

A Compilation of Diocesan Focus Group Reports

Background

In 2002 the Bishops' Committee on Women in Society and in the Church embarked on a project to explore the relationship between women's spirituality and their employment outside the home. As a first step, the Committee invited dioceses to convene focus groups on the topic. The Committee provided a suggested template and asked women to discuss such questions as: What do you find satisfying and frustrating about work? How do you balance home and work responsibilities, and how do you fit in volunteer activities? How do you make time for spiritual activities? Does your spirituality affect your work, and vice versa?

A cross-section of arch/dioceses—large, medium, and small, rural and urban, from all parts of the country—accepted the Committee's invitation to hold focus groups. The groups were conducted over a two-month period, from late November, 2002 until late January, 2003. Each diocese submitted a written report to the Committee. This report is a summary of the diocesan reports.

Reports were received from the following 17 arch/dioceses (number of focus group participants in parentheses): Albany (9), Allentown (54), Biloxi (27), Buffalo (10), Chicago (22), Detroit (7), Gary (26), Jackson, MS (6), Las Vegas (17), Marquette, MI (29), Newark (8), Orange (8), Richmond (5), Saginaw (28), St. Paul and Minneapolis (9), San Bernardino (11), and Youngstown (16). A total of 292 women took part in these focus groups.

Demographics

Most of the focus group participants were in their forties or older, including retirees, with a few in their thirties. Most were white and married with children (often grown), but a significant number were single, divorced, or widowed. A few were African-American or Hispanic. Some of the focus groups included women who work for the Church, but the focus of this project, and this report, is on women who work outside the home but are not paid Church employees. Many, probably most, have some type of volunteer involvement with the Church, such as catechist, lector, Eucharistic minister, RCIA, or member of a parish committee.

The women came from a wide range of occupations. The two major occupational fields were education, both teaching and administration, and health care, especially nursing. There was some representation from business and the professions (attorneys, accountants, engineers, TV news anchor, director of operations in gaming properties). Some were in service occupations (beautician, flight attendant) and others identified themselves as clerical workers. Some dioceses held one focus group for professional women and another for working class women, but the reported concerns of both groups were remarkably similar.

Summary of Major Themes in the Focus Groups

Responses to specific questions are summarized in the following pages. Several major themes are noted here.

First, many women in the focus groups have found workable, often creative, ways to integrate family, work and spirituality. They resist compartmentalization in their lives and struggle, at some times more than others, to balance all three priorities. Spirituality is seen as a unifying factor that permeates all of life.

Second, women describe a strong, often intense, relationship between their spirituality and their work. Women bring their spiritual/ religious beliefs and values to the workplace and seek to live them out, sometimes at personal risk and cost. This means that the workplace is a prime locus for evangelization, although no one used that word. Women believe that their faith and values should and do make a difference in how they do their job and relate to co-workers, clients, and others.

Third, women want their work outside the home to be recognized as valuable. Women see their work as important: they help and serve others, solve problems, and learn new ideas and skills and pass them on to others. Despite some frustrations, most see their work as personally fulfilling.

Fourth, women bring a wide range of gifts and skills to the workplace, and work provides an opportunity to use and enhance them. Many are conscious of bringing these same gifts to the Church, which does not always recognize and utilize them. Women continue to be immensely generous in volunteering time to the Church; many express the wish that they could do more.

Finally, women appreciated the opportunity to relate their experiences and opinions to the bishops. They are pleased that the bishops are addressing this issue and hope to be kept informed about the project. As one focus group participant said, "I am fascinated that the Committee is addressing the issue of women and spirituality in the workplace. I honestly want to commend the members for taking this on and for gathering comments through diocesan focus groups. This is a very far-ranging topic and I would love to hear the feedback received."

Summary of Responses from Diocesan Focus Groups (Quotations from participants in italics)

What do you find most satisfying about your work?

The top answer, expressed in various ways, was helping and serving people. This is especially true for educators and health professionals, but for others as well. (*When I work, the customer in the chair is most important. To brighten someone's spirits by improving their appearance gives me joy.*)

Many enjoy their co-workers, especially those who, like them, are highly motivated and want to

make a difference. Others welcome the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds. Work itself can be a source of satisfaction, especially if it provides a chance to learn new information and skills, solve problems, and exercise creativity. Some are able to pass on information and skills that help people to improve their lives. A few, especially in management, cited mentoring and helping employees to succeed (*My delight is in seeing them [employees] realize that they can do things they never thought possible or felt were beyond their capabilities.*)

What do you find most frustrating about work?

