

Growing in the Shade

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Some people talk about "the corridors of power". I like the image of a forest, where trees compete with each other to reach the life-giving, strength-supplying sunshine. This light is the source of power, and being able to access it denotes a powerful position. When the forest canopy becomes dense and closes up, it is impossible for some of the lower trees to develop fully, because, although there is protection for them, the light is excluded and the competition for nutrients too fierce. Only those who are able to reach the light can be strong, solid, and attain their true potential.

I once thought of writing a book under the title: *Growing in the Shade – a Study of Women in South Africa*. This chapter, however, is the story of just one woman who, when a gap opened up in the forest canopy of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, grew through it into the sunshine.

The closed canopy

The priesthood in Christianity, almost since the beginning of the Church, has been reserved for men. For reasons too many and too complex to be dealt with here, women were safely relegated to support roles where they would pose no threat to the men and thus allow the power structures to stand. In many, probably most, cases the work of the church was carried largely by the women, but – to use the image of the forest again – they were kept in the shade and allowed to compete only for the small amount of nutrients and light left over from the tall men.

Jesus himself demonstrated a completely different view of women, and the gospel writers confirm this in their editing of his stories. Quite clearly, the curse of Genesis 3:16 ("I will give you desire for your husband but he will be your master") falls away in the new order, the Kingdom of God brought in by Jesus – the second Adam, as St Paul refers to. Jesus pays to women the same respect as that due to men, sharing theological insights with them, as we see in conversations with Martha of Bethany (John 11: 20-27), and with the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4: 7-28), to name but two; appointing Mary Magdalene

to be first witness to the resurrection (John 20: 11-18); and interrupting an errand concerning a man in order to heal, speak to, and reassure, the woman with the haemorrhage (Luke 8: 43-48). He is radical in his feminism in its truest sense.

A first shaft of light

This should have been the first shaft of light for women, but it was quickly stopped as the Church Fathers closed ranks and returned women to their subservient positions – heads covered and silent in the presence of men.

And so the centuries rolled by, with intermittent bursts of light as individual men understood the purposes of God and took the risk of examining them and bowing to them. In the 18th century Anglican Church, John Wesley came close to opening up a gap in the canopy when he licensed women as Local Preachers in his Methodist communities, followed by the offshoot Salvation Army which allowed women as officers (ordained ministers). In South Africa, I was the first woman to register for a BA (Divinity) degree in 1961 and was something of a curiosity to people, including the staff of the Faculty at the time. At that point I was a Methodist, and although a representative of the Church asked me if I would be seeking ordination at the end of the degree, I had to answer no. It was the Congregationalists, finally, who led the way in the 1960s, followed by the Presbyterian Church in the early seventies. The Dutch Reformed Church managed a couple of ordained women, although the question of a Call for them to a congregation was more difficult.

In order to understand the process in the Anglican Church, it is necessary to know something about its organisation. The Anglican Church worldwide is divided into Provinces, each with an Archbishop or someone similar at its head. Such a Province consists of many dioceses, each headed by a bishop. Each bishop is the head of his diocese, and is largely autonomous – within the limits of the Provincial Canons (church laws) which govern the life of the church in that Province and maintain its unity. Every three or four years the bishops and representatives from their dioceses meet in the Provincial Synod where there is an opportunity to make any adjustments that seem to have become necessary. We in South Africa are part of the Church of the Province of Southern Africa, and are headed by the Archbishop of Cape Town. The various Provinces meet every ten years at Lambeth in England, where the meetings are presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Unlike the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury has no authority over any other bishop. For women to be ordained as priests in South Africa, the Provincial Synod of the Southern African Province would have to sanction changes to the wording of the Canons so as to allow for this.

After the devastating disappointment at the 1989 Southern African Provincial Synod when the motion to approve the priesting of women was a mere

handful of votes short of the required two-thirds majority, the motion was finally carried with acclaim at the Provincial Synod of 1992. Days later the first three women were ordained priest in Grahamstown, immediately followed by Wilma Jakobsen and Margaret Vertue in Cape Town.

A triumph, perhaps? A limited one, certainly, since it was also required that, because of the sensitivity of certain dissenting people, the fact that a woman would be presiding at the Sacrament had to be advertised in advance, and alternative places of worship indicated. Women could still not be on an equal footing with their brother priests, even though their ordination was exactly the same. And it was still not certain whether a woman would ever be allowed to be consecrated bishop.

