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The Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Church

Leroy Shepherd

Contrary to the popular saying, I am actually *quite* sure how I got roped into writing this article: in 2008 the Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Church of Cloverdale, Oregon, came to have a minister who happened to be female. It is not that we broke important ground in the discussion of the role of women in the church or made an earth-shattering statement on the nature of ministry. Rather, our experience in bringing Mary Ellen Pereira on as our minister in September of 2008 was a matter of recognizing a couple of opportunities. The first was an opportunity for our congregation to be ministered to by a faithful servant of Jesus Christ. The second was an opportunity for Mary Ellen to participate in a Christian community in which she could demonstrate and develop her skills, gifts, and abilities for ministry. We pursued Mary Ellen in our ministerial search because we saw a person who could use a place in which to express her calling to serve Christ to the best of her abilities. I trust that sharing our experience will encourage other congregations to consider how to create opportunities that encourage people (male, female, young, old, or whatever demographic category describes them) to flourish in their ministries.

The Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Church is historically tied to the ministry of Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Camp. The congregation was started by a former Camp manager and over the course of the last several decades struggled with whether it existed to serve as a chapel for the Camp or a congregation for the community. Because the congregation meets in a building at the center of the Camp's grounds, church activities often are overshadowed by camp programming. The congregation, however, maintains a strong desire to reach beyond the Camp's program to present a significant outreach to south Tillamook County. Our attendance fluctuates seasonally with the Oregon coast's summer tourist and camping season. Our core congregation consists of fifteen to twenty members who live in south Tillamook County.

Prior to Mary Ellen's arrival we had depended on a series of male pastors who were semi-retired from careers in ministry. Our desire as a congregation was to find someone who would have a vision of ministry beyond "filling the pulpit" on Sundays. We understood how difficult it would be to find someone willing to relocate to this isolated part of Oregon and develop a full-time ministry. While our first choice would be for someone who lived in the area and would thus be available to participate in the community, when Mary Ellen's name was suggested we began to see how God might use her in ways we had not anticipated.

I was acquainted with Mary Ellen from her participation in the Camp's Christian Heritage Conference, her education at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, and her teaching at Puget Sound Christian College and Northwest Christian University. At the Stone-Campbell Symposium hosted by NCU in the spring of 2008, I learned that Mary Ellen would be leaving her position at the University. Because of her husband's job in Eugene she hoped to continue to engage in ministry somewhere in the area. That summer we contacted her with the idea of commuting to the Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Church on weekends to serve as our minister. I imagined this would be good for the congregation on several levels: She was a highly respected educator, biblical scholar, and speaker. She had demonstrated, to me in particular, a level of competency through her work on the program committees at the Camp. Her Christian character and commitment to following Christ were exemplary. In other words, all I had seen and experienced supported the idea that she would serve well as our minister.

On another level, it seemed Mary Ellen would need an outlet for her work—a place to study, write, and speak. While different from the college classroom, it seemed that the pulpit, the Sunday school class, and pastoral conversations that the Wi-Ne-Ma Church could provide might serve to help her continue to pursue her calling to ministry.

In light of these various factors, I contacted her to consider the idea of coming alongside us at the Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Church to serve as our minister. When she replied that she was open to the idea, her name was shared with the elders of the congregation and the pulpit committee. We met with her and had her preach for us on a Sunday. From the beginning, the rest of the congregation really saw no problem with having a woman pastor.

The congregation was already familiar with women in ministry roles traditionally thought of as men's roles. The congregation was served by Mont Smith in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after he retired from teaching at Pacific Christian College (now Hope International University). I have learned that Mont encouraged the congregation to support women in ministry. In addition, by the time I arrived in 1996, the congregation had a woman as elder. She had been educated at Northwest Christian College and spent time in her younger years as a missionary in Mexico. Other influences that helped prepare our congregation for a woman pastor included speakers at the various conferences held at Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Camp, such as Dr. Robert Hull of Emmanuel Christian Seminary who addressed the topic, "Women in Ministry." In fact, this was the theme of the Camp's 2004 Christian Heritage Conference at which Mary Ellen was one of the featured speakers. The Wi-Ne-Ma Week of Missions often presented female missionaries as part of the program as well.

