

1941–April 8, 2011



Nancy Hardesty, a scholar of American religion and a key figure in the evangelical feminist movement, died on April 8, 2011. She had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2009. Hardesty wrote many books and articles on the holiness movement and on the status of women; she was also professor of religion at Clemson University, arriving there in 1988. She is best known, however, for the book she coauthored in 1974, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today* (Word Books), which introduced Christian feminism to conservative Protestants. In 1975 she helped found the Evangelical Women's Caucus (now the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women's Caucus), and remained an active board member until her death.

Nancy Hardesty was born in Lima, Ohio, in 1941 and in 1963 she received her BA from Wheaton College, a flagship evangelical school in Illinois. The following year she completed a master's degree in newspaper journalism at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. In 1976 she received her PhD in American religious history from the University of Chicago, studying with Martin E. Marty. Her dissertation, "'Your Daughters Shall Prophecy': Revivalism and Feminism in the Age of Finney," was published under that same title in 1991.

Hardesty's scholarship was integral to her life experience. Her own upbringing in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, a holiness denomination, had introduced her to an array of capable women serving as missionaries and evangelists. Hardesty also took inspiration from her own family history. She recalled the time her mother produced two old documents from family records, one a receipt for a contribution to the Prohibition Party with the slogan, "No citizen shall be denied the right to vote on the account of sex," and the other a clipping from an old Lima, Ohio, newspaper advocating "Equal Suffrage, Prohibition of the Liquor Traffic and a single standard of morals for men and women." Both carried the signature of her paternal great-grandfather, Joseph Tapscott.

As an educated single woman in the postwar evangelical world, however, Hardesty had to carve her own path forward. Women had always played a central role in conservative evangelical churches — the missionaries and evangelists Hardesty grew up with were not unusual for the time, especially in holiness churches — but never in public leadership. Moreover, in the 1950s and 1960s, evangelicals adopted the conservative family values of the era with zeal, scaling back decades of women's active participation in outreach and institution-building. The norm for

women was marriage not career, and the rule was submission to men in both the home and the church. On all counts, Nancy Hardesty was unique. After serving on the editorial staff of the *Christian Century* and then as an assistant editor at *Eternity* magazine, she taught English and writing at Trinity College in Deerfield, Illinois, a conservative evangelical school.

During these early days, as the feminist movement was roiling American society, Hardesty began a lifelong friendship with Letha Dawson Scanzoni, at the time an independent scholar balancing a writing career with the demands of family. The story of this working partnership goes back to 1963, when *Eternity* published an article by Charles Ryrie, the dean of Dallas Theological Seminary, on “woman’s role.” “A woman cannot do a man’s job in the church,” Ryrie declared, “any more than a man can do a woman’s job in the home.” With assistance from Nancy Hardesty, then an editor at *Eternity*, Scanzoni published a rebuttal, which appeared in 1966. “Woman’s Place: Silence or Service” was not a terribly radical statement, especially by secular feminist standards, but it ignited a fervent, and mostly negative, response from readers, including one who denounced Scanzoni’s article as “a perfect example of why a woman is admonished to be silent in the church.”

The episode spoke volumes, not just about evangelical conservatism on women’s issues, but about the growing restlessness of women who aspired to serve and lead in churches. Feminist protest resonated deeply with these women, but it did not square with the teaching coming out of evangelical pulpits and publishing houses. The clear word of scripture seemed to be against any form of women’s leadership, resting on a theology of gender that emphasized the “headship” of men in every sphere of life. The feminist ethic of equality was therefore a direct attack on biblical authority.

In 1974 Scanzoni and Hardesty addressed these questions head on with the publication of *All We’re Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women’s Liberation* (Word Books, 1974).

All We’re Meant to Be

was an important and controversial book from the moment it was published, and it has remained in print for decades. In 2006, the evangelical magazine

Christianity Today

included it in a list of the top fifty books that “changed the way we think, talk, witness, worship, and live.” The editors wrote, somewhat ambivalently, that

All We’re Meant to Be

“outlined what would later blossom into evangelical feminism. For better or worse, no evangelical marriage or institution has been able to ignore the ideas in this book.”

Most important, *All We're Meant to Be* took seriously the evangelical concern for the authority of scripture. Scanzoni and Hardesty offered up a compendium of emerging biblical scholarship, nuancing cryptic texts and correcting questionable translations. They pushed evangelicals to read the Bible in its historical and cultural context, an approach usually associated with liberals hoping to “explain away” difficult passages. Scanzoni and Hardesty argued that evangelicals who wanted to be faithful to the words of the Bible could also embrace feminism; correctly interpreted, the message was one of liberation. *All We're*

Meant to Be

was not a scholarly book, but it would have a profound and long-term effect on evangelical women who aspired for scholarly careers. In a recent tribute to Hardesty, Julie Ingersoll, author of

Evangelical Christian Women: War Stories in the Gender Battles

(New York University Press, 2003), wrote of young women being “battered by submission theology” in conservative churches. “To those who never felt battered by these texts, it’s hard to explain just how freeing it is to realize that those interpretations [of biblical texts] are just that: interpretations. And in fact they are interpretations made by men who have an agenda.”

