

Remembering Mum Beall

This article explores the topic of mothers as religious leaders by reviewing the life of Pastor M.D. Beall. M.D. Beall (1896–1979) was born Myrtle Dorothea Monville in the Upper Peninsula town of Hubbell, Michigan. She was ordained by the Assemblies of God in 1933 and in 1934 founded one of the oldest Pentecostal churches in Michigan. The Bethesda Missionary Temple (now Bethesda Christian Church) located at Nevada and Van Dyke in Detroit grew from her Sunday school. M.D. was also a 39 year–old mother of three children at this time. In 1934 female preachers were still considered an oddity in the United States. Notably all three of her children entered into church work. This paper will explore a brief history of her life and also mechanisms that she utilized to successfully combine the vocations of motherhood and ministry.

How would you cope if you believed that you had damned your children to hell?

M.D. Beall experienced just such a torment. Mum Beall, also called Sister Beall by her parishioners, started one of the first Pentecostal churches in Michigan in 1934. The Bethesda Missionary Temple located at Nevada and Van Dyke in Detroit grew from her Sunday school ministry located in an old tire shop. Her church also served as a center for the Latter Rain Revival Movement and Christians from various dominations attended Bethesda for her healing ministry. The seeds planted by M.D. from a Detroit storefront have grown into a congregation over 5,000 strong in Sterling Heights, as well as planting other non-denominational churches through its Bible Institute. M.D.'s path to becoming a minister was directly tied to her experience of motherhood. Briefly, I want to explore a history of her life and also the mechanisms that she utilized to successfully combine motherhood and the ministry.

Female religious leaders often have problems of visibility within the field of religious studies. Religious studies professor Ursula King notes:

How much the study of religion as an academic discipline is still deeply rooted in androcentric framework which often remains unquestioned ... This marginality is particularly evident in the historiography of the discipline and in current academic teaching on religion where most courses operate a 'sexism of omission' which is not overcome by instituting separate courses on women and religion. (1995: 221)

In *The Cross-Cultural Study of Women* by Margot Duley and Mary Edwards, Karen Sinclair has also commented on this trend:

Women's religious experiences have not been thoroughly studied and their contributions to religious life have been underestimated ... Yet all too often it is the masculine perspective that is solicited and then presented as typical and representative. More importantly, religious experiences are quite often private affairs, closed to public scrutiny. The inherently private nature of women's lives tends to reinforce the personal, confidential dimension of religious awareness. (qtd. in Duley and Edwards, 1986: 107)

When the historic achievements of a female minister are noted, it is easy to fall into the traditional, androcentric pattern of describing the chronology of her life as a pastor, while ignoring the importance of other roles to her life story. This type of omission fails to recognize, as Linda Wagner-Martin notes, "the primary definition of a woman's selfhood is likely to be this combined public-private identity.... Historically, most women lived within family households; even in this century, women who have gained public recognition have also run homes" (1994: 6). Much can be learned by not only knowing the public persona, but also the private persona of such women. What are the types of choices these women had to make in order to become a pastor? Choices such as when Mae Eleanor Frey made the decision to put her daughter in boarding school in order to evangelize full-time or when Alice Belle Garrigus chose blessed singleness in order to spread the gospel or when Aimee Semple McPherson left her second husband who was not supportive of her calling. The focus of this paper is to examine the challenges of combining the public identity of pastor with the private identity of parent. This examination will take the form of a case study of Pastor M.D. Beall.

M.D. Beall (nee Myrtle Dorothea Monville 1896) was born into a working-class immigrant family in the Upper Peninsula town of Hubbell, Michigan. She was ordained by the Assemblies of God in 1933 and in 1934 founded one of the oldest Pentecostal churches in Michigan. The Bethesda

Missionary Temple (now Bethesda Christian Church) located at Nevada and Van Dyke in Detroit grew from her Sunday school ministry. At this time female preachers were still considered an oddity.

M.D. was also a 39 year-old married mother of three young children at this time. She defied conventions further by beginning her ministry at perhaps the worst time for the financial security of her own family, during the Great Depression. Many women with similar educational and professional backgrounds would have picked a job that would actually help to bring in extra money to the family unit. However, M.D. had left middle-class aspirations behind to join the lowly-regarded Pentecostals and more importantly to trust that the Lord would provide for her if she would only follow him.

M.D. left the Upper Peninsula and arrived in Detroit in 1918 after attending Michigan Normal School (now Eastern Michigan University). Instead of teaching, M.D. decided that she could support herself better by working as a payroll clerk for the Palmer Bee Company. It was here in 1919 that she met Kansan Harry Lee Beall who was a millwrite contractor. They married in the Methodist Church in 1920 over the objections of both their families. The objections were due to religious differences. M.D. was Roman Catholic and Harry was raised Methodist. "They decided to marry, which was the end of the world for both sides of the family. The Methodists were adamantly against the Catholics as the Catholics were . . . vice versa" (Beall, 2002). Her family and her Church ostracized her. Eventually, the families grew to accept the union after many years. M.D. and Harry had three children, Patricia (born 1922), James (born 1924) and Harry (born 1930).

