

## **The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices**

### I. The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices: The CTCR's Assignment

#### A. The Service of Women

The Scriptures without qualification affirm that all believing Christians, both men and women, are priests of God (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6). Through Baptism God has made them all, equally and without distinctions of importance or value, members of the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Gal. 3:27-28; Rom. 12:5). No one is baptized to be either man or woman. To the members of the "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9) of believers belong all of the rights, privileges and responsibilities which Christ has given to His church on earth (1 Cor. 3:21,22; Matt. 16:13-19; 18:17-20; John 20:22,23; Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25; Treatise 24). By the mercies of God, His priests are exhorted to present themselves "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [their] spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1).

In their various callings, Christian men and women alike have received from their Lord the high privilege and responsibility of serving each other and their neighbor, as He has served them (Mark 10:45; John 13:15). In their relationship to one another as followers of Jesus and members of His family, all questions of rank or authority and the insistence on individual 'rights' must be set aside (Mark 10:35-45; John 13:16-17). Rather, in their common life together, they are to give themselves to each other in humble and loving service (Phil. 2:1-4), seeking ways in which they might encourage each other to good works (Heb. 10:24).

When we speak, therefore, of the service of women in the church we are referring in the first instance to nothing else than the common work that belongs to all Christians which they faithfully and joyfully accomplish until the Lord comes (Phil. 4:4-7).

B. The Service of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices

The Synod has asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to prepare a study of the service of Christian women in assigned areas of responsibility in the church.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, the Synod has requested "that the CTCR, in consultation with the Council of Presidents, prepare a study on the eligibility of women for service in all offices of the congregation, including that of chairman, vice-chairman, and elder and district and synodical boards and commissions where their official function would in effect involve public accountability for the function(ing) of the pastoral office."<sup>2</sup> Simply stated, this assignment has arisen because the Synod has previously taken the position that the Scriptures themselves qualify or limit the eligibility of women for service in the church. The Scriptures do so in those passages which require that only men are permitted to serve in the office of pastor and carry out the functions which God has assigned to it (1 Corinthians 14; 1 Timothy 2). The question before the Commission, therefore, is this: In applying what the Scriptures teach concerning the pastoral office and its functions, what additional limitations, if any, should Christians place upon the service of women in the church, specifically with reference to offices established in and by the church?

In our judgment a Scripturally informed response must seek to hold in tension two equally valid themes. On the one hand, we must take care not to diminish in any way what the Bible teaches us about the full possession by men and women, equally, of the rights and privileges of the priesthood of believers. At the same time, we must remain faithful to Biblical teaching regarding the uniqueness of God's gift of the pastoral office, and the divinely given requirements which circumscribe it.

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix.

<sup>2</sup>1989 Res. 3-13A "To Study and Clarify Services of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices" (1989 *Convention Proceedings*, 118).

## II. Offices Within the Christian Congregation

### A. The Pastoral Office

#### 1. A Divine Institution (*iure divino*).

According to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, our Lord has mandated and instituted the office of the public ministry—the only divinely established office in the church (Matt. 28:18-20; John 20:22-23; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:1; Tit. 1:5; AC V; AC XIV; Ap XIII; Treatise 67-72). This office is distinct from the universal priesthood of believers and has its origin in the divine institution (*iure divino*) of the office. The Scriptures speak of the office uniquely as one to which God appoints men with the responsibility of oversight and care for His flock (Acts 20:28). To this office belongs the "shepherding" (serving as "pastor") of that portion of God's flock assigned to him (1 Pet. 5:2-3). This charge to serve as pastor of God's flock is conferred by God through the call of the church, which places a man under a special obligation for which he is accountable to God and to those who have called him (1 Cor. 4:1-15; Heb. 13:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-7, 14-15; Tit. 1:5-9).

#### 2. Divinely Given Functions (*iure divino*).

The pastoral office requires the performance of specific functions that carry out the mission of God in His church as it carries out its work in the world. Some of these functions are "distinctive," for they entail the public exercise of the ministry of Word and sacrament that has been assigned by God to this office for the nurture, care and equipping of His people. In summary form, the Augsburg Confession asserts "that according to the Gospel the power of the keys or the power of bishops [pastors] is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments" (AC XXVIII, 5; cf. 8-9,21 etc.). We recognize that neither the Scriptures nor the Lutheran Confessions provide a detailed list of the activities required of pastors as they carry out these responsibilities in the Christian congregation which they are called to serve.

