
“Women, Come!”

Transforming the Difficult but Indispensable Church

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It is a privilege to participate in this *Festschrift* for one of my own teachers, Norma Cook Everist, and to reflect on two issues about which she was passionately concerned: women’s ministerial leadership, and the church itself. In this article, I want to connect them in the following way: describing the ongoing need for more women in ministerial leadership positions to visually embody the continuing transformation the Holy Spirit is working in the church for the sake of the gospel and the world.

It is my firm belief that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), inviting the church—the body of Christ in the world—to grow, and to be transformed. In each individual congregation, this invitation takes a different shape, depending on the context and what is needed for the most faithful proclamation and embodiment of the gospel in its place and time. But, in all places and spaces where the church finds itself, the Spirit is both calling for and creating fresh instantiations of the body of Christ that are diverse, welcoming, and inclusive, and that include the “bodies” of all God’s children. More and diverse “bodies” are needed in the church—both in the pews and in leadership. The reflection in this article on the need for more women in leadership is one way to exemplify and highlight the larger call for more diversity in the ELCA.

As it stands now, the “body” of the ELCA is still overwhelmingly white, and the leadership “body” is still predominantly white and male. The numbers from the recent Pew Research Center data (2015) indicate that 95% of ELCA members are white;¹ and the most recent statistics available on the ELCA website (Dec. 31, 2018) state that only 32% of clergy on the ELCA roster are women.²

This last figure is unsettling, given the fact that ELCA seminary populations are much more balanced between men and women. For example, in the last four years of data from the Wartburg Theological Seminary graduating class (2018-2021), Wartburg has had more female-identifying students than male-identifying

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students in all categories: MDiv, MADM (Diaconal Ministry), and MA. When you look back even further, at the data from roughly the last ten years (2012-2021), the percentage of female-identifying students is 56%.³ According to the ELCA, this same pattern is reflected across the ELCA seminary system, where “the numbers of women and men preparing for ministry are about equal.”⁴ Why, then, are there not more women on the ELCA clergy roster? More about that later.

So, as we move further into the twenty-first century, nearing a quarter of the way through now, I argue that the body of the church needs to continue to transform—not for reasons of political correctness, not for reasons of numerical growth, and not for reasons of moral fairness or equity. No, the church answers only to the Triune God and to the call of the Holy Spirit to be a faithful expression of the body of Christ in the world. And when we look at Jesus’ own ministry, and the way he used his own body in that ministry of healing, forgiveness, and restoration, we see that Christ’s body is a vulnerable body, an open body, a body that resists easy categorizations and dichotomies. It is an inclusive, welcoming

1. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/evangelical-lutheran-church-in-america-elca/racial-and-ethnic-composition/#demographic-information>, accessed January 11, 2022.

2. https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/ELCA-Facts?_ga=2.192438249.297099870.1641997440-1735258858.1640623384, accessed January 11, 2022.

3. With gratitude to Wartburg Theological Seminary Registrar, Kevin Anderson, for compiling this information.

4. https://www.elca.org/News-and-Events/ELCA-Facts?_ga=2.192438249.297099870.1641997440-1735258858.1640623384, accessed January 11, 2022.

body, a body in-service to the other. The church, then—Christ’s body in the twenty-first century—is called to be such a body, too.

For this reason, the church needs many bodies to be the body of Christ—as many bodies as are in the world, as many bodies as there are children of God: queer bodies, immigrant bodies, black and brown bodies, red and blue bodies, rich and poor bodies, old and young bodies. The ELCA is already actively engaged in responding to the Spirit’s call, of course, and we need to continue to do so. One of the ways that the church can continue to respond faithfully to this invitation of the Holy Spirit is by raising up and celebrating diverse leaders in public ministry. When we embody in our leadership the diversity, inclusion, and belonging we want to see in our pews, we make a strong statement about what we value, whom we trust, and the kind of “body” we want to be.

In this article, then, I make the argument that congregations, synods, church-affiliated organizations, and church-related institutions need to continue to advocate strongly and actively for women’s leadership. This is one concrete way that the church can continue to live into the call of the Holy Spirit to transform itself for the sake of the gospel and the world. To be clear, I am focusing on women in leadership to honor Dr. Everist, and not to the exclusion of other categories of underrepresented and much-needed public ministers. In what follows, I use women as one example of the kind of diversity the church needs to foster, as a way to reflect concretely and particularly on the importance of diversifying leadership in the ELCA.