The women gave a variety of answers. Difficult co-workers led the list; related concerns included backbiting, gossip, and office politics. Some expressed frustration with "higher-ups" (*High-level management has no idea what happens below them.*)

Time is a major issue. Some expressed frustration with a lack of time to get everything done, others struggle to balance time at home and at work. Some said that insufficient financial and personnel resources hindered their work. Widespread downsizing, for example, means that fewer people are expected to do the same amount of work.

Women are discouraged when clients need help and cannot get it. Sometimes, however, they encounter people who *work the system for everything they can get.*

A significant number were disturbed by a lack of Christian values and attitudes in the workplace. Some cited anti-Catholic attitudes among co-workers. Others said they were unable to share their religious beliefs at work.

A few complained about bureaucracy and paperwork, especially when it detracts from time spent in direct service to clients.

Many people find it hard to make time for their spiritual lives. How do you deal with this? What spiritual activities are important to you? How do you make time for them?

Finding time for spiritual activities is a challenge for many women. Family and work responsibilities, the culture's emphasis on doing rather than being, and too many choices can make it difficult to set aside time. (*If you skip spirituality it doesn't "show" as much. If you skip other parts of your life more people notice. You are only letting yourself down vs. letting others down by not getting things done that involve them.*)

Despite the challenges, almost all the focus group participants find time for spirituality. The term "spiritual activities" was not defined, and the women interpreted it broadly.

For most, structured activities are important, with an emphasis on traditional practices. Eucharist is the single most important activity. Personal prayer, the rosary, spiritual reading, days of recollection, and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius were frequently mentioned.

Some rely on spontaneous opportunities to deepen their spirituality (*You have to take it*

[spirituality] where you get it). Women are creative in finding such opportunities throughout the day. Many use drive time or lunchtime to pray. Some keep spiritual reminders at their work station, for example, one woman keeps the Our Father on her computer monitor, another tucks prayer cards in her desk blotter.

Many emphasize the need to make spiritual activities a priority. They speak of time carved out early in the morning or at other times for prayer and other spiritual practices (*I made a commitment to pray each morning at 6:00 for at least ½ hour, often more*). Some are able to start the day with prayer or Scripture reading in their workplace.

Besides these traditional religious practices, women identified many other activities as spiritual. Some said that time spent with nature (gardening, walks on the beach) renewed them. Yoga, poetry, music, reading before bedtime, exercise and other activities were important for some women.

Significantly, many find spiritual growth within their families (*Work at times is spiritual. Family life is more so.*) *Some cite specific activities with their husband and/or children (My husband is very spiritual... We pray the rosary together and cherish this as a special time.)*

Finally, a sense of community is important for many. They find this through parish-based small groups, Cursillo, Bible study groups, and participation in the liturgy, especially as lectors and Eucharistic ministers.

Does your work influence your spiritual life? Does your spiritual life/values influence your work? Do you find spiritual meaning in your work?

A few see no relationship, or a negative relationship, between their spirituality and their work, perhaps because of the nature of their employment (*As a home-based medical-transcriptionist, work does not influence my spiritual life. It is a totally separate entity.*) Work can have a negative impact on spirituality (*Work often makes me feel de-valued.*)

The vast majority, however, see the two as related at least some of the time; many see spirituality as permeating all they do (*Categorizing where spirituality lies can be artificial; it penetrates all we do.*) (*Life is messy. Spirituality is intertwined in everything.*) Many believe that work enhances and expands their spirituality. Work can take people out of their comfort zones and force them to deal with difficult situations. Many see work as an extension of their Christian values. Through their work they can help correct some of the world's injustices. Some say that their spiritual values help them to stay positive at work.

The women expressed concern about modeling Christ in the workplace. They speak of trying to see Christ in others and treating others as Christ would. Many are conscious of setting a good example and acting on their moral beliefs (*My spiritual life influences my work in that I am more conscientious about how my words and actions impact others.*)

Many said that their faith helps them to deal with situations at work, for example, they try to be

more patient and understanding with difficult co-workers. Many pray about difficult situations (*When a crisis occurs I quickly ask God's help and the more I am able to do this, the more Christ-like I am.*)

Some workers need to be circumspect about their religious/spiritual values (*Because I work for the public schools, I sometimes have to be careful about my choice of words regarding religion in any way. My values show through my actions and my relationships with co-workers, students and parents.*) Conversely, in some settings employees can openly discuss their religious values and beliefs. One woman said that a co-worker encouraged her to become a Catholic.

