

THE RESOURCE OF LEADERSHIP

WISDOM'S FEAST AND UNITED METHODISM

By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just;
by me rulers rule, and nobles, all who govern rightly.
I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me.

—Proverbs 8:15–17

Driving through the leafy suburbs of Philadelphia, I was finally meeting Rev. Susan Cady (Cole) and Rev. Hal Taussig after a series of long-distance phone calls and correspondence. Both had been United Methodist ministers for more than thirty years. She was a full-time retreat leader and spiritual director, and he was a professor at Union Theological Seminary as well as a pastor at Chestnut Hill Methodist Church. Their current work, however, was not the reason for my visit. Twenty years earlier, they wrote one of the first books on Sophia theology for parish life. Published in 1986, *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* described how Sophia theology was being used in sermons, rituals, and Bible studies in church. Their book provides a window into how Sophia ritualizing began at the parish level in the early 1980s. The backlash to their book reveals how emplacement of Sophia theology became politicized during the latter part of the twentieth century. As worship leaders, Cady and Taussig demonstrated commitment and dedication when educating and ritualizing Sophia in church worship. As we shall see, church leadership is an essential resource of strategic emplacement of Sophia in worship.

DISCOVERING SOPHIA

As we settled in with our mugs of hot tea, Cady began by describing her upbringing in Mentor, Ohio, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Methodism had deep roots in this small town, and her first memory of church was as a small child, drawing on the church bulletin while the congregation sang “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “Jesus Loves Me.” Cady loved going to church and never questioned the significant part it played in her life. I asked if she had always wanted to be a pastor. She replied “No” because she had been taught while growing up that only men could be pastors. The most she imagined was becoming a pastor’s wife.

I found her answer curious because Methodism had a relatively long history of ordaining women. Founder Charles Wesley licensed Sarah Crosby to preach in England in 1761. The first woman in America to be ordained was Anna Howard Shaw in 1888, with a few women continuing to be licensed or ordained on an “exceptional” basis over the next seven decades by local bishops. In 1956, when Cady was ten, the United Methodist Church granted women full clergy rights on a national level, making it one of the first mainline Protestant churches in America to do so.¹ How could Cady not know?

The answer was that her local church leadership chose not to tell her. Bishops who did not agree with women’s ordination resisted the decision by not appointing female clergy in their geographic areas. Uneven implementation of the new policy among bishops in the 1950s and 1960s meant that many United Methodist women and men were not aware that women could be ordained.

Cady had accepted the teachings of the church as they were presented to her. After graduating from a Methodist college in 1967, she did marry a Methodist, but not a pastor. It would be seven years before Cady’s “call” would surface. During that time, she embraced married life, moved to Philadelphia, had a child, and expanded her horizons by teaching in a racially mixed urban school.

Then one Sunday Cady went to church and saw a woman of similar age installed as associate pastor of her parish. It was the first time Cady actually saw a woman placed in the pulpit, and it moved her deeply. Her personal call to ordained ministry was awakened in that moment. Cady identified with the woman on the altar, not just with her femaleness but also with her age. For Cady, it was seeing the woman perform sacred ritual that changed her perception of who could serve God as ordained

leaders. Within a year, she started the process to become an ordained United Methodist minister herself.

Her first major step was to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Just three months after Cady began her seminary studies, the December 1974 cover of *Ms.* magazine featured a picture of Carter Heyward, a Union alum. Heyward and ten other women were being “irregularly” ordained to protest the exclusion of women in ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. The article described the ordination struggles that women were facing in certain denominations.

Cady came to Union inspired by these times. She was interested in studying women and female imagery of God in the Bible. The progressive social environment, however, did not always transfer into the classroom. “There were enough women at school to question a lot and begin to stand up a bit, but the professors certainly did not do much. What I got from my Old Testament professor was to look at Near Eastern texts for some of the myths there.”² I asked Cady why she had not been directed to the Wisdom texts at that time. She replied that it was as if no one had noticed Sophia yet. Cady wrote her master’s thesis on mother Goddess imagery in baptism rites and in exodus scripture instead.

Cady’s thesis helped her embrace her professional and personal call after being told her whole life that God never meant for women to lead Christian worship. While women in many professions in the 1970s and 1980s had to figure out their new roles, female ministers also had to reconsider how they related to God as women as well as pastoral leaders. For some, this reassessment included radically different images of God. As Cady recalled, “That’s pretty much when God the Father dropped out. It just totally dropped out for me. And Jesus—I found I related to Jesus more as brother than as savior. All that happened during seminary. The only image I had was of God as a desert.”³

Today, Cady has more insight into what was happening during her seminary years. “I am a spiritual director, and now I know all about this. It is basically a transition in God imagery, reflecting a transition in how one relates to God. That’s all it is. I mean honestly, spiritually it’s not a big deal. It just means your spirit is in transition. Today I help people with that kind of transition all of the time. But then I didn’t know what that was. All I knew was that God the Father was no longer of any use to me, and whatever was yet to emerge had not yet appeared. When you are in-between things, you don’t know if something will emerge or not. So it was a very hard place to be.”⁴ Today, many Christian seminaries

require seminarians to engage in monthly spiritual direction sessions where they reflect on their changing images and deepening understandings of God. Spiritual direction was not part of Cady's seminary program in the 1970s, however, and she had to handle this unexpected turn in her prayer life alone.

