

Like Water on a Rock: Ordained Women and the Transformation of Canadian Anglicanism

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It was a cold morning, brisk in its November anticipation of early winter. In the sacristy of a small rural church an older woman was busy putting on the vestments of her priesthood. The occasion of that morning Eucharist was of particular significance to those gathered – it was an anniversary service. On that cold day, 30 November 1996 a notable number of “regular” and a few guests had gathered to mark the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the ordination of women to the priesthood. For the woman slipping the stole and chasuble over her alb in the sacristy it was also the twentieth anniversary of her own ordination to the priesthood. As she looked at her reflection in the tiny mirror hung on the back of the closet door, the young woman beside her, ready and waiting, holding the heavy cross on its long wooden pole looked at the priest and asked somewhat sharply (as perhaps only a twelve-year-old can do), “what difference do you think it has made – I mean do you think it has made any difference that they ordained you, that they have been ordaining women to the priesthood for twenty years now?” Somewhat taken aback and yet not taken by surprise the priest answered reflectively, “I’m not sure. It has made a difference to me. I have done what I love and what I think God wanted me to do for the last twenty years and longer. But beyond that – I’m not sure I could say.”

The question posed by that twelve-year-old in a tiny sacristy almost a year ago was not unique. The question – “what difference has it made”? – is no stranger to the historical mind. Any who seek to examine the

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changing place of women in ecclesiastical structures in the twentieth century must eventually come up against just such a question. This paper is one person's attempt to begin the process of addressing that question with all of the limitations and perils implicit in attempting the historical analysis of a phenomenon which is still happening and indeed will continue to unfold long after this generation of thinkers and readers is gone. One might ask – what is the dateline between journalism and historical study anyway? It is my contention that the first twenty years of women in the priesthood in the Anglican Church of Canada is a feasible project for historical investigation. However, the lens through which we look today is unique to us and will be replaced by later generations. Today we only begin to formulate an understanding which later generations of historians and historical actors will of course redact and re-formulate. Some have argued that the greatest discovery of the post-Newtonian era is the realization that unadulterated objectivity is impossible. When we study something we change it and in turn are changed by it. It is with full awareness of this dialectical relationship between the desired empirical objectivity of the standard academic genre and the necessary subjectivity implicit in all human experience and narrative that I embark on this journey of exploration.

The methods I have employed to develop some response to the primary question – “what difference has it made?” – themselves reflect the dialectical tension between objectivity and subjectivity. Given the time frame which this study explores (1976-1996) little archival material was available to me. As such, it was incumbent upon me to generate a database which would in some way shed light on the question at hand. I chose the method of prosopography illumined by oral history to achieve this goal. The assumption here is that until we know something about who these women are, we cannot make any assessment of what their lives and work have meant. Who are they then becomes the necessary first question.

Prosopography or collective biography requires access to human beings or information about them. As such, I began the process of finding the numbers and names of women actually ordained to the priesthood in the Anglican Church of Canada as of 1996 (no central repository of this information is kept by the church). I then circulated to these women (476 in all) a questionnaire which asked for basic biographical information and for reflective responses to specific questions about their vocation and experience. After two mailings I closed the database with a response rate

of just over 61%. I then conducted selected interviews with women of diverse perspective and experience to shed further light on the empirical data. While sociologists might argue that a 61% rate of return will give a reasonably representative profile of the group studied, I am not approaching this study with that as a direction. In other words, rather than saying that my statistical and narrative findings are representative of the whole 476, I have decided to understand the material as representative of what it is – the experience and stories of 291 women in the priesthood. The others elected not to participate in the study and as such their experience is inaccessible to the historian at this juncture. What I am presenting here is a profile of women in the priesthood in Canada which is as comprehensive as possible but which is not complete (if any historical study is ever complete).

Something must be said about the way in which this paper understands the use of prosopography. At first glance, it appears that this database was formulated to find the dominant features of a particular group within a single denomination and national context within a narrow time frame. However, as the commonalities in the backgrounds, personal lives, vocations, career patterns and ministry experiences began to emerge, it was clear that identification of contextual variants was essential to a meaningful analysis of the data. The data base and narrative text demonstrated that diversity was as striking as commonality and attention to the subtle diversity within the commonality is critical to understanding the subject.

Given the layers of diversity inherent within the more general categories of commonality, the collective profile can only be understood in a comparative fashion. For example, 47% of women said that they have experienced sexual harassment in ministry but what they meant by that, as well as what those who said they had not had such an experience meant, is only measurable in light of great diversity of perspective and experience.

While I was in the process of collecting data for this study, some expressed concern that the genre of prosopography would turn great inherent diversity into a melting pot. Just the opposite is the case. While prosopography does show patterns and trends, it also highlights places of glaring disjuncture both within and outside of the trends. The perspective which frames the context for this paper is grounded in the notion that no phenomenon can be understood as a solitary event existing in isolation from all other historical events and realities. As such, any attempt to say anything meaningful about any historical phenomenon implies comparison,

whether or not the historian is acknowledging the parameters of implicit comparison which have factored into the final analysis. Contextual variants can be refined to almost microcosmic proportion. All historical analysis requires the identification of significant contextual factors which influence outcomes of historical processes. These contextual factors help the historian to track consistencies and points of difference in each situation. Identifying not only significant factors, but distinguishing factors (factors which distinguish actor A from actor B, or context A from context B) are a necessary pre-condition of valid interpretation. In other words, in all historical analysis the implicit and microcosmic diversity of historical and human processes must be recognized explicitly as the container within which all causation happens. To do anything less is to shortchange the potential depth of one's analysis. Prosopography then becomes a vehicle for defining a container for interpreting diversity rather than an attempt to homogenize and present all subjects as the same.

It is clear to me, after creating a collective profile of ordained Anglican women in Canada that the beginning place of wisdom in the exploration of the history of these pioneer women lies not in their collectivity alone. Rather, their collective identity and experience can only be interpreted when the polarities, the poles of their diverse experience and practise of ministry are identified in comparative relationship with each other. The Anglican axiom of unity in diversity provides a paradigm for interpreting this rich twenty-year history. It is not my intention to compare diversity against some baseline of normativity – such a theorized baseline only defeats the richness of a microcosmic comparative approach. Rather, I use the tool of comparative analysis as a point of departure to explore the incredible plethora of dominant realities which characterize this tapestry and to discern the subtexts of majority and minority experience.