The argument in this article proceeds as follows. First, I note the importance of seeing and experiencing something different (women in leadership) as a means of helping us imagine how to embody something different. Even though we are celebrating fifty years of women’s ordination in the ELCA, this critical effort continues. Second, I share how embodying something different (a diverse and “difficult” church) can help foster a society that can imagine more welcoming, inclusive ways of being. I conclude by emphasizing how embodying the changes the Spirit is initiating is one important way the church faithfully proclaims the transformative, welcoming presence of Christ in our midst.

Seeing something different

I take as my starting point a small book, compiled by Norma Cook Everist and Sandy Berg, titled, *And the Women Came One Hundred and More... the stories of the first women degree candidates at Wartburg Seminary*. In this book, Everist and Berg offer a brief account of the 1970 convention of The American Lutheran Church, which ratified the ordination of women: 560 “yes” votes to 414 “no” votes, with one abstention. (Wouldn’t you love to know the story of that abstention?) The text of that resolution reads as follows:

Whereas men and women are both resources for ministry in the church and each other in the pastoral role, and whereas, women are prepared to serve and have been certified for call and ordination, therefore be it resolved,

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that the Church Council be requested to recommend to the General Convention which will meet in San Antonio October of 1970, that women be eligible for call and ordination in The American Lutheran Church.⁵

The bulk of the book, however, is devoted to the women’s stories: the first women who studied at Wartburg Seminary for certification for ordination. The stories begin with Carol Olson, the first woman accepted to a degree program at Wartburg in the fall of 1970, and end with Sheryl Biegert, who began her time at Wartburg Seminary in 1983.

Many of these women talked about the challenges they faced, not only in their parishes, but in seminary as well, from other students who thought they shouldn’t be there. Their “bodies” were not the bodies that were supposed to be in the classroom, in the pulpit, and behind the altar. Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl, who went on to become a bishop, said, “My own emerging feminism, the small number of women students on campus and the sexist climate of the seminary community made my first two years there something I wouldn’t go into debt for again. I earned my stripes as a pioneer, however, and those early battles have shaped my perspective on women’s issues and on ministry.”⁶

These women continue to inspire today’s readers with their commitments to opening doors for others, creating a church that is more inclusive and welcoming, and combating sexism and racism in the church. Over and over again, in the various congregations in which they served, these women were the first female interns, the first female pastors that parishioners had experienced; and it is

5. Norma Everist and Sandy Berg, *And the Women Came One Hundred and More*, (Dubuque, Iowa: Wartburg Theological Seminary, 1983), v. The Lutheran Church in America also voted that year to allow for the ordination of women, with a more straightforward vote: “a simple voice vote that altered one word in the constitution of that body: “A man may be ordained...” was changed to “a person may be ordained.” *Theology, Tradition, and Turbulent Times: Ordination of Women in the Lutheran Church*, Donna L. Koch, MA Thesis, Old Dominion University, 2001, 2.

https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=history_etds#:~:text=For%20millions%20of%20Lutherans%20in,women%20to%20join%20the%20clergy, accessed January 11, 2022.

6. Everist and Berg, *And the Women Came*, 5.

their "bodies" that created space for my own body, and the bodies of other women who came after them. While these women report a great deal of support and encouragement, many of them also voiced the myriad ways sexism and patriarchy challenged their very existence as public ministers. Another future bishop, April Larson, reported that even in her second call, she often was seen as an assistant pastor to her husband, "Pastor Judd," with whom she was co-pastoring. She stated, "When Judd presents our ideas, they are more acceptable. That's painful. Sexism is subtle. One can ignore it, but the effects are cumulative."⁷

While many of the women had a strong sense of call from an early age—even before ordination would have been a possibility—many others talked about their struggles with their sense of call, not sure that seminary was for them, and lacking confidence in their own abilities. None of them would have grown up in the Lutheran Church with a female pastor as a role model, and yet, they persevered, and in doing so, modeled for others what the church could be. To this end, Marsha Jark-Swain said, "My hope for the future is that there be a climate in the church that generously affirms the ministry of women in the church and that ordained women be considered necessary to model the full humanity of the Church."⁸

The reality is that even today, we are still working to fully realize that hope. This sad truth is described in a recent book by Mindy Makant, which celebrates fifty years of women's ordination in the ELCA. Makant's research makes clear that while many things have changed for women in ministry, unfortunately, too many things are still the same. The difficulties women continue to face in public ministry exemplify the larger challenges so many ELCA congregations are experiencing in transforming their own "bodies" with greater diversity and openness. Yet, at the same time, the stories she shares exemplify how transformative it is to have women in ministerial leadership; how it opens individuals and congregations to imagine a different way of being church, a different way of "embodying" the gospel in the world.

