

Ordination

Woman to take her vows Sunday

By BOBBIE TRAENKNER
Gazette Staff Reporter

Good things come in small packages, the saying goes. In the case of Meredith Whitfield Neill the saying is right on target.

Meredith, a 25-year-old petite brunette, recently graduated from seminary. After her graduation she became the first woman to be approved for ordination in the Gaston Baptist Association. Her ordination ceremony will be held Sunday during the 11 a.m. worship service at First Baptist Church where she has been a member all her life.

Meredith doesn't fit the conservatively-dressed stereotype most people think of as a female seminary graduate. Instead she sports one of the latest hairstyles, uses today's jargon and dresses like any other young woman her age.

Hospital chaplain

She grew up in a church-oriented family and regularly attended Sunday school, church and other church-related activities. Although she had the teenage dream of someday becoming a missionary, a serious illness of a relative opened her eyes to the need for more hospital chaplains and her ultimate goal in life.

After graduating from Meredith College she enrolled in Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., with her mind made up to become a hospital chaplain. The job requires ordination.

Meredith faced the eight-man ordination board of the Gaston Baptist Association on Nov. 28, 1977, less than a month after she graduated from the seminary with a Master of Divinity degree.

"Several of the girls with whom I attended seminary school told me how awful going before the ordination board was going to be. They said their interviews lasted up to three and a half hours. I was scared to death and prepared for the worst, expecting dragons, but the board went out of their way to put me at ease. I was surprised to receive the same treatment as any guy would have gotten and my interview lasted only 45 minutes," Meredith said.

A formality

"Going before the board was a formality since my church had already approved my ordination and



MEREDITH WHITFIELD NEILL

the church has the last word, but I didn't want any special favors because I was a girl. I'm glad I did it. It was quite an experience."

The ordination ceremony on Sunday has been completely planned by Meredith and will include her favorite

hymns. Two seminary professors will take part in the service and over 50 out-of-town guests are expected. Although she is entitled to wear robes befitting her status as a minister, she has chosen instead to wear a two-piece, cream-colored knit dress.

Time has come

"I didn't want anyone to think I was putting myself above them by wearing robes," she said. "Planning the ceremony has been exciting. My time has come."

She has applied to become chaplain at two hospitals and is waiting to hear from them. However, she admits that if a call came to preach in this area she would give it serious thought.

On Monday Meredith is leaving for Louisville where she will be working for a month, filling in for a friend who works as a chaplain.

Meredith is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Buren S. Neill Jr. of 903 Churchill Dr. She has one brother, Buren S. (Chip) Neill III, who attends Carson Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn.

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