

When the Quotidian Shifts

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When the 1956 General Conference voted to approve full clergy rights for women, I was five years old. Our son Jason was five years old when a local newspaper journalist paused in his interview with me to ask Jason if he wanted to be a preacher when he grew up. He appeared mystified and then replied, “No, that’s a girl’s job!”

In the life experience of our family over these years, the quotidian shifted. The quotidian, as Kathleen Norris teaches us in *The Quotidian Mysteries*, is the normal, the regular, the usual. Surrounding consistencies, simple repeated actions, necessary daily work have mysterious capacity to form us. There is power in the quotidian.

The shifting in our life experiences was organic rather than linear. At the age of five I had experienced only male clergy. However, life flowed onward, always damp with the baptismal

water of my infancy. Across time my experience broadened, my call clarified, my confidence increased, my vision expanded. I discovered youth ministry, explored Christian education, embraced mission adventure. I resisted the pulpit yet felt compelled

toward the word proclaimed: I was fascinated by words that conveyed the good news with clarity and power. Meandering in ministry, I found myself more and more in love with ministry in Christ’s church with God’s people. Tolkien suggested, “Not all those who wander are lost.” I concur, having wandered in Christian ministry, enthralled.

As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the granting of full clergy rights to women, we look back to the moments of dialogue, debate, and decision in the 1956 General Conference. And we look forward. What’s next for clergywomen? The question implies linear unfolding. I asked some wise clergywomen in

Mississippi, “What’s next for clergywomen?” They responded quickly, “Next? It’s not linear with us. There are entries and exits, ebbs and flows, stops and starts.”

History bears this out. Women preachers expounded, were resisted, were written out of history, and reemerged. We acknowledge starts and stops, resistance and breakthroughs. We celebrate marks of movement, decision, openings. One writer commented, “Female preaching has not been a continuous tradition in American history, but a disconnected and broken one.”¹

The lives of women are rarely linear. It is more characteristic that they gently circle, circling thoughts, encircling children, multitasking. In a lovely book review, Alice Walker expressed amazement at the work of the African writer Buchi Emecheta who Alice Walker called a “writer because of, not in spite of, her children.” Buchi Emecheta dedicated her book to her five children

“without whose sweet background noises this would not have been written.” Alice Walker wondered what sort of writer considers background noises of five children “sweet”? Then she reasons that it is because Emecheta is both a writer and a mother that

she is a writer at all. Just as African women have traditionally planted and harvested and cooked and done the washing with a baby strapped to their backs, so it is that women can write with children playing at their feet.² Women often have remarkable capacity to go beyond multitasking to effective integration of their multifaceted lives with effective ministry.

Included in the women in ministry forum at Millsaps College in January of 2006 was a panel discussion with several of us called into ministry. As the dialogue unfolded, I remembered how many times we have circled the same questions. How do you balance home, calling, vocation, avocation, demands,

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desires, children, marriage, singleness, resistance, solitude, loneliness, community? The questions circle back, over and over.

The world around would make the whole issue linear. We pose the linear question: what's next for clergywomen? We sense imposed linear weight when appointments for women are considered: "We have had a clergywoman already" or "We tried that . . ."

My mother prayed when my siblings and I were young that one of us would be called into the ministry. She told me that she assumed that if God called one of us, God would call one of her three sons, not one of her two daughters. It is all right that she prayed in this way. The story is not linear. It does not grow out of who we are and what we envision. It grows out of who God is and what God is bringing forth.

Anne Wilson Schaefer in 1981 described two realities, a male reality and a female reality, neither definitive for gender but descriptive of a way of being in the world. Power, authority, community, relationships, and leadership are embodied differently in the two realities. In female reality, power increases as it is shared. In female reality, authority is granted rather than grasped. In female reality, community is essential. In female reality, relationships are collegial rather than hierarchical. In female reality, leadership involves facilitation, mentoring, encouragement.³ As women lead the church in increasing numbers, we sense a shift in these directions.

What is emerging? What is being born in us? Birth is not a "next." Birth is new gifting, emergent creativity. Birth comes from the heart of God. To hold a newborn is to know this truth. For nine months there is in the womb mysterious emergence before a baby appears through labor into light with capacity to draw breath.

What's emerging fifty years after May 1956? What's emerging now that half of seminarians are women? What's emerging now that women are district superintendents and bishops and pastors of churches of all sizes and characters and in all sorts of places? What is being birthed in The

United Methodist Church?

We sit in circles more. In circles we look at each other, we speak to each other, we engage each other. United Methodist Women have gathered in circles for years. Our encircling God draws us inward, onward. There are fewer podiums and high pulpits, more chairs, more round tables, more walking away from notes, more remote microphones.

Our communities are becoming stronger. We see in many places authentic

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engagement, space for speaking truthfully, listening carefully, and careful reflection. There is a renewed honoring of silence. We engage in covenant life with others.

Organization is becoming more gentle and inviting. Create what is needed to accomplish the mission discerned and embraced. We see simpler organizations that are more transparent and more accessible.

Storytelling is increasing. The narrative nature of scripture is embraced, and narrative preaching continues to develop among us. We see the ways that our stories find meaning in the light of the biblical narrative. Homiletics continues to move toward engagement. The story is carrying us onward.

Mutuality is increasing. We express more readily our need for one another and for God. We are experiencing the ways our ministries depend upon the faithful ministry of our sisters and brothers. We welcome one another and rejoice in God's latest gifting.

The quotidian shifted as my family and I departed the church we last served. In the eleven years shared with this congregation, we had together embraced min-

istry with children. We worked to welcome children and their families in worship. Numbers of children in worship swelled, as did the challenges of engaging all ages effectively. In worship there was joyful noise, much joyful noise.

Four months after our departure, I saw a former parishioner who is a dear friend. She had served as chair of worship and championed the cause for the nurture of children in worship. We exchanged news of our families. Then she volunteered an

interesting comment, "The children are behaving better in worship since you left."

I asked what was making the difference. She answered, "I think they hear in Leonard their father's voice." Leonard, their new pastor and my old friend, has a wonderful, rich, deep, resonant voice, gathering up all the richness of the African-American preaching tradition. All of us who know him know the gift of his voice, the perfect voice for a loving father, a teacher, a preacher.

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Watch for it. The quotidian continues to shift. Fifty years out, God's fullness in us is still emerging. □

1. Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 16.

2. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 66.

3. Anne Wilson Schaefer, *Women's Reality* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1981), 99ff.



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