



## **Women's Ordination and the Leadership of the Church**

CAROL J. MORK

First Lutheran Church, Columbia Heights, Minnesota

Until the summer before I started kindergarten, my family lived in an apartment building across the street from St. Mary's Catholic Church. Since "the street" was busy State Highway 12, I was not allowed to cross it by myself, but I did have full run of the entire block. The convent for the sisters of St. Mary's was located two or three blocks south of our block, and the "nuns" as they were called in the 1940s walked past our sprawling white-frame multiplex several times each day. For some unknown reason, I began to walk with them. Meeting them at the north corner of the block when they strolled home for lunch, running to the south corner when the noon hour ended and they returned to church, back again on the north corner in the late afternoon to escort them home at the end of their work day. They were "saints" in my four-year-old mind's eye, gentle women serving the Lord, dressed head to toe in black with halos of white encircling their creamy faces. They wore sturdy, sensible shoes, the kind my grandmother wore, and they listened to my childish chatter like my grandmother as well, asking me questions, smiling, and occasionally taking my hand. I wanted to grow up and be just like them!

Later after we moved out of the apartment, there were Sunday School teachers, the "missionary lady," a youth choir director, and finally, when I was in high school, a parish worker. All women, all serving the Lord in different ways. And that is what my adolescent mind determined I should do as well. A missionary? No, I didn't think that was the right thing to do. A choir director? Perhaps, and I was, for a while. A teacher? Certainly, and for over two decades, beginning as a sophomore in high school with a half-dozen three-year-olds. A parish worker? That became the career choice. A logical decision for a young woman in the mid-sixties who believed she was "called" to service in the church.

But it was not to be. Another choice—marriage—and I became a pastor's wife. Teaching, doing dishes in the kitchen with other women of the church, spending time with young people on retreats and district youth gatherings, leading Bible studies, baking cakes for funeral lunches. And, for the first time, finding a circle of "sisters" in the faith. Serving the Lord, as I understood it.

Never did it cross my mind that I should be a pastor. To be sure, Barbara Andrews, then a student at Luther Theological Seminary, often said, "You should be over here with us!" But I laughed her comment off with no thought. Men were pastors. I was not a man. Therefore I would not be a pastor. Little did I realize how parochial was my church/world view: "Women served; men ministered."

## I. SERVICE AND MINISTRY

It was several years later before I began to understand that world view and allowed it to begin to crack. Studying Greek vocabulary I first encountered the word *diakoneo*. Studying Bauer's Greek lexicon I detected a lack of clarity in English translations of that Greek word, for no less than five meanings were supplied for it: (1) wait on someone at table; (2) serve (generally services of any kind) someone; (3) care for, take care of; (4) help, support someone; (5) serve as deacon.<sup>1</sup>

The comments of Hermann Beyer in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* reinforce the double-sidedness of *diakoneo*. In the secular sense *diakoneo* meant "'to wait on tables' or more generally 'to serve' and the word often referred to the work of women." Thus, as is pointed out, "In Greek eyes serving is not very dignified. Ruling and not serving is proper to a man."<sup>2</sup>

In the New Testament the notion of waiting on tables is retained, according to Beyer, but Jesus radicalizes it and uses it as the paradigm for a disciple. The key to Jesus' understanding of *diakoneo* is found in Luke 22:24-27:

A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves (*diakonon*). For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves (*diakonon*)? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves (*diakonon*)."

It must be pointed out that cultural assumptions have worked interesting mischief on *diakoneo*. This can be seen in the rendering of this verb in the Revised Standard Version in regard to the activities of women. In Luke 4:39, after Simon had rebuked his mother-in-law's fever, the RSV says, "immediately she rose and *served* them." In Luke 8:3, Joanna, Susanna, and many others *provided* for Jesus and the twelve. And in the overly familiar Luke 10:40, Martha was distracted with much *servicing*. On the other hand, the closely related noun *diakonia*, which can mean either "service" or "ministry," when applied to the activities of men is regularly translated in the RSV as "ministry" (Acts 1:17, 25; 21:19, etc.)