As the study began to take shape, it became self-evident that weaving the story of these women alone would not adequately frame a way of answering our primary question of investigation, i.e., “what difference has it made?” Further layers were then added to the study. A small group of male clergy ordained from the same period randomly selected from across the country were asked the same questions addressed to the women. While 200 men were approached to participate in the study only 103 chose to do so providing a lower rate of return than in the women's case (51%). Finally, thirty parishes who have experienced the ministry of women enthusiastically participated in the study. This final aspect of the study may

take us closest to answering our primary question. While very few of those in the parish groups were able to directly answer the question of difference and meaning, all attempted to respond to it. The form of their response although not requested was almost universal – the people from parishes began to tell stories of individual women whom they had known in ministry. The fabric of those stories fashion the wisdom and interpret the meaning which can be had at this juncture with regard to the last twenty years.

As is probably apparent from this introduction, this paper utilizes statistics, narrative text and story to construct its analysis – to fashion its wisdom. I will begin with a look at the basic statistical profile of the 291 women, and then unpack nuances in that profile through the identification of significant subtexts leading toward some response to the question- what difference has it made from the perspective of the women themselves. Finally, I will consider the perspective of the thirty parishes from the vantage point of both statistics and story to formulate a response to our initial question what difference has it made in relation to the parishes and people who have lived with women in the priesthood and to the ecclesiastical structures which they all inhabit.

Confidentiality was guaranteed for both women clergy and parish participants in this study. There appeared to be no other way of responding to the multiplicity of issues inherent in a writing about living subjects. As such, no parishes or individuals will be named other than through the study identification number given to them by me. Several participants did not identify themselves to me and even I know them only by number. Naming names has never been the purpose – discerning collective patterns and unique wisdom more effectively meet the challenges of our undertaking.

A Statistical Profile

In this collective biography the basic categories of families of origin, personal back ground (including work history, vocation and education), ministry employment patterns, and experience of ministry were unpacked with a series of questions. The most significant of these will be elaborated here.

Family of Origin

Within the group of 291, place in birth order was varied. However, the single largest group identified itself as eldest children – 42%. 13% were only children while 23% were the youngest in the family and the marginally smallest category with 22% were middle children. 47% of the sample identified the socio-economic class of their family of origin as middle-class. No direction was given as to what constituted middle-class and it was apparent that people interpreted the category differently. Both women with parents with grade school education and working in the traditionally designated “blue-collar” workforce and women with parents who had post-graduate university degrees in traditional “white-collar professions” chose this category. A couple of women did not self-designate as they found this category offensive. 32% stated that they were raised in working-class families (again undesignated) and 19% chose upper-middle, with no one electing to identify their families as “upper-class.”

The educational level of parents was somewhat surprising in light of other studies on the educational background of the parents of women in professions newly opened to women. Other studies have indicated that the first generations of women in a profession tend to come from families with a significant degree of post-secondary education.¹ Such was not the case here. The largest single group of fathers held an elementary school education (34%). 32% had secondary school diplomas while 22% held baccalaureates and a further 12% a post-graduate degree. Interestingly, the largest single group of mothers held a order was eldest diploma (46%), with the next largest group holding an elementary school diploma (36%). 15% held a baccalaureate degree and 3% held a post-graduate degree of some kind. While mothers held fewer university degrees than the fathers, they also had a higher level of basic education than did the fathers.

The occupations of fathers and mothers were diverse and revealed little significant pattern. The largest single group of fathers (worked in the category of “professions” including doctors, lawyers, teachers, dentists, clergy and university professors. The next largest group worked (31%) worked in the trades. This category included plumbers, steamfitters, electricians, farmers and tool and die makers among others. 24% of the fathers in the sample worked in some form of business/enterprise, often self-employed or as sales representatives. 6% of the men worked in factory work and another 6% in service industries. None were identified as primarily homemakers. The mothers were primarily homemakers with 62%

of women designated in this category – not a typical for the time period. However, the remainder of the sample did engage in paid work outside of the home. The single largest category for this work was employment in the service industry (19%). 10% worked in white-collar professions, 5% in the trades, 2% as factory workers and a further 1% as self-employed business people.

Personal Background

This study measured several aspects of the personal background of women clergy. In this category, diversity seems more evident than any significant pattern. I found that as one might expect a significant majority of women clergy are Canadian citizens (81%). 14% hold dual citizenship from Canada and one of either the USA, Great Britain and Australia. Three are American citizens and 1% retain British citizenship.

The largest single category in birth order was eldest child. 42% of participants in the study were eldest children. 23% were youngest children, 22% were middle children and 13% grew up as only children. This profile once again seems to parallel some studies on birth order and profession which suggest that people inclined to the clerical life tend most often to be drawn from the category of eldest child.² Only 8% were children of clergy, relative to 18% of their male clergy peers.

At the time of the study, 55% of participants were married; 24% were single; 14% were divorced and 17% were widows. These statistics challenge a popular myth which holds that most women clergy are divorced women. In fact, the 14% of participants who are divorced reflect a smaller contingent of divorced clergy than their male peer group who were divorced at the rate of 22% (current status). 66% of the women were either raising or had raised children. 19% of the women are part of a clergy couple – their spouse is also a priest, while 3% of their male colleagues found themselves within that category.

The level of education for women clergy is high – reflecting the Canadian House of Bishops standard for ordination (Master of Divinity [M.Div.] degree or equivalent). 73% of the women in the study hold the M.Div. degree. 16% hold undergraduate degrees in theology. 8% hold no degree and 3% hold doctoral degrees (including D.Min. and Ph.D.). Relative to their male counterparts, women ordained in the last twenty years both have more and less overall education. In other words, more hold the M.Div. degree – 73% versus 68% of male clergy – but fewer have

pursued doctoral studies – 3% versus 12%.

An overwhelming number of women chose the vocation of ordained ministry (or were chosen by it) as a second, third or fourth vocation. 94% of those who participated prepared for ordination after at least ten years in other life paths or professions. This reflects an overall trend in the ministry toward second vocations. However, the number of second vocations among women was much higher than among male clergy respondents. 94% of women were ordained as a second vocation while only 68% of men fell into this category.

