
ANNA HOWARD SHAW CENTER

NEWSLETTER

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The Living Word

"The Living Word: Scriptural Context and Mutual Ministry" was the theme of the 1991 Women and the Word Event, March 14 and 15. The Rev. Dr.

Lynn Rhodes and the Rev. Dr. Renita Weems provided leadership, as did the seven workshop leaders and the twenty Bible study team facilitators. Highlights of that event are the content of this issue of the Anna Howard Shaw Center Newsletter.

As Lynn Rhodes asked in the opening words of her presentation, "What does it mean to be the living word, formed by the power of Scripture, culture, and human experience?" She then raised the question as to what we mean by the term "Mutual Ministry?" The following are excerpts from her presentation:

"Mutual" is a very common word, and we all have a sense of what it means. However, I did look it up in the dictionary and would like to share the dictionary meanings with you.

Some of the dictionary meanings of "mutual" include: "entertained, proffered, or excited by each with respect to the other; given and received in equal amount; having the same feeling one for the other or something shared in common; enjoyed by each; or done, experienced, or possessed in common."

"Mutual" also means "to be characterized by or suggestive of intimacy or familiarity: mutual feelings, mutual connection."

"Mutual" is also "of or relating to a plan whereby the members of an organization share in the profits, benefits, expenses, and liabilities: a common endeavor."

"Mutuality," according to the dictionary, is "the quality or state of reciprocity, interchange, interaction, interdependence. It is a sharing of sentiments between persons; interchange of kind acts or expressions."

These definitions from the dictionary suggest some wonderful images and ideals. To be in mutuality is to be in social organizations that recognize our interdependence as the condition of individual and social welfare. Our welfare does not come from competition, but from the sharing of kind acts and mutual intimacy.

As I have tried to understand what creates mutuality, it has become clear that the quality or state of being mutual is a quality of being in some state of equality where we experience the ability to be reciprocal, interdependent, and to share intimately.

Mutuality has to do with the transformation of power arrangements whereby each group and each person can trust that they will not be destroyed by the power another group or person has over them. You can see why it is not practiced much. It is the hardest work we are called to do.

The concept of "ministry" started off meaning simply "service," such as the performance of any service or function for others; a person or agency through which something is accomplished.

In Christian history, "ministry," which started out to mean any work of service that engaged the community, has come to refer most often to the work that the ordained do.

"Ministry" has come to mean in the everyday life of the Church, therefore, the work of the clergy or the work of those who specialize in church work.

If we take seriously the mutuality of ministry, we are faced with serious theological issues; with our understanding of the distinction between clergy and laity; with a critique of many of the present forms of church life and mission; with a critique of our understanding of the terms "unity" and "difference"; and with a need to struggle for real possibilities of meaningful work.

Theological issues

As we try to move into mutual ministry, we find ourselves raising serious questions about some commonly held theological perspectives. What does our concept of an all-powerful God mean for mutuality? Does our understanding of "sacrifice" and "servanthood" become cruel news of oppression?

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We need to examine which of our theological beliefs cripple our mutuality and which sustain it. In mutuality, we are risking our own most cherished beliefs. We cannot assume when we enter into mutuality that we will come out unchanged. Mutual ministry requires a theology of risk and the possibility that we will be the ones transformed, even to the point of a new understanding of who God is and what the Good News is all about.

Distinction between clergy and laity

As a feminist who is also ordained, the issues of clergy and laity are especially poignant. Some of the things that we have fought for the hardest are obscured by the clergy-laity designations. In fact, although we need leadership, the actual reality of ordination has created serious problems for the community of faith.

The origin of the word "laity" or "laos" goes back to the Greek word "laikos." It meant originally, "belonging to the people of God." Yet current usage designates "laity" as those who are

unqualified to speak or judge in various fields of knowledge.

In 1958, Hedrik Kraemer wrote a book called *A Theology of the Laity* (Westminster Press). In this book he said, "The Laity or the body of lay-membership of the Church has never in church history enjoyed the distinction of being treated with care and thoroughness as a matter of specific theological importance or significance."

