

Some Concluding Reflections: Milk, Honey, and Giants

The Lord said to Moses, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I give to the people of Israel; from each tribe of their fathers shall you send a man. . . . Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, and said to them, ". . . see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds. . . .

At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. . . . And they told [Moses], "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fruitful and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.—Numbers 13:1-2, 17-20, 25-28 (RSV)

. . . It will not make our task easier if people conclude that there are "no problems" as we seek advocacy for women's full participation in the life and ministry of the Church."—CLERGYWOMAN, Denominational Official

The report of the spies to Moses surely has to be one of the earliest "good news–bad news" stories on record; and that, in effect, has also been the message of this book. On the whole, the findings from our study have brought good news about the acceptance and functioning of women as parish clergy. While "milk and honey" may be too exaggerated a metaphor to describe what these women clergy have found in occupying traditionally male territory, most of them seem to have found it a "good land." But our study has also uncovered some bad news. Along with the "milk and honey," there are still "giants" to be met. Thus, while women now contemplating entering parish ministry—or laity considering calling a clergywoman—can find satisfaction

in the good news, we would not want to understate the obstacles that still remain "to full participation in the life and ministry of the Church." In these final pages, we wish to reflect further on both the good news and bad news that we have observed and to consider some of the implications of these findings. We will not attempt a full summary but rather will call attention to some of the more important conclusions that indicate both "good" and "bad" news.

The "Milk and Honey"

There is much of a very positive nature that has been reported in these pages. Aspiring clergywomen, laity in congregations, and denominational and seminary officials can take much encouragement from them.

To begin, the women who have entered parish ministry are generally dedicated and competent individuals who have a strong sense of calling to serve God as ordained ministers. In the past, many of these women would have had to be content to serve as highly committed laity, frustrated perhaps, but resigned to their exclusion from the ranks of ordained ministry. Indeed many of the current clergywomen and women seminarians have served in this lay ministry capacity before the doors—either personal or institutional—opened to allow them to pursue ordained ministry. That this situation was the case for many women in our study is attested to by their relatively older age on entering seminary. This "graying" of the ordained ministry is an important social fact to which we will return below.

As women entered seminary in the years when they were still pioneers—roughly prior to the early 1970s—they typically experienced the seminary as a male enclave in which they were curiosities at best, and unwelcome intruders at worst. Our study reveals that this situation has changed considerably. While it would be a mistake to assume that all seminary obstacles to full acceptance of women have been removed, the majority of the women in our sample, especially more recent graduates, found the seminary to be a comfortable environment and their experience in seminary to be positive.

The news from the job market for clergywomen is mixed, but there are a number of positive aspects that deserve highlighting. Recalling once more that our survey includes only those already in parish ministry positions, thus perhaps excluding women (and men) who have been unable to secure a position, we nevertheless note that women did not, on balance, experience unusual difficulties being ordained. Neither has securing a first parish position been unduly difficult. Also, contrary to some reports, the women in our study were not more likely than men to be sent to declining churches or churches in trouble. In securing

calls or appointments, many, but not all, clergywomen find the denominational deployment systems useful and are appreciative of the advocacy of regional denominational officials on their behalf in the appointment or call process. Similar findings were true for clergy couples. Thus, there is some very good news about the job market for women, and we predict that it will likely continue to improve as local churches and denominations have wider and longer exposure to clergywomen. All of this good news is not to gloss over the problems that persist for clergywomen as they try to maneuver in the job market; nevertheless, the positive findings reported here are significant and cannot be gainsaid.

As they enter parish positions, clergywomen are functioning competently as pastors. Positive self-assessment of clergywomen regarding various areas of ministerial functioning equal or excel those of the clergymen in our sample. Furthermore, their positive assessments are confirmed by lay leaders who have experienced clergywomen in positions of pastoral leadership. Additionally, clergywomen are no less likely than men to maintain harmonious relationships with parishioners; although several types of laity seem more problematic to women clergy than to men. In general, therefore, fears that having a clergywoman would bring on decline in the parish are not supported. Having a woman pastor is not an institutional threat to a congregation's future.

The generally favorable experiences that lay leaders have had when their congregations have been served by women pastors appear to have had an important positive effect on their attitudes towards clergywomen. While there is no groundswell among laity for affirmative hiring of clergywomen, and while there are only limited numbers of lay leaders who would actually prefer a woman pastor over a man, those with direct experience of a clergywoman are much more likely to say that the pastor's gender makes no difference. As the generally positive experiences of these laity with clergywomen become commonly known throughout the church system, the apprehensions of other laity about having a woman pastor should be reduced.

