

Talking to Strangers: Feminist Women in Ecumenism
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Introduction

It seems appropriate to begin a conversation with geographers and planners by telling you a story about a suburban street and a boundary. Many years ago, my neighbour Rhonda and I, both seven years old, ventured up the road – almost to the corner of Kingsview Blvd and McMurchy Ave. We lived on Kingsview, in our hometown of Brampton, Ontario, and its intersection with McMurchy, about eight houses up from my house, was the limit of the known universe, at least the universe that we were allowed to traverse unattended. As we came close to our boundary intersection, a life form came into view: a dark-haired boy, about our age, or maybe a lot older – like eight. He had a shiny red bicycle, with glorious plastic streamers flowing from the handlebars, and he was riding lazy circles around the road. We didn't know him because he lived in a house at the corner of McMurchy and Kingsview, and the kids who lived in that house all went not to our neighbourhood elementary school, but to St. Mary's Roman Catholic School, downtown.

When he saw us, the dark-haired boy pedaled over toward us. Now *this* was interesting.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” I replied.

“Where do you live?” he asked us.

As I opened my mouth to answer, I felt Rhonda tense beside me. “I'm not allowed to talk to strangers!” she proclaimed, and she turned on her heel and strode away.

Rhonda's words hit home. We had both been street-proofed, although that's not what they called it back then. The rules were simple: don't take candy, don't get in a car, don't give out information. In short, “Don't talk to strangers.” But was this boy the sort of person they meant? I rather doubted it, but who could be sure? I hesitated. Then I, too, turned away from the dark-haired boy and his shiny bicycle, and followed Rhonda back down the street to familiar territory.

My world gradually expanded, as worlds do, beyond the corner of Kingsview and McMurchy. And as my travels whisked me along the grand social and intellectual avenues of the late twentieth century, I found companions for the journey in all sorts of places, including both the ecumenical and the women's movements. As a member, then an ordained minister, in one of the world's most liberal progressive denominations, the United Church of Canada, I actually learned my feminism *in* the church. With its ecumenical history and its mandate to be “united and uniting,” I also learned ecumenism in my church community. Both captured my imagination and my heart. Both became part of me. And yet, being part of both is not an easy fit. It has confronted me once more with that long ago dilemma of Rhonda and the boy on his bicycle. For while both Christian ecumenism and Christian feminism take their warrants from what I understand to be Jesus' radical and healing ministry, they are sometimes at odds in their goals and methods, particularly when it comes to women. If I talk to this stranger, will he help me discover the unity which seems to lie at the heart of Christian yearning, or am I simply being seduced by those plastic streamers on his bicycle? And so I have asked myself: *should* I talk to strangers?

At one level, there should be no conflict. The ecumenical and the women's movements share a common vocabulary of unity and community for a broken world.¹ Roman Catholic ecumenist Margaret O'Gara points out that feminism and ecumenism also share a desire to *reform* the church in some way; particularly by rethinking the way authority has been understood and practiced.²

Women have also been at the forefront of modern global ecumenism from the beginning. They were deeply entwined in pioneering ecumenical efforts: through Christian interchurch organizations like the YWCA, and as a powerful force in international mission work. A formidable cast of foremothers³ helped birth and suckle the World Council of Churches. It was a woman, Kathleen Bliss, who crafted the WCC's first public message, which included a now emblematic, heartfelt rallying cry: "We intend to stay together."⁴

World ecumenism has not only included individual women, however; it has also been *about* women. The first world conference on Faith and Order, at Lausanne, Switzerland in 1927, raised the question of women's roles in the church. The first assembly of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam, 1948) launched a study of "Men and Women in the Church," and the next assembly (Evanston, 1954) created a permanent department of the WCC, called "Co-operation of Men and Women in Church and Society." Since then, there have been numerous studies and conferences under the auspices of the WCC focusing on women, including a whole decade dedicated to the "Churches in Solidarity with Women in Church and Society" from 1988 to 1998. The written accounts of these many gatherings brim over with the joy and tears that women have been able to share as they meet one another across barriers of geography, culture and class. The ecumenical movement has created a space for women "to express their deepest aspirations for solidarity and sisterhood."⁵

