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WOMEN-CHURCH

Feminist Concept, Religious Commitment, Women's Movement

Mary E. Hunt

Women-church is a movement of autonomous groups seeking to actualize "a discipleship of equals." It is an example of how a feminist concept, coupled with religious commitment, animates a women's movement. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is an integral part of women-church, a theologian whose ideas and dedication have sparked, guided, and sustained the movement. This essay explores the roots of the women-church movement, its impact on the larger world of religion, and its contribution to the future of religious feminism. This critical analysis honors Elisabeth's contribution and invites more feminist participation in shaping justice-seeking communities. Women-church is a living example of the fact that feminist studies in religion are dangerous to those who seek to preserve kyriarchy and liberating to those who envision change.

Lots of feminist theology is in print but less of it is in action. Women-church is an exception to the rule, an example of how a feminist concept, coupled with religious commitment, animates a women's movement. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is an integral part of women-church, a theologian whose ideas and dedication have sparked, guided, and sustained the movement. This essay honors her contribution and invites more critical feminist participation in shaping justice-seeking communities.

A typical women-church group, if such a thing exists, meets periodically in the homes of its members for a meal and a ritual. Members lead the group in worship and activity, but there is no fixed leadership. While the group may include clergy (ordained in certain denominations), women-church groups do not typically ordain anyone and do not recognize lay/clergy distinctions in es-

sence or function. Rather, the groups strive to be a "discipleship of equals," a democratic assembly in which the various talents of the members are put to the service of the community. Each group is autonomous though all are welcome to be part of the Women-Church Convergence, a coalition of such groups that meets annually for education and networking.

How did women-church come into being, what impact is it having, and what does it contribute to the future of religious feminism? I will answer these questions with special reference to Elisabeth's work. There are other sources of inspiration for women-church, including the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Diann L. Neu, and myself.[1] But Elisabeth's groundbreaking analysis and steadfast accompaniment of the movement over nearly thirty years is what I celebrate in this writing.

The Development of Women-Church

Women-church is a feminist concept that arose in a Catholic context but has since spread well beyond it. From the late 1950s, when Swedish Lutheran women were ordained to the priesthood, to the mid-1970s, when Episcopal women in the United States were ordained, Catholic women named the injustice of being prohibited from ordination and vowed to right it. Their efforts, initiated by Mary B. Lynch in the United States, resulted in a conference in 1975 in Detroit, Michigan, "Women in Future Priesthood Now—A Call for Action," at which women declared the right to test their priestly vocations and to develop a renewed priestly ministry.

At that meeting, Elisabeth reiterated a suggestion she made in an early book on ministry that women must become bishops first and only then priests and deacons so as not to be cast into subservient roles.[2] This was sage advice, although she was clear even in 1975 that "the ordination of women can not simply mean their addition and integration into the clergy but implies a psychological, structural and theological transformation of the church" (100).

In the same lecture, Elisabeth called for a "New Christian Sisterhood" (foreshadowing women-church, perhaps) that would unite women, especially those in religious congregations and those who do not belong to such groups (what later became known as the nun-woman/laywoman split). She was prescient in her view that the kyriarchy would be happy to pit women against women, or-

[1] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986); Mary E. Hunt and Diann L. Neu, *Women-Church Sourcebook* (Silver Spring, MD: WATERworks Press, 1993), and Mary E. Hunt, "Women-Church" in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether, 3 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 3:1243–49.

[2] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Women Apostles: The Testament of Scripture, in *Women and Catholic Priesthood: An Expanded Vision, Proceedings of the Detroit Ordination Conference*, ed. Anne Marie Gardiner (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 100.

dained against lay, and in so doing maintain its hierarchal structure with a few token women in key places. While no Catholic women are yet ordained validly and licitly, such a move may not be far off. Inexplicably, some women actually favor it and call for the ordination of women as deacons as a first step toward equality. Apparently, they don't know or reject Elisabeth's analysis.

The Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) formed after the Detroit meeting and carried a feminist agenda for Catholic women. It seemed only a matter of time before the hierarchy's denial of women's agency—and the tawdry scholarship it represented—would be exposed and women would be ordained. Shortly thereafter, however, in its "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood" (1976), the Vatican made clear that women could not be ordained because Jesus had not named any women disciples and women do not bear a "natural resemblance" to Jesus in the Eucharist (in other words, women are not male). Such specious reasoning only further insulted Catholic feminists, who realized the pitiful theological foundation that undergirded rank discrimination and vowed to do better.