Not only are clergywomen relating well to most parishioners, but they report generally positive relationships with other clergy and judicatory officials. This fact is important, since the clergy profession in the denominations studied is tied to the larger organizational system of the denomination. Not only does this broader system play an important role in facilitating parish clergy pursuing their careers through serving in a succession of local congregations, but clergy find social and professional fulfillment and support in various relationships, roles, and responsibilities in this broader system. Not all clergywomen are as yet well integrated into this larger system. Nevertheless, the majority

seem to be, and their experiences bode well for clergywomen in the future.

Finally, to return to the matter of the relative maturity of many clergywomen—the “graying” of the ministry referred to above—there is “good news” here as well. While their maturity is a consequence of the clergywomen’s relative age and experience rather than their gender, nevertheless, we noted a number of instances in which maturity and previous experience as lay leaders in congregations proved salutary for effective ministerial functioning and positive interpersonal relationships. There are those who have argued that maturity and experience ought to be the norm for ministerial leadership in the church, and that it is a fundamental mistake to “inflict” on churches young seminary graduates with little or no experience of leadership in the parish. They cite the early church’s selection of “elders”—persons of maturity and experience—to lead congregations.¹ From this perspective, the delayed entry into the ordained ministry, which is the case for many women and an increasing number of men, is a positive phenomenon. They come into parish leadership, not as “wet-behind-the-ears” novices, but as mature individuals with a number of years of leadership experience in parishes. We are not arguing here for restricting entry into ordained ministry only to older clergy, but simply noting that the “graying” of the ministry may have positive benefits for clergy leadership in parishes. In this instance, the large number of mature clergywomen are leading the way.

The “Giants” Still to Be Met

Not all, however, is flowing with “milk and honey.” As is clear from the findings, clergywomen still face obstacles to their full participation in the ordained ministry of the church. In almost every instance of “good news” reported above, there was a corresponding negative note.

In contemplating a career in parish ministry, women are less likely than men to be encouraged by either their parents or pastors. Cultural stereotypes about appropriate roles for women apparently continue to operate and deprive women of needed support at an important time of personal decision making. And once they have made the decision—at least to enter seminary—they will still find faculties with a heavy male majority, especially at the senior professor levels. While this may be more a fruit of tenure systems and low faculty turnover than overt sexism, it remains as a negative factor to be encountered by women seminarians (and women faculty) along with other aspects of lingering sexism.

It is in the clergy job market that a number of “giants” remain to be met. The resistance of some judicatory officials to women clergy, rang-

ing from polite neutrality to refusal to allow women clergy in the judicatory, is a major obstacle to women seeking calls or appointments to parishes. Moreover both the inequities of salary between clergymen and women with comparable experience and the apparently more "flat" career lines of women—the "typecasting" hypothesis—point to serious institutional issues that need to be confronted in the churches. To be sure, charges of gross injustice must be tempered by the fact that some women choose to remain in lower paying or less "prestigious" parish ministry positions, often because of what were referred to in Chapter 5 as "special needs" that restrict their willingness to move to other positions. Nevertheless, we do not believe that "special needs" account for all of the differences uncovered between salaries and career lines of male and female parish clergy. Rather some of it seems to reflect a residual sexism that "rewards" women with lower salaries and positions with less status than their male colleagues in the ordained ministry, as is also the case in many secular occupations.² But unlike many secular institutions/churches are legally unaffected by equal employment regulations that seek to rectify inequities. Regrettably, an institution committed to justice and love among humankind perpetuates injustice among a significant number of its professional leaders.

There are also obstacles to the full acceptance of women pastors by lay members, as our data have revealed. The image of a minister is still, for a large number of laity, a masculine image. And even when exposure to a clergywoman reduces significantly the expressed preference for a male minister, there is no overwhelming preference for a female. Nor are laity much inclined to act affirmatively to employ clergywomen; and some types of laity—businessmen and executives and middle-aged men and women—offer special challenges to clergywomen, especially younger women.