Tracking the dates of ordination for women reveals an interesting trend. The study measured numbers of women ordained by five-year increments. 9% of women clergy studied were ordained in the first five years. Between 1981 and 1985 a further 25% were set apart. Between 1985 and 1989 a further 45% of women were ordained. Between 1990 and 1996 21% of the total accepted holy orders. What do we see here? There does not appear to be an increasing or expanding trend in the ordination of women. Some fear that women clergy are “taking over the church” with an exponential growth in their number with advancing years. While it is true that there is a steadily growing number of clergy, there is not a proportional growth. The bulk of ordinations occurred during the 1980s – 70%, relative to 30% in the decade framing the 1980s (in two five-year increments).

The bulk of ordinations during the 1980s become even more interesting when one correlates dates of ordination with birth dates and forms of ministry. 5% of the women clergy were born between 1910 and 1920; 13% were born between 1921 and 1930; 19% were born between 1931 and 1940; 38% were born between 1941 and 1950; 19% were born between 1951 and 1960 and only 6% were born between 1961 and 1970. The bulk of women clergy are in their late forties and their fifties. 37% are over the age of 57. Only 6% (as of 1996) were under the age of 37. When one correlate ages with ordination dates one discovers that these young women were almost universally (with a statistically unmeasurable exception – under 1%) ordained in the 1980s. In other words, vocations among young women are almost unheard of in this decade (while young men in decreasing numbers continue to present themselves for ordination). Furthermore, with the exception of the first group of women ordinands a majority of women who are 60 and over have been ordained in this decade. One might hypothesize a general trend in aging among the clergy

especially when this is paired with statistics from male clergy peers. While the statistics are not as dramatic, the proportion of older men seeking ordination has risen dramatically in this decade. The Anglican Church of Canada is an aging church with an aging clergy (preponderantly but not universally) – even its newest clergy.

The relationship between age and current ministry position is also interesting. First let us consider the categories of current (as of 1996) employment. The largest single category of women (47%) are working in paid full-time parish ministry; 12% in part-time paid parish ministry; 12% are retired but in active parish ministry; 8% are in part-time non-stipendiary ministry; 2% are in full-time non-stipendiary ministry. A total of 81% identify themselves as working in parish ministry in some fashion. The remaining 19% defined themselves in relation to ministry in the following fashion: 6% in institutional chaplaincy; 3% in theological education; 6% left ministry to raise children; 5% left church work and are employed in the secular arena or are looking for work there.

It is notable that 81% are self-confessedly active in parish work of some kind. Those in chaplaincy and theological education and raising their children also live for the most part in parishes and are actively engaged in the life of their parish communities. Only 5% overall consciously rejected church work and with that choice most disaffiliated from regular parish involvement also. That leaves 95% still intact in relation to the institutional church. However, considered from another angle, less than half of women clergy are working in the “traditional” career path of full-time paid parish ministry (relative to 72% of their male clergy peers).

The variety among women clergy in terms of part-time work for the church is striking. What this demonstrates is that women are on different career paths than their male counter-parts in many cases. Is this difference by choice or lack of options? The answer depends largely on individual women. Some who are not in full-time paid ministry state that diocesan structures and parish communities have not been open to their ministries. Some hypothesize that while parishes will accept women as an assistant they do not want women in the position of rector, which is what most full-time paid positions are. Other women are clear that they have had no impediment to the progression of their clerical careers because of their gender. 61% of women in the study stated that they have experienced no gender barriers in their career and some even stressed that at times they felt their gender had been an advantage in their employment situation. One

woman writes: “I haven’t experienced gender barriers in the progression of my career – in fact just the reverse most times. If I let my name stand for a diocesan committee I will likely be elected and I suspect it’s because I’m a woman in a climate where gender equality is still a concern.”³³ Many who work part-time stated that they did this because of personal choice. Many had no desire to fit into the traditional model of full-time rector. Accepting or pursuing part-time work in creative combinations was the stated choice of many women.

The 6% of women who state that they left paid ministry to raise children are an interesting group in relation to this issue. They are interesting because they represent most of the young women who participated in the study – those in their thirties who were ordained in the 1980s. Many of the youngest women have left to raise families – at first an apparent motherhood and apple pie issue having little to do with the church. However, most of this 6% state that they would not have left parish ministry if parishes and diocesan structures had been more willing to accommodate the life cycle of a woman with a young family. Repeated concern with intransigent structures, and expectations about the way in which one must exercise priesthood within parish communities revealing itself in inflexible expectations was expressed. It raises a significant question – if women are to serve the church as priests, does that mean “fit in here girls or else”? Is the church willing to accommodate the different life-cycles of some women in its expectations of ordained persons? Does inflexibility and a desire to have women exercise ministry which conforms to the pattern of their male contemporaries have something to do with the fact that most women now serving as priests and presenting themselves for ordination tend to be beyond the child-bearing age?

There are some who argue that women are no different from men and that difference in gender should make no difference to ministry. In a sense this is a defensible position – our humanity rather than our gender is the defining criteria for priesthood. However, such generalizations fail to do justice to the microcosmic diversity of all of us – a diversity which transcends even the social construct of gender. We are not all priests in the same way. The diversity which defines our humanity of necessity shapes a diverse priesthood. Any attempt to disqualify the social construct of gender as a critical component in the formation and elaboration of our diversity consigns us to simplistic and unhelpful generalizations, rather than to a critical and complex analysis of fascinating subjects. It also

truncates the rich potential for ministry to be nurtured in the bosom of a diverse community.

One cannot ignore the fact that 39% of respondents in the study did state that their gender has been an impediment or obstacle in the pursuit of their chosen vocation. Many women expressed the concern that diocesan hierarchies and parishes had been less than supportive of their ministries. Some contend that they had directly experienced bias which held that woman might serve as assistants but never as a rector in a given parish.

I have experienced discrimination in applying for parishes. It has been made clear to me on two occasions where the parochial committee did not want a woman priest but went through the motions of the interviews because the bishop told them they had to. In my region all of my colleagues are male. During regional meetings they are usually referred to as Father or Reverend and yet they, male and female laity and clergy alike refer to me by my first name.⁴

Interestingly, many of the women who expressed concern over discrimination also talked about the shifts in attitude that they had witnessed first-hand as parishes lived with the ministries of women they had initially not wanted. When communities live with the ministry of women their fears and prejudice tends to undergo some transformation in a positive direction. Within diocesan ecclesia structures few women hold places of institutional authority beyond their own parishes. While there were some women who participated in the study that were Archdeacons and regional deans, the proportion was small – just over 1%.

