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Practical Issues and Challenges Encountering Theologically
Educated Lay Ministers in Orthodox America

An issue with which I am constantly dealing is how theologically educated women and men can better serve the Orthodox Church outside of the ordained priesthood. Historically and theologically Orthodox Christianity has encouraged all her members to serve according to the best of their abilities. Today in America, however, due to a combination of factors, lay men and women have been serving in more limited capacities. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, as well as the other jurisdictions, in my opinion, tend to be behind in many respects on this issue, to Orthodox dioceses back in the "homeland".

Some obvious examples that will help support this hypothesis are that: 1) Most Orthodox theologians in the "homelands" are laypersons, whereas, the clergy tend to heavily dominate Orthodox theological circles in America; 2) Another ministry that is virtually unknown to the American scene, is that of the "geronta" and "gerontissa" ("staretz" and "starista"; spiritual father and mother). These persons are usually lay persons (especially monastics) who have the gift of spiritual counselling. Although this ministry is becoming harder to find in the "homelands", it is far from extinct; 3) The holy call to monastic vocations is hard to follow in America, because of the sheer lack of monasteries; whereas, there are many overseas. Clearly many of the spiritual ministries that are natural to the Orthodox experience, are deficient in the practical life of the American church.

In order to get a better perspective as to what are some of the attitudes lay-ministers (who are female) may be encountering, I conducted an informal survey with some of the women at Hellenic College-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology.

The following are some of their responses to the various questions. They are not listed in any particular order.

1. In what kind of parish or community diakonia did you participate?

Ans.: Sunday School instructor, Campus ministry, retreat work, choir director, discussion group leader, presentations, ministry to the elderly, Bible Study leader.

2. What did the laity expect from you?

Ans.:

- The women came as the seminarians girlfriends.
- Knowledge in Religious Education methods and application.
- They expected an authority.
- They wanted an expert on the faith.
- They don't know what to expect.

There appears to be a consensus that there are lower expectations of the women in areas where there is a densely populated Greek community. The responses of these parishioners tended to be more vague.

3. What did the clergy expect from you?

- Many tended to expect the same level of quality work that was expected of the seminarians, however,
- Some pastors tended to expect very little from them.
- Others expected the women to be "organizers" and functional.
- The women were not taken seriously at all in some situations.

4. How were you treated by the laity?

- With respect, because: 1) the women were seen as future wives of priests; 2) the women were seen as young theologians; 3) some were treated as "nice students".
- Parishioners often asked them what they were going to "do" with their education.
- One woman was asked, "Why are you here?...We already have the seminarians."

-Other responses were: "warmly" and "like a novelty".

There was a consensus among the women interviewed, that much of the treatment they received from the laity depended upon the way the clergy and seminarians treated them.

5. How were you treated by the clergy?

- With respect,
- It varied,
- Warmly,
- Lovingly,
- +Ignored,
- Condescendingly,
- Was told she would never be hired as a lay-assistant because she was a woman,
- With almost the same positive regard given to the seminarians,
- Continuous support,

6. What "role" do you think was ascribed to you?

- Leader,
- Female seminarian,
- Not much,
- Future presbytera,
- Nice "girl," but not seen as a Christian minister,

7. How have these interactions influenced your direction/commitment to Orthodox ministry?

- Encouraged, because of home pastor's support,
- Increased, because these experiences indicate that I have many talents to give,
- I have to be strong, especially spiritually,
- These experiences are humbling, because they help teach what the real parish situation is like.

A few women had negative reactions, yet they could not articulate any specific response.

These responses indicate to me that the situation is confused and that it varies from one community to another. All of the women, however, acknowledge that there is a problem. Most would agree that the situation is very slowly improving, although there still is a lack of support on many levels.

The results indicate a very limited understanding of Orthodox Christian diakonia among many laypersons and some clergy. There appears to be a vagueness and hesitancy concerning the support and encouragement of the women in their endeavors. Fortunately, there were many examples of isolated support on which to be counted.

As part of the preliminary preparation to this project, I compiled a list of potential areas for Vocational Diakonia with the women. The suggestions were not meant to limit, but to begin in aiding the process of developing an expanded vision as to what some ministries to the American Orthodox Church may be. A copy of this list is included at the end of this report.

Every national church has its' own concerns and needs. The American Orthodox Church, indeed, has many. We need only look, however, to the examples of the "homeland" churches, to see that more can be done. It is imperative that we make creative use of our Orthodox Christian phronema when it concerns facilitating the varied ministries we have potentially, for the glory of God.

*A helpful study - illuminating
some of the possibilities and
some of the problems.*