
Faith Matters: Women heard, heeded calling to do more to care for downtrodden

By David Waters

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Neither Elaine had any idea where in God's name her faith would take her. They were just following instructions.

"When the Lord is speaking to you, nothing else matters," said Elaine Sanford, a marketing executive who felt a call to work with women in prison and found herself helping the homeless.

"God brings us here to help each other," said Elaine Blanchard, a nurse and chaplain who opened her heart to the homeless and ended up working with women in prison.

Blanchard was ordained by First Congregational Church in 2000. Sanford will be ordained later this month at Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church.

But their ministries have nothing to do with pulpits and ordination papers.

One day in 2004, Elaine Sanford was at work when she got a message from the Lord.

"I didn't hear a voice, but I felt it, and it was saying, 'Elaine, you will go to the prison,'" Sanford said.

Sanford didn't know anyone in prison, and she wasn't in any trouble. She thought maybe she'd gotten the message wrong; maybe it just meant she wasn't doing enough to help others.

She was teaching Sunday school at Greater Middle Baptist Church, but she could do more. So she got up from her desk and told her assistant, Dolores Asberry, they were going to visit nursing homes.

At each home, Sanford asked if they needed a volunteer Sunday school teacher. They didn't.

"Did the Lord tell you to go to a nursing home?" Asberry asked her when they were done visiting.

"Not exactly," Sanford replied.

A few days later, Sanford found her way to Shelby County's Adult Offender Center. She began leading a weekly Bible study and prayer service for female inmates. The experience opened her eyes and her heart.

"I believe God doesn't have any throwaway people," she said.

Still, she didn't feel like she was doing enough. She enrolled at Memphis Theological Seminary and began studying for ordination.

One day in 2008, Sanford was at church when she got another message from God. There was a young woman sitting in the parking lot in the car in which she was living with her two children.

"It was Sunday. It was Easter. It was cold. The woman had a real bad cough. She had two little kids." Sanford said.

"I couldn't just leave them alone."

Sanford spent much of the day searching for a shelter that could take the young mother and her kids.

"I couldn't find one that didn't have a waiting list," she said. "Then God said, 'Elaine, you have a house.'"

She did. Her sons had just moved out of a house she and her husband owned in Frayser. The utilities were on. There was a bed, a kitchen and food in the fridge.

Elaine took the mother and her children to the house. They stayed for more than a year while the woman found a job and got back on her feet.

In the process, the Sanfords' house became Her Place -- the core of Her Faith Ministries, a nonprofit organization that provides food, clothing, shelter, safety and stability for women who have lost their jobs, their providers or their family support systems.

"Elaine has a special calling from God to help the downtrodden, those who have made bad choices in life and those who are marginalized and mistreated by society," said Otis Sanford, her husband and former managing editor of The Commercial Appeal.

Some of the women at Her Place have made bad choices; others have been the victims of bad choices. All are expected to be making "reasonable progress in improving their situation" while they stay -- getting more education, finding a job, working their way to independence.

Most women stay six months to a year.

"There is no safety net for some women and children," Sanford said. "The government has limits. The church has to do more. God expects more from us."

Elaine Blanchard's messages from God came in story form.

It began with the story of a girl who grew up in the emotionally and spiritually abusive home of her fundamentalist pastor father. He called her "tubby" and "fatso" and even more demeaning names, even though she wasn't overweight. She thought everything enjoyable was sinful, that the devil was inside her.

One day, a high school classmate took her to a theater club meeting. She fell in love with the freedom of the stage.

"I'd always been the one who was left out, or kept out," Blanchard said. "I didn't think I mattered, to God or to anyone. Theater saved my life. It's where the healing began."

It hasn't ended.

Over the years, Blanchard has involved herself in the healing stories of others -- as an acute care nurse, a pastor in Denver, a director of religious education for another church in Memphis, and a faith-based storyteller.

"Elaine has that beautiful way of describing people and situations with both deep graciousness and brutal honesty," said Rev. Cheryl Cornish, pastor of First Congregational Church, where Blanchard was ordained.

"She encourages us to not be afraid of our failings, but to face them, to acknowledge them, and in that way, to become more human and more trusting of the power of grace and compassion in our lives."

Blanchard volunteered in public schools and told stories. She worked with homeless veterans and wrote their stories. She talked to people whose family members were losing their memories to dementia and Alzheimer's and helped remember their stories.

"I wondered whose voices needed to be heard? What Memphis voices have been most ignored or devalued?" she said.

"I got to thinking about the people in jail."

As a child, Blanchard had visited prisons with her parents, who took their organ and the Bible and led services inside the walls.

"We'd force the inmates to listen, sing old hymns and read Scripture," Blanchard said. "What choice did they have?"

In January 2010, she called the Shelby County Division of Corrections and asked if she could bring a different sort of ministry to the prison. She wanted to sit in a circle with 12 women inmates, listen to their stories and teach them to tell their own.

Out of those four-month sessions came "Prison Stories" -- a play written by the inmates and performed inside and outside the prison by Blanchard and other actors.

The women tell stories of abuse and neglect, illness and addiction, homelessness and violence.

"It's hard to dehumanize a person when you know their story, and it's hard not to be human when you're telling your story to someone who's listening," Blanchard said.

"It sets you free."

Elaines' Ministries

Elaine Sanford, founder and president of Young-Sanford Marketing & Media Services,

is also founder of Her Faith Ministries. Learn more at herfaithministries.org.

Elaine Blanchard, a chaplain for Aseracare Hospice, is a storyteller, actor and author. Learn more about her work at elaineblanchard.com.



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