

Women in Ministry. Receptivity and Resistance

Edward C. Lehman Jr, Melbourne, 1994. pp 128 plus 28 pages of appendices. *Peter Bentley reviews this new book from the Joint Board of Christian Education.*

Though a relatively short book, this report of a study of the opinions of Anglican and Uniting Church members is very dense and detailed, packed with interesting observations and summations about the future. It would be worthwhile if each participating church could arrange the material into smaller packages and organise some times to reflect on the material and conclusions.

Ed Lehman (Professor in Sociology at the State University of New York College at Brockport) notes from the start that his observations are in no way theological. It is a sociological study and cannot point toward any normative practice. The study is concerned with the area of leadership in the church, and in particular the ordination and placement of women. It is a study of the attitudes of lay people, because "What lay church members think has important implications for religious organisations. Denominational leaders sometimes forget that they are dealing with voluntary organisations, structures in which members participate of their own volition or from which they can withdraw with total impunity." (8)

The book does not start with a bed of statistics, rather the context is clearly outlined in a very good introductory chapter. This chapter provides information about the nature of the research and also succinctly outlines some background to the debate about women in ministry, as well as providing a historical survey of the women-in-ministry movement in Australia and details about recent developments. The author clearly demonstrates that he read a wide range

of local material and became very familiar with the particular nuances of the Australian scene during his year of research based at Monash University. Having said that, there are some instances of incorrect naming of church organisations (like Board instead of committee, Archdiocese instead of Diocese), though because these are not consistent they may have taken place in the editing.

Chapter Two provides the basic conclusions arising from the survey and also provides much of the background information related to the survey, which was conducted by mail in March - April 1991 (the response rate was 87%). One of the key findings of this chapter is that "Most members of both denominations do not perceive women clergy in stereotyped forms." (51) A number of questions probed what members thought about women clergy's possible absentee rates, their suitability to the work and ability to cope with family and parish duties. Between one-third and one-quarter of the responses were stereotyped, with Uniting Church members being less likely to stereotype women in ministry than Anglican members. The largest stereotyped response (about two-thirds agreeing) was provided to the statement that a woman priest/minister who openly questioned the use of traditional language for God would alienate many members of her congregation.

Still overall, nearly three-quarters of the Anglican members and over 90% of the Uniting Church members indicated they approved of women having ministerial leadership roles, but more to the point,

were prepared to accept a woman as their minister/priest.

The third chapter looks at the correlates, the range of factors to see if there are any patterns concerning receptivity and resistance to women in ministry. Why do lay members disagree about women in ministry? The areas are: Individual characteristics, religious commitment, contact with women in ministry and church and community characteristics.

Looking at some characteristics of religious commitment (in understanding receptivity), for Anglicans, the more that a person attended public worship services and said grace at meals, the more likely they were to oppose women having ministerial leadership roles. Overall, for both Uniting and Anglican members, "The more traditionally religious they were, the more likely they were to hold traditional assumptions about religious leadership." (79)

On the last area noted (the community), it is worth considering that in relation to church member's opinions of different social groupings (categorised into three groups, one including homosexuals, never-married mothers etc), Lehman found that "The more church members were prejudiced toward various social groupings in society, the more they tended to resist the ordination and placement of women in their churches." (91)

This chapter provides some fascinating profiles of members who hold certain views about the ministry of women, but again, there are too many specific points to note. It is worth stating again that Angli-

can and Uniting church members would find it valuable to look at this study with a fine tooth comb in order to extract the material related to their own situation.

The final chapter presents the broader picture and relates the research to that conducted by Lehman in other countries. It is clear that Australia is following a similar pattern to that evidenced in the U.K. and the U.S.A.

This study demonstrates how useful it is to compare different denominations, as well as the state/regional areas (like diocesan differences). As Lehman notes, "At the time of the survey, denominational norms about women in ministry were much clearer in the Uniting Church than in the Anglican Church." This is related to the ar-

ticulated pattern where "Church members tend to follow denominational and local norms in developing attitudes toward women priests and pastors." (120)

Where to from here? Lehman has a very positive outlook on the outcome of the initial ordination picture, but he also suggests three upcoming "battlefields" (which interestingly are now quite clearly areas of discussion): the theological colleges, the placement of

women in ministry and denominational hierarchical leadership.

The Study is completed by nearly thirty pages of reference material including, an excellent background reading list and copies of the surveys. It is a thorough study and one that commends itself to the whole church, because certainly no denomination in Australia is an island unto itself. Some denominations may think that this topic is not a concern, but I would suggest that all denominations are struggling

with the issues raised by the growing participation of women in church leadership and ministry, the main difference being that some struggle more publicly.

Peter Bentley

