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Ordained and Female

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not go far enough. Our relationships with each other and with God do, however, need language in which to be expressed and it seems to me important that we take as much care as possible to use language in a way that will all the time continue to deepen our faith, enable us better to share it with others, and help us to build each other up in Christian partnership.

Some books for reference

Betty Thompson, *A chance to change* 'Women and Men in the Church, (based on the Sheffield Consultation 1981), The Risk Series of the W.C.C.

Sara Maitland, *A map of the new country* 'Women and Christianity, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Pauline Webb, *Where are the Women?* Epworth, 1979.

RUTH MATTHEWS

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ORDAINED AND FEMALE

Returning from speaking about ministry in the inner city in a church some distance from home, I realized that nobody had commented during the main sessions on the fact that I was a woman. Only in personal conversation in the church porch did a few people feel obliged to express interest or surprise in the fact that I am both ordained and female. That is quite good - as these things go. I still sometimes dream of the day when everybody to whom I minister will be more interested in the quality of my ministry than in my gender - though, on second thoughts I shall qualify that! I want people to notice that I am female - of course I do. But not to let that prejudice their assessment or acceptance of my work. Objectivity, that is what I long for. In my early days as a minister, I thought I might see such an objective approach in my time. Now, I know I shall not; never on a scale that is really widespread and never, in my lifetime, in the church.'

Remember Martin Luther King? 'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character'.

My present church is in inner London (Islington); it is multi-racial and multi-cultural, and for this I thank God. I should like to say that my experience of discrimination has opened my eyes to the deep-set and continuing hurt that some members of my church family have suffered. But the truth is the other way around.

I discovered an important truth early in my ministry here: that confidence, far from being a sin, is essential to growth. For some of us, personal confidence is well-nigh impossible to achieve, for we are so diminished by others. It happens not only in the way they treat us, but more subtly and effectively in the low level of the expectations they have of us. Their surprise, when we do something well, betrays them. I believe passionately in the need for personal confidence, and I

believe that we Christians can give this to one another as a ministry, an offering. Moreover, I believe that we must engage in this kind of ministry if we are to enable people to grow to their full stature in Christ. I deplore, with a sense of righteous anger now, anything that diminishes another and I pray that my ministry may be of this enabling kind.

Having stated my position, let me 'back-track' over the years, in order to record my reflections on being both a minister and a woman. I was called to the ministry in 1966 by a local church. I cannot say the idea had never occurred to me before then - but neither can I imagine entering the ministry without this call. Mine was not the initiative but the response and thus I have been spared that particular kind of solitary agonising in which a person wrestles, not only with a vocation, but also with the courage to be unorthodox as well. My training at Bristol Baptist College was unusual, in that it combined the necessary academic work with a part-time ministerial post at Horfield Baptist Church (an excellent foundation, though not providing scope for all the academic work I would have liked).

For nine years the Horfield people faithfully gave support, encouragement and opportunity. There were, however, some odd moments: the times, for example, when people walked out (only in ones and twos) as soon as I entered the pulpit; my first Fraternal when every man in the room stood in silence the moment I entered (they had to vote even to admit me and were as embarrassed as I); and the Brethren-educated man who had managed to endure one of my sermons and commented, 'If you can forget she's a woman, you find she's got something to say'.

Five years as Home Mission Organiser followed, a marvellous opportunity for insight into the whole denomination and the best job in Church House, I still say. I know I did not do a bad job (to be honest, it was a good job quite well done - why should I lie?), but on my resignation the hope was expressed that next time, 'we'll get a man'. That wound remains.

Despite the fact that in our denomination women have been ordained through most of this century, ministers are usually referred to as 'men'; 'leaving men', 'Dear Brother', 'men in the ministry', and, of course, there are 'ministers' wives', though quite a number have husbands. I used not to bother about such language, but now I do and I wish that all those in leadership positions in our denomination would think about the language they use. It is often exclusive and this diminishes one's sense of worth.

Soon after coming to Holloway (a wonderful church, open-hearted and open-minded in the best sense, where I honestly believe the quality of ministry counts most) I gained the co-operation of an Associate Minister. David Trafford is a professional musician, an ordained minister and he worked with me (with us) for three years. He, together with our multi-racial church family, stimulated in me a new awareness of prejudice. He drew my attention to those things which I had noticed all through my ministry, but which I preferred not to see; the way in which male colleagues in a Fraternal would not readily accept my views or suggestions; only when uttered through a male (sometimes priestly) mouth were those same views acceptable; the way in which male colleagues chose to address questions and comments

to him first, although I had been introduced as the senior minister. I tended to accept this (I said it was for my own sanity). David, thank God, did not. He grew angry, but the tendency to accept such behaviour is so much part of a woman's training that by adulthood it is 'built-in' to all one's expectations.

Now, I try to face my own sense of rejection and resulting anger. And when I examine this anger, I find it strong and deep. I am tired of being patronised and I am tired of surprising people. I am tired of being treated as a peculiarity in churches, and in banks, shops or anywhere I cash a cheque. I am tired of the way conversations stop when I 'admit' to being a minister and I have grown out of the phase when I added 'but don't let it worry you, I'm quite normal!' And, in truth, I am angry and disappointed sometimes, when men cannot cope.

I am impatient with media coverage of the ordination of women (and I have said so). They talk as if no woman has ever before been ordained and what makes me most indignant is the way they ignore the Free Churches. I have little regard for the arguments against the ordination of women, for they are not strong arguments in any rational or theological sense - and this is widely acknowledged. I am much more concerned about the hidden debate about group psychology in a male-dominated vocation (why do some clearly feel so threatened?), and about a woman's body (is she really 'unclean' and therefore unfit to preside at communion during menstruation and after childbirth? If so - what kind of creator do you believe in?).

The human factor is not commonly discussed - though it is there in our minds - and I regret this lack of openness. But then - honesty is an elusive quality. Take the relative strength of the sexes. I have been told countless times (yes, to my face) that a woman cannot cope with the stress of ministry. Yet ask a number of men who has been the strongest person in his life and many will answer - his mother. Strong women who give men the position and appearance of strength, whether they have that strength or not, connive in a deception. Probably we have all shared in it. Women, as a result, have often become devious in their use of power ('behind the throne', in churches too) and few people are perceptive about real inner strength and genuine leadership qualities.

For the future, I fear most the loss of respect on the part of women for men. When you need only the appearance of strength to get by, you do not develop the reality. But, when the appearance is stripped away, as it often is in these changing times - well, I fear for us all, both women and men.

I would plead for honesty in our relationships - and quickly. I have many friends and colleagues, men and women, who are supportive and encouraging in the best sense and, though I have not dwelt on this, it is important.

'I don't believe in women ministers', said a stranger once, facing me squarely and too close. 'I'm afraid you are confronted with the reality', I replied. But some people will not see what they do not want to see.

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