Makant's book is titled *Holy Mischief: in Honor and Celebration of Women in Ministry*. For this book, she interviewed a total of eighty-five female pastors in the ELCA, and nine male bishops.⁹ Makant uses a statement from Anne Lamotte, who says that stories are like flashlights that shine a light in one place, and offers the following about the book as a whole:

This book is intended to tell a story...I have asked the women I have interviewed what they most hoped would come from their participation in such a project. And, as if with a single voice they have responded, "I just want my Bishop and my male colleagues to *know*." To know how different it is to serve the church in a female body. To know how much more difficult even the most daily of

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tasks can be. They want their parishioners to know how much they love them, and how desperately they hope to serve them, and how much harder both parishioners and community members make it for female pastors to do their jobs. And they want and need the whole church to know what they are doing for our sake, for Christ's sake, every day.¹⁰

What I appreciate about this statement is the emphasis she places on actual female bodies; it is not just the concept of women in ministerial leadership, or the idea of female pastors; what she is concerned with are the women who are concretely embodying leadership with their own bodies and encouraging their congregations to embody Christ in new ways. Too many individual Christians and individual congregations support only the idea of women in ministry—and the idea of a more diverse community. However, when they are called upon to act on those ideas and make the kinds of changes necessary to make those ideas come to life in the real world, in real bodies, they resist.

An interview with Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton comes early in the book, and a comment she makes is telling. In response to the question, "What do you see as the greatest struggles faced by female clergy," Bishop Eaton says, "People will leave a congregation when/if it calls a woman. Every time. Every call I served had folks leave. Most of the time before they even met me. So, I learned not to take it personally but it's hard. Because I know they left because I'm a woman."¹¹ This kind of resistance to something new, to *someone* new is tragic; it cuts short any possibility of transformation, any chance at forming creative constructive relationships, any chance of embracing a fresh expression of the gospel—any chance of *being* a fresh embodiment of Christ in the world.

However, resistance to change is not the only story Makant's book tells. Over and over, she also shares stories of people who were willing to think differently because they saw and experienced a woman in ministry, and what that experience meant in their

7. Everist and Berg, *And the Women Came*, 8.

8. Everist and Berg, *And the Women Came*, 32.

9. The specifics of her sources can be found on page 9: Mindy Makant, *Holy Mischief: in Honor and Celebration of Women in Ministry*, (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2019).

10. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 9-10.

11. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 11.

own lives. In chapter three, titled "Embodying Ministry," she talks about the familiar experience of female pastors who were the "first." She writes, "The overwhelming majority of women interviewed expressed recognition that in many interactions with others they are—surprisingly often—the first and perhaps only female pastor or religious leader someone has ever met."¹²

Certainly, this kind of groundbreaking work—being the "embodiment" of something new—is both a gift and a burden. Makant observes: "Because they recognize the importance of experience with a 'good' female pastor, several judicatory officials reported intentionally sending women whom they viewed as particularly strong pastors to supply preach or to serve as interims in congregations resistant to female clergy. Said one, 'Exposure and positive experience of healthy leadership from a strong female pastor often builds the bridges folks need'.¹³ In some ways, this is unfair, of course, and puts a great deal of extra pressure on women to be exemplary—knowing that any mistake they make will not only be attributed to them, but to the next female pastor who comes after them. For this reason, Makant notes that it is not enough for female pastors to be good; they have to be *better*.¹⁴

But, at the same time, the opportunity to open someone's eyes to new possibilities and create the space for a new reality to take shape is incredibly rewarding and powerful—for everyone involved. This is especially true when women are able to embody the vision of a new future that someone is then able to see for themselves. Makant observes, "Quite a few of the women noted that the recognition that they were a role model for the children and youth, especially the little girls, was one of the most humbling and holiest parts of their call."¹⁵ Certainly, to invite young women to experience the reality that they, too, could be pastors, is a great blessing. At the same time, to invite an entire congregation to experience the reality that they, too, could be something different—that they, too, could look different—is also an incredible blessing.