While many clergywomen have experienced little difficulty with being accepted and integrated into judicatory structures and clergy support networks, our data show that there are significant problems for single clergywomen in rural areas and small communities. The same is true to a lesser extent for single clergymen. There, the lack of the support of a spouse or of nearby clergy with whom one can join in a support group, along with the "fish bowl" existence that rural and small town clergy experience, often lead to loneliness and serious questioning of one's vocation. Additionally, there are the obstacles of balancing one's career with marriage and family responsibilities that clergywomen, especially, seem to face. Even in more "modern" marriages, where couples have worked to overcome traditional, sex-role distinctions, combining full-time ministry and motherhood poses a problem for a large number of clergywomen.

Relative Success and Persisting Inequities

There are then both "milk and honey" and "giants" yet to be met for women in parish ministry. To acknowledge the positive aspects of the situation which our "scouting" report has revealed is quite important; on balance, we believe that the positive aspects substantially outweigh the negative, and that women clergy have made important gains in overcoming the dilemmas and contradictions of status which we discussed in Chapter 1. This was confirmed when, in the course of this study, we shared preliminary findings with several experienced clergywomen. When, for example, we lamented that *fully* 55 percent of the lay leaders in our survey expressed negativity regarding having a clergywoman as senior minister, one of the clergywomen present replied, "But don't ignore the fact that *fully* 45 percent of the laity expressed a positive attitude!" She continued, "That is a very encouraging statistic. It would not have been likely to occur as little as a decade ago." It is highly important, therefore, to see the *relatively positive* findings of the study for what they are—a considerable improvement over what they would have been only a few years previously.

At the same time, we would be remiss if we did not also emphasize the distance that remains to be travelled before persisting inequities between clergymen and women are fully overcome. It is important that current clergywomen, women contemplating a call to the ordained ministry, and all those responsible for making the church system work, do not ignore the obstacles that remain. Overcoming naivete with realism—especially among women entering the ordained ministry—is crucial.

Why do these inequities and obstacles remain? It is important to identify some of the major causes, even though a full discussion of them is beyond the scope of this book.

The most obvious and insidious cause of the inequities is the persistence of sexism in the churches as well as in the culture. Sexism can be defined as any attitude or action by individuals, groups, institutions, or cultures that treats individuals unjustly because of their gender and rationalizes that treatment on the basis of biological, psychological, social, or cultural characteristics.³ This definition calls attention to both individual and institutional aspects of sexism. At the individual level, as we noted in Chapter 6, sexist attitudes and actions can be manifest and blatant, or they can be more latent and subtle. While we encountered, in the course of our study, a few individuals who were blatantly intentional about their negative attitudes towards women, we were struck more often by the prevalence of latent sexism, sexist attitudes that seemed to us unintended and unrecognized. Because of their subtlety and generally unrecognized character, such attitudes are sometimes more difficult to deal with and alter than more blatant ones.

As this chapter was being written, we received a publication for seminary students in which an author discussed pressures facing parish ministers today. His article used the male pronoun frequently and exclusively to refer to ministers, ignoring the gender of almost half of the audience for whom he was writing; the article also contained a list of successful persons, including clergy, as examples of the kinds of individuals with whom parish ministers are often compared and encouraged (pressured) to emulate. Not one example given was a woman! While the author would likely maintain that no sexism was intended (and this is probably true), sexism nevertheless is present and no less negative in its consequences for being unintentional. The image of the minister the article conveys and perpetuates is distinctly a male one.

But attitudinal sexism is only a part of the problem. Sexism, like racism, is often institutionalized in the customs, laws, and structures of society, including those of the churches. Institutional sexism can perpetuate inequities even when individuals in the institutions do not have sexist intentions. The restriction by church law of ordination to men, which none of the denominations in our study now practice, is an obvious example of institutional sexism, as is also the practice, noted in Chapter 5, of paying clergywomen less than men, even when their years of experience are similar. Typecasting of women into particular kinds of clergy positions, which was at least suggested by our findings, also reflects institutional sexism. The use of masculine forms of religious language is also reflective of not only of individual sexism, but institutional, as well. Language is also one of our most powerful cultural institutions, and it is a shaper of consciousness and behavior. When religious language uses predominantly male images, whether in reference to God or as a designation for clergy, consciousness is shaped in the direction of excluding women. Thus sexism, whether individual or institutional, whether intentional or unintentional, is a major obstacle to the full participation of women in the ordained ministry.

