

Women in Ministry

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Discussing Women in Ministry from a theological perspective would involve careful steps through a mine field of debate in biblical interpretation. I am on the mailing lists of two organizations representing opposing evangelical thought on the subject. Being a good Nazarene, I am to the extreme left of one and the far right of the other—trying to bring some personal internal balance.

R. Paul Stevens is associate professor of applied theology at Carey Theological College and academic dean at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. In his article, "Breaking the Gender Impasse" he notes:

Competent biblical scholars line up on both sides of the women's–ministry debate. Some defend what they call parity of the sexes at home and in the church; others defend distinctive roles and governmental differences between men and women. Both groups claim the authority of the Bible. (*Christianity Today*, January 13, 1992, 28)

Dr. Stevens poses an intriguing question: "What if the ambiguity at the root of these differences is not accidental but God–inspired?"

Dr. C.S. Cowles' book, *A Woman's Place? Leadership in the Church* states for us a sound theological base and calls the church to action. However, the focus of this paper is not theological. Looking at Women i Ministry historically would necessitate tracing God's call to women from biblical times, through early church history (where the men who wrote sometimes seemed to forget to record what God was doing with and through women) to the beginning days of the holiness movement where Phoebe Palmer and others led the way. Rebecca Laird in her new publication, *Ordained Women in the Church of the Nazarene*, sets forth our church's legacy of the pst in proportion to its present challenge. Taking the historical route of studying women in ministry could lead through interesting byways, but would take longer than the scope of this discussion allows.

Reflecting on Women in Ministry from a psychological viewpoint is a tempting path where acceptance and stress factors could be explored along with personal/colleague anecdotes and scholarly studies. Yet, that, too, would miss the mark somewhat for this audience of Nazarene sociologists.

Therefore, this paper will attempt to address the sociological issue of Women in Ministry, even though the theological, historical and psychological aspects of this topic may intrude and overlap. As a personal disclaimer, please consider that my one class in sociology was taught by a Jewish professor at the University of Idaho in the early '50's!

Since the topic of this meeting is on clergy preparation, defining that for women may also be profitable.

In their book *Megatrends for Women*, Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt (1992) describe women's leadership style as matching that needed for managers of the future (88). They

looked at how a woman leader translates values and “behavior she was socialized to possess into valuable job *skills*.” (89). Moreover, they placed these characteristics of women’s leadership into six basic categories: empower, restructure, teaching, role model, openness, questioner (91).

How does their work apply to women in ministry and the church? Nancy Hastings Sehested, a Southern Baptist associate pastor in Georgia, writes passionately about new paradigms for leadership in the church (*Review & Expositor*, Winter 1986). Using images of a Jewish rabbi and the modern community organizer, she explains:

This model of organizing for social change requires far more patience than the take-control model of leadership we are most familiar with. It requires a process of education that is far more true to the root meaning of that word—“to bring forth, to lead out”—not unlike the role of a midwife. The role models of rabbi and community organizer offer styles for ministry that are grounded in empowerment for people, not control over people. These models suggest that we need to learn to be good midwives—educating, encouraging, holding, comforting, rejoicing—all through great labor pain, all in the name of enabling the process of new birth as God’s transformed and transforming people. (74)

Furthermore, Rev. Sehested states:

In encouraging women to fuller participation in ministry, it is time to transcend all the talk about demanding *rights* and place the emphasis on exercising *gifts*. We are not seeking rights for women so much as we are urging the freedom of women to develop the gifts bestowed on us by the workings of the Holy Spirit. Our abilities, the resources with which we have been entrusted, need to be dug up out of the sand and invested in kingdom enterprises. (75)

Marie Wiebe says, “I’m an ordained minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church...At first I thought God was calling me into the ministry in spite of the fact that I am a woman. Now I know it’s because I am a woman.” (*Sojourner*, 1987, 24)

...God is directly challenging some problems we have not faced very well in the church. The issue of understanding ministry as servant hood is spoken about but is not acted upon. The church has tended to see power as being in limited supply, rather than working for empowerment of all by God’s Spirit. Authority has been used to control others, rather than using power (the Spirit’s power) to serve others.

We need to look at the issue of men and women learning mutual submission and being equally called and equally responsible before God for their lives. When women become pastors, these issues are brought out to the forefront.