Related to the issue of gender barriers and professional placement is the contentious question of sexual harassment. Intentionally, this study did not define sexual harassment. It simply asked women if they had experienced it in the context of their ordained ministry. Room was provided for people to elaborate on their response if they chose. While this lack of precision is problematic for the statistician, for the social historian it allowed for some exploration of nuances of interpretation and definition – anecdotal rather than statistical.

53% of respondents said that they had not experienced sexual harassment. Comments proffered on the choice of a negative response reflected diverse understandings of what harassment was and was not. Many who said that they had not experienced sexual harassment shared

stories of experiences which by others' criteria would have fallen within the realm of harassment. For example, one woman who was clear that she had not experienced sexual harassment (harassment because of gender) was physically assaulted by a priest in her deanery after her ordination to the diaconate. He threatened her saying that if she ever moved to accept orders as a priest he would kill her. The police took this threat seriously enough that on the night of her ordination to the priesthood, they were stationed at the airport, train station and church just in case this priest showed up to follow through on his threat.⁵

Another woman talked of a similar painful experience. As an older single woman, she had been working for several months after her ordination in an isolated location. Most parishioners had been welcoming – a few remained either openly hostile or cautiously reserved. One evening she returned to the rectory after an evening prayer service held in a church several miles from her home. When she arrived she found the back door of her house open. Nervously she entered her kitchen, calling out asking if anyone was there. From the shadows of her kitchen a parishioner who had been openly hostile emerged. He said, "It's time you learned that your kind are not welcome here." He then sexually assaulted her. He was later prosecuted for this criminal act and convicted. This woman priest is adamant that she has not experienced sexual harassment in her ministry.

47% of the study respondents stated that they had experienced sexual harassment. The stories of these happenings were as diverse as the responses from those who stressed that they had not experienced sexual harassment. The stories ranged from reports of relatively minor slights, to graphic propositioning, to actions which were concertedly aggressive and at times violent. 31% stated that their primary experience of harassment was from male clergy peers, 11% from laity and 5% from seminary professors. Interestingly, virtually all of this 5% (with the exception of one individual) studied at one particular theological college during the 1980s. The level of participation in this study of graduates from that school was lower than other schools and yet they comprised the whole 5%.

The stories which were predominant told of encounters with male clergy. It seems to have been those experiences which were most disturbing to women clergy and therefore uppermost in their consciousness. The expectation of professional collegiality when frustrated was experienced as one of the most difficult dimensions of the new work.

As I prepared the original parameters of this study, I encountered a

surprising expectation. More than one individual raised a question about the inclusion of questions about sexual harassment in the study. Some made speculations that there would be a correlation between level of education and response to the sexual harassment questions. Indeed, there was a correlation but it was not the one which some had hypothesized. The greater the level of education the more likely it was that women said yes in the category of sexual harassment. This is starkly illustrated by the following: in the category of those priests without a university degree 0% said that they had experienced sexual harassment; in the category of people with a doctorate 100% answered in the affirmative with regard to sexual harassment. The percentages rose in increments by degree (BA; M.Div; Ph.D.). A correlation between age and date of ordination and a positive or negative response to these questions is also discernable. The women born in 1930 or earlier most frequently said no they had not experienced sexual harassment. The largest single group of respondents in the affirmative were those born between 1940 and 1959. Interestingly, the youngest women (born in 1960 or later) had the second lowest rate of affirmative response. The women in their forties and fifties were the most likely to experience sexual harassment. Date of ordination is also significant. 76% of all those who stated that they had experienced sexual harassment were ordained in the 1980s. Only 9% of affirmative respondents were ordained in the 1970s and 17% in the 1990s.

What can be said about the sexual harassment of women clergy in light of these statistics and the discursive elaborations collected for this study? Correlative factors such as education, age and ordination dates in conjunction with narrative text indicate that the issue is not as much whether women have experienced sexual harassment but rather one of consciousness. Different contexts, experiences and generations form individual and generational consciousness. The particular consciousness of the individual seems to be the most significant factor in determining whether or not a woman says she has experienced sexual harassment. Events themselves become secondary in the naming process.

Undergirding the diverse attitudes on the experience of sexual harassment is a notable uniformity, however. This uniformity lies in the overall assessment by women of the meaning and place of sexual harassment in their ministry experiences. Whether or not a woman says she has experienced sexual harassment, most indicate that harassment is not the issue. Most agree that it is not ultimately an obstacle to ministry. Those

who say it does exist and they do live with it, generally tend to agree that it has not prevented them from doing the work to which they have committed themselves. Clearly, there is agreement that people should not be treated in an unfair or obstructionist manner because of their gender. However, most have developed coping mechanisms to either avoid, or confront and often transcend the obstacle such experiences become. Even though such encounters were named as painful and distressing, they were consistently relegated to the realm of the marginal concern. The commitment to ministry and energy for doing it was not overwhelmed by the pain engendered by harassment. Few who have left professional ministry cited sexual harassment as a factor, while in several cases perceived institutional gender barriers was cited as a factor in career leaving.

Ministry Experience

94% of the women who participated in the study came to ministry as a second vocation, while only 6% came to the work as their first career. I will look at the second vocation women as a group with regard to vocational discernment and then the first vocation women as a group. However, before I look at the vocation of the two groups separately some interesting parallelism should be noted. Time and again adolescence was noted as a critical point in the vocational awareness process. The difference between most of those who were second vocation and those who were first vocation is the lack of opportunity to even consider priesthood at that stage of their lives for those who were born before 1960. Decades before the question of women in the priesthood was raised by the church, there were women who felt passionately called to church work and had the experience of identifying with the priest – “I could do that work; I would love to do that work” For second vocation women that sentiment was quickly dismissed and in many cases not reconsidered for decades.

