

Catholic Feminist Ministries—The Sacred Work of Women-Church
Mary E. Hunt, Women-Church Convergence Conference
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Catholic feminist ministries are abundant, varied, and changing. I want to explore: (1) how we have come to see catholic feminist ministries as the sacred work of women-church; (2) why we engage in catholic feminist ministries and how the world is better because of it; (3) what these ministries portend for the future of our movement and for the world.

I come to the topic with more than a casual interest because I am engaged in this work. The locus of my catholic feminist ministry is WATER, the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, a non-profit educational center in Silver Spring, Maryland, where I teach, write, organize, and train people who bring their feminist faith perspectives to bear on the work of social change.

I belong to Sisters Against Sexism (SAS), a local women-church group now almost 30 years old. SAS was inspired by Pope John Paul II's first visit to the United States in 1979. We often refer to it as "The Theresa Kane Visit," mindful of the warm, forthright welcome Theresa offered to the Pope and his rude reaction to it. At the time of the visit there was a women's prayer group in Washington, D.C. that called in a male priest when they wanted to celebrate the Eucharist. Some members of the group were among those women religious who stood at the National Shrine during the Pope's remarks in silent protest wearing blue armbands signaling support for women's ordination. It was at that service that Sister of Mercy Theresa Kane welcomed the Pope with the invitation to include women in "all of the ministries of the church." The Pope's negative reaction was obvious and had many harsh repercussions. The women's prayer

group, scandalized by the Pope, never called a priest again and continued to celebrate the Eucharist regularly. So began one women-church group, Sisters Against Sexism, which still meets regularly.

As a white, U.S. citizen I am aware of the specificity of my perspective, how privilege shapes my view and limits the scope of my claims. I offer my analysis with the hope that together with others it will form part of a plan for action for the women-church movement.

(1) How we have come to see catholic feminist ministries as the sacred work of women-church

As we celebrate twenty-five years of the women-church movement, let us recall our history to understand our current focus on catholic feminist ministries.ⁱ Our first gathering, here in Chicago in 1983, “From Generation to Generation: Woman Church Speaks,” was an outgrowth of both the refusal by the Roman Catholic kyriarchal church to ordain women and the deeply felt need on the part of Catholic women to act publicly as moral and religious agents. In 1983 we celebrated the Eucharist, strategized about myriad issues, and protested on the streets of Chicago against U.S. involvement in Central America. Thus our origins lie in being church and acting justly. Rosemary Radford Ruether captured much of this in her book Women-Church: Theory and Practice.ⁱⁱ

At our second gathering, “Women-Church: Claiming Our Power” in 1987 in Cincinnati, we made clear that we were not tinkering with the Roman Catholic Church, but that we were “women-church,” the regularly convoked assembly of those who seek to be a “discipleship of equals” in continuity with the Jesus movement. The power we

claimed was not an elitist share of the pie, but a commitment to transform structures of inequality, what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza so helpfully named “kyriarchy.”ⁱⁱⁱ We committed to create new structures and institutions that are egalitarian, participatory, and democratic. Our local organizations grew and our ministries took shape. We understood ourselves as church and we acted for justice.

In Albuquerque, the third time this ekklesia of women came together in plenary form, we called ourselves “Women-Church: Weavers of Change.” We said who we are—women and some always welcome feminist men—who engage in social and ecclesial change knowing the many interlocking ways in which injustice functions. We confronted the contradictions and challenges among us as well as in the world. Once again we emphasized sacrament and solidarity, being church and doing justice.

Women-church has never been a reform movement trying to change a recalcitrant kyriarchal church. Thanks to Divine Wisdom, it has always been a constructive force that tries to embody what it envisions. We who have the privilege of creating something new have the responsibility to do it according to our common values of equality and mutual empowerment. We have kept the justice focus sharp by prodding one another to explore hard issues including racism, reproductive choice, homosexuality, and economic justice. We have never been in lockstep agreement. But women-church has long been a forum for expressing our views, finding ways to work together, making public our shared values, and celebrating the Eucharist as a source and symbol of our common struggle. Long may it be so!

Much has changed in the twenty-five years since we began this work but the fundamental pattern of being church and doing justice has persisted. Earth is endangered

by global warming. Poverty and class divisions grow apace. Wars rage in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel/Palestine. The “war on terror” is an excuse to erode rights around the world, especially of those who are imprisoned. Racism remains a major cause of oppression. Economic injustice spawns migration which in kyriarchy spells the mistreatment of immigrants. Women suffer violence at home, on the streets, and especially in the sexual and reproductive arena. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people live without basic relational rights. Children, especially girls, are abandoned and abused.

I sometimes wonder if we have made even the slightest dent in the world’s problems. Backlash is the controlling power of the day. Then I realize how much worse things would be if we were *not* engaged as women-church doing the work of justice, and how bereft we would be of hope and companionship. At least as women-church we have the guiding vision of Divine Wisdom who beckons us forth; at most we have one another with whom to struggle. Together it is enough. Blessed be!

Being church— being part of the ekklesia of women—and developing ways to bring about justice continue as we engage in catholic feminist ministries. Catholic feminist ministries are the answer to the question “What do weavers of change do?” Catholic feminist ministries are *not* the answer to the question “What do Roman Catholic women do?” **Catholic feminist ministries are defined not by the limits of the Roman Catholic Church but by the needs of the world.** Catholic feminist ministries are the work that each one of us takes on to create a world in which all life can thrive.

“Catholic” is understood in the most ancient and enduring sense of that word— from the Latin ‘*catholicus*’ meaning universal and the Greek ‘*katholikós*’ meaning

“according to the whole; 1. broad or wide-ranging in tastes, interest or the like; having sympathies with all; broad-minded; liberal. 2. universal in extent; involving all; of interest to all.”^{iv} Isn’t it great to be catholic? We catholics encompass and embrace the grandmother in the barrio who prays the rosary and the child of lesbian parents. Our concerns are for all.

Our ministries have no parochial limits; they are not for “Catholics” (capital ‘c’) only. Rather, “catholic” (small ‘c’) means we are responsible for the whole world starting with our local setting and leaving out no one and nothing. This understanding fits well with our women-church efforts to act together as communities of accountability to change the world.

“Feminist” concerns the well-being of women and dependent children, as the word first connoted in the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, feminism in the 21st century is critically strategized action to eradicate the interstructured forms of oppression (kyriarchy) beginning with racism, capitalism, and nationalism, including sexism and heterosexism, ecocide and war to bring about equality and dignity, rights and flourishing for everyone.

“Ministries” are the infinite range of ways we serve our communities, including but moving well beyond any institutional church-focused definition. Whether in health care or education, business or counseling, worship or social work there are catholic feminist ministries galore that are characterized by explicit efforts to bring about justice. They take many common forms—political, community building, feminist theologies, spiritualities, gender and racial justice—as well as still others that our colleagues engage

in around the world. There is no one way to engage in catholic feminist ministry. As the Grail says, “Together we are a genius.”

As women-church our various ministries are made more powerful by the collective spirit of Divine Wisdom in which we participate. Our task is to coordinate and amplify these ministries so as to be more efficient in doing justice against powerful forces. We are building communities where love and hope dwell. This is the sacred work of women-church lived out in our catholic feminist ministries.

(2) Why we engage in catholic feminist ministries and how the world is better because of it

Catholic feminist ministries spring from the common gift and responsibility of baptism when we are received into and become part of a community that has love and justice as its reason for being. In an increasingly unjust world in which the beauty of creation is obscured by the fog of war and the walls of division, our ministries are a sign of hope that Divine Wisdom intends something else. So we go about them—each in her/his own way—with a common vision that equality and mutuality will trump hierarchy and greed, that empowering the many will triumph over the tyranny of the few.

We are building new structures as women-church. Some of the structures are organizations and communities which reflect our values in their horizontally integrated, participatory forms. Local women-church groups operate this way as do many of our national groups. We are also building buildings. No, not a cushy headquarters for a large infrastructure, but some of our groups are building straw bale houses with composting toilets—Open Houses of Divine Wisdom—which will shelter families and communities in eco-sound ways. Still other new structures that we are building are in our minds and

hearts. We learn that we do not minister at the behest of a hierarchy to some nameless “the people” out there. We are building ministries that encourage everyone to fulfill their Wisdom-given potential.

This is hard in a world where HIV/AIDS ravages and U.S.-led capitalist pillaging makes life increasingly precarious especially in the Global South. But this is the context of our ministries. It demands special action by those of us who live in the United States. We must exert pressure to change the scandalous policies of our government. It is no accident that so many of us as women-church are engaged with people who are poor, needing education, homeless, or without medical care as these are the first casualties of kyriarchy. We teach and write, counsel and pray with words and concepts that include and empower because survival is at stake.

Most of us wish no part of the kyriarchal Roman Catholic Church’s ministries though we claim the feminist resources of that tradition as our own. We have seen all too painfully and expensively how that flawed model of ministry can endanger the lives and well-being of children and disrespect women, how those in power can hide criminal conduct including their own. Rather, as women-church we need to deepen our collaborative efforts to maximize our beneficial impact on the world and assure the safety of those who are vulnerable. We need to put serious money behind the projects we prioritize, develop quality education and training for people who will carry them forward, and create a minimal infrastructure to sustain and proclaim women-church as a dynamic movement of sacrament and solidarity. That is our challenge to which we rise together.

(3) what these ministries portend for the future of our movement and for the world

Our efforts to be church and to do justice take on new forms as new people join the movement and new challenges emerge. Inspired by the many women and feminist men who have done this work before us, and ignited by the Spirit of Divine Wisdom, we dare to project what our catholic feminist ministries mean for our movement and the world.

First, they are part of global efforts to eradicate poverty, sexism, and racism, to end war and halt ecological destruction. Without these changes we will not have much of a world to worry about. Pessimistic as this may sound, it is the reality our children and grandchildren will face when our names are among those of happy memory. Recognizing the gravity of the situation is helpful for putting current differences among us into perspective. At the same time it encourages our best thinking to craft effective strategies to create a different future, lifting our increasingly strong public voice as women-church.

Second, we and our ministries need to be interreligious in scope and action. Fortunately, many people share our concerns and engage in similar work whether with religious motivation or not. They are our colleagues. The straight vertical divisions of religious traditions (Jews, Christians, Muslims, etc., as well as Catholics, Mennonites, and those from the United Church of Christ, etc.) have given way to wavy, more horizontal grouping of those who, regardless of religious identity, seek to maintain or to change the status quo. Thus we find ourselves more often in concert with progressive Pagans and Buddhists than with conservative Catholics or Presbyterians. We who come from the Catholic traditions find we have more in common with the work of the Mennonite Central Committee and the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ than we do with Opus Dei and the United States Conference of Catholic

Bishops. This is an implicit imperative to learn more about other faith traditions, and to re-envision our own as one of many traditions that reflect the Power of Divine Wisdom. In an increasingly secular environment we have much to learn also from our colleagues who see no value in religion whatsoever but who do the work of justice.

Third, our catholic feminist ministries are grounded in feminist theological and ethical reflection. Plans are afoot to develop women-church education/reflection circles in which we can explore issues using the abundant resources that our feminist scholars and activists have produced that spring from and ground our common work.

Fourth, our ministries are shaped by those who understand the intricate interweavings of oppression and are unafraid of the work it takes to expand the table and the agenda continuously. “Church” is a dynamic reality which each generation embraces and shapes according to its Wisdom. For example, anti-racism efforts in women-church are led by young women. Justice is still a long way off, but at least we have more than rhetoric; we have a tradition of commitment and a vision and a trajectory of what the world could be like if love and justice were to reign.

That vision is often obscured. But when we come together as women-church, as a discipleship of equals, as the ekklesia of women who are engaged in catholic feminist ministries, it comes more clearly into view: Divine Wisdom not only built herself a house with seven pillars, but also she “sent out her ministers” (Proverbs 9:3) that we might be church and do justice. That catholic feminist ministry has been our sacred work as women-church for twenty-five years. Wisdom willing, it will be our joyful task for generations to come. Let us thank one another for our steadfast efforts and join hands for the work ahead.

ⁱ See dictionary entry on “Women-Church” by Mary E. Hunt in Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America, Volume 3, edited by Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Part XIII: Contemporary Women’s Issues in Religion, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006, pp. 1243-1249.

ⁱⁱ Rosemary Radford Ruether, Women-Church: Theology and Practice. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza defines “kyriarchy as “interlocking structures of domination, elite male, relations of ruling (*Herr-schaft*)” in But She Said, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, p. 8.

^{iv} “catholic”entry in Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/catholic> (accessed: August 15, 2007).