



# FACE . . .

## Lay Ministry: The Gifts of Women

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**S**EVERAL YEARS AGO, I TAUGHT A SUMMER BIBLE SCHOOL, BEGINNING ONLY THREE days after I had returned from an exhausting Guatemalan mission trip with college students.

Surviving the first day, I came to the home where I was staying and fell sound asleep on the bed. The door opened; I heard the soft giggle of two kindergarten girls and thought, “I’ll stay asleep and they’ll leave.” Then I realized that they were gently strewing lilac petals around me and over me as I slept. They tiptoed, whispered, and dropped these fragrant petals as if anointing me in my rest. They didn’t expect me to wake up and respond. They didn’t explain in words what they were doing. They didn’t wait and watch for my response. They simply tiptoed out and closed the door again. I lay there anointed, gradually coming awake to the new reality around me.

It is this same gradual awakening that has brought me to an awareness of our rural women in ministry. Quietly and gently, different women and their experiences have anointed me with little petals of awareness. My job provides me the opportunity to travel the periphery of western North Dakota and join these faithful women in their monthly deanery meetings of catechetical leaders. Eighty-five percent of our rural catechetical leaders are women; some are full-time employees of the church earning as little as \$10,000-15,000, with few benefits. Some are volunteers, paying for their gas and supplies from their own meager resources.

As I began my ministry in the fall of 1997, I introduced myself and talked about my background, my excitement. I thanked them for their faithful ministry. I asked how I could be of support and service to them as catechetical leaders: What did they want me to do? It was at the first meeting that I sensed this was a new question. There was a long time of silence, and finally Dennise looked at me and said, “Sister, you’re going to have to give us a while to think on that one. I came prepared to hear you telling us what you expect of us. I can’t ever recall anyone asking me what I need and want. Not anyone from the church for sure; not even in my own family.”

And so I have listened, and clarified, and learned. “How can we as church

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# TO FACE

## Lay Ministry: A Gift to Congregations

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**W**HEN PIONEERS CAME TO THE PRAIRIE OF THE DAKOTAS THEY BROUGHT WITH them their religion. The church was a source of identity and solidarity for a community of believers far from their homes of origin. There was a sense of belonging, familiarity, and comfort that could be found in worship. Many times a pastor came only once a month or even less often, and the duties of leading worship fell to the people of the congregation. Now in our own time we find the people of the church once again leading worship due to a shortage in pastors.

In 1989 the North Dakota synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America started a pastoral assistant program with the assistance of Lutheran Brotherhood and Luther Seminary. Pastor Arland Fiske of Bethany Lutheran Church in Minot, North Dakota, led the program, seeking to fulfill Martin Luther's vision of the "priesthood of all believers," with all being "workers in the vineyard." Each member has a function or office that is part of the structure of the church, a structure that does not imply levels of status or hierarchy. The members of the deacon program (now GIFTS—Growing in Faith to Serve) are a pool of theologically articulate and pastorally trained lay persons who work collegially with ordained pastors. There is personal study for growth and enrichment under the guidance of a pastor mentor who meets with participants on a regular basis. The synod sponsors several educational events each year to address areas of interest for study and spirituality. The seminaries serve as a source of speakers and have schools for lay ministry for in-depth study. Congregations, pastors, participants, the synods, and the seminaries all benefit from this exchange of ideas and knowledge, with all being challenged and taught.

After ten years the program in Western North Dakota has over 100 participants, a lay leadership team, and a board of advisors who oversee the program. Many participants are leading worship and preaching weekly in churches that are awaiting ordained ministers; others are assisting pastors in multiple point parishes. Twelve participants have become ordained ministers and returned to Western North Dakota after attending seminary, their call being nurtured and confirmed by their participation in GIFTS.

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leadership heal, support, and empower the women who minister in the rural church?” I asked them. Here are some responses:

*We are hungry.* Many women used the image of being hungry for spiritual nourishment or starved for spiritual presence. Julie said, “We are encouraged to rely on our own resources, but it seems as if we have all drawn on our reserves and are hitting bottom. A little boost would mean so much. I wish someone could come to my home for a day. I would put on a pot of soup and some bread, invite others over, and talk about something spiritual.”

