

## WOMEN IN MINISTRY

At recent Melbourne Seminar Professor Richard Lennan, Boston College, proposed a 3-fold model for addressing change and conversion in the Church<sup>1</sup>:

**Unlearn**  
**Learn**  
**Relearn**

Regarding the topic of Women in Ministry this is particularly apt.

That there needs to be **unlearning** is clearly evident thinking in a myriad of websites, an expanding number of international and national renewal groups, the speeches of prominent leaders<sup>2</sup>, observation of the status quo in parish life, the ongoing departure of women from parishes, the documented apparent *sensus fidelium*, as reflected in National Plenary Council Reports.

Regarding **learning**, Lennan asks: From whom do we learn? To whom do we listen? He maintains that our learning needs to embrace a vision that stretches towards God, reappropriate what we know of the Spirit and encourage us to enter into the bigness of God as people of hope.

**Relearning** 'invites us to look at something in our tradition we can learn again'.

In this regard the ground-breaking research of Dr John Collins is utterly timely<sup>3</sup> and deserves thorough study and 'listening' prior to the forthcoming National Plenary Council. Collins' intent is 'to stimulate frank discussion about the state of ministry in the Australian churches', arising from 'a very close consideration of how the early Christians practiced and experienced the ministry that made them what they were'. It importantly explores ministry per se, not as pertaining to either women or men. Considering these insights will point the way to a very different model from what we know, aligning us with its original gospel vision.

A recovery of the essence of the Greek word *diakonos/Minister or diakonia/ ministry* lies at the heart of his exploration:

1. *Diakonos* is a masculine word but it pertains to both women and men, without distinction. It is not a 'genderised' word. (eg. Paul calls Phoebe *diakonos* of the church. Rm 16:1)
2. *Diakonos* designates an agent carrying out a commission; a medium.  
A window can be a *diakonos* to mediate the light (a very pertinent example); a government minister or emissary can be a *diakonos* to effect a particular task/policy. Paul saw himself as the *diakonos* of God, mediator of the good news, or *diakonos* of the community, called and sent to bring the collection from the gentile communities.
3. As *diakonos* Paul carried the Word of God to communities: forming and enabling them to embody its spirit and life. So the essence of being a minister is to deliver and own the word of God in community, enabling of life, fostering the intimacy of community growth.
4. Communities require structure, no less the church, and people called to *diakonia* are discerned in communities and commissioned accordingly (as in the calling of 'the Seven', Acts 21:8).
5. Importantly, Collins reminds us that nowhere in the New Testament does *diakonia* mean 'lowly service' or helping another (misappropriated in Pope Benedict's Encyclical *God is Love*). Such an interpretation has no doubt relegated women (and men) to the status of self-effacing helper. Gospel service (*diakonia*) is much deeper: a calling to embody the lifegiving mission of the Son of Man, who realigns us to the radical new way of sharing in God's reign, where power is not admissible as a factor at work and all are called to mission.

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<sup>1</sup> Leadership Seminar, sponsored by Melbourne University of Divinity, CTC. East Melbourne, 1 Mar, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Eg. Francis Sullivan, 28 Feb 2020

<sup>3</sup> John N. Collins, **Gateway to Renewal. Reclaiming ministries for women and men.** Morning Star Publishing: Northcote, 2016

Collins' insights about ministry<sup>4</sup>, are foundational to the conversation about whether women ought be ordained as deacons or priests. His publications develop these arguments. But to realign current thinking with that of the early church is a critical point of departure, dispelling the myth of ministry as merely a call to charity. It broadens the horizon, as Lennan implies, to understanding it as a call and commission discerned in community, to women and men who are recognized as emissaries of God's Word, able to assist people to appropriate it in daily life, and whose lives are clearly patterned on the model of the Son of Man, sent by God to draw people into God's lifegiving Reign.

### **In this light the task is to ponder**

- The undisputed fact that the call to *diakonia of the word* pertains to women and men
- The nature of inclusive ministry that will best serve God's Reign today.
- What it means to be a minister of the Word of God.
- How a call to such ministry can be discerned (differentiating from current practice)
- How to form communities oriented to an intimate living of God's word (in lieu of the current tendency to form mega parishes because of the perceived shortage of ministers -viz ordained male clerics).

To do anything less belies the New Testament vision of ministry.

Not all are called and commissioned to ministry/diakonia. Some women and men will hear a calling to ministerial service and will seek ways to receive the commission from the community; others, the community will itself identify and proceed to call and commission them.

Unequivocally, however, the process of '**relearning**' affirms that from the Church's earliest experience women and men, equally, were called – and commissioned – to lifegiving gospel service.

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<sup>4</sup> **Ibid**, 4: Michael Putney, former Bishop of Townsville, profoundly observed in 1993, '[Collins' study] fundamentally changes one's approach to ministry in the Church and throws into doubt the arguments of most of the books on ministry in the past fifty years. The whole area of theology can never be the same'.