

Women and Men in Ministry: A Collaborative Venture

Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., Judith Logue, and Robert Wheeler

Three authors explore the challenges of exercising collaborative ministry as a gender inclusive team, at the service of spiritual and ministerial formation in a graduate school.

Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and Washington Theological Union in Washington, D.C., the two theological schools that sponsor *New Theology Review*, have long been committed to the formation of ordained and female and male lay ministers for the Church. Their commitment is formulated in the mission statements of both schools: Catholic Theological Union . . . prepares women and men to serve the Church throughout the world (CTU); inspired by the charisms of its religious orders, Washington Theological Union educates candidates for priesthood and men and women of diverse backgrounds for service to church and world (WTU).

The importance of such a commitment has been affirmed and reinforced by two documents issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Dianne Bergant, C.S.A., professor of Old Testament Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, is past-president of the Catholic Biblical Association and has served on the editorial board of New Theology Review.

Judith Logue, director of the Emmaus Program at Catholic Theological Union, is author of Forgive the People You Love to Hate.

Robert Wheeler, director of the Emmaus Program at Catholic Theological Union, served for over thirty years as a corporate attorney.

These documents, *Strengthening the Bonds of Peace* (1994) and *From Words to Deeds* (1998), underscore three goals set forth by the bishops: (1) to appreciate and incorporate the gifts of women in the Church; (2) to appoint women to church leadership positions; (3) to promote collaboration between women and men in the Church. The concluding words of *Strengthening the Bonds* state that “we have seen that the true face of the Church appears only when and if we recognize the equal dignity of men and women and consistently act on that recognition.” Thus the bishops insist that collaborative ministry is not an option; it is a visible sign of the Church’s *communio*.

Recognizing the diversity of gifts bestowed upon the Church by the Holy Spirit, the bishops are concerned that these gifts not be determined according to restrictive gender categories with women “expected to carry out the behind-the-scenes tasks rather than assume the more visible roles of group leadership and facilitation” (*From Words to Deeds*). They further maintain that “the violation of women’s equality also diminishes the true dignity of men” (*From Words to Deeds*). Finally, they recommend that one of the ways of preparing women for leadership roles in the Church is to “provide opportunities and resources, including scholarships, for women to acquire the education, spiritual formation, and skills needed for church leadership positions” (*From Words to Deeds*).

While CTU and WTU may have committed themselves to such collaboration and subsequently structured the academic, ministerial, and spiritual formation components of their programs to this end, and while the bishops also may have espoused collaborative ministry and the formation it requires, a pressing question must still be posed: How do the fruits of such a theological formation flourish in an actual ministerial situation? The Emmaus Program for Lay Formation established at CTU might be considered just such a ministerial situation. It is under the direction of a woman and a man, both graduates of CTU. The Emmaus Program may not represent the norm in collaborative ministry because both the ministers and the ministerial situation are so closely associated with the institution that formed them. Such circumstances are unlikely to occur in the average ministerial setting. However, the program is still a genuine experience of ministry for the directors and can serve as a legitimate test case for investigating the question. The description of the program has been written by the directors themselves.

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Emmaus Program

The Emmaus Program for Lay Formation at CTU was inaugurated in September 1994 at the request of lay students who wanted spiritual and ministerial formation to complement their academic program. Judy Logue developed the initial program in collaboration with a group of students and several graduates who served as facilitators for theological reflection groups. Because the scope of the program and the number of its participants increased, in September 1999 Bob Wheeler accepted the role of associate director. He was selected because he was both qualified and available, and not primarily in order to form a gender inclusive ministerial team. However, over the years, the richness of such a team has become apparent. The program has provided requisite formation activities for more than one-hundred lay students pursuing professional degrees at CTU.