There are at least two other factors that play lesser but contributing roles in hindering women's full participation in ordained ministry. One, already alluded to in previous chapters, is the current situation of mainline Protestantism as an "imperiled" institution. As is well known, many mainline Protestant denominations have experienced serious institutional problems since the mid to late 1960s. These have included: unprecedented declines in church memberships that have only recently begun to slow and perhaps "bottom out"; the combined impact of inflation and membership declines on church finances, with a growing number of congregations experiencing severe financial exigencies; and, in some denominations, an oversupply of ordained clergy.⁴ None of these trends has a necessary connection with resistance to clergywomen; however, as we noted, they create a climate of anxiety among laity

and clergy about the future of the church. This anxiety no doubt fosters a resistance to any innovation which might be suspected of further endangering the already fragile institution—women clergy being such an innovation. Under these conditions latent sexism can rise to the surface but be rationalized in terms of anxiety over the institution. We hope that the positive findings of our study will help to show this fear to be groundless; nevertheless, we strongly suspect it has been an obstacle to the full acceptance of clergywomen.

Another factor contributing to resistance to clergywomen rests in characteristics of the clergy profession itself. For one thing, at its very center is the profession's focus in religion. The profession is the guardian of the religious heritage. While one function of religion is to nurture visions of the future on the basis of which social change can occur, religion also has a conservative function. It is a promoter of stability, a preserver of tradition, lifting up to sacred status aspects of the social order considered vital. The aura of sanctity given to the tradition of an all-male clergy is a case in point. The "sacredly masculine" image of the clergy, as we have seen, is a hard one to shake.

Other attributes of this profession also make resistance to women clergy more likely than in some occupations, or make it possible for sexist attitudes to come into play in more subtle, less obvious ways.⁵ Unlike some professions, parish clergy do not have clients or patients. Rather, they relate to parishioners who are considered colleagues in ministry. While ordination recognizes the special training of clergy and sets them apart for special functions in the church—preaching, teaching, celebrating the sacraments, administering the affairs of the congregation—the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers" emphasizes that ministry belongs equally to all Christians. Ordained clergy are *primus inter pares*, first among equals. Clergy perform their special functions of ministry to enable laity to perform their ministry. Such an emphasis, while salutary from our perspective, nevertheless can lead to a blurring of lines of authority when it is not clear what the clergy's primary tasks are, how their role differs from that of laity, and who, in the last analysis, is in charge. This can make it difficult for any clergy-person to exercise authority;⁶ and it may be especially difficult for clergywomen, as we noted in Chapter 7. This ambiguity of the clergy role is compounded by the additional ambiguity that some have of accepting a woman in the status.

Added to these problems is the fact that there are rarely clearly defined standards for evaluating the performance of clergy. It is relatively easy to evaluate the performance of an engineer—man or woman—where one can assess the adequacy of the efficiency of a new product that he or she has designed. It is much less easy to evaluate the adequacy-

cy of a theological idea which the minister has communicated in a sermon or lecture. Or should the laity's evaluation be placed rather on the minister's effectiveness in leading a person to salvation? Or on her or his ability to build up the institutional life of the church? Such diverse and ill defined criteria for evaluating clergy performance make it easy for evaluators to let latent or manifest sexist attitudes color their evaluation. Those who resist the idea of a woman minister can usually find some aspect of performance to criticize, blowing it out of proportion, while ignoring other more positive aspects of her performance. The absence of clear and agreed on criteria makes this likely.

Let us add that the clergy profession is not alone in sharing many of these characteristics. It is important, nevertheless, to acknowledge some of the important reasons that the various inequities and obstacles to women's full participation in ordained ministry exist. By understanding these issues, it is possible to develop strategies that may alter the situation into a more favorable one for clergywomen, and beyond that to address core issues of ministry and mission related to entry of women into ordained ministry.

Overcoming the Giants

The theologian Paul Tillich once observed that there are three ways in which the church has exercised leadership in social change: (1) through the exercise of direct political power, as in a theocratic state; (2) through offering prophetic criticism, holding up before the society and its leaders the contrast between valued forms and those actually practiced; and (3) the way of silent interpenetration in which change is subtly wrought by behavior and example.⁷ We are not concerned here so much with the change of society per se, but more directly with change in the church; yet, each of these broad methods of change is indicative of particular strategies which our research has shown to be necessary.

One of the major "messages" of our research findings has been that time and increasing exposure to women pastors have had a generally salutary effect on the acceptance of women as ordained ministers. This reflects the third of Tillich's change strategies: the way of silent interpenetration, through which change comes subtly by behavior and example. Women clergy are now approaching becoming a critical mass within the churches and these numbers will be bolstered considerably by women presently in seminary. Their silent (or not so silent) interpenetration of the church's ordained ministry should reduce the present inequities and overcome some of the obstacles to full acceptance of women clergy. The fact that many current women seminarians, according to the women faculty we interviewed, are not strongly

feminist in orientation, makes it likely that silent interpenetration will be a major change strategy.

