



## **Women Bishops: “Unhierarchical and Related to Everyday Life”**

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I took up my office as bishop of Hamburg in August 1992. My installation was grandly ecumenical. Leaders of the church came from North and South America, Asia and Africa, and almost every country in Europe—including, as I expressly desired, women as well as men. They represented Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches, and were joined by more than 3000 church members and media people.

Considerable interest remains, with candid enquiry from my own church, from the entire ecumenical community, and from the secular world and the media. Every day I get letters from near and far expressing good wishes, sharing issues of faith or pastoral care, making personal or political requests, and offering critical comments and insults; time allows me to accept only a small number of the media requests.

Although at first most of the interest centered on the fact that a woman was in the bishop’s office, things have gradually changed. Now what I say and do is considered in its own right.

In the process, a female leadership style and female portrayal of the church seems to stand out, a fact that I see as trend-setting for our church. Some people speak of my “close connection and orientation to the common people,” while others have called my episcopal administration “unhierarchical and related to everyday life,” related to women and politically open. It is, in fact, important to me that my words not be spoken or heard in isolation, but rather in the context of my role in church and society.

With that in mind, I called for a public demonstration against the hatred of foreigners and used the occasion to express my theological and ecclesiastical position. At Christmas, I paid a visit to prostitutes, foreign sailors, and a police station. I

participated in the International Conference of Women in Zagreb and was part of an ecclesiastical delegation to Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. I visited the Hanukkah celebration of the local Jewish community, and I gladly accept invitations to receptions in public and ecumenical life, whether as participant or speaker.

In this way, the church loses its anonymity and becomes more visible, more associated with social engagement. In the process, I keep in the foreground what is fundamental for the church: on the one hand, the women and men who are active in our congregations, shaping the everyday life of church and society; on the other, a biblical theology oriented toward those who are weak and excluded. In all this, I see it as my task to encourage others and to raise a voice for

those who, in their suffering and distress, have either become mute or to whom we have not listened.

The church cannot live in a ghetto; it needs to enter the public arena and assume its responsibility for social issues. A church cannot be measured only by its institutional structures and leaders, but must be encouraged to allow public debate and lively controversy. Church life should be more diverse; the guiding image for me is the picture of the church in the New Testament, with its different theological directions and types of piety. A church of officials, a pastors' church, does not fit with my own belief.

I regard it as a serious mistake that, in its history, the church has seen or treated women—and the laity in general—merely as objects. Therefore, I support a feminist theology that corrects the existing internal ecclesiastical hierarchy by casting a new eye—a woman's eye—on history and church tradition.

The work of our church and its congregations needs to be marked by the ecumenical concern for justice, peace, and the integrity of the environment. But that will only be possible when we develop and live out a strong new spirituality. Once, Hamburg was a purely Lutheran city, but today less than half the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians are now present in large numbers, along with members of independent churches, smaller Christian groups, and sects. The Jewish community has become quite small, but there are now many Muslim groups and mosques. And, of course, many citizens of Hamburg have no religious affiliation. One of my concerns is to bring the different religious groups into conversation and to develop anew the biblical ecumenical community with services of worship, dialogues, and other events.

Just a few years ago, most people did not expect much from the church because they believed their own clichés about what the church was. But my installation has caused many of these people to look again at the church, and they have discovered it to be other than they had thought—more lively and more diverse. The church has become more female and more human at the same time—not, of course, simply because of my being bishop, but because, for the first time, many have actually paid attention to the church, with all the variety in its congregations, and have begun to take seriously the fact that they, in fact, are the church.

So, some prejudices have been overcome—but one should not expect a revolution from women in positions of church leadership. What will come instead is a gentler kind of change!

MARIA JEPSEN is the first woman ever elected bishop by a Lutheran church body. Her essay was translated by Frederick J. Gaiser.

## **Women Bishops: The Opening Door of Pentecost**

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“Women of the late 20th century are revolutionizing the most sexist institution in history—organized religion,” according to Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt in *Megatrends for Women* (1992). However, for Christians this revolution began with Jesus and the way Jesus treated women in the patriarchal society of the first century.

It was almost 2,000 years after Jesus that the wall in Christian churches keeping women from entering the “holy of holies” was shattered. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that yoke was dashed not with the election of its first woman bishop, but at the ordination of the first woman pastor. Given the understanding in the Lutheran church that there is one office of presbyter/bishop, the dividing wall was shattered when our predecessor bodies decided in 1970 to ordain women. Few knew then how dramatically that event would change the church. I am proud of and thankful to my church for taking that decisive step, acknowledging in a new way that both sexes are equally made in the image of God (Genesis 1) and that both sexes are equally able to represent the holy.

The decision to ordain women was made twenty-three years ago. During this period of time we have been in dialogue with communions that hold the three-fold office of ministry but do not accept women as pastors or bishops. Prior to the Lutheran election of women bishops, it was conceivable they might agree to join with us as long as we kept the office of bishop exclusively male. Thus the rubble of that dividing wall against women could have remained, apart from the election of women bishops.

An Orthodox patriarch has called the election of the first Lutheran woman bishop in the U.S. “dividing” because Orthodox members of the U.S. Lutheran/Orthodox dialogues were not consulted first. However, once the Lutheran church ordained women as pastors, it was only a matter of time until women bishops would

be elected as part of the one office of presbyter/bishop. Yet, this reaction of one of our dialogue partners does indicate the importance of the election of women as bishops. Any who harbored doubts of the liberating effect of the election of women bishops had only to come to my living room after my election on June 12, 1992. It was filled with flowers, and I wasn't even dead!

The power of this event is in the symbol! The first element is: There is no place in church structure or in the “holy of holies” that women cannot enter. Women, even women who are not virgins and who are “unclean,” can bear the holy. With Bishop Jepsen's election, we say to all the faith communions, we now have and are committed in the future to having women in all offices of the ordained ministry.

The second element of this symbol is: The female is granted permission by the holy community to stand for all humanity. Our children learn the opposite early in life, where even most of the Sesame Street characters are male. Translated into the church, this has meant that only the male can stand on behalf of the community and offer prayers to the triune God. Thus the power of the symbol of woman as presbyter and bishop: She can stand in the precipice and publicly speak the word of God and administer the body and blood of Christ for *all* the people of God. She can stand in the chancel, the “holy of holies,” and bring the prayers of both men and women. Her prayer, her interpretation of their pain and experiences, stands not only for women, but for the whole community, male and female.

One continues to see barriers to the full expression of the gifts of over half of the members of the church. The ordination of women and the election of women bishops could become only a temporary matter if it weren't for the biblical scholars and women theologians who walk with them side-by-side, interpreting Scripture in light of the whole human experience (now including, for the first time, the experiences of women). This is a difficult task, especially

since women have little recorded history and have grown up learning to defer to the male experience as though it were the only human experience.

I am thankful that more of my male colleagues (pastors and bishops) are realizing the majority of members in their parishes experience life and God through a different set of lenses than the dominant culture; these colleagues are including women theologians and theologians from other contexts as at least half of their reading. They are beginning to become sensitive to and to share vicariously in the experience of the majority of the people who sit in our pews—women, who experience life differently than they are “expected” to experience it.

Having women bishops opens the door just a bit wider, so the full range of the gifts and experiences of people with God and the world is now included in the oversight of the church. May the door continue to swing wider so that our church is seen for what it already is: no longer a monolithic structure, but a multicultural communion—the essence of Pentecost. “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17).

APRIL ULRING LARSON is the second Lutheran woman bishop in the world and the first in the United States.