

DIFFERENT VOICES /DIFFERENT CHOICES: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON
MINISTRY—A Contribution from the United States

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Bonjour, good afternoon, Guten Tag, buenos tardes. My warm thanks to the organizers of this historic conference, and especially to our Canadian sisters, for gracious hospitality.

Coming from the Washington, D.C., area, I am especially happy to be in Ottawa, where I can see the impact of another kind of government. Thank you, Canada, for showing those of us who live to your south what it means to be a responsible citizen of North America. We often look north with envy and with hope.

I will address our theme, "Different Voices, Different Choices: Feminist Perspectives on Ministry," from a distinctly U.S. starting point, mindful of my limits even though I live as a conscientious objector to the hegemonic policies of my country. I am mindful, too, of the global context in which we live, so I look forward to hearing my colleagues' views. I hope that the gestalt will give us each a fuller appreciation for the big picture that is feminist ministry in a "discipleship of equals." ⁱ

Indebted to and following Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's insightful keynote and Rosemary Radford Ruether's creative contribution, I believe that not only are we church, "a kindom of priests," well beyond the bankrupt kyriarchy, but that actualizing our various ministries in an egalitarian model is an urgent priority in an increasingly unjust world. My focus is on the justice connection.

I will spell out my view in three moments: first, claiming that the context in which we live out our ministries has changed from one that prohibited women's ministry to one which fairly demands it; second, suggesting that the most adequate way of thinking about feminist ministry is by analogy to women-church since "women" seem to get lost in the shuffle otherwise; and third, offering criteria we might employ as we strategize how our ministries can overlap to do justice and build up our communities.

(1) From prohibition against to need for women's ministry

When the unthinkable discussions of women's ordination began post Vatican II in the 1970s in the U.S., following the lead of St. Joan's Alliance, the clearest analogue was the so-called "valid but illicit" ordinations of Episcopal women priests in Philadelphia in July 1974. We presumed that Catholic women would one day be ordained as well. Thirty years later, at least four factors have changed our thinking on ordination.

a) The U.S. religious scene was then predominantly Christian and Jewish with ecumenical relations between/among Christians a high priority. Now the U.S., according to Harvard Pluralism Project director Diana Eck, is among the most religiously diverse countries in the world, with more Muslims than Presbyterians.ⁱⁱ Women are increasingly becoming the majority of ministers in many religious groups including Reform Judaism. Coupled with the rise of the Religious Right and other forms of fundamentalism, the religious landscape is now highly politicized and commercialized. It is within this context that we evaluate our strategies, learn from and collaborate with the many feminist rabbis and ministers, from women who function as imams, as well as those in pagan ministry. How far we have come from the now seemingly tame Philadelphia ordinations. Our religious imaginations spark with new models of ministry and new role models in

ministry.

b) The U.S. Roman Catholic kyriarchal church has changed profoundly as well. It is impossible to overstate the impact of the priest pedophilia and episcopal cover-up scandals as they have eroded the institution's last shred of moral authority and cost more than a billion of the community's hard-earned dollars. The sheer number of victims/survivors, as if one were not sufficient evidence of a system in need of overhaul, and the unconscionable collaboration by many bishops has left the U.S. church in ruins. To pay the claims, many dioceses are closing local parishes over the objections of the parishioners who pay for them. This "solution" is yet another manifestation of the top-down problem, authoritarian action without accountability to the community that was part of the cause of the original crimes.

A feminist reading of the situation sheds new light. I do so thanks to a report by Barbara Mahar of Massachusetts Women-Church: "Recently I stopped in at St. Albert's in Weymouth {editor's note: one of the churches closed by the kyriarchy but kept open by the people until the kyriarchy relented}. It was the middle of a week day afternoon. I was greeted warmly at the door by a man and a woman. Several people were in the church—praying, reading, sitting silently. The church was in perfect condition...In a word—welcoming...I sat and took it all in for a while, then read the bulletin...full from front to back with activities, meetings, outreach programs, prayer service schedules...a list of suggestions from parishioners, Legal Counsel, beginners painting and knitting classes...And not a priest in sight! Holy Communion is being distributed. And not a priest in sight...The whole scene brought a smile to my face and relief to my heavy heart. And not a priest in sight...." ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara's comments, though she read the situation slightly

differently than I did, made me realize that to think constructively about feminist ministry we are well advised not to replace male priests with women, but to reconfigure the whole model of church, confident that the many ministerial gifts of the community will be sufficient to its pastoral needs. Feminist ministry is a response to the call of Vatican II for increased lay participation.

