

The legacy of *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* – a conversation

In 1999, the Australian bishops published the landmark document *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*. A year later, they published a response to the document in the *Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000*, in which nine decisions were listed. The Australian Catholic Theological Association working group on gender justice set out to discover what fruit those decisions have borne.

To that end, two women who hold leadership roles in the church were interviewed. Judith Foster sgs is Townville Diocesan Liturgy Consultant. Judith worked as a coder on the original *Woman and Man* project in the late 1990s. Kari Hatherell osu is Pastoral Director of the Brisbane parish of St John's Wood / The Gap and chair of The Australian Catholic Council for Lay Pastoral Ministry. Kari wrote *Female lay ministry: my experience as a lay parish pastoral director* (2009) as one of the reflection papers for the tenth anniversary of the *Woman and Man* document.

The interviews were informal. Judith and Kari were not expected to make detailed and comprehensive evaluations; rather, they were asked to reflect on their own experience about what affects (if any) the Bishops' decisions have had on their roles in church. Further, they were asked to comment on how these decisions may have affected the participation of women in the Australian Church, generally.

In the event, only five of the issues listed in the decisions were discussed. Here is a snapshot of those conversations.

In their first decision, the Bishops expressed their commitment to establishing better balance of men and women, clergy and laity in the power structures and professional life of the church in Australia.

Judith recalled that participants in the *Woman and Man* project in the 1990s were not asking for women to do more in the church - since they were already very active in their local and wider church communities - rather, they were asking for women to be included in the decision making of the church. Judith said that she had not noticed much progress in this direction.

Reflecting on her recent experience of Plenary Council discussions about synodality, Judith asked: 'Where is the synodality, where is the wider community (not just women either) involved in consultation about, for example, movement of priests?'

While Judith finds it difficult to influence the attitudes of priests in parishes, she acknowledged that her boss, Bishop Tim Harris, appreciated her contribution 'preparing liturgies and supporting liturgical practice across the diocese.' Nonetheless, from her work in Townsville and elsewhere, Judith said that, 'when I run courses, people often say "how will we tell father?" They see that change needs to happen, but they can't see that their priest is ready to make that change.' In Judith's experience, 'many women regard the church as a boys club.'

Both Judith and Kari acknowledged that there are numerous women - including themselves - in high office in their dioceses. Nonetheless, Kari said, 'you've always got that wall of clerics, some of them good fellows, but when their backs are against the wall, they tend to come out clerical.'

Kari commented that the notion of the church as ‘a community of equals’ is a theological ideal which is difficult to achieve because of pervasive clericalism. ‘I think clericalism is alive and well within people not just priests, but ordinary Catholics keep it alive’ she said. ‘We always need leadership; but is the leadership model clerical even if the person is not ordained? There is a tendency to create clericalism even when there is no clergy.’

Kari has experienced clericalism herself: ‘Parish folks,’ she observed, ‘have this funny idea that a religious will be better educated and would be that much closer to a *genuine ordained person* than a lay person would be.’ In her experience ‘yes Sister, no Sister’ is the same as ‘yes Father, no Father.’ It seems that lay people, including women, sometimes support the ‘boys club’ mentality in the church.

The second and third of the Bishops’ decisions point to promoting the equality and dignity of women and their participation in the church through the development of new theologies of church and ministry.

Kari was appointed to her present position of Pastoral Director by Archbishop Mark Coleridge under Canon 517#2, which gives her most of the roles and responsibilities of a parish priest. This seemed like an innovative appointment by the archdiocese. However, Kari said she had ‘come to realise, that this role . . . is not such a different model - it is a traditional parish model with me looking for priests, it doesn’t break other boundaries down at all.’ Kari admitted that she is unsure how to do things differently ‘because there is not a lot of thinking that has been done . . . to develop an alternative, such as a team approach.’

In Kari’s experience, the traditional parish model isn’t working. ‘Every so often’ she said ‘we discuss the possibility of having a cluster of parishes with a ministry team . . . with diverse roles. There would be a priest leader probably, but to have the lay pastoral ministers and ordained ministers in a team responsible for an area.’ However, she reiterated that no one ‘has really thought about how we can do this in reality.’

Clearly our parishes are not being renewed by new theologies of church and ministry. Kari identified a perennial problem: ‘most of our parishioners are old and so we would be expecting them to do things in a new way.’ Further, she said ‘even our younger members are wedded to the single parish model - they want church close to where their kids go to school.’ Sadly, there seems to be ‘no appetite among parishioners for things to be different.’

It seems that it is not just the hierarchy who are loath to be innovative in terms of new models of church and collaborative ministry, but also parish folks are slow to change. If there are new pastoral and theological approaches to church and ministry, these have not made a noticeable impact on the everyday lives of most Catholics, especially women.

In decision four, the Bishops commit to providing guidelines and training for lay led liturgies, lay preaching and the use of inclusive language. Further, in decision six, they commit to providing educational opportunities in theology and the practice of collaborative ministry.

In the Brisbane archdiocese, there are policies and documents relating to lay led liturgy. The implementation of these policies, however, relies on the willingness of parish priests to be inclusive and innovative.

