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Concluding Reflection: “Where Do We Go From Here?”

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I offer three reflections in my summary remarks on the Consultation. First, while as participants we share similar racial and cultural backgrounds, not surprisingly the Consultation interchange has revealed that we are at different points of awareness regarding the nature of gender analysis and its implications for theological education. For some of us, gender analysis of current theological education means adjusting and improving existing structures. For others, it means entering a more sustained dialogue on sexuality and gender relations, analyzing how our understandings and patterns have been built up from biologically-based assumptions and socially-constructed claims and then correspondingly introducing deep changes in theological education. For still others, examining the issue of women and men in theological education implies a long-term commitment to transformation and a critical and constructive look at ritual and theology itself. I am one who believes that feminist theory and theology is about deep change in which, perhaps, we are just at the beginning stage. To examine the question of women and men in theological education is to accept and enter with deliberated choice into epoch-making change, the end of which is not given or known with much clarity at all. What we know is only that it is an inevitable task of our times.

This may account for the recurring theme of liminality in the Consultation. For many women and some men who have struggled for some time now with sexism in all its blatant and subtle forms, and with the persistence of androcentric and patriarchal thought-forms and structures, there is a sense of darkness and barrenness about the current state of affairs. The persisting experience of devaluation often leads to the feeling

state of hopelessness, the reality of which must be fully accepted before we can move forward into an attitude of courageous assertion and a generative time that will produce new ways of thought, inclusive symbols, and healthy patterns of relationships based upon equality in discipleship. Liminality as a state of consciousness is not an easy one to be in, but it is not without theological significance. Traditional understandings of faith, hope and love are themselves subject to re-interpretation from this liminal experience. What is at stake is no less than the experience and naming of God as God.

A second observation about the Consultation concerns language. Women's experience of oppression, silencing, or marginalization is often communicated in story, and this has been a frequently used form of communication in our discussions. The power of narrative is not to be underestimated, especially in its ability to establish the details and consequences of an androcentrically ordered world on women. But so also is there power in analysis as a form of communicating, as much of contemporary feminist theory and theology and several papers at this consultation have shown. Narrative and discursive forms of communication must be held together in creative tension. Each serves both to unmask bias and to create new horizons of understanding.

I believe that women's stories must be privileged at this time as a source for theological reflection. I believe that women must also be committed equally to advancing theory, producing new theology from analyzing their experience and especially their relatively new pastoral experience. It also appears, from glimpses at certain consultation interactions, that many men have a good deal of work yet to do on their stories in order to redress their historic privileging of reason as a source for theological production. Experience and analysis should not be played off against each other, either by women or men, and new understandings of gender relations will only come about if we do this work both separately and together. A long period of sustained dialogue and interaction, it would appear, is still ahead of us in this regard.

Thirdly, there has been a fair amount of discussion during the Consultation about differing contexts for doing theological education. There is the parish or congregation context

to which several of our contributors spoke from their experience as pastors. There is also the school or university context, also represented well in the Consultation by students, faculty and administrators. How these two contexts interrelate is a very important matter in theological education today. I do not believe, however, that they can be collapsed into one context. Theological education, I believe, must continue to be differentiated by its different goals. Advanced degree goals, for instance, cannot be collapsed into those of basic degrees, and neither of these can be collapsed into the goals of developing theological literacy and engagement in the congregation. Differentiation does not exclude dialogue between these contexts, however, or the reform of school or university-based theological education from practice-based reflection. Attending to women's needs and experiences in this regard, precisely because of their historical exclusion from the process of theological education and pastoral leadership, is critical for a genuine reform of theological education.

The Consultation has been a good beginning at dialogue. Sustaining that dialogue in the coming years will be a real challenge, however, not only because of our geographical distances but also because of the breadth and depth of gender analysis and relational reorientation, a major issue in this era of massive change.