

RRA Presidential Address:

CLERGY WOMEN'S WORLD: MUSINGS OF A FOX

EDWARD C. LEHMAN, JR.

SUNY, BROCKPORT

REVIEW OF RELIGIOUS RESEARCH, 2001, VOLUME 43:1, PAGES 5 - 13

In his presidential address to the Religious Research Association, Edward C. Lehman, Jr. discusses his career of research on women in the ministry, what he and his colleagues have found, the implications for religious organizations, and insights for future research.

To begin, I want to thank you for the honor you bestowed on me by electing me President of the Religious Research Association. During the twenty-five years or so that I had been a member of RRA up to that point, that possibility of holding the office had never entered my mind. So I am deeply grateful for that expression of trust.

At the same time, I confess that I now have mixed emotions about the experiences that came with such incumbency. During my two-year watch, we dealt with some tough issues, especially the relations between RRA and SSSR. The discussions of possible merger between the organizations and of issues dealing with our joint annual meetings were intense, reflecting some clashes between new ideas and vested interests. But we dealt with them openly, and I think we came through them with a better understanding of our life within RRA. Our relations with SSSR are now on more stable footings. Many of you were involved in those discussions, and I appreciate the contribution you made. We have landed on our feet. Nevertheless, once through those deliberations as President was quite enough, thank you.

I also have mixed emotions right now, because I feel somewhat intimidated by the task immediately before me. You see, I have been retired from the University for four years now, and I have done no research during that time. Other pursuits have captured my interest. I also had no time for new undertakings during the four years prior to retirement due to my work as the Executive Officer for SSSR. That gives me eight years with no significant scholarship. And here I stand, about to present a presidential address.

To my title—"Clergy Women's World: Musings of a Fox." What lay behind it? Each semester that I taught a course in the Sociology of Religion, I had teams of students observe various congregations and produce ethnographies of them incorporating the concepts and theories covered in the course. One term a team was assigned to a liberal mainline protestant church in a city near the campus. The staff of that church included three clergy women, one of whom was assigned the responsibility of working with my students. In the written report, one student wrote that the clergywoman had told them that she had read some of Lehman's work, and that letting Lehman into her life and work would be akin to letting the fox into the henhouse.

So I am a fox! Can you believe it? If you were to ask Johnnie, my wife, about it, she would assure you that I am no fox at all. My female colleagues will probably tell you the same thing—"he's no fox." Yet I am not sure how I feel about that assurance—"he's no fox." But we'll leave it there.

I would like to describe some things that this fox thinks he and his colleagues have seen inside that henhouse. Two caveats—first, most of our work has been with mainline Protestant bodies, so any generalizations clearly apply primarily to them. Nevertheless, I am convinced that many patterns we have seen are not restricted to mainline Protestantism. Time will tell. Second, in describing some aspects of clergy women's world, I will intentionally present various points in their simplest form. There clearly isn't time to cover all of the multivariate analyses that might be applicable.

Did you ever think about the role of the fox—how the world responds to him/her? In reality the fox is simply a hungry animal following its nature and looking for its next meal. But that is not how we look at foxes. Our attributions of their motives and actions are often a real put down. "That fox is up to no good." "You'd better watch him carefully." "Do not let him get anywhere near the chicken coop." "If you see him around, you'd better shoot him!"

There is little doubt that those perceptions are what the clergy woman had in mind when expressing her feelings about cooperating with Lehman. That's what makes me a fox in her eyes. As a nosy social scientist, and especially as a man, I was not to be trusted. My motives were suspect. I must have a hidden agenda. If she were to allow me into her world, there's no telling what the consequences might be. In her mind, any information she might give me about herself could boomerang and be used to prevent her from pursuing her ministry. (As far as I know, she did not own a shotgun.)

But she had never met me! Why would she attribute such things to me? Perhaps she saw me as a fox simply because either she herself, or others she had known, had experienced just those kinds of betrayals. The attributions also came, I suspect, from the particular feminist sub-culture in which she lived. Beware of foxes in men's clothing!

Fortunately for me, she was clearly an exception to the reactions I had actually experienced in my work with clergy women (and clergymen). In one study after another, they gave of their time and of themselves when I asked for information. My colleagues involved in similar research have reported the same thing. We have not been defined as foxes. We were allowed to enter their lives and snoop around.

