

Race divided Southern Baptist and African-American women more than gender united

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BELTON—Progressive Southern Baptist women in the early 20th century proved “unreliable allies” for African-American Baptist women, historian Carol Holcomb said.

African-American Baptist women and Southern Baptist women in that time struggled alike to carve out a place in patriarchal structures and worked together on some modest reform initiatives, but they could not bridge the chasm of race and color, Holcomb told a conference at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

Carol Holcomb, professor of church history at the University of Mary Hardin Baylor. For the most part, even reform-minded progressives such as Annie Armstrong, the first corresponding secretary of Woman’s Missionary Union, who believed they had a sacred obligation to help African-American women stopped far short of challenging segregation, she noted.

“Race divided them more profoundly than gender could ever unite them,” said Holcomb, professor of church history in the UMHB College of Christian Studies. She participated in a panel discussion on Baptists and race during an Oct. 12-13 conference at UMHB on “Baptists and the Shaping of American Culture.”

Holcomb noted particularly the relationship between Armstrong and Nannie Helen Burroughs, first corresponding secretary of the Women’s Convention of the National Baptist Convention—a post she held 47 years.

She characterized Armstrong and Burroughs as “kindred spirits (who) faced one another from opposite sides of an immovable color line.”

Each of the women faced opposition from the male leaders of their respective denominations. “Black Baptist men resisted the formation of an independent women’s missionary society as vociferously as did their white counterparts,” Holcomb said.

Armstrong had formed an interracial home mission society at her home church, Eutaw Place Baptist Church in Baltimore, Md., in 1880. Later, she advocated on behalf of the African-American women’s mission societies—but insisted to male Southern Baptist agency leaders her support would remain behind the scenes.

In part, Holcomb noted, Armstrong needed to “remain in the good graces” of male SBC leaders who believed in white supremacy. But Armstrong also personally supported Southern culture—a racially segregated society.

“Armstrong simply could not transcend her cultural context and comprehend the pervasive nature of racial discrimination. She found no problem with the custom of segregation,” Holcomb said.

Even though her writing revealed some paternalistic attitudes, Armstrong promoted interracial cooperation with the National Baptists’ Women’s Convention, provided financial support for the group’s missionary endeavors and developed a genuine relationship with Burroughs, she noted.

However, Armstrong and other white Baptist women in the South seldom exerted their influence to advance seriously race relations as much as Burroughs hoped, Holcomb observed.

“Sadly, Southern Baptist women did not share Burroughs’ vision of gender solidarity, and very few—if any—successfully mastered the ability to think

black," she said.

"Although Burroughs and the women of the National Baptist Convention worked diligently to build bridges, Southern Baptist women proved to be unreliable allies."