In 1978, a second conference on ordination took place in Baltimore, Maryland, at which both Elisabeth and I spoke about the plurality of Catholic approaches to theology and the feminist future of Catholic women.[3] Even if priesthood were denied, the full participation of women in the ministry and decision-making of the church were at stake. Many Catholic feminists had completed theological degrees, both professional and academic, and were prepared with all the requirements for ordination minus the anatomy. It remains intellectually and spiritually shocking in a postmodern age to realize how a biologistic reading of texts still keeps women from ordination. Theologians find it hard to explain in a symbolic universe how a one-dimensional analysis—biological maleness as constituent of qualification for ordination—could have any credibility. This inadequate explanation "works" only insofar as kyriarchal power can absolutize it.

Through this kind of theopolitical discussion Catholic feminists came to realize that power, not purity of doctrine, was at stake. Shared leadership in sacrament and real estate was in the balance, rather than some trumped-up notion of apostolic succession that not even the bishops were naïve enough to believe. So instead of insisting on being admitted to the priesthood, which was not likely to happen officially any time soon, a well-trained and highly experienced cadre of Catholic women set about creating new organizations like WOC and WATER (the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual) to reshape

[3] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "To Comfort or to Challenge: Theological Reflections on the Pre-Conference Process," 43–60; and Mary E. Hunt, "Roman Catholic Ministry: Patriarchal Past, Feminist Future," 31–42, both in *New Woman, New Church, New Priestly Ministry: Proceedings of the Second Conference on the Ordination of Roman Catholic Women (November 10–12, 1978)*, ed. Maureen Dwyer (Rochester, NY: Women's Ordination Conference, 1980).

their religious communities and extend those networks through the National Coalition of American Nuns and the National Assembly of Women Religious, and to attend to the needs of an increasingly unjust world by becoming scholars, lawyers, social workers, medical professionals, and community activists. This commitment to a new way of being religious consistent with feminist principles grounded the women-church movement.

These groups and individuals formed the "Women of the Church Coalition" to create a space in which to network and a platform from which to speak. The agenda broadened from ordination to a host of social justice issues including, eventually, reproductive justice and rights for same-sex loving persons.

In 1981, the Center of Concern, a Jesuit-funded think tank in Washington, D.C., sponsored a conference entitled "Women Moving Church" at which Elisabeth introduced the term *ekklesia gynaikon*, the ecclesia of women. Diann Neu, a feminist liturgist, and Elisabeth agreed that in English it would best be rendered *women-church*. Elisabeth included this work in the Epilogue to *In Memory of Her*.[4] In words that remain equally powerful decades later, she wrote, "Commitment to the *ekklesia* of women as the people of God is sustained in consistent resistance to all forms of patriarchal oppression and in political involvement in women's struggles for liberation and equality" (351).

Women-church was necessary if a Christian community were to be a discipleship of equals because *church* signaled exclusively male leadership. It was based on the Greek model of the *ekklesia*, which was the regularly convoked assembly of free male citizens who came together to make decisions for themselves, their wives and children, their slaves and animals. If those who were marginalized were to be included, they had to have rhetorical representation as well as voice and vote. So, the term *women* came to signify those who had been left out. Only by including the marginalized in "women-church" could a "discipleship of equals" come into being.

The term is often confused with the notion of "a church for women only." Indeed, many women-church groups remain women-only in an effort to find and amplify women's long-silenced voices. But the movement as such is paradoxically inclusive to the same degree that traditional "church" was exclusive. Elisabeth wrote of women-church as a locus from which women, "in the angry power of the Spirit, are sent forth to feed, heal, and liberate."[5]

She also coined *kyriarchy* to name the fundamental structural problem that Catholics face.[6] It is not simply, she argued, that sexism is a problem. The hierarchical system itself is at issue, built on and held in place by interlock-

[4] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 343–51.

[5] Ibid., 346.