The pulpit committee included a man recently retired from a career as banker and lobbyist. As such, he was accustomed to women in leadership, and from his business standpoint he encouraged us to "hire the best person possible." The congregational vote was unanimous when the elders presented Mary Ellen to the congregation to call her as our minister.

One of Mary Ellen's concerns as she began her ministry with us was that she considered herself more a teacher than a preacher. While she had ministry experience as a hospital chaplain, as a professor in Christian colleges, and through involvement in local congregations, she had not been called upon to perform the weekly task of preaching for a congregation. Our group had experienced a number of different styles of preaching. In the interim preceding her call, we "preached by committee." The elders took turns, with a guest preacher brought in occasionally. We thought it important for the congregation to hear God's word presented through a variety of voices. As a result, while Mary Ellen's style may indeed have been more like teaching, we promptly learned that she delivered thoughtful biblical messages. We could tell that she worked at presenting something more than content to be learned. Her aim was for us to have our lives changed through encountering God's word in her preaching.

Mary Ellen and her husband Ron quickly became part of the Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Church family. Ron's participation as the "pastor's spouse" was a wonderful bonus. We had made clear that we did not consider Ron to be part of a package deal by which we would get two workers for the price of one. Nevertheless, like most ministers' spouses, he became involved in the life of the congregation as well. While he did not play the piano, he worked with the sound and recording systems. Occasionally he would give offering and communion meditations. We witnessed him doing whatever he could to support and encourage Mary Ellen's ministry.

Several logistical issues needed to be resolved. The primary issue was the three-hour drive between the church building and their home in Eugene, Oregon. They would drive over on Saturday and stay through Sunday. For the greater portion of their time here a small cabin was available where they could stay. Housing for the minister has always been an issue for our congregation, so the graciousness of the family that let them use their cabin was a wonderful blessing.

Because of the distance and time involved every weekend, we found a second issue to be how to give Mary Ellen and Ron time together. Ron had a full-time job in Eugene that was time- and energy-consuming. Understandably, Mary Ellen's responsibilities were also draining, for she had to remain on task throughout each weekend. We therefore tailored her responsibilities so that one weekend each month they stayed home. In other words, we tried to shape our expectations of her ministry within a time schedule that would work for them. Since several of us in the congregation had been involved in local preaching ministry, we understood the

pressures and stresses of that kind of ministry. We considered it important to find ways to make it work for them, and not merely because we felt fortunate to have someone of Mary Ellen's commitment, quality, and competence to serve with us. Moreover, we wanted her ministry to be as much about joy and satisfaction in serving as about the hard work and sacrifice that such ministry involves. Pastoral ministry is difficult enough as it is; we did not need to make it any harder due to distance and time.

As Mary Ellen settled into her ministry her commitment to pastoral care became evident. Though she was not on-site all the time, she made good use of telephone and email to stay in touch with the congregation. She reached out to other pastors in the area to coordinate a cooperative Easter Sunrise Service, and she was well regarded by those pastors. She also stayed in touch with our area's benevolence ministry and worked to keep our congregation involved there even though it was sponsored by another congregation. In spite of the limitation that she did not live here, she kept finding ways to participate in the larger community.

The timing of her ministry was providential in retrospect. Several women in our congregation, along with other female family members, experienced severe health problems. Looking back we believe it especially appropriate that Mary Ellen was available to provide pastoral care in ways and situations that would have been difficult for a male minister. When it came time for Mary Ellen to leave, one lady commented, "When Mary Ellen came, I was disappointed that she would not be able to live here and would only serve part-time. However, I have never been blessed with such pastoral care as we received from her."

