



Ministry in Emerging Contexts

Christian ministry is no stranger to new contexts and the challenges they present. Beginning with the shift from Jewish to Gentile communities in the Roman Empire, Christian leaders and their congregations have learned to think new thoughts and act in novel ways in order to keep Christian faith alive and strong. This capacity to transcend the limits of one time and place so that another can be penetrated by the Gospel, while expected of an ecumenical church, surely cannot be taken for granted. At no time has the move been made without tension and even sharp conflict between “movers” and “home-bodies” in the churches. Intimate ties to particular forms of culture and social structure are not easily given up. Indeed, the more deeply the faith is embedded in the life of a community, the more wrenching and upsetting the effort to express it in new ways can become.

This issue of *Word & World* is about ministry in emerging contexts. We have asked our writers to describe ways in which the contexts of ministry are changing, and to suggest necessary and appropriate responses. Although the changes identified here occur *within* present fields of ministry rather than *between* discrete contexts—thus the necessity of speaking of *emerging* contexts—the challenges and conflicts are no less evident.

In her “Perspectives” piece, *Constance Parvey* discusses the consequences of a growing ecumenical consensus regarding the definition of ordained ministry for the cause of the ordination of women. Then the articles by *Gabriel Fackre* and *Paul Sponheim* each take up one new dimension of the American religious scene, the neofundamentalist movement on the one hand, and a new form of atheism manifest within the Christian community itself, on the other. Next, two persons charged with responsibility for ministry in very different sociocultural contexts, *Daniel Long* and *Merle Boos*, discuss the explosion of Hispanic people into American life, and worrisome trends in small town and rural society, respectively. Taking a different approach to his assignment, *Jon Gunnemann* explores the dynamics of social change in capitalist society and their impact on our understanding and commitment to communal values. Finally, in the “Resources”

section, *Paul Fransen* argues for the importance of indigenous leadership for churches among people of color, and *Charles Wilson* and *Pat Keifert* together explore the possible consequences of an emerging cultural pluralism for the development of contemporary Christology.

Yes, there is challenge aplenty here. Only a vigorous, culturally diverse, theologically sophisticated and well-disciplined group of leaders will be able to minister well to these several emerging contexts. How indeed can justice be done for women in the church while we also disentangle the thorny problem of common structures of leadership between churches? How can the fundamentalist concern for certain truth be satisfied, if we must also recognize and attend

with all seriousness to the voices of atheism in our midst? How do the churches develop the resources to build new ministries among people with cultural ways very different from their own, if the foundations of their own cultural system are crumbling? And how can we govern the change-producing engine of capitalism, so as to limit its capacity to destroy communal values? Add to these concerns the urgent appeal of Fransen for indigenous leadership and the complex challenge to the theologians raised by Wilson and Keifert. The reader will be ready for *Jim Nestingen*'s counsel, drawn from the first lessons for the Sundays in Lent: although to be friends of God does not deliver us from the experience of trial, suffering, and failure, nonetheless faith in God is still possible—and more than possible—well-founded. Indeed, a pastor looking for material for a series of Lenten sermons will do well to reflect on these texts in relation to these discussions of emerging contexts of ministry.

D.H.O.