Reflection on Team Ministry

Although they received their professional ministerial degrees from CTU, both Judy and Bob came with extensive parish and program-based lay ministry experience. This included Marriage Encounter, Cursillo, RCIA, Renew, retreats, days and evenings of reflection, as well as other activities on both diocesan and parish level. Judy had been an adjunct staff member at her parish, had been involved in volunteer ministry, and had done some retreat work. Bob was the traditional part-time lay volunteer. Married with children of their own, they both knew well the difficulties of balancing home and family, career commitments, and volunteer lay ministry, although from differing perspectives. This diversity of perspective has allowed them to appreciate keenly the challenges that other lay students at CTU face as they balance competing demands for their time. They both consider marriage and raising children as a substantial source of their ministerial expertise. Having learned innumerable lessons of love and service in both good and bad times within their marriages and experience of child rearing, they maintain that they enjoy the ministerial perspective to which 1 Timothy generally refers: “If a man [or woman] does not know how to manage his [or her] own household, how can he [or she] take care of the church of God?” (3:5). They believe that they have not only survived but have genuinely thrived in that first church—the home. They now bring the commitment and wisdom learned there to minister in the larger Church.

Expectations of Collaboration. Judy and Bob admit that, because they already perceived women and men as equals with unique perspectives and wisdom to share, they both took collaborative ministry somewhat for granted. However, they knew that such a point of view was not the prevailing pattern encountered

in their respective backgrounds. The point of view that they espoused was a product of deliberate choices that each, along with their spouses, had made over the years. During his legal career Bob had developed the practice of treating as equals the women with whom he worked in team-based situations. He readily acknowledges that this collaborative pattern is not a norm within the legal profession. For her part Judy consistently chose only those ministerial opportunities that afforded collaboration, working situations that modeled a church of mutual respect and cooperation. She admits that the experience of parish work too often falls short of this model. Both of them claim that today, ministry that is not collaborative and mutually respectful would be strange, uncomfortable, and ultimately unworkable for them.

Collaboration at CTU. Judy and Bob both insist that during their student years at CTU, their attitudes toward gender cooperation were reinforced by sound teaching and modeling within that particular ecclesial community. Whether in the classroom or related curricular activities, they experienced CTU as both gender inclusive and gender respectful. This was evident especially in the faculty and administration's concern for each member of the CTU community, a concern that was devoid of gender stereotyping. This is no small feat within a Catholic tradition that struggles to achieve some dimension of gender inclusion and respect.

They maintain that their effectiveness as a ministerial team derives in large part from this common CTU spirit. Thus they understand and embrace the mission and the goals of CTU, especially as they relate to the formation of laity for ministry and leadership. They share a vision of the laity properly assuming its responsibility for the entirety of the Church's mission as articulated by Vatican II. They believe that today the laity is being called by God's inscrutable Spirit into a full and responsible sharing of Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission. This means that lay theological students must not only be acquainted with the identity and role played in the past by laity, but they must also be able to imagine what their identity and role might be for the future. Today lay women and men partner with the hierarchy in faithfully acting as midwives for a church constantly being born anew.

Collaboration with Differing Perspectives. Acting as directors within the Emmaus Program, Judy and Bob both use their own sacred stories as they seek to enter the Catholic tradition and bring it alive today. In doing so, they often

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discover differing yet complementary points of view which are triggered by their own female and male natures respectively. For example, as they prepared for a student retreat centered around the theme of power, they were surprised at how their past experiences uniquely oriented their respective understandings of power. After several preparatory sessions to outline the theme of the retreat, they decided to allow their differing perspectives to serve as the format of the retreat. They presented power from three perspectives: power taken, power given, and power shared. These perspectives drew upon the realization that encounters with power were markedly different for most women and men. For Bob, power was positive, something that allowed him to accomplish good. They concluded that this was traditionally a male point of view, a perspective held by those who are themselves often in positions of power. Judy did not define power so positively. She saw it both as a social kind of transaction that can effect either good or evil and as a force capable of preventing some things from happening. They concluded that this might be characterized as a female point of view, a perspective of those who are often denied power.

The wisdom they collectively discovered regarding the three faces of power shaped the choice of biblical passages used during the retreat: power taken, as in the story of Adam and Eve reaching for a forbidden source of power that might break a relationship; power received, as in the story of the woman with the hemorrhage grasping the healing power of Jesus as it went out from him; power shared, the goal of collaboration, illustrated by Jesus' constant reminder to his disciples that true leadership resides in service of others, not in lording it over them.