THE CHALLENGES OF PASTORING

Despite the changes in her prayer life, Cady continued with her training to become an ordained minister. Her first Methodist parish assignment was Calvary United Methodist Church in West Philadelphia. She had been a member of Calvary before she attended seminary, and she periodically returned during her studies. It was located on the edge of the University of Pennsylvania campus. West Philadelphia was one of the poorer sections of the city, an area providing low-cost housing for city residents and students alike. According to Cady, this mix of Ivy League students with the local neighborhood encouraged new thinking, yet it also challenged the congregation to allow for diversity of thought and expression and still remain in community with one another.

It was during her seminary days that some younger women in the congregation formed a feminist study group. They had begun reading feminist theology and asked to present their discoveries during worship. The parish leadership agreed, and one Sunday they presented a panel during worship where they discussed Mary Daly's book *Beyond God the Father*, particularly the quote "If God is man, then man is God." Cady recalled that it created quite a stir but that no controversy endured.

Hal Taussig was already a pastor there at the time. He did not initially relate to their interest in feminism and religious imagery, but he wanted to support the group in their theological quest. He remembered having read a paper written in German by the chair of his PhD dissertation committee that referred to a feminine face of God in Proverbs and other Old Testament Wisdom books. He encouraged the group to look at the Wisdom texts for scriptural support for their inquiry. The group became so inspired by the Wisdom Sophia texts that when Taussig went on a two-year sabbatical in 1979, he decided to explore the scriptures himself.

While on sabbatical, Taussig did extended meditations on the Sophia material, using *lectio-divina*, a Christian contemplative technique where he imagined himself in the scripture stories. The imagery was

compelling, and he found the experience deeply moving. He returned to the parish as an enthusiastic supporter of the group's Sophia work.

During this time, Cady was appointed as one of the four co-pastors at Calvary. Cady was learning to cope with the intense demands of pastoring, and she noticed that she was treated differently than her male colleagues. She recalled how during all her years at Calvary, she was never approached to baptize a baby, while the male pastors were frequently asked. This experience spurred her in new ways. "For me it was clear. Even though Calvary was one of the most progressive churches in the conference, it was still biased in favor of men. It just was. So part of the spirit that crept in there at that time was noticing that there was no place better than this, and this still wasn't good enough. So that was all in the mix. It was all part of it."⁵

Cady's early ministry experience reflected the awkwardness of the times. The problem, according to Cady and her fellow clergywomen, was that their congregations still favored men in pastoral ministry. In response, they formed a Methodist clergywomen group to deal with the unique challenges they faced. Gathering weekly, sometimes with their babies, they would do some form of spiritual exercise for spiritual and collegial support. Cady recalled that when pastors held large conferences and gatherings, men would make comments that the women were separating themselves from the men. Cady remembers, however, that she was never invited to join the men's circles, and this exclusion was why she reached out to her female colleagues.

THE SERMON: A PUBLIC TURNING POINT

In January 1982, Cady delivered a Sunday sermon that revealed the complications of pastoring as a female minister during the late 1970s and early 1980s. She also presented a vision of God that offered her comfort and hope. The New Testament gospel reading was Mark 1:14–20, where Jesus calls the apostles to follow him to "fish for men." The Old Testament passage was Proverbs 8:1–11, a text widely quoted in Sophia theology, in which Sophia stands at the gates and calls out to the faithful to follow her (see the scripture at the beginning of Chapter 4 of this volume).

Cady began her sermon by referring to her "call" to follow Jesus. She admitted to the congregation that she had been in the midst of a

crisis for some time. She described how much she loved the scriptures, but now felt the scriptures were cut off from her experience as a woman. She knew about the feminist reinterpretation of the Bible, but it was not enough. “The parts we’d been able to liberate still seemed so small, so insignificant compared to the patriarchal immensities that remained untouched.”⁶ She said that this insight about scripture also applied to her experience of the United Methodist Church structure.

While many women were battling sexism as they entered new professions, for female pastors this problem was amplified because they were expected in their new positions to reaffirm the power of exclusively male sacred symbols, images, and language with their embodied actions. Secular feminists had already critiqued Christianity for this, claiming that the emplacement of exclusively male imagery perpetuated sexism and patriarchy by making it holy, natural, and self-evident. Cady and her female colleagues, however, had become ministers believing this would not be as troubling as it later became for some.

