



Partners in Ministry: Men and Women

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In a recent *Christian Century* article a United Church of Christ conference minister lamented the fact that, despite the improved placement climate for ordained women, “it is clear that they do not have equal access to those positions often considered to be the most powerful and prestigious: the senior pastorates of multiple-staff churches.”¹ The article went on to suggest ways this situation might be rectified by men currently holding senior pastorates, denominational placement officials, and clergywomen themselves so that ordained women might “claim their places as strong candidates for senior pastorates.”

The full acceptance of the leadership of ordained women at all levels must indeed remain a front-burner agenda item for the church. Whether or not this necessarily means moving more women into traditional senior pastorates of multiple-staff congregations, however, is an assumption which needs to be tested in the light of a biblical vision of the nature of ecclesiastical power—a vision which is lifted up in the understanding of the office of Word and sacrament provided in the Lutheran confessions.

Article V of the Augsburg Confession locates the power source of the church in the living Word and sacraments which God has bestowed upon us for the purpose of obtaining that faith which justifies the ungodly.² The only power possessed by those in the ordained ministry is the power which possessed them in their baptism: the forgiving, freedom-bestowing, future-opening Word of God. The ordained ministry exists because of and for the sake of

¹Carole Carlson, “Clergywomen and Senior Pastorates,” *The Christian Century* 105/1 (January 6-13, 1988) 15.

²*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 31.

this Word. It is a ministry to this Word, in the power of God who speaks this Word, for the empowerment in daily ministry of those who are claimed by this Word.

Such an understanding of the nature of the office of ministry has radical implications for the incumbents—female or male—in that office, and especially for their relationships with one another as well as with the congregations they serve. In a world where hierarchical, “top down” management styles predominate, followers of the Crucified One are challenged to adopt an entirely different vision of how to be about their “business.” In the words of our Lord:

“You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and

whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
(Mark 10:42-45)

We are a woman and man, unrelated by ties of blood or marriage, who since September of 1986 have served as co-pastors of a 1200-member congregation in a small, rural community in the Midwest. In terms of our approach to sharing the pastoral office of our parish, we describe ourselves as “equal, but not the same.” We have developed some ways of being in ministry together which might help the church move not only toward the full utilization of the gifts of ordained women, but also toward a more biblical and confessional understanding of the nature of ecclesiastical power in a church which stands under the cross.

It is our intention in the remainder of this article to describe how we came together in ministry, how we have shaped our ministry, how we have been both challenged and supported in our ministry, and how we have been reflecting on our ministry from our unique perspectives as a man and woman who are “equal, but not the same.”

I. COMING TOGETHER IN MINISTRY

The idea of forming a female/male pastoral team together did not originate with us. In the spring of 1986 we were both available for call, and it was in the process of discussing ministry possibilities with our bishop that we were challenged to consider interviewing together as co-pastors. Although prior to this time we were acquainted well enough to have a mutual respect for each other, we were not long-time friends. Any team relationship which would develop between the two of us, therefore, would be a new creation.

In retrospect, we believe it is significant that we were paired by a third party—a matchmaker of sorts. We say this for two reasons. First, it is our conviction that a person often is not as aware of his or her gifts for ministry as a concerned third party may be. Even before we became partners we had discovered that others are often best at recognizing and calling forth our gifts for ministry. Second, being paired with one another by a third party gave us—as relative strangers to each other—the chance to begin our common ministry with a clean slate. We didn’t, for example, have to worry about the prospect of tarnishing a long-term friendship, but could instead develop a working partner-

ship out of which we knew a healthy friendship might also grow.

With the idea of serving together thus planted in our minds, we set up a number of meetings to discuss this possibility with each other. We discovered that we each brought varied ministry experiences to our partnership: Stephanie had been a church publishing house editor and an associate pastor in a large, multiple-staff congregation; Larry had been the pastor of a small rural parish and the admissions officer for a seminary. After discussing the pros and cons of those previous ministry situations, we tried to identify some of our individual strong suits and growing edges in ministry, and we went on to imagine some ministry settings which might best utilize our gifts.

