



## **Leadership From a Feminist Perspective**

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In the late '60s when I went to seminary, the professors were being encouraged to look at the research on how people learn. The material was not new, but the demands from students for a more participatory learning style were more insistent. One professor who had perfected the fifty-minute lecture was caught in the fervor to develop a new teaching style. So, he tried it. He reduced his lecture to forty minutes and then left us with ten minutes to raise questions. The style of lecture had not changed. It was not designed to elicit questions, but to impart knowledge. We students tried hard to come up with questions that the professor could answer, but it was a struggle. After a semester of forty minutes of lecture and ten minutes of strained questioning, the professor announced that, as he had expected, the new method did not work. We went back to fifty minutes of lecture.

### I. THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE

I was reminded of this experience because it seems to me that we have been aware for some time of the critique that feminism brings to issues of church leadership. We live in a time when many people have heard something about feminist modes of leadership and have even tried a few changes. We have a class that tries to incorporate feminist methodology. It has frustrated many students and teachers who find that learning to use a more collective and collegial style of education is very hard work. We fail, and so we go back to the old methods. I also experience women who as individuals have struggled to incorporate feminist principles into their work and find themselves discouraged, doubting the wisdom of such actions and reverting to "what works" as they take on leadership roles in

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institutions that have changed very little. Like the professor in my seminary, we tried it, and just as we expected, it didn't work; or we tried it with passion and commitment and became defeated by the recognition that the change in ourselves and others seemed too massive to be implemented. I recognize the tendency in myself as a teacher in seminary. It is easier to acquiesce to the expectations of the dominant leadership modes, than constantly to try to create new ones that are not supported institutionally.

Feminists understand that the dominant structures of church life do not reflect the accumulated wisdom and experience of women, but are embroiled in a long history of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. Therefore, we need to start with new understandings of the purpose of the church in order to know what we need in our leadership.

Feminism is not one coherent theory. Feminists are those who have committed

themselves to the valuing of women's experience and to women's search for the truth and meaning of their lives. They are committed to the well-being of women. Out of that commitment women in different social contexts and out of different experiences and analyses have developed a variety of feminist perspectives. I speak out of a feminism that is committed to the social transformation of our dominant forms of life—personal and political. I understand that women bring insight, not because they have intrinsic goodness or special gifts, but because they have a history of difference.

As women we have experienced the realities of sexism and patriarchy. It is out of our marginalization in public life and our role in sustaining private life and the multiple contradictions of this dualistic approach to reality that we have gained particular skills and sensitivities. It is out of the pain of sexism and the recognition of what patriarchy has done to all of humanity that I speak to the issues of feminist understandings of leadership. Our concepts of women and women's place have been socially constructed. Therefore, we can develop alternative social constructs that would enhance and contribute to our liberation.

## II. A FEMINIST VISION

Women need to be involved in developing communities that promote justice for women and solidarity for all those marginalized and oppressed. In such situations leadership will need to be collegial, experimental, experiential, committed to honoring differences (struggling with power and conflict), praxis-oriented, collaborative, and flexible.

Theologically, we are talking about an understanding of God as the one who calls us to repent and to resist evil, to be healers and do justice. We have been called to reveal the sins of sexism and patriarchy. We have been called to resist whatever harms God's creation. We have been called to participate in the new creation through our commitment and love of ourselves, others, and all of God's world.

We do have material on what feminist leadership is about. Letty Russell has written about feminist leadership as partnership. Her book details various approaches to leadership. The major thesis is that leadership needs to be a partner-

ship not only with each other, but with God, in liberating action and building of solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

Feminists are not alone in our advocacy for certain understandings of leadership. Many groups, working for social change, for the equality of peoples, the full use of talent and gift, the desire for human development, and the desire to participate in the creativity and joy of God's realm, have come up with similar insights into leadership. Many recognize that the dominant styles of leadership in church and society are not working. The selection of the issue of leadership for this journal attests to the need to rethink our concepts of leadership.

I work with seminarians who are preparing for church leadership. Out of that experience I am becoming more and more convinced that we need to be more explicit about what is damaging to the development of the church life of witness, prophecy, and love. Letty Russell talks about subverting the clergy line. I think she is right. We are making impossible demands upon those who are preparing for clergy leadership. We are finding that too many people who are clergy are becoming depressed, acting out, leaving, or enduring. I spent four years with a group researching the issues of sexuality, friendship, and the fishbowl living of clergy. My conclusion from that

research is that the clergy role is not healthy for the development of human beings. The division between clergy and laity is also not healthy for the development of a witnessing Christian community.

I am told by church officials that we are not recruiting the best and brightest. Many denominations keep adding to the list of skills that clergy need. We are hoping for charismatic persons who can save us in a time of diminishing numbers and loss of public power. When we believe that ministerial leadership belongs to the clergy, then the problems of the church are seen to come from the inadequacy, incompetence, and immaturity of clergy.

In feminist understanding, Christian leadership does not come out of recruiting the best and the brightest, nor out of a set of competencies and skills, but emerges out of the examination of the concrete needs of particular communities as they struggle to embody a vision of Christian community and become witnesses in the world to that vision. Before we know what we need for leadership we need to ask questions. What is needed by the community in order to be that witness and to participate in that vision? Who are the members of the community? What do they bring? What is missing? Who is missing? What is needed in order for all the people to express their particular creativity? What will nurture justice-making and deeper compassion for each other and the wider world?

We don't need to worry about being the best and brightest, or the most skilled. We do need to worry about what it takes to believe that all people are loved by God and that all have a unique gift critical for the transformation of ourselves and our world.