The second vocation women for the most part pursued other careers before preparing for priesthood. 11% had been primarily homemakers, while the remaining 89% had worked in other arenas before ordination. As one might expect, there is a heavy preponderance of work in the traditional helping professions- teaching, nursing, social work. Many others worked in some form of business, either as self-employed entrepreneurs or as sales representatives or administrators. This balance of helping professions (71%) and business related employment (27%) – 3% other – is remarkably consistent with the comparative sample of second vocation male clergy

(67% helping professions; 29% business related; 4% other).

Consistent among the second vocation women is the gradual evolution of their vocational discernment. No participants in the study made a speedy career change. Most listened carefully over a period of many years to gentle and sometimes not so gentle nudging from the Holy Spirit and others in the community toward priesthood. Many prepared for priesthood through part-time theological studies over a number of years and in a variety of ways. Their unfolding sense of vocation was nurtured in the bosom of love of people. The desire to share with people in the unfolding journey of their lives in a sacramental way is a consistent theme. The meeting place between personal faith and the desire to share that faith and support others in theirs was the birthplace of many of these vocations. The parameters of this personal faith are broad and diverse. Statements about personal faith ranged from accounts of ecstatic religious conversion and experience, to medical and spiritual healings to stories of quiet faith developed and nurtured over a lifetime. The language for naming God was also diverse, but a consistent christocentrism recurred in many discussions of vocation. Perception of God's call and love for and the support of the community were the point of confluence for priestly vocation.

The words used to express personal vocation and calling paralleled the sample of male clergy. The only significant difference was a greater emphasis on God's call and less on the needs and love of the people. Both elements were present in the male and female sample but in inverse proportionate relationship.

The group of first vocation women used similar language of call and love of people. However, many of the younger women talked about their experience of being young and idealistic and still forming as persons: "I began my formal theological training when I was 22; at 22 I was still searching for who I was and what I wanted to do. Exploring vocation to priesthood was in a part a safe avenue for exploring who I was."⁶ Many of the older women became disillusioned with work in other helping professions and turned to ministry as a greater opportunity for service.

I sought ordination because I stood alone praying one day at the front of my church and I was asking God what I could do in this world other than what I was doing – I had been a teacher for many years and had become very disappointed in education; I couldn't make the difference I had hoped to. The answer, "You can be a priest" brought

rebuke from me. “God,” I said, “the Anglican Church doesn’t ordain women.” Later that day a friend stopped by seeking subscriptions to the *Living Message* magazine. The page she flipped open first showed women with collars on. I decided to pursue it and continued through open doors over several years.⁷

The first and second vocation women differed in that the younger group went first to the church as a vehicle for serving people and God – with their hope to make a difference to the world in people’s lives. The possibility of such work was open to them as a vocational choice. Perhaps the fact that many of these women no longer work for the church reflects the fact that there is a life cycle to disillusionment. First vocation women experienced their first institutional disillusionment with church rather than moving to the church later in a life as an alternative when other work had become less meaningful.

Regardless of age or marital status male and female clergy all talk about the difficulty in balancing home, work and Sabbath time. This difficulty was most keenly felt in relation to parish ministry. Given the nature of congregational life, the parochial leadership role is not a nine to five job. It can expand to take as much time as one will give it. The actual parameters of the working day can stretch from morning to night – night work is necessary and not an option. Weekends for the most part are non-existent. All of these unique dimensions of the parochial clerical life can make family life and personal time difficult to navigate. Most women and men talked about the importance of setting clear limits on time available to the parish. Setting aside one day a week (but usually not more) seemed the most common vehicle for attempting to ensure some family or personal time. The single women in the study stressed that protecting some personal time was as critical for them as for the married women. Because of their single status it was generally assumed by many that their woman priest was available for parish week 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Parishes were not noted for their awareness of the need to respect limits. Indeed, young women with children (many who had left paid parish work) stressed the failure of parishes and diocesan structures to accommodate the rhythms and needs of family life. In the clergy couple (19% of the total sample) these issues of time, family and parish and diocesan expectations appear to be most acute:

I feel a strong vocation to ordained ministry and I believe I am a good priest – modelling in my life the love of God for us and the call to be faithful to God. However, the realities of church hierarchy and structure and the realities of being married to a priest are such that I find myself unable to work in the structure. We have three small children to care for and provide a home for. Being raised in a rectory I know the importance of a loving, stable home. Our proposal to share work at home and in the church was met with resistance. Partnership is important to us as a couple and the church's lack of commitment to it (the concept of partnership) and to us as a family is distressing.⁸

The unconscious assumption that the vocation of priest means sacrifice on a variety of levels (including financial, time and family life) appear to be present still in many aspects of the parish experience. Such unnamed expectations not universally but commonly held still, seriously limit the possibility of healthy balance between work, home and family and personal time for any priest – male or female. The issue becomes particularly critical for clergy families attempting to live a dual vocation and raise a family. The stress in this regard was relieved somewhat as children grew older. Clergy with grown children are the least vocal in their concerns about the dynamics of parish demands and family life.

One other area of concern which was raised in relation to family life was the challenges associated with living in rectories. Issues of privacy and access compounded the complexity of attempting to balance work and family. One woman priest who is part of a clergy couple wrote:

When you live close to the church it is harder to have a sense of separation between work and home. There was no parish hall and so the office was in the rectory. Parishioners understood the rectory to be church property, "the church house" and thereby public. During our first weeks there both my husband and I had the experience of walking out of the bathroom after showering on the main floor directly into waiting parishioners! After that we started locking the screen door (most parishioners had keys to the rectory) and carrying our clothes to the bathroom with us!! The rectory was not hooked up to city water. It had a cistern which held water for bathing but which was contaminated and could not be drunk. The day we moved in a parishioner dropped by with two plastic water jugs which the parish had provided for the last priest and were now passed on to us. We

were told the parish couldn't afford to have drinking water brought in so we could take our jugs to parishioners' houses and fill them up when we needed to. They held about three litres each! Well, we were fairly poor ourselves and so (I can't believe it now) while we were there we did just that. It was our first parish and I guess we didn't want to rock the boat.⁹

Boundary issues are particularly acute when the lines between work and home are muddied by rectory living and the clergy couple experience.

In the arena of ministry experience much diversity was evident in the stories shared. However, in two areas a striking level of unanimity was present – greatest joys and most difficult aspects of the work. Regardless of age common themes ran through both of these areas.