We discovered, to our delight, that we both had a particular passion for preaching and teaching, that we both valued well-planned and thoughtfully led liturgical worship, and that we

both wanted to grow in the areas of pastoral counseling and parish administration. Owing perhaps to the fact that we had studied under some of the same seminary instructors (and that we had each been assigned the same seminary adviser), we also came to realize that we shared a common Lutheran confessional theological base.

At this point we wondered: Would we seem too much like “two peas in a pod”? Would such commonality work against complementarity as we sought to blend our gifts for ministry? We raised these questions with each other as well as with our bishop, and we came to the conclusion that an effective pastoral team need not be characterized by a yin-and-yang relationship between the partners—each person’s weaknesses being compensated for by the other person’s strengths. Our subsequent experience in ministry together has borne out the wisdom of this decision, even as we have had time to discover ways that we complement each other more than we had at first anticipated.

During our “getting acquainted” period, we also attended a workshop for multiple-staff ministries, sponsored by our Southwestern Minnesota District of the American Lutheran Church. This event, designed for those currently in or anticipating service in a multiple-staff parish, provided us with additional opportunities to know each other on a more personal level through discussions based on family systems research. At this event we were also able to gain insights from other pastors already involved in team ministry.

One of the things that Stephanie (who is single) was particularly sensitive to during this period was her relationship with Larry’s spouse and children. We intentionally structured a good portion of our first time together so that they would be actively involved in our discussions. Larry’s wife and Stephanie have been grateful for such opportunities to develop their own trust, respect, and friendship.

II. SHAPING A TEAM APPROACH TO MINISTRY

Once the decision had been made that we would make ourselves available for call as a pastoral team, we began the process of shaping our ministry together. For example, we arrived at some mutually-acceptable guidelines for the division of basic pastoral tasks, established some preliminary policies regarding occasional services (specifically weddings and funerals), and talked over our approach to the call process itself. With respect to the latter, we decided

to interview together with parish call committees, and we committed ourselves to seeking equal compensation packages.

At this point our bishop apprised us of a number of parishes in the call process which might be looking for a pastoral team such as ourselves. In conversation with the bishop, we began to focus on two of these congregations as offering the kinds of ministry challenges which might most benefit from our ministry gifts, and we expressed a willingness to have our names given to the call committees of both.

Little did we expect that, in the span of two weeks, we would be interviewed and called by both congregations! Now our fledgling venture into team ministry was to be tested by one of the hardest decisions any pastor ever encounters. With three calls facing each of us (i.e., the two new calls plus the calls we currently held), we engaged in a prayerful sorting-out process made all the more difficult by the fact that both of the two new calls seemed so challenging.

Eventually, however, we arrived at a decision with which both of us felt at peace. We returned one of the calls (to a congregation which later called another female/male team!) and accepted the call to our present congregation.

During the months before our move to St. James we continued our contacts with one another—for fun as well as “business.” One of the tasks we undertook during this time was the planning of our installation service as well as our first Sunday “in office.” Convinced that these first two events would do much to set the tone for our subsequent ministry in St. James, we tried to do the kind of liturgical planning which would best affirm our mutual servanthood as co-pastors. So, for example, our shared installation service was centered around the gospel lesson which we chose from Mark 10 (quoted above). And for our first Sunday in office—which happened to fall on Holy Cross Day—we each delivered brief homilies expressive of our commitment to a servant-style of ministry growing out of the theology of the cross.

Another task we undertook prior to the start of our ministry at First Lutheran was the creation of preliminary policies regarding pastoral acts. We did so in the conviction that theologically informed and pastorally sensitive policies could also strengthen our team partnership by helping us avoid situations where conflicts might develop. One of the first things we did after our installation was to have our church council discuss, respond to, and ratify these pastoral acts policies, which were subsequently published in the parish newsletter.

As we have shaped our approach to team ministry, we have been guided by a number of principles:

1. With respect to liturgical leadership, we have sought to follow the guidelines of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* as much as possible. Instead of assuming the roles of preacher and liturgist, we have used the designations of presiding minister and assisting minister. The presider preaches, presides at the Table, and officiates at any baptisms scheduled for that Sunday—with the assisting minister leading those portions of the liturgy designated specifically for that role. This arrangement has not only provided a way of making leadership roles in liturgy unmistakable to the worshippers, but it has also given us public opportunities to defer to each other’s leadership—thus, we hope, modeling a servant-style of ministry. Since the presiding pastor officiates at all bap-

tisms scheduled for his or her Sunday, this arrangement has also helped us avoid requests for one pastor or the other from parents scheduling baptisms.

