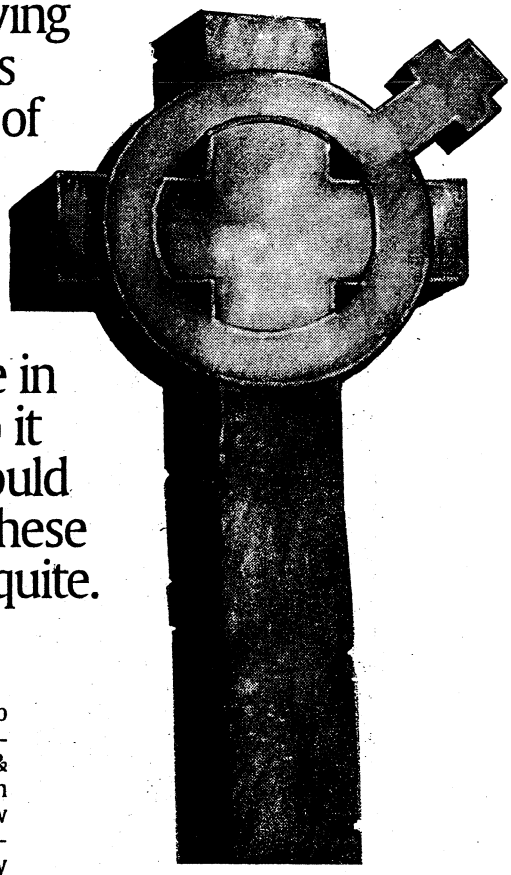
Do women

Men have been the driving force behind the world's religions since the days of Adam and Eve. Yet an analysis of religious trends in America today finds that women are more active in their faith than men. So it follows that women would be given a lead role in these institutions, right? Not quite.



By Mary Zeiss Stange

When it comes to being religious, do women have a prayer? The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life certainly thinks they do. In anticipation of Women's History Month, the Pew Forum in late February released a report that suggested women "outperform" men in several key measures of religious belief and practice. Working from data collected for the Forum's massive 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, the Pew Forum came up with several significant gender differences.

Most striking among the findings are that women are far more apt to believe with absolute certainty in a God or universal spirit, as well as to believe that this supreme being is a personal one. More American women than men are affiliated with a religion. Two-thirds of women say religion is a very important factor in their lives, as opposed to roughly half of men — percentages that are about the same for those who say they pray on a daily basis. Forty-four percent of women attend weekly religious services, as opposed to just a third of men.

One would think that these facts would translate into women's rise to positions of spiritual leadership — surely the mark of genuine equality — in the various denominations. Alas, as a glance at some of the largest organized religious groups in the country shows, the picture is at best mixed when it comes to women's ability to break that stained-glass ceiling.

The hurdles

The United States is a predominantly Christian nation. The Roman Catholic Church, whose more than 66 million members make it the largest U.S. Christian church, remains adamantly opposed to the ordination of women to the priesthood — so adamantly, indeed, that in May of last year, the Vatican decreed the automatic excommunication of any person involved in the ordination of a woman to the priesthood, in addition to the woman herself.

The church's logic is biblically rooted. As Pope John Paul II pronounced in 1994, and Pope Benedict XVI reaffirmed in 2006, women cannot become priests because the original apostles were male. In other words, had Christ intended to admit women to the apostolic succession, he'd have done so. Mary Magdalene fans, eat your hearts out. Nonetheless, Catholic women have made substantial gains at the parish level, and the Women's Ordination Conference continues to work toward change in church policy on ordination.