<sup>1</sup>Letty Russell, *Growth in Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 14. Russell's book presents more detail about the implications of feminism for leadership.

Jesus' band of twelve was definitely not seen to be made up of the best and the brightest of his day. In fact, Peter often seemed particularly dense. The community that came after Jesus was not made up of the most successful or powerful. In fact, as recorded in Acts, that community had to improvise all the time. They were met with challenges that were not covered by the old way of doing things. Those who healed became healers, those who could give hospitality did so. They gathered together to gain insight and experienced the Holy Spirit. They spoke so that everyone could understand them. They shared all in common.

We may again be living in times like those experienced by the early disciples—times when we need to trust in God to give us the courage to risk, the courage to ask basic questions over again. Why ordination? Why meet in set aside buildings? Why spend so much money on theological education for the clergy and so little on education of the laity who face the most difficult issues of being faithful in daily life?

Individual leaders will not save us. We will not find the perfect formula for leadership that will provide what we need at this time in history. Instead we have to rethink our understanding of what it means to be Christian communities. Instead of starting from the perspective of the individual we need to start with the critique of the community and then envision new possibilities for our future. Otherwise we end up trying to discover just the right formula for leadership (limiting our creativity) or trying to justify what is (leaving sexism and patriarchy in place) or justifying our cynicism about what we cannot do (a version of cheap grace).

If we are to reenvision leadership that is attentive to feminist insights, then we need to explore what the ministry of all believers might mean. We need to recover a sense of the calling of all and work for the time when everyone would be accountable to the larger community for the expression of their gifts and for meeting the needs of the world. Everyone would be nurtured and supported in discerning their particular roles and encouraged to risk making changes in their roles as needs and times changed.

### III. PARTICULAR GOALS

With that kind of vision we start from our present situation to analyze what would facilitate the movement toward that kind of ministry leadership. First we would need to recognize that leadership is not invested in a particular person. Leadership comes out of a process that is infused with a vision. It requires flexible and changing forms with different individuals taking responsibility for specific work. It shifts from person to person and from group to group. It is constantly in flux. It cannot be contained in the group called clergy.

Theological education would be for the whole church. Different people would have specialized training as they and the community to which they belong determined gifts and needs. Each of us would be encouraged to learn how to integrate our creativity, our spirituality, our politics so that we are giving our best back to the world—doing our unique part to help in co-creating our world. No one

would be exempt from the demands of leadership, but no one would be responsible for the whole. Instead each one would learn how to connect to others in order to strengthen the whole.

The work of ministry is the work of empowerment and social transformation of communities. Leadership in that kind of work needs to learn how to function collaboratively. To be collaborative means that we will be in the midst of confrontation and conflict. We will need to learn how to analyze power dynamics. We will need to learn to listen with infinite care to experiences and perspectives very different from our own.

We will need to develop a spirituality that is rooted in the welfare of the community. Much of what we are seeing today is an individualized spirituality that is cut off from connection. One woman expressed the fear that if she really opened up to the welfare of the community she would split apart from its pain. We need a faith community that helps us see that instead of splitting apart with pain, we find that broken hearts can contain the world.

We will need to be politically committed to justice and liberation activity. That means we need to learn how to pay close attention to the voices of the most marginalized and oppressed and to find ways that our lives intersect so that the possibilities of real connection might take place. Connection with others and the whole of creation becomes a political/theological principle.

Our leadership activities need to be communally responsible. We need to have groups of people that we trust, that share our vision, who can help us keep in touch with what we value and love. We need to relate to those who will expand our own boundaries of self, race, class, nation.

Our leadership will be process-oriented in the sense that we are not destructive to human beings as we strive to accomplish goals. We understand that the “journey is home” as Nelle Morton, feminist theologian, reminded us.

#### IV. IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

What does this feminist perspective on leadership have to say to the concrete situations of churches today? Each person who shares some of this vision needs to gather with others to look at the context in which they live and work. They need to ask each other what it would mean to take the first step in empowering their own community to work for justice and compassion in the world; what circle of healing and empowering and ritual and celebration and training and analysis would begin to help strengthen their own particular creativity, contribute to their communities' healing and witness, and the work of solidarity with others.

It will be a time of great ferment and experimentation and trial and chaos. This requires courage and the support of our friends. It would be devastating if we decided now, in the midst of the great imbalance of power between women and men, among races and nations, between humans and the rest of creation, that we had to defend our historic modes of leadership or our latest success models.

We need to learn to be truth-tellers about our own experiences. As we work toward a vision of justice and love we need to acknowledge that building relation-

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ships is tough. It takes time and much care and much forgiveness and generosity of spirit.

We need to do everything at once and only one thing at a time. We are growing into the responsibility of co-creating while at the same time knowing that we do not have it all together. But that is the way we become God's partners. We don't get ourselves together and then become leaders. We do it all at the same time. Which means we also learn to love ourselves as we learn to love others.

We need to learn to work daily to establish good connections and to lead in small ways so that we are not seduced into thinking we can control the outcome. We need to develop consciousness of how we use or misuse our power. What we are doing is building the connections for the possibilities for change that might become bridges to our visions and dreams.

We need lots of laughter and music and ritual. We are all difficult to work with at times. We need to keep focused on what we love so that our compassion and connection to others is deepened each day; so that we understand our profound mutuality, complicity, and interconnectedness.

And when we are overwhelmed with the enormity of the tasks we learn to pray without ceasing and join with Israeli peace activist, Veronika Cohen, who when asked if she were optimistic or pessimistic about her leadership, replied, "I'm neither, I'm working."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Penny Rosenwasser, ed., *Visionary Voices: Women on Power* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1992) 83.