Collaborative ministry continues to be a huge a challenge for lay people when priests, especially the older ones, were trained in a model which supported clericalism. Judith recalled the time when she attended a seminar given by the rector of an Australian seminary, who described the programme taught to the seminarians concerning sexuality:

‘He got totally derailed because the women in the group said: “Yes, but who does the cleaning in the seminary, who does the cooking?” We found out that in twelve months, he had never actually met with those boys’ families. It seemed that the young men were totally isolated from ordinary family life when they entered the seminary. The women in the workshop were shocked, because we said that these guys have got to go back and work with ordinary women and men. So how are you going about developing their ability to relate to people and not seeing women as their servants?’

These issues are being addressed in places like Brisbane’s Holy Spirit Seminary, where the formation staff includes two women. Nonetheless, the nature of seminary training – past and present - is still understood to be a widespread problem in Australia. This is especially so in the light of the recent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

But there are many other factors that affect women’s participation in ministry. Kari pointed out that ‘there is no incentive for women to study now. Back in the early 2000s there were women studying at Brisbane College of Theology [now closed] – and they were self-funded. There was often a bit of a pathway so they could become pastoral associates or whatever. Now there is no one much around in terms of laypeople with degrees [and] parishes haven’t got the money to employ them. There is no incentive for women to self-fund through a theology degree now because there is little possibility of making a decent career out of parish or church work. It seems to me that there is still no energy for forming lay people. We put a lot of money into seminarians and we import priests from overseas. To lead Eucharist, you need to be an ordained male and it seems to stop there.’

Kari noted that the nature of the employment has changed. ‘The HR rules and regulations,’ she said, ‘have become so necessarily formal that there is not the flexibility in some employment situations now.’ Also, ‘parishes are more frequently employing part-timers to do sacramental programme oversight, etc.’ and ‘these are very different roles from the Pastoral Associate role and they do not have the same level of leadership.’ Often these part-timers are ‘not seen as part of a parish leadership team, so much as the co-ordinator of a particular programme.’ They ‘often don’t have a role on the Parish Pastoral Council and rather than working *with* the parish priest in a collaborative ministry, these part-timers are seen to be working *for* ‘Father.’

What happened to that generation of women who were enthusiastic and committed enough to study and take up roles in parishes? Kari suggested that ‘some were employed and it didn’t work out well for them, they felt used by the system, by priests.’ Foreign priests, for example, ‘sometimes have a very different attitude towards women, but also young priests can find it difficult working with women.’ For other women in parish ministry the prospects were good ‘they were working hard, but things were going well’ and ‘then there would be a change of parish priest and their role changed and they felt undervalued.’

Currently, there are new roles opening up for women, for example, in hospital chaplaincy or Centacare. The appeal of these roles, Kari suggests, is that they ‘have a more regular life-

style (timetable wise) and regular working conditions – in terms of not having to deal with changes of parish priest etc.’

Kari has seen that ‘some women have become a little jaded and have come to the conclusion that this is a mug’s game basically.’ In any case, many of the women who gained their qualifications in the early 2000s were mature age students and by now many have retired. Sadly, there is little evidence of a leadership succession strategy.

‘Some places in Australia, like Melbourne, still have a large network of pastoral associates,’ Kari acknowledged, ‘but not here [in Brisbane] anymore . . . the old-time pastoral associate who was an all-rounder . . . there are probably only two or three remaining in this archdiocese.’

Regarding inclusive language, Kari said that she was disappointed that the bishops had not made much progress. She mentioned that in choosing a new translation of the Lectionary, the bishops now favour the Revised New Jerusalem Bible, which she said ‘it is not as inclusive as the NRSV.’ It is not just the bishops who are stalling here; Kari maintains that parish folk don’t seem to have ‘the energy to argue about liturgical language.’ Also, it worries Kari that among young people in the church, there is a wave of conservatism and often ‘gender equality and inclusive language are not issues’ for them.

Moving forward

The roles for women in the church are diminishing and there are fewer young women ready, willing and qualified to fill lay leadership roles in the Australian church. However, there is a sign of hope. In a recent initiative Leadership for Mission was established as a cooperative project of the Office for the Participation of Women, Catholic Mission, Catholic Church Insurance and the Australian Catholic University. This is a two-year program which aims to prepare Catholic women for leadership for mission within and beyond the Church.

One of the successes of the bishops’ decisions was the establishment of The Commission for Australian Catholic Women in 2000. Unfortunately, in 2006 the Commission was downgraded to a Council and its sphere of influence has move further from the ‘engine room’ of the Australian Church.

The Bishops’ *Social Justice Sunday Statement 2000* - written as a response to *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus* - is inspiring and forward thinking. However, all the decisions listed by the Bishops, were prefaced with this proviso: ‘where necessary, and within the divinely ordained structure and communion of the Church.’ What hope is there of real renewal, when concepts like these dominate the discourse?

The president of the Australian Catholic Bishops conference and Archbishop of Brisbane, Mark Coleridge, has said often and vehemently that the plenary Council is not about ‘business as usual,’ but a movement of the Spirit for real change in the Church in Australia. This is also the hope of the Australian Catholic Theological Association.

Written by Dr Jenny Close, for the Australian Catholic Theological Association working group on gender justice.