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## Beginnings, Endings, and Middles

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# Beginnings, Endings, and Middles

It is a coincidence that the issue celebrating the twentieth anniversary of *Daughters of Sarah* is also the last one I plan to edit in a long time, perhaps forever. Sit with me while I tell you a piece of my story and of the story of our magazine.

In 1974, I was a homebound mother of two babies when I saw the classified ad in the peace-and-justice magazine, *The Other Side*: "Subscribe to *Daughters of Sarah*, a bimonthly Christian feminist newsletter, \$2.00/year for six issues."

I was thrilled. A debate about women's roles had just surfaced in our church publication. My consciousness was getting raised in a hurry, and already I had started to write articles on Jesus, the New Testament, and women. I subscribed immediately.

The new newsletter did not disappoint me, for I was not only learning about history, social issues, and biblical interpretation from a women's point of view. I was being introduced to a network of kindred spirits.

Hard on the heels of the inception of *Daughters of Sarah* was the first conference of the Evangelical Women's Caucus in Washington, DC, where for the first time I met some of this network of Christian feminist women and had, as it were, the top of my head blown off. Whatever re-imagining of Christianity was done in Minneapolis in November 1993 seemed to me like peanuts compared with the paradigm shift I experienced through the pioneers of Christian feminism at this conference in November 1975.

It was here that I first met Lucile Sider Dayton (now Groh), *Daughters'*

editor and founder, and told her our family was hoping to move to Chicago the following summer. "That's great!" she said. "Come to our monthly meetings and help us publish our newsletter." My heart leaped at the thought of working with like-minded women for a cause that not only invigorated me but was reaching many others.

The first meeting held after we moved to Chicago was in September 1976. Despite having the flu, I couldn't bear to miss—and ended up serving as book review editor and volunteering one day of office work each week.

But soon our copy editor Fran Mason decided to move to Kansas. I panicked. Who will edit our articles, I worried. "Oh, Reta can do it," announced Fran and off she went. And that was the start of the unplanned editing career of this grade school teacher and mother of two boys, who had not a shred of training in journalism.

I panicked again when in 1978 Lucile decided to pursue her doctorate in counseling and psychology and wanted me to take over the management and editorial responsibilities of *Daughters of Sarah*. "Oh, Reta can do it," said Lucile airily, and off she went.

We moved out of Lucile's basement near North Park College and set up shop in a Wesleyan Methodist Church where the water pipes froze and burst on a bitter December night, and we had no heat the entire winter. It was the same terrible winter of '78-'79 when the snow piled up while the mercury dropped, and for a week nothing moved in Chicago, costing Mayor Bilandic his job and the rest of us our parking spaces from January until April.

But we had just received one thousand dollars from Church Women United for our first direct mail effort. For four Saturdays in a row, the Daughters met at North Park College to stuff twenty-two thousand envelopes addressed to names *Sojourners* magazine had given us. That first mailing cemented friendships and yielded 500–600 new subscribers.

I could tell many stories of the enthusiastic, hardworking, generous, and outrageous women who have worked with me. We have been sisters together and I have grieved when any of them moved away or on to other jobs. Together we bore the brunt of shoestrings economics, with the wolf continually howling at the door (it still does), and moments of celebration when a rare grant or large contribution would come in. Together we stuffed envelopes when we could not pay for anyone else to do it. Together we faced legal problems when our ignorance of non-profit rules resulted in those scary letters from government offices.

And together we critiqued each other's writing skills and thrashed out our theology. *DOS* was begun by women from evangelical churches who were committed to scripture. Each eight-page issue they produced contained one biblical article, one historical article, and one article on a social issue.

These early women assumed that the readers of *DOS* would be primarily women in churches, but they had the wisdom to make the newsletter a forum for a range of views within Christian feminism. This statement allowed for many denominations to be represented among our members and in our readership.

It also made for lively dialogue. When inquisitive, non-conventional women get together, they talk! In the early years, everyone was in on business and editorial discussions at our monthly meetings. For years, Sheryl Olson kept us in stitches with humor that cobbled

together her radical social agenda with an evangelical theology, all perched on top of hairy legs unshaven for the sake of feminist ideology. Issues of race were never far from our minds when Sheryl recounted stories from her black church and the male African-American ministers she kept unnerving.