While many women elaborated particular aspects of the job that they particularly enjoyed (preaching, teaching, presiding, pastoral care) these specifics were presented in a relatively uniform container. Overwhelmingly women talked about the joy they found in sharing in people's lives with them – the joys and sorrows, the full drama of human experience. Relationship was the theme consistently honoured as a source of primary job satisfaction.

The greatest joy of parish ministry for me is being in relationship with parishioners. It, for me is an amazing honour to be trusted enough to carry the difficult stories parishioners often tell me. It is amazing to be allowed to share in some of the most intimate moments of life – birth, marriage, death. Sharing the walk and the work is what I love.¹⁰

This emphasis on sharing the daily journey was something of a contrast to how the male sample responded. Most male respondents emphasized the aspects of the job they liked – sacramental, preaching, teaching and few used the language of relationship. This difference may be a difference in expression rather than meaning. However, the emphasis on relationship was striking among the women and raised interesting issues in relation to the nature of the pastoral relationship particularly with reference to counselling and spiritual direction. Since the 1950s it has been normative to think of the preparation and training of clergy as an exercise in the formation of professionals – similar to the preparation of a doctor, lawyer teacher. Much emphasis has been placed on the importance of professionalism in the pastor/parishioner relationship. While the impor-

tance of professionalism particularly in the arena of sexual ethics cannot be understated, professionalism alone does not express the meaning of the pastor/parishioner relationship as experienced by many of the women clergy in the study. Many talked about their love for their people. Others talked about the importance of friendships in the pastoral relationship. In violation of traditional taboos (parishioners cannot be friends), some women clergy stated that old models of spiritual direction and pastoral care did not adequately reflect their experience. Many said that they affirmed a model of spiritual friendship rather than direction and that friendship and emotional intimacy was a necessary pre-requisite to caring for the spiritual needs of their parishioners. Rather than seeing themselves as the ones with all the answers, many women clergy understood themselves to be partners on a journey and occasional guides. However, they themselves needed the support and guidance of those whom for whom they were hired to be pastor on occasion. Peer pastoral relationships was how one women put this. Does this self-understanding reflect a gradually emerging shift in the paradigm of ministry as we have heretofore understood it?

Major negatives in the ministry experience were even more universal than the joys. Both men and women, people of every age group, time or ordination, education level and family background emphasized a fairly homogenous major negative – conflict, pettiness and in-fighting (turf wars) combined with unwillingness to adapt (inflexibility) in parish communities. Within this section of the questionnaire people were given no guidance as to categories of major negative (or positive). They were given simply blank space to fill as they chose. As such, it is particularly striking that the language used to describe common issues was so similar. Regardless of the category of current ministry exercised, women and men struggled with the same painful dimension of community life.

What makes it hardest to go to work some days is the little “insignificant” details and complaints. My former rector used to say that all parishes used up energy in inverse proportion to the importance of the issue. I remember one board of management meeting where a motion regarding pro-life work was passed in 30 seconds with no discussion. At the same meeting, we spent an hour and a half talking about whether or not we should pave the parking lot. Many times my parishioners demonstrate an inability or an unwillingness to listen to each other and work through conflict. Avoidance and denial are too

common.¹¹

Those who left church work entirely for secular employment were among the most vocal with regard to the difficulties of dealing with conflict and resistance to change. Most cited this as a major factor in their career changes. Eventually, most felt that the time and energy they expended on the “pettiness” of parish life was too great a price with too little opportunity for practising the work they felt that they had been ordained for.

The amount of time and energy which is taken up in basic management tasks is huge. I don’t mean just basic administration which is bad enough. I mean the management of petty conflict. People in parishes are territorial. Turf wars spark a lot of conflict which then requires a huge amount of mediation and conciliation among parties who often won’t be reconciled – regardless of what the gospel says on the matter. Many times it seems that people would rather fight over the smallest issues than work together on anything. This is destructive – to them and for me – it destroys some of my hope and saps my vision. The pettiness and meanness surprised me.¹²

Other negatives which received considerable attention included the relatively low level of theological education/awareness in parishes combined with a lack of desire to improve that situation; the time spent as a building manager rather than as a pastor and spiritual leader; the overwhelming amount of work with too little support; the consumer/management mentalities which dominates many parishes, “we are not a business, we are a faith community.”¹³

One of the areas which turned out to be unintentionally self-limiting in this study was in the area of gender relationships (other than in the area of harassment). While I asked people to comment on their relationships with women clergy and parishioners, I failed to ask the same in relation to men. Some participants in the study interpreted this as “looking for the negative.” It really was not a conscious omission and the findings in relation to women need to be read in light of the fact that I did not ask corresponding questions in relation to men of female or male clergy. Having said all that, however, I did have a particular interest in exploring same gender relationships as particularly critical to the experience of female clergy. The reason for this is the contention that same gender

interactions are of critical importance in the church community. We know from living in the church that many congregations tend to be more than a majority female. Some estimate the gender proportion in mainline North American protestantism as 60 to 75% female.¹⁴ The leadership in church communities, both lay and ordained, remains disproportionately male. The new symbolic archetype generated in the person of the woman priest will have a significant impact on men and women alike, but it is my contention that given the large number of women in parish communities it is primarily the response of women to this shift which will determine, in large measure, the experience of the women clergy. Hence, although much scholarship in the arena of women's history examines the relationship between men and women in a patriarchal system, the relationship between women and women is actually the issue. It is in this arena that historical meaning for women's lives is most fully shaped.

What information then was collected for the database in this critical area? I asked for categorized responses concerning relationships with female parishioners and other female clergy (positive, negative, mixed). I also allowed room for discursive commentary on the nature of these relationships. Very few elected to define these relationships primarily in terms of the negative. Only 2% stated that they had primarily negative relationship with women parishioners and 8% chose negative as their primary descriptive label in relation to other women clergy. 45% felt that they had had mixed relationships with women parishioners and 48% mixed in relation to women clergy. 53% defined their relationships with female parishioners as primarily positive (the single largest response) and 44% defined their relationships with female clergy as positive. These numbers alone do not tell about the woman to woman relationship in church life. The only thing which is particularly significant is the low level of primarily negative responses in both categories and the fact that relationships with other women clergy are viewed as more negative than relationships with female parishioners.