You know, I must confess that it took a long time for me as a man to see into that world. For instance, from 1958 to 1961, I was a student in Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. I still remember two women who were also enrolled there—Patchy Williams and Juanita Swidler. Patchy was a gorgeous woman, but that's not really why I remember her and Juanita. They stick in my memory because they were completing the same curriculum I was in—preparation to be a pastor. At that time, I couldn't understand that. Why were they taking those courses? They were women! That curriculum was for men! I did not get it. Similarly, when I first became involved in studies of the women-in-ministry movement ten years later, I was on a denominational task force set up to promote clergy women's interests. (I had come a long way in ten years.) Two women in that group frequently became very angry as we discussed situations in which women clergy found themselves. Why were they so angry? The deliberations of the Task Force did not make

me angry. I did not feel what they felt, because I couldn't really get inside of that world. Even Weberian *verstehen* wasn't adequate to arouse my resentment. Perceiving and appreciating the implications of sexist arrangements in the churches is not easy for someone who doesn't experience them directly.

CLERGY WOMEN'S WORLD

So, what have we foxes seen in that world? In using the term "world," of course, we follow Peter Berger's model of social life. People live and act within shared systems of meaning, fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality—assumptions of what is important and how to act—a "culture" and a "social structure" within which it is produced, maintained, and altered.

Both clergy women and clergymen live in such a world—a "nomos" anchored securely in a "sacred cosmos." It is imperative to remember that their working world is so heavily bounded by the customs of their religious traditions that it is largely the same for both men and women. In the big picture, within each tradition, the ROLE of "clergy" structures the thought and action of religious leaders in a gender-blind fashion. All Baptist pastors are expected to conduct worship services on Sunday, not Friday evening. Rabbis in Conservative Judaism must respect scrolls held in a sacred ark, not a cross. Evangelicals expect their preachers to lead people to confess faith in Jesus Christ, not to encourage a pilgrimage to Mecca. Etc. The cultural and social traditions linked to the position "clergy" in a particular religious tradition end up pressing all incumbents of that position look very much alike. The roles are like a fairly rigid glove all incumbents are given to wear, and that glove is basically one-size-fits-all. For some the glove is very comfortable. For others it is so tight that it is painful. Women and men fall into both categories.

On the social-psychological level, most male and female clergy also hold in common a key assumption that defines their ministry, i.e. that somehow God has laid a hand on their shoulder. They have been called—set apart—to pursue a uniquely religious quest. In responding to that sense of call, they dare to dream—to dream that they will lead people to reach for values beyond self interest—to dream that they will be able to comfort people mistreated by life—to dream that they can help people shed demons from their soul—to dream that somehow they might actually lead someone to experience an almighty yet loving God. Those are the visions of both men and women clergy.

But then comes the rub. It is in *pursuing* those dreams that the world of clergywomen often diverges from that of clergymen. This departure takes place simply because, as clergywomen try to realize those dreams, their world encounters other worlds, the traditional structures and shared assumptions of other actors in their religious traditions. As women seek to act out the clergy role, to many of those other actors, they become a "problem"—simply because they are women breaking with traditions significantly defined by gender.

THE DENOMINATION

Early on they must interact with the leaders of their denomination. The first of these contacts often is their own parish priest or minister. You would think that those local leaders would be pleased to learn that anyone is eager to follow in their footsteps. But very

often the response to the woman who aspires to ordination is quite different from what a man hears. "Are you sure about this?" "I think you ought to pray about this decision some more." Yet even with such less-than-encouraging responses, many women continue with their plans.

At the level of the denominational offices, women are often confronted with remote and faceless structures ostensibly instituted to promote the programmatic and organizational interests of the clergy and members of the churches. Women are seen as a problem at this level too. In some religious bodies, where women have been officially barred from ordination, the problem is solved easily—just ignore them and say, "NO." This is the case with most evangelical and fundamentalist associations and some of the liturgical and sacramental groups. Any talk of women's ordination there is defined as illegitimate.

However, even in denominations where women's ordination has been officially endorsed and promoted, women are still viewed as a problem. In its simplest sense, to denominational officials the problem with women clergy is, "What to do with them." That question remains an integral part of denominational discussions of ordained church leadership even after nearly a half-century of admitting women into seminaries and conferring ordination on them. Women are still defined as deviant cases in the pool of religious leaders, candidates who are frequently separated out for special treatment.