Sometimes having a female pastor was confusing to visitors. In a time when we are not sure what to call our ministers (*senior minister, executive pastor, head elder, preaching minister, etc.*) it was educational to explain Mary Ellen's role in our congregation. Since we are all supposed to be ministers (servants) it seemed redundant to call her "The Minister" while the rest of us were just lowercase ministers. Role reversal was also evident on Sunday mornings. Our worship services are fairly traditional, reflecting the older character of our congregation. Thinking back to the days in which the song leader was usually female and the preacher usually male, we were now experiencing the opposite: a male song leader and female preacher. One day a group of visitors from China was visiting the Camp and were introduced to Mary Ellen. As it turned out, the group included a Catholic, an evangelical Christian, and a Buddhist. When Mary Ellen was introduced they were confused about how to address her. They asked if they should call her "Father Mary Ellen"!

The confusion or discomfort with Mary Ellen filling a role in the congregation customarily filled by men provided opportunities to think about the nature and character of Christian ministry. For some, it was no longer church as usual. The challenge is for us to pray and work in such a way that opens us to God's leading for a congregation and encourages us to expand the effectiveness of the variety of ministries God calls us to. Someone has said, "God does not discriminate based on the shape of someone's skin. Neither should the church." It may be appropriate for a certain congregation to call a female pastor. In another situation, the male candidate may be the better choice. In the final analysis, we should look more at what we see God accomplishing through that person's ministry rather than "the shape of their skin."

We are familiar with Paul's charge to Timothy: "As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully" (2 Timothy 4.5, NRSV). We need to be careful not to place unnecessary limitations on capable people who want to serve Christ. I have to confess that I am uneasy with what seems to be contemporary trends regarding pastoral leadership. Models of ministry that seem to work in contemporary culture (minister as CEO, for example) may be causing some churches to pass by capable, committed people whose strengths lie in other areas of ministry. Bringing a person on staff as a paid minister requires a significant financial investment and relational commitment. For a congregation to commit themselves to a minister and also to submit themselves to that minister's leadership creates a difficult situation if the fit is not quite right.

If our current practice of ministry is more culturally based than biblically worked out, then the minister's gender is among the least of our worries. For example, I remember a workshop at a conference on how a (presumably male) minister might strengthen his relationship with (presumably male) elders. The advice was to meet for breakfast or coffee, play golf together, or get involved in other personal activities meant to build friendships. We recognize that when both genders are involved, we must tend to tact and etiquette, finding

creative ways to build the necessary relationships of trust and mutual respect that should characterize congregational leadership. The basis of our relationships will not be based so much on joint participation in gender-specific activities, but grounded in our common mission to proclaim the Gospel, make disciples, and encourage one another to serve Christ faithfully.

The congregation of the Wi-Ne-Ma Christian Church enjoyed a wonderful relationship with a female pastor for more than four years. We were blessed by her preaching, her pastoral care, and the fellowship shared in the life of the congregation. We trust that she was blessed as well by the opportunity to “carry out her ministry fully.” We provided a place for her to exercise the gifts for ministry God gave to her.

We are in the process now of bringing on a new male minister. We have used the same principles in our discussions with him. The same questions remain as we look forward to what God has in store. Our goal is the same: to be a place where a person might “carry out their ministry fully.”

LEROY SHEPHERD IS CURRENTLY AN ELDER AT THE WI-NE-MA CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND SERVES AS MANAGER OF WI-NE-MA CHRISTIAN CAMP, BOTH NEAR CLOVERDALE, OREGON. PREVIOUSLY HE WAS AT THE ESTACADA CHRISTIAN CHURCH FOR 12 YEARS AS MINISTER AND HAS A BA FROM NORTHWEST CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY AS WELL AS AN MDIV AND DMIN FROM EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY. LEROY ENJOYS LIFE WITH HIS WIFE, JEAN, AS TOGETHER THEY ADVISE THEIR THREE SONS (WHO ARE BEGINNING THEIR OWN MINISTRY TRACKS) AND REVEL IN A NEW GRANDSON (LSHEPHERD@WINEMA.ORG).

