

**FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION:**

**30 YEARS OF ALLIANCE OF BAPTISTS' CLERGYWOMEN ON THE INTERSECTION OF  
PREACHING THE MAGNIFICAT AND THEIR BAPTIST IDENTITY**

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## **Part One: Introduction to the Project**

Baptist women in ministry have faced an uphill climb for as long as Baptist women have been in ministry. However, since the inception of the Alliance of Baptists in 1987, women in ministry have been affirmed and their voices celebrated. As the organization has grown, so has the presence of women in pulpits and pastorates across the United States. The work of liberation and singing songs of resistance has been always been a part of the Alliance's story and an integral part of the Alliance's covenant. The intersection of those songs with core Baptist theology has brought to light new ways of considering Baptist identity. Specifically, Alliance of Baptists' women clergy identify strongly with Mary's song in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, the Magnificat.

This paper engages the Magnificat as a formational text for six Alliance of Baptists' women preachers. All of these women relate the Magnificat to elements of their own Baptist identity. Their interpretations of the Magnificat highlight themes of Baptist identity, including embodiment in preaching, power and agency in the act of proclamation, and the principle of freedom. For many women clergy in Baptist life, their bodies have been seen as problematic.<sup>1</sup> However, when preaching Mary's Magnificat, a song that Mary sang when her body was seen as problematic by the larger religious world, these Baptist women grasped their full embodiment with power as sermons flowed from their lips and their hearts. They believed God had looked with favor on them, as they are created by God.

Agency and freedom are also strong themes that resonate throughout the conversations about identity. The Alliance of Baptists' covenant, an influential document for each of the women came about in a time when a small group of Baptists had to sing about what they

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<sup>1</sup>Judith Bledsoe Bailey, *Strength for the Journey: Feminist Theology and Baptist Women Pastors* (Richmond: Center for Baptist Heritage and Studies, 2015), 176-177.

believed—in the midst of a swirling, powerful Baptist entity—the Southern Baptist Convention. When Baptist women preach the Magnificat, they do so in conversation with their Baptist identity. As women preach this text, in general, they tell the story of Mary as a woman and her own agency and power. As New Testament scholar, Sharon Ringe points out, “It is important to recognize how the framing celebration of God’s mercy and the center describing a reversal of fortunes interpret each other. Within the frame of God’s mercy, the center loses any tone of vengeance or triumphalism.”<sup>2</sup> In Luke, Mary sings,

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” (Luke 1:46–55 NRSV).

Considering that Mary’s trip to visit her cousin Elizabeth and her song of God’s faithfulness passed down from one generation to another, I identified women preachers within the Alliance of Baptists who I thought would want to share their stories and their sermons. The Alliance of Baptists celebrated its 30th anniversary on February 12, 2017, and these women represent a shared commitment to the organization from its birth to the most recent celebrations of life.

These generational perspectives sing of God’s faithfulness from the pregnancy, birth, and growth of this group of Baptists. Through conversations with women clergy, common threads emerged that pointed toward themes of identification of calling, participation in justice issues, and personal connection with the Magnificat as a song of liberation for Baptist clergywomen. This project amplifies voices that have been previously neglected in current research by

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 35.

providing a specific focus on Alliance of Baptists' women. There has been some work<sup>3</sup> conducted about women clergy after the breakup of the Southern Baptist Convention, but nothing specifically focusing on women within the Alliance of Baptists. It will also bring into conversation race, sexuality, gender, and identity, which previous studies have not named.

In the Alliance's conversations about Baptist identity, conversation focused on the core Baptist distinctives, as well as the Alliance covenant, which highlights those core distinctives and freedoms. The covenant guides the organization along the way as a type of lived, dynamic systematic theology. It was even used as a discussion piece of what needs updating—both the language of the “Lordship of Christ” and the notation of the use of binary language when referencing “ordaining male and female.”

Percentagewise, there are more Alliance of Baptists' congregational partners pastored by women than any other Baptist denomination. The Alliance also endorses more women to chaplaincy and pastoral counselor ministry than any other Baptist denomination.<sup>4</sup> Nearly 31 percent of Alliance of Baptists' congregational partners are pastored by women, compared to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at five percent, Baptist General Association of Virginia at two percent, and the Baptist General Convention of Texas not even at one half of one percent. Female clergy have found a home in the Alliance of Baptists and found empowerment from Mary's song. We will examine the history of the Alliance that led to such a welcoming, the stories of individual women, and the implications of their stories on the connection between Baptist identity and the preaching of the Magnificat.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth H. Flowers, *Into the Pulpit* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Pam Durso and Kevin Pranato, “Baptist Women in Ministry: State of Women in Baptist Life Report 2015” (paper presented at the annual meeting of Baptist Women in Ministry, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, June 26, 2016).

## **Part Two: The Alliance of Baptists in the World**

Upon the birth of the Alliance of Baptists, the support of women in ministry emerged as one of its key emphases. The covenant of the Alliance of Baptists would serve as the guiding document, which both explored Baptist distinctives or freedoms, and affirmed women who preached. These Baptist freedoms would be what women pointed to and connected with as they considered their calls to preach. Over the course of Baptist history, the term “Baptist distinctives” emerged as one way to describe the tenets of what it means to be Baptist. Soul freedom, religious liberty, priesthood of the believer, autonomy of the local church, and believer’s baptism are distinguishing characteristics held by Baptists in England in the early seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup>

However, as Baptist historian, Bill Leonard points out, trying to narrow down these distinctives, or define into any unifying type of consensus is nearly impossible. “From their beginnings in seventeenth-century Europe, Baptists have demonstrated beliefs and practices so diverse as to make it difficult to compile a consistent list of distinctives applicable to all segments of the movement at time.”<sup>6</sup> This idea of existing within a plurality of Baptist opinions has always functioned as a strength for Baptists and a place for conversation and dissent.

The Alliance of Baptists formed as a prophetic voice in Baptist life in 1987 with 33 individual founders—30 men and three women. In its earliest days, the movement self-identified as an “Exodus people singing a liberation song.” As the organization formed, they sought justice and core Baptist liberating freedoms as they left and in some cases, were forced to leave the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC was going through what Baptists who left would call

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<sup>5</sup> Leon McBeth, “Baptist Beginnings,” The Baptist History and Heritage Society Blog, 1979, accessed November 12, 2016, <http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistorigins/baptistbeginnings.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 1.