I recall observing a meeting of denominational executives from several states, a gathering that took place routinely three or four times a year. One of the things they discussed was the recruitment and placement of clergy in local churches where there were pastoral vacancies, a kind of horse trading. One executive would describe a church needing a minister and ask if there was anyone in the other regions who would be a good candidate for that church. From the other end, someone would identify a particular minister who was looking to move from his present parish and ask if the other executives knew of vacancies where such a person would fit. (They always seemed a little suspicious that the individual up for grabs might somehow be a thorn in the flesh.) It was noteworthy that they carefully singled out women candidates for separate consideration. One executive would say, "I have a woman who is seeking a pastorate. Do you have any churches where a woman might work out?" "Do you know of any churches who are open to a woman?" Then the others became visibly nervous. Some of them glanced over at me. Sometimes the response was that they had a church where a woman pastor had just left, but they did not think that church would want another woman this soon. More often than not, a reply about a possible opening would involve a small congregation struggling to survive. It was also noteworthy that they never asked, "Do you know of a church that was recently served by a woman but is now willing to accept a man?" Women are still defined as a problem to be solved, not as a pool of resources to be tapped.

In spite of these patterns of discrimination, women have been ordained and placed as ministers of local congregations—literally thousands of them. While many men serving as denominational administrators still aren't sure "how to handle women clergy," we now see more women in denominational offices showing the men how to do it (and keeping them honest). We have women serving as solo pastors and a few appointed as senior minister in multiple-staff situations in large churches. Women now serve as area ministers, executive ministers, district superintendents, and bishops. They hold faculty positions in the seminaries. To be sure, there is a constant danger that women in such leader-

ship positions will be treated as tokens. By no means has the stained glass ceiling disappeared. But they're on a roll!

THE SEMINARY

Many women succeed in navigating the denominational maze, and they move on. The path to clergy status almost always leads the neophyte through a theological seminary. It is there that men and women aspiring to ministerial careers learn the intellectual and professional aspects of the role. Most first-year students enter seminary with stars in their eyes. Their focus is on those dreams. They are confident of their mission. They typically enter seminary with a Sunday-School understanding of religion—simplistic, literalistic, basically unexamined. What they do not expect is the cold water shower that comes with the basic courses—a real jolt. After a few courses in Greek and Hebrew, literary criticism and form criticism applied to Biblical literature, and the history of dogma and the church, their naive confidence that they know the answers gives way to an uncomfortable hope that they can identify the basic questions. Their understanding grudgingly moves from elementary school toward intellectual maturity. Men and women alike must travel that path. If they do not have that experience at some level, they probably haven't digested the material in the required courses.

But seminary today can be a very different experience for women and men. They have inherited important cultural and structural realities that derive from the actions of seminary women in the early 1970's. The cohort of the 1970's included significant numbers of women who were personally involved in the women's liberation movement. They organized campus movements and caucuses and pressed successfully for increases in the number of female faculty and for new courses dealing with feminist perspectives on religious life and scholarship. By the end of the 1990's, women's presence on seminary faculties had increased noticeably, and feminist perspectives were apparent in courses taught by women—in Biblical literature, church history, worship, pastoral relations, etc. Religious and academic presses were publishing monographs examining religious life from feminist frames of reference. The seminaries were quite different from what they had been a generation earlier.

Once those cultural and structural alterations were in place, they became a part of the new experiences of subsequent cohorts of seminary students. Feminism had a stable place on campus. The seminary culture and the content of seminary courses now *introduced* entering students to feminist perspectives on religious life and scholarship. Some of that course work involved basic required offerings in Biblical literature and church history, aspects of the curriculum taken by both men and women. Often for the first time, students hear systematic critiques of traditional Biblical exegesis, reinterpretations of events in church history, analyses of the role of gender in the organization of religious groups, criticisms of values underlying church programs, and ridicule of the foibles and pomposity of the predominantly male clergy. Since that material resonated more with the experiences of women than of men, it became a part of the women's psyche much more readily. The *elective* courses focusing on women's viewpoints and issues found far more women than men in enrollment. And women's caucuses or interest groups, involving almost exclusively women, still functioned on many seminary campuses. The end result was a built-in

set of seminary experiences that gave at least some women graduates a new dream—to challenge things they see wrong with sexist religious life..

PLACEMENT IN MINISTRY

Initial job placements for women are not terribly different than men's. But where women go right after seminary is usually a critical factor in the trajectory of their career. For women, much more than for men, the first placement following graduation carries a label and often results in type-casting. If they move into a position as solo pastor of a local congregation, the door to future placements as pastor in local churches remains relatively open. But if they accept a position as *assistant* pastor of a church, it is very difficult for them to become a solo or senior minister. If they accept a position *other than* with a local church—e.g. in a denominational office or as an institutional chaplain—the door to future placements with local congregations virtually closes. Such rigid labeling is much less likely to occur for men.