[6] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 7–8; also in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 118–24, 211.

ing structures of lordship, that is, racism, classism, heterosexism, and colonialism, as well as sexism and other forms of oppression that create inequality and, woven together, intensify its impact.

Elisabeth's work dovetailed with and informed nascent feminist religious groups. She wrote from her own experience as a Catholic woman trained for ministry and academic work in theology but with no place in the Catholic priesthood nor in the magisterium or teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Hers is feminist theology based on experience, refracted through the critical lenses of sophisticated theoretical tools, and incarnated by the many women (and some men) who make up a grassroots movement to be church. While numbers have never been huge, the impact of the women-church movement goes well beyond its adherents to shaping the larger debate among progressive Christians.

It became increasingly clear that ordination in the Roman Catholic sacramental system would only reinscribe the kyriarchal model of ministry, coopting women into a system that does not work with men. The clerical system is fundamentally flawed insofar as it creates a power caste that makes decisions both practical and spiritual, privileging the clergy and oppressing the laity. New models of church, not simply tweaking the notion of ordination, are needed.

In 1983, the Women of the Church Coalition convened a conference called "From Generation to Generation: Woman-Church Speaks." This gathering of several thousand in Chicago, Illinois, marked the beginning of a new self-understanding for Catholic feminists and their friends, one in which ministry, not ordination, was central. The conference provided women a chance to speak not simply about church injustice, but *as church* about myriad forms of economic and political injustice including racism, the U.S. government's intervention in El Salvador, and of course, the Roman Catholic Church's complicity in maintaining exclusive structures and oppressive teachings, for example against the use of contraceptives, that harm women. It was time to "be church," not simply to critique the (kyriarchal) Church.

Women (and a few men) left this gathering fired up to replicate the dynamics they had experienced: women-led liturgies, including the Eucharist; discussions of how feminist religious values influence work and political decisions; and community in the form of shared meals, dancing, and singing. Local groups were infused with the energy of this meeting, and their numbers grew.

Three thousand women (and a few men) strong, they gathered in 1987 in Cincinnati, Ohio, for "Women-Church: Claiming Our Power." The power in question was political, economic, spiritual, and sexual as religious feminists explored and proclaimed their views. The name change from *woman* to *women* signaled increasing diversity, beginning with Protestant women and including women from several nonwhite groups including Latinas and African American women.

Gloria Steinem and other leaders of the larger women's movement also par-

ticipated in the meeting. They expressed their delight that religious feminists were not the timid "church ladies" they might have imagined, but rather were committed to the same issues of equal wages, childcare, reproductive health care, and the like that motivated other women. A signal contribution was made by Catholics for a Free Choice, who proved that religious feminists were not afraid to buck the tide in their church and stand as Catholics with women who chose to have abortions. This added credibility to the women-church movement even though it also caused internal dissension among those who were not pro-choice. Likewise, explicit acceptance of lesbian women, including some in prominent public roles, made clear that women-church was for *all* women, and that its allegiance finally was to women and not to the kyriarchal church. In retrospect, this all seems quite tame, but in the moment, it was vexed and hard wrought.

Participants went back to their local groups and to the organizations and academic institutions where they worked with a renewed sense that feminist religious insights and commitments play a vital role in social change. The lines between so-called secular and so-called religious groups grew thinner with increased appreciation for the critical feminist work of scholar/activists in religion. For example, Elisabeth insisted that kyriarchal analysis applied to state as well as church, and that a "discipleship of equals" was a good model for political units as well as religious ones.

More women-church groups sprang up both in the United States and abroad. A group in Seoul, Korea, led by the Reverend Sook-Ja called itself "Women-Church" even though it was part of the larger Presbyterian community. In Iceland, the Reverend Audur Eir Vilhajalmsdottir, the first woman ordained in the Lutheran Church there, began Kvenna Kirkjan, a women-church congregation. *Frauen-kirchen* groups developed in Germany and Switzerland while *mujer-iglesia* took form in Argentina and Uruguay. None of these were large movements—usually a group or a handful of groups—but they were bringing the same theopolitical sensibility to the challenge of being religious.