...I have grown to understand how mothering has parallels with shepherding a flock. Many of the same skills of guiding, nurturing, prodding, encouraging, listening, enabling, and letting go are used. As a parent, I felt it was my task to help my family grow up physically, mentally, and spiritual. As a minister, my vision also is to help my congregation mature. (25)

May I suggest that one overarching question confronting us, the church, is in the area of leadership. Will we allow women to lead in ways that fit society's paradigm shifts and that are natural to them—in ways that are complementary to male leadership styles—for the building up of the church? Will we share leadership roles responsibly at all levels?

WILL WE RISK EDUCATING WOMEN NOT ONLY FOR MINISTRY, BUT ALSO FOR MINISTRY LEADERSHIP?

As editor of the Nazarene clergywomen's quarterly newsletter, I applaud the step taken by Nazarene Theological Seminary President Gordon Wetmore to devote the fall 1993 issue of the *Tower* to women in ministry. We gratefully reprinted his editorial as an encouraging signal to women in our denomination. Dr. Wetmore notes:

In the 1992-93 academic year at Nazarene Theological Seminary, 18% of the student body was made up of God-called women. The national average for seminaries is between 25% and 30% women. They come with a clear understanding of the call of God to be pastors, evangelists, chaplains, missionaries, and other specific leadership roles. Some of them are tops in their class academically. Some of them win preaching sermon contests. During this past year half of the student body officers were women. The chair of the student organization was a woman.

We encourage them from their childhood to be open to God's call. We encourage them to prepare themselves in college and seminary for ministerial roles. We praise them for their achievements and take pride in their accomplishments.

Then something strange happens. Many of our women who feel called to the pastoral role are not placed as pastors in our local congregations. They come to talk about this with those of us who work at the seminary. There are no easy answers. Some have gone to other denominations to be placed as pastors. Some have dropped out of sight. They talk about a "glass ceiling."

. . . God is calling Spirit-filled women to places of leadership in the church. He is girding them to fulfill their call. The church of the Nazarene must respond to God's call and give these women equal access to places of leadership.

Dr. Cheryl Sanders, associate pastor for leadership development at Third street Church of God in Washington, D.C., and assistant professor of Christian ethics at Howard University School of Divinity, states that although the Church of God has ordained women throughout its more than 100 years of existence, placement is now a problem for women in their denomination. "It is ironic to note that there were proportionately many more women pastors in the early days of the Church of God than at present." (*Sojourners*, Vol. 16, 1987, 27) That is not unique to the Church of God. It is true for many other denominations, including our own.

When I analyzed the mailing list of clergywomen in the Church of the Nazarene, I was dismayed to see the trends. Granted all clergywomen are probably not on the mailing list, particularly students. Yet, the decline in numbers (even in my lifetime), the aging factor, and placement gaps were startling.

For example, of the over 600 names on the list in Spring 1992, in the United States and Canada, almost one-third of us are retired (197). However, more than half of that number are assigned in active ministry. Of the 171 listed as unassigned, 94 are retired. Those assigned are active as:

pastors of churches or missions	56
associate pastors	121
missionaries	6
general assignment	5
educational assignment	5
evangelism	19
students	26

(Note: Some on the list did not have roles designated on the computer printout.)

The age span (20's to 90's) with so many at retirement stage means that students have few, if any, role models and mentors near their ages. I heard Janine Tartaglia, a nazarene evangelist who was saved through the influence of the Earl Lees during the hostage crisis, lament recently that her mentor, Rev. Estelle Crutcher, is 95 years old.

A dearth of women pastors and evangelists in their 50's or even 60's means that local congregations may never have been exposed to a woman preacher. That impacts and limits placement possibilities.

Barbara Hargrove, professor of sociology of religion at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, suggests one solution:

In the Presbyterian Church (USA), an experiment of appointing women as ministers-at-large, who are available to fill pulpits while regular pastors are on leave or to act as interim pastors while congregations are seeking new leadership, has provided this experience to some congregations. This has led to increased acceptance of women in some churches.

