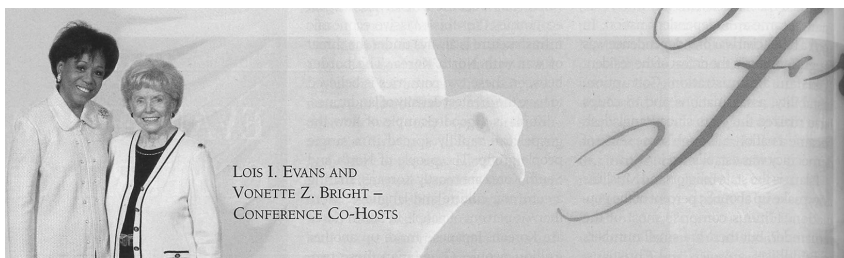
Or not. Some women earned their place in the sun and others simply basked in the reflected glow of others. While most women fought to be worthy of their status, it was possible to find megaministry women happy to float on the credentials of their mates, offering what skills they already

had with mixed results. Like any inherited job, women may assume a church position as an entitlement and a perk. A megachurch wife might cheerfully list “shopping” as her primary hobby, knowing that her massive church salary and limited obligations give her plenty of money and time for it.⁴²

Regardless of whether she craved the public eye or longed for anonymity, she must pick her place. A famous Christian woman could be many things—ambitious or deferential, canny or naive, intuitive or clueless, sweet or with a dash of salty language. But, whoever she was, she lived in front of many audiences.

Though not all famous Christian women were pastors’ wives—and in fact, many of the most widely recognized were not—the most common role for a woman in megaministry was that of the preacher’s wife. (See Appendix II for a full account of how this phenomenon was tracked.) Like Whitney Houston’s famous movie character, the preacher’s wife was married to the ministry and her talents were inexorably drawn into the life of the church. This should come as no surprise: the complementarian theologies that governed the largest Protestant churches installed hundreds of men at the helm of institutions and pressed their willing (and sometimes unwilling) wives into service. Further, many of the leading women in itinerant or parachurch ministry were also married to men in ministry. For this reason, a famous megaministry woman found that her power maintained the appearance of being borrowed. Regardless of her own credentials, she drew fame from the familial role she held as a mother, sister, daughter, or, most often, wife of an important godly man. It was seen in almost every small gesture like her Twitter handle or the way the conference host announced her onstage: Taffi was Creflo Dollar’s wife. Dodie was Joel Osteen’s mom. Priscilla was Tony Evans’s daughter. Though there were some scrappy women who built their ministries from scratch it was hard and lonely work. Most women built on the poured foundation of marriage and family.

The woman who professionalized her role as wife or family member could build a career of her own. It was a convenient arrangement for both churches that affirmed women in ministry and those that did not, because audiences presumed that a wife’s actions were subject to her husband’s approval and therefore sanctioned. She could likewise benefit from the administrative staff, publicity, in-house audiences, and personal



JOEL & VICTORIA OSTEEN
LAKEWOOD CHURCH
HOUSTON, TEXAS



T.D. & SERITH JAMES
THE POTTER'S HOUSE
DALLAS, TEXAS



TIM & BEVERLY LAHAYE
CONCERNED WOMEN FOR AMERICA
RANCHO MIRAGE, CALIFORNIA



JOHN & DIANA HAGEE
CORNERSTONE CHURCH
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS



STUART & JILL BRISCOE
BRISCOE MINISTRIES
BROOKFIELD, WISCONSIN



GARY & NORMA SMAILLEY
SMAILLEY RELATIONSHIP CENTER
BRANSON, MISSOURI



KAY ARTHUR
PRECEPT MINISTRIES INTL.
CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE



BRIAN & BOBBIE HOUSTON
HILLSONG CHURCH
SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA



LARRY & MELANIE STOCKSTILL
BETHANY WORLD PRAYER CENTER
BAKER, LOUISIANA



TED & GAYLE HAGGARD
NEW LIFE CHURCH
COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO



KENNETH & TOGETTA ULMER
FAITHFUL CENTRAL BIBLE CHURCH
INGLEWOOD, CALIFORNIA



WENDELL & CINI SMITH
THE CITY CHURCH
KIRKLAND, WASHINGTON



ADRIAN & JOYCE ROGERS
BELLEVUE BAPTIST CHURCH
CORDOVA, TENNESSEE



ROBERT & CHERYL RECORD
NORTH AMERICAN
MISSION BOARD
ALPHARETTA, GEORGIA



JACK & ANNA HATFORD
CHURCH OF THE WAY
VAN NUYS, CALIFORNIA



TOM & DONNA MULLINS
CHRIST FELLOWSHIP CHURCH
PALM BEACH GARDENS, FL



JOEL & BECKY HUNTER
NORTHLAND A CHURCH
DISTRIBUTED, LONGWOOD, FLORIDA



BILLY JOE & SHARON DAUGHERTY
VICTORY CHRISTIAN CENTER
TULSA, OKLAHOMA

This 2004 “Free to Soar” Pastors’ Wives conference showed how indispensable a wife was to public ministry. Their titles varied wildly depending on the wives’ theological tradition, ranging from “co-pastor” (prosperity theology) to untitled helpers (evangelical). Kay Arthur bucked the trend by simply being stand-alone famous. Reprinted with permission from Charisma Media, www.charismamedia.com.