Theological sparks flew when Pat Broughton joined our group with a somewhat different theological agenda. One result was our 1981 "Unveiling the Goddess" issue, which aroused more reader response than any other to date. It was followed by long meetings when Sheryl pushed us all to declare our confessions of faith!

From the very first years, hot topics like abortion and lesbianism were discussed in the magazine, but the real debates didn't start until we did theme issues—on abortion in 1985, trying to present both prochoice and prolife positions fairly; and on lesbians in 1988, following a year of study and numerous sweaty four-hour editorial meetings. Consensus is not always easy to reach, but we sure tried!

Today, the theological range within Christian feminism seems to me to have broadened. Women from church backgrounds are saying things only post-Christians said earlier. All of us have seen, however, that limits cannot be stretched indefinitely, for if we move too far to the left, we lose our more evangelical subscribers—or vice versa. Thus, it is impossible to be totally inclusive.

If I were to set limits, I would use the ancient concept of "Jesus-Sophia is Lord"—understanding that sovereignty in the context of Jesus' life of voluntary servanthood. As I explained in our Spring 1994 issue, I think that such allegiance frees us from capitulating to the lordship or domination of any other concept, person, or institution. I include Wisdom-Sophia, for Her path seems a valuable one for encountering the feminine aspect of the biblical God. Within these parameters, I believe, lie

enormous possibilities for “re-imagining God, the church, and community” in an inclusive, feminist key.

I am not leaving *Daughters of Sarah* because I necessarily want to. I have loved the work and my sisters who shared the yoke with me. I loved getting to know readers and authors. I am grateful to all of you who worked to make this magazine possible. If my spouse had a job in Chicago and if I could make a living wage teaching part time and editing part time, I would jump at the chance. It may happen some day, but I must first write my dissertation and see how the pieces fall into place after that. I hope to teach New Testament in

college or seminary—but will probably not be able to refrain from writing articles for *DOS*.

Our managing editor, Sandra Volentine, and our art and publication director, Kari Sandhaas, are leaving also. Thus, as we talk about the beginnings of *Daughters of Sarah*, we must deal with the endings of three staff persons’ particular association with it. We trust that for the magazine itself, this stage is only the middle, or the adolescence, of its life-span.

*Reta Halteman Finger*

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## **Blame It on January**

by Sandra Volentine

Last winter brought the worst sub-zero temperatures I’ve experienced in fourteen years in the Chicago area. There were three days in January I refused to go outside, even canceling a board meeting one Saturday.

Then I visited my sister in Phoenix, land of warmth and sunshine. Locking eyes with a bobcat in a dry wash near Tucson convinced me. It’s time to realize a long-time goal of moving to the Southwest.

I leave *DOS* at an exciting time, with strategic planning finished, goals and objectives laid out, new women coming on board to join long-time editorial committee members. The fresh ideas generated by participants thrill me.

During my tenure of a little over two years, *DOS* met and overcame several crises. I’m proud to have helped the organization through the government reporting crisis—we are now up-to-date in that arena. I would like especially to thank Richard Wochholz for his diligent, painstaking work on our financial statements. Richard, you saved us.

I wept as I read your notes that came in with your generous contributions that

kept us going. Thank you all for your donations, prayers, and good wishes. I regret that we were not able to send personal notes of gratitude, but a letter coming to you from the Board of Directors details our financial position and our goals for the future.

There were times in the past two years when my many responsibilities here came into conflict. I’d like to thank Kari Sandhaas for often taking up the slack when I needed extra time to work on corrections so that the magazine still came out on time. Kari, you saved me.

With all the comings and goings, I’d like to say that *Daughters of Sarah* is really *your* magazine, not ours. The staff changes won’t affect our purpose or our commitment to bringing you women’s stories that have meaning for you.

I am thankful for all the women and men who have touched my life here. I’ve grown in faith and feminism thanks to staff, Board, editorial committee members, readers, and authors. Bless you all.

*Sandra Volentine*