This experience of the new is not only transformative for children, or even for entire congregations. It is also transformative for adults—especially for those who might initially have been resistant to the whole idea of women in ministry. Makant recounts, "One pastor remembers sitting in the hospital waiting room with a male parishioner during his wife's surgery. After they had talked and prayed together, he said, 'Pastor, I didn't vote for you. I could not imagine having a woman as a pastor. But you have changed my mind'.¹⁶

The point this parishioner makes about imagination is an important one. Makant references theologian Sam Wells, and suggests the following:

...sin is often a lack of imagination. We fail to be faithful because we are unable—or unwilling—to imagine life

12. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 42.

13. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 43.

14. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 44.

15. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 57.

16. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 57.

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as God intends. The faithful development and use of our imagination allows us to see the world as it could or should be—and in an important eschatological sense the way it *really* is—rather than the way it appears to be because of the way it has been. A healthy imagination can make the seemingly impossible not only possible but probable.¹⁷

I find this insight both compelling and accurate, as it speaks to the importance of being both willing and able to envision a new reality for oneself, and how crucial that ability is for the proclamation of the gospel. The ability to see what could be, and the courage to work to bring that new possibility to life, are holy talents the Holy Spirit invites us to use as we participate in the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

But, as we all have experienced, it is difficult to imagine something for which we have no frame of reference. But once you have seen, heard, or experienced something new, something transformative, then you are able realize a new possibility for yourself. I argue that still today, women in ministry are one example of this "something new, something transformative." Individuals and congregations that both support and encourage women in ministry are creating these opportunities for imagination that have far-reaching implications for the whole body of Christ.

Embodying something different

The themes of both embracing and embodying the changes that one wants to see in the church are also described in *The Difficult but Indispensable Church*, a volume that Everist edited, published in 2002. In the introduction, Everist makes a case that the church has a critical role to play in the world, but in order to live out its call faithfully, it needs to be a place where people—*bodies*—who come from different backgrounds, experiences, and orientations can work, worship, and live together. In this way, the church can model for society as a whole, the way we need each other, and the reality that only together can each of us thrive. Yet, as she

17. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 103.

notes, this modeling is not something we can do on our own; it is something that flows from the church's existence as the body of Christ. Everist writes, "belonging to a congregation and being faithful to one another are difficult. Equally difficult is being the church active in the world. At this point of greatest challenge, we need to recall for ourselves and for one another that it is Christ who brings us together as a gift. We are indispensable to one another's faith and life. Even if the church is often caricatured as irrelevant in today's society, by the grace of God our call to mission is indispensable to the needs of a hurting world."¹⁸ The church needs all of our bodies to live into this call, including and especially the bodies that are currently missing and/or overlooked in many congregations today.

Norma's own chapter in this book is titled "Re-Membering the Body of Christ: Creating Trustworthy Places to be Different Together," and she emphasizes this same message even more clearly here. Norma writes, "The church *is* good news, the radical, possible impossibility of being joined together with people different from ourselves, even with people we may not like very much. For Christ's sake, the church is the reality of the alienated reconciled, the rebellious returned, the lonely encompassed with love."¹⁹ Notice that Everist uses the same language that Makant uses in her book: making the impossible possible. This is no coincidence. The Bible is full of stories that illustrate this powerful reality: "With God, all things are possible" (Matt 19:26). Our call as disciples of Christ is to both embrace this proclamation and embody it ourselves, such that it becomes real for others as well.

In the divisive, contemptuous culture in which we find ourselves today, I remain convinced that the church is one of the few places where people from all walks of life, with different voting patterns, Ancestry profiles, educational backgrounds, and tastes in music can sit and share a meal side-by-side, working together for the common good and the sharing of the gospel. Everist writes, "We are called to create and sustain a trustworthy environment within congregations for us to be different together in *membership, identity, and companionship*, through our *worship, education, care, stewardship, and decision-making*, even our *conflict*."²⁰ The world desperately needs the church to *be* the church—the body of Christ—in all its messiness and multiplicity. But to do that, the church needs bodies—bodies that visually represent the kinds of differences that all too often become points of division and conflict in our larger society. Everist describes the powerful witness the church can be to the world by embodying a diverse community that can work, live, and love together not in spite of their differences but in, with, and through them.