The numbers become more interesting when cross-referenced the attitude towards women with other things such as form of ministry employment and age. In relation to age the oldest women tend to put the most positive spin on relationships with both female clergy and female parishioners. 57% reported a positive experience in relation to both groups which is above the overall average. In relation to female parishioners no one chose negative as the defining label. However, 14% of women over 70

reported primarily negative relationships with other female clergy. The categorizations are more black and white than their younger peers who tend to choose mixed as the best way of describing these relationships. The youngest women (under the age of 40) tended to be the most comfortable with the designation of mixed in relation to both (10% negative to both and 80% mixed in relation to female clergy and 70% mixed in relation to female parishioners). Interestingly, this group is largely out of stipendiary parish ministry – although not entirely.

Ministry employment seems to make a difference in the perception of same gender relationships also. This is particularly true in relation to the category which deals with other women clergy. 8% of women in full-time paid parish ministry designated these relationships as primarily negative; women in part-time paid work chose negative 5% of the time (the smallest grouping); 8% of women who left ministry for secular employment, 8% of part-time non-stipendiary, 11% of active retired and 33% of full-time non-stipendiary women chose negative as their primary definition. Interestingly, no women in chaplaincy, theological education or women who had left to raise children chose negative to define their relationships with other women clergy. In the positive category the responses were as follows: women in chaplaincy 78%; women in theological education 75%; full-time non-stipendiary 67%; active retired 61%; part-time non-stipendiary 42%; full-time paid parish 39%; secular 38%; part-time paid parish 37%; women who left to raise children 22%. This last category of primarily younger women again seems most comfortable with the mixed designation choosing it 78% of the time. Next most likely to choose mixed were part-time paid parish (58%) and full-time paid parish (53%).

This realm of statistics could be further elaborated with more extensive cross-referencing, but for the purposes of this study I would like to simply make a couple of observations on overall patterns. First, overall relationships between women seem to be fairly nurturing ones. Most do not want to label them negative and the ones who choose mixed as a designation are overall quite satisfied with the quality of relationships. Generally there seems to be more dissatisfaction with relationships between women clergy than between women clergy and their female parishioners. Where women are working outside of the traditional parish structures relationships between women overall tend to be more positive (note women working in chaplaincy and theological education). Where the form and structure of relationships are less rigidly entrenched in clerical-

ism and traditional praxis (ie. outside parish and in parishes where new models of ministry are evolving) supportive relationships between women seem to have the greatest hope of thriving. However, having made these generalizations I must stress from my assessment of anecdotal and narrative material that every possible range of opinion has surfaced in this study. These stories range from tales of extreme rejection in both categories to passionate affirmations of life-giving support and nurture among women. Further, what given women meant by positive, negative and mixed varies with the person choosing the category.¹⁵

What Difference Has It Made?

At the outset I considered the story of a woman preparing to preside at the eucharist which honoured twenty years of women as clergy – her own anniversary. When asked what difference has it made, she was clear that she could only answer that question for herself. Her response was both honest and realistic. Repeatedly women interviewed for this study answered this question in very personal terms. Both positively and negatively they talked about what it had meant in their own lives through the use of story and, of necessity, subjective analysis.

The reflections shared were diverse. However, as with other aspects of this work, several generalizations with reference to meaning revealed themselves. Most women did not regret the vocational path they had chosen. Although it had not always been what they had hoped it would be, most did not wish themselves back. Most, however, had aspirations for what their past would mean to their future. While some had rejected parish ministry because of overwhelming hurts, betrayals and violation, most in some fashion have stayed with the church. What is striking is how many have stayed in their own way. They have attempted to carve out a niche for themselves in a church which they have often experienced as inflexible. Some have adopted traditional models of full-time rectorship; most have not. Many of these women say that if they had an agenda to change the church when they started, that is not their agenda now. Now most hope not to be changed by it in ways which compromise their own dreams and visions. Some talk about their hope for transformation and their longing to be agents in it.

As individuals in relation to an old and established institution, most women stressed that they felt that they had changed the church very little.

Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that the ecclesiastical structures which first welcomed women into the priesthood are significantly different than they were. Some felt that they had been changed by it in ways they wished they had not. These sentiments reflect the necessary polarities inherent in life in human institutions. We live in a dialectical relationship with each other and the church, and whether it is visible to the naked eye we are changing each other. One woman talked about slow process of evolution with the following words: "I see my work with the church like water on a rock. You know – water that drips and drips and rolls a away. It appears to make no difference at all but it continues to drip and roll away and drip, and over time – a very very long time – that water reshapes the face of the earth."¹⁶

Parishes and the Ministry of Ordained Women

It is through a consideration of parish responses to the ministry of women clergy that one can begin to answer the question what difference has it made both to the people with whom the women have worked and to ecclesiastical structures at large. Thirty parishes scattered across the country generously participated in this project. Although the selection was randomly based on size and geography the fact that all had women clergy working among them may have tilted the outcomes in a positive direction. The overwhelming majority response was positive. Through the stories of the women, particularly those who left, it is evident that there are parishes who still have difficulty with women clergy. These are not glaringly apparent in this group of thirty.

The form of parish participation was small group response to a questionnaire designed for them. It asked for information on the parish itself and then for correlations between the parish history and experience with women in holy orders. Collective patterns of response were greater than in the case of the women as a group.

Most notable among these patterns was what I will call the attitudinal lifecycle. Most parishes stressed that before they had experience with a women priest first-hand, their congregations had some trepidation about what this would mean. "We weren't sure – we had never had a woman before and we were a little afraid. What would it be like? Would people stay away?"¹⁷ This type of generalized anxiety was common. However, there was a lifecycle to the anxiety. 28 out of the 30 parishes

talked about the transformation in that anxiety over time. As people lived with a woman priest who was an individual and not a concept, anxiety gradually changed into genuine appreciation for what individual women brought to parish life.

After a while we stopped thinking about our priest as a woman first and she became for us simply our priest. She married us and buried us, she baptized our babies and held our hands when we were sick; she even started a youth group and she has a pretty good sense of humour. I guess you could say we came to love her and we knew that she loved us.¹⁸

The transition from resistance or caution to acceptance appears to have taken anywhere from 2-5 years among the parishes studied, but most made the transition. That is not to say that all transitions were easy. Parishes shared many stories of perceived offense on both sides during the years of attitudinal transition.