For Cady, the discord occurred once she became a central agent in the ritual act. During the sermon, Cady told the congregation how much she loved celebrating the Eucharist, but had recently felt uncomfortable with the ritual. “All of my theological grounding gave way. And I kept trying to talk myself out of it: “But you know that in Christ there is no male or female—you know that the body of Christ includes us all. But it made no difference. All I could see was that this central act of the church was the celebration of the life, death, and resurrection of a man—and I felt on the outside.” In despair, she wondered if she would ever feel at home again in the church. Her internal anxiety continued to build as she began preparing the worship for the following week. She described her vision of Sophia for the congregation:

I was in the middle of writing one of the prayers for the service, when there she was, looking at me through a window in the door, and she was calling out to me, “What are you afraid of anyway? Do you think I care about your old theology? Do you think I care what name you name me? Do you think I care if people think I’m legitimate or not? Haven’t people always refused to listen to me? But that doesn’t make me any less real—and that doesn’t make you any less faithful.” And then, laughter. Much laughter. Mocking laughter, laughing with me and at me, all at the same time. And dancing. “I’ve been here all along. Come on out and dance with me,

and sing. Come on out—open the door. I’ve been waiting for you for so long.” . . . In my vision, Sophia was looking at me through a window in a door. I wasn’t sure where the door led; I was afraid it led out of the church. This week I found the courage to open it, and it opened out into this great, wide, airy expanse—a huge, seemingly endless dome full of light. I looked back at the door through which I’d come, and saw that it was a church whose door I’d opened—a tall, narrow, Gothic structure; it was dwarfed by the immensity of the vast dome. But the church building was inside the dome, not outside it. In opening the door, I hadn’t left the church behind. It was still there, but now as a part of a much larger reality. In following Sophia, I opened the door, the door that opened up perceptions and possibilities to a much wider sphere—a sphere that includes my past and new possibilities for the future.⁷

For Cady, these interior experiences of God were real, profound, and life altering. She did not think of them as figments of her imagination, but as experiences of God. Her epiphany was that God not only had feminine characteristics, but also could have a female form. This image not only spoke to her inner discomfort, but also dynamically released it. It was while crying for joy that Cady discovered the depths of her need to see God in this way:

The inside of my head hadn’t changed with a mere shift in vocabulary. My imagination was so formed by my tradition that I couldn’t see God in any other way. And now I can, and that has made a tremendous difference—all the difference. The change is so immense that it’s hard to talk about it coherently. But let me try. It’s changed who God is for me. God is no longer just a he—no longer a male God who occasionally acts motherly but is still male just the same. . . . And now that God has opened up to include the feminine, so has my whole perception of what is possible opened up . . . I always identified with the women around Jesus, experienced his power second-hand, never directly. But I can identify with Sophia. No problem at all. She is like me. She can dwell deep within me and call out to me. She is laughing within me, and I laugh along with her.⁸

The identification with Sophia did more than resolve the tension of being a woman experiencing Jesus secondhand. Sophia was an image of femaleness representing traits that Cady herself wanted to cultivate, and she felt God's presence in supporting her in them. She connected Sophia's experience with her own:

We're ignored a lot and often not taken seriously. Much of the time, our opinions and experience don't carry the same weight as those of men. Sophia knows what that's like—she's experienced it too—but she keeps on calling. Following her doesn't end the pain of being on the edge of our tradition. It doesn't change the reality of being on the margins of power. It doesn't end the very real possibility of being thought foolish and silly. Matter of fact, following her just about assures that all of that will be the case. But what makes it worthwhile is that she is with us in the wandering. That her strength, her laughter, life itself, is there, too. For women on the verge of a new era, when the past is crumbling and the future has not yet emerged, she leads us through a long period of wandering and keeps us going in a world in which male privilege will not be relinquished without pain and struggle and hurt for many of us. She's strong enough to keep us going, and she leads me in the certainty that she leads towards life—fullness of life, not just for me, but for all people. A life that is whole and complete. A life that, like my vision of that vast dome, allows for a lot of variety, a lot of difference, all accepted, all loved, all a part of life with Sophia.⁹

Cady's experience of Sophia placed femaleness in the center of power, as God is the ultimate source of power for Christians. This image of Sophia also affirmed an internal reworking of female identity as primary, not secondary to power. This image of Sophia reaffirmed Cady's divine and public right to be on the altar and to lead God's people. "She's also the strong one. She's full of power. In the Book of Wisdom is a passage describing Sophia leading the Hebrews through the sea. She was their shelter by day, and she led them by starlight at night—and she slew the pursuing Egyptians. Sophia brings salvation that is full of power—power for me to share, strength for me to use. Because she is strong, so is it possible for me to be strong." The image of the dome reframed Cady's anxiety about potentially falling out of her tradition into seeing her Methodist

faith as being contained within something bigger and grander, something that invited exploration. It affirmed the wonder, not the fright of being on the edge of her tradition. It was a hopeful perspective, which allowed her to see new possibilities in her Christian faith.

