



UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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NEWS

NATIONAL CATHOLIC OFFICE FOR INFORMATION

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CHURCHES URGED TO ACCORD WOMEN FULL RIGHT OF PARTICIPATION

WASHINGTON--The Worship and Mission Section of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian and Reformed Consultation has recommended that qualified women "be given full and equal participation in policy and decision-making, and voice in places of power, in the Churches on local, regional, national and world levels."

A statement released by the Worship and Mission Section also recommended:

- That seminary education in all the Churches be open to qualified women.
- That qualified women be admitted to ordination.
- That Churches for which the ordination of women presents theological difficulties and which have not made a theological study of the matter establish a committee to investigate the problem and make recommendations.

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The statement called on the North American Area Council, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs to establish and fund an Ecumenical Commission on Women. The purpose of this commission would be to "facilitate the fulfillment" of the recommendations made by the Worship and Mission Section "and to safeguard and extend the gains made."

The Worship and Mission Section of the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian and Reformed Consultation met for 3 years under the auspices of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the North American Area Council, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, to discuss practical and pastoral concerns of the churches. It was to the sponsoring agencies that the statement's recommendations were directed.

Bishop Ernest L. Unterkoefer of Charleston, S.C., co-chairman of the joint consultation, stressed that the document is a study report.

"We intend that this document receive serious study and reflection from the decision-making bodies of our churches," Bishop Unterkoefer said. "On the Catholic side, we have transmitted the document to the newly formed Bishops' Committee on Women in Society and the Church."

This committee, chaired by Coadjutor Archbishop Leo C. Byrne of St. Paul and Minneapolis, has recently held a number of meetings with representatives of various women's organizations.

The 10-member Worship and Mission Section said in its statement that "theological investigation" is not the basis for its

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recommendations, for "we are not this consultation's Theological Section, charged with the task of theological research."

The members said they were moved to make the recommendations by several facts which came to light during the course of their work, noting they had heard the grievances and aspirations of a number of women who have devoted "many years of service to the Churches and to the world."

"Within the fellowship of the Church, it would appear that we have obliged women to exercise a secondary and often demeaning ministry," the statement said. "Women have been excluded from making decisions in the Churches, even in an advisory capacity, although many of those decisions determined the disposition of their own lives. Even when women are involved in decision-making, more often than not their voice is not significant in relation to their contribution to the life of the Church. We have either denied women part in the ordained ministry or have granted them part with reluctance, and then have proceeded to hedge their ministry with severe limitations. Very few ordained women, in those churches which admit them to ordination, have been accepted as pastors by local communities."

The statement asserted the injustice inflicted upon women is one of the most massive of the age "for it affects one half of the human race--and one half of the Churches' membership. The unjust conditions under which women are (often subtly) compelled to live affects adversely the personal development of men as well as women," the statement said. "No human being is truly and fully free as long as one other human being is in bondage."

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"The world will attach little credibility to the call of the People of God for justice for every human being, if the People of God within their own fellowship continue to regard and treat women as inferior human beings, discriminating against them because of their sex and thereby depriving them of fundamental personal rights."

The statement had words of sympathy for the current women's liberation movement. "Penetrating through the excesses which sometimes accompany (it), we discern a sign of God's presence and purpose in its basic cause of justice, freedom, and full personal dignity for women. The Churches will be unfaithful to the Spirit of the Lord if they fail to take up this cause, especially within their own fellowship," the statement asserted.

The statement cited a growing number of theological investigations in various Churches which have found "there are no conclusive, biblical, doctrinal or theological reasons why women cannot exercise decision-making positions in the Church and receive ordination."

It also cited ecumenical reasons for improving the status of women in the Church and society: "If the Churches can advance toward the unity willed by Christ for his Church by working together to secure justice in the world at large, how much more fruitful for Christian unity will be their working together to secure justice for women, not only in the world, but especially in the Church!" it said.

The most obvious reason for admitting women to policy-making positions in the Church, according to the report, is that policies

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and decisions which are made so frequently determine the lives of women.

"Until women have such an effective part to play in the determination of their lives in the Churches, it is difficult to avoid the accusation that in the Churches they are oppressed in a kind of bondage or slavery."

Another and more profound reason, it added, is the total well-being of the Church, both men and women.

Asserting that many women desire to serve the Church and the world with "that theological and pastoral expertise" provided by a seminary education, the report said frustrating this desire is to deny the right and freedom of women to acquire education and cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men. It added that the admission of women to seminary education would benefit future male ministers and priests who would learn the woman's point of view in areas in which they have specialized knowledge or exclusive experience.

"Since the Churches have need of all available human resources for carrying out their mission to mankind, it is unreasonable to deny ordination to women simply because women have not been admitted to ordination in the past," the statement said.

Noting that the ordination of women presents theological difficulties for some churches, the report asserted "it would be a serious neglect before God and man for any Church to delay to make that rigorous theological investigation which would settle the question of the ordination of women.

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"To hesitate to take up the question...would suggest indifference to the will of the Holy Spirit, the personal rights of women, and the needs of the Church in its mission to the world," the statement said.

The statement suggested the proposed Ecumenical Commission on Women be charged with making recommendations to the leaders of the Churches in pursuit of justice, dignity, and freedom for women in all the Churches, and in pursuit of unity among the Churches in regard to women's rights.

The proposal suggested that other Churches be invited to join the North American Area Council, World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs in responsibility and funding for the Commission, whose members would be predominantly women "who are actively engaged in the lives of their Churches and also positively concerned for women's dignity, freedom and rights."

A two-part appendix which accompanied the statement on Women in the Church included legislation and policy statements on women in various Churches, and a bibliography of studies on women in the Church.

The signers of the statement were: Rev. Glenn E. Baumann of the United Church of Christ, Midland, Michigan; Msgr. Henry G. Beck, pastor of Sacred Heart Church, Lyndhurst, New Jersey; Rev. Scott F. Brenner, retired from the Board of Christian Education of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.; Mr. Richard L. Davies of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.; Sister

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Anne Dunn, I.H.M., Immaculate Heart College, Los Angeles.

Also Rev. Andrew Harsanyi, Hungarian Reformed, Carteret, New Jersey; Rev. Raymond V. Kearns, Jr., United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., New York; Rev. Christopher G. Kiesling, O.P., Aquinas Institute, Dubuque, Iowa; Rev. John T. Middaugh, Northampton, Massachusetts; and Rev. William B. Ward, Presbyterian Church in the U.S., Columbia, South Carolina.

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