<sup>1</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. Frederick W. Danker (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 184.

<sup>2</sup>Hermann W. Beyer, "Diakoneo," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76) 2.82.

Quite surprisingly, the seventeenth century translators of the King James Version were not as sexist in their assignments of English words. Simon's mother-in-law arose and *ministered* unto them. Joanna, Susanna, and many others *ministered* unto him of their substance. Nevertheless, even in KJV, Martha was still "cumbered about much serving!"

Perhaps it is no coincidence then that a young girl growing up in Minnesota formed a

self-identity which included the notion that “women served; men ministered.” For it was out of precisely such an environment that the committee of translators for the Revised Standard Version were doing their work. Both reflect the culture in which they lived. Women did serve, and men did minister.

In Acts 6:1-4 that dichotomy between serving and ministry seems to take on a value of its own.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables (*diakonein trapedzais*). Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word (*diakonia tou logou*).”

The reader is led to believe that “table-serving” (*diakonein trapedzais*) is distracting the twelve from preaching the word (*diakonia tou logou*). The decision is then made that “seven men of good repute” be appointed for table-serving. Could it be that at that moment in church history a greater value is placed on “ministry” (i.e., preaching the word) over against “serving”? Why, for example, did the twelve not split *diakonia* of the table and *diakonia* of the word among themselves? Could it be that there was already at work a hint of a hierarchy developing among the followers of the way, especially over against the Hellenists whose widows were being neglected? Even though the distinction during the first century appeared to be only among men, how long did it take before the table serving became the work of women and the preaching became the domain of the men?

Jesus’ words to his disciples at the Last Supper stand in judgment both on the early church and on our own day: “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). But as was the case for the Greek world, so also for us. “In Greek eyes serving is not very dignified. Ruling and not serving is proper to a man....The formula of the sophist: ‘How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?’ expresses the basic Greek attitude.”<sup>3</sup> How different are they from a gift poster I received: “A man is in general better pleased when he has a good dinner upon his table than when his wife talks Greek”? Such a statement is attributed to the good doctor Samuel Johnson.

But women bear the sting as well as men. After years of “serving,” many women want some of the ruling, and the words of Jesus, calling us constantly to serve, pull at our “will to power” as well.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

But throughout American church history, it has been the women by and large who have lived out their *diakoneo* through serving. *Serving Love* and *Love’s Response*, Frederick S. Weiser’s histories of Lutheran deaconesses in America, illustrate a particular group of women who dedicated their lives to serving.

Who are these deaconesses? No matter what else may be involved, they are primarily servants...the keynote of the subject is serving....Is it possible, too, that this service might be *the* Christian concern and not merely one among many?...[The diaconate] offers an office for the woman serving her church, even as it provides training in a spiritual environment for all women who seek full-time church service.<sup>4</sup>

Less particularly, women have served in a variety of ways in the congregations. But their roles have generally clearly reflected their roles in the larger society. Women taught Sunday School; women cooked coffee; women sewed quilts. Women made soup and they made soap. “Women served; men ministered.” Men preached; men sat on boards of deacons and councils; men voted. Congregations reflected the divisions and assumptions of American society until the 1960s. And women, unable to “serve” in the male-controlled power structure of the congregation or the larger church bodies, created their own auxiliary organizations. These groups—mission societies, Ladies’ Aids, circles—provided a place where women could exercise their own leadership skills as well as serve the church. For example, members of the Ladies’ Aids could elect their own officers, form their own committees, as well as provide in a myriad of ways the “service” of *diakoneo* at the congregational level.

But as society changed, so also, albeit gradually, did the churches. As American women sought equality in the marketplace, women in American churches began to question the assumptions of male “ministers” and female “servers” in the church. With little recognition of the implications of their decision (my own analysis), for example, the national conventions of the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America voted in 1970 to ordain women. And with that vote the centuries-old dichotomy between “serving” and “ministry” was challenged. Serving at the Lord’s Table and preaching the Word were now open to women, theoretically at least.