My own sunburst

For all the years that I was a Methodist Local Preacher (a lay person trained to lead services and preach, but not to administer the Sacraments), I had experienced no vocation to ordination – of this I was sure within myself, although the – subject had come up several times. Not long after I joined the Anglican Church in 1987, however, I had a quite different experience. I began to know in the depths of my being that I was called to ordination as an Anglican Priest.

Now this was very strange because, for one thing, I was at that time still only slightly Anglican, as it were, having been reconfirmed only in October of that year. And, more importantly, the Anglican Church had no women clergy. In fact, the very ‘high’ church that I attended in Johannesburg allowed no women in the sanctuary at all – not even as Lay Ministers (these read lessons, lead prayers and assist by bearing the chalice in Communion. Some are also licensed to take communion to the sick).

How did I know I was called? I didn’t have any bright lights, or mystical experiences. Nor was there a special message in any one sermon, confirmed by verses that I read in the following days. Nobody suggested it to me, since it would have been a bizarre thought in the parish to which I belonged. I just became increasingly aware that this was what I truly am. It was as though I began to know myself more deeply; and more and more I knew that my essential identity was that of Priest. Various of my experiences over the years began to fall into place. I said nothing, however, until I was on my first silent retreat the following year. There

I enquired of the Retreat Master regarding the procedure required from someone wanting to offer for ordination. He merely told me that the first stage was to speak to one’s rector – who would in turn write to the bishop – and from there proceed through various further stages.

I moved to Cape Town in 1988 and joined the St George’s Cathedral. To start with, I was what Dean Colin Jones called “a caterpillar member” I crept in

to services, sat behind a pillar and crept out again. I needed to be anonymous and to have some space to explore what was happening in me. But by late 1989, I had been licensed as a Lay Minister. I also met and got to know Wilma Jakobsen, another woman called to ordination.

Wilma had been accepted by the Archbishop and had completed her training, but what stood in the way of her priesting was there need for the Provincial Synod to sanction the ordination of women to the priesthood. This was several years in coming, as I have already indicated, and Wilma spent them as Deacon (with the title Reverend, but unable to administer the Sacraments, pronounce the absolution of sins or a blessing), having to watch the men who had trained with her – as well as those who had started long after her – all move on as priests. We women then met and prayed a novena (nine days of prayer) before the Synod of 1992, and were almost overcome with joy when we heard the glad news that women could now be priested.

In my own case, in 1990 I had met with the Dean of Cape Town who was my rector, and he had written to the Archbishop recommending me to start the process that might lead to ordination, recognising that I had already received training in this field. This training had begun in 1961 when I first started studying Divinity at Rhodes. At that time there was no provision for women students in the Faculty at all. Women had, of course, studied individual courses before, but none had ever registered for the BA(Div) degree. Prof W. D. Maxwell (we called him the “Holy Goat” because of his goatee beard) had difficulty being convinced that I had not made a mistake in trying to register for the degree.

The conversation on Women’s Registration Day went something like this:

Margaret: *Good morning, Professor. -I would like to register for a BA(Div).*

Holy Goat (without looking up): *No, you don’t. You want a BA.*

M: *No, Professor. I want to do a BA in Divinity.*

HG (looking up): *My dear, just because you want to do Biblical Studies doesn’t make it a BA in Divinity.*

M: *I know that, Professor. I actually do want to register for a BA(Div).*

HG (pseudo-patiently): *Show me your courses.*

I present him with my list of projected courses over the three years.

HG (surprised): *But that’s a BA in Divinity! Just wait here while I call someone!*

There were many practical problems regarding being the first woman in the

Faculty, some of them amusing, such as the fact that the chapel was located inside Livingstone House, a men's residence. We were required to be in chapel every evening for prayers. In 1961, women were fined R7 each time they were found inside a men's residence – this amount being not much less than my term's pocket money! The University authorities had evidently just never considered the possibility of a woman's registering for a theology degree. Fortunately for me (and my pocket money) this law was never applied to me and I managed to trot in and out of Livingstone House throughout the time I was there.

My main difficulty was in being taken seriously as a theology student. This is illustrated by my receiving several proposals of marriage at the end of my first year, one of the suitors summing up the common attitude to me when he said, "You will make a good minister's wife with this training". It seemed then that there were men who simply could not conceive of women as theologians, as people of thought.

It is nothing new, of course. There have been, through the ages, discussions on whether or not women were capable of any independent thought at all.

The depth of this suspicion of women is borne out by the fact that as late as the early 17th century, the Lutherans at Wittenberg spent several days debating whether or not women were really human!