In 1993, women gathered again in Albuquerque, New Mexico, to act as "Women-Church: Weavers of Change." Theopolitical issues were on the table and rituals were rich in culturally diverse expressions of the sacred. But the challenges of being women-church across racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, the real grappling with racism, discrimination against people with disabilities, issues of privilege, and the use/abuse of symbols and prayers from cultures other than the dominant one added a dose of reality to the women-church movement. Like other groups in the 1990s, women-church had to confront the diversity among women in the movement, especially the growing gaps between those with resources and those without that infested the whole culture. The meeting was hard, and participants went home chastened by the discussions but resolved to make the women-church movement a place where women without

fear stand for justice without limits. It was fifteen years before the group ventured another large public gathering.

Meanwhile, conversations continued on language and imagery of the divine, models of ministry, feminist ethical stances on controversial moral issues including abortion and homosexuality, as well as on ecology, war, and racism, spirituality, biblical studies, and feminist theological education. Local groups as well as nationally based ones offered courses and workshops, lectures and meetings where theologians and other colleagues struggled with feminist religious insights. It was a time of deepening the initial insights that set the movement in process. Elisabeth gathered her insights into a useful compendium, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation*, which traces the development of the many threads that comprise women-church the movement and women-church theology.[7]

From 1993 to the early 2000s, women-church deepened in experience. Local groups, like Sisters against Sexism (SAS) in Washington, D.C., which Elisabeth acknowledged in *In Memory of Her*, became close-knit communities. Resources for worship became increasingly diverse with Buddhist, Goddess, Jewish, and other religious contributions adding to the Christian store. Some women outgrew their local groups, preferring to worship and seek community in larger progressive Catholic parishes or in Protestant denominations where some of them were ordained, or simply left as part of the normal attrition of any movement. But those who stayed in women-church groups developed all manner of creativity—sponsoring seders, retreats, naming ceremonies to welcome children, blessings of relationships, and even funerals—as part of the human right to be religious on women's own terms, what kyriarchy prohibits.

Re-Imagining was a parallel, predominantly Protestant movement in the late twentieth century that addressed similar issues at large and small gatherings as well as in publications.[8] The first Re-Imagining meeting, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1993, became a cause célèbre among the religious Right. They accused the mainly churchgoing and/or ordained Protestant participants (there was a Catholic contingent of the women-church variety but feminist Protestants largely planned the meeting) of abandoning Jesus and forsaking God for secular feminism and Goddess worship. Of course, this media hype gained international attention for feminist work in religion. But the biased reporting and sensationalized articles bore little resemblance to what actually took place at the meeting. Critics even cobbled together an audio tape, excerpting parts of

[7] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklēsia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

[8] Mary E. Hunt, "Another Fine Women's Conference," in *Re-membering and Re-Imagining*, ed. Nancy J. Berneking and Pamela Carter Joern (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 190–92.

several speeches but taking words and phrases out of context to distort what speakers had said.

Negative repercussions were felt in denominations that provided funding (for example, the Bicentennial Fund of the Presbyterian Church USA), especially by women who were vulnerable in church-related jobs. Some were fired, not rehired, or otherwise penalized for their participation in a marvelous creative conference that was hyped beyond recognition. Conservative groups like the Institute for Religion and Democracy recognized to their horror that feminist work in religion might encourage and ignite social change. In the echo of Mary Daly, if God were no longer Father, then the fathers could no longer rule in church or in state. While nothing was said or done at the Re-Imagining conference that was not well-known in feminist theological circles beforehand, this time, the general public (albeit through slanted news reports) became aware of the power of feminist religious thinking.

The marked difference between the women-church movement and the Re-Imagining community in its early days was in their respective relationships to institutional churches. Not one nickel of kyriarchal Roman Catholic Church money was spent in the service of women-church. Some Catholic women's religious communities were a source of both cash and staff, since some women religious were able to do women-church work as part of their jobs with their congregations. By contrast, the first Re-Imagining conference counted on large donations from institutional Protestant churches both in money and in staff time. This is not surprising given that many Protestant women had been ordained and/or risen in the bureaucracies of their denominations so as to have some leverage on the use of resources, something that virtually no Catholic woman could claim. But it meant that the denominations felt some ownership in a meeting that scandalized their growing right-wing groups. In the case of Re-Imagining, the fallout was that ordained women and those who serve churches could be disciplined both formally and informally for their participation in a meeting that included intercommunion, feminist theological reimaginings of multiple topics, and a general sense that women were church if not women-church.