2. We have, as much as possible, sought to divide evenly our basic pastoral responsibilities. We basically alternate in presiding at Sunday worship, funeral services, and weddings—with the presider also taking responsibility for attendant duties such as funeral planning or pre-marriage counseling. In terms of our weekly visitation schedule, we alternate each week for hospital calling and crisis situations so that the partner who will not be presiding at worship the following Sunday is considered “on call.” We also have divided teaching duties and leadership responsibilities relative to the boards and committees of the congregation, taking into account not only the number of boards with which we each work but also the varying workloads of these boards. We also share equally all perquisites received for funerals, weddings, and other pastoral acts.

3. Even though the division of certain responsibilities is an important way of maintaining

efficiency, we also recognize the value of jointly bearing the weight of other responsibilities. So, for example, while normally only one of us conducts wedding services, we both participate in leading funeral liturgies—convinced as we are that deaths in the parish are particularly crucial moments for exercising effective pastoral care. Similarly, during the rite of Affirmation of Baptism we both do the laying on of hands—regardless of who happens to be the presiding minister. Setting up church council agendas and meeting monthly with our congregational president is another responsibility we have undertaken jointly. We also have attempted to issue all major reports and letters to the congregation under both of our names. As much as possible we search for ways to use the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our.”

4. We also recognize the fact that in a church body which authorized the ordination of women as recently as 1970, it is necessary for a male/female pastoral team to be “unequal” in some respects for the sake of equality. We have been attentive to those subtle but significant ways in which we both have felt the need to “tip the scale” in Stephanie’s favor for the sake of upholding the mutuality of our ministry together. Even before our arrival in St. James we wholeheartedly agreed that Stephanie occupy what had been the senior pastor’s office. We also decided that Stephanie should, at least at the beginning of our tenure, hold the title of “administrative pastor”—understanding administration as a dimension of servanthood, not the exercise of authoritarianism. Being intentional about consistently having our names listed alphabetically (i.e., “Frey” before “Wohlrabe”) has also sent out a subtle, but strong, signal about how we wish to be regarded as a male/female pastoral team.

5. Throughout our time together we have come to realize that team ministry is effective only as both of us maintain a steadfast commitment to the partnership which is nurtured by mutual trust and open, honest communication. We place a premium on covering for one another and avoiding third-party discussions of the other. We have grown in our ability to offer each other constructive critiques along with affirmation. We strive for a healthy balance between working together and enjoying one another’s company in social settings, while at the same time continuing to cultivate other relationships with friends

and colleagues. Above all, we laugh together and try to keep from taking ourselves too seriously.

III. CHALLENGES TO AND SUPPORT FOR TEAM MINISTRY

Lest the impression be given that everything has worked out perfectly in our partnership, we want to describe some of the challenges which have also been faced. Such challenges come, of course, from two directions: from within (i.e., from ourselves) and from without (i.e., from others, specifically our parishioners).

As was stated above, in our “coming together” period we were somewhat concerned about being too similar in our theological orientation and gifts for ministry. The more we have worked together, however, the more we have discovered a myriad of ways in which we are dissimilar in terms of our personalities, temperaments, tastes, life experiences, and ministry styles. Our partnership has been challenged “from within” simply because, although we are equal, we are most definitely not the same.

Learning more about each other, with the help of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, has helped us tremendously in this regard. Our bishop encouraged us to seek growth counseling from

the start of our ministry together—long before any difficulties might develop—and our district and congregation sought to support us by sharing the cost of periodic visits to a male/female counseling team from Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota. (This arrangement was made available to all pastoral teams within the Southwestern Minnesota District and now in the new synod.) Being able to leave our parish setting occasionally in order to work together with two concerned but neutral third parties has been one of the most refreshing and renewing experiences of our time together.