. . .Recent studies show that congregations which have had women pastors have tended over time to change their mind about the acceptability of women in that role...Studies show that few of the laity think that women cannot do the tasks of ministry. Rather, they have held back from accepting women as pastors primarily because they have feared dissension in the church or a loss of esteem in the community for being a woman's church. (*Sojourner*, July 1987, 16)

WILL WE MAKE THE NECESSARY CHANGES IN CHURCH STRUCTURE AND PRACTICE TO PLACE APPROPRIATELY THE WOMEN WE HAVE TRAINED AND ORDAINED?

Another social problem facing women in ministry is a sense of isolation. References to isolation in one form or another crop up repeatedly in the literature, throughout my newsletter mail, in

conversations with students/colleagues. The phenomenon of support groups springing up across the country and across denominational lines indicates women are coping through friendship and fellowship. Within our denomination, I know of three such groups which have started within the last six months--two are meeting on college campuses, although they are not official organizations.

The enthusiastic response to the clergywomen's newsletter and the attendance at the clergywomen's breakfast in Indianapolis tell the church that many women in ministry within our own ranks feel great need for encouragement as they face resistance, restrictions, and challenges of their calling and implementation of their ministry.

Many of us were touched and perhaps troubled by the "silent picketer" at General Assembly who handed out well-documented sheets each day on the problems of women in ministry in the Church of the Nazarene. She took the only route she felt she had left to speak out. Yet, her apparent isolation was so great that she could not respond to another woman minister's warm invitation and offer of a ticket to the clergywomen's breakfast. What experiences of prejudice, sexism, or perceived discrimination produced this?

In my own experience as a Christian woman, and now a minister, I refuse to assign motivation to those who make me uncomfortable by their behavior. Much of the time, it is probably prompted by thoughtlessness or inability to think ahead. However, this lack of awareness can result in rather ludicrous situations.

I remember the flustered photographer for the ordination photo at our district who could not get either my husband or me to sit on the front row with the women spouses. In that instance, I was an ordinand, so I didn't belong with the pastors' wives. My husband didn't belong with them either, so we both stood while everyone else shifted their feet and their mindset. That was a passing awkward moment, but what happens at preachers' meetings, pastors' retreats, district assemblies—natural social groupings in the church where women in ministry who are notably in the minority can feel like social outcasts.

Perhaps no one else found it amusing that I was the only woman in the elders' choir at district assembly this year who sang (as low on the scale as possible) the special song, "Rise Up, O Men of God."

Neither our culture nor our church seems ready to make room for women in ministry in the mainstream. However, the feminist movement has nudged our society to the point where women have increasing opportunities for equality in the secular world. Yet, that is seldom true in the church world.

To be more specific, what happens when a woman starts through the ordination process on your district? Is she given the same consideration as her male counterpart—her call to pastoral ministry encouraged? Is she required to jump through the same number of hoops or are there extra barriers? Is she viewed as someone who really shouldn't be trying to enter "the good ole boys' club"? Are we professional, as well as spiritual, in the way we mentor and nurture the ones God has called—male and female?

I do not intend to cast reflection on any district boards, for I was treated well. Yet, I encountered several elders who did not know what to do with me or my call, so their comments were exclusive rather than inclusive. At the same time they found ways to help me, they let me know that I had somewhat upset their business as usual—that I was an exception to their rules. Clergywomen by their very presence challenge the system.

Nevertheless, God is doing a new thing; it is not always comfortable to those He calls or to the church which tries to receive them. Still, our choice, I believe, is to respond positively to women in ministry rather than to react negatively.

Kari Malcolm has pointed out that whenever the church has been in a state of revival—a “mini-Pentecost”—arguments about which sex should do what seem to recede into the background. At other times men and women alike seem to regress to a pre-Pentecost anxiety about gender roles and become preoccupied with details concerning headship and submission. The terrible irony of this regression (often rationalized as a “return” to the most important requirements of Scripture) is captured by Malcolm’s comment on it: “We have a world to win for Christ. The ship is sinking, and we [stand] on the shore arguing about who should go to the rescue, men or women.” (Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart, “Life After Eden,” *Christianity Today*, July 16, 1990, 19)

WILL WE TAKE STEPS TO SEE THAT THE SOCIAL CLIMATE OF THE CHURCH (AND THE CLASSROOM) IS INCLUSIVE FOR WOMEN IN MINISTRY?