c) Another major change since the early 1970s is the increasingly conservative kyriarchal institutional church represented by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger under both species, as it were. In his first papacy, as I have come to think of it, he was the theological heavy hand as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He established a tripartite approach to most issues: claiming that there is but one truth, grounding arguments in natural law, and then insisting that his views become public policy. This is clear in the Vatican position on abortion where fetal life trumps a woman's life; where such matters are considered part of natural law, not a woman's right and responsibility to handle her own reproductive choices; and where governments worldwide are lobbied to codify anti-abortion views according to Roman dictate. Likewise on same-sex marriage: heterosexual marriage is trumpeted as part of the divine plan; any other sexual activity defies natural law; countries should therefore outlaw same-sex marriage. Tell that to Canada which has legalized same-sex marriage, Joseph.

Now under the other species, as it were, he is Pope Benedict XVI, with the massive media-driven power of the papacy as backup. He has expressed a theo-political preference for a smaller, more homogenously conservative, some might say leaner/meaner, church. He has shown a willingness to sacrifice the catholicity of the church. In this papacy, I predict that women's ordination will either remain in the "don't

talk about it” zone, or be “settled definitively” one more time for the road. The “best case” scenario, which would please those who want to get ordained, for reasons that I consider mistaken, would be the creation of deaconesses. With all due respect to those who wish to be deaconess, in my view, this would amount to a ladies’ auxiliary around the edges of the clergy with women once again doing the unpaid housework of the hierarchy.

The most likely outcome is the continuation of the present system with neither married Catholic men nor women admitted to the clerical ranks any time soon, while Anglicans and others who oppose the ordination of women in their denominations (for example, the Anglicans in England who are now faced with the real possibility of women bishops) are welcomed with open arms. The misogynistic handwriting is on the Vatican’s wall.

Women who once desired ordination into the kyriarchal system with the best intentions of changing it from inside can see in light of the current situation that such good intentions are woefully inadequate to transform an increasingly recalcitrant institution. Nonetheless, cooptation is still, in my view, the most serious danger. One day (may it be soon) when the house of cards comes tumbling down even the present pope will see the wisdom in recognizing women’s ministry on kyriarchal terms, and ordaining women, and/or regularizing the ordinations of those already ordained, in order to preserve the kyriarchal system of power. We must do better than that, or all of our efforts in the past four decades will have been for naught.

d) The urgency I feel about deepening the practice of feminist ministry now in a discipleship of equals, the reason I continue to think about this issue when so many

seemingly more pressing ones are on my screen, is because I understand how the various forms of kyriarchal oppression are connected. Let me be specific from a U.S. context. The immoral war in Iraq; the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the name of national security; globalization that results in increased poverty; the destruction of the environment as a sacrifice to unbridled capitalism; the racist, sexist, heterosexist, colonialist attitudes; and the death-dealing lack of sharing of health, education, and other common resources are all part of the same worldview that baptizes and confirms privilege for some and oppression for others. Disgracefully, many U.S. citizens do not register the impact of tens of thousands of Iraqis who have died, thinking somehow that the thousand plus U.S. dead are more important simple because they are Americans.

In this worldview, clergy, from pope to parish priest, are logically and divinely Other than the lower status laity. This hierarchical dualism, this habit of thinking in twos such that one is always better than the other, is deeply ingrained in us. Feminist theorist Catherine MacKinnon described it as the inability to see difference without discrimination.^{iv} I respectfully suggest that what is at stake in our choice of models of feminist ministry is no less than how we wish to posture vis-à-vis these global issues, because at root the permission to think of another person, another animal, even the earth itself as Other and of lesser value is intimately connected to one's religious view.