Re-Imagining ceased work shortly after the 2003 conference celebrating its tenth anniversary. Resources simply could not be stretched any more. The feminist agenda among U.S. Protestant women is dispersed across denominational staffs, for example, the Justice and Witness Ministries of the United Church of Christ, the Methodist Women's Division, and the like. But there is at present no replacement for Re-Imagining, no equivalent of women-church that runs across Protestant lines.

The Women-Church Convergence has carried the feminist agenda of Catholic women in the years since the Albuquerque meeting. It is "a coalition of autonomous Catholic-rooted groups raising a feminist voice . . . commit-

ted to an ekklesia of women which is participative, egalitarian and self-governing. . . . A discipleship of equals, moving from a paradigm of domination to one of mutuality . . . to eradicate patriarchy, especially sexism and racism, in order to transform church and society."[9]

The Convergence meets twice a year (in person and by telephone) to offer education and networking to its thirty-five member groups (including Catholics for Choice, the National Coalition of American Nuns, BVM Network for Women's Issues, The Grail Women's Task Force, WOC, WATER, and so forth) and to speak out on issues of political and ecclesial import. In 2008, for example, the group castigated the efforts by some U.S. Catholic bishops to convince Catholics to vote against pro-choice candidates. The Convergence also registered strong support for Louise Lears, a nun placed under interdict by a local bishop for her support of women's ordination.

In 2007, the Convergence marked its twenty-fifth anniversary with a conference in Chicago, "Celebrating Catholic Feminist Ministries: A Women-Church Forum." Again, Elisabeth provided critical analysis in a presentation entitled "The Open House of Divine Wisdom," in which she renewed and refreshed the vision of wo/men-church (note the virgule that has come into her later writing to include men and women).[10] She argued that a "feminist vision of a radical democratic Catholic church" still eludes given the corruption of the kyriarchal church and the backlash it has engendered against efforts to live in egalitarian communities. She reprised her earlier contention that the "non-ordination of women" has resulted in Catholic women not being "'ordered' and hierarchically 'disciplined'" so that they are free to do what needs to be done.[11] She invited the assembled "to celebrate each other's work and struggles, to find hope when we are tempted to despair, to gather around Divine Wisdom's table and ask for Her grace of transformative imagination" (7). This was vintage Schüssler Fiorenza, a fitting start to a conference that focused on a range of feminist ministries: political, community-building, feminist theologies, spiritualities for justice, and gender/racial justice. More than two decades after women-church began, the kyriarchal church during the papacy of Benedict XVI shows few signs of moving in the direction of a discipleship of equals. But the movement is mature enough to let the needs of the world, not the failings of the institutional church, guide it.

[9] Women-Church Convergence, "Images and Speeches from 2007 Conference," http://www.women-churchconvergence.org/home.htm.

[10] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Open House of Divine Wisdom" (lecture delivered at "Celebrating Catholic Feminist Ministries: A Women-Church Forum," Chicago, Illinois, August 2007).

[11] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Hermann Häring, eds., *The Non-Ordination of Women and the Politics of Power in Concilium* (Glen Rock, NJ: Concilium, 1999/3).

The Impact of Women-Church

Assessing the impact of the women-church movement this early is challenging, and it is important not to lay praise or blame on any one person or group. Rather, we should remember that women-church's impact has been multivalent and varied depending on one's social location. It is also premature to hang too much on any such evaluation, as the movement is still young in comparison with the millennia of the Christian churches. Nonetheless, several illuminating comments can be made.

First, for participants (and I write as one) women-church has been the alternative to leaving the Catholic tradition entirely. As the unjust, sexist, and unworkable clerical model of the kyriarchal church slowly implodes, caused by priest pedophilia cases and episcopal cover-ups, its increasingly precarious financial situation, and the narrowly parochial theological views it espouses, women-church becomes an evermore attractive alternative. Women-church is rooted in the Catholic tradition of love and justice, sacrament and solidarity, but broadly conceived as both a political and ecclesial space in which to strive to build a "discipleship of equals." Likewise, it is a comfortable space in which to worship and celebrate with people who understand their faith in a pluralistic religious context in which no tradition can claim hegemony contra the kyriarchy's embarrassing insistence on being the sole source of salvation. It is also a way to "be church" rather than simply attend church, to be an active shaper in the life and work of one's own community. For many Catholic women, including members of religious congregations, women-church is a touchstone with the tradition we share and a launching pad for our interreligious and postkyriarchal Catholicism.