After this sermon, Cady and Taussig began teaching and preaching on Sophia when Sophia Wisdom texts appeared in the Sunday scripture readings. They viewed their Sophia work as a pastoral response to the currents of change that were running through their congregation because of the women's movement. Their approach moved debate around women's roles and women's rights in the parish away from the temporal, earthly, and political realm to the eternal scriptural realm. They were going to God's Word to support the entire congregation in embracing new understandings about life. For Cady and Taussig as pastors, the biblical figure of Sophia was a touchstone for those wanting to see more equality for women and at the same time a corpus of scripture that provided new but firm footing for others who were bewildered by the amount of social and liturgical change happening around them.

This incorporation of feminist spiritual ideas and focus on Sophia was only possible because Cady and Taussig were in leadership positions as pastors. To create the amount of change in the parish that they sought also required motivating others within the parish community to help make it happen. Cady and Taussig found that beginning with the feminist spirituality group was the best way to start, letting the group slowly develop in its relationship with Sophia, and letting the group call some practices of the larger parish community into question. The biblical basis of Sophia was key to providing validation for the larger congregation to listen to the women's concerns.

Ritual played a significant role. In the spring of 1986, the feminist study group had been reading about the close connections between Sophia and Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and the group had been experimenting with placing female imagery as the central character in the life and teachings of Jesus. As Easter was approaching, the group asked Cady to lead alternative Holy Week liturgies, and Cady agreed. The ceremonies did not replace the main liturgical events at the church, as they were scheduled one hour before the main worship occurred, allowing the women the opportunity to participate in both ceremonies. The group developed a foot-washing ceremony in which, instead of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, "Sophia Washes Her Followers' Feet." There was a Good Friday ceremony, "The Trial and Crucifixion of Sophia"; and for Easter, "A Sophia Resurrection."

Cady's leadership role as a pastor allowed her to create such ritualizing. Without her participation, it would have been impossible for the group to ritualize these understandings as United Methodist Holy Week liturgies. The legitimating presence of her position also elevated the activities of the group and endorsed the new Sophia theology it was exploring.

The result was profound for the participants involved. Cady had shared in her sermon that she and other female pastors felt like spectators watching Jesus, only relating to Jesus through the female characters around him. The members of the feminist spirituality group felt the same. They wanted a ritual to experience what Christ experienced, and making the central character female in these well-known gospel stories brought new meaning and new perspective to the participants. Just as Jesus was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices, Sophia became emblematic of the sacrifices of women. During the Good Friday reenactment of the crucifixion, Sophia stood trial. The group was invited to say things that both women as well as female deities have been accused of throughout the ages. A partial list included:

You're just a woman . . . you're getting out of hand . . . you don't know your place . . . you participate in witchcraft and the work of the devil . . . you don't have any place in the church . . . you're not as strong or as powerful as the male God . . . you are trying to usurp God's power . . . you are heresy . . . you're a slut . . . you're a cheap broad . . . you're a castrating bitch . . . you're not a real Goddess . . . you're too minor . . . you're not important enough . . . who do you think you are, acting like an equal to God? . . . you're silly and foolish . . . you're evil . . . you're the gateway of the devil . . . God can't be a woman.¹⁰

For the crucifixion, materials for drawing, painting, and sculpture were provided, and each woman created and shared her art. Most pictures included murder, which might have been expected in relation to the crucifixion narrative, but Cady recalled that almost all the pictures included rape. Afterward, candles were lit, and all were invited to pray as they periodically said names of women who had suffered and died. The evening ended in silence and the candles were blown out. Connecting rape with the crucifixion of Jesus was a powerful act of creative ritual making. The liturgies transformed the histories and tragedies that these women either symbolically or literally endured, from shaming secrets to holy moments.

At Easter, the resurrection was retold as Sophia. In their ceremony, Mary Magdalene encountered the empty tomb, and Sophia instructed her to tell her sisters and brothers the good news. Then the group sat in a circle as the scripture in the upper room was read with Sophia showing her wounds. Continuing on the theme from the night before, names of women who had been wounded were invoked, with the group responding, "We touch your wounds. We rejoice in your presence with us" as they touched each others' hands. The worship continued with a reading of the end of John's gospel with Sophia appearing on the shore, sharing a meal with them, and asking, "Do you love me?" based on John 21:17. The group then meditated on the scripture and was encouraged to use prayer and imagination to experience the gospel story in a new way. The Saturday Easter vigil evening ended with a festive meal.