Unfortunately, however, the story of women in ecumenism has another side. Its litany of participation is a bit misleading, for much of it was won through struggle. The decision taken in Amsterdam in 1948 to study "men and women in the church" came as a result of a debate between some of the founding mothers and the Reformed theologian Karl Barth about women's roles. Barth argued that women are "equal – but subordinate in the order of creation."⁶ The documents show that early women ecumenists longed for "the right to serve."⁷ At the WCC assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1998, women who had organized a festival for the Decade for Women sent a letter to the Assembly, asking church leaders to "initiate actions to correct the gender imbalances that exist in

¹ Francine Cardman, "BEM and the Community of Women and Men," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25 (1984): 84.

² Margaret O'Gara, "Ecumenism and Feminism in Dialogue on Authority," in *Women and Church: The Challenge of Ecumenical Solidarity in an Age of Alienation*, ed. Melanie May (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1991 for the Commission on Faith and Order of the NCC), 119, 123.

³ Henrietta Visser't Hooft, Sarah Chakko, Kathleen Bliss, Madeleine Barot, Pauline Webb, and Lois Wilson to name a few.

⁴ "Message" from the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam 1948, reproduced in Michael Kinnamon & Brian E. Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 21-22.

⁵ Aruna Gnanadason, "Women in the Ecumenical Movement," *International Review of Mission* 81 (1992): 243.

⁶ Constance F. Parvey, "Participation: a Pilgrimage of Agony and Hope," *Ecumenical Review* 40 (1988): 496.

⁷ Gnanadason, quoting Susannah Herzog, *A Voice for Women* (Geneva: WCC, 1981), 18.

your midst, and make all levels of administration in churches and ecumenical organizations accessible and just for women.”⁸ Fifty years later, women were still begging at the gates.

Furthermore, most of the energy for women in ecumenism has been in the area that was traditionally called “Life and Work,” the area that focused not on belief systems and broken communion, but the actions of Christians striving together in and for the world. The ecumenism that takes very seriously the “*stranger*” in the act of “talking to strangers,” the kind that struggles with the doctrines, dogmas, and other theologies that divide us – what is generally called “Faith and Order” ecumenism – tends to tell a different story. This latter kind of ecumenism has been, particularly at the international level, less enthusiastic in its embrace of women’s concerns. Women academics do not often choose to work in “faith and order” ecumenism. And yet that is the place I seem to have found myself in my own life and work – attempting to map a journey from dilemma to promise as a feminist woman in ecumenical dialogue.

A. The Dilemmas:

Feminists in faith and order ecumenism face at least two dilemmas, which I might bluntly name as danger and irrelevance. The “danger” is easy to find. In the quest for ecclesial unity, women are repeatedly named as *the problem*. As the Archbishop of Canterbury might say, “We get mail.” In 1978, a letter post-marked “Moscow” warned the Anglican global communion that the ordination of women would be a threat to ecumenism. In 1984, a letter from Vatican City told the Archbishop of Canterbury that the ordination of women to the priesthood and episcopate would constitute a “threat” and an element of “grave difficulty” in the quest for Christian unity.⁹ And in 1989 an Episcopal priest in New York made a formal objection to the ordination of Barbara Harris to the office of bishop, on the grounds that it created an “intractable impediment to the realization of that visible unity of the church for which Christ prayed.”¹⁰ Last fall, as antsy Anglican clergy lined up to join special “personal ordinariates” of the Roman Catholic Church, thus escaping the potential clutches of Anglican women bishops, Hegumen Riabykh, of the Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate, addressed a gathering of North American scholars of ecumenism in Montreal. Women and the ordination of homosexuals, he assured us, are “novelties” opposed by those who know and practice “true orthodoxy.”¹¹

On one level, the question of ministry: who does it, and how, and why, is an excellent and textured one for ecumenical discussion. It takes us deep into both the vocation of every Christian person, and into the ways Christian communities gather and order themselves. But as soon as some of us, by virtue of only a chromosome, become a “novelty,” an “intractable impediment” to unity, it is much more difficult to enter that fascinating discussion, and that difficulty is ultimately dangerous.