Second, women-church as a rhetorical device has helped expand Christian women's horizons. Beyond simply being accepted as members of a church that used to (and still does, in many instances) oppress, adherents of women-church are actually creating new spaces and new expressions of church that allow them to move "from margin to center" as bell hooks would have it, and function as protagonists of their own spirituality.[12] This is crucial for Catholics, since kyriarchal space is so corrupt and options for women's religious agency so circumscribed.

Third, women-church has changed the debate about women's ordination. Once considered an unmitigated good, a right that women should struggle for as part of creating a just society, ordination in the Roman Catholic understanding has been unmasked. It is now seen as the way to create a "we/they," "clergy/lay" split in the church, as the means to confine decision-making power to a few, as a tactic for holding the Eucharist hostage in the consecrated hands of priests. Rather, women-church poses the possibility of an egalitarian community in

[12] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

which decision-making is shared and sacramental life is designed by the whole community. For many years, these two views of ordination were held in tension by Catholic feminists who sought to keep pressure on the institution to change its policies as well as to worship and live out their faith in women-church communities. The advent of the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement changed that equation and occasioned new thinking.

Roman Catholic Womenpriests "is an international initiative within the Roman Catholic Church. The mission of Roman Catholic Womenpriests (RCWP) North America is to spiritually prepare, ordain, and support women and men from all states of life, who are theologically qualified, who are committed to an inclusive model of Church, and who are called by the Holy Spirit and their communities to minister within the Roman Catholic Church."[13] Thus far, several dozen women have been ordained, including some as bishops. By locating itself within the Roman Catholic tradition, rather than the Catholic but not Roman tradition of women-church, RCWP seems to be accepting the kyriarchal framework of ordination while at the same time seeking to develop "an inclusive model of Church." Whether one can square this circle remains to be seen.[14]

The RCWP ordinations are not recognized as licit by the kyriarchal church, which has nonetheless taken the defensive posture that such women (and the women and men who support them) excommunicate themselves. In other words, Rome is troubled but not quite sure why! Perhaps the problem, according to Rome, is that the women have taken on sacramental responsibility, something that women-church groups have done for decades. But by imitating the form of kyriarchy rather than creating new models, RCWP has incurred the wrath of the Church. While it is possible to largely ignore Rome, the unfortunate result in some cases is that RCWP's agenda may be set by its oppressors rather than by those with whom it seeks to minister.

RCWP is a member of the Women-Church Convergence, signaling its identity as a feminist group that understands the need for serious structural change. Women-church groups respect and embrace RCWP as another group finding a way to transform kyriarchy. I suspect that history will reveal certain differences of opinion within RCWP, as has happened in many other groups, leading to the seemingly contradictory efforts to get ordained and be inclusive. But what is clear is that the ideology of women-church (in other words, its opposition to hierarchical ordination and its encouragement of a discipleship of equals) has

[13] Roman Catholic Womenpriests, http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org.

[14] See Marian Ronan, "Ethical Challenges Confronting the Roman Catholic Women's Ordination Movement in the Twenty-first Century," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 149–69; and Hellena Moon, "Womenpriests: Radical Change or More of the Same?" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 115–34.

functioned as a brake on all-out efforts to get women ordained within the structures of the kyriarchal church.

Fourth, women-church is an explicitly ecumenical and interfaith articulation of Christianity. What began as a Catholic women's movement now includes non-Catholic members, including a large number of mainline Protestants. This is due both to the power of women-church as an idea and to the dearth of alternatives. For example, for many women ministers it is a relief to have a group of their own where they are not expected to be the ones who lead every service, solve every problem. The closest parallel to women-church groups seems to be Rosh Hodesh groups.