“the fundamentalist takeover.” From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, the operating procedures and theology of the SBC swung quickly to the right. As Alliance founder Alan Neely, would say, “History will record, I believe, that this was a struggle for the soul of what it means to be Baptist.”<sup>7</sup>

SBC annual meetings during this period were characterized by the silencing of women, votes happening in secret, and maneuvering to elect only those from the fundamentalist group. Southern Baptist seminaries were firing female faculty, forcing professors to sign statements of faith, and not allowing female students to take preaching classes. The issue of women in ministry and autonomy of the local church became the two most discussed issues at the time. Women had been ordained within Southern Baptist Churches since Addie Davis at Watts Street Baptist Church, Durham, North Carolina in 1964. What has continued to be common in Baptist life is that although Davis was ordained in an SBC church, she had to go to the American Baptist Churches USA, to find a pastoral position in Vermont.<sup>8</sup>

At the formation of the Alliance of Baptists, women were removed from all roles of leadership within the SBC, including denominational leadership, some churches, and all seminaries.<sup>9</sup> The issue of Baptist identity for women clergy was on the forefront of Baptist-wide discussions and had immediate, hard-hitting ramifications for those involved. This attention to women and women’s bodies being excluded from the pulpit and pastoral roles echoes through the generations of Baptist life and impacts the awareness of the younger generation’s calling. These theological and ecclesial issues, like autonomy of the local church, priesthood of the believer, and soul freedom had far ranging impacts on the state of Baptist life and women

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Neely, *Being Baptist Means Freedom*, (Charlotte: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1988), vi.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Frances Anders, “Tracing Past and Present,” in *The New Has Come*, ed. Anne Thomas Neil (Washington: Southern Baptist Alliance, 1989), 18.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

ministers. Birthed from schism, and what many would call an oppressive regime of the Southern Baptist Convention, members of the Alliance did and sometimes continue identify as “an exodus people, a justice people, a movement people.”<sup>10</sup>

The founders agreed that the Alliance needed a guiding document of principles and what came to be was the covenant. The founders felt the need to sing truth to power—echoing the tradition of the prophet Mary. The Alliance of Baptists’ covenant, as adopted in 1987 reads:

In a time when historic Baptist principles, freedoms, and traditions need a clear voice, and in our personal and corporate response to the call of God in Jesus Christ to be disciples and servants in the world, we commit ourselves to:

- 1) The freedom of the individual, led by God's Spirit within the family of faith, to read and interpret the Scriptures, relying on the historical understanding by the church and on the best methods of modern biblical study;
- 2) The freedom of the local church under the authority of Jesus Christ to shape its own life and mission, call its own leadership, and ordain whom it perceives as gifted for ministry, male or female;
- 3) The larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions, and to a cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the Gospel;
- 4) The servant role of leadership within the church, following the model of our Servant Lord, and to full partnership of all of God's people in mission and ministry;
- 5) Theological education in congregations, colleges, and seminaries characterized by reverence for biblical authority and respect for open inquiry and responsible scholarship;
- 6) The proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the calling of God to all peoples to repentance and faith, reconciliation and hope, social and economic justice;
- 7) The principle of a free church in a free state and the opposition to any effort either by church or state to use the other for its own purposes.<sup>11</sup>

Anne Thomas Neil, long-time member of the Alliance and former SBC missionary and proponent of women in ministry said upon reading the covenant, “I read these seven principles and then I read them again. I knew I had been waiting since my early childhood for this moment. To be honest, I never expected to see the formation of such a community of faith in my

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<sup>10</sup> Keith Menhinick, “My Kind of People,” *The Alliance of Baptists Blog*, April 27, 2015, accessed January 6, 2017, [http://allianceofbaptists.org/PCP/alliance\\_blog\\_detail/aobgathering-my-kind-of-people-by-keith-a.-menhinick](http://allianceofbaptists.org/PCP/alliance_blog_detail/aobgathering-my-kind-of-people-by-keith-a.-menhinick).

<sup>11</sup> “Alliance of Baptists’ Covenant” Alliance of Baptists, last modified April 2013, accessed November 2, 2016, [http://allianceofbaptists.org/OurAlliance/covenant\\_and\\_mission](http://allianceofbaptists.org/OurAlliance/covenant_and_mission).

lifetime.<sup>12</sup> As the story goes, a sub-committee drafted the Covenant and when brought to the founders, only three words were changed in the entire document. The membership heartily approved it at the annual meeting.<sup>13</sup> This risk of leaving their Baptist home and all that was familiar—because of principles, paved the way for the concept of taking risk to be a huge theme through the life of the Alliance. One of the Alliance founders, Walker Knight of Atlanta, Georgia, said, “the Alliance formed around principles and has remained principle focused. And if we don’t remain principle focused, then there’s no reason to exist.”<sup>14</sup> These principles have been the guide for the organization throughout its 30 years. Andrew Gardner writes in *Reimagining Zion*,

This organization created a space for theologically marginalized Baptists to participate and thrive in denominational life. The organization’s history is permeated with an inclusiveness and hospitality that reaches out in partnership to disenfranchised female ministers, members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, radical Baptists in Cuba, after-school programs on the South Side of Chicago, and many more.<sup>15</sup>

The inclusiveness and hospitality from the birth of the organization connected with marginalized Baptist women who were searching for a place to be ordained and serve as ministers. Although the issue of women’s ordination was supported and even one of the most energizing reasons behind the creation of the Alliance, the day-to-day work of supporting women did not always demonstrate full support. In the early days, there were discussions about how to support women fully and not use them “as a prop upon which the Alliance stood.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Gardner, *Reimagining Zion: A History of the Alliance of Baptists* (Macon: Nurturing Faith, 2015), 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> Paula Clayton Dempsey (director of partnership relations, Alliance of Baptists) in discussion with the author, November 1, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Gardner, 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

Nancy Hastings Sehested and Susan Lockwood—two Alliance founders were key in this move toward equity within the Alliance. They pursued discussions with the board of directors, led workshops at the annual gathering, and ensured that women were always in leadership in worship and preaching situations. Their faithfulness and dedication, alongside Anne Thomas Neil and many others, ensured that women in ministry were truly a valued and supported part of the Alliance of Baptists.

### **Part Three: Introduction to the Preachers and their Sermons**

The six preachers selected to participate in this study range from founders of the Alliance of Baptists to those born after the Alliance was created. Their commitment has stretched from generation to generation. This commitment has called them to examine the intersection of Baptist identity, preaching liberation and embodiment of their call. Each story is incredibly unique and intersectional with other stories. Through the particularity of their stories, we learn of certain universal aspects of women clergy in Baptist life.

#### **Nancy Hastings Sehested**

Co-pastor Circle of Mercy Church, Asheville, N.C.