There is a keen hunger for theological reflection and Bible study. There is a deep desire to learn new and creative ideas for ministry. Women speak of the need to be invited to pray together as women; they desire to find ways in which to recognize women’s experiences of birth and death, of mothering and nurturing; they seek affirmation of values such as love of the land, concern for tradition, and extended family ties.

*Help us to find our voice.* Women are often the silent story carriers of a community. They are looking for safe zones in which to speak, so they may return to their communities and continue to listen. It is by gathering to share the stories of one another that they find validation of their own story. By hearing the stories of women who have served as leader of the house church, *amma* of the desert, or prophetess, women find validity in their own power. By being granted permission to speak about their pains, fears, and successes while being helped to find tools to handle their stress and anger, women can learn to speak in their own voice.

*Validate our experience.* When I first began offering catechetical training sessions, I would often sit in my car and weep when I finished. I most often wept out of a deep sense of humbleness. The women who attended these sessions were fully dedicated and committed to their ministry. They were doing magnificent things against tremendous odds. They were immensely grateful that someone would deem their small number to be worthy of a two- or three-hour drive. And they didn’t recognize their own richness.

We need to assure rural people that bigger and more sophisticated is not always better. Rural women often feel vulnerable and fragile when they are among professionals, and men and women in church leadership are mostly highly educated professionals. Validate the giftedness of the local woman; believe that a woman in a town of 500 people really can—without a college education and maybe even without a computer—preach the gospel. Her faithful experience will provide her with much of the material she needs. She will be eager to learn and to share. She can be trusted.

And so, the women say to us:

We are hungry.

Help us to find our voice.

Validate our experience.

May their words gently anoint us with petals of awareness. ⊕

My experience with visiting many churches as a lay preacher is that the shortage of pastors is empowering congregations to look for gifts among their own people. They are seeing the pastor as a teacher, preacher, and guide who will help them discover where each parishioner has an office in the church. People become participants, putting into action what they hear from the pulpit and taking the church outside the building to unchurched people.

The future is exciting when people find that what they learned in confirmation classes is the base from which they need to continue to study God's word. With this study, they discover their office in the church. Some are called to preach and lead worship while others see to education, visitation, administration, and numerous other duties. By empowering the members of congregations to participate in the everyday work of the church, the program frees the pastor to concentrate on shepherding the congregation. The members have an investment in their church, an enhanced sense of stewardship, and a Spirit-driven way of life. The pastor learns by teaching and by experiencing the gifts of the congregation.

Lay persons should not be considered those who lie down and do nothing. Lay persons are those who lay down their lives at the altar and ask God to use them as instruments of the kingdom. Laying hands on the trembling shoulder of a fellow human in trouble, spreading hands to give the benediction, or holding a pen in hand to keep the books of the church can all be done by the lay persons of the church. Once again, people have an active investment as builders and maintainers of the church. Ordained pastors come and go, but it is the members of the congregation, with the leadership of the Holy Spirit, that constitute the local church over the long haul.

Take, for example, the three rural congregations that make up the Greater Rural Kenmare Parish. After a long relationship with a larger congregation and two other rural congregations, changes occurred that broke up the parish, and people found themselves without a pastor. For almost three years they looked at alternatives with the assistance of a vice-pastor and the synod office. During this time lay preachers led worship, enriched, and challenged the congregations. One service was held each Sunday, the location rotating among the three churches. In December 1999 these congregations installed a pastor in cooperation with another parish, the pastor now having five churches to serve. The Greater Rural Kenmare Parish has no plans to discontinue using lay preachers and is even supporting several of the lay preachers who are doing online seminary studies. Their support of the future of the church is inspired by the gifts they are given by the lay preachers.

Here and elsewhere congregations are making adjustments without losing their unique identities. Not only are the rural churches a landmark on the plains, they are the heart of many a community. The strong desire to keep the pulse of the rural church strong and heard is satisfied by this use of lay ministry. ☩