

Exercising the Priesthood of the Believer: Women Pursuing Ministry

Dr. Molly Marshall-Green
Associate Professor of Christian Theology
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky

Vocational discernment is one of the focal life tasks of the college student. The role that the campus minister plays in assisting his or her student in this is of great value. What may seem to the minister to be a casual statement of affirmation after a mission project or leadership task or a routine question about a possible major or the projected graduation date may be, for the student, an encounter in which the vocational mists clear and the gentle prompting of the Spirit of God is experienced in a revelatory way. As a "midwife of grace," one who encourages what is struggling to be born, the campus minister can function as God's tangible presence, enabling the clarification of God's calling.

In this brief article we shall examine four aspects of how the campus minister can address the issue of women in the ministry in light of the priesthood of the believer. First, we will investigate how vocational discernment can best be accomplished by attending to the liberating wind of the Spirit; second, we will reflect theologically on the significance of the priesthood of the believer; third, we will delineate the special needs of women in vocational guidance; and fourth, we will offer suggestive proposals as to how the campus ministry matrix can become a hospitable space for women students to hear the calling of God.

Vocational Discernment in the Freedom of the Spirit

Many of us who work with students continue to wrestle with church and society's stereotypical vocational assignments, usually made according to gender. Actually, the only thing a woman cannot do is be a father, and conversely, the only thing a man cannot do is be a mother. Each can nurture, each can lead, each can be authoritative in both the public and private spheres. The New Testament speaks of the freedom of the Spirit in the matter of calling and gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:11-14). One's gifts and the church's need interface in God's providential work in the life of an individual; both women and men are needed to do the work of ministry and gifts for ministry are not given according to gender. Interpreting the work of the Spirit in this manner can greatly assist in vocational discernment.

The pool of messages young persons receive in their developmental years about what boys or girls should do "when they grow up" may severely restrict a woman's ability to assess realistically her gifts or to hear the voice of God calling toward a field thought to be proper only for the "other sex." The freedom of God's Spirit is often shackled to cultural expectations informed more by a patriarchal world view than by the "discipleship of equals" inaugurated of Jesus.¹

Thus, the campus minister must become ever more intentional in his or her guidance of the student lest he or she continue to function unreflectively in a oppressive traditionalist orbit. This issue becomes acute when a young woman is considering a calling to ministry, theological education, chaplaincy, etc. Her campus minister may help her envision vocational horizons that her parents, home pastor, peers, and others simply will not countenance. Indeed, the student's minister may provide for her an ecclesiastical or surrogate parental blessing that has been withheld because of rigid expectations or lack of openness. Here one's

understanding of the priesthood of the believer can provide constructive assistance.

A Theological Understanding of the Priesthood of the Believer

I firmly believe that advocating the unhindered role of women in ministry is a thoroughly biblical and baptistic viewpoint. Indeed, our Reformation-forged theology demands it! It is time that we lay appropriate claim to our rich Baptist heritage at this turbulent point in our denominational history. Rather than allowing a lingering perception of women ministers as interlopes in Baptist life, we must stress that this movement of women toward vocation in ministry is thoroughly informed by Baptist theological distinctives, particularly our understanding of the priesthood of the believer.

Simply put, the priesthood of the believer affirms the right and capacity of the individual to deal directly with God. Of significance to women perceiving a call to ministry is the foundational understanding that one needs no authority other than the Lordship of Christ to determine the viability of such a call.² One can apprehend God's calling for oneself; no hierarchical ecclesiastical control can restrict the liberty of the individual conscience. No one should presume to dissuade another from responding to the Spirit's stirring. Baptists have consistently borne witness to this belief; today it is finding expression in the encouragement of women to pursue God's leading into new contexts of ministry.

We should not understand the priesthood of the believer, however, as the privatization of experience with God. Often this doctrine (first given clear articulation by Martin Luther) has been interpreted to mean: "that the priesthood of all believers implies that every Christian is his or her own priest and hence possesses the 'right of private judgement' in matters of faith and doctrine."³ But this is a distortion; yes, one can hear the voice of God for

oneself, but God has more to say to us than any of us can hear by ourselves, as Richard Foster reminds us.⁴

The priesthood of the believer means that one should listen intently for the voice of God as it comes through Scripture, prayer, proclamation, and the wise reflection of other Christians. Hence, this doctrine is best understood as affirming that every Christian is another Christian's priest; we are all priests to one another. Just as Israel was not chosen simply for her own benefit, neither is the Christian -- nor the communion of saints -- to be preoccupied with the state of its personal spiritual welfare. One stands accountable before God (coram Deo) as an individual, but cannot be expected to function in a priestly manner apart from the community of faith.

The priesthood of all believers is a responsibility as well as an opportunity. This means that the campus minister must neither presume to speak, without qualification, God's word of direction to another, nor should the minister assume that the student can discern, without assistance, God's directing impulse toward vocational ministry. "Midwife" remains a useful metaphor for the patient work of expectant hope; the campus minister, as midwife, works with the laboring student so that the vision of her graceful vocation can be born.

