

## **Women in the Church**

### **Presbyterian & Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue**

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Christian faith acknowledges the equal dignity of man and woman. We, the members of the Worship and Mission Section of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian and Reformed Consultation, have studied the life of women in Church and society in our meetings at Morristown, N. J., May, 1970; Princeton, N. J., October, 1970; Columbus, Ohio, May, 1971; and Richmond, Va., October, 1971. As a result of this study, we are moved to make some recommendations to our parent bodies - the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the North American Area Council, World Alliance of Reformed Churches - in regard to women in the Churches served by our parent bodies.

Our own, personally conducted theological investigation is not the basis for these recommendations, for we are not this consultation's Theological Section, charged with the task of theological research. We are moved to present these recommendations because of several facts which have been brought to our attention in the course of our study.

The first fact is the injustice imposed upon women in both society and the Churches. We have heard and weighed the grievances and aspirations of women of wide experience who have devoted many years of service to the Churches and to the world: Margaret Kuhn (Presbyterian) and Arlene Swidler (Roman Catholic) at Morristown; Frances McGillicuddy (Roman Catholic), the Reverend Patricia Doyle (Presbyterian), and Suzanne Hiatt (Anglican) at Princeton; Grace Howard (Presbyterian), Sheila Collins (Methodist), Theodora Sweeney and Sister Jane Pank, H.M., (Roman Catholics) at Columbus. At Princeton we also heard the observations of the sociologist, the Reverend Joseph Fichter, S.J.

As a result of their testimony, we have been led to see such injustices as: Men are usually hired for jobs in preference to women, even when the women are equally or better qualified for the job; women are generally paid less than men for the same work; woman's identity is so dependent upon a man that the unmarried woman is regarded as strange or unsuccessful by society and is frequently excluded from participation in society's affairs. That this exclusion is often the result of oversight only confirms the affirmation that in society's eyes a woman's identity comes from her relationship to some man rather than from her own person. Married women are identified by their husband's name rather than their own, as if they were pieces of their husband's property.

Within the fellowship of the Church, it would appear that we have obliged women to exercise a secondary and often demeaning ministry. Women have been excluded from making decisions in the Churches, even in an advisory capacity, although many of those decisions determined the disposition of their own lives. Even when women are involved in decision-making, more often than not their voice is not significant in relation to their contribution to the life of the Church. We have either denied women part in the ordained ministry or have granted them part with reluctance, and then have proceeded to hedge their ministry with severe limitations. Very few

ordained women, in those Churches which admit them to ordination, have been accepted as pastors by local communities.

This list of obvious injustices could be extended. More subtle ones could be added, for "our way of life, our folk cultures, and even the very idiom of our speech have assigned to women a secondary and, at best, supportive role..." ("Women in Church and Society," statement of the Worship and Mission Section of the Roman Catholic/ Presbyterian and Reformed Consultation, Morristown, May 15, 1970, in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 7 [1970]:690).

Of the many injustices of our age, the injustice inflicted upon women is surely one of the most massive, for it affects one-half of the human race - and one-half of the Churches' membership! The unjust conditions under which women are (often subtly) compelled to live affects adversely the personal development of men as well as women. No human being is truly and fully free as long as even one other human being is in bondage. "More and more women today feel strongly that they wish to share fully with men in all human responsibilities" ("Ministry in the Church," draft paper of the Theological Section of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian and Reformed Consultation, Richmond, October, 1971). This aspiration of women today is frustrated by the accepted status of women in society and the Church. We judge this status quo to be sinful and immoral.

True, all men are not alike from the point of view of varying physical power and the diversity of intellectual and moral resources. Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 29).

In the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Christians could have, and very often should have, known and acted otherwise than we have in regard to the treatment of women in Church and society. We acknowledge our sins of commission and omission which contribute to the unjust conditions to which women are subjected. Therefore we acknowledge our need for conversion, for finally recognizing and ensuring women's personal identity, dignity, freedom, and rights to human fulfillment, especially in the Church. "The whole Christian community must summon the will and discover ways whereby the equality of the sexes is boldly confessed before God and man-confessed both in word and in deed. This equality of personhood, whether male or female, married or unmarried, can no longer be stifled" ("Women in Church and Society," Morristown).

The world will attach little credibility to the call of the People of God for justice for every human being, if the People of God within their own fellowship continue to regard and treat women as inferior human beings, discriminating against them because of their sex and thereby depriving them of fundamental personal rights.