However, intrinsic to this office of overseeing and shepherding of the flock are the following functions: 1) preaching in the services of the congregation; 2) leading the formal public services of worship; 3) the public administration of the sacraments; and 4) the public administration of the office of the keys.<sup>3</sup>

3. Eligibility for Service.

In addition to the moral and vocational qualifications required of those divinely placed into this high office in the church (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 3:5-9), the Scriptures teach that the incumbent of the pastoral office must be a man. On the basis of Old Testament Scripture, St. Paul taught that "the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says" (1 Cor. 14:34). Understood within its context, this passage means that women ought not lead the public worship service, specifically carry out the teaching-preaching aspects of the service.<sup>4</sup> In 1 Tim. 2:12 St. Paul instructs the church, "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over man; she is to keep silent." Again on the basis of Scriptural arguments, the apostle holds in this text that women are not to take the position of one to whom is assigned responsibility for the formal, public proclamation of the Christian faith.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, Scripture teaches that women not hold the formal position of the authoritative public teaching office in the church, that is, the office of pastor.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Report of the CTCR on *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice*, 1985, 42.

<sup>4</sup>See 1985 report on *Women in the Church*, 32-33, for more detailed discussion.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 34-37.

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the creational pattern of male headship in the church, see *Women in the Church*, 27-37.

## B. Other Offices Established by the Church

### 1. Established by Human Right (*iure humano*)

Throughout its history the church in Christian freedom has established other offices distinct from the one divinely instituted office of pastor in order to meet various needs in different times and places. Since the church is under no divine command to create such offices, they and their functions exist only "by human right" (*iure humano*). Already in apostolic times, and under apostolic direction, the church selected individuals to assist the apostles in carrying out their work (cf. Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Similarly, the contemporary church has continued to establish offices which have their origin not in a divine command but in the decision of the Christian congregation and groups of congregations (e.g., Synod) to facilitate the mission given to them by God.

### 2. Functions Assigned by the Church (*iure humano*).

When a congregation or group of congregations (the Synod) assigns "official functions" to a particular office established by the congregation or the Synod, this too, is done not by divine mandate (*iure divino*), but by human arrangement. That is to say, the assignment of duties to all offices in the church belongs in the sphere of Christian freedom exercised in love. Congregations are free to assign functions to various offices in their midst as they deem appropriate and necessary, for the edification of the church and in keeping with the principle of good order (1 Cor. 14:40). This principle also holds true for all synodical and district offices.

### 3. Eligibility for Service.

In determining the eligibility of women for service in these humanly established offices, it will be helpful to bear in mind that many of these offices are created for the purpose of assisting pastors, to a lesser or greater extent, in carrying out the duties of their office. There is a long tradition in the church of proceeding in this way and such a practice, which engages the service of both men and women, ought to

be encouraged, especially in circumstances where burdens of time and increased organizational commitments severely limit pastors' ability adequately to care for those in their charge.

At the same time, such assisting in pastoral work should be distinguished in practice as in theory, from the public exercise of those functions that belong to the pastor's supervision of the flock through the public proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. In keeping with what the Scriptures teach about the service of women with respect to the pastoral office, women may not assume responsibility for or carry out in behalf of the congregation (that is "*publicly*"), and in the stead of Christ, those functions in the local congregation that would involve them in the exercise of authority inherent in this authoritative public teaching office in the church.<sup>7</sup> This remains the only stricture.