Age 65

*“Expect resistance but do not let that hinder you from fully claiming who God has called you to be. Remember we are able to move forward because there have been many women who have sacrificed before us. We don’t know all their names, but we know they paved the way. Unheralded women continue to create the space to sing forth our songs of courage and hope with Mary.”*

-Nancy Hastings Sehested<sup>17</sup>

Nancy Hastings Sehested, co-pastor at Circle of Mercy Congregation in Asheville, North Carolina, and an Alliance of Baptists’ founder, speaks to the promise of God’s presence in the above quote and the promise of God’s calling on the lives of women. Sehested was there from

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<sup>17</sup> Nancy Hastings Sehested (Alliance of Baptists founder, clergy) in discussion with the author, October 26, 2016.

the very moment of conception of this organization we now refer to as the Alliance and served as president from 1996-1998. Remembering the days of the schism from the SBC and the foundation of the Alliance, she explained, “We were a renegade group that felt disenfranchised. We were meeting in small groups all over the place—in gatherings around SBC annual meetings and in late night meetings. The seeds for the Alliance started in those gatherings where we felt like we were exiles.”<sup>18</sup>

As one of the founders of the Alliance, Sehested helped to create the covenant. Of the 33 founders, there were only three women in that group. As she recalls, it was not easy in the beginning to move on the issue of women in ministry. The Alliance affirmed women in ministry but some of the founders didn’t see the need to have it stated in the covenant. “That line about the mutual partnership of women and men was born out of that historical moment. Even men who were ordaining women would say things like ‘What, don’t you trust us? Do we really need to include this in the covenant?’”<sup>19</sup>

Nancy Hastings Sehested grew up in a Baptist family so she says Baptist was the name that happened to be hers. Although Baptist life is full of scoundrels and saints, she said, she still felt that what was near and dear to her and her identity were the Baptist distinctives of soul freedom and priesthood of the believer. Her devotion to the Bible and the stories therein helped her claim her identity. “The centrality of the Bible is that we claim the story. I caught the story growing up. I’ve given up on the Church a few times, but I’ve never given up on the story. I caught the story and the story caught me.”<sup>20</sup> Being caught up in the wildness and vastness of the story, also gave her the powerful understanding about missions that in her words, “we give

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

ourselves sacrificially in a servant role to those who are not people of privilege and power.”<sup>21</sup>

That’s part of her understanding of the good news and also laced with understandings from the gospel of Luke. “I joined the other founders in longing to be a part of a Baptist movement for peace and justice, one that clearly claimed our servant role in bringing good news to those who are poor.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1978, she graduated from Union Theological Seminary in New York and she knew she wanted to pastor, but unsure where she might find a church that would call a woman. She was ordained in 1981 at Oakhurst Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia, and preached there regularly. She said, “At first it felt awkward to stand in the pulpit to preach. It was strange for all of us, really. Cultural conditioning can do that to us. However, it was also a historical moment and women were finding their way into pulpits around the country. Even in the awkwardness, it felt right, in a justice-sense.”<sup>23</sup> For Sehested, it was a leap of courage just to stand in the pulpit. She was called to pastor Prescott Memorial Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee, in 1987 and it was there she began to hone her preaching voice. She was greatly affirmed by the congregation, even though they suffered during the takeover of the SBC. She recalls little girls asking her if boys could preach, as their new model in ministry was a woman. She also remembers that if she preached a particularly tough passage— such as from the prophet Jeremiah, she would receive chicken casseroles the next week because people thought she needed to be cheered up. They were not accustomed to hearing a woman offer the challenging words of a biblical prophet. Soothing words were more the social norm for the public words from women.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Nancy Hastings Sehested has always felt a connection with Mary and the Magnificat and has preached many sermons in her career on the Lukan passage. She has likened the context of Mary's song to herself, the Church, and the Alliance of Baptists. Throughout her career she witnessed various power dynamics in the church and in society. People sometimes think of Mary as powerless, Sehested said. She lived in a violent and hostile world, and yet she courageously lived her call with all that was within her.<sup>24</sup> In her earliest sermons, Sehested felt kinship with Mary, a young woman stepping up against powerful forces resistant to God's vision. But she lived into the hope every time she stepped into a pulpit or pastoral role. Mary calls Sehested back to herself. There have been times when she has questioned her Baptist identity. She wondered where else she could go, but everywhere she looked there were also problems for women in ministry. "Throughout my years of ministry, the most hateful and hostile words that have come my way have been from Baptists. But also some of the most loving, courageous, beautiful people that I know have been Baptist."<sup>25</sup> The Alliance of Baptists has always been small. At times, it has struggled with its size. Sehested reflects, "The Alliance always been small and yet always had power. What does that look like when we feel inadequate? It looks like Alliance people who are incarnating God's radical story of love, like Mary. It looks like gospel to me."<sup>26</sup> In her sermon, "Hopes and Fears," from December 2014 on the Magnificat at Circle of Mercy, Sehested preached,

The hopes and fears of all the years burst forth in this song. Mary discovered that she mattered to God. Us too? Just when we think that our tiny life could not possibly matter in the ways that might matter against the horrors of Herod times...the Mischief-Maker shows up with divine design to give us a part to play. Our faith is not a message until it's an experience. It is first birthed in us through body and soul. Mary's 'yes' was a journey of love incarnated in the mess and miracle of a Herod-world. Our hope is still for a world

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

without the horrors of Herod. Such a hope requires all the love that is within us. God's still in the birthing room and all's wild with the world."<sup>27</sup>

Nancy Hastings Sehested's "yes" helped birth the Alliance of Baptists and generations of Baptist women preachers and her benediction to her Baptist women preacher colleagues is: "The surprises of God's Spirit are still bringing new life amid the miracle and mess of it all and we are bodying forth the good news of God's transforming love."

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### **Isabel Docampo**

Associate Director of the Intern Program; Professor of Supervised Ministry, Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas  
Age 60

*"Mary was speaking to the way religion has been co-opted by the Roman Empire. Religion had become institutionalized and oppressive to many. Mary gives us a moment in time where we don't have to accept the status quo. We don't have to live there. God is at work. God does not forget; God is with us. This is an opportunity to reimagine life together and life with God."*

—Isabel Docampo<sup>28</sup>

Isabel Docampo remembers being typically the only woman in her preaching classes in the early 1980s at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. At that time, women were still welcome to take preaching classes, but fewer and fewer women were signing up. In her undergraduate work, there were only three women in the biblical studies program at Louisiana College. Growing up in Louisiana, with parents who emigrated from Cuba, Isabel was always aware of her identity and how she never quite felt at home where she was. As a little girl, whose parents didn't speak English, struggled to provide a home, and navigate the culture in the United States, she was ever aware of how she was often seen as an outsider in the United States. Her father was functionally illiterate and her mother worked hard to get her GED.

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<sup>27</sup> Nancy Hastings Sehested, "Hopes and Fears" (Sermon preached at Circle of Mercy Congregation, Asheville, North Carolina, December 21, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Isabel Docampo (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 26, 2016.

Isabel lived as a bridge-builder between her home and her world, her childhood Baptist church, and herself. Reflecting she said, “I live a bit uneasy in a world of middle class. One whose life has been spent working with refugees and immigrants, I can always see both sides. My identity doesn’t escape me and being the bridge is tiring. Being of both worlds, but not be of either is exhausting. Yet, it also gives me enormous insights.”<sup>29</sup> After seminary, in 1982, Docampo was appointed as a home missionary for the Southern Baptist Convention through the Home Missionary Board. She returned to Louisiana, working with Latino, Cambodian, and Vietnamese refugees, and attending her Broadmoor Baptist Church, a predominantly white, English-speaking church. She remembers trying to claim her pastoral identity in Home Missionary Board meetings and that people were constantly trying to strip her of it as the takeover was in full force in Louisiana. Paradoxically, she also experienced enormous support from other leaders and laity that led to her ordination at Broadmoor Baptist Church in Baton Rouge in 1985. This occurred at the same time women were in the crossfire of the larger battles of women in ministry. A few years after that, she lost her job as the fundamentalists took over the SBC and Home Mission Board.

At about the same time, Docampo started receiving mailings and seeing reports in the Louisiana Baptist newspaper about the formation of the Southern Baptist Alliance. The news of this gave her hope and upon a move to Washington, D.C., she met with Stan Hasteley and Jeannette Holt, the directors of the organization. She was piecing together ministry work through a local retirement home, the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, and was always paying attention to what was happening with the Alliance. Docampo’s Cuban heritage became connected to the Alliance of Baptists when Stan Hasteley asked her to read a letter from the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba (FIBAC), an Alliance ministry partner. They had just learned at that time, that FIBAC wanted the Alliance to come for a visit and in 1996, she visited with Stan Hastey. Isabel Docampo has made several partnership trips to Cuba to visit with the Fraternity there and in 1999, Paco Rodes, executive director of FIBAC and pastor of First Baptist Church, Matanzas invited her to preach in the worship service. Her text that morning was the Magnificat and she struggled with how to preach it—as a Baptist woman and as a Cuban-American. She had never preached the Magnificat before and she realized she hadn't preached in Spanish in a long time. She was used to preaching in English and realized in that that moment that she had work to do surrounding her own identity.

“I was handwriting the text and so aware of who the audience was in Matanzas. I was in a communist state. People cannot be motivated to rise up and protest government! I was worried that I might jeopardize the ministry. So, I asked Paco what I should do. He said, ‘You preach what God has put on your heart, don’t worry about us.’”<sup>30</sup> The Magnificat, in that context in Cuba, was about remembering and not forgetting people who are isolated and caught up in occupation without having to put anyone at risk. She could not mute the power of Mary’s song, but she could be smart about nuance. She saw the text as a personal story of a woman being remembered and chosen as well as her people being remembered and chosen. “In this Magnificat,” Docampo said, “you have liberation personally and communally. In this Magnificat, you have the intersection of oppression and liberation—it speaks of both.”<sup>31</sup> It served as the text at the crux of the moment of identity for Isabel. Always a supporting member of the Alliance of Baptists, Docampo has served on committees, the board of directors, and most recently, served as chair of the Annual Gathering Planning Committee in 2016, which gathered

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

in St. Louis. The theme of the gathering, under her guidance was “Bearing Courage: Rooted in Hope” and featured the stories of women and all three worship services featured women preachers: Traci Blackmon, Phyllis Tribble, and Kyndall Rothaus.

Like most Baptists who lived through the split with the SBC, Isabel Docampo has questioned whether to remain Baptist. She ended up saying, “I’m Baptist. If I’m going to live out this call, this is where I’m going to live it out. I identify with the Alliance of Baptists because it is progressive and the covenant speaks to me. It best captures my identity and faith values on church polity and doctrine.”<sup>32</sup> She works at Southern Methodist University and attends a United Methodist Church and still considers herself Baptist through and through. To stand in a pulpit as an ordained Baptist women, Docampo believes she is a witness to freedom and liberation. As she stands there, God is breaking down barriers and weaving freedom with grace. As a Baptist woman, she reflects on Mary’s voice and her own preaching voice. “Mary is the one that’s chosen and given voice. Her voice is strong. This is explicitly about women being chosen, having strength, being blessed, and into the light and anointing of God.”

And when Docampo speaks about it, a feminist, mujerista theologian herself, she notes that when Mary sings she sings as an indigenous person. “The Magnificat helps the indigenous person, the lowest of the low. Mary was a Palestinian Jew. She was indigenous to the land, which was now occupied and she was at the bottom. In her context, an indigenous woman would never have this platform. But Mary did. And she sang of the Divine’s faithfulness and of her own power.”<sup>33</sup> Mary’s power came from knowing her God, her identity, and still singing to the powers of the day. Isabel Docampo’s benediction to her Baptist women preacher colleagues is, “My soul magnifies the Lord...God has regard for the humble state, of this, God’s servant. We

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

are endowed with all that God needs. The misogyny cannot take that away from us and so I exalt my God.”

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**April Baker**

Pastor, Glendale Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee

Age 53

*“Mary sings not that God will do these things, but that God has done them, is doing them, even now. We could take that song and sing it and listen to it and delve into its words and lines and beauty for the entire season of Advent.”*

—April Baker<sup>34</sup>

In 1988, April Baker helped form the student chapter of the Southern Baptist Alliance at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. As a seminary student, she had become connected to the formation of the Alliance as it happened just down the road in Winston-Salem and she and other students were paying close attention to the newness of this organization within Baptist life. The Alliance presence on campus as the fundamentalists took over control of her seminary raised awareness and provided connections with faculty and folks outside of the campus with others doing the same type of dissent and proclamation. The Alliance covenant especially, rang true for Baker. She sees it as “good news from top to bottom.” When she was finishing her degree, and looking for a place to serve, the covenant was a song of hope, when every door she thought possible was slamming shut.<sup>35</sup> April Baker looked to the generations before her to receive encouragement and wisdom. One of her sources of inspiration was Nancy Hastings Sehested. Sehested came and preached at Southeastern in chapel while Baker was a student and soon after that Sehested was called to pastor in Memphis.

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<sup>34</sup> April Baker (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 19, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Since seminary, Baker's involvement with the Alliance of Baptists has continued. She's attended annual gatherings and most recently, served two terms on the board of directors as vice president from 2012-2016. And she still sees the covenant as good news. "When we say the covenant together, it makes it a living document because a body of people are speaking the words and making it living. It does something to us. It reinterprets it every time the body gathers. We leave the time together and go, living and affirming who we are."<sup>36</sup> Those days after seminary proved difficult in finding a ministry position in a church. She was ordained at Second Baptist Church, Kershaw, S.C., and would occasionally receive invitations to "speak, not preach" at local Women's Missionary Union events or retreats. Baker said she always accepted those events because she wanted little girls to see women in the pulpit.