It was with the birth of her children that M.D. began questioning her religious beliefs in earnest. She had attended parochial schools as a child and this had instilled in her a deep love and fear of God. From a Catholic understanding at that time, she had failed as a woman in her inability to marry a Catholic man and raise her children in the true faith. Her unbaptized children would be considered damned—a serious failure for a mother. It was difficult for M.D. to completely disregard this worldview. "She felt Catholic. And if she was Catholic, she knew she was living in sin and was in serious trouble. Her family ignored her. Her church ostracized her. Her soul felt heavy with guilt . . . the little ones weren't responsible for their eternal agony. She was damning them forever" (Bethesda Christian Church, 2003). M.D. needed to determine if there were alternatives to the Catholic viewpoint that might hold a greater truth for her family. Without her husband (who was not particularly religious), M.D. attended the Methodist church with her children and taught Sunday school. She became an evangelist after having a pronounced conversion in the Methodist church that began after attending a prayer meeting. "She began to tell God of all her worries, fears, guilts, and heartaches. She prayed for her family and asked that they would be spared the hell for which they seemed intended. She offered her life to Him, if she could only know that heaven was with her. God told her that it was" (Bethesda Christian Church, 2003). M.D.'s conversion

experience was complete following a “close call after a goiter operation”; she then dedicated her life to full-time evangelism (Ward, 1964). She worked as a Sunday school teacher for both Methodist and Baptist churches. Her son James relates, “It was her teacher training background ... the thing that happened in her conversion more than anything else is that she seemed to gain a great understanding of the Bible. And could convey it, communicate it, and people wanted to hear her” (Beall, 2002). This gift for teaching continued to develop throughout her calling. Granddaughter Patricia Beall Finley emphasized that “she could get across what she wanted to get across in fewer words than anyone I ever knew. She would preach to 3,000 or 4,000 people and just hold them in the palm of her hand. You could hear a pin drop” (Volgenau, 1979).

M.D. also utilized this teaching gift with her own children. She stressed the importance of self-sufficiency. “I think that us kids were independent. We had a good house. We never had any problems whether mother was there or not” (Beall, 2002). Additionally, it was a blessing that her ministry grew gradually so that her family was able to adjust to the changes. M.D. had a very close relationship with all of her children. She listened to them and encouraged her children to develop and utilize their God-given gifts. She modeled for her children determination and faithfulness. For example, during the later years of the Depression her husband Harry lost his job. She did not leave her small ministry to take a wage-earning job, as many would in her precarious financial situation. She believed that God would provide as he promised her. This modeling greatly influenced her children. James states, “it was a privilege being her son, working with her and learning about the gifts of the spirit” (Beall, 2002). M.D.’s skills as a mother proved invaluable to Bethesda.

Her first church was located in an old storefront that had been a tire shop in Detroit. “Children who came to her little storefront during the Depression received besides spiritual food for their souls, new soles for their feet made from machine belts in a workshop in the back of the church” (Ward, 1964). In 1944, she added radio as an evangelistic tool. She served as “a woman’s voice religiously in the Detroit area” until the mid-1950s (Beall, 2002). In addition, M.D. utilized other mediums to witness, such as a publishing operation, television program, and school. Her family helped oversee various aspects of the ministry. Harry Sr. focused upon the daily operations, Pastor Patricia focused upon the print ministry, Pastor James focused upon the radio ministry, and Pastor Harry focused upon the music ministry.

Following December 5, 1948, her church also served as a center of the Latter Rain Revival Movement. In 1948, “the movement began as a revival at Sharon Orphanage and schools in North Battleford, Saskatchewan among students assembled by former Pentecostal Assemblies ministers George Hawtin and P.G. Hunt and Four Square Gospel minister Herrick Holt” (Melton, 1996: 84). This healing revival spread from Canada to the United States through the evangelism of ministers such as Oral Roberts. The movement proclaimed the unity of the body of Christ along with the expectation that the

Second Coming would be soon (Riss, 1988: 112). This association would eventually lead M.D. to the decision to break with the Assemblies of God and Bethesda would become an independent church in 1950. M.D. added catechism and confirmation to the Pentecostal tradition at Bethesda. “I guess you would call her not quite a full-fledged Pentecostal because there was much more to it than speaking in tongues, which they insisted upon personally. We have no problem with it. It’s in the Bible, but it is not the central issue” (Beall, 2002). I would trace these additions to M.D. drawing upon her Roman Catholic heritage.

Referred to by her parishioners as Pastor, Sister, or Mum Beall, M.D. continued preaching up until her death at the age of 84. Currently, son James is senior pastor with granddaughter Analee Beall Dunn as associate pastor. Pastor Dunn will be the successor of James. The seeds planted by M.D. Beall from a storefront Sunday school in Detroit have grown into a congregation over 5,000 strong in Sterling Heights.