and professional relationships that floated his career. In the pages that follow, the preacher’s wife serves as an embodied argument for the twin forces—complementarianism and capitalism—that steered the careers of evangelical women celebrities. The preacher’s wife was the safest woman in ministry: authorized to exercise her gifts by her husband’s pastoral oversight and shielded from the worst excesses of the marketplace. Most women’s careers in ministry depended on borrowed institutions, a guest spot on a television program, or a women’s conference in someone else’s church. Certainly, women without famous husbands

could build a career on their own with a skeleton staff, but their livelihoods hung on a delicate web of relationships and connections. They depended on each other to keep their content and their brand in circulation and to find that sweet spot between irrelevance and controversy.

For women, this is an era of *almost*—almost feminist, almost patriarchal, almost progressive, and almost regressive—and in these pages we hold the prism of their experiences up to the light. The lives of public women invite us to ask again what Americans expect from women in the spotlight; and whether they will ever grow used to women's presence in the main seats of power, in the pulpit, in the corner office, or in the White House. The women of megaministry are exceptional, but they are not simply exceptions. They are religious reflections of almost-mythic American ideals of women as wives and mothers, pillars and martyrs, in a culture divided over whether women should *lean in* or opt out.⁴³

THE GENDERED NATURE OF WHO'S WHO

To understand the public lives of these women requires a brief explanation of megaministry itself and the role that gender plays in building name-recognition. If this were a history of men in megaministry, this account would be far more straightforward. We would not have to piece together a far-flung network of traveling ministries, for most men did not endure the hazards of itinerancy in order to earn a paycheck. We could simply examine a list of the fifteen hundred or so churches in America, past and present, that earned the title “megachurch” for their claim that two thousand or more people attend worship there each Sunday. The names of its senior pastors would leave readers with a sense of familiarity—Rick Warren, T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, Jeremiah Wright, Andy Stanley—not only because the largest churches typically broadcast their services on television, but also because of their relationship with the media. When journalists need a comment from a Protestant leader on anything from an invasion to an earthquake, they typically ask a man because he is the leader of a megachurch or of a handful of politically tinged parachurch organizations such as James Dobson's Focus on the Family. A man is at the helm of an institution that validates his authority and employs a staff who knows his schedule and his talking-points.

As reporter Elizabeth Dias told me, “It is so hard to quote a woman in this world. All of the infrastructure is set up to put a man on the phone, and if I do find a woman to talk to then no one at the magazine has heard of her.”⁴⁴ She would know. Her reporting put the first female preacher on the cover in *Time* magazine’s history.⁴⁵ Since recognition breeds more recognition, senior pastors hold a significant institutional advantage when it comes to building and maintaining a national platform.

Women who aspired to leadership had a much more complicated relationship with Christian institutions. Roman Catholicism, with sixty-five million adherents in the United States, was the largest Christian tradition in the country, double the size of the nearest Protestant denomination, and its position against women in the priesthood was absolute.⁴⁶ Though this narrative is dominated by Protestants, we will see that even a cloistered nun can have a national following if she leaves the sacred offices and the sacraments alone. Mother Angelica, an owl-eyed Franciscan sister from Alabama, became one of the best-known Catholics in America for two decades when she founded EWTN, her Eternal Word Television Network, and broadcasted her unique style of non-sense televangelism, which was said to have a reach of 264 million households around the world.⁴⁷

Women’s success in leadership was predicated on whether they could find institutions *to* lead. To paint a rather grim portrait, it was much more common for a woman to gain a major pulpit through the death of her husband than through a promotion.⁴⁸ This was because many megachurches (especially pentecostal and prosperity megachurches) tapped husbands and wives as “co-pastors.” An early widowing thrust the wife into solo leadership, and provided one of her only opportunities for a promotion. In almost every case where a woman was permitted to lead a large church without the spiritual oversight of a man, she had founded the congregation herself and stayed single. Only a handful of women have ever led a megachurch in American history and their authority has been brittle. (See Appendix V for a list of the many women who fell from power during the brief period of this research.) As a result, most women in megaministry have found either a position of indirect institutional power in a congregation (as, say, a co-pastor or women’s ministry director) or they have founded or occupied a position in an organization not officially designated a “church.” The reasoning goes: she is not a pastor