In fact, this is the work God is doing all the time in our midst, all around us, and we see it every time the church cracks open

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and dares to embrace a new face, a new location, a new leader. It is the Spirit who leads us in this way, bringing people to faith, calling God's people together, and throwing open doors—and then giving us a little shove from behind to encourage us to walk through. Every Sunday, we see the fruit of the Spirit's labor, as the body of Christ is formed and re-formed, again and again: "The Spirit empowers us to believe that Christ's body has been given for us, resurrected and whole. Each time the congregation welcomes a new member into the congregation through the baptismal waters and is fed together at the eucharistic table, Christ's body is present."²¹

Everist concludes her chapter on the diverse body of Christ with a brief discussion of pluralism. She advocates for interreligious dialogue and engagement, in and through important religious differences, neither downplaying nor heightening them, but acknowledging them and trusting that those differences do not have to be barriers. Perhaps they can even be strengths. She writes,

We live in a diverse world. Rather than building fortresses to protect people from the secular world or trying to compete with its attractions, why not claim our identity and voice so that we can speak clearly in the public world? ... The goal is not to make everyone in this nation just like us, but to help create safe places to listen and learn from one another in interfaith dialogue. How could congregations lead a whole community to create hospitable places to be different together?²²

Certainly, this is true when it comes to interreligious dialogue, but I argue that it is true for other kinds of differences as well. Not only when we think about different religions, but also when we think about different ethnicities, gender orientations, sexualities, and nationalities. Christ reminds us that we do not need "fortresses" to protect ourselves from "the other;" what we need are more

18. *The Difficult but Indispensable Church*, edited by Norma Cook Everist, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2002, xix.

19. Norma Cook Everist, "Re-Membering the Body of Christ," in *The Difficult but Indispensable Church*, 45.

20. Everist, "Re-Membering the Body of Christ," in *The Difficult but Indispensable Church*, 52.

21. Everist, "Re-Membering the Body of Christ," in *The Difficult but Indispensable Church*, 52.

22. Everist, "Re-Membering the Body of Christ," in *The Difficult but Indispensable Church*, 56.

"hospitable places to be different together." Congregations can be such places, places the world desperately needs; encouraging women in ministerial leadership roles is one essential means of embodying this kind of place in the world.

A vision of hope

In the almost forty years since the publication of Norma Cook Everist's booklet on Lutheran women in public ministry, much has changed in the church, but sadly, many things are still the same. In her book, Makant quotes a bishop who says, "This refusal to hear women's stories of their own experiences of patriarchy leads to a resistance to women in ministry that is much more subtle today than it was when I started in ministry nearly 30 years ago. It is more subtle and less prevalent. But still present. And still just as insidious."²³ As with so many difficult things, each step forward is accompanied by a step back. As with so many new visions, for everyone blessed with the gift of dynamic imagination, there is someone else who consistently refuses what could be and settles for what is. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Makant concludes her book with these words that are both realistic and hopeful at the same time:

Change is inevitable; the opposite of change is death. But change is slow and sometimes painful... That is, there is clear movement forward. And yet as soon as that forward movement is perceived as a threat institutionally or communally there is a backlash that seems to stall progress or even cause a momentary regression. But this backlash is temporary and is and will be followed by even greater momentum forward.²⁴

I continue to feel hopeful about the church—the body of Christ in the world. I am optimistic that the invitation of the Holy Spirit to welcome diverse bodies ultimately will prove irresistible; and that the transformation that such a welcome will spark—will light—a larger blaze that will spread not only through the church, but through the world. Of course, this will not be easy; and of course, there will be resistance to such a transformation. The experience of women in church leadership is a clear example of that. Yet, I remain confident in the compelling power of the Spirit and in the transformative love of Jesus Christ to make the impossible possible—and to convince us of that possibility, too. The experience of women in church leadership is a clear example of that as well.

The church has been given the sure promise of Christ's presence with us in the difficult work of transformation; and the Spirit empowers us to live out the good news that Christ calls us beyond our fears, beyond our idolatries into a diverse embodiment of life together.

I conclude with a vision described in another volume edited by Everist, titled *Ordinary Ministry, Extraordinary Challenge: Women and the Roles of Ministry*. The introduction to Part Two of that text reads as follows: "Christ's ministry among us liberates us to participate in Jesus' ongoing liberating ministries. He is always already in that place to which we are called. He is always on the other side of any barrier human beings might erect. We have been called to leave behind our own fears and false gods so that we might minister in wholeness of life to people as we walk with them in ordinary places of daily life."²⁵ The church has been given the sure promise of Christ's presence with us in the difficult work of transformation; and the Spirit empowers us to live out the good news that Christ calls us beyond our fears, beyond our idolatries into a diverse embodiment of life together. May we have the courage to imagine the impossible, and trust that with God, the impossible is possible after all.

23. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 109.

24. Makant, *Holy Mischief*, 109.

25. *Ordinary Ministry, Extraordinary Challenge: Women and the Roles of Ministry*, edited by Norma Cook Everist, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 57.