Yet, as Kraemer points out in his book, the people who were the friends and witnesses to Jesus' ministry were common folk. In Acts 4:13, the priests and scribes were astonished by the outspoken witness of Peter and John, the more so because they were common people. The New Testament does not set clergy apart, but deals mainly with functions that needed to be done and with commitment, not with "offices." (*A Theology of the Laity*, pages 9-10).

In spite of the emphasis on clergy as "the ministry," it is also true that much of the ferment and change that has occurred in church life over time has been largely brought about by laity.

There have been many movements: the Quakers, the lay missionary movements, youth and women's movements that have been powerful forces of change.

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wider world?"*

Church life

The issues of the present structures of church life relate to the clergy/laity issues. They are also related to those who are in each particular community of faith. What does the church organization look like? Does it encourage mutuality?

We will have to examine each community in its context and ask of it, "What enhances and what deforms mutuality, not only within the community itself, but in its relationship to the wider world?" Some communities will need to be broken open because they are homogeneous keepers of the status quo. Other communities will need to nurture specific identities so that people who are oppressed have the space to find their voices, to organize for empowerment, and to nurture the particularity of their gifts in the world.

Critique of our understanding of "unity" and "difference"

As we examine issues of mutual ministry, we need to look at issues of power arrangements and understanding of unity and difference. Over the years theologians have argued over what is the true faith. Often it is declared that the basis of the faith is unity in Christ. Yet, history shows that often this unity is actually defined by a small portion of the believers and has often left out many people and groups. Themes of unity are suspect. As much as we might long for common ground and things that unite us, we will not know what it is that unites us until all peoples and groups have mutual respect in the dialogue. In the meantime, we must attend to the ways in which we use our own perceptions of reality to define others.

We are a country still deeply divided by racism, gender oppression, definitions of what is normal regarding age, disability, sexual orientation, class, etc. Mutuality is not easy because we are not the same and have very different life experiences.

The issue of mutual ministry is whether I believe that my own worth is really enhanced in mutuality, or whether I believe that my self worth will crumble when I am confronted.

As a woman who wants other women who share my concerns and experiences, I can easily do to others what has been done to me. I can expect other women of other races, classes, and cultures to be like me, or at least not want them to confront me with the painful reality of my whiteness in a racist society, with my privilege in education and access to certain kinds of power as a citizen of the United States.

I want harmony and sisterhood and it is hard to face the reality that much will have to change before that is possible. Much of that change will have to come from me. Just when I am learning to claim my worth, I discover how easily I can deny someone else's. The issue of mutual ministry is whether I believe that my own worth is really enhanced in mutuality, or whether I believe that my self worth will crumble when I am confronted.

Furthermore, we need to confront Christian imperialism. Mutual ministry does not only extend to those within the communion of Christianity. We need to learn what it means to be in mutuality with other faiths.

Vocation

Another issue for living in mutual ministry is the relationship between work and vocation. We live in a time when many people do not have the luxury to think about their own creativity and mutuality, but must work to survive and/or must work at jobs that demean or create waste and destruction. So much work that needs to be done is undervalued or even seen as non-work, such as caring for children or caring for the environment.

The opportunity to find meaningful work and to be creative in this culture is very limited. Most of us expect that the individual is responsible for her or his work life. But the problem of meaningful work is a systemic issue. Economic and political structures determine much of what is possible. Therefore, we need to work on the economic and political level. We cannot do this work alone.

Yet, most churches are not places people go in order to think through vocational issues unless they want to go into church work.

Laity Sunday and Labor Day sermons extol the virtues of all work and the importance of "work in the world," but most of us do not experience the Church as the place that seriously says to each person, "What is your vocation? How will you work in the world so as to fulfill your sense of vocation and be responsible to the community for the sake of the world?"

Furthermore, we are not usually involved in criticism of work. We know that most people don't have options, so we just don't say anything. When many cannot even find jobs, we find it hard to say much about the meaning of work.

Women still have major responsibility for the care of children. Many find that they are being torn between the necessity to work and the needs of their children for care. Women who have to find paying jobs find themselves facing almost impossible demands. These are communal issues, not issues of women's personal desires. They are conditions of a society that does not support its young.

These are complex and troubling issues that face those of us who struggle for mutual ministries. Yet, I also find hope in many places and I do dream dreams. I do believe that we can begin the work of co-creating.