So what support mechanisms can be identified that helped M.D. be successful as a mother and in a vocation that had few mentors for her? It was beneficial that M.D. had a background in the Pentecostal tradition. “Very early in their history the Pentecostals recognized the vital role that women could play in a spiritual awakening. They utilized them as pastors, evangelists, and missionaries” (Thomas Nichol, 1966: 63). Son James further highlights, “We come from a framework of scripture that many denominations will not touch. So here is the Apostle Peter standing on the day of Pentecost and saying now (in the last days) your sons and daughters will prophesy ... Jesus was a friend of women” (Beall, 2002). In this worldview, the gifts of the spirit are not confined to one sex. “All people—common people, young and old, housewives, laborers, officials—everyone was given the Spirits, not just religious officials or prophets, priests, and kings” (Jones, 1974: 27) leads the way for development of female preachers, such as Maria Woodworth Etter, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Maria Burgess.

According to Sherilyn Benvenuti, early Pentecostalism was focused upon servanthood instead of authority. “Authority is not derived through position alone, as some may assert, but rather is found in the individual who serves the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (1995: 231). It was the issue of authority that earlier lead M.D. to become dissatisfied with the Methodist Church. The Methodist elders seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time debating the qualifications of a prospective pastor. “One morning, as she listened to another of these discussions she heard a small voice in her ear say: Tell them it is not a minister they need to seek. They need to seek Me!” (Bethesda Christian Church, 2003). M.D. blurted this out to the astonished deacons. M.D. left the Methodist Church, after she and people were filled with the Holy Spirit in her classes and she was told by the administration that Methodists do not pray like that. She found that gifts of the Holy Spirit were similarly unwelcome at the Baptist Church. M.D. viewed

speaking in tongues as a gift from God. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether states that in these Pentecostal and Holiness movements, “the Spirit is no discriminator among persons on the basis of gender but can empower whomever it will. Ministry is proven by its gifts, not by its credentials” (1983: 197).

Another major area of assistance was her family. Son James recalls, “my dad was an independent Midwesterner ... he could cook, he could do anything. And so all of us took on much the same thing. We had a good house. We never had any problems whether mother was there or not” (Beall, 2002). Following the conversion of Harry Sr. in 1936, “he supervised building projects, repairs, banking, all the areas of support where Myrtle was weak. Between them they created a whole that was greater than either individual” (Bethesda Christian Church, 2003). All members of the family were involved and invested in the ministry.

Another support was her *other* family, her congregation. When M.D. needed help, she did not hesitate to accept assistance from members of Bethesda. When the ministry was struggling, members of Bethesda would assist in fundraising, as well as cooking meals for the Beall family. This was indicative of her practical personality. She very much viewed her church family as an extension of her home life. James describes his mother as,

Firm, loving, trusting. That was very important. Consistent I think one of her great reasons for success was that she was not only Sister Beall, but she was Mum Beall. She was a mother to the congregation If she found out you (as a congregation member) were doing wrong, you could expect to be called in to talk. But kids felt good about her. They wanted to talk to her. She was a no nonsense type of person. (Beall, 2002)

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, was M.D.’s strong faith. In many instances throughout her life she obeyed God’s direction even when it seemed crazy to others. M.D. could discern God’s will for her and trusted the messages she received from Him. Major life decisions, such as marrying Harry, leaving the Methodist Church, starting her own church, the involvement of her family with Bethesda, were based upon her love and submission to God. One good example of this was when she talked a local businessman into buying a building for her tabernacle but did not have property for this building. The businessman was incensed by the irrationality of it all. M.D. replied, “I’m just a woman, and I don’t do things the way men do. I just obeyed God and did what He told me. Since God told me about the building. God must know about the lots” (Bethesda Christian Church, 2003). M.D. dedicated her life to serving God. She believed that God had put an anointing on her life. Granddaughter Patricia Beall Finley stated, “The Lord told her to build an armory where people could come in, be taught” (Volgenau, 1979).

This belief would provide support to her unusual combination of vocations, motherhood and the ministry. She did not worry about the contradictions because from her worldview the Lord was with her.

In conclusion, in this brief history of M.D. Beall's life I have attempted to expand the historiography of religion to work toward the goal of theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether for "a working paradigm of the human situation drawn from a sufficiently large sample of experience that can eventually stimulate dialogue and lead to yet a further synthesis" (1983: 21). Women of all classes, races, ages, orientations, and religious organizations need to be researched and written about by scholars. King stresses that "many other examples of scholarly production in religious studies—articles, monographs, reference and text books—provide continuing evidence of the marginality, if not the invisibility, of women" (1995: 221). This article in its small way attempts to combat what King calls the "sexism of omission." This work also explores the support mechanisms of religious tradition, family, congregation, and faith that M.D. utilized to successfully combine motherhood and the ministry. Knowledge of these areas of support would be helpful to other wo/men that are focused on a life of service. Such models in the ministry can provide beneficial guides to wo/men who receive the call. Perhaps Pastor James Beall describes Mum Beall best when he said at her Memorial Service in 1979, "A Mother in Israel indeed. You started so many things through her Lord ... a trailblazer in every way" (Beall, 1979).

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