Years later, when these liturgies appeared in print, some would accuse the group of blasphemy for not imaging God as male and calling him Jesus, but these women saw themselves as following the invitation of the scripture to view God with both genders. They wanted the freedom to experiment, to see what new insights about God and themselves could be called out if they ritualized the passion of Christ with female imagery.

PUBLICIZING SOPHIA

While their work at Calvary continued to develop, Cady and Taussig began to share their Sophia Bible teachings outside the parish. There were many who found the message of a feminine face of God in the Christian tradition inspiring, and their work quickly expanded. As early as 1984, just two years after Cady's sermon, the United Methodist Commission on the Status and Role of Women of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference invited them to give a workshop on Sophia at Philadelphia's main United Methodist Church on Arch Street. As the chairwoman of the event explained, "It is not sufficient simply to seek to improve the social and professional status of women in the church. We need to see the evolving new roles of women and men in a larger perspective of growing in relationship to the biblical witness. . . . Wisdom/Sophia may be of particular help to women today in finding a way to affirm themselves within their relationship with God and the church."¹¹

For the conference, Cady and Taussig invited Marian Ronan, author of *Image-Breaking, Image Building*, to give a response to their talks. Ronan was a staff member of the Grail, a Catholic laywomen's community, and she provided additional insight from her own work on images of God

for Christian women. After the conference, Ronan suggested that Cady and Taussig consider writing a book. She arranged for them to meet her publisher, a small, liberal Catholic press.

The publisher suggested making two editions: the first would be on the theology, and the second on the worship and study aid materials. In a fortunate turn of events, before the first edition was complete, the small publisher was bought by Harper & Row, which was contractually obligated to fulfill the existing agreements. This gave their book much more publicity and distribution than they had anticipated. *Sophia: The Future of Feminist Spirituality*, by Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig, was published in 1986 by Harper & Row and publicized on its "Academic Announcement List for Oct/Nov/Dec 1986" in the Sociology and Women's Studies section.

The book was described in the Harper & Row press release as "a fascinating study of the biblical figure that could unite feminism and Western religion."¹² *Sophia* appeared along with five other new titles that all celebrated the exceptional histories and contributions of women in a variety of fields. The description of the books gives a snapshot of the subjects, themes, and debates regarding women in 1986 in American publishing. *Hypatia's Heritage: A History of Women in Science from Antiquity through the Nineteenth Century* highlighted "outstanding scientists whose names have been left out of the history books." *Jaguar Woman: And the Wisdom of the Butterfly* "celebrates the crucial role of women in Indian society." *The Economic Emergence of Women* illuminated "the economic and social origins of women's new roles, including changes in the job structure and technology, birth and divorce rates, education and ideas about sex roles and the family." *Women's Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* was about women who "struggle to be heard in schools and families that value neither a woman's voice nor her ideas." *Psyche as Hero: Female Heroism and Fictional Form* expounded on "woman as hero (autonomous initiator of change), rather than heroine (assistant to male hero)."

These themes reflected popular and academic interest in women's new roles. The small cluster of new books also reflected the beginnings of gender analysis before it was widely recognized that race and class were entwined with gender. The economics book privileged gender over class, with no mention of race in its description. The book written about American Indian culture placed the white author, Lynn Andrews, as the protagonist in the narrative. Even the book on historical scientists reflected the focus on privileged women who had been "exceptional"

in their fields. Like *Sophia*, all the books assumed that gender was a binary of male and female and that the ideal woman was an independent autonomous individual, equal to and as capable as men in all actions.

When *Sophia* was published, Cady and Taussig hosted a party and invited their bishop and his cabinet, along with many of their colleagues in ministry. The response was positive. Their supervisor, Superintendent Arthur Bradenburg, wrote a glowing review for the *United Methodist Reporter for Eastern Pennsylvania*, echoing the perception of gender as the prime liberation movement and tying the book in with the famous Christ/Christa crucifix controversy that was occurring at the time:

Recently a crucifix with a crucified female figure was displayed in New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, long known for its avant-garde experiments in theology and liturgy. Cries went up, special meetings were called, and the female crucifix went down. Somehow I have a feeling that incident is a key to this astonishing little book . . . Patriarchy is that interlocking system of oppression—racial, sexual, political and economic—which aims to subjugate and control the earth, the poor, females, people of color, feeling and spontaneity. Patriarchal spirituality is the extension of that into our hearts and minds. The emerging feminist spirituality movement may be the most powerful liberation movement of the twentieth century. It cuts across all the other liberation movements and calls into question the basic patriarchal assumptions of Western civilization and at least three of the world's religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Cady, Ronan, and Taussig argue that the feminist movement will be a saving dynamic for the post modern world only to the extent it finds a set of myths and symbols which enable it to ground itself in the Ultimate Reality."¹³