First of all, justice has to be the ethical norm. There can be no mutuality without justice.

Second, I envision an understanding of spirituality that is not individualistic and is not the same as "feeling good," but is understood as whatever deepens our sense of solidarity, of our commitment to our mutual and abundant life; a spirituality that understands my intimate connection to all other living things and rejoices in their joys and suffers in their sorrow and finds strength in the interweaving our our lives.

Third, I long for a love that is not that of a servant, not a form of self-absorption epitomized in the television advertisement, "I deserve it." It is a love that refuses to let go of the vision of mutuality. With Carter Heyward, I think that the problem of co-dependency is not that of loving too much, but not loving deeply enough. We have still to learn what loving with all our hearts, spirits, minds, and bodies means.

Fourth, we need to continue to experiment with models of communal life. We need communities that value interdependence, particularity, and solidarity. We need an expanded sense of what family is and the role that the larger community plays in the care and nurture of children.

Fifth, I hope to work for an expanded sense of self. My hope is that as women, who have struggled to gain a sense of self and to combat sexism in its many and devious forms, we will learn to love with an expanded sense of self. Adrienne Rich has a wonderful essay on truth telling as necessary to our lives. This means that we open ourselves to hearing others' truths and letting those truths enter our lives.

Lastly, we need to nurture courage; courage to voice the unmentionable and to believe in our visions, not being trapped by the logic of the power elites.

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The question is what do we want to live for. What will make the time we have with each other full of yearning, care, compassion, pleasure, laughter, and rage at injustice? Those are virtues and emotions worth cultivating in the soul. They will require mutual up-building, mutual accountability and the mutuality of all the creativity we have to develop new ways of being in the world with others. Mutual ministry is both a vision and a way of life for us in this moment and at this time. I look forward to our work together.

— Lynn Rhodes

"Beating Back the Buzzards"

The Seventh Annual Women and the Word Conference, "The Living Word: Scriptural Context and Mutual Ministry," featured The Rev. Dr. Lynn Rhodes, Associate Professor at the Pacific School of Religion, and The Rev. Dr.

Renita Weems, Assistant Professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School.

On Thursday evening, March 14, 1991, I heard The Rev. Dr. Renita Weems preach what was possibly the best sermon that I have ever heard. Such a declaration may reveal one of two things. The first, that I have not, in my twenty-seven years of life, had the opportunity to hear good preaching. The second, that Renita Weems is truly an outstanding preacher. My assessment is that the latter is true.

Her sermon, titled "Beating Back the Buzzards," was based on a text in the Hebrew Scripture, II Samuel 21:7-14, which recounts the slaying of Saul's sons, two of whom were born of Rizpah. Rizpah, in Renita Weems' telling of the story, emerges as the paradigm of voicelessness—and yet triumph—of all women who are the victims of men's battles, men's quest for power.

"She is obscure and has been obscured not because of the insignificance of her contribution to the history of salvation, but because the official interpreters have not always found meaning in her story from which to preach or to teach or to write."

Weems dedicated the opening minutes of her sermon to establishing the context of the passage within the war narratives of I and II Samuel. It is in this collection of books which, according to Weems, are "already full of obscure, unknown, overlooked, and silent women" that Rizpah's story is found. Or, more correctly, it is from these pages that we must "orchestrate" her story; we must "wrestle her story from the hands of male narrators." We are reminded by Weems that "Rizpah is not obscure because her deeds were insignificant. "In fact," she argues, "we discover that her deeds were very significant . . . [that] she is obscure and has been obscured not because of the insignificance of her contribution to the

history of salvation, but because the official interpreters have not always found meaning in her story from which to preach or to teach or to write."

She recounted her experience of trying to locate the text when it first came to her mind to preach on it, knowing it was in II Samuel, but was unsure of the chapter and the verse. She noted that the story of Rizpah was shrouded behind such chapter headings as "The Gibeonites Revenge," "The Hanging of Seven of Saul's Kin," and "David's Burial of Saul and Jonathan." The reality, she said, was that there was no mention of Rizpah. "She was so obscured," observed Weems, "that she doesn't even, in most of the study bibles I looked at, warrant a chapter heading."