Yet, silent interpenetration is a slow means of bringing about change. Another generation may grow up in the church before we are able to assess fully the kinds of subtle influences that may result in the full acceptance of women as ordained ministers. Other, more immediately effective strategies may speed up the process of acceptance.

One strategy that continues to be needed is Tillich's second method of change: prophetic criticism. Active, vocal advocates—women and men—for full acceptance of women as ordained ministers are crucial if the process of change is not to be interminably slow. These include judicatory officials who will press pastoral search committees or pastor-parish relations committees to accept women clergy, especially as senior pastors in the larger churches, and who will work to overcome salary inequities between men and women pastors. Advocates are needed to ensure the representation of women in positions of leadership within the denominations. In addition, continuing, if sometimes irritating, advocacy is needed to rid church practices, language, and cultural images of sexism. The goal is to create an environment which filters out inappropriate uses of gender that hinder women's full participation in the church's ministry and undermine the church's broader witness to justice and liberation.

It is unlikely, given the more professional orientation of many women seminarians and clergy, that large numbers of clergywomen (or men) will be strong vocal prophetic critics of sexism; nevertheless, however unwelcome it may be, such advocacy is essential if the change process is to be pushed forward. A lesson from the black experience is important. Blacks have gained considerable acceptance in recent years through the "silent interpenetration" of black men and women and children into schools, business and the professions, civic leadership and government. But this silent interpenetration could not have been possible without the strong and often costly prophetic criticism and advocacy of the black civil rights movement. And, as the political situation at the time of this writing makes clear, continued strong prophetic criticism and advocacy by blacks are needed if blacks are to continue to consolidate gains and overcome injustice and oppression.

Finally, the present situation of clergywomen can be considerably helped if clergywomen are better prepared for the situations that face them as ordained pastors. Naivete needs to be overcome with realism and wisdom. A major objective of this book has been to provide the kind of information that will help women to understand the "land" they are trying to occupy. Clergywomen—and almost all that we say is

equally applicable to clergymen—need to have a realistic picture of what the current situation of ordained ministry is like. This information needs to include an understanding of what the job situation for clergy is in their denomination, what salaries are reasonable to expect, how the denominational deployment system works, and how to use it. There is a need for better understanding of power and the political process within congregations and denominations, so that Tillich's first change strategy may be used. What are appropriate leadership styles in dealing with situations for which there are few cultural models for women? Finally, there is need for greater realism about balancing the demands of marriage, family, and career. The "superwomen" myth is not a helpful one for effective ministry or healthy personal and family life. Realism and wisdom regarding these and other issues of parish ministry will not, in themselves, reduce the obstacles and inequities that women pastors face, but they will reduce the likelihood of being caught off guard by them. Both realism and wisdom are necessary first steps, not only of successful coping, but for effective change.

Women and the Promised Land

Much that we have dealt with in this book has focused on career and organizational concerns. What kinds of careers are women able to carve out in the church? How are they accepted? What institutional obstacles remain? Some may believe that these questions are penultimate or secondary, that what really matters in the last analysis is what difference does it make for the larger ministry and mission of the church that women are full participants in ordained ministry. We agree that this is a primary issue, and that we have concentrated heavily on what are really secondary concerns—important but nonetheless secondary. While we concede this, we believe that these issues of blocked access to full participation in ministry by women and other marginal groups are too compelling, too dominant, to allow the broader discussion without first addressing these issues.

Yet, it may also be that in addressing what some may believe to be secondary issues of careers and organizations, we are also indirectly raising primary issues of ministry and mission. It may be that, as churches have addressed the issues of whether women should be ordained, they have been led to a deeper understanding of what ministry and calling mean for all Christians. In raising concerns about salary inequities between clergymen and women, perhaps broader issues of justice will be focused. Perhaps, too, the abysmally low salaries paid to a majority of clergy, both male and female, will also be addressed. It may also be that, in the growing exposure of laity and male clergy to

clergywomen, a new cultural image of the ordained ministry will emerge, one that is androgynous, neither male nor female, but incorporating the strengths and gifts of both. If these things occur, then women will not only have reached the "promised land" of full acceptance into ordained ministry. They will have contributed to the quality of life in that "land" for all who occupy it.