

Present at the Beginning: One Woman's Journey

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ON NOVEMBER 17, 1985, MANY RLDS (now Community of Christ) congregations witnessed the sacrament of ordination to priesthood office. Identical in every way to the church's long tradition of priesthood selection and ordination, these events were, nevertheless, not only unique but revolutionary. The ordinands were women. The events of that day ended 155 years of exclusively male tenure in the priesthood offices put in place by Joseph Smith, Jr., in the early years of the church. The only exception to that exclusive male prerogative was the ordination of Emma Smith in July of 1830. That revelation directed her to act as her husband's scribe and to gather hymns for a new hymnal. She was apparently ordained and expounded scriptures and exhorted the church. She was instructed to study to fulfill this function. Her call did not specify a priesthood office as listed and defined in Section 17.

The authorization to include women as full participants in existing priesthood offices would wait 150 years until April of 1984. It would be initiated in a revelation to the church, Section 156 of the Doctrine and Covenants, presented to the World Conference by Dr. Wallace B. Smith, President and Prophet, and overwhelmingly approved by the delegates assembled in Independence, Missouri. No one present in that assembly during the introduction of the inspired document and the debate and vote that followed will ever forget those moments: President Smith's statement in the preamble that he had petitioned the Lord repeatedly for confirmation and had received such powerful assurance of the Lord's will that he had no choice but to bring it to the church; the additional instruction to the church to build a temple dedicated to the pursuit of peace; the heated debate that would be repeated again and again in the years that followed.

As I listened to the dialogue on the conference floor and during the months that followed, I would contemplate my own journey in relation

to the enormous cultural change that was taking place in our movement. I was born into a devout family whose heritage went back to the early church. My maternal great grandmother's family had been converted in Ohio and had gathered to Nauvoo. Her stories of those early days were part of our family tradition. Elias Benner, buried with the eight other victims of the Haun's Hill massacre, was our relative. My father's uncles, as young men, had joined the church much later in Nebraska against the wishes of their parents who informed them that they would rather see them dead. My husband came from an equally long tradition in the church, and on that historic day in 1984 was a member of the Council of Twelve Apostles. We had met while students at Graceland College, the church's only institution of higher education, and responding to the strong teaching of the church to pursue education, had both earned Ph.D.s. (I was probably the third woman in the church to hold that degree. In addition, I knew of one female physician and one female attorney. Two of us were married and had children.) Two months before the 1984 World Conference, I had been named president of Graceland, the first woman to hold that position and the first RLDS president not to hold priesthood office. During the next two years, I would be ordained first to the office of Elder and six months later to the office of High Priest.

From an early age I had an overpowering sense of the presence of God's spirit in my life. I looked forward to every opportunity to fellowship with the community; camps and reunions were spiritual high points for me. As a student at Graceland, I participated enthusiastically in the religious life of the campus and received encouragement from mentors who urged me to continue to study beyond Graceland's two years. I saw my role very clearly as a lay leader, making my own contribution and helping other women find ways to develop and express their spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church. Looking for a way to make that contribution through the academic study of rhetoric, I chose to write my dissertation on the preaching practices of the early church and years later would write a handbook for preachers. I also was invited to serve on a number of world church committees and was the volunteer editor of the *University Bulletin*. I wrote frequently for church publications and was invited to deliver a number of speeches at church gatherings. Occasionally I spoke from the pulpit on Sunday morning, although my part of the service was never called "sermon." These experiences strengthened a feeling which I would later recognize and name as a sense of ministerial "call." Never expecting that the church would change its practice in my lifetime, I tried to expand the ways in which women could offer ministry outside the specified functions of priesthood office. I thought carefully about the calling of "member," believing that our creator willed every disciple, ordained, unordained, male, female, to develop his or her giftedness for the benefit

of the church and the larger community. The inspired revelations of the early church spoke clearly to me of God's intention.