She emphasized this point by making a series of contemporary literary parallels, using repetition to reinforce her point -- one of her many oratory techniques which resonated with what is recognized as a decidedly African American preaching style. She said, "And so Rizpah's story in II Samuel comes across, like so many stories of women in the New and Old Testaments, as a footnote, a parenthetical aside, a by-the-way, a postscript to David's story. Rizpah's story in Chapter 21 comes across as 'By the way, there was a woman by the name of Rizpah,' or 'Did I tell you there was a woman by the name of Rizpah,' or 'P.S. there was a story of a woman named Rizpah.'" In this way, she engaged her hearers to journey with her as she illuminated the importance of this particular "footnote" as it were.

It reminds us of the human pillage that occurs when individuals, societies, and nations refuse to acknowledge the principle of interdependence, of mutuality, of the interconnectedness of all humanity.

From here, she moved into a more detailed discussion of the way in which women have historically suffered because of the petty ambitions of men. She compared it to the then-present war in the Persian Gulf, demonstrating how the old, the women, and the children of Iraq would suffer. But, she added, this suffering did not occur merely over international turf wars. Closer to home, she talked about women's responsibility in managing intrafamily conflicts, and added the personal tragedy of how her own grandmother was killed by a bullet intended for her oldest son. She spoke of how this affected her mother and herself—of women paying the price for men's battles—of the cyclical nature of suffering and the ultimate destruction that vengeance-seeking wreaks on all humanity. She said, "Blood for blood. Eye for eye. Your child for my child. Your kin for my kin. Isn't that how we still are now? We want to destroy the other person. As if somehow, that will bring us comfort for the destruction of our own. As if that will make the world seem inhabitable." The text from II Samuel is an example of this. David complies with the request of the Gibeonites to avenge the wrongdoings of his predecessor Saul by shedding the blood of the present generation.

For Weems, the weaving of Scripture with personal experience; of biblical exegetical techniques with deep insight, results in a decidedly womanist perspective on a text that has historically been overlooked or dismissed as irrelevant for contemporary religious people. Yet as Weems lends her own strong voice to the voiceless Rizpah and all that she represents in the text, it becomes clearer that the text recounts the story of all oppressed and marginalized in patriarchal societies. It reminds us of the human pillage that occurs when individuals, societies, and nations refuse to acknowledge the principle of interdependence, of mutuality, of the interconnectedness of all humanity which espouses that our decisions are not only our decisions, our actions not only our actions in isolation. It, sadly, exemplifies that too familiar situation whereby the strongest voices become the only voices.

Rizpah, Weems notes, must simply watch as her sons—her flesh—are offered as atonement for Saul's misdeeds. She says, "Notice no one asks

Rizpah for permission. And Rizpah must stand by and watch her sons be taken and watch them be hung. Rizpah, whose only sin is that she bore sons for the wrong man. Rizpah, whose only fault is that she bore sons for the wrong man. Rizpah, whose only sin is that she is a woman who loved a man whom history hates. Rizpah, whose only sin is that she slept with the enemy."

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how all of God's people are capable—and
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destruction.*

The text, as interpreted by Weems, presents another lesson. While she appears to single out the dominant male culture as the oppressors and victimizers in the bulk of her sermon, she does not exonerate women from the role of the oppressor. Weems powerfully acknowledges how all of God's people are capable—and indeed culpable—of violence and destruction, which is carried out in the name of "God's will." She lamented, "How deluded we are. How shamefully, pitifully, woefully deluded we are. I think of that when I look at us, even those of us who are God-fearing, people who love God, who worship God, who call ourselves the children of God. And I see the rage in our faces when people believe something different from us. And how, with a vengeance, with anger, with violence, we go up against them, in the name of the Lord. In the name of our piety, how we will lash out and persecute, how we will excommunicate them, how we will destroy them because they live a life different from us, because they do not look like us, because they sing differently, because their pronouns are different. And we will kill people and destroy people in the name of our holy wrath."