Martha Long Ice of Concordia College, Minnesota, did an interesting in-depth phenomenological study of seventeen clergywomen in the 1980’s. They ranged widely in age, ethnic origin, marital status, denominational groups in Christianity and Judaism, clergy assignments, economic background, but all were viewed as “successful” by colleagues or supervisors.

The study also reviewed extensively the literature of futuristic social thought and summarized generally accepted conclusions from the literature on gender differentiation. Finally, it compared and integrated findings from all these areas of inquiry.

Her interview data, though admittedly relative only to the seventeen informants, may reflect sociological religious trends for us:

Their world views clearly lean to the holistic. They show strong awareness of the complex dynamism of modern social change and the need to take it seriously in their ministries, though levels of explicitness vary. They tend to be nonabsolutist and process-oriented in their conceptual approaches to truth and morality. The well-being and full participation of persons in social arrangements that affect them is a high-priority consideration for the women. All of them place responsible caring at the heart of their moral commitments. As they talk about intentions for shaping institutional structure, all profess attention to how it serves the world level of human need. They rely on personal integrity, sensitive caring, authentic self-disclosure, and equalitarian negotiation as the primary tools for effective leadership in

religious communities. The women regard their real authority as rooted primarily in charismatic credibility—personal influence more than institutionally legitimated power. (*Word & World*, Vol. VIII, No. 4, 357)

She concludes:

Women such as these informants are in a spectacularly visible location for modeling new ways to be in the world, in faith, in relationships in marriages, in parenting, in authority, in vocation, in ministry, in community, in conflict, in learning, in growth—as people and as women. And the commonalities in the ways these seventeen women look at life and think of their ministries coincide remarkably with major aspects of the worldview favored by many social thinkers as appropriate to the reality of our modern age. (365)

While we may not subscribe to all we see in this study or in our world, we cannot ignore the fact that women in ministry today are set on the world stage and in the kingdom for such a time as this. They will shape society and the church in significant ways. Can we afford to be spectators in their educational process, or will we take action?

Perhaps much of what I have been trying to say in this paper is embodied in a student named Susan at Nazarene Bible College. In her mid-40's, Susan is a single parent with a grown son studying law and two teen-age boys still at home. She was reared in a mixed Jewish/Gentile home. She prepared to teach in California, graduating from a state institution with her master's degree in English.

Susan came to know the Lord Jesus later in life and felt strangely led to Nazarene Bible College to study Greek! That was the extent of her call to ministry in 1990. Yet, as she sat in my missions class, she felt that call take form and expand to missionary service. Furthermore, as she read her Bible, she felt God directing her specifically to a teaching ministry, and she didn't understand how the pieces of her "call" could fit together.

She has been impacted by the preachers—men and women students and professors—in classes surrounding her. She wonders, but tries to push away the thought that she herself should actually preach as part of her calling, despite the fact that others feel she definitely has the gifts and graces.

I notice she is in the middle of the clergywomen's support group on our campus and is definitely going to the April interdenominational conference for women in ministry in New Mexico.

Susan and I have had many conversations at church, in various parts of the campus, and particularly across the desk in my office. The other day as she sat confused, trying to fathom the scope of her call, I impulsively said to her: "Susan, if I were to play God in your life—and I am not—I would tell you to graduate from NBC right away and get on to Nazarene Theological Seminary. Go from there to get a doctorate in theology. Become the woman theologian our church needs now (Mildred Wynkoop is in her 80's)—get prepared to teach (and/or preach) in the States or overseas." A slow smile played across Susan's face as she said, "You mean I

could do all of that!" The next day Susan came briskly into chapel, glowing with wonder at the prospect of studying Hebrew at Seminary!

She is a brilliant student with a warm open heart to God and people. We must nurture her at each stage of her development. We must network as institutions with each other to provide the full-orbed education and spiritual formation she and others like her need. We can help the Susans of our educational institutions become the instruments God needs to keep the Church of the Nazarene impacting our society in this new century just upon us.

We cannot do everything, but we can do something. Therefore,

1. Will we risk educating women not only for ministry, but also for ministry leadership?
2. Will we make the necessary changes in church structure and practice to place appropriately the women we have trained and ordained?
3. Will we take steps to see that the social climate of the church (and the classroom) is inclusive for women in ministry?

God helping us, let's rise up together as men and women of God!