Women-Church's Contribution to the Future of Religious Feminism

We find clues about the future of religious feminism in the women-church experience. Some of these relate to the limitations on women-church, and as such function as a critique of a movement that needs outside input to develop its own next step. First, women-church has to resolve a number of issues regarding ministry and leadership. While saying that hierarchical ordination is an inadequate model for ministry is fine, there are few well-theorized feminist models that might take its place. This problem faces all religious feminists who seek to develop more egalitarian ways of participating in their faith traditions and then have to live them out in the daily struggle to be religious. Ideas and commitments are one thing, but operationalizing them in movements is quite another.

We are far from knowing how to empower and give public recognition to women-church leaders both within our groups and as they function as part of the larger social setting. For example, one women-church minister was selected as the chair of a board that usually has an ordained—that is, recognized and accountable to her denomination—person in the position. Imagine the confusion among the Catholic priests, not to mention among other board members, as well as her own confusion about her role and place. This is not an excuse to pass over such persons in leadership, but an imperative to think through lines of accountability and issues of representation.

Little guidance exists on how to train, license, and sustain high quality ministers in feminist ways. Although little is taught in seminaries today, developing feminist practices of professional boundaries, feminist spiritual practices, and feminist ministerial practices is necessary. A new study reveals how limited seminary offerings are in the sex education and the feminist and LGBTQ work in religion that women-church ministers need to function well in their settings.[15]

[15] Kate M. Ott, Study Director, "Sex and the Seminary: Preparing Ministers for Sexual Health and Justice," Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 2009, http://www.religiousinstitute.org/SeminaryReport.html.

All of this sets an ambitious agenda for feminists in religious studies since we will have to shape and design such programs for the well-being of our communities.

Second, women-church up to now is a movement of adults, with very few children. It is mostly women who have been "formed" in a well-defined religious tradition with values and practices that can be brought along into the hybridity that is women-church. As such, the movement will die out in two generations unless explicit attention is paid to how children are received, socialized, and empowered in women-church. This, too, is a problem for feminist religious studies at large since there are few feminist resources for teaching children and even fewer professionals trained to use them. Moreover, our children are growing up in a religiously diverse world with technology that allows them access to one another in ways unimagined by previous generations. Perhaps they will teach the women-church movement! In the meantime, we need sustained attention to children's faith development in all feminist communities.

Third, the term *women-church* continues to limit as much as it liberates since so much confusion attends it. In the same way, *kyriarchy* remains a strange and foreign word for many. "Discipleship of equals" gets used in a variety of ways that contradicts its original intent. This suggests both a need for feminist studies in religion to be articulated in ways that are understandable and accessible to the average person, and to be communicated by practitioners in ways that relate easily to the experiences of those most deeply affected by its insights. This requires not a "dumbing down" of key concepts but a ratcheting up of efforts to communicate clearly and with simple, sensible examples.

Fourth, women-church remains a small movement with little collective sense of size or reach, trajectory or accomplishments. Women-church needs some good survey research to know what it is doing and with whom it is doing it. Careful attention to preserving and archiving its history is another need that is generalizable across the field of feminist studies in religion.[16]

Feminist scholarship both in the theological areas and in cognate social sciences is required to broaden the insights that ground women-church especially in racial/ethnic groups that have been marginalized in the mainstream religions. This will help explain what feminists in those groups see as priorities and how they might shape the larger movement. It may be that women-church and other time-bound movements will morph into something more inclusive and effective, but not without research and writing.

Women-church is a dynamic example of feminist religious scholarship combined with feminist religious commitment lived out in a feminist religious movement. It is exciting to see scholarly work expressed by faith communities that truly would not exist in the same form or with the same self-consciousness

[16] Women-Church Convergence materials are archived at Women and Leadership Archives, Ann Ida Gannon, BVM, Center for Women and Leadership, Loyola University, Chicago, http://www.luc.edu/wla/pdfs/WCC.pdf.

without such insights. Women-church theologians lecture widely, teach constantly, and engage in strategizing with the larger movement as solid models of feminist praxis.

Ideas are powerful, commitments are motivating, and movements are born. It is hard work, usually thankless and exhausting. The work of being women-church has intellectual and spiritual integrity even in the inevitable disagreements and debate over issues of the day. But in the final analysis, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's contribution demonstrates, feminist studies in religion are dangerous to those who seek to preserve kyriarchy and liberating to those who envision change.