The position seminary graduates have sought traditionally is as the pastor of a local congregation. Much of the seminary curriculum is legitimated by its linkage to preparation of students for that role. What a shock they experience when they reenter the world of the local congregation, an arena with dominant themes that are miles from the seminary culturally. Most lay church members are very conventional middle-class folks who know nothing about the scholarly discourse that defines theological education. To the laity the linguistic nit-picking that goes on in a lot of Biblical scholarship belongs in a game of trivial pursuit. They couldn't care less about how many people wrote the first five books of the Bible or whether someone named Paul really wrote all of the letters attributed to him or when they were written. Again, their religious world is largely informed at the level of the Sunday school. What is important to them? Their local congregation and what is going on in their local community, that's what. Their local world may be theologically naive and unsophisticated, a fact that leads some outsiders to denigrate it. But to those living within that world, it is *their* world, and they like it just the way it is, thank you. It is their *koinonia*, their sacred community.

When someone first introduces lay church members to the possibility of having a woman as their minister, the news typically sends shock waves through the congregation. Such an option flies in the face of almost everything church members think they know about ordained church leadership. While many members, even a majority of them, appear willing to consider the idea, it is very threatening to others. The prospect brings out John McEnroe's famous line, "You can't be serious!" The typical response is to say, "It won't work here." In small churches members argue that a woman would fit better in a large congregation. In large churches they say that women work best in smaller places. If it's an urban setting, then she should be in a rural area. If it's rural, then she should be urban. Right from the start, the introduction of a woman candidate, once again, has created "a problem."

The first direct contacts clergy women have with local congregations are often through a search committee. Such groups have different official names, e.g. "pulpit committee," "call committee," "pastoral nominating committee," "pastor/parish relations committee," etc. To varying degrees, their responsibility is to screen possible candidates for the con-

gregation's pastorate and make recommendations to the congregation or denominational offices as to the acceptability of particular applicants. Both women and men must pass through that filter in the placement process.

There is a story of one such screening process in a small rural church. A female candidate had proceeded to the point of visiting the local parish and had arrived on the field to be interviewed and to look around. The search committee for this congregation had a unique practice of taking visiting candidates out on the local lake fishing to get to know them in a relaxed situation. On this particular outing, after they had pushed away from shore and were about half way across the lake, the woman exclaimed, "Oh, my goodness! I forgot my fishing rod on the bank." As the two committee men were turning the boat around, the woman stepped out of the boat and proceeded to walk on the water toward the shore. The two men watched in utter amazement, and one said to the other, "But can she preach?" In another version of the same story, the man says, "Isn't that just like a woman to forget her tackle?" In yet a third rendition, the woman later confides to a friend, "I was familiar with that lake; I knew where the rocks were."

The receptivity of lay church members to female church leadership is a bit paradoxical. On the one hand, most research indicates that a *majority* of lay church members are *open* to the idea of having a woman as their pastor. Typically between two-thirds and three-fourths of the members relate to the idea positively, i.e. they hold few if any stereotypes of women in ministry, they have no strong preferences for a man in various clergy roles, and they are hesitant to outright discriminate against a woman. Yet a woman's candidacy becomes a "problem" even to them. They typically feel intimidated as the very vocal minority who oppose women in ministry make threats about what they will do if the church installs a woman. The opposition usually contains members who threaten to withhold their financial contributions to the church, and to leave the parish if a woman is installed.

One might ask why the majority, then, just doesn't let them go. The answer is simple. Most local churches are small voluntary associations of people who care very much for each other. They are struggling to carry on meaningful programs and meet their budgets. The thought of losing even a small percentage of their members is very threatening. In some congregations, such threats are seen as one step from closing their doors. And in *their* mind, what is causing such a problem? It is the woman!

However, in spite of all of this misperception, stereotyping, misplaced anxiety, and distrust, women find themselves installed as the minister of a local church! Search committee's decide to recommend women. Officials decide to recommend or appoint them. Congregations decide to call them. It has happened thousands of times. Most congregations try to be fair.

So then what happens? Do some families withdraw their money after the woman comes? Yes, some do. But if they stay around long enough, their involvement in the congregation tends to return to normal, and their gifts flow to the church once again. Do some families leave the church altogether? Yes, some do. And most of them do *not* return. But other families usually enter the congregation to replace them. Contrary to some dire predictions, there is no disaster. Does the church, on the other hand, take off and grow in leaps and bounds as some advocates for women predict? In a few cases, yes, but usually

not. Most often the church simply continues being the church meeting people's spiritual needs, but this time under a woman's leadership.