These considerations imply, and even require, that in determining the eligibility of women for services in all congregational, district and synodical offices, attention be given to the functions attached to a given office. As the Commission stated in the 1985 report on *Women in the Church*, "For other offices [other than the office of public ministry of Word and sacraments] we have no express 'thus saith the Lord,' and everything depends on the functions assigned to these offices."<sup>8</sup>

#### CASE ONE: The Office of Elder

From the early years of the history of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to the present, congregations have established an office called "elder" (*Vorsteher*) to assist the pastor in carrying out

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<sup>7</sup>See the Commission's discussion of 1 Tim. 2:12, with special reference to the Greek term *authentain*, in *Women in the Church*, 35-36. At its September 1992 meeting the Commission received a request from the Atlantic District to clarify concerns relative to women's service in the church, including the meaning of the term *authentain*.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 44.

the functions of the office of the public ministry (*Predigtamt*).<sup>9</sup> The duties of this office in synodical

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<sup>9</sup>The term "elder" is derived from the Old Testament and the Jewish Synagogue. In the Old Testament the "elders" were the chief representatives of the tribes and together represented the nation (see Exod. 3:16ff.). The New Testament often refers to the Jewish elders who were the rulers of the synagogues and were apparently responsible for the discipline of the people in the practice of the Law (see Luke 7:3). The New Testament's own use of "elder" is in continuity with its Jewish antecedents. When used as a designation for an office, the New Testament uses the title "elder" as a synonym for "pastor" or for "overseer" ("bishop"), thus designating those who on behalf of the people are responsible for teaching and the maintenance of Christian discipline. The "elders" of Ephesus are "bishops" placed by the Holy Spirit "to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:17-29). The "elders" "shepherd the flock of God in their midst" and are to perform this task as "types of the Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Elders "preside" in the church and labor "in the word and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). Scriptural evidence, therefore, indicates that "elder" signifies those who represent the church and on its behalf have oversight in doctrine and life. Even in the early Church when a distinction between bishop and the elders existed, elders were closely associated with the duties of the bishop and were usually ordained to Word and sacrament ministry.

C.F.W. Walther stated in 1864, "A congregation shall also establish (*aufzurichten*) the office of such elders or overseers as do not labor in the Word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17: 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching') but who assist the incumbent of the office of the divine Word in ruling, disciplining, and keeping order in the congregation . . . . The qualifications of the candidates for this office are to be determined from Acts 6:3 . . . 1 Tim. 3:8-12 . . . ." (The Proper Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State, in Walther on the Church, John Drickamer, tr. [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981], 141). Cf. E. Eckhardt, "Vorsteher," in Homiletisches Reallexikon (v-z) (St. Louis: Success Printing Company, 1917), 219-22; Theodore Graebner, Handbook for Congregational Offices (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), 1-44.

It has been consistently maintained by Missouri Synod theologians that the office of elder is not divinely mandated, but an office created by the church following apostolic precedent. Eckhardt's Reallexikon states that to have elders in the congregation is not forbidden, nor is it a sin to abolish them (Vol. v-z, 219). Theodore Graebner writes, "The

congregations generally indicate that elders work closely with the pastor in his divinely assigned responsibility to feed the whole congregation with the Word of God and to watch over it for the sake of its spiritual welfare. Elders serve primarily to assist the pastor in shepherding and overseeing the entire flock of God at their place. They frequently assist in certain aspects of the conduct of the public worship service, such as in the distribution of Holy Communion. In certain emergency situations elders may be asked by the congregation to perform, on a temporary basis, certain distinctive functions of the pastoral office (e.g., lead public worship, deliver a sermon).

In evaluating whether women may serve in the office of elder (established *iure humano*) in congregations, the principal consideration is whether the office requires that those who hold it are eligible to perform those functions that are distinctive to the public exercise of the ministry of Word and sacrament. If such a situation pertains, women may not serve in this office. An additional consideration has to do with the use of the term "elder" for those offices which do not in fact require such responsibilities. In view of the use of the term "elder" in the Scriptures (see note 9) in the history of the church, and in our own synodical history, we recommend that this term be reserved for that office which has as its assigned duty assisting the pastor in the public exercise of the distinctive functions of his office.

To avoid confusion regarding the pastoral office, consideration should perhaps be given to the use of a different term (e.g., deacon, deaconess) for those who assist the pastor in the care of the flock, but who are not engaged in the distinctive functions of the pastoral ministry. Women have long participated actively in a caring, spiritual ministry in our Synod's congregations and in light of presently changing needs will likely be increasingly asked to do so. Such work is not only necessary, but ought to

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Lutheran contention is that the office of eldership, the deaconship (diaconate is the better English word), was not divinely appointed, not instituted by God's command, as is the office of the ministry" (Handbook, 9).

be encouraged, for the responsibility for the mutual care and nurture of Christ's body, the church, lies with all and may indeed be enhanced through the creation of offices for this task.

