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On the Virgin Mary, Inclusive Ministry, ... and Christmas

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BY PAUL ANDERSON

HAIL, FAVORED ONE! The Lord is with you!" were the words announced to Mary by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:28). After regrouping from the shock of it, and after receiving support from her cousin, Elizabeth, Mary exclaimed, "My soul magnifies (and amplifies) the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God, my Savior!" (vv. 46-47) What if young Mary would have said "No" to God's plan to use her in His unfolding plan of salvation? Or, what if Joseph or Elizabeth would have discouraged her from following the Lord's leading in her life? Heaven and earth would be all the less for it, and the divine mission of Jesus himself would have been altered. Few ministries are absolutely gender-specific, but this was certainly one of them.

To stretch the parallel, perhaps to the point of breaking, I wonder if Friends are as supportive as we need to be to women who have sensed a divine calling to serve in pastoral ministry among us. If not, the entire Body of Christ suffers impoverishment. Obviously, the calling of Mary was a unique one, but there may be nurturing, pastoral, instructional, or organizational needs within the church to which God calls specific people—not in spite of being women, but because of it. All this comes to mind in the light of knowing several talented and well-trained women who feel a clear calling to pastoral ministry, but who have not yet found places to serve. I don't know why that is the case, but it raises the query:

"If God calls women to serve, why don't Quaker churches?"

That's a question I've wondered about for some time now. I remember hearing stories about my grandparents, Scott and Grace Clark, both recorded ministers who responded faithfully to God's call to ministry, and I wonder what the Lord is doing among His people today. Grandpa served as president of Friends Bible College (now Barclay College) for 18 of its early years and as pastor of several Quaker churches, but Grandma was every bit as active in ministry. Some of the first things she would do when they entered a new community were to start a jail ministry, prayer meetings, Bible studies, and a WCTU chapter (Women's

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Christian Temperance Union). Recently, a pastor in Eastern Region told me with a smile about how Grandma would organize six or more carloads of adults and young people and take them for a Bible study at the county jail. These early experiences in ministry played a formative role in his own calling into the pastorate. And the WCTU movement, for all its limitations, sought to address radically the social problems related to alcohol abuse in the American home: worsened economic hardship, spouse and child abuse, wage-earning instability, etc. Grandma was also quite an evangelist, and she and Grandpa held extensive outreach campaigns. All of this makes me wonder why Friends have lost so much ground in terms of openness to women using fully their gifts for ministry nowadays.

During the first part of this century women enjoyed a greater freedom to live out their spiritual callings in terms of pastoral leadership within the church. In Kansas (now Mid-America) Yearly Meeting, for instance, over one quarter of the active, recorded ministers were women during the first half of this century. Since World War II, however, the

percentage of women ministers active in virtually all North American yearly meetings has declined about fourfold or more. Some explain this phenomenon as the result of post-traumatic recompense after a popular war. In exchange for the brave and valued service of American (male) soldiers during the early forties, jobs were "created" for the returning men, and the roles of women were reassigned back into the home in the late forties and fifties.

Before this time, Quaker girls as well as boys were encouraged to consider God's calling them to full-time Christian ministry. And many responded faithfully. Only in the last half century have the invitation and the opportunity for women to serve dried up among Friends. The question we ought to be praying about is whether this trend should be maintained or reversed, especially in the wake of another "popular" war. Another way to put it: "Are we being proper stewards of the spiritual giftedness and callings of all members of Christ's Body, as opposed to only half of them?" Still more importantly: "Are we following the Holy Spirit's leadership fully in the ways we identify and utilize forthcoming leadership?"

And now for the difference Christmas makes. The way you look at the Gospel makes all the difference when it comes to ministry. Many well-meaning Christians interpret the New Testament wrongly—as a delimiter of gender roles, when it actually does the opposite. Jesus came to show us the true picture of how God works. God is not a respecter of persons, races, or genders. All have access to Him directly through Christ, and all are expected to respond to His invitation into loving relationship. Granted, Paul appeals for church order in ways patriarchal, but Jesus sets us free from all bondage, societal and otherwise. To celebrate the advent of His coming is to embrace His liberating message and mission. As Paul also put it, in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male or female." (Galatians 3:28) Thank goodness Mary said "Yes" to the Holy Spirit; may we be given the grace to respond as faithfully. Merry Christmas! **EF**