Hardesty also played a central role in the formation of the Evangelical Women’s Caucus (EWC), an unapologetically feminist and conservative Christian organization. This story began in 1973 when she was one of three women invited to a gathering of socially progressive evangelicals in Chicago. Hardesty managed to insert a plank decrying women’s secondary status in the document they produced — the Chicago Statement set the standard for a small but articulate left-wing evangelical movement — and helped form a separate women’s task force. By 1975 the Evangelical Women’s Caucus was large enough to hold its own national gathering. The first EWC conference, “Women in Transition: A Biblical Approach to Feminism,” brought together 360 women from across the United States and Canada. Though often in tension with the secular feminist movement, the EWC was an important presence in the religious world, with its own publication, *Daughters of Sarah*, which ran from 1975 to 1994. Renamed the Evangelical and Ecumenical Women’s Caucus in 1990 to reflect a broader constituency, it continues to hold conferences and publishes a magazine, *Christian Feminism Today*.

Nancy Hardesty’s scholarship both reinforced and instructed her commitment to feminism. Her doctoral dissertation and her book *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Abingdon, 1984; rev. ed. University of Tennessee Press, 1999) documented the connection between women’s rights and the nineteenth century holiness movement, which emerged out of the Wesleyan wing of American Protestantism. Following the line of interpretation opened by Timothy Smith’s *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Abingdon Press, 1957), Hardesty and a growing number of other historians argued that the holiness movement — and its central idea, that truly committed Christian believers might lose the active will to sin — was the true source of socially progressive views among nineteenth

century Protestants. At the core of women's rights, temperance, and abolition was that one idea: liberating Christian women who were "equipped for service" by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Hardesty's work now belongs to a growing body of scholarship about the holiness movement and its central place in the formation of modern-day evangelicalism, an influence long obscured by scholars' interest in fundamentalism, a movement with Reformed Calvinist roots. The particular stories Nancy Hardesty told, about people like Phoebe Palmer, Frances Willard, and Amanda Berry Smith, have also become an important theme in American women's history, as scholars recognize more and more the role of religion in enlarging women's traditional role.

These stories also had practical consequences for women in evangelical churches, demonstrating that the social conservatism of the late twentieth century was not central to the tradition. In fact, throughout her career, Nancy Hardesty took care to write for this audience, making technical scholarly debates accessible and challenging. Her books and articles addressed subjects like inclusive language and women's right to preach (*Inclusive Language in the Church*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1987, and *Great Women of Faith*, Baker, 1980; Abingdon, 1982). At the same time, however, she was an important contributor to emerging scholarship on women in American religion, including Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Keller's important book *In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writing* (HarperCollins, 1995) and their *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (3 volumes, Indiana University Press, 2006).

While teaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University (1978–1980) and then at Clemson University, Hardesty continued to combine scholarship and social activism. She pursued her work with EEWC and the cause of Christian feminism, never missing a yearly conference, and also engaged in varied research interests, including women and religion in the South and the stories of children growing up in fundamentalist homes. The year before her death, she was laying out a project on African-American Christianity. Hardesty's papers are now part of the Archives of Women in Theological Scholarship at Union Seminary's Burke Library.

Recent tributes to Nancy Hardesty have mirrored the breadth of her career. In a series of blog postings about the friendship that produced *All We're Meant to Be*, Letha Scanzoni remembered not just the trials of writing and publishing, but Hardesty's love for day trips to the mountains near her home in Greenville and the time she bought her first CD player, "with a car wrapped around it." Writing in the *Hartford Courant*

, Susan Campbell remembered Nancy Hardesty as a “graceful writer and a rigorous researcher” who corresponded with “her multitude of friends and fans right up to the last.” Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible commented to a friend that “Nancy’s death marks the passing of an era.”

After her cancer had metastasized in May 2010, Nancy wrote an extended meditation on her own impending death, “Some Thoughts on Living and Dying,” which was published in the winter 2011 issue of *Christian Feminism Today*. The photograph attached to the article shows Nancy with her typically bemused and thoughtful expression. “While I have had my share of disappointments, slings, and arrows, I often say I’ve lived a charmed life. God has been good. . . So many people have shared with Letha and me how our book, *All We’re Meant to Be*, changed their lives,” she said. “I view the dying process as an adventure, a learning experience, and I look forward to my next assignment from the One whose love is steadfast forever, that Creative Energy which sustains us all.”

This In Memoriam piece was written by Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, American Congregational Association and Library.