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Susan L. Storey

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Response to Donna Runnalls

Susan L. Storey

*Associate Rector,
Big Country Parish, Kindersley, Saskatchewan*

At the beginning of her paper, Dr. Runnalls identifies three issues as basic to assessing the present situation of inclusiveness in theological education: *participation, authority, and power*. Inclusive theological education depends on inclusiveness in the churches, and specifically on inclusiveness in parish ministry. In this response I will examine Dr. Runnalls' three issues from the perspective of a parish priest in The Anglican Church of Canada.

My own experience of *participation* has been, I believe, privileged and unusual for an Anglican clergywoman. In the Diocese of Qu'Appelle where I serve, one-quarter of our active clergy are women. One of three archdeacons is a woman and women serve as regional deans and chair standing committees. In other dioceses the picture is not as bright. In one Anglican diocese this spring, for the first time, a woman was chosen as the full-time incumbent of a parish. My own experience of being welcomed, accepted, and encouraged to take a leadership role in the diocese has not been the experience of women clergy universally.

Of course, total numbers of women clergy on active rosters does not tell the full story of women's participation in the leadership of the church. Where women do participate, we need to look for patterns in their ministries and in their personal lives which differ from patterns of men. There are two obvious patterns in our diocese which are dramatically different for women and men. In the Diocese of Qu'Appelle, 50% of the women clergy are full-time and sole incumbent of a parish, compared with 80% of the men; 43% of the women clergy are married, compared with 89% of the men. As it happens, only one of

the married women is a full-time incumbent. This one married woman incumbent is the only woman priest in the diocese who has children at home. Yet someone in her parish has admitted that they probably would not hire a woman of childbearing age again due to the prospect of time-off for maternity leave!

These figures cannot be taken as statistically significant as the 50 clergy in our diocese represent too small a sample. A survey undertaken by sociologists Grace Anderson and Juanne Clarke, however, found that 47% of their respondents, all women, were presently employed as full-time incumbents;¹ 58% of the women surveyed were married.² We need to ask: Are women clergy more likely than men to be unmarried? If so, does this have implications for theological education? Are women more likely to be working part-time, as assistant pastors or in specialized ministries? If they are, does this reflect women's choices or does it reflect the lack of opportunities open to them? In any case, if such differences exist, they need to be recognized and perhaps challenged by those preparing women for participation in the leadership of the churches.

At least in the Anglican Church, the role of the priest carries *authority*—legally, historically, and in terms of parishioners' expectations. Yet there are practical dilemmas for a clergywoman in the authority of the clerical role. For example, a newly-ordained woman must decide whether, or when, to wear a clerical collar. If she doesn't wear a collar, will people assume that the authority that goes with the collar is still properly the purview of male clergy only? If she does wear a collar, will she be betraying her own conviction that all ministries have authority and that ordained ministry should not be singled out for special privileges or given elite status?

There are other questions around how ordained authority is to be used. As the parish priest, will I decide unilaterally that all worship at which I preside will use a modern rite and will be a eucharistic celebration? Alternatively, will I form and work with a worship committee that, predictably, wants some use of the *Book of Common Prayer* (with its non-inclusive language) and some services of morning prayer (liturgically dismal without a choir).

As Runnalls points out (citing Barbara Brown Zikmund), historically in North America equality for women is not normative. Even more certainly, other than in all-female enclaves

or in matters to do with children, having women equally represented in positions of authority is not normative. Runnalls raises the question of whether the movement toward women exercising authority could again, as in the early years of the church, be reversed or forgotten. I think not. This time the movement has two supporting pillars: social change in the wider society, with more inclusion of women in leadership roles; and the articulation by scholars of the theological insight of gender-inclusiveness as a gospel imperative. Women's equality in authority is not yet a norm, but there are signs that some day it will be so. In June 1993, the first woman diocesan bishop in the Anglican Church in North America was elected in Vermont. The popular mistake now may be that equality in authority for women and men has already been largely accomplished!

Turning to the issue of *power*, I want to concentrate on images and language as vehicles of, or barriers to, inclusiveness. One of the most powerful images of inclusiveness is simply that of a woman functioning in ministerial, and especially in liturgical, leadership. For many of us in the past, a powerful image of exclusion has been liturgies in which everyone having a visible part was male.

Another aspect of power comes into view when we ask, as do Runnalls and Zikmund, whether religion in North America is increasingly being relegated to the private sphere of human interest and activity. If this is so, having women—those historically associated with the private sphere—as leaders will perhaps seem quite natural. Yet surely, as long as churches provide rites of passage such as baptisms, marriages, and especially funerals, religion will remain a very public phenomenon. Reginald Bibby found that the majority of Canadians, whether active churchgoers or not, still expect the church to provide such services for them.³ Yet rites of passage such as these are community gathering occasions and, at least at funerals, those in attendance seem attentive to what is being said and done. Rites of passage are powerful signs that can speak eloquently of the basics of human life, love, and death as ultimately being mysteries grounded in God's life and love. Women presiding at these rites of passage are performing profoundly public acts.

Finally, language is powerful. Yet my own experience echoes that of one of Anderson and Clarke's respondents: inclusive

language is still a non-issue in rural areas.⁴ Several parishioners have patiently explained to me that “men”, “brothers”, and “sons” have always been understood as including women, sisters, and daughters. They, as women, feel included; and they are irritated when I refuse to use hymns with what *I* call non-inclusive language.

The parish can be a frustrating place for women coming out of theological college with great expectations and idealism. It can also be an exciting place. Is people’s consciousness being raised in our parish by experiencing a woman in ministerial leadership, and by consistent use of gender-inclusive language for human persons? I am not sure, but I like to think that something significant is happening, at least subliminally.

There *are* opportunities and signs of hope. At a baptism on the Festival of Pentecost, by using John 3:1–8 as the Gospel (Jesus visited by Nicodemus), it was possible to preach about our rebirth at baptism by the Holy Spirit through water. It is even possible in sermons to throw in a feminine pronoun for God now and then without panic in the pews (which may simply be an indication that no one is listening!) Images of power and images of God can change. A favorite hymn in our parish is “Spirit of Gentleness”, with its images of wind and water, the Spirit whispering in silence, coaxing up the mountains, rising on her wings. The hymn is addressed to the Spirit, and though there are no feminine pronouns used, the images *feel* feminine... and people love it.

The road to inclusiveness may be rocky and long, but flowers grow here and there along the way and there are days when the destination really does seem to be coming into focus on the horizon.

Notes

¹ Grace M. Anderson and Juanne Nancarrow Clarke, *God Calls: Man Chooses; A Study of Women in Ministry* (Burlington, ON: Trinity Press, 1990) 35.

² *Ibid.* 25.

³ *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Irvin, 1987) 89, 94, 97, 108–109.

⁴ Anderson and Clarke, 96.