In the introduction to her case study of women priests in Sweden, Brita Stendahl observes:

The last two decades have experienced radical change in that women, although they continue to serve the church, no longer are willing to be subordinate to men, letting their will be done, their values go unchallenged, their theology be the standard for all theology worth the name. Women have declared themselves ready to serve as priests. They want to do theological research to test their theological views, and they want their share in the decision-making process of the church. And in many churches they have begun to do so.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Frederick S. Weiser, *Love’s Response: A Story of Lutheran Deaconesses in America* (Philadelphia: Board of Publication, United Lutheran Church in America, 1962) 1-2.

<sup>5</sup>Brita K. Stendahl, *The Force of Tradition: A Case Study of Women Priests in Sweden* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 1.

But Stendahl also notes that the ordination of women in Sweden “aroused an unequalled controversy among the clergy.”<sup>6</sup>

While the ordination of women remains a controversial topic in Lutheran churches in America, the short seventeen years of experience with women clergy allows the question, “What has the ordination of women meant for the leadership of the church at this point?”

## II. ORDINATION AND LEADERSHIP

In a conversation with Bonnie Jensen, Director of the American Lutheran Church Women, she noted the very positive influence of women clergy in the ALC. “Visible women clergy help keep women in the church,” she commented. “Women at the Lord’s Table and as preachers provide a positive role model for women and, perhaps more importantly, for younger girls in the congregation.” Second, Jensen pointed to the theological work currently being done by women and named that as a crucial area where women are giving other women and men new tools and perspectives for biblical and theological study.

While recognizing the traditional outlets for leadership that women’s groups have provided women in the church, Jensen hopes that such a role will decrease as women—ordained and lay—move into the mainline power structure of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Nevertheless, Jensen does not see the elimination of the women’s auxiliary in the future. Rather she sees at least two important purposes for the Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In the first place the women’s organization can provide a place for all Christian women—clergy or lay—to share with one another their stories and experiences. Second, and again perhaps more important, women of the ELCA can be encouraged to see and to make connections between themselves and women in other places—geographically, economically, emotionally. The Women-to-Women project of the ALCW provides such a global experience.

When asked how women clergy can or should relate to the women’s organizations, Bonnie Jensen answered, “Participate as sisters. Volunteer as appropriate, or be responsible when asked.” Does there need to be competition for leadership between lay women and clergy women? No, not at all. But Jensen added, “All women are reluctant to step ahead into positions of leadership.”

Nor are all positions of leadership truly open to women. While quotas may mandate the placement of women on boards and committees of the ELCA, quotas will not bring about second calls for women, calls as senior pastors, or calls to the office of bishop. A disturbing number of women are leaving parish ministry. Others, more than ready for second calls, sit in parishes with little hope for movement. How many recently elected synod bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are women? And there is another question on the horizon unanswered at this point. What is to happen to ordained women as ecumenical discussions with Rome continue?

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 3.

Last December Dick Youngblood, a columnist for the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, reviewed a book by Sarah Hardesty and Nehama Jacobs, *Success and Betrayal: The Crisis of Women in Corporate America* (Danbury: Watts, 1986). The authors, two New York advertising and public relations executives, argue that a “quiet revolution of women managers” is occurring in the workplace, draining it of our best-educated, best trained women.<sup>7</sup> Women are leaving the workplace because they are frustrated and disenchanting. A 1985 survey indicated that just 2% of

1362 senior corporate officers were women. A University of Michigan study of 800 promotions to vice-president and above in medium and large corporations last year demonstrated that only 2.6% of those promoted were women. If, as has been argued above, church behavior reflects societal behavior, it is worth asking what the future holds for women in leadership positions in the church.

Women serve; men minister. No, not any more, not always. But yes, women *diakoneo*; men *diakoneo*. Perhaps the unity of that word can be restored through the leadership of women and men in the church modeled by our Leader. “Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves....I am among you as one who serves.”

<sup>7</sup>Dick Youngblood, “Corporate Bias Repels Women,” *Minneapolis Star & Tribune* (December 1, 1986).