Several mentioned ethical and moral challenges:

- Health care professionals may confront life issues such as feeding terminally ill patients or the morning after pill. A pharmacist refused to carry or dispense contraceptive products.
- Business people also encounter ethical dilemmas (*I was asked to alter records that could save a business a large amount of money and told them that I could not do that as it was against my morals and ethics.*)
- Dealing with ethical challenges can put one's job at risk (*If you are the only person bringing home a paycheck it is harder to take a firm stand on ethics.*)
- Some challenges are posed by supervisors or co-workers who act unethically (*My values influence my work in that I could never work for an employer who had unethical practices. I speak my mind to anyone I feel is unaware that what they're doing is wrong.*)
- Values can lead one to take counter-cultural actions (*From an import/export furniture dealer: The store is not open on Sunday because I believe furniture is not something you should shop for on Sunday.*)

Does your work affect the amount of time you can give to volunteering in your parish or for other church or charitable organizations? Have you had to give up volunteering because of job and home responsibilities?

Some said that work and family responsibilities, especially the latter, affect the time they give to volunteer activities (*My home responsibilities and children have affected the amount of activity I do in Church much more than work.*) Still, few focus group participants have given up volunteering entirely. Often they speak of finding joy and meaning in volunteering. They make it a priority.

A significant number have cut back or re-directed their volunteer efforts. Women with children often choose activities that relate to their children's school or religious education. Some have put boundaries on their volunteer efforts (*I learned long ago to say no—if I make a commitment, you can count on me. I never do volunteer work that goes beyond 9:00 p.m.*)

Women who are retired and/or whose children are grown speak of having more time to volunteer. Others with small children and/or demanding work schedules anticipate a time when they can resume or increase volunteer activities (*When I was working full time and raising a family I had no time to give to volunteering. Now that I am retired, I am able to give a great deal of time to volunteering in my community and church. My philosophy is, "You can do it all. You just can't do it all at the same time."*)

Some women have caregiving responsibilities for aging parents or other relatives that affect volunteering. Some single women without children pointed out that they, too, have time constraints that limit volunteer activities. We should not assume that these women have lots of time to volunteer (*The single person often has less time, although the perception is that they should have more time. The single person frequently is the caregiver for parents.*)

Several women suggested that parishes need to be flexible in utilizing volunteers. Many cannot volunteer for weekday activities. Some said that more short-term volunteer opportunities would fit their lives better.

Finally, it was noted that some businesses actively encourage their employees to volunteer and even allow time for it.

Do you have any suggestions for the Committee about how it can support women in the workplace? Is there a specific issue that the Committee should address?

Several major themes emerged. First, working women want to be heard and supported by their pastors and bishops. The role of women in society has changed and church leaders need to acknowledge this new reality. (*I want the Bishops to know that I do important work and I couldn't if I didn't bring my spirituality into it. This is the wise use of the gifts I've been given.*)

Second, bishops can help to raise general awareness of the needs of working women. They can play a key role in educating priests about women in the workplace. (*Priests do not seem overall to have a good opinion or understanding of workplace issues in general, let alone women's issues in the workplace.*)

Third, many expressed the hope that the church would recognize women's gifts and utilize them by putting women into decision-making roles in the church. (*As a woman executive, I see that women have made some great strides and have taken on roles in the business world that were previously denied them. How can we begin to bring about that same recognition of women and their capabilities in the Catholic Church?)*

Specific suggestions included:

- Sponsor or promote conferences, workshops and days of recollection on spirituality in the workplace
- Encourage homilies and develop educational resources that address this topic. (*I would love to see a series that addresses the different areas of concern in the workplace, such as ethics, difficult co-workers, dealing with certain situations*)
- Continue focus groups such as these, perhaps in parishes or vicariates
- Support legislation and policies of particular interest to working women, such as affordable day care and living wage
- Reach out to single mothers
- Provide emotional and spiritual support for single women
- Invite older women to serve as mentors and role models for younger women who are trying to balance home and work