The Special Needs of Women in Vocational Guidance

Contemporary psychologists contend that women and men approach the tasks of identity and intimacy differently;⁵ men are more likely to pursue establishing identity prior to intimacy, while women tend to establish identity within the context of intimacy. Thus, the campus minister must tailor his or her ministry with sensitivity to these differing developmental processes. Many women may fear that a calling to ministry might necessitate surrendering the potentiality of marriage. (After all, the nearest thing Southern Baptists have to saints are those single women, Lottie and Annie. Ask any former G.A.!

that those who are companions to women in the process of vocational discernment communicate that one is not required to become a "Baptist nun" in order to be a minister. Identity and intimacy, vocation and relationship, can be held together whether one is a married person or a single person. Each Christian needs the priestly ministry of other Christians; part of this ministry can be offered in the context of marriage and, for others, this ministry comes through enduring friendships.

The lack of role models for women in many areas of ministry makes the imaginative task nearly impossible. A significant component of vocational discernment, I believe, is imagination;⁶ envisioning oneself leading in worship, nurturing students through the classroom, planning a mission trip, directing the ministry of an inner-city congregation, is often made possible by observing God's ministry through one with whom a young woman can identify. Therefore, it is extremely constructive for the campus minister to acquaint her or his female students with a variety of ministry opportunities being carried out by competent women. It is not always possible nor necessary to have a role model, for Christ serves as our key role model; yet, meeting pioneers in Christian service encourages others in faithfulness.

Many women have received less than whole-hearted encouragement toward ministry (or even professional identity) from their home churches. It is understandable that they have internalized a deep sense of "sacral unworthiness"⁷ from a congregation where men carried on the "important" work as deacons and staff ministers. The theological framework in which their faith was nurtured dictated a secondary status for their Christian identity. Women were only supposed to be authoritative in certain prescribed areas, i.e., children's ministry, missions education, decorations and hospitality, and other "support services." In such a context, the "priesthood of all believers" lacks full expression. It is not

"priesthood of all believers" lacks full expression. It is not difficult to see why women question whether or not this doctrine really applies to them!

Campus Ministry Forging a "Hospitable Space"

Many of us have been captured by the lyrical language of Henri Nouwen, spiritual teacher and friend of persons struggling to allow space in their lives for God. The place where the richest learning occurs, he writes, is in a "hospitable space."⁸ This is a context where one is free to disclose doubt, suspicion, and fear without being judged or overly "corrected." Here truth can become one's own personal dignity can be identified and nurtured as the student's gifts are received and strengthened in community.

It is the campus minister's job to shape such a hospitable space, whether it be in a quiet, individual conversation or the dynamics of the gathered community. Persons should be encouraged to pursue tasks for which they are qualified and gender should not be considered a disqualification! Men and women should work toward mutuality in shared projects through their campus ministry organization. The campus minister's attitude and consistent action can best enable this openness. For example, student revival or "share" teams should not automatically presume that the men students only should preach. A person's gifts should determine how one functions. (Some men may prefer working with children in Backyard Bible Clubs rather than leading in services of worship). Obviously, more men than women may have experience in preaching, but lack of experience does not mean lack of giftedness. Giving women an opportunity to explore their gifts for ministry can be a life-transforming activity of the hospitable space.

It is also very important that the campus minister interpret the relationship between ministry and authority in a careful way. Over the last several years, there has been much conversation about "ministerial authority"⁹ and

the priesthood of the believer. We recognize that those whom God calls to serve as vocational ministers exercise leadership within the church, but it is not at the expense of the priesthood of all believers. Because authority has often been exercised in a demagogic way, the priesthood of believers has suffered, especially in the testimony of women. Not only were women thought to possess less authority than men in the life of the church, such leadership served to reduce it further.

True ministry is not power over others, but the empowerment of others, as Rosemary Radford Ruether writes.¹⁰ One's authority as a minister comes from one's calling, one's faithful response to God and the persons being served, and one's willingness to share authority, even as God shares it with humanity.

Conclusion

The campus minister can accompany the student on the arduous path of vocational discernment. It can be a joyous and fearful undertaking. He or she must remember that it is God who calls and that the call to salvation is also the call to service. How this will coalesce in the life of an individual student has to do with wise choosing and openness to the Spirit of God, often mediated through the words of his or her spiritual guide. It is of particular significance in these days that the campus minister attend to the needs of female students as they contemplate the horizon God seems to be placing before them. In our Baptist heritage, the priesthood of the believer still holds promise for enabling freedom to pursue God's calling with a full heart.

Endnotes

¹ This phrase is Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's in her fine book, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983), p.140.

² Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in Three Treatises (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), p.290ff.

³ Timothy George, Theology of the Reformers (Broadman Press, 1988), p.96.

⁴ Richard J. Foster, The Celebration of Discipline (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), p.150ff.

⁵ See especially Carol Gilligan's In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) and Mary Field Belenky, et al. Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

⁶ M. Basil Pennington, Called: New Thinking on Christian Vocation (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983), p.89ff.

⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders characterizes the experience of most women in ecclesiastical settings in this manner. See her helpful article, "Effects of Women's Experience on Spirituality," Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development, ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p.33.

⁸ Reaching Out, (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p.50ff.

⁹ See the helpful article by Andrew Lester "Some Observations on the Psychological Effects of Women in Ministry," Review and Expositor, Vol. LXXXIII (Winter, 1986), 63-70, for an analysis on the relation between issues of authority and women in ministry.

¹⁰ Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), p.207.