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Response to Jean Stairs

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I was challenged by Dr. Stairs' paper to ask myself how the shifts which she has described affect my situation as a theological educator within a Roman Catholic faculty of theology. My response will take the form of adding some reflections from a Roman Catholic perspective to the analysis laid out for us so clearly by Dr. Stairs. I do this because the situation of Roman Catholic women is different from that of our Anglican and Protestant sisters. The difference, of course, is that Roman Catholic women, as well as our Orthodox sisters, are not considered "ordainable". This has implications for theological education which are both seen and unseen.

As a way of reflecting on this "given", I draw on my own experience over the past 20 years, first as a graduate student, then as a professor at St. Michael's College, a Catholic theological faculty in an ecumenical consortium. I do this recalling that the "personal is the political". The story of one Canadian Roman Catholic woman who has struggled with some of the "realities seen and unseen" of theological education may add background for our discussion on "Women and Men in Theological Education: Exploring the Present, Creating the Future".

I begin with a brief look at how the shifting demography and its resulting new pluralism occurred at St. Michael's, and how it has impacted on me. As a young woman, I experienced a call to ministry and would have liked to have been a priest. Since this was not an option for me, I joined the Sisters of St. Joseph, an order of apostolic women. At that time (in the 1950s), formal theological education for Catholic women was not available in Canada, although during our formation we

had some theological lectures given by priest-professors. When theological study opened up for Catholic women in Canada, it was the MA/PhD route rather than the MDiv. This was the route I followed, although if the MDiv. had been open to women at the time, I probably would have chosen it. (It has been suggested that one of the unseen effects of the refusal to ordain Catholic women has been the number of Catholic women who studied theology as an academic discipline and whose impact is being felt in the various theological discourses.)

When I began my doctoral studies in 1973, our dean was Elliot Allen, a marvellous man of vision and practicality, one of the founders of the Toronto School of Theology. Al encouraged me and other women to pursue degrees in theology. It was Al who not only brought women students into our faculty but made it possible for a number of women to join St. Michael's Faculty of Theology as teachers, at a time when there were few, if any, women faculty at TST. Dean Allen's invitation to women to pursue degrees in theology was not only a wise practical measure that added numbers to the student body, it was based on a vision of church, a vision that saw women and men collaborating in the mission of the church.

Soon not only sisters but other lay women, some with babies and children, began to enrol in a number of different degree programmes, including the MDiv. It must have seemed like an "invasion" into what had been an all-male seminary whose sole purpose had been the preparation of men for ordination as priests. St. Michael's quickly grew into a theological faculty with a diverse student body. In 1992, 25% of our MDiv. students were women, one-third of our DMin. candidates were women, and in the other programmes (MRE, MA, ThD/PhD), there were more women than men. Our total enrolment is presently approaching 50% women.¹ The number of women faculty teaching at St. Michael's and the other TST colleges, however, has not kept up with this increase in women students.²

The increase in the number of women students is a dramatic change from the situation in 1977 when I began to teach at St. Michael's. The few women in classes were often seen as "outsiders" who had been allowed into the sacred grove, but it was obvious that not everyone appreciated their presence. I still recall the class in which I became conscious of just how

dramatic the shift had been. From groups of young men with one or two mainly silent women, I suddenly had a group of articulate women, already experienced in ministry, and a few quiet young men. At times there were tense sessions. But gradually there has developed a greater comfort-level among the student body composed of women and men of different ages and educational backgrounds. With this greater comfort-level has come the ability to discuss gender issues.

Although there is generally a climate of mutual respect, at the same time theological education continues to be shaped by white, male clerics. Although women are involved on committees and in administration, the prevailing ethos is still predominantly clerical. This is a reality which is both seen and unseen. As Dr. Stairs stated: "We create a safe space where plurality can be explored yet we deal with environments that can dissolve all too quickly into adversarial or therapeutic nightmares." The fact that Catholic women will always (or at least for the foreseeable future) be lay women, dependent on male clerics for their admission into most ministerial situations, means that there is an inequality in the very structures of our institutions. I think of one bright young woman in my Foundations of Theology class this year who said, "I'm learning all these wonderful things, but who is going to listen to me?" I wanted to reassure her that her voice is important for the church (and I believe that it is), but on the practical level this is a real concern. Who will listen to her?