Kathy Khang got her start in public ministry as a campus ministry leader for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Image courtesy of Kathy Khang.

if her audience is not a church. In practice, these distinctions become rather blurry. Many of the women in this book (particularly Asian women) got their start preaching to college kids in Protestant or Catholic campus ministries, which, despite the fact that they perform most of the functions of a congregation, are not technically considered churches. Likewise, female televangelists were usually exempt from criticism because the studio audience was not a local congregation, though in scuffles with the Internal Revenue Service over tax-exempt status some television studios have declared that they are.⁴⁹

Because this book is focused on the role of women—and each chapter tells the history of women as preachers, homemakers, performers, counselors, and beauties—I have chosen to scatter the discussion of the various megaministry industries in which they operated throughout the book. Since the 1970s, many branches of the popular religious marketplace have been dominated by evangelicals and pentecostals. These include book publishing (e.g., Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, WaterBrook

Multnomah, Revell, Bethany House, Chosen, Harrison House, InterVarsity Press, Kregel, LifeWay, Moody, Tyndale, Crossway); music production (e.g., Capitol Christian Music Group, Hillsong Music, Motown Gospel, Maranatha Music, RCA Inspiration); retail marketing (e.g., Hobby Lobby, Family Christian, LifeWay Christian Resources); magazine publishing (e.g., *Brio*, *Charisma*, *Relevant*, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Marketplace*, *Virtue*, *Today's Christian Woman*); movie studios (e.g., Affirm Films, Big Idea Entertainment, Lightworkers Media); television networks (e.g., Christian Broadcasting Network, Trinity Broadcasting Network, Praise the Lord Network, Eternal Word Television Network); radio networks (e.g., K-LOVE, Moody Radio, Salem Radio, United Christian Broadcasters); and a wide variety of other products and services, including award shows, film festivals, dating services, children's programming, music festivals, apparel lines, and an endless array of independent businesses. As we saw in the rise of Victoria Osteen at Lakewood Church, some megachurches grew so large that they housed multiple industries within them, doubling as concert venues, music studios, retail outlets, and television studios. Occupying a coveted pulpit for Sunday morning's sermon was not the only way to have a ministry.

Pentecostal evangelist Daisy Osborn once observed that if the pulpit is the man's Holy of Holies, then the parachurch was like the temple's outer courts, where the women were allowed.⁵⁰ But women like Daisy knew the power of these external organizations. Their talents were largely hidden by the seeming insignificance of parachurch organizations, but this hidden-in-plain-sight quality often worked in women's favor, allowing female-led organizations to thrive in a culture ambivalent about women in ministry. Some of the most successful were sprawling enterprises. Let us look again at Lysa TerKeurst, who, as I mentioned, was the founder and president of Proverbs 31 Ministries, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Hers was a parachurch organization with a paid staff of almost fifty people tasked with finance and operations, donor development, digital media, communications, customer service, marketing, and, of course, the endless stream of content sent to five hundred thousand subscribers.⁵¹ The organization was not simply an online bible study, but a platform for Lysa's brand, the place where readers could go to buy her *New York Times* bestseller, hear from her staff daily on theological topics, or find out the dates for her latest speaking tour or upcoming writer's

conference. It also made her the gatekeeper of other women's successes, as she could choose which other speakers and authors to endorse.⁵² At best, institutions like Lysa's parachurch ministry mirrored most of the advantages of a megachurch and offered similar resources, but they also shared the restrictions of the megachurch. While, in theory, the organizations could be focused on any topic (justice, the environment, political advocacy, etc.), most essentially followed the megachurches' "separate spheres"⁵³ model of women's ministries, restricting women to speaking only to women. And while this women-only focus was market gold, it rarely earned these women the national brand recognition that male senior pastors could achieve simply by being male senior pastors.

As we will see in these pages, the presence of women in megaministry reflected the advantages of power—effectively inventing roles ideally suited to the women at the helm—or subjecting them to the whims of theological communities with capitalist logics. For instance, scripture tells women to be modest,⁵⁴ and the American fashion industry reminds them to be spectacularly beautiful, so women on stage must look flawless in a tea-length skirt. Church tradition says women are subject to their husbands, and American culture privileges egalitarianism, so women should be on stage, but a step behind their husbands. There were endless variations on this theme, as women publicly negotiated the freedoms and constraints each context afforded them. And, of course, as in any market, only the very lucky, clever, or stubborn would endure.

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