A second fact is the women's liberation movement which is gaining momentum in society today. "The People of God...labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the

happenings, needs, and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age" (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 11). Thus, penetrating through the excesses which sometimes accompany the women's liberation movement, we discern a sign of God's presence and purpose in its basic cause of justice, freedom, and full personal dignity for women. The Churches will be unfaithful to the Spirit of the Lord if they fail to take up this cause, especially within their own fellowship.

Many Churches were slow in exercising leadership in the civil rights and peace movements of the 1960's. The credibility of the Churches will be damaged further if they fail to demonstrate creative leadership in the movement for women's rights in the 1970's. Given the current alienation of so many young people from the institutional Church, this matter of the credibility of the Churches cannot be taken lightly.

A third fact is that an ever growing number of theological investigations have been made in recent decades in various Churches and have repeatedly come to the conclusion that there are no conclusive, Biblical, doctrinal, or theological reasons why women cannot exercise decision-making positions in the Church and receive ordination. (A list of such studies and pertinent ecclesiastical decisions is in the appendix to this statement.) Christian theology demands certain steps which will correct a patently unjust situation which is intolerable in the light of the Gospel. We urge readers of this statement to consider the theological studies which have been made concerning women in the Church, and in particular certain sections of the study on "Ministry in the Church" of the Theological Section of this consultation.

We have become starkly aware of the gap between the status accorded to women in our Churches and in the Word of God. The status of women in our Churches often lags behind that accorded to them in society at large. For example, in some Churches women are not involved in decision-making positions. This noninvolvement may arise from conditioning in childhood not to desire involvement. Both the conditioning and the resultant noninvolvement reflect the pattern formerly followed in secular society and long since outmoded. The criterion for the status of women in our Churches is the Word of God in Jesus Christ.

St. Paul bears witness to this revelation of God when he writes:

"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:27-29 RSV). In this passage and others (Rom. 10:12; I Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:11), the Word of God, alive and active, cuts like any two-edged sword, but more finely (cf. Heb. 4: 12), into the assumptions of the ancient synagogue and societies of every age with regard to women's status. The Christian life as such, both in its individual and corporate manifestation, is grounded in baptism in Christ, not in this or that ethnic origin, this or that social status, or this or that sex. Human beings are "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise," not by being male or female, but by belonging to Christ. The place accorded to women in the Churches should stand in prophetic judgment on the place accorded to them in society and not simply give divine sanction to society's values.

It is, indeed, true that there are certain statements in the New Testament which treat women as unequal to men, v.g., I Cor. 14:34; I Tim. 2: 11-15 ("women should keep silence in the churches..." RSV). Here, it may be suggested, the Apostles mirror the culture of their times, reflecting a sociology which *de facto* made women subordinate. Just as the Apostles could accept slavery yet at the same time unleash spiritual insights which finally found slavery incompatible with the Gospel, so their seminal affirmations, v.g., Gal. 3:27-29 and I Cor. 11: 11 ("nevertheless in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman" RSV) would, in the end, point toward the integral Christian vision of women as fully equal to men.

Finally, we are prompted to make our recommendations for ecumenical reasons. All our Churches are confronted by the same challenge: To recognize, promote, and safeguard the personal dignity, freedom, and rights to human fulfillment of the women who constitute half of their membership. Our various Churches have made different degrees of progress toward this common goal. Those Churches which have made little progress can benefit from the experience of those which have advanced farther, and these latter can find corroboration of their efforts in the undertakings of the former.

Cooperation among all Christians vividly expresses that bond which already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. Such cooperation...should be ever increasingly developed... . It should contribute to a just appreciation of the dignity of the human person, the promotion of the blessings of peace, the application of gospel principles to social life, and the advancement of the arts and sciences in a Christian spirit. Christians should also work together in the use of every possible means to relieve the afflictions of our times, such as famine and natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, lack of housing, and unequal distribution of wealth. Through such cooperation, all believers in Christ are able to learn easily how they can understand each other better and esteem each other more, and how the road to the unity of Christians may be made smooth (Vatican Council II, *Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 12).

If the Churches can advance toward the unity willed by Christ for his Church by working together to secure justice in the world-at-large, how much more fruitful for Christian unity will be their working together for justice for women, not only in the world, but especially in the Church!