I see feminist ministry as the lynchpin in our theo-political situation. If we build even the hint of hierarchy into our community we capitulate to forces that would love our blessing. Imagine instead if feminist ministries became synonymous with interreligious international social justice. We are not far from it since the majority of women I know who have been interested in the question of ordination at one time or another are actively

involved in justice work, whether as lawyers, teachers, government officials, social workers, professors, pastoral ministers, musicians, eco-farmers, writers, or the like.

Thirty years ago women could not be ordained. Today we cannot **not** minister.

2) Women, “women-church,” and ministry

Given this religiously pluralistic setting, the sorry state of American Catholicism, the increasingly conservative Vatican, and especially the global need to develop new ways of living cooperatively—not hierarchically—on this earth, I consider the need for feminist ministries crucial. However, I am dubious that ordination is the most useful rubric for our thinking for two reasons:

First, no matter how we parse it, ordination as such, and especially in the Catholic tradition, conveys rank order. Encouraging, recognizing, and blessing feminist ministries does not. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, “Order is used to signify not only the particular rank or general status of the clergy, but also the outward action by which they are raised to that status, and thus stands for ordination. It also indicates what differentiates laity from clergy or the various ranks of the clergy, and thus means spiritual power.”^v

Feminist efforts to talk about ordination in a discipleship of equals face the serious problem of squaring this circle. While I appreciate that ordination should not mean hierarchy, I think we finesse the question at our peril. I prefer to put our collective weight behind the matter of feminist ministry in the many forms feminists (women and men) put our talents to use doing justice and building our communities. That way we are in no danger of falling into the kyriarchal trap of orders. At the same time, those whose

talents and training take them in the direction of what has traditionally been the work of ordained ministers can still exercise their gifts without fear of contradiction, cooptation, or scandal.

Second, even in some of our best efforts in the U.S., we have let ordination drive the train while women seem to be left in the station. Whether Women's Ordination Conference or Women's Ordination Worldwide, or any other coupling of words that substitutes for feminist ministry in a discipleship of equals, it is my observation that what attracts the most attention is "ordination." There is a certain logic to this since it is our intention to lift up the unjust, theologically incorrect teaching that prohibits women from being licitly ordained. There is power in resistance. There is justice in naming wrong by its name. Inclusion must always triumph over exclusion. But it is still a defensive—not offensive—move to ask for ordination, a reaction—not a construction.

I worry that in the current climate even our best efforts to confront kyriarchal powers result in reinscribing the importance of ordination and, however inadvertently, elevating those who are ordained. By doing so, we pass over the power of women worldwide who are engaged in various efforts to create a just world. From my participation in WOC's 1975 conference in Detroit, through the WOW gathering in Ottawa, the most important experience of our movement for me has always been living as a feminist community united in sacrament and solidarity, a discipleship of equals struggling, however imperfectly, to be church.

Just as "women-church" gives new meaning to the word "church" by including women and others who have been marginalized, so, too, does "feminist ministry" instead of women's ordination change the default assumption that ordination is primary, that

kyriarchy sets the agenda. ^{vi} It puts the emphasis instead on women's and, yes, feminist men's many forms of committed service. It leaves behind once and for all the hierarchical trappings we saw on display during the papal transition.

One of our success problems as a movement is that we have a variety of perspectives on ordination—what it means, whether to do it illicitly, how to understand it in a wider theo-political context. We have varying views on professionalism in ministry including whether some people should be paid for what they do and, if so, who and why. We are thinking through the training necessary for new models of ministry, as well as who supervises and approves such programs. We have not yet grappled with matters of liability and malpractice. Given this complexity, there is something comforting about relying on the tried and now known to be untrue system of bishops or the equivalent who will make such decisions or using the old model of religious congregations to assess fitness and belonging. But I caution against all of this as a dangerous lack of imagination, and/or a dubious passing over of the new context in which we find ourselves. I suggest we look for ways to coordinate and amplify our ministries so as to be more efficient in doing justice against very efficient forces to the contrary and to build up our communities as places where love and hope dwell. The question is how, for which I will conclude with several concrete suggestions.

(3) Criteria for enhancing ministries and building up communities

When the balcony doors opened at St. Peter's after the sham conclave "*Habemos papam*" was intoned, and out came his nibs dressed to kill, down to the red shoes that had been out of papal vogue for years, I realized that the problem was not simply that

Cardinal Ratzinger had been elected pope. I am not sure I would have been happy if Jesus had been elected for the simple reason that the process was so utterly flawed: bereft of any input from women, lay people, or children; undemocratic and elitist. The papacy is meant to be a symbol of unity, not a person with authority.

I realized that about the only thing that could have rescued the sorry Vatican scene from what I predict will be history's harsh judgment would have been if the doors had opened and an African woman, HIV positive, with her baby in her arms had come out onto the balcony proclaiming the love of Wisdom-Sophia for all of creation, the imperative of Wisdom-Sophia that justice be done. What a symbol of unity she would have been! Our tears of joy at such a miracle would have cleansed the world as we went about actualizing the ministry of a catholic church worthy of its name. Instead, we got Cardinal Ratzinger.

I mourned the failure of religious imagination and vowed then not to postpone what we envision. I urge us to live the vision of radical equality now, however imperfectly, rather than participate in what oppresses. I urge us to listen with special attention to what young women are saying about the world and the church they want. To that end, I propose four criteria we can consider as we develop new models of feminist ministry in a discipleship of equals:

First, our ministry must be *feminist* in the deepest sense of that word. The full personhood of women, the very survival of millions of women and their dependent children is in the balance. We have feminist resources aplenty to guide not a liberal, corporate approach to ministry, but one which weaves the experiences and talents of willing workers with the pressing needs of the day. Feminism, far from outmoded, is a

deep well of successful struggles against racism, sexism, colonialism, heterosexism, and the like that can help set priorities and implement strategies that work.

Second, the implications of our choices must be *evaluated in global terms*, not simply in terms of local options. While all ministry like all politics is local, choices we make, styles of ministry we embrace have implications beyond any given shores. Training programs, ministerial preparation, even ministry will vary, of course. But especially those of us who live in so-called developed countries must resist the tendency to imperialize our styles and criteria, and thus perpetuate colonial Christianity in feminist dress. This is a tricky balance given the unequal distribution of resources, but it is no excuse for setting up a parallel system that excludes and diminishes the contributions of the world's majority.

Third, feminist ministry is *not denominationally specific, but interreligiously connected*. That is why excessive concern about Roman Catholic ordination is, in my view, misplaced. It is an important issue of principle, of course, but in the present context it can function as a distraction from the collaborative work we need to be about to do justice. Indeed there are already many Catholic women ordained as Episcopalian and Lutheran priests who are no less Catholic for it, just as there are women ministering in countless communities who have not needed a papal pat on the head for their work to flourish.

Fourth, feminist ministry is *justice-seeking activity*. Grounded in the pain of exclusion, we began our movement for ordination as a matter of justice. Along the way, as our feminist ministry deepened we have joined our forces with those who seek to eradicate poverty, to provide health care, to eliminate HIV/AIDS, to stop war, to live

simply in communities and families that do justice.

These criteria for ministry, that it be feminist, global, interreligiously connected, and justice-seeking, offer a common starting point for hearing different voices and evaluating different choices as we carry out our various feminist ministries in a discipleship of equals. I have every confidence that Sophia in her Wisdom will bless our efforts to live them out with integrity. Then, just as we break bread and share wine “in memory of her,” our daughters and their friends will take up their ministries in memory of us.

ⁱ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined this term. For a good explanation, see In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins, New York: Crossroad, 1983, especially Part II, and Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation, New York: Crossroad, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Diana Eck, A New Religious America: How A “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Mahar, e-mail to MCWR@yahoo.com, February 4, 2005.

^{iv} Catharine MacKinnon, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination," in The Moral Foundation of Civil Rights, Ed. Robert K. Fullinwider and Claudia Mills, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986.

^v From the Catholic Encyclopedia, 2004, “Order is used to signify not only the particular rank or general status of the clergy, but also the outward action by which they are raised to that status, and thus stands for ordination. It also indicates what differentiates laity from clergy or the various ranks of the clergy, and thus means spiritual power. The Sacrament of Order is the sacrament by which grace and spiritual power for the discharge

of ecclesiastical offices are conferred.” (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11279a.htm>, July 20, 2005).

^{vi} The women-church movement is based on the idea of the ekklesia of wo/men articulated by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See her Wisdom's Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001.