A long haul

In the Anglican Church, the first step towards ordination was to join the Fellowship of Vocation. This is a group that meets every month. It is made up of people who think they have a vocation to ordination, and their Wardens – members of the clergy. It is customary for people to spend about two years in the Fellowship, and during that time, they receive much information on the ministry and on life as a priest. There is also a certain amount of spiritual formation and teaching. The Warden gets to know the members and forms an impression of them, as well as meeting with them in some depth from time to time. He will indicate to the bishop when he considers that they are ready for assessment. Each year there is a Vocational Guidance Weekend during which the candidates are assessed, and a decision is made as to whether those who have been close to them recognise a vocation to ordination or not.

In addition to the Warden's report, there will be the letter from the rector and any other subsequent correspondence relating to the candidate, a psychological assessment professionally conducted, and the results of other interviews from various sectors of the church – the Women's organisations, the Justice and Peace Commission, representatives of the Diocesan Finance Board, and so on. If the whole group comes to consensus on the vocation of the candidate, he or she is allowed to train for the priesthood, though there is not any guarantee that ordination will follow. Priests need a degree in theology, or at least an

approved diploma, and most are expected to pay for all or most of their studies themselves. At least one year needs to be spent in the Seminary during this time.

When the training is over, if all is well and all the reports are good, the person is assigned to a parish and is ordained Deacon. A year or more later – again, if all is well – he or she will be ordained Priest. There follows four years or more of Curacy, usually two years in each of two parishes, in a sort of apprenticeship to the rector there.

A growth spurt

The experience of the congregations where the women have ministered has been positive, and gradually, one by one, even those dioceses where the Diocesan Synods had rejected the principle of ordaining women to the priesthood, passed the motion at subsequent synods. It became a normal thing to have a woman leading the worship and presiding at the Eucharist. Often someone would say, as I shook hands at the door after the service, "I've never been at a service where a woman has preached, and I must say, it was quite nice!" It was as if they were amazed that the sky had not fallen in!

Some incidents from the time when I was waiting to be accepted stand out in my memory. There was the occasion when the then Dean of Cape Town told me, "The Church is not ready for strong women!" On reflection, I suspect that he was both right and wrong. The Church leadership was not, and still is not ready for strong women.

Women have managed, through the feminist movement of the last century, to earn the right to enter many professions and trades previously closed to us, and this has been very threatening to a number of men for whom the main grounds for a feeling of worth or superiority lay in the mysteries of the initiated in these "men's jobs". There they were safe from the power of women and could keep each other's egos satisfactorily inflated. The intrusion of women into these sacred mysteries was alarming indeed, and the few areas where women were still excluded were jealously guarded, especially by those who were unsure of themselves.

In the Church the members are, however, a different story. They were ready then, and are ready now, for women in the priesthood. The worshipping Anglicans recognise true ministry wherever it happens and are only too happy to have a priest who is there for them in their need, who takes trouble in the preparation of services and teaching and who will love them, whether that particular priest is a woman or a man. The gender of the priest is less important than the authority people recognise within that person. A strong woman is, according to those I hear, most acceptable.

She is, however, a discomfort in the structures. It is a matter of observed fact that, when women enter a profession in significant numbers, that particu-

lar profession gradually becomes downgraded and men begin to ignore it as a career option. It ceases to have the status it had when it was a man's preserve. We saw it in shop assistants, and we have recently seen it in teaching and banking. There is the lovely (probably apocryphal) story of Margaret Thatcher's nephew being asked what he wanted to be when he grew up. When someone suggested he might like to be Prime Minister of Great Britain, he is reported to have replied scornfully, "No, that's women's work!"

There is a natural resistance on the part of many men as they see their precious position in the Church being eroded by the mere presence of women on an equal footing. There is also the uncomfortable tendency on the part of women to be less hierarchical than men. Perhaps it is the lower competitive urge in women in general. Where many of the male priests are careful about their titles and love to be called Father, the women tend to opt for first name terms and are far less rigid about the protocols of rank within the Church.

Problems of power

This leads us on to thinking about aspects of power and the meanings we attach to the way things are done.

Professor Scilla Elworthy, in her book *Power and Sex* (1997), has drawn a very clear difference between "power exercised over" (control) and "power given to" (empowerment), which she typifies as the male (power over) and female (power to). I suspect that these form the main axes in the church, particularly as expressed in the external veneration of priests and the encouragement to view priests as people apart, somewhat superior – as well as the expectations lay people have of clergy and the roles played by them.