CASE TWO: The Offices of Chairman, Vice Chairman

If the duties prescribed for the offices of chairman and vice chairman in the congregation do not allow for the assumption of the distinctive functions of the pastoral office, women are free to hold this office without any Scriptural restriction—a principle that applies to the chairmanship of all other congregational committees as well. Since the responsibilities of these offices usually do not involve the exercise of the functions of pastoral oversight through the ministry of Word and sacrament in congregations today, women gifted for such areas of responsibility should be encouraged toward such service.

CASE THREE: Members of a Synodical Dispute Resolution Panel

The following questions have been addressed to the CTCR regarding the service of women on a synodical Dispute Resolution Panel: 1) Whether, or in what cases, the majority of persons on a dispute resolution panel may be women, and 2) if the majority serving on a dispute resolution panel are women, would the decision be valid in that specific case?<sup>10</sup> Given the limitations noted above regarding other positions created by the church but not divinely established, women are free to serve as reconcilers and members of such panels. The question as to whether women may constitute a majority on such a panel is in itself irrelevant. To be sure, if women having a majority on such a panel were to seek to assert their power as women over men as men, such conduct would be a violation of Christian love, just as it would be for a majority of men to exercise power as men over women in such a situation.

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<sup>10</sup>This request was forwarded to the Commission by the Task Force on Conflict Resolution in February 1993.

### **Conclusion: A Word of Encouragement**

St. Paul concludes his epistle to the Romans by greeting and commending by name a number of men and women in the congregation. Included among those mentioned are a number of women, most of whom are held up for the church to see as models of devoted labor in support of the ministry of the Gospel. "If women kept silence in the public worship of the church (1 Cor. 14:34), they certainly did not remain inactive in the work of the church."<sup>11</sup> The apostle's friendship and the warmth of his affection must have been a source of great encouragement to these men and women who had toiled hard with him in the service of Christ and His church.

The Biblical restraints regarding the service of women in the church and the authority of the pastoral office need not become the only, or even predominant, word we speak to one another. To speak of the "eligibility" of the service of women in congregational and synodical offices might give the impression to some that our primary concern in the contemporary church is to discourage women from exercising the privileges and responsibilities they hold as members of the priesthood of believers. Men and women alike, however, need to help one another, first of all, to see that God's Word itself provides standards of "eligibility" for service in offices of the church, and it does so without any diminution of the value of persons. But just as important, God's people must be instruments of daily encouragement to one another and help each other to discover and appreciate the joys of Christian service. All of us would do well to emulate the apostle Paul's example in giving words of support and commendation to fellow workers in the church of God.

It is the prayer of the Commission that this brief report will assist the members of the Synod in

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<sup>11</sup>Martin Franzmann, *Romans* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 274.

understanding and faithfully applying what the Scriptures teach about the service of women in various positions of assigned responsibility. May our beloved Lord continue to guide and bless our deliberations and decisions in this area, to the end that we remain faithful to His will regarding the ministry of Word and sacraments and our life of Christian service.

## APPENDIX

The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, after a number of years of careful study and deliberation, decided at its 1969 convention "to grant women suffrage and board membership."<sup>12</sup> In that decision the Synod stated that it understood those statements of Scripture which pertain to the service of women in the church (specifically, 1 Corinthians 11, 14; 1 Timothy 2) to mean that "women ought not to hold the pastoral office or serve in any other capacity involving the distinctive functions of this office." Regarding offices and board membership the Synod went on to state its belief that women are prohibited from holding any other kind of office or membership on boards or committees in the institutional structures of a congregation, only if such a way of proceeding involves women in a violation of this principle. Accordingly, the Synod held, the pertinent Scriptural texts do not prohibit full membership of women on synodical boards, commissions, and committees, nor is the manner of filling an office or establishing membership on a board or commission, in congregations or in the Synod under any Scriptural prohibition. With respect to woman suffrage, which congregations without Scriptural prohibition are free to adopt, and the matter of congregational offices and board membership, the Synod concluded that congregations are free to alter their policies and practice, provided the polity developed conforms to the Scriptural principles informing the Synod's position regarding the pastoral office. The Synod recognized the sensitivity of this issue and therefore urged "cautious and deliberate action in the spirit of Christian love" if changes are implemented.