In 2002, she was called to Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville as associate pastor. When April Baker was called as pastor at Glendale, two local Baptist bodies sent over messengers to meet with the church. They were informing Glendale that they could no longer be in fellowship with them because the church had called April Baker, a woman and a lesbian. The delegation insinuated that Glendale should fire her. The church did not fire her and in fact, two and a half years later, she was called to serve as co-pastor with Amy Mears, who was also recently called to that position from outside Glendale. When asked about why she's still Baptist, she said, "Well, why not be Baptist? Free church with opportunities and freedoms is our tradition. Being called at Glendale is evidence of that."<sup>37</sup>

The Magnificat has spoken to April Baker over her career about her embodied place in proclaiming this gospel, "The Magnificat speaks most clearly to me about the powerful voice of someone who is not allowed to have a voice. Some of that for me is from being female and from

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

being lesbian. I came into the calling not as the first generation of Baptist women and so I did not have to deal with some of the issues as others, like Nancy [Hastings Sehested] and Anne [Thomas Neil] did.”

April Baker specifically remembers the Sunday in December she preached her sermon, “The Mystery You Behold,” at Glendale. She sat on the front pew of the church between two acolytes, both girls. Mia, was careful to tend to her partner, Meghan, who has Down Syndrome. April sat on the pew, with her arms around both girls, as the Magnificat was read from the pulpit and she sat there, watching as the two cared for one another, drawing a comparison between Elizabeth and Mary. As she stepped into the pulpit that day, the image of Mia and Meghan lingered with her. “There Mary finds open arms and a warm embrace [with Elizabeth]. She finds someone who delights in her presence and calls her a blessing—not a burden, not a disgrace, not a nobody—a blessing, even to the very one from whom she seeks refuge,” she preached. “Mary’s song pours out of her soul; how can she keep from singing?” Baker continued. “God has considered her state and looked upon her with favor. What seemed utterly unbelievable until this very minute now flows from her heart as though it has already happened.”<sup>38</sup>

Being called blessed by God and being used by God is sung gospel to April Baker. “There is the confidence of spirit that dwells within me. It’s not that something will happen, but that it is happening. There is an all-of-time sense to the calling of God and once I had a sense of my own calling to pastoral ministry and awareness of my sexual orientation and chose not to live hidden. This text gave me power.”<sup>39</sup> She is aware that she embodies a broader sense of what a

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<sup>38</sup> April Baker, “The Mystery You Behold” (Sermon Preached, Glendale Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, December 20, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> April Baker (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 19, 2016.

preacher is, of what proclamation is, of what God’s word is when it comes from a different voice and body, especially one that has been systematically excluded from pulpits.

Her benediction for her fellow Baptist women preachers is, “Use your voice and sing the song that’s in your heart. When you’ve encountered the holy, there is something of yours to bear in the world. So, do it. Do it through art, preaching, kindness, presence. Sing it.”<sup>40</sup>

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**Kyndra D. Frazier**

Associate Pastor of Pastoral Care and Counseling at First Corinthian Baptist Church, New York City

Age 35

*“Mary had this relational experience with the Divine that made her transcend her own interpretations of her identity and see herself anew. My work is to continue to see myself anew so I can provide a safe place for people to land where they can see themselves anew everyday.”*  
—Kyndra Frazier<sup>41</sup>

“Why Baptist? We should start with why I’m Christian!” Kyndra Frazier said when reflecting on how she’s landed amid Baptist life. When Frazier encountered the Alliance of Baptists, she was a student at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. She had grown up with a strong family and a committed connection to the Church of God denomination. And while quite different from Church of God, she had been attending a church in Atlanta that integrated metaphysics, Christianity, and African Traditional religion when she found herself wanting a different context of ministry. She knew her theology was progressive and at times, she had challenges identifying as Christian because of the oppression it has perpetrated over the course of history. During Frazier’s time of discernment, at the invitation of a friend, another Candler student, she began attending Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, one of the founding churches of the Alliance of Baptists.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Kyndra D. Frazier (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 31, 2016.

Frazier is a life-long learner, constantly questioning, reading, and engaging with the world around her. As she learned about the Alliance she found a theological home—one where she affirms the covenant and finds the freedom to push against it at the same time. “A lot of what we made our commitments to,” she said, “is individual freedom.” Because she places value on relational experience with the Divine, these freedoms transcend dogma and legalism. The freedom of the individual is valued and affirmed. In addition to the freedom of the individual, it was one of the first places where she felt she could live into her full, created identity. She is helping advise a task group on discernment around the current language in the covenant including binary gender references and references to imperial language surrounding the Lordship of Christ. “The commitment of the Alliance to work around racial justice, gender equality, and LGBTQ advocacy is important to me. This is wonderful for someone who thought she would never be able to participate fully as an African American Woman and identify as lesbian, as queer.”<sup>42</sup> She was later ordained at Oakhurst Baptist Church in 2012 and went through the clergy recognition process with the Alliance of Baptists.

When growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, Kyndra Frazier’s ever-present sources of inspiration came to her especially from the strong women in her life. In the Church of God, there were lots of examples of women preaching. Her great-grandmothers helped charter her family church 115 years ago. Her maternal grandmother would bring Frazier with her to Bible studies in the “homes of the saints” as one of the only children. She remembers sitting and listening to these women discuss the scripture lesson. Women would lead prayers in these homes and anoint her hands as she played the piano. These women were involved in her spiritual development for as long as she could remember.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Kyndra Frazier’s mother has been her prayer partner since she was 18 and away at school. Her mother has gone on a long journey of accepting her daughter’s sexual orientation and moved to a place of accepting same-gender loving couples. “My mother’s evolution,” Frazier said, “exemplifies what it means to love unconditionally. So, what do I need to do to embrace her and others more fully? It’s a question I’m always asking.”<sup>43</sup> Kyndra Frazier sees her preaching as honoring these women and their presence in her life. This area of generational identity, especially, connects Frazier to the Magnificat in the gospel of Luke. She is reminded of what she believes was Mary’s faithfulness—to not be moved by external appearances—particularly when you have a divine internal revelation. The Magnificat speaks to her when it comes to honoring her call and her identity. Frazier came out based on a conversation she had with God. She remembers begging God to take away her queerness and that God never took it away. The answer that came to her, from God, she says, was “You’ve always been okay, but you never asked me.” She further stated, “I relied on external interpretations. This was a saving moment in my life.”<sup>44</sup>

For Kyndra Frazier to accept her full identity and stand behind a pulpit is powerful for her. It’s a gift to her and to the world to fully embrace her identity. “It’s still audacious to be in someone’s pulpit when people believe that you aren’t supposed to be preaching. But God transcends respectability politics, legalism, and religious dogma. We can’t allow people to get in the way of what God has called us to do and be in the world. That’s where Mary was. It’s powerful to see her transformation.”<sup>45</sup> Frazier ministers as the associate pastor of pastoral care and counseling at First Corinthian Baptist Church in Harlem. As she does, she works to

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

continually be aware of her own identity, so that she can continue to offer safe spaces where others can engage with their identities.