The experience of discovering that one has gifts for public ministry, gifts of preaching, presiding at liturgical services, drawing people together into a faith community, but that these are not officially recognized in one's own tradition, is an experience of marginalization. Women may serve as lay ministers, but opportunities for professional lay ministry are severely limited in a church where the emphasis is on the sacramental life and where there is not a strong tradition of paid lay ministers. This reality influences how women experience theological education. Women are being educated for pastoral ministry, but the structures in which this ministry is carried out are not equally accessible to women who cannot be ordained and men who can be ordained. The restriction of ordained ministry to single men seems to some of us to be a suffocation of the gifts of the Spirit. The reality of exclusion and the pain and anger

that often accompany the awareness of this exclusion need to be named, even as we search out the creative possibilities in this situation.

In the second section of her paper, "A Shifting Understanding of Sexuality: Uncovering the Effects of Sexism, Patriarchy and Heterosexism", Dr. Stairs raises the question: "What keeps any of us able to live in the midst of a church and society where sexism, patriarchy and heterosexism are being brought to light?" This is a difficult question for men as well as for women, and is experienced by some of our students in theological education when they are confronted by an analysis of the effects of sexism in the church and society. Some men decide that they cannot be ordained in a church in which there is gender-based discrimination. What can one do? Dr. Stairs suggests that we must have a vision of ministry which includes opportunities to liberate ourselves and others from what may be called "social sin". In situations of oppression, we are either part of the problem or part of the solution. How can we support one another in the task of uncovering the effects of sexism and racism in our own lives and in our church? And having uncovered these devastating effects, what do we do? How does a liberative vision of ministry find expression in praxis?

Dr. Stairs' third shift, the shift in epistemology, is disorienting for people who have thought in terms of "eternal truths". Feminist scholars emphasize the limitations which have been present in theological discourse; voices which have not been heard are being raised. The result is a re-visioning of the theological enterprise. In her book *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza includes a chapter on "Feminist Theological Education" which explores both the resistances and possibilities of a feminist pedagogy.³ The image she uses for women in theological education is that of "resident aliens". In order to work for the transformation of theological education, it is necessary to become qualified residents yet remain foreign-speakers at one and the same time (p. 170). Schüssler Fiorenza's question is: "How can theological education and its intellectual discourses be transformed in such a way that women and others who have been excluded from scholarly discourse and theological education can become speaking subjects and agents for its systemic

change?" (p. 181) To ask this question presupposes a conviction that the clerical academic paradigm is no longer adequate for women *or* men and needs to be changed.

Although the number of women studying and teaching theology in my own institution has increased dramatically, the institutional structures and educational practices continue, in many ways, to reflect the clerical academic paradigm in spite of some significant changes. Optional courses, such as the one I teach on Feminist Perspectives in Systematic Theology, raise some issues for a few students (usually women). The question that we need to address, however, is how can we best prepare *all* our students to minister in very diverse situations in a rapidly changing world.

Finally, Dr. Stairs looked at the shifting economy and the resulting challenges it presents to all our institutions, including the kind of leadership required at this particular time. She pointed to the need for flexibility and collaboration in ministry, attitudes which must be developed by women and men as we move from hierarchical organizational patterns of leadership to collaborative models. We know that such a shift does not just happen. I ask myself if it is even possible within a hierarchically-organized church. Perhaps one place that it can happen is in our theological faculties, where women and men of different ages and backgrounds struggle together to respond to the shifts in demography, sexuality, epistemology, and leadership in creative ways. I look forward to these days as an opportunity to explore this possibility.

Notes

¹ 1992 enrolment in St. Michael's Faculty of Theology:

program	men	women	total
MRE	17	32	49
MA	16	20	36
MDiv	45	15	60
DMin	6	3	9
ThM	6	1	7
ThD/PhD	26	33	59
total	116	104	220

- ² There are 14 full-time women faculty at TST, of whom four are at St. Michael's.
- ³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 168-194.