Following this action by the Synod in 1969, the President of the Synod and a number of congregations asked that guidance be given by the Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) to congregations desiring to incorporate into their constitutions and bylaws the provisions adopted in

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<sup>12</sup>1969 Resolution 2-17 "To Grant Woman Suffrage and Board Membership" (1969 *Convention Proceedings*, 88-89).

Resolution 2-17. In 1970 the CCM issued "Suggestions for Congregational Constitutions or Bylaws Regarding the Privileges of Women (Voting and Holding Office)."<sup>13</sup> Restricting itself to the position taken by the Synod ("*de iure humano* rather than *de iure divino*, by human right rather than divine right"), and assuming that the Synod "may further define its position in the future, thereby making it necessary perhaps to refine the suggestions being offered herewith," the CCM offered a sample constitutional paragraph under the title "Privileges of Women." This paragraph allows, in addition to franchise, that women may "serve as officers and as members of boards and committees as long as these positions are not directly involved in the specific functions of the pastoral office (preaching, the public administration of the sacraments, church discipline) and as long as this service does not violate the order of creation (usurping authority over men)." The paragraph then concludes (footnotes bracketed): "Accordingly, they shall not serve as pastor, as a member of [Here shall be listed the board of elders or corresponding board directly involved in the functions of the pastoral office], as chairman or vice-chairman of the congregation, or as chairman of [Here the congregation may list at its discretion those major policy and decision-making boards or standing committees, if any, whose chairmanship the congregation may wish to restrict to men]." The Synod affirmed this position as stated in the CCM opinion in 1981<sup>14</sup> and again in 1986.<sup>15</sup>

In response to inquiries regarding the eligibility of women for service in congregational offices, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations addressed itself briefly to this matter in its

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<sup>13</sup>See 1971 *Convention Workbook*, 244.

<sup>14</sup>Resolution 3-11 "To Urge Completion of Study on Women's Role in the Church" (1981 *Convention Proceedings*, 158).

<sup>15</sup>Resolution 3-09 "To Reaffirm Position of LCMS on Service of Women in the Church" (1986 *Convention Proceedings*, 144).

1985 report on Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesial Practice. The Commission replied to the question "May women hold office in a congregation, serve on committees of the congregation, chair committees of the congregation?" by stating the following:

Women may hold any office and serve on any committee of the congregation which enhances the work of the priesthood of all believers. Women also have the privilege to chair congregational committees, since a "chair" does not "have authority over men" any more than the committee *per se* would have such authority in the New Testament sense. The only stricture would have to do with anyone whose official functions would involve public accountability for the function of the pastoral office (e.g., elders, and possibly the chairman of the congregation). The tasks of the elders in a congregation are often directly associated with the pastoral office and the public administration of the office of the keys. As stated in the introductory paragraph to this section, everything depends on the nature of functions assigned to various offices established by the church.

The same general position outlined above applies to various district or synodical committees and commissions. Affairs of the church have never been assigned only to those holding the office of the public ministry. Women offer valuable contributions to the work of such committees, boards, and commissions.<sup>16</sup>

Taking into account its previously stated positions, the CTCR's counsel, and questions and concerns raised about the eligibility of women for service in congregational offices, the Synod at its 1989 convention adopted Resolution 3-13A "To Study and Clarify Services of Women in Congregational and Synodical Offices." The Synod specifically asked "that the CTCR, in consultation with the Council of Presidents, prepare a study on the eligibility of women for service in all offices of the congregation, including that of chairman, vice-chairman, and elder and district and synodical boards and commissions where their official function would in effect involve public accountability for the function(ing) of the pastoral office."<sup>17</sup>

Adopted by the CTCR on November 16, 1994

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<sup>16</sup>*Women in the Church*, 46.

<sup>17</sup>1989 *Convention Proceedings*, 188.