This expansive view of Sophia, not just as a remedy to combat sexism, but as a way to deconstruct all social inequalities, would continue to be echoed in other reviews at the time along with the call for new images of God. The image of Sophia, however, blurred the distinction between Christian and Goddess groups, which often benefited from clear demarcations between the two. Some reviewers expressed uneasiness in co-locating Goddess imagery within Christianity. This critique came not just from Christian sources, but from the growing Goddess movement as well.¹⁴

After the book came out, interest in Sophia grew beyond Calvary United Methodist Church. Cady and Taussig helped form a Philadelphia Sophia Group that met in people's homes for ritual, prayer, and fellowship. Eventually, Taussig, Cady, and two others also formed Sophia House, offering courses and retreats on Sophia designed for both college and retreat settings that led to more ecumenical collaborations. An order of Roman Catholic nuns, the Daughters of Wisdom, invited Cady to speak to them about the biblical origins of their namesake. For years afterward, the predominantly Methodist Philadelphia Sophia Group would go on joint retreats with a small group of sisters from the Daughters of Wisdom to explore their shared understanding of Sophia.

THE BACKLASH BEGINS

In 1987, one year after *Sophia* was published, Cady was reassigned to be pastor of Emmanuel United Methodist Church, a small, predominantly white, working-class congregation in Roxborough, a section of Philadelphia where many families had multigenerational roots in the neighborhood. In a congregation that valued tradition and stability, Cady represented change. Not only was she the church's first female pastor, but she was also the first female clergy to serve in any church in that section of the city. The following year, Cady would also become the parish's first divorced pastor, and many in the congregation struggled to accept her divorce. In addition, the top position in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, which covered half of the state of Pennsylvania, was now held by a woman, Bishop Susan Morrison.

Yet for all of the challenges around women's leadership in the church, there was little initial resistance to Susan Cady's authoring a book on Sophia. She told the lay leadership team about the book when she arrived, and there were minimal questions or comments. Cady did not start a parish group around Sophia when she saw it did not serve a pastoral need, though she continued her activities with Sophia House and the Philadelphia Sophia group outside the parish. Then a new edition of the book titled *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* was published. This edition included more than fifty worship and instructional aids, including sermons, Bible studies, rituals (including the Sophia Passion), hymns, retreat formats, and formation of Sophia circles. The book also included advice on how to successfully develop and integrate Sophia awareness and worship into a parish setting. The overall message

was that introducing a new theology took time, pastoral preparation, and care, particularly when introducing new images of God based on scriptural references that were not well known. These words of caution were prescient for what happened next.

Up to this point, publicity about Sophia gatherings, retreats, and coursework, even the first edition of Cady and Taussig's book, seemed to have received positive feedback in the church, mostly from friends within the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference. The fact that their superintendent and their bishop supported their work gave them significant institutional support to explore Sophia theology in ritual. At the same time, Cady and Taussig were now doing most of their Sophia work in voluntary gatherings outside parish structures. Cady's decision not to form a Sophia group at her new parish may have been a wise pastoral decision, but soon she could not keep her Sophia work outside the parish separate from her life as a church pastor.

On February 19, 1989, the front page of the Sunday edition of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* featured an article titled "Women creating ritual to fill religious void." There was a picture of Cady, Taussig, and two others watching a woman in the foreground lifting a potted plant over her head in a residential setting. A second picture on an inside page showed the five seated in front of a table set with candles, challah bread, wine, and dishes, with a caption below indicating that they were "singing their own hymn." Cady was quoted in the article as saying that women's ritual was "very personal, and almost always includes at least an invitation to sharing and storytelling."¹⁵ The article described this as a movement of "religious feminists," some who made these alternative liturgies their only form of worship, while others attended them in addition to regular church services.¹⁶

Eric M. Umile, a white male lay leader of the Roxborough Emmanuel United Methodist congregation, read the article and was shocked to see that his Methodist pastor was engaged in such activity. He accused Cady of heresy, but he got little support from the rest of the congregation. In fact, the parish, which had openly struggled with her divorce, was now coming to her defense.

Frustrated, Umile began to write letters. He wrote Cady's superintendent, bishop, and finally the president of the national United Methodist Council of Bishops, but no action was taken. Next, he wrote to the *United Methodist Reporter* newspaper. His article was published on October 6, 1989, in the series *Here I Stand* under the title "Why silence about heresy?" There was a picture of the cover of the book *Wisdom's*

Feast, which had been published just a month before, along with the subhead “Mainstream the goddess?” His writing would provide the core narrative of the anti-Sophia material generated within United Methodism over the next three years:

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran a front page story earlier this year on “feminist spirituality.” Bread, milk, fruit, and a potted plant were used in place of the traditional Eucharistic elements of bread and wine. Among the celebrants were two United Methodist pastors, who along with a third, have co-written a book, recently released in paperback, which maintains that a goddess named Sophia is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition . . . In fact, it tells us that she and God were lovers and created the world together. Moreover, it says that Jesus was not the Messiah, but actually the incarnation of the divine Sophia herself. The authors regard patriarchy as a “demonic aspect of classical Western spirituality.” In their view, Christianity is patriarchal in spirit and, hence, unacceptable and dangerous to the feminist cause. They say the reason we know nothing about Sophia is because male-dominated religious institutions have deliberately ignored and suppressed her since the early days of Christianity. Consequently, the authors feel that their main task is to “mainstream the goddess” into the lives of all women. In fact, they tell us that some religious feminists are conducting experimental worship services that involve such things as substituting Sophia in place of Jesus in the Easter account. One church leader has told me that our church is blessed in its “diversity and openness to new theological perspectives.” Does that mean that we should sit passively by while self-seeking special-interest groups infiltrate our churches and play fast and loose with the religious symbols that we hold sacred? . . . That professed Christians including our top church leaders are choosing to be silent when confronted with heresy in their very midst is portent of the dark future that awaits this denomination. I pray that people will come to their senses before the walls come tumbling down.¹⁷

When the article appeared, Cady was shocked that the editors had allowed the *Here I Am* column, which published personal accounts

of Methodists and their faith, to be a place for tearing down the faith position of another Methodist. Taussig, for his part, photocopied the article and typed in the inaccuracies and half-truths he found: "Very few of the texts dwell on the love affair between Sophia and the Lord of All . . . She is mainly pictured as the lover of human beings . . . There was practically no way that the early churches could say that Jesus was not the Messiah."¹⁸

A significant point of debate was whether Christianity had been corrupted by the human overlay of patriarchy, as Christian feminists surmised, or whether Christian patriarchy had been given by God as a significant and unapologetic part of the tradition, as Umile and others claimed. Taussig found Umile's short editorial to be an expression of his anxiety around a range of issues that Taussig saw as interconnected: feminism, sexuality, sacredness of symbols, diversity of voices, and denominational boundaries.¹⁹ All of these themes were points of change that, taken together, appeared to be disrupting Umile's sense of holy patriarchy.

Cady and Taussig's supporters, inside and outside the church, rallied to lend their support, writing letters to the editor of the same newspaper and providing positive book reviews of *Wisdom's Feast*.²⁰ Umile's reaction to their work convinced Cady and Taussig that their ministry of Sophia was needed more than ever. Their new Sophia House brochure described a place "where women and men can celebrate and integrate the spiritual dimension of feminism."²¹ Their legitimacy and positional power as ordained Christian ministers helped them to expand their work. There was enough interest and resources that a quarterly newsletter was added to complement the monthly study meetings and workshops they were holding.

Bishop Susan Morrison was not deterred by Umile's complaints either. In March 1990, she had the opportunity to make her first appointment to one of the most prestigious churches in her conference, Arch Street United Methodist Church. Located on the historic and exclusive Rittenhouse Square in the heart of Philadelphia, she chose to appoint Cady to be its new associate pastor. Without responding to the controversy, the bishop's placement of Cady communicated her position.

Umile responded by forming the Lay Coalition for Doctrinal Integrity. The title gave an impression of a much larger group than the two couples listed as founding members. Proceeding on his own crusade, Umile sent a letter to all 600 parish lay leaders of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference, encouraging each to "[p]in your pastor down and find out what his or her position is." He asked for signatures to an attached

petition stating that the signed were aware of *Wisdom's Feast* and believed the theology incompatible with orthodox Christianity in general and with beliefs and practices of UMC in particular. During this time, Umile and his wife left Emmanuel parish. They joined another parish whose pastor shared their views.

Upon their arrival, Rev. Paul Beck issued a letter urging his parishioners to contact Bishop Morrison regarding *Wisdom's Feast*, characterizing it as "pagan" and inviting them to reaffirm their commitment to Jesus Christ, not Sophia. This anti-pagan framing would appear in subsequent issues of the UMC Huntington newsletter, where *Wisdom's Feast* would be continually attacked. "We must not allow pagan idolatry to be given equal footing with Christian doctrine."²²

TAKING SIDES AND GOING NATIONAL

As the debate heated up, the Eastern Pennsylvania Annual Conference, where ordained and lay leadership would meet to discuss and vote on issues, was quickly approaching in June. The Sophia controversy was well known by then. Both sides scheduled worship services to spiritually affirm their positions. Supporters of Cady and Taussig organized a worship service on June 8, 1990, the eve of the conference, in which participants were invited to show their support for Cady and Taussig by bringing objects to "empower and encourage them." Even though the UMC bishop and council were solidly on Cady and Taussig's side, the controversy had obviously taken a toll on the group. The gospel reading was about Mary Magdalene and the other women witnessing the empty tomb yet being rebuffed by the male apostles. Later in the liturgy, the worship leader read a statement that reflected the frustration and weariness of those who were the vanguards for bringing feminist reform into United Methodist worship:

The hearts of the leadership of Jesus' followers had turned to stone. The hearts of the women were heavy as stone because nobody would believe them, stone cold, stone deaf, stonewalled. Words that are all too familiar to us. Words that break our hearts. Words that break our spirits. Words well known to women and men who are witnesses to something coming to new life. Words that create immovable, stone cold obstacles at every turn. Stones are the tests of believers. Do

we believe our Mother-Father God can so empower us and give us courage that we can roll away any stone?²³

The reality of being at the center of such a controversy was now a burden for Cady, Taussig, and their supporters. In contrast, the Jesus Christ is Lord (JCIL) Task Force was happy to report that three hundred people attended their rally of support. Their service held before the conference was titled "Jesus Christ is Lord," with only male pastors officiating and music provided by the all-male Huntington Valley Boys choir.²⁴ During the conference, study and discussion groups met regarding Sophia, but no official resolutions or actions regarding Sophia teachings were passed.

Undeterred, Eric Umile's efforts soon found national support. His complaints were picked up and broadcast nationally by the conservative, evangelical United Methodist magazine *Good News*. The July/August 1990 cover simply read in bold letters: WHO IS SOPHIA? AND WHY ARE SO MANY UNITED METHODISTS WORSHIPPING HER? Inside was a six-page article titled "Wisdom's Feast or Gospel's Famine? The brewing storm over Sophia Worship." The article recounted Eric Umile reading the *Philadelphia Inquirer* article and chronicled his struggles to stop Sophia theology in the United Methodist Church. The author of the article felt that integrating feminist theology into church ritual was particularly threatening. "These books synthesize Sophia scholarship and offer it to the common person. Suddenly it's not just speculation at some seminary; it's something you can try in a church Bible study." The author of the article acknowledged what Cady and Taussig had already realized: that Cady in particular was being targeted. "It is unfortunate that Cady has borne the brunt of most of this controversy. She is actually the most conservative of the three authors."²⁵ Yet editor James V. Heidinger II did not hold back his personal attacks. He wrote that Cady's sermon acknowledging her discomfort with celebrating the experience of "some man" reflected "unhealthy, if not seriously affected, attitudes toward the male gender."²⁶

This criticism of Cady as an angry, prideful woman in theological crisis was echoed in a 1990 Christmas petition titled "An Open Letter about Our Common Crisis of Faith as United Methodists." Signed by forty-four laity including Umile, the letter also questioned her sexual identity. "If a personal crisis of sexual identity began this crisis of faith . . ."²⁷ The sexual innuendos were well known; Taussig had heard male pastors derisively call Cady a lesbian. This allowed critics to bring up homosexuality, another issue being contested in the church at the time.

Cady was being cast as norm breaker: breaking the sanctity of marriage through her divorce, preaching on scripture in abnormal and heretical ways, and challenging the tradition of an exclusively male clergy to lead the United Methodist flock. Calling her a lesbian in this context just added to her offenses. It was character assassination.

The names Cady was called and the boundary-breaking improprieties she was accused of committing characterized her as a heretical woman, a tradition that had ancient roots. In the same year Cady was enduring these personal attacks, *Harvard Theological Review* published the article “The Heretical Woman as Symbol in Alexander, Athanasius, and Jerome.” It described the symbolic figure of the heretical woman described by early church fathers:

The fourth-century figure of the heretical woman, who is almost invariably identified as sexually promiscuous, expresses the threatening image of a community with uncontrolled boundaries. Just as she allows herself to be penetrated sexually by strange men, so too she listens indiscriminately and babbles forth new theological formulations carelessly and without restraint: all the gateways of her body are unguarded. She furthermore ignores both woman’s physical restriction to the private sphere and her corresponding social subordination to the public sphere of men; the heretical woman is a wanderer—a “gadabout,” as English translations of ancient texts—she is notoriously indifferent to the authority of her male superiors. The figure of the orthodox virgin is the counterpoint to this figure of the heretical woman.²⁸

Cady’s actions—speaking out as a Methodist pastor, standing on the altar, expressing new theological understandings, replacing male images of God with female ones, and then publicizing this through writings and workshops—fit neatly into this old trope. The female body itself had become a symbol for church boundaries.

Because of these personal attacks, Cady and Taussig decided that Taussig would be the primary speaker to defend and explain the book in public. Some opportunities were educational. In January 1991, Taussig and Claudia Camp presented on Sophia at the Annual Conference’s continuing education for clergy. The presentation occurred without incident, while other engagements were more contentious. In March 1991, a mandated theological forum in the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference