

March is Women's History Month, a time to honor the contributions of women who have shaped history, including those who have profoundly impacted the Presbyterian Church. Women have played a vital role in ministry, leadership, and social justice within the denomination, breaking barriers and paving the way for future generations. This year, we are delighted to highlight three remarkable women: Rev. Karen Hernandez, a dedicated leader in pastoral ministry; Rev. Holly Haile, the first Native American woman ordained in the PC(USA); and Rev. Dr. Eileen Lindner, a scholar and advocate for church unity and social justice. Their faith, leadership, and commitment continue to inspire and strengthen the church.

Eileen Lindner

1. *What does Women's History Month mean to you, and how has it influenced your perspective or journey?*

Women's History Month brings forward the untold stories—of Black women, immigrant women, and so many others—whose contributions have been overlooked. I think about this in the context of the Christian tradition where history spans not just centuries but millennia. Women's History Month is a chance to tell the full gospel story. Who bore the Christ child? Who first declared him risen? Women played pivotal roles in our faith, and this is a time to celebrate that.

2. *What challenges have you faced as a woman, and how did you overcome them?*

When I was first ordained—50 years ago—two things were undeniable. First, in meetings, my words were often ignored, only for a man to say the same thing minutes later and be praised for his "great insight." That doesn't happen anymore, but I was a person then too, and it stung. Second, I was the 68th woman ordained in the Presbyterian Church—now there are over 2,000. In those early years, there was a new awareness of women's roles, so I was placed on task forces and committees I wasn't yet experienced enough for. But I believed God put me there for a reason. So I paid attention, learned everything I could, and understood I was standing in that space for the women who came before me and the ones who would follow.

3. *Can you share a defining moment or achievement that has inspired you or shaped your path?*

There have been many, but one was being arrested during the Civil Rights Movement in Cordele, Georgia. A young woman called my mother and said, "We have to go to this demonstration." My mother replied, "If you're going to be arrested for being a Christian, make sure there's enough evidence to convict." That stuck with me. The next morning, when I was bailed out of jail, a young African American man faced a barrage of racial slurs as he came for me. He introduced himself: "I'm Andrew Young with the National Council of Churches." Years later, we worked together on the Carter White House staff, and he became my son's godfather. That moment confirmed I was among people I trusted and admired.

Another was being the first woman in a National Council of Churches delegation to meet with the Pope—something unheard of at the time. That experience, along with my work in the Civil Rights Movement, solidified my lifelong commitment to racial justice and Christian unity.

4. *What advice would you give to women who aspire to create meaningful change and make an impact?*

Draw strength from your sisters—connect with them, support one another—but don’t exclude your brothers. Some of your best allies will be men. That may not be a popular thought, but it’s true. And most importantly, don’t go it alone. Work as if everything depends on you but pray as if everything depends on God.

Karen Hernandez

1. *What does Women's History Month mean to you, and how has it influenced your perspective or journey?*

Women’s History Month is an opportunity to live out the PC(USA)’s commitment to education—both within the church and in society. I love using PC(USA) resources to learn about women’s contributions and honor their achievements. One way I’ve done this is by partnering with McCarter Theatre, dedicating hours to invite 100 women—clergy, government officials, young adults, and teens—to attend a play for free and celebrate together at a reception.

I also treasure a resource I found in 2019 that highlights the work of women in the church and beyond. It reminds me that Women’s History Month isn’t just about the past; it’s about recognizing and gathering the women who are making an impact today. This should be a yearly practice, not something we observe once and forget.

2. *What challenges have you faced as a woman, and how did you overcome them?*

As a Latina clergywoman, I’ve been told—both directly and indirectly—that women aren’t called to preach or be pastors. As the second to last in a family of 12 children of the Rev. Jose Belen Hernandez, a Pentecostal Pastor, I could not envision being the child called to follow in his footsteps. I pushed through those doubts by remembering my own call story. I was once asked, “Karen, have you considered ordained ministry?” My immediate response was no, and my mind flooded with reasons why. But at that moment, I also felt a deep assurance that God was, in fact, calling me. That certainty has sustained me ever since.

3. *Can you share a defining moment or achievement that has inspired you or shaped your path?*

Reading *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander was a turning point. I had noticed for years that many of my urban congregation’s young people had incarcerated family members. I was unsettled when I heard them casually using prison jargon in daily life, but I didn’t yet understand mass incarceration. That book opened my eyes—and changed my calling.

From that moment, I knew I had to be active in dismantling mass incarceration. This led me to the Criterion Institute’s *God’s Economy* curriculum, which is a 5-lesson curriculum that helps churches consider how to support local communities economically. During COVID, my church partnered with Nassau Presbyterian to

explore how we could make a tangible impact. That's how we launched the Trenton Microloan Collaborative, which provides small loans and professional services to formerly incarcerated entrepreneurs up to \$2,000.

With support from a Synod innovation grant and the Lilly Endowment, we've now helped 15 returning citizens rebuild their lives. One of our first recipients received pro bono business and tax services, which allowed him to clear years of financial backlogs. With that foundation, he successfully applied for a \$10,000 grant from Mercer County. Stories like his affirm that even small investments can create lasting change.

4. *What advice would you give to women who aspire to create meaningful change and make an impact?*

Find your people—your community, your supporters—and lean on them. Change doesn't happen in isolation. And don't be afraid to step into spaces where you can make a difference, even if they seem daunting. When others hear your story, you never know who might be inspired to join the work.

Holly Haile:

1. *What does Women's History Month mean to you, and how has it influenced your perspective or journey?*

I certainly think that there are wonderful opportunities to uplift members of our society so that we can focus and appreciate the contributions that they have made. I feel that Women's History Month is just that sort of opportunity.

2. *What challenges have you faced as a woman, and how did you overcome them?*

I have not overcome them because if the solution is to no longer be a woman, well, it's a mute cause, because that's what I'm just gonna keep on being. I think that most everything that I've had to do in life for more than six decades has to do with, yes, being a Shinnecock Indian and, yes, being a female. I just think that in some places your gender or your race means more, and in some places it means less—but it always means something. It is always a factor.

3. *Can you share a defining moment or achievement that has inspired you or shaped your path?*

Yes, I can, and it's a sad one—a defining moment when I was referred to as "girl" on my first day at a white congregation. I was waiting for their parish associate pastor to show up, and in that community, where there are ultra-wealthy people and where there are servant classes of people, to be referred to as a "girl" was very intentional on the part of the person who called me that. The lesson was also not taken lightly by me—it reminded me that, as high-minded as the church likes to be, non-white leadership is rarely offered the respect that we are due, just because we are not white.

Well, remembering that my call is not from humankind—my call is a divine call—you know, the little child phrase, "I'm good 'cause God don't make no junk." So I don't think it's a mistake that I have been called. I think that I do well to remember why I am volunteering my life to the church and that good can come from honest effort and from an open heart and from walking in a way that is to model justice and love for neighbors, friends, and enemies. If I can keep that in my mind, other things will come and go, but that's not why I'm in those spaces. I'm in those spaces for good news and for justice.

- 4. *What advice would you give to women who aspire to create meaningful change and make an impact?***

I would say be courageous. I would say model your pathway after women who you admire and who you respect, and to not give up hope. Because if it weren't necessary, it would be very easy for the doors to be flung wide and for everyone to act in a way that perhaps we ought to act related to the church. But find some role models and let that help you along your path of a wonderful and impactful life.