Most important for the women-in-ministry movement, most clergy women are able to change people's minds about them. The evidence is pretty good. As lay church members remain in their role, but under the pastoral leadership of a woman, their attitudes toward women clergy tend to become more positive. The negative stereotypes give way to more realistic images of women in ministry. They no longer prefer that men perform specific clerical functions. There are many stories of members who were the most adamantly opposed to calling a woman becoming the woman's staunchest supporters. Women pastors, just like the men, typically find that the love they give to their people returns to them expanded many times over.

Most clergy women are insightful and skillful leaders. They do not come to a parish and try to ram through all of the changes they'd like to make. They recognize the tremendous gap between the seminary and the congregation. They look, they listen, and they pursue their dreams. From the work of the new shepherd, people grow toward more unselfish lives. They find solace when life mistreats them. The demons fall off some people's backs. And some even say they experience an Almighty yet loving God.

THE FUTURE

It was more than a quarter of a century ago that these events moved into high gear. During that time the number of women clergy, and their proportion of total clergy, have risen fairly steadily. And we have learned a great deal about them. One is tempted to think that these collisions between the clergy women's world and those other worlds would become less cataclysmic over time, perhaps even merge into one homogeneous ethos. Seeing women serve successfully has to count for something.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy. While the presence of women in ministry is gradually becoming routinized, the vast majority of local churches still have not experienced the leadership of a woman. Until they do, they are not likely to abandon the idea that their congregation can only function well under the leadership of a man. Furthermore, it is a mistake to assume that congregations that have experienced ordained female leadership are prepared to call another clergy woman. In some cases, when a woman moves from one charge to another, the church she leaves behind takes the position that they "have taken their turn" with a woman. "The next pastor should be a man." Even where a woman pastor has served her people well, the congregation often does not generalize from that experience to other women. Should they install another woman as pastor, she has to start virtually at "square one." True, that pattern can apply to job turnovers involving either men or women. But the problem clearly seems to confront women more than men.

In spite of those realities, I believe that women will continue to seek ordination and offer to lead local congregations in their religious life. All of the partisan rhetoric notwithstanding, just as with men, most will succeed. Some will even excel. But the rate of any change in those worlds, especially at the local level, will be slow. My *hope* is that the churches will eventually become gender-blind, and there is a chance that they will. But I shall not see that situation in my lifetime.

I'll close with two footnotes. First, the churches have just begun to deal with an issue that makes the debates about women in ministry seem about as important as childhood

squabbles. That issue is sexuality. The inclusion or exclusion of gays and lesbians in the life of the churches has far greater potential for fragmenting religious organizations than the women-in-ministry movement ever will. Already there are records of gay or lesbian individuals being barred from participation in local churches. Local congregations have been ostracized and even expelled from denominational structures for going on record as welcoming and affirming persons living homosexual lifestyles. When a local church takes such a position, they lose significant numbers of their members. While it is widely recognized that denominations demanding celibacy in their clergy end up with a significant number of gay clerics, openly gay or lesbian clergy in other groups are very rare and clearly unwelcome. While secular society is struggling and slowly coming to grips with unconventional sexual lifestyles, the churches are still burying their heads in the sand hoping those developments will go away.

Leaders of traditionally conservative denominations seem to have a fairly easy time dealing with sexuality issues. While they claim to love the homosexual as an individual, they condemn what they view as deviant sexual behavior, and the end result for the individual is the same. He or she is condemned and excluded from the church. Leaders of traditionally liberal denominations, however, appear to be almost paralyzed in deciding how to deal with the issue. They seem to want to avoid the stigma of publicly discriminating against homosexuals, but they also fear splitting their denomination if they do not condemn them. So far the result has been the same as among the conservatives, i.e. by the churches' silence, the homosexual individual is condemned and excluded. Today's secular gay and lesbian social movements have been much slower to have any effect on the churches than the second wave of the feminist movement did a generation ago. Here, my colleagues, is something that bears examining.

My second footnote returns to the musings of a fox. The picture I have painted of clergy women's world, while somewhat simplified, is what these foxes have seen. Women in ministry are wonderful creatures, and I am always amazed that they carry on and accomplish what they do in spite of what the churches throw at them. I firmly believe that what we have written about them has helped make their lives better. Their dedication and accomplishments, once masked by stereotype and obstructed by fear, are now made visible in the research we have done. If it took some foxes to get at what some people were unable to see for themselves, then so be it. Bring on more foxes! Yet, no doubt, there are still some who will say, "He still doesn't get it!" But that's OK. After all, what can you expect from a fox?

REFERENCES

Berger, Peter L. 1969. *The Sacred Canopy*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co.