Gender as a Ministerial Tool

This retreat-planning experience heightened the realization that, for all the commonality of their academic background and ministerial activity, the two ultimately ministered from different gender-based perspectives. They did not experience these differences as divisive. Rather, they discovered that these differences could become a rich source of new theological understanding. By articulating, respecting, and sharing these differences, they learned that as a ministerial team they could enter into more profound levels of formation with students. Furthermore, they could demonstrate that gender differences need not be a barrier but could be a boon to team ministry. As a consequence of this early discovery, they now deliberately explore ways in which their perceived feminine and masculine points of view affect their theological understandings as they prepare topics and processes for theological reflection groups, and develop retreat themes and presentations. They have learned, and now teach, that each person's gender is a fundamental aspect which all, as practical theologians and ministers, ought to be aware of and take into account.

Gender also plays an important role in the structuring of theological reflection groups in the program. The insights generated in the single gender group discussions are shared at day's end in a concluding general session. This kind of grouping shows that, while gender is important, it is only one of many important dimensions of the person which should be recognized and respected. In listening attentively to varying individual characteristics, they have become increasingly aware of the blessed depth within the richness of those whom God calls to ministry in this very diverse Church. Their role in the program is the facilitation of the ongoing individual discovery and exploration of these personal dimensions and characteristics in order that they might be brought into ministerial service.

Emmaus as Metaphor and Model

The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, which gives this lay program its name, has become a compelling metaphor for Judy and Bob. It has become particularly fitting since today many Scripture scholars maintain that the disciples were a man and a woman. The theme of companions on the journey with God, conscious companionship with one another, along with storytelling and listening, all form the basis of their work together in program design. They acknowledge that within the Catholic tradition gender consciousness can be frustrating. In fact, gender is for some an overarching and exclusive concern often leading to ecclesial dead ends. However, it does not seem to assume such a dominant role or frustrating destination for these two. They credit this to their CTU education coupled with the fact that each has a full life. This has enabled them to articulate responsibly the gender issues within today's Church, while at the same time presenting faithfully the Church's tradition and teachings.

They are constantly appreciative of and delighted with what they can do in the program to nurture the lay ministers and leaders of tomorrow's Church. Doing this, they draw upon their individual gifts and talents, their own gender differences, and the theological training that each received. They hope that by simply demonstrating how faithful laypeople can respectfully and collaboratively minister as a team, they are modeling authentic possibilities, at once both ancient and new, for Christian ministry in the faith communities of tomorrow.

The Impact on Theological Education

If the Emmaus Program can act as a metaphor and model for collaborative ministry, it can also serve as a tool for assessing one aspect of theological education offered at CTU. This short report suggests that the remarkable level of

collaboration, an earmark of the program, is due more to the personalities and commitment of the co-directors than to any course of study offered by the school. CTU's commitment to collaboration provided a setting in which the directors' commitment to collaboration could be affirmed, challenged, and enhanced. The description of the process of dealing honestly with two very different experiences of power indicates how divergent, even contradictory, perceptions need not constitute obstacles to collaboration. Had such been the case, or worse, had it been simply one example among many of how conflicting perceptions prevented the directors from respecting gender diversity and from ministering together, CTU would have had to ask some very probing questions, such as: How relevant to our students is our own commitment to collaborative ministry? How can we make it a more effective dimension of the ministerial formation that we offer?

While the Emmaus Program may not be typical of ministerial sites, its quite distinctive character serves as a valuable tool for assessing gender collaboration. The fact that the directors seem to possess many of the elements needed for cooperation allows us to judge the effectiveness of their explicit formation. Have they become sufficiently sensitized to the ministerial potential of gender differences, their own and those of the students with whom they work? Have they developed the tools needed to bring these differences into dialogue with each other rather than into conflict, and have they been able to actualize this potential? Finally, are they adequately prepared for situations in which gender differences are not acknowledged or respected, or in which they result in conflict? The answers to such questions will come from both the directors and the students in the program. To date, the program itself has been quite successful in this regard. However, it will be in ordinary parish or diocesan settings that the real success of the program and the truth of the bishops' statement will be revealed: "We have seen that the true face of the Church appears only when and if we recognize the equal dignity of men and women and consistently act on that recognition" (*Strengthening the Bonds*).

References

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