Returning to the text, Weems tells her audience that despite her circumstances, Rizpah does not simply give up and cry. I say "simply" because Weems made the notable statement that one can "cry and fight at the same time," a powerful affirmation for all who have been taught that

logic and emotions, objectivity and feelings, intellect and passion are mutually exclusive. Incompatible. Ineffective as a means of inaugurating change. Weems notes, "What she [Rizpah] can do, she does do. And thank God for what Rizpah does. According to the Bible, she essentially fights back. Does she cry? Yes she cries! And when you have been abused by the system you better learn how to cry. Does she wail? Of course she wails! Because our emotions, our crying, our wailing are those things which keep us human. Does she cry? Of course she cries! But she not only cries; she fights back. And you know what? You can cry and fight at the same time!"

Weems emphasizes that what Rizpah *can* do, she *does* do. In the context of the story, that amounts to sitting on a rock with her sackcloth, beating back the buzzards by day and the beasts of the field by night, so that the corpses of her hanged sons would at least be entitled to a decent burial by David, the King. In time, David gets word of her persistence, of her around-the-clock vigil on the rock, and he returns the bodies for burial.

Weems takes this opportunity to extend the image of Rizpah on her rock to the church as a whole, sitting on the rock, who is Jesus, and using their gifts—no matter what they are—to fight back. She exhorts the congregation to pick up their rags, whatever they may be, and to fight back despite the seemingly overwhelming odds against such a defense. Weems emphasized that Rizpah was successful "not because her rag was so significant, but that it was consistent . . . unyielding."

*"After you cry, you have to say
'Now how long am I going to cry? Am I
going to be crushed or am I going
to get up again and beat back the
buzzards?'"*

She concluded, "All she had was a piece of sack cloth. All she had was a rag. . . . She beat back the buzzards by day, and she beat back the wild

beasts by night. That in the midst of those who would steal from us our integrity, who would steal from us our dignity. Steal from us our hope. Who would steal from us our character. You had better go somewhere and get yourself a piece of rag. . . . After you cry, you have to say 'Now how long am I going to cry? Am I going to be crushed or am I going to get up again and beat back the buzzards?'"

Throughout her sermon, Weems was careful to address the context of the passage, as well as to deftly articulate her broad knowledge of the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which the story of Rizpah occurred. This assiduous scholarship added a credibility to her interpretation that might have been obscured if one considered only the radical conclusion and poignant critique of the status quo rendered by Weems in her sermon. Instead, it was her commitment to extricating her-story from history, to recounting the relational casualties of the holy wars and not merely the battles and victors, and to celebrating the hope and resilience of the oppressed ones rather than the assuredness of the dominant ones which she brought into her telling of Rizpah's story. In her own words, "Rizpah understood, like so many of us have to understand, that we are afflicted on every side, but not crushed. We are torn down, but not destroyed. We've got to beat them back."

While this piece has preserved much of Weems's own voice, as a hearer of her sermon I had the benefit of experiencing the energy and flamboyance of her delivery firsthand, and thus was a part of the synergy that resonated throughout Marsh Chapel on that Thursday evening resulting in an emotive, powerful, and truly spirit-filled experience.

In the end, it was all the people who said "Amen!"

— Doreen Treacy: A third year Master of Divinity student at the School of Theology.

Needed: Typewriter

The Anna Howard Shaw Center's archaic typewriter has finally bitten the dust. If you know of a IBM Selectric Correctable typewriter that could be donated to the Shaw Center, please contact Margaret Wiborg or the Shaw Center Staff at 617/353-3075.

CONGRATULATIONS to Dr. Carole Bohn and her husband Dr. Bob Furman on the adoption of their infant daughter, Deana Leah.

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Upcoming Events:

SEPTEMBER 20-21, 1991: The Anna Howard Shaw Center Women's Retreat. "Around the Table and Across the Lines." Open to all women students, faculty and staff.

OCTOBER 5, 1991: The Women, Work, and Wholeness Event in Cumberland, RI. For more information, contact the Shaw Center at 617/353-3075.

FEBRUARY 9, 1992: Celebration of Anna's Birthday and Recognition of the Anna Howard Shaw window as a United Methodist Historic Site.

MARCH 19-20, 1992: WOMEN AND THE WORD; leadership includes Bishop Susan M. Morrison, Bishop Barbara C. Harris, and Dr. Diana Eck.