Kyndra Frazier’s benediction to her fellow Baptist preachers is, “Mary said yes to God and to herself. It’s a different thing when we say God accepts us, but we don’t accept ourselves. Mary gave herself a yes and it’s a celebration! So, women say YES to yourselves! Love yourselves!”

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**Maria Swearingen**

Co-pastor, Calvary Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.

Former Associate University Chaplain, Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina

Age 31

*“If we don’t sing this with love, then it’s not the gospel song. So, the enactment of a mother singing it while her child is brewing inside of her is emblematic of that.”*

—Maria Swearingen<sup>46</sup>

“I came into the world one kind of Baptist and came out another kind,” said Maria Swearingen when asked why she is Baptist. Because of the elasticity of what it means to be Baptist, she said, there has been space to be the fullness of herself and still be Baptist with other Baptists. “Clusters of people since the very beginning of Baptists have shared their understandings of Baptist identity. As long as those clusters exist, there continues to be space for me to be Baptist. We’ll gather around these ideas and principles and go live, go sing in the world.”<sup>47</sup> It’s this understanding of the freedom of claiming Baptist identity that strikes a strong chord within Maria Swearingen.

Swearingen was raised in Texas as the daughter of a Puerto Rican mother and a white, Southern Baptist pastor father. When she was 18 and beginning as a student at Baylor

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<sup>46</sup> Maria Swearingen (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 13, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

University, her understanding of Baptist identity looked very different. She says that she often looks at that tension and must live in the cognitive dissonance of knowing that both her understanding then and her understanding now, get to define what it means to be Baptist. The disruption she experienced while a student had a profound impact on her identity. “During the disruption is when you start looking at all of it. The disruption makes you look inward. Everyone needs to come out of something because disruption leads to transformation.”<sup>48</sup> At Baylor, she participated in the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core (BIC), an honors program, which disrupted the way she saw the world. It opened new doors and windows to the world. At times, she was also feeling the disruption, under the surface of exploring her sexual orientation, but looking further into that did not feel safe at the time. She was working to make sense of herself and her orientation. Inquisitive questions abounded during her college years.

From Baylor, Swearingen attended Duke Divinity School and graduated in 2010. Her first encounter with the Alliance of Baptists was in 2013 while a member at First Baptist Church (FBC), Greenville, South Carolina. She was invited to be on the planning team for the Alliance’s annual gathering that year. Maria had done a divinity school internship at FBC Greenville where she also met her wife. She was also ordained by the church in November 2015.

In 2013, the gathering was originally planned to be in Atlanta, but was moved due to a scheduling conflict and relocated to Greenville. The relocation held a deeper meaning though to both the Alliance and FBC Greenville. The 2005 gathering had to be relocated from FBC Greenville because of the Alliance’s stance on being welcoming and affirming to the LGBTQ community. FBC Greenville had some discomfort with the possibility of a lesbian preaching during that gathering. The return to FBC Greenville in 2013 was pregnant with meaning.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Swearingen remembers looking around the room during worship at the gathering in 2013, and seeing some of those who had been previously uninvited, now behind the pulpit. No one said anything about the presence of those previously excluded, but it's like everyone exhaled, she said. FBC Greenville came out in support of same-sex marriage in 2015. That was her introduction to the Alliance of Baptists and since then she has participated enthusiastically. She is currently chairing the 30th Anniversary Annual Gathering, taking place in Raleigh, N.C., in April 2017. "The Alliance is aware of its limits--it's predominantly white, but they are not blind about it. The Alliance is honest about what's aspirational and where they are not perfect, and then articulates who they hope to be."<sup>49</sup>

She thinks there's even a great connection between Mary, the Magnificat, and Baptists. "Here's the handmaiden, a servant, a regular old somebody becoming a priest. It's a very Baptist notion."<sup>50</sup> Her work as Assistant University Chaplain at Furman University was a laboratory for conversations on identity. Each Sunday when she stood before students, she was aware of the pain, questions, and joy that surrounded them. It was with that awareness that she preached two homilies, both at Advent Moravian Love feasts in 2013 and 2015 on the Magnificat. In her sermon, "God, the Caroler," from 2015, Swearingen preached,

This is no accident. This is the genius of Luke's gospel. This is the genius of Scripture, as a whole... It sings us away from violence and toward peace. It sings us out of brokenness and into right relationship with God and others. It sings us away from power and greed and empire and toward mutuality and forgiveness and wholeness.<sup>51</sup>

Maria Swearingen reflects that when singing the Magnificat, Mary feels invited to claim her identity. She uses it as her moment. Her story is transcribed on the larger story and that's a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Maria Swearingen, "God, the Caroler" (Sermon Preached, Daniel Chapel, Furman University, Greenville, South Carolina, December 6, 2015).

powerful invitation for everyone. “What does it mean for my embodied reality to take on and claim a portion of the text, a kind of identifying and lived incarnate reality?” Swearingen pondered. For her, Mary becomes dynamic expression of just that. She takes something older and deeper and wider than her and says this is about her and goes far beyond her at the same time. It is the deeply embodied and the deeply cosmic that can only come from God.

For Maria Swearingen, as a queer woman, Mary’s Magnificat and her embodied singing remind her that at the time, Mary’s body was also problematized sexually. Mary had been impregnated before marriage and she was no longer deemed acceptable in her society. Her body was the last one that would have been accepted as the one to sing a song such as this. Swearingen sees Mary’s singing as the good news. “She’s been problematized and she’s receiving this great gift and her body is the one singing out this great dismantling gospel to the world and for all time,” Swearingen said. “For me, to imagine my own body that’s been problematized and questioned as a body that gets to sing the Magnificat or my own version—that’s an ancient gift and I get to sing it back out to the world. That’s a big deal.”<sup>52</sup> And the Magnificat is calling the world to disruption that leads to a new identity—the upturning, uprooting, challenge found in Magnificat is Jesus’ love song to the world, she says.

The awareness of the embodied aspects of preaching strikes her frequently. She was preaching at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 2016 and she felt the seriousness and sacredness in the few seconds it took her to climb the stairs up into the grand pulpit there. She felt more connected to all those who had gone before her and paved the way for her in that sensory moment. She works to encourage young women who are called to ministry. She recently met with a young, queer, Baptist student who is discerning her call to ministry. In

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<sup>52</sup> Maria Swearingen (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 13, 2016.

those moments, she was reminded that it's a very thin place where possibility and opportunity meet for many people.