Having said this, further nuances in the patterns of acceptance should be elaborated. Generalized patterns within the lifecycle of transition are discernable. For example, parishes which classify themselves as theologically broad stream tended as a group to be more open to the idea of a woman priest initially and tended to make the transition to acceptance more quickly than parishes who classified themselves as primarily anglo-catholic or evangelical. This same pattern was present in the decision-making processes by which dioceses in the Anglican Church of Canada moved to accept the ordination of women to the priesthood.¹⁹ Rural parishes also tend to demonstrate a measurably more positive attitude to women clergy than do urban parishes. Although small rural parishes may be less progressive in theological and liturgical matters (though not necessarily), they value clergy who will come and be with them. In other words, small rural parishes often have difficulty procuring and retaining clergy. When a priest is willing to come and stay, gender becomes a non-issue for many.

I found the most interesting responses from parishes were those which related to the question of meaning and difference. What difference has it made to the church that women that there have been women in the priesthood for the last twenty years? The following two stories are examples of a primary point which was made over and over again in parish

groups and individuals within those groups. A son talks about the death of his mother:

A few years ago my mother was dying of cancer. She hadn't had an active affiliation with a church for many years, but the associate priest, a part-time woman in the Anglican church nearest to where she lived took it upon herself to start visiting my mother who was often alone. Well my mother died on Good Friday. The day before she died, of course it was Maundy Thursday. I returned from the grocery store and Mary, the local pastor was there for a visit. My mother couldn't talk any longer so they were sitting in silence, in fact my mother was asleep. But what I saw there amazed me. My mother had been a smoker to the end and the afghan she was usually covered with was full of small holes from her falling ash. Her priest had brought yarn with her that matched the colour of the afghan and was darning the holes. For the first time, I really understood something about what Maundy Thursday was.²⁰

Within another parish group, the following story was shared:

Do you all remember last Good Friday? I don't really remember what was being preached in the sermon but I remember what happened during the sermon. Our priest assistant has three children. One of them young- she was about 3 last year I guess. Downstairs they were having a Good Friday program for the children. This little one was walking by the doors of the church proper as the group of children headed outside for a walk. She saw her mother and ran to her as she stood in the aisle preaching. The mother reached down and picked her up, comforting her, reassuring her without words while she carried on with her sermon. After a moments or so the little girl jumped down and quietly rejoined the other children. I wish my mother could have seen that. She was raised in the church- her parents were both officers in the salvation army, but never once did she experience something like that. The work of the church was always first and she and her brothers always felt pushed to the side. Love was for God and the downtrodden- not for them. None of them ever went into a church again once they were old enough to leave home. I wish my mother had lived to see something like that Good Friday service. I think she would have found healing in that. The love of God and love of a child both had a place in worship. They were not different- they belonged

together in that moment. I wish my mother had lived to see it. God doesn't seem so far away to me now, and the priest too seems much closer.²¹

Within these stories, the answer to our primary question is to be found. It is not that women as a group do things uniformly differently from men. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Women are diverse, as are men. But when we exclude any particular group from participation in any aspect of the church community, we limit the possibilities of encountering the Christ. If it is a true theological statement that our incarnate God reveals Godself in those around us, if we limit the gender (or race or age and so on) of the group which may offer leadership, we exclude all those possibilities of seeing the face of God more nearly.

Consider the two illustrative stories above. Not all women sew and not all women would have thought to darn the dying woman's blanket – but one woman did. The social construct of gender in western culture is such that aspects of who we are as men and women are consciously and unconsciously formed in certain ways. Even if we form ourselves by rejecting gender stereotypes, we have defined ourselves in relation to the social construct. The same might be said of the woman preacher with the three year-old child. Not all women would have reacted as she did, and some men certainly would have. When we open up leadership roles to all possibilities of incarnation we optimize our capacity for understanding who God is in relation to us. Herein lies the difference. The inclusion of women clergy in the life of the church has opened up the possibility of new wisdom and new meaning both within and outside of the church.

The potential for new wisdom and meaning is nurtured through the re-formulation of symbol systems, language and experience. Symbol systems change over long periods of time. They evolve as human experience unconsciously dictates new meaning. The congregations who have lived with women clergy and have embraced the experience of their ministry are participating in the gradual evolution of a whole religious symbol system. As their understanding of who the priest is in relation to God and the people changes, so will the theology and teaching of the church. It is my contention that this process of the transformation of symbols happens in the dialectical tension between change in the hierarchy/ecclesiastical structure (the decisions to actually ordain women) and the grassroots internalization of the implications of that structural shift.

This internalization at the grassroots or parochial level of church life in its turn ultimately re-shapes the teaching and direction of the structure.

The women themselves have said that they often feel that their work as women clergy has made no difference – not many are bishops; not many are Archdeacons; not many are professors in theological colleges; few hold significant places of traditional power-holding within ecclesiastical structures – except the power of their office. But perhaps when lived wisely that power of simple presence and persistence is all that is required. Women do not have to consciously attempt to change symbols, archetypes, theology and structures. They need only be who they are in a structure which says its welcomes them. The rest will unfold in the living of ordinary days in ordinary time. Like water on a rock, the face of the earth is being re-formed.

Endnotes

1. G. Lehman, *Women Professionals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1991).
2. Lehman, *Women Professionals*, 139.
3. Study subject #257.
4. Study subject #81.
5. Study subject #29.
6. Subject #261.
7. Study subject #220.
8. Study subject #51.
9. Study subject #12.
10. Study subject #53.
11. Study subject #73.
12. Study subject #111.
13. Study subject #263.
14. Rosemary Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds., *Women and Religion in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 339-348.

15. For a more extensive reflection on this critical area read Wendy Fletcher-Marsh, *Like Water on a Rock: The Ministry of Women and Transformation in Canadian Anglicanism* (Toronto: Artemis, 1998).
16. Study subject #37.
17. Parish subject #8.
18. Parish subject #19.
19. Wendy Fletcher-Marsh, *Beyond the Walled Garden: Anglican Women and the Priesthood* (Toronto: Artemis, 1995).
20. Parish study subject #4.
21. Parish study group #14.