The transformation we need lies far deeper than merely in the way we do things. Our constant cry is that we are up against attitudes that don't change. The Christian Church preaches a fundamental transformation – St Paul says, "If any one is in Christ, that person is a new creation" (II Corinthians 5: 17). That new creation will necessarily be someone who does things differently. We further teach that the focus of adoration – and therefore the source of power in that person's life – ceases to be the self and becomes God. Now, the implication of moving the power from self to God is that the unredeemed power-plays and the need to be recognised and have positions of importance cease to operate, as is illustrated in Jesus's story of the guest at the dinner party, as well as his teaching that first shall be last (Mark 9: 35) and of the servant Lord (Mark 11: 43–45). We see nothing of this yet in the hierarchy of the church. Some people still bow as the priest goes by in the liturgical procession. There is a strict protocol which includes a kind of veneration of the priest. This kind of power is seductive and is dangerous for both people and clergy.

One of the problems faced by our congregants is what to call women priests.

This can be quite fun. It took me a while to get used to being greeted by a cheerful "Hello, Father!" as I walked down St George's Mall from the Cathedral when I was first ordained. It got worse, and soon, as people got to know my name, I was being called Father Margaret. With the difficulty regarding our title, we women have been in the wonderful position of being able to insist on being called by our first names. It is hard to convince the people that it is not rude or disrespectful to do this, because habits of a lifetime and strict upbringings change slowly; however, the women priests have been able to lead the way into a certain relaxation and demythologising of the clergy. I found it happening slowly in the Cape Flats parish where I served, although more small children called me by my first name — (or Auntie Margaret) than adults, who still mainly called me Reverend Margaret.

When we clergy, as a group, are prepared to let go of our titles and privilege (congregants were astounded when I insisted on paying for my cake at the cake sale, and for my ticket to the parish dance), then perhaps we are beginning to foster the kind of fundamental transformation that Jesus intended, a transformation which will not seek to keep the ordained ministry as a select position, but will promote selection on the basis of ability to do a job rather than on affinity to a particular group.

One comes back to the kind of power both evidenced in the life of Jesus, and taught by him. He urged "servant leadership" on his followers, but the church has taken that and turned it on its head, making the role of *minister* (the Latin for servant) that of overlord instead. Over the centuries, this has given the men who occupied the position of priest and minister the kind of power over their parishioners that has so easily led to abuse — even to the extent of witch-hunts and the Inquisition. Where Jesus sought to bring empowerment to people so that they could grow into full humanity, the jackboots of the church bullied and burned until all conformed and paid due reverence to those whom God had called to serve.

Where do I as woman priest come in to this? Exactly where Prof Elworthy (1997) demonstrates the feminine power of facilitation. Perhaps God has now called women into the ministry precisely to lead the way back to that gentler, nurturing love that Jesus showed. It is important to emphasise, however, that this "power to" is not the exclusive field of women, but it does engage the gentler side of people, and perhaps the presence of women who are prepared to be women in the priesthood will be the catalyst for this return.

The danger of a new canopy

Old habits do not die easily, especially where there is a vested interest or much to be lost on the part of men, and a great deal of anger on the part of women. Whilst it is fashionable to be feminist at the moment, especially in the Church, without a matching transformation of underlying attitudes on the part of both

women and men, there is the danger of a battle developing between the genders to form a new canopy and dominate the other.

There is the question of the deep resentment of some of our brother priests. It seems that the office of priest was sometimes sought after partly for its high status in some communities. As is so often the case when status and power are involved, a closed-shop mentality can develop, and anyone trying to break into it finds the ranks closed.

There is a need for us to understand the gospel as true liberation for clergy and lay alike, for women and men. I believe that Jesus intended us to be set free from the need to dominate, from the structures of domination. I believe that he taught that truth is essentially a paradox. He spoke of the first being last, of the meek inheriting the earth, and taught that we are not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. That love is our only weapon in the fight against evil, but that it is also the most powerful weapon possible (Matthew 5). That if we want to be great, we must be the servant of all. And he gave us a pattern for this in his own life. What a paradox!

If the men of the Church are to safeguard their positions, they need to allow the women to be there as well. For, as St Francis said, "It is in giving that we receive, in forgiving that we are forgiven and in dying that we are raised to eternal life".

A transformed harmony

Can this be? I believe so. Am I being idealistic? I hope so. We could do with a vision for South Africa where we are served by a Christian church reflecting the radical norms of inclusion set up by Jesus, instead of the competitive, authoritarianism that controls by exclusion. And I pray that we women priests may be part of this transforming harmony.

Then all the trees in the forest can grow together into the light, each making space for the other and intertwining their branches so that the light reaches to every verdant leaf.

Bibliography

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