Maria Swearingen's benediction to her fellow Baptist women preachers is, "Disruption comes when you claim embodiment. As people problematize who you are based on your presence, keep singing. There is an ancient song that keeps showing up and you get to claim it."<sup>53</sup>

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**Molly Brummett Wudel**

Co-pastor, Emmaus Way, Durham, North Carolina  
Age 28

*"We are called and invited to dance and be about this good news. The place where the world has been made whole in such a way by Mary's song. It disrupts all of it and shakes us up. I need it."*  
—Molly Brummett Wudel<sup>54</sup>

Molly Brummett Wudel has always known part of her identity was the woman she was named after. She said, "It's strange growing up with parents who named me after Molly T. Marshall. This notion of being Baptist, being named after this significant Baptist theologian means that I was named to not be afraid to stand up to the powers that be."<sup>55</sup> She said her parents always told her, "Whatever you do professionally, we named you after her because she understands the good news of the gospel." Molly T. Marshall was one of the professors at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky who was systematically removed by fundamentalists on the Board of Trustees. A PBS documentary was even created about her story and journey, *Battle for Their Minds*.<sup>56</sup> She now serves as the president at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kansas. Living into the work her namesake, Molly

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Molly Brummett Wudel (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 12, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Steven Lipscomb, *Battle for the Minds*, Documentary, directed by Steven Lipscomb (1997; Louisville: PBS).

Brummett Wudel—born two years after the formation of the Alliance of Baptists—has always understood that being Baptist meant freedom.

Growing up in Tennessee, as a white Baptist female, she always knew about the Alliance as individuals in her home church supported the organization. But her entry point did not come until she attended divinity school at Wake Forest School of Divinity in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. While in school, Molly Brummett Wudel met Chris Copeland, who had previously been on staff as one of the co-directors of the Alliance. As she wrestled with whether to be ordained Baptist, she remembers a conversation she had with Chris. He advised her, “Molly, you are a trailblazer. It’s in your DNA and how you’re wired. You’re about justice and radical inclusion. The Alliance is a trailblazing group of Baptists. Those are your people.”

That sounded like good news to Brummett Wudel and so did the Alliance covenant. She said, “The attention to the proclamation of the good news and justice is the heart of who we are. I’m tired of apologizing and assumptions being made of what it means to be a Christian and to be Baptist. This covenant is the heart of it. It points to the radical love of God, open, expansive, and I’m not ashamed of that.”<sup>57</sup> She was later ordained in 2013 at First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Tennessee and called to an Alliance congregational partner, Knollwood Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, North Carolina as associate pastor. She currently serves as co-pastor at Emmaus Way Church in Durham, North Carolina, which as a congregation, does not identify with any denomination. Even though not serving in a Baptist church, she says Emmaus Way very clearly knows they called a female Baptist pastor. She continues in her Baptist tradition, even though questioning it as she goes and loves to sing the truth that Baptists came from the radical reformation. Being Baptist means standing on edges and bringing about justice in

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<sup>57</sup> Molly Brummett Wudel (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 12, 2016.

society—there’s no hierarchy informing us what to do and that is part of the beauty of being Baptist, she says.

This is part of what connects her to the Magnificat and to Mary. She is fascinated by Mary. “This idea of agency, of co-creation with God and living into this idea of ‘yes’ is good news to me. What would it look like if we read this as instead of God telling Mary what to do, that Mary is hearing a call and willingly choosing to say yes? How does that invite us into that call of revolution?” The Magnificat has shaped Molly in her ministry. It gives her the freedom to fully embrace who she is and the call as Christians to be about love and light in the world. She believes the Magnificat is a call to change the world. “If Mary could do it and go against so many societal judgments and structures, if she was brave enough to enter in and say yes, then I can too.”<sup>58</sup> Molly has said yes in various ways throughout her ministry, like choosing to preach.

Molly Brummett Wudel’s sermon on the Magnificat was preached in 2012 at Green Street United Methodist Church, the site of Molly’s internship placement during divinity school. It was during a summer sermon series on calling. In this sermon, “Mary: A Call to Revolution,” Molly Brummett Wudel proclaimed, “A revolution is a radical and pervasive change in society and the social structure; a marked change in something; a single turn of its kind. The Magnificat marked such a change. This song of Mary is more than a beautiful anthem we proclaim at Christmas. It is a revolutionary, prophetic song that gives voice to the call of God for her life and for ours.”<sup>59</sup> Brummett Wudel’s attention to the revolution Mary sparked with the Magnificat is revisited by her almost daily. She believes that Mary sings a constant invitation to engage in the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Molly Brummett Wudel, “Mary: A Call to Revolution” (Sermon Preached, Green Street United Methodist Church, Durham, North Carolina, July 15, 2012).

revolution of the kingdom some way, every day. Mary is as much a part of her as anyone, as a reminder and nudging of how she is called to bear God in the world, daily.

Molly Brummett Wudel’s benediction for her fellow Baptist female preachers is that, “We would willingly and boldly embrace the revolution of the Magnificat and dance in that truth in our whole beings, in the world, and in our churches. We would embody the Magnificat in all we do.”<sup>60</sup>

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#### **Part Four: Preachers in Conversation**

This project and these conversations delved into the deep waters of Baptist identity, the connection between sexuality, race, gender, and embodiment in space that was previously not a safe space and generational aspects of this call to preach. Through conversations with women who were around at the very founding of the Alliance of Baptists to those who were born after its founding, the power of the organization became apparent. Key themes that continued to resurface—as if these preachers were sitting around a table, in conversation with one another regarding their Baptist identities and preaching the Magnificat—were the importance of the freedom in being Baptist, embodiment as an act of gospel fulfillment, and the Magnificat as a call to agency, power, and revolution in their own lives and in the world.

##### *Freedom in Being Baptist*

Every preacher shared her struggle with wading through her Baptist identity. Some were born into the family and some joined later in life and ministry. What each preacher identified though, was the core commitment to Baptist freedoms. To be Baptist is to affirm each person’s

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<sup>60</sup> Molly Brummett Wudel (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 12, 2016.

individual freedom in relationship with God. As Molly Brummett Wudel said, “Baptists are scrappy. And keenly in tune to freedom of the individual.”<sup>61</sup>

This commitment to the freedom of being Baptist was fascinating given that the very aspect of committing to being Baptist also limited the ways in which each preacher could live out her call. They were systematically excluded from search committees, from pulpits, from positions, and even from reading scripture during worship services because of their gender. When layered with sexuality, the options became even less and the discrimination even more. Yet, this freedom is what each preacher returned to—as April Baker said, “Why not Baptist? We are a free church with opportunities and freedoms in our tradition.”<sup>62</sup>

The freedoms of the Alliance covenant were especially named, appreciated, and held close by the preachers—both the ones who helped craft the statement and the ones who received it years later. The freedom of individual interpretation of the Bible, of the local church, of participation with the wider world, of servant leadership, of theological education, of work for justice, and of a free church in a free state still sound like good news to the six preachers and part of the reason they find a theological home within the Alliance of Baptists.