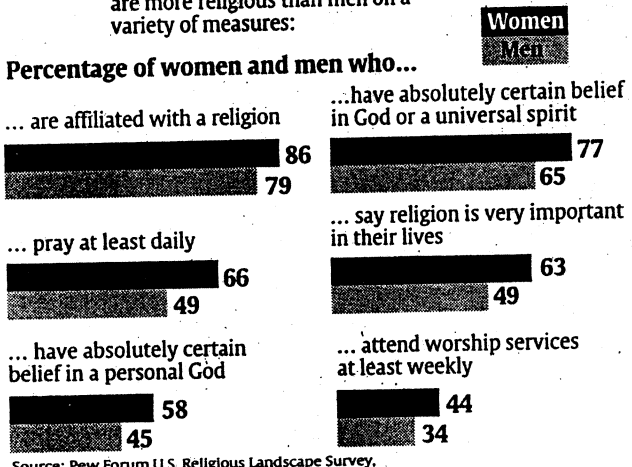
The Southern Baptist Convention, with 16 million members, is America's largest Protestant denomination. It similarly appeals to the Bible to justify women's exclusion from ministry. While the SBC admits that women and men are equally "created in God's image," women's equality is of a subordinate sort. The 2000 revision of the Convention's statement of Baptist Faith and Message reaffirmed the wife's duty to "submit herself graciously" to her husband's leadership. She is

The Forum

have a prayer?

Women more religious

A new analysis of data by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life finds that women are more religious than men on a variety of measures:



Source: Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007, released in 2008.

By Web Bryant, USA TODAY

his "equal" and his "helper."

So inhospitable is the SBC to the notion of women's religious leadership that last September, the Convention's LifeWay bookstores pulled from their shelves the October issue of *Gospel Today*, the most widely distributed urban evangelical publication in the USA. Why? Because the cover pictured five female pastors with the banner, "Breaking the Glass Ceiling." The magazine's publisher, Teresa Hairston, complained, "They basically treated it like pornography and put it behind the counter." LifeWay's motto is "Biblical Solutions for Life." The elevation of the status of women is obviously not among those solutions.

On Religion
Monday focus
Faith. Religion. Spirituality. Meaning. A weekly column seeks to illuminate the national conversation. Read the series online at religion.usatoday.com

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the nation's fourth-largest denomination with more than 5 million members, is similarly hostile to the idea of female equality, let alone leadership. In 1979, fifth-generation Mormon Sonia Johnson was excommunicated for advocating passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. Joseph Fielding Smith (a descendant of church founder Joseph Smith, and the 10th LDS president) offered women the cool comfort that they might become "priestesses and queens" in the afterlife, reaping the "benefits" of their husbands' this-worldly priesthood. Why is this still relevant? The church's position remains the same today.

The better news is that among the so-called mainline Protestant denominations, women have made considerable progress in attaining positions of religious authority. The United Methodist Church, the nation's second-largest Protestant Church with 8 million members, has ordained women since the 1950s.

But — in a pattern familiar among churches that do ordain women — few of these women hold senior positions in large congregations. In January, the church announced an initiative, the Lead Women Pastor Project, to study barriers to female advancement in the church.

In addition to the other mainline Protestant churches, the Salvation Army, Assemblies of God and Unitarian-Universalists ordain women. Yet Seventh-Day Adventism excludes women from ministry, even though its co-founder, Ellen White, was a woman.

The religious picture for women is equally mixed outside of Christianity. Most branches of American Judaism ordain female rabbis, but Orthodox Judaism is about as welcoming of the concept as are the Catholic Church and SBC. Even so, there is a growing feminist movement within Orthodoxy.

The same can be said for Islam. Male religious authority is so strictly asserted that Amina Wadud made international news when, in March 2005, she led women and men in a prayer service in New York City (under Islamic law, women are only allowed to lead female-only prayer). Her act of defiance led to condemnation and death threats on the one hand, and on the other to increased enthusiasm for what has come to be called the Progressive Muslim movement in this country.

'Second-class citizens'

It is a truth so familiar as to have become cliché: Women are the driving force behind organized religion. They fill the pews, they bring their children into the fold. The Pew data help make sense of these facts. But the same data highlight the cruel irony that in far too many religious contexts in this country, women remain second-class citizens.

Another of the findings of Pew's 2008 Religious Landscape Survey was that, among people who pray "more than seldom," a significant proportion across most religious groups say their prayers are regularly answered, at least once a week or once a month. This religious demographic was not broken down by gender.

But it is fair to assume that, given women's greater likelihood to pray at all, a sizable number of these supplicants are women. It is equally fair to assume that, if religious equality is what they are praying for, many of them are going to have to wait a while longer.

Mary Zeiss Stange, a professor of Women's Studies and Religion at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., is a member of USA TODAY'S board of contributors.