Believing that the absence of opportunities for the unordained in the church deprived the body of a rich ministry, for many years I encouraged all persons to develop their spiritual gifts. I respected the special functions of priesthood and did not try to encroach on them in any way. I did, however, accept as many invitations to work, to serve in positions, and to speak as possible, and my willingness to work wherever invited gave me a high profile in the church. I used that visibility to raise expectations in the minds and hearts of unordained persons. For example, in the spring of 1968 Dr. Velma Ruch and I, both professors at Graceland, organized a conference entitled "Womanhood and Manhood: A New Image." Papers addressed male and female roles and division of labor in the family, in the workplace, and in the church. One paper delivered by Maurice L. Draper, a member of the First Presidency of the church, discussed the necessary boundaries of priesthood authority and function. Affirming that the ideal concept of ministry is service rather than recognition or power, Draper acknowledged that practices at any time are heavily influenced by their cultural context. He stated that the administration of the ordinances was the only basic function necessarily reserved to priesthood office. This prerogative, of course, carried with it leadership responsibilities. The entire conference proceedings, published in the *University Bulletin*, Winter 1969, made these ideas available to the membership and stimulated much strong response, not all of it positive.

Along the way I became convinced that there was no scriptural prohibition for the ordination of women. I appreciated the efforts of some church leaders to articulate that position. Notably Apostle Charles Neff, president of the Council of Twelve Apostles, writing in the *Saints Herald* in February 1981, raised the issue of the ordination of women in an article entitled "Ministers All." The church was beginning to address its relationship to the changing roles of women within western culture.

The articulation of these new ideas clashed squarely with tradition. Although I had never directly or actively advocated the ordination of women, some people assumed that my high profile position within the church meant that I was "lobbying" for institutional change and for ordination for myself. I did not believe that women would be ordained in my lifetime. I also felt that the disruption such a change would cause would be too high an institutional price to pay. An educator to the core, I believed that a conscious objective on the part of the church leaders over a long period of time would eventually result in general acceptance of the idea without great institutional disruption. I also felt that the change should not be initiated by revelation because the power of that method would sweep the decision before it. It would be much better, I thought,

for a slow evolution accomplished through generational change in expectation, followed by a regular legislative procedure.

Thus, my reaction to the stunning development of the 1984 World Conference was mixed. I had viewed myself as a spokesperson for the unordained. If I were to receive a call, could I, in good conscience, accept? And yet, what about the feeling of call I had experienced for so long? A few months later, in accordance with established practice, my pastor informed me that he had "light" regarding my call to the office of Elder. He also indicated that he felt that a call to High Priest would soon follow. After much prayer I decided to accept. My ordinations carried a sense of assurance and power, which I cannot find adequate words to describe. Because my previous ministerial opportunities had not been typical of the unordained, I did not experience a great change in function. However, in participation in the ordinances I felt the power of God's spirit and love flowing through me. Serving the emblems of the Lord's Supper, administration to the sick, and marriages and funerals as well as ordinations especially carried strong feelings of ministry for me.

I also came to the realization that the office of High Priest matched the gifts that I had been aware of previously. Increasingly, I had realized that I was a natural leader. My "style" was enabling and my mantra was expressed in the observation, "At the end of the days of a great leader, the people will say 'We did it ourselves.'" I carried the concerns of institutions in my heart and in my mind, and my objective was to build communities in which individuals felt they were heard and in which they could find fulfillment. Those were the values I tried to express during my years as a college teacher, during the eight years I served as president of Graceland, and in my participation in various committees of the world church. Soon after my retirement from Graceland, the church invited me to become the first director of the Peace Center at the Temple. I tried to implement those same values as I initiated a new program that would support the mission of the Temple. Three years ago I was asked to return to Graceland in a temporary leadership position at a very difficult time in its history. Once again those values helped restore calm and build morale. I believe that, however imperfectly I carried them out, I was exercising the spiritual leadership called for in the ministry of the High Priest.

The spiritual journey of each woman who has accepted ordination since 1985 is unique. I am humbly grateful for the opportunities that I have had and am well aware of my failures to live up to the high calling that every person who would serve Christ's cause must aspire to. As for the institution as a whole, we still mourn the absence of friends and family who could not accept the change. However, the resulting enhancement of ministry within our movement has been unmistakable. A burst of energy and dedication is still occurring. Almost two decades later,

every priesthood office and quorum except the First Presidency have women members: three apostles in the Council of Twelve, one member of the Presiding Bishopric, and one member of the Council of Presidents of Seventy. Benefiting from important lessons learned, confirmation received, and enriched and empowered ministry offered, the Community of Christ is blessed immeasurably by the ministerial gifts of all of its members who are willing to participate. Members understand and accept the mission of the church "to proclaim Jesus Christ and promote communities of joy, hope, love and peace" and know that it will take all of us as parts of the body of Christ to fulfill that mission.