### Embodiment

Each preacher identified the times they are keenly aware that their bodies represent more than just their bodies when they step into the pulpit. Women across all denominations deal with comments about haircuts, dress, jewelry, shoes, and nail polish,<sup>63</sup> but these questions of identity and embodiment point to something far more incarnational that has been systematically excluded.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> April Baker (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 19, 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Amy McCullough, “Her Preaching Body: A Qualitative Study of Agency, Meaning and Proclamation in Contemporary Female Preachers” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2012), 127-137.

As churches were restructuring and stabilizing upon the creation of the Alliance of Baptists, there was still great resistance to women in pulpits. There is still resistance in many Baptist churches to women preaching or being pastors. Even when churches are welcoming, the statistics are not high even though enrollment at seminaries across the country is about equal.<sup>64</sup> Each of their stories of preaching began with what they had to overcome to get to the place where they even had the opportunity to preach and put their bodies in a pulpit.

Nancy Hastings Sehested reflected on the fact that often her body was the first female body to be in pulpits. It was startling for people to have a woman there, proclaiming and in her words, awkward as congregants adjusted, as they became used to a woman's voice, a woman's body in the pulpit, where it had never been before. Isabel Docampo was aware that her identity as a Cuban-American Baptist woman limited the places where she was welcome to preach and live into her call—ranging from seminary preaching classes to her position of working with refugees. April Baker was repeatedly told that she didn't belong because of her gender and sexuality. Kyndra Frazier recounted how her queer body was not welcome in the pulpits she grew up in and many where she continued to attend. Maria Swearingen told us that her queer, female self was viewed as the problem as she preached—in the same way Mary's pregnant body was viewed as the problem to be dealt with as she sang. And Molly Brummett Wudel knew that even 30 years after the formation of the Alliance of Baptists, her body was still not as welcome as others. These are the challenges these women face with the embodied work they do.

But the beauty of the full embodied preaching they take part in overtakes the negative as they told their stories. As Isabel Docampo said, "To stand in that pulpit, I am a witness to freedom and liberation. I stand there, showing that God breaks all these barriers. It shows the

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<sup>64</sup> Durso and Pranato, 3.

unconditional *hesed* of God.”<sup>65</sup> April Baker feels the tension and notes the power of her identity and when preaching that, “sometimes you do not even have to say a word. Your presence in the pulpit is the embodied you and that preaches.”<sup>66</sup> Each preacher has examined what their presence in the pulpit means and claimed their embodiment as a gift from God, even while recognizing the culture might not welcome that embodied power.

### *Agency, Power, Revolution*

Commitment to Baptist freedoms and embodied preaching led these preachers to acknowledge how much the Magnificat pointed them back to their own agency and power as followers of God. “Being obedient to this call and those who have come before means we must preach. Baptist women must continue to claim space as pastors and preachers and not apologize for doing so,” says Molly Brummett Wudel.<sup>67</sup> This agency, power and revolution from Mary singing her Magnificat rang through all the preachers. Nancy Hastings Sehested said that in some of her most difficult and pain-filled moments, she would look to the generations before her—to the women preachers of the 19th century who were trying to do the same work as she with even less progress. They were still trying to get equal rights in civil society and in the Church. “But,” Sehested would remind herself, “we’re not going back this time and we will keep at it until this idea of women in ministry is as easy as breathing in and out.” She looks to those women before her in the same way women younger than her reflect on her faithfulness and commitment to not go backward.

This power that comes from connecting Baptist identity to agency as understood through the Magnificat means that each person gets to sing—or preach—in their own way. The freedoms

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<sup>65</sup> Isabel Docampo (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 26, 2016.

<sup>66</sup> April Baker (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 19, 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Molly Brummett Wudel (clergy) in discussion with the author, October 12, 2016.

that these six preachers named demonstrates the space where co-creating with God, as Molly Brummett Wudel points out, can occur. Mary claimed her space in her singing even though it would not have been given to her by the larger culture at the time.

Mary's call to revolution was another aspect the preachers all pointed to as they worked through understanding themselves and the larger Baptist world. If they were going to have a revolution within Baptist life, it started with themselves. Nancy Hastings Sehested was aware that 30 years ago, the reason women weren't finding places to serve is because the Church still held relative cultural power. Women would take whatever they could find in means of ministry positions—part-time, lousy-paying just to find their way into a church. But this was a form of agency and power. By using the means to which they had, they pastored and preached, although often called “ministering” and “teaching.” April Baker said it well, when she shared that she would accept every invitation to speak in front of WMU or Girls in Action meetings, because it meant that little girls would have a memory of a woman inhabiting a space usually reserved for a man. Little by little the barriers were breaking down and these women were changing what it looked like to be a pastor. The calls to justice in the Magnificat are viewed as the life's work of many of these preachers. It's a calling for these Baptist women preachers because their very identities depend on it. Their commitments and understanding of the radical, welcoming love of God means that justice is always there, always calling them to more action—to a revolution.

### **Part Five: Conclusions**

It is clear from these interviews and the themes drawn from their overlapping elements of the preachers' lives that the Magnificat has served as formational text for each of them. Throughout their stories and their reflections, the Magnificat and Mary's story has guided these

women preachers in ways of peace and justice and shepherded them in ways of accepting and celebrating their own identities.

If “to be Baptist, means freedom,” as Alan Neely said, then these six preachers are uniquely qualified to speak to both being Baptist and Baptist freedoms. Their sermons and their ministries embody the Baptist ideas of freedom of the individual and the local church as understood in the Alliance of Baptists’ covenant. Their commitments to the priesthood of the believer offer a nuance on the wide-ranging, expansive calling of God on the lives of all people. They join in the giant chorus of voices singing the words of the Alliance covenant, which point to a song of liberation and love.

The Magnificat in the gospel of Luke is a text where a woman is uniquely given the opportunity not just to speak, but to proclaim the good news. In this case, singing is an act of proclamation and protest. Mary sings of what she knows to be true of the faithfulness of God and what she believes is to come because of that faithfulness. The lives of these six preachers, Nancy Hastings Sehested, Isabel Docampo, April Baker, Kyndra Frazier, Maria Swearingen, and Molly Brummett Wudel sing with the faithfulness of God and point us to the ever-loving, ever-creating power of God.

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