

Pioneering woman minister seeks glimpses of holy as prison chaplain

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ASHEVILLE, N.C. (ABP)—As an ordained Southern Baptist woman pastor, Nancy Sehested became a celebrity in some circles when her Tennessee church was pushed out of its association in the late 1980s for hiring her. Today, she serves outside the limelight as a prison chaplain.

Nancy Sehested baptizes new believers during an Easter morning worship service at Marion Correctional Institution. (ABP PHOTO)

Twenty years ago, Sehested was in demand to speak about her experiences as a pioneer who helped dream into reality the [Baptist Women in Ministry](#) organization.

She pursued her call to ministry in her birth denomination, where her father and grandfather were pastors, amid Southern Baptist Convention resolutions that reserved the pulpit for males.

After six years as associate pastor of [Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta](#), which ordained her in 1981, Sehested accepted a call to Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis as pastor in 1987.

Before she even got to the field, Shelby Baptist Association disfellowshipped the church and thrust Sehested into the spotlight. Ironically, local interest in Prescott surged because of the publicity, with people saying, "I always wanted to be in a church like that."

Sehested led an active church, was raising two daughters with her husband, Ken, who was executive director of the [Baptist Peace Fellowship](#), and traveled frequently to tell her story of a distinct calling from God that her tradition said could not be true.

It exhausted her. "I put extra pressure on myself as a pioneer to prove that I could do it," she said. "It was clear I couldn't keep up the pace I was going."

With no specific study to verify it, Sehested suspects many women involved in the early struggle for acceptance no longer are in church leadership.

"It was an extremely difficult time to get positions. And once we got positions, we had to work so hard to prove ourselves, to meet the expectations of the congregation and the expectations we had on ourselves," she said.

"I think I would have left the church completely if it had not been for the fact I cannot figure out any other community that has this grand story of Jesus."

She left Prescott Memorial after eight years. She had a "profound sense of having failed at being a pastor" and "in being able to balance attention to family and husband and children and my own soul."

She moved to North Carolina on the promise of leading a retreat center. Her husband moved Baptist Peace Fellowship offices there, and their children were at a place in school where consistency was essential. When the retreat center didn't happen, she needed to stay in the area and found an interim pastorate at tiny Sweet Fellowship Baptist Church.

She found a home, too, among the least-loved and furthest outcast of society when she became a prison chaplain.

Every day, she enters the walls of maximum security [Marion Correctional Institution](#) expecting to glimpse the holy in the midst of a population that has committed unholy acts.

"I'm a priest in the village of the damned," she said.

Even as she transitioned to the chaplaincy, she, her husband and Joyce Hollyday started Circle of Mercy as a fellowship dually affiliated with the [Alliance of Baptists](#) and the United Church of Christ.

Nancy Sehested's drop from the pioneer radar screen and presence on conference programs is no more complicated than her being a chaplain, she said.

Her congregation numbers 350 staff and 800 prisoners who claim one of 13 religious affiliations recognized by the state for which she must provide accommodation.

Sehested said she seeks to be a "companion for those who are seeking healing, who are really shattered souls."

"Prisoners are the truth bearers in our culture," Sehested said. "Regardless of what we say, this is what we model: money is all; end a conflict with violence; address any difference of opinion with blame, dismissing or shunning. They bear that truth to us in vivid and destructive ways."

She appreciates volunteers who come regularly to demonstrate and teach discipleship in the severe environment. "If you can practice discipleship here, you can do it anywhere and be an example of God's peace," she said.

"This place challenges me every day in my faith about what I really believe about grace and redemption," she said. "I'm so grateful that Jesus showed us how to live in the midst of turmoil and suffering."

Pam Durso, director of Baptist Women in Ministry, called Sehested a

"founding mother" of her agency and "the dreamer behind getting BWIM started."

"She really paved the way for this organization," Durso said. "She put the dream into motion. I consider her one of the great heroes in our journey as Baptist women in ministry."