

Issues addressed in letter still remain 10 years later

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As Sister Hughes noted, Bishop Clark's 1982 letter addresses many of the concerns that still confront the U.S. bishops today: sexism in society and the church; the often unrecognized contributions women have made to the church's life; and the pain many women have felt as a result of their treatment by — and sometimes exclusion from — the church.

Bishop Clark's letter also includes a list of practical suggestions for the diocese to encourage greater involvement of women in ministry and to promote healing.

The diocesan pastoral suggested that all diocesan agencies, parishes and groups invite women and lay people to participate in all areas possible under church law, including leadership positions and such roles as pastoral assistants and eucharistic ministers; that the diocese increase educational opportunities for women and lay people and provide support for people seeking advanced theological education; and that priests and seminarians become more sensitive to issues affecting women.

Bishop Clark's letter also considers the question of ordaining women to the priesthood, explaining reasons both supporting and opposing such a change in current church practice.

Bishop Clark concluded, "I pray that as this theological discussion continues all of us may be alert to the Spirit who instructs us so patiently."

Looking back at the period in which he wrote *The Fire in the Thornbush*, Bishop Clark said that women in the church was an obvious subject for his first pastoral letter after his appointment as bishop of Rochester in 1979.

"I think it was a realization on my part that the experience of this local church was much more developed and full than my own (experience) on these particular issues," Bishop Clark remarked during an interview with the *Catholic Courier*.

Bishop Clark explained that he had come to the Rochester diocese after serving for seven years as the spiritual director at the North American College in Rome, and had not had contact with the changes in the United States in terms of the greater involvement of women in society and the church. Thus the letter was a way to explore the issues surrounding women in the church and the pain that they felt because their contributions were not being recognized, he said.

Indeed, the bishop's letter was in some respects a culmination of