



## Feminism and faith aren't oil and water

### Author tries to bridge gap in new book

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By RENA PEDERSON / The Dallas Morning News

You could say Helen LaKelly Hunt is a card-carrying feminist. Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan are friends. She's been so active in the women's movement that she has been inducted into the Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls.

She also was raised as a Southern Baptist.

Those two parts of her life shouldn't be mutually exclusive, she says.

"I love my faith; I'm proud of my faith. But I noticed over time that I could talk about everything *but* my faith at women's meetings," Ms. Hunt says. "If I would mention a prayer meeting I had attended the night before, the room would get very quiet."

That division became even more apparent when she attended the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995. She decided to interview the women around her about whether their social activism and church lives were connected. All of the 50 women she asked said they felt a polarization.

The feminists in Beijing felt organized religion had been no friend to women, that there was "blood on the cathedral steps." That mirrored the feelings of churchwomen, who felt feminists too often seemed anti-religion, anti-male, anti-family.

"That's a chasm that needs to be bridged," Ms. Hunt says. So she's trying.

She has credentials that give her unique credibility for the task – she is a homemaker who has raised six children with her husband Harville Hendrix. She is a serious Christian who just received her doctorate in church history. She is a champion of women and children, having helped start the Dallas Women's Foundation and the Sister Fund in New York.

She's quick to point out that feminism has gotten a bum rap as being anti-male: "Feminism is about all human rights, about living in dignity with all others."

Ms. Hunt has written a book called *Faith and Feminism* to spotlight women of faith who also could be considered feminists – such as Teresa of Avila, who reformed the Carmelite order; Sojourner Truth, who worked for the abolition of slavery; Lucretia Mott, who was both an abolitionist and suffragette; and Dorothy Day, who started the Catholic worker movement in New York to help the needy.

Ms. Hunt judiciously stays away from the abortion issue, which has been the most polarizing issue among women of faith since the 1960s. As important as the abortion issue is, it should not keep women of faith and feminists from rediscovering each other and working together on other social justice issues.

Women constitute two-thirds of the poor in this country. They struggle to raise their families. They are the majority of the elderly poor.

"Some collaboration already is going on," Ms. Hunt says, "but we need to be more intentional about it."

Indeed, there is a new feminine ferment in organized religion around the world. As Ms. Hunt points out, female Jewish theologians are writing more about Sarah and Miriam, just as contemporary Muslim feminists like Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi are insisting that the Prophet cared about women's rights.

An intellectual revolution about the role of women in faith had been building even before *The Da Vinci Code* threw a giant spotlight on the troubled relationship between the church and women. Elaine Pagels at Princeton University, one of the foremost experts on the Gnostic gospels, has a new best seller, *Beyond Belief*, that sheds light on the roles of women believers like Mary Magdalene.

In a recent interview, Professor Pagels said *The Da Vinci Code* was wrong about a great many things, but it was right that the organized church did "suppress the voices of women over time and that at the beginning, women were apostles, evangelists and fellow-workers."

Taking that thought a step further, Professor Karen King of Harvard Divinity School recently told an overflow crowd of men and women at Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Houston that "Gender is important for reproduction, but not for leadership – leadership in the church should be determined by your spiritual status, not your gender."

To some, those might be fighting words. But at heart, what Professors King and Pagels are saying dovetails with what Ms. Hunt is saying. There is much work to do in the world, and women of faith need to unite in leading the way. That means speaking up inside and outside the church.

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