The relatively few conflicts from “without” which we have experienced thus far seem to have centered around weddings. In some ways, that is not surprising because most any pastor would be able to tell a few “war stories” related to the planning of weddings. In two cases, people did not want Stephanie to officiate at the wedding because one member of each wedding couple happened to be from a denomination that does not affirm the role of women in most settings, much less as ordained ministers.

It seemed ironic that in each instance Larry was the person to receive the “barrage” of anger as the parents of the wedding couple made their complaints known. In neither case were the people able or willing to speak directly with Stephanie. The positive side of that is, perhaps, knowing that people were hearing from Larry his loyalty to the team and his commitment to our partnership as equals. He was able to respond quite adamantly that he was not, as they seemed to assume, “really the one in charge.” He also questioned the parents’ insistence that a better Christian witness would be made by our accommodation to the scruples of the guest families who would be offended by Stephanie’s presence. What kind of witness, he asked them, would we be offering if we seemed to be ashamed of our congregation’s decision to call a woman as their pastor?

In one case, we were able to work out a good resolution when Stephanie

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was able to have significant conversation with the couple themselves rather than through their parents as intermediaries. In fact, the non-member partner subsequently joined the congregation. In the other case, such significant “adult” conversation was impossible, and we reached a mutual agreement that Larry would have the wedding.

Such incidents are hurtful, both in the brokenness of relationship that occurs with the parishioners involved, and also because they hurt our relationship with each other. We have found that it can cause Larry to think, “If I weren’t working with a woman I wouldn’t have to go through this hassle!” and it can cause Stephanie to feel frustrated that Larry never has to be the object of such prejudice because he is a male, even though he has been the direct recipient of people’s anger. Hours of talking go into the resolution of such hurtful times!

IV. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

In this article we have sought to describe a servant-style of ministry which, we believe, can undergird effective pastoral team partnership. “Partners,” however, never lose their individuality—nor should they. We want to conclude this article by reflecting on how each of us as individuals has experienced our venture into team ministry.

Larry’s perspective is colored by the fact that his prior pastoral experience had been as the solo pastor in a small rural congregation. Accordingly, the transition from “I” language to “we”

language has sometimes been a challenge for him—a challenge he has still found to be liberating. He has also discovered, somewhat contrary to his expectations, that team ministry doesn't always mean a reduced workload vis-à-vis the workload in solo ministry. Communication with a partner takes time!

In short, he would conclude, there are both costs and benefits to being part of a pastoral team. As stated above, we have found that it is necessary for a male/female pastoral team to be “unequal” in some respects for the sake of equality. For this to happen, Larry has come to see how crucial it is for him to feel comfortable with who he is and confident of his gifts for ministry. On occasion he has also had to hear some of the burdens which Stephanie does experience in confronting those who may not yet fully accept the ministry of ordained women. In the face of such lingering prejudices, Larry has been granted some critical opportunities to uphold and affirm the validity of the ordination of women, something which he can do without appearing self-serving.

Stephanie's perspective is shaped by a prior ministry experience of serving as an associate pastor in a staff of three clergy plus one full-time lay minister devoted to youth work. That congregation was also larger than the one presently being served. For her, the “we” language had always been there, but because the previous setting was in the senior/associate model, the “we” has now taken on new meaning with this genuinely collegial partnership. Stephanie has felt an implicit trust in the partnership from the start—one of the gifts of being purposefully “matched” with someone for the work of ministry. That trust, in turn, creates energy for the work at hand and provides needed support during the “dry seasons” when that energy ebbs a bit. Even in

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the challenging times that have brought hurt and frustration, this partnership has been worthwhile, because it has provided an “anchor”—a place to be heard and received, and a place for joy in this shared calling.

Both of us have become convinced that the payoffs are well worth the investment we have made in our team—rewards such as the opportunity to be challenged and critiqued by a trusted colleague, the mutual accountability which partnership engenders, as well as the chance to be on the receiving end of the gospel. Perhaps most satisfying has been the privilege we both have received of embodying—at least in some small way—that new creation in which there is truly neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (Gal 3:28). We would say that that privilege alone has made our experiment in team ministry more than worth the effort!