Dangerous because dialogue ecumenism is partly about learning to let go, learning to surrender our isolation and the identity that comes with it for the opportunity to build a new community. Women, however, have only recently won the right to *have* an identity, and only in *some* cultures and

⁸ Decade Festival, Letter to the Eighth General Assembly, “From Solidarity to Accountability.” (www.wcc-coe.org-coe).

⁹ Quoted in John Selby Spong, “Women: Crux of Ecumenism,” *Christianity and Crisis* 46 (1986), 431.

¹⁰ Quoted in Joan Brown Campbell, “Towards a Renewed Community of Women and Men” in *Women and Church*, 79.

¹¹ As quoted by Thomas Ryan, “Ecumenism Today: Looking Back, Looking Forward” (<http://www.tomryancsp.org/newsletter.htm>).

economies. Along with other oppressed groups, women are still learning to claim power in a patriarchal culture, but in faith and order ecumenism, they are being asked to give it away. When they are told that in their quest for a voice and an identity they become an ecumenical “problem,” women are being asked to deny their very selves. An American theologian, Rena Yocum, calls it the “ungifting” of our gifts. Women’s gifts in the church, she says, often get sent back. They are “deemed undesirable because they do not match the ecclesial furniture.”¹²

This “ungifting,” this identification of ordained women as part of the ecumenical “problem,” then, injects a moment of hesitation for *all* women, not only those who feel called to ordered ministries. Many feminists abandon faith and order ecumenism – if not organized religion altogether – for this reason. They fear losing what women have struggled so long to gain. Feminist theologian Letty Russell says that women have three choices in their spiritual life: to accept their marginalized positions, to choose the power centre, or to choose the margins, but for the purpose of transforming the centre.¹³ Some would name faith and order ecumenism as part of the “power centre,” a space carved out by and for males, a space that tends to serve the status quo.¹⁴

Faith and Order ecumenism earns this reputation because its documents, which offer eloquent critiques of some parts of ecclesial history and biblical interpretation, are often silent about the way those traditions have spoken of women. Even “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” (BEM), the “poster child” of faith and order ecumenism, a document that has done much to advance doctrinal agreement, is suspect. It retreats from the stronger stances on women’s ordination that appear in earlier Faith, and Order documents.¹⁵ As one critic puts it, in this important document “the facing of conflict fades before the hope of concord.”¹⁶ To stay in this ecumenical “centre,” then, a woman is not only in danger of losing voice and identity. She is also in danger of being co-opted for the patriarchal cause, in danger of sacrificing women’s concerns on the altar of Christian unity.

This danger to women’s voices and hopes becomes part of a larger question of the relevance of doing faith and order ecumenism at all, when women can “go elsewhere” to construct their ecumenical visions. There are many spaces for women to gather within global ecumenical networks. The WCC has a program on “Women in Church and Society” that, in its words: “offers a space for creative dialogue between women’s diverse voices and experiences across regions and denominations.”¹⁷ Those voices sing a familiar litany: the might and flight of capital, the fragility of the earth, the oil-soaked obsessions of the rich nations, the ravages of preventable disease, the mingled hope and fear we feel as we watch social movements unfold in North Africa, the Middle East ... and Wisconsin. Whenever women gather globally in the name of ecumenism, these are the issues that both worry and inspire them. Like other feminists, they celebrate diversity and crave justice. As Christian feminists, they turn these joys and longings into prayer. Women have consistently utilized the ecumenical movement to share their stories and raise their life concerns.

¹² Rena M. Yokum, “Presents and Presence,” in *Women and Church*, 70.

¹³ *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 192-3.

¹⁴ See, for example, O’Gara, “Ecumenism and Feminism,” 118.

¹⁵ Melanie May, “The Ordination of Women: The Churches’ Responses to BEM,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 30 (1989), 263-5.

¹⁶ Cardman, “BEM,” 91.

¹⁷ This program is featured on the WCC website at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/programmes/the-wcc-and-the-ecumenical-movement-in-the-21st-century/women-in-church-and-society.html>.

In this kind of ecumenism, women often bring together the spiritualities that work for them, and simply cast off or ignore what they see as the errors and conflicts of the churches' patriarchal past. It is appealing, compelling, and affirming. It beckons us out of the gloomy back alleys of ancient bitter controversies, to a path strewn with hope and light. So why keep visiting the back alley? Because I still think there is still enormous power lurking in those back alleys. We live in an intensely secularized, but also an intensely religious world. Feminists ignore that religiosity at their peril. We have some work to do there – something to contribute. I also persist in believing that there still lurks in those dusty alleys of institutional religion, including Christianity, something feminists need – we have something to gain. So I will speak briefly about what I see as the promise for feminist women in ecumenism.

B. The Promise

1) What feminists can offer:

The earliest women in the global ecumenical movement asked for a chance to serve, so it seems fitting to ask how feminist women can serve faith and order ecumenism. Among a number of things, I would consider two the most important: feminist women can contribute their experience of the margins and their refusal to go away.

The debris one encounters on the shoulder of a road can be both disgusting and fascinating. It tells a story about those who have been travelling that route. I am leery of any suggestion that women are by nature more relational and loving.¹⁸ But I *would* argue that women, even those who have been empowered in the church, as I have been, have also learned how to live – to greater or lesser extents – on the shoulder of the ecumenical road, on the margins. And the very pain of marginalization, the pain that can make ecumenism dangerous, can also be a wonderful gift to faith and order ecumenism.

Because women, like other oppressed groups, have been subjected to subordination, they can be “particularly sensitive to misuses of authority.”¹⁹ From the edges, they can ask pertinent questions about the power embedded in the churches' doctrines and practices, power that will continue to exert itself even if some women walk away. Feminists have trained themselves and others to be alert to historically distorted interpretations of scripture, those “normative” readings that teeter on a stack of flimsy assumptions. They have trained us to ask: who is here? Who is not at the table? It is a familiar task for academics. We must, as Cornel West puts it, target “the catastrophic and the monstrous, the scandalous, the traumatic that are often hidden and concealed in the deodorized and manicured discourses of the mainstream.”²⁰ It is a methodology, but in Christian circles it becomes a theology: the conception of a God who, from the margins, topples the mighty.

Feminist women can also contribute the annoying fact of their presence. When I returned from Montreal last September and reported at the St. Andrew's College communal lunch table the pronouncements of my brother from the Moscow Patriarchate, the St. Andrew's students responded with a pep talk. “We're glad you're there,” they told me. “Don't give up. Someone needs to be there to witness to a different reality.” Many of the currently emerging formal ecumenical and interfaith dialogues involve groups that have never before been included in formal mainstream conversation:

¹⁸ Joan Brown Campbell makes this argument, for example, in “Toward a Renewed Community,” 85.

¹⁹ O'Gara, “Ecumenism and Feminism,” 122.

²⁰ Cornell West video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ywBLEUoqok>

Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Missionary Alliance, Muslim scholars. Many of these new dialogue partners have what we might call “complicated” views about women’s leadership. By refusing to leave the room, feminists remind all concerned that, as long-time ecumenist Mary Tanner puts it: “A united church in which ecclesial divisions were overcome but in which divisions based upon race, class, sex, or wealth remained would not be a church truly united.”²¹

2) *What feminists can gain:*

As I have participated in ecumenical work, I have come to realize that feminists can contribute much to making the dialogue richer and more honest. But that would not be enough to keep me there. As a scholar – or perhaps just as a person who needs to be needed – I want to engage in this exercise believing that the work has some wider import. Some days, I get discouraged. On good days, I think I’ve discovered the life in the task.

I can best describe what I gain from this work in ancient, often sexist institutions with another road story. When I was first ordained as a minister, I spent several years driving an old white half-ton pick-up truck on the coast of Labrador. I bought the truck on tender through my father, an Ontario Hydro employee, so it had been a service vehicle. It came complete with a high white cap on the box, and a flashing orange light. Murray, the local mechanic, called it the “Sinner Catcher.” Southern Labrador is subject to huge annual snowfalls. It covered my house, literally over the roof. It drifted across the road, sometimes several feet deep. But there was only one road, and one of the churches in the parish I served was at the other end of it. I had no choice but to learn to drive my truck through snowdrifts.

What I have gained in ecumenical dialogue is much like what I learned from those driving adventures. Both experiences are a bit wild and unpredictable. Both involve a moment of snowy confusion. Both threaten to leave you impossibly stuck, isolated, or even facing the wrong way. And both inculcate courageous humility, or perhaps humble courage: a humble respect for the obstacles, and the courage, through practice, to take them on.

If you have been part of any social, political or religious movement of resistance, you know how easy it is to become rigid, absolute in the certainty of your cause and the way to get there. Ecumenical dialogue, however, has taught me to plunge in, however absurd the possibility of reconciliation might seem. For whenever I have been sure that I had it all sorted out, and had divided the world appropriately into those with correct views and those with wrong views, my work has driven me into dialogue with all the wrong people: cranky old Oblate priests, impossible Pentecostals, unbending Baptists, all with nothing to teach *me*, of course, all of whom did teach me to see some new contour in my faith and understanding.

All the classic dialogue disciplines I have learned in ecumenism: skills of listening, of waiting to understand, of learning new faith grammar and vocabulary, all of these have helped to teach me to be utterly open, beyond anything I can see or imagine, open to the ways in which our deepest chasms might be bridged. It is different to passivity, or appeasement, or giving up my voice. An ecumenical women’s group once issued a statement from their dialogue on reconciliation: “Reconciliation,” they said, “is not about compromise and the relinquishing of part of one’s standing room.” Rather, it is “an opening of oneself to the realization that there is something

²¹ Mary Tanner, “Toward a Common Confession of the Apostolic Faith Today,” *Women and Church*, 179-80.

beyond oneself. It is about being strong enough to avoid ... being co-opted into naming the other as enemy.”²² That has been ecumenical dialogue’s gift to me: it has given me a courageous humility that invites me, repeatedly, into dialogue – not simply with those who are “other,” but with those who are “other” in ways that are not very appealing to me. It has taken me to the heart of Jesus’ impossible challenge, “Love your enemies.” It has returned the stranger to me, with a kind of “second naïveté”: ecumenical dialogue has given me back the stranger as a gift.

Further, ecumenical dialogue has given me not only the stranger out there, but the stranger I *am*. It has helped me not only to encounter the stranger with humble courage, but also to ask: For whom am I a white, educated, middle class dangerous stranger? For whom do I represent not promise but threat and loss? This twice-wrapped gift of the stranger is, above all, what keeps me in ecumenism. To receive this gift is to be, in religious terms, converted, to be reoriented. For while, in these troubled times, I believe we must know and practice the gift of resistance, I also believe – and you can tell me if you think I sound like a devotee of some patron saint of lost causes – I believe that, for the sake of the earth, we also must know the gift of the stranger, the gift that refuses us our convenient divisions and draws us, again and again, into the snowdrifts that keep us apart.

So when I decide to accept and to be the gift of the stranger, with or without the plastic streamers, I commit to go beyond my safe intersections. I commit to travel the road to the place when and where we can all, we the inhabitants of this little blue planet, say, as the early ecumenists did: “We intend to stay together.” Thank you for agreeing to walk a kilometer with me along that highway today.

²² “Reconciliation,” printed in *Ecumenical Review* 42 (1990): 264-65.