

## A Men's Movement for the Church?

JAMES E. DITTES

A YOUNG male minister tells what it felt like to move from seminary to his first church: "It was like I had been happily watching the big boys play baseball and suddenly they said, 'Come on and play.' There we were counting my strike-outs and errors, and I couldn't keep up. Every time the ball was hit my way was excruciating. Everybody was keeping score." Another puts it this way: "They insisted on calling me Father, and that's what they wanted, a perfect father."

Trying to be a minister in our culture is too much like trying to be a man—or Superman—in our culture: super-competent, expert, error-free, cool, sturdy, silent yet eloquent; hearty, tender without being weak; an effective and prolific lover of people; understanding of human dilemmas (like the Prodigal Father) yet above the fray; an untroubled, steadfast, well-armored and desexualized model of stability and endless commitment; an unwoundable and always available hero; everyone's ideal father, everyone's ideal man. That's what people expect of men and that's what they expect of ministers.

Harrowing as it is for women to live up to such expectations—and it is precisely this blending of "ideal minister" and "ideal man" that accounts for much of the resistance to women clergy—it is at least equally harrowing for men. Because men try. Scripted roles for "minister" pile on to the lifelong, well-learned scripts for "man," and there is no wrenching free from the one without breaking the power of the other. George and Carl, the two ministers quoted above, tried to redefine ministry for their churches and for themselves, but they failed; the expecta-

tions and score-keeping persisted—inside their congregations and inside their own heads. They still practiced ministry-by-checklist, trying to keep everything under control. Then family tension compelled each one to tackle the redefinition of "man" and "father." They discovered a rich array of ways to be a man or father that the media and familiar models had never disclosed. They abandoned the idolatrous conviction that selfhood was tied to success, performance and score-keeping. New modes of ministry seemed to flow easily and smoothly.

George and Carl did not become less manly in redefining themselves and their ministry. Rather, they discovered new ways to be men, modes of participation that were not "performance," forms of intimate connectedness with others that were not competitive, and styles of openness and unguardedness that were not weakness. They found ways to become more richly male, more gracefully ministers.

Ministers are hardly the only men burdened with a stifling allegiance to our culture's notions of manhood. But neither George nor Carl nor any other man should have to look outside the church for help in shedding the world's expectations of how to live. After all, they are in a church that regularly reads Paul: "Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). Men should not have to look outside the church to find support and direction for living the manhood for which they were created. This transformation, this conversion from a worldly definition to a self-definition open to the abundant riches of God's creation—this is the church's business.

What are we to make of an issue of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY focused on men? After two decades of a women's movement in church and theology, are we now

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to have a men's movement? Maybe even men's liberation? Are we to have caucuses and agencies devoted to men's issues within denominations and at the American Academy of Religion? Are we to have men's sections of religious bookstores and publishers' catalogs? So far there has been, here and there, a meeting, a book, a workshop, a support group, a caucus; but these are transient and support is thin. There is no movement, in any sense of the word. Some will welcome the prospect of a movement as fundamental to the church's mission. Some will

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be appalled at what they perceive as another faddish and polarizing distraction from that mission.

**T**HE WELCOME goes like this: A men's movement, like the women's movement before it and like God's movement among us, is about living life more abundantly and more faithfully to God's intentions. It is about winning the tug-of-war between the internalized voices of others that bark "Be manly; be ours" and the inner voice that invites "Be God's man." It is about a turnaround as dramatic and life-saving as any other repentance and conversion. It is about accepting responsibility by making choices among alternatives, about choosing the routes we take instead of dumbly following the world's ruts and routines. A men's movement guiding such discoveries becomes a prime mode of the church's mission.

Some of the misgivings about a men's movement are: 1) It is another example of forsaking the Christian center of the church's mission for a marginal and essentially secular issue, crudely baptized in hopes of making the church more relevant. 2) Questions of identity like this are sinfully individualistic when the church is called to deal with pressing and overwhelming issues of human suffering and the deathly scarcity of justice and peace. 3) How can men claim a men's movement (women may ask) when men do not suffer the neglect, abuse and exclusion that women have? Men are agents of cultural oppression, not its victims. A men's movement may even be construed as mobilizing men *against* women. 4) Imitating the women's movement (some men may say) is the signal that you want men to imitate women, to be more feminine. "Men's liberation," like "women's liberation," is an attack on masculinity.

The first two concerns express the risks and limitations of any pastoral project in the church. The second two can be addressed, partly, by asserting that *a men's movement is about men*. It is not about blaming women for men's dilemmas. It is not the women's movement or women's liberation that makes problems for men. Learning to live

and work with women who have power and make choices about their lives may indeed be challenging, but that is not the oppression of the spirit that men need to undo; that oppression is in the set of scripts for maleness that long preceded feminism.

Second, a men's movement is about becoming more manly, not less; it is not about becoming more feminine or more androgynous, not about, as we sometimes hear, balancing the masculine with "the feminine which is within each man." A men's movement is about exploring the astounding variety of ways to express manhood, far beyond the narrow compass of the prevailing stereotypes.

A men's movement, then, would emphasize the distinctiveness of masculinity and its diversity. This is the emphasis of books reviewed in this issue. Robert Bly, for instance, helps dramatize the reclaiming of masculinity, though he seems to be sufficiently caught in conventional stereotypes that he cannot alert us to the rich diversity within masculinity. Jungian analysis may obscure the distinctiveness of masculinity by recommending a kind of androgyny which blends the masculine and feminine within each person. But Jung decidedly does help us recognize diversity by arraying the archetypal figures which inhabit our psyche.

Even traits like nurturing, intimacy and vulnerability can be talked about as *masculine* traits, not as feminine traits to be borrowed, though we have to be tentative because these masculine forms are so little explored. When men discover their nurturing capacity, it is a pater-

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### Any News

Just before sleep  
when we nest in the smudge  
of what already was,  
you call to ask  
"Any news?" and together  
we lip-read our marks  
on the day's drying skin.

We are gathering stories,  
the floaters in memory  
we string  
like beads for the brain.

In a tale  
told in two tongues  
we caption this day,  
releasing the ordinary  
to walk in lines  
that leave things out  
in an eternal  
and thick-soled  
silence.

Joan Rohr Myers

nal trait they discover, not a maternal one, and if we don't know yet just what that difference is, we do have hints that the paternal has a vigor and urgency that seems distinctively male. When men discover their capacity for intimacy, it is in some form of a robustly shared participation which is a complement to "relationship" as practiced by women. When men find their vulnerability, it is perhaps not as a kind of emptying, but rather as a risking, a penetrating exploration of possibilities, pushing them until the limits are reached.

**B**UT STILL the question: Why in the church? What would a men's movement in church and theology look like? What could it do? What is its warrant?

1) "God the father" may be rescued. If "father" has made God seem too patriarchal and unapproachable, one solution has been to think of God also as female, which is a helpful and perhaps necessary solution. But, as a complementary approach, what if we discover that there is far

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## *Blackberry Surprise*

Early and unawares they snagged me  
—mind not full returned yet from  
wherever it spends sleeping hours—  
ripe and glinting blackberries just out  
of reach, daring me to stretch, risk  
a scratching of my skin, even bloodshed,  
for the sour-sweet midnight tang of darkness  
crushed across the tongue. Late summers  
we would go by bus to scramble down the crags  
beyond the proud Edwardian civic esplanade  
and reach, sheltered around their feet,  
a deep ancestral bramble-bushy tangle.  
Mum and Dad picked fast and clean,  
plucking ripe fruits by handfuls,  
while calculating pounds of sugar  
—strictly rationed for the war—  
jars of jam to store for scarcity ahead,  
still-young voices echoing calls to share  
the untouched bounty they had stumbled on.  
But Dick and I got lost, whenever possible,  
among the laden branches, purple-mouthing  
as many as we saved. There was the picnic  
sun-splashed on the rocks to look forward to,  
that always potential prehistoric monster  
to watch out for—fossils lumbering back to  
life out of the rock face or the shallow caves.  
But the most cherishing part is this . . . beneath  
and wrapped around it all was that warmth within,  
too delicate to name, of being family for once—  
just like folk in books—of belonging, held somehow  
in a grasp still tugs the wistful cords of memory  
over almost fifty years, endless miles of ocean.

**J. Barrie Shepherd**

more to maleness and fatherhood than patriarchy? What if there is a distinctively fatherly vulnerability, tenderness and nurture? As we come to discover that maleness is richer and fuller than we supposed, it becomes easier to approach God the father.

2) "God the father" liberates all men. What is a real man? What does it mean to be authentically masculine? Our culture has its standard answers and so do our internal fears. These models constrict and cheat us. A very different and liberating model comes from taking seriously the incarnational revelation of a father God who risks to the point of a radical vulnerability.

3) Biblical and historical figures may take on more vitality and have more to teach and model. If men know themselves more fully, they may come to know better the figures of their tradition in three-dimensional perspective. They are no longer merely "patriarchs" but people to be preached about, studied, accompanied. They become known as more fully human and more fully God's people because they become known as more fully male. The figures may return the favor, making it easier to know ourselves as men who are part of God's people.

4) Men's energies can be better put to men's use and God's. This is perhaps the heart of the matter—joining the church's concerns to men's daily and lifelong dilemmas, hopes and frustrations. If men are single-mindedly, religiously, sacrificially obsessed with the idols of work, can this capacity for commitment be celebrated as a male gift, even while it is redirected to more transcendent values? If men are virtually phobic about intimacy even at home, or especially at home (and hence also phobic about religious seriousness), perhaps because such intimacy appears dangerously feminine, can we rescue intimacy (religiousness) in its more masculine modes? If men get a mystic-like high from their access (or semblance of access)—at work, in TV sports, in financial manipulations, in petty church politics, in office-cooler gossip—to what may feel like the fundamental mysterious powers that govern and sustain life, can that mystical hunger and capacity be acknowledged, nurtured and redirected toward even more fundamental and significant powers? These are some goals for a religious men's movement that perhaps no other men's movement and no other religious movement could aspire to.

5) Ministry can be rescued from narrow maleness. We end where we began, with the possible rediscovery of vocation that can come from liberating "minister" from having to play "ideal man" (an identification more commonly lodged than we suppose in the minds of parishioners, pulpit search committees and ministers themselves). When male ministers report burnout, when they find the role hauntingly frustrating, constricting, dehumanizing, as every minister must at least once a day, perhaps there are new opportunities for ministry to be discovered in asking oneself how a real man, not an ideal, performance- and control-addicted man, would respond. I hope for a men's movement that will offer each of us resources for answering that question. ■