### ***Recommendations***

Because we are concerned about the worship and mission of the Church, because unjust and unchristian conditions prevent women from full participation in the worship and mission of the Church, because the Church is broken, because different theologies, customs and practices exist in regard to women in the worship and mission of the Church, and because we are placed in a position to make suggestions to the Churches which we represent, we recommend:

***(1) That qualified women be given full and equal participation in policy- and decision-making, and voice in places of power, in the Churches on local, regional, national, and world levels.***

The first and most obvious reason for admitting women to policy- and decision-making positions and to voice in places of power in the Churches is the fact that the policies and decisions made

and the power exercised frequently determine the lives of women. Unless they have an effective part to play in these policies and decisions and this exercise of power, they are being treated as children and manifestly deprived of their rights as adults to determine their own lives. Until women have such an effective part to play in the determination of their lives in the Churches, it is difficult to avoid the accusation that in the Churches they are oppressed in a kind of bondage or slavery.

The second and more profound reason why women ought to participate in decision-making and the exercise of power in the Churches is for the sake of the total life of the Church, both men and women. "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph. 4: 15-16 RSV). ..If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (I Cor. 12:26 RSV).

Our recommendation is supported by voices within our Churches. For example, the *Report of the Standing Committee on Women to the 183rd General Assembly (1971) of the United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.* enunciates this principle: "Since women are called to be partners with men, they must accept all forms of service in the Church, including leadership positions in the decision-making processes. The Church must encourage and enable women to assume ecclesiastical and societal responsibilities" (Introduction, principle no. 3).

The draft document "Justice in the World," prepared for the Third World Synod of Bishops (October, 1971), speaks of the various rights which must be honored. Among these rights, "a third series of rights regards the active participation of all men in the various decision-making institutions which control social, economic, cultural, political, and religious life" (in the *National Catholic Reporter*, 13 August 1971, p. 7).

The Theological Section of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian and Reformed Consultation, in its statement "Ministry in the Church" (Richmond, 1971), recommends: "All offices in the Church, ordained and unordained, be opened to qualified women, and that a major effort be undertaken to place qualified women, ordained and unordained, in offices and positions of leadership and decision-making in something approaching their proportion in Church membership."

***(2) That seminary education in all the Churches be opened to qualified women; (B) that qualified women be admitted to ordination; (C) that in those Churches where the ordination of women presents theological difficulties and no theological study of the matter has been made, a theological committee be established immediately to investigate the problem and make recommendations.***

(A) The basic reasons for this recommendation are the same ones mentioned above. The following additional reasons may be added:

First, many women desire to serve the Church and the world with that theological and pastoral expertise which men enjoy as a result of seminary education. To prevent the fulfillment of this desire is to deny "the right and freedom" of women "to acquire an education or cultural benefits

equal to those recognized for men" (Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, no. 29).

Second, the needs of today's world call for the theological and pastoral expertise which seminaries alone are geared to provide. If the Churches are going to respond adequately to this call, they must make use of all the human resources at their disposal, whatever the sex of those human resources. Therefore the Churches should open seminary education to women as well as men.

Third, the Churches' seminaries were for a long time exclusively the domain of men and are still overwhelmingly dominated by them. Welcoming women into the seminaries of all the Churches would be a sign to the Churches' membership and to society that the Churches take seriously their proclamation that in Christ there is neither male nor female and that women ought to be accorded personal rights and freedoms equally with men. Admission of women to seminary education would signify that the Church is willing to back up its proclamation by deeds.

Finally, the admission of women to seminary education would benefit not only women but men. Future male ministers and priests would learn the woman's point of view in those areas of life where women have specialized knowledge and often exclusive experience, e.g., pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, sexual discrimination, etc. Seminary students would have the opportunity to learn to relate to men and women on the basis of their equal ability to think: theologically and function skillfully in pastoral situations.

(B) Since the Churches have need of all available human resources for carrying out their mission to mankind, it is unreasonable to deny ordination to women simply because women have not been admitted to ordination in the past. Several thorough theological investigations made in various Churches have found no Biblical, doctrinal, or theological obstacles to the ordination of women. Moreover, some qualified women believe themselves called by God to ordination.

(C) Some of the Churches which we represent are not willing to accept the theological investigations conducted in other Churches and concluding that women may be ordained. Yet in those Churches unwilling to accept these theological investigations, there are women who desire to be ordained and believe that the Holy Spirit is the source of their desire. The least that should be done is to test this desire and belief in accord with I Thess. 5: 19, 21. The will of the Holy Spirit may be at stake here, as well as the personal rights of women members of these Churches. We should also consider the need of the Churches to use all available human resources in the mission of Christ. It would be a serious neglect before God and man for any Church to delay to make that rigorous theological investigation which would settle the question of the ordination of women. To hesitate to take up the question in the most serious, competent, and formal manner would suggest indifference to 'the will of the Holy Spirit, the personal rights of women, and the needs of the Church in its mission to the world.

***(3) That the North American Area Council, World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs establish and fund an Ecumenical Commission on Women, inviting other Churches involved in bilateral consultations with the Roman Catholic Church to join them on an equal basis in responsibility***

***and funding for this commission and in sharing the fruits of its labors; that the members of this commission be predominantly women from all the sponsoring Churches who are actively engaged in the lives of their Churches and also positively concerned for women's dignity, freedom, and rights; that the purpose of this commission be to facilitate the fulfillment of the first two recommendations and to safeguard and extend the gains made.***

Such a commission would be a concrete step in implementing our first recommendation, namely, that qualified women be given full and equal participation in policy- and decision-making, and voice in places of power, in the Churches on local, regional, national, and world levels. It would be charged with making recommendations to the leaders of the Churches in pursuit of justice, dignity, and freedom for women in all the Churches and in pursuit of unity among the Churches in regard to women's rights. The commission would give valuable guidance to the Churches and would greatly encourage women to assume their full responsibility in the life and mission of the Church.

We do not wish to prescribe as a priority what projects this commission should undertake, but we make the following suggestions of the sort of projects that could be profitable.

1. The development of criteria for guiding children, adolescents, and adults in attaining a healthy attitude toward their own sexuality and a joyous celebration of their manhood and womanhood.
2. The exploration of additional forms of innovative ministries for both women and men, unordained and ordained-ministries which would be ecumenical in nature, and recognized and supported by the Churches.
3. A study of means of encouraging and preparing congregations to receive women as pastors.
4. A thorough study of the Churches' influence, through their teachings, customs, and the unexamined attitudes of their members, upon both men and women in the development of their attitudes about being men or women and in their fulfillment as persons.
5. A careful study of the conditioning to which the young are subjected through the educational materials which the Churches use, in order to determine what attitudes about being male or female this conditioning produces.

## ***Appendix***

To this statement is appended a list of legislation pertinent to women in various churches, or statements which determine policy in regard to women. This appendix is too lengthy to be included here...The documents cited in this appendix are the following:

1. The United Presbyterian Church of the USA 1930 Legislation on Women Deacons  
1955 (167th General Assembly) - Report on Ordination of Women  
1969 (181st General Assembly) - Report on the Status of Women in Society and in the Church  
1970 (182nd General Assembly) - Report on Committee on Women  
1971 (183rd General Assembly) - Report on Committee on Women
2. The United Church of Christ  
1961 Constitution of UCC, #8, 9, 23, 23, 27, 28  
1955 (8th General Synod) - "The Status of Women in Church and Society"
3. The Reformed Church in America  
1957 (General Synod) - Report on Ordination of Women

- 1958 (General Synod) - Report on Ordination of Women
- 1970 (General Synod) - Recommendations of Christian Action Commission
- 1971 (General Synod) - Recommendations of National Department of Women's Work
- 4. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.
  - 1961 (96th General Synod) - Report on the Interim Committee on Biblical Study of Women in the Church
  - 1964 Amendment of Form of Government, Section 9-2
- 5. The Cumberland Presbyterian Church
  - 1921 (General Synod) - Recommendations on Women in Church
- 6. The Roman Catholic Church
  - 1965 (Vatican II) - Pastoral Constitution on Church in Today's World, #29
  - 1970 Third Instruction on the Correct Application of the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, #6, 7
  - 1971 (Paul VI) - Apostolic Letter *Octogentesimo Anno*, #13, 16
  - 1971 (NCCB Committee on Permanent Diaconate) - *Permanent Deacons in the Church: Guidelines on their Formation*, #168, 169, 179
- 7. The Episcopal Church
  - 1958 Report of the Lambeth Conference
  - 1968 Report of the Lambeth Conference
  - 1970 General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the US, Houston, Texas
  - 1971 Anglican Consultative Council
- 8. The Lutheran Churches
  - June, 1970 LCA Biennial Convention, Minneapolis
  - October, 1970 ALC Biennial Convention, San Antonio
- 9. United Methodist Church
  - 1924 Partial rights to ordination for women
  - 1956 Full rights to ordination of women
  - 1969 Establishment of Commission on Status of Women
- 10. The Church of Christ Uniting
  - 1970 The Plan of Union, Chap. II. #17; Chapter VII, #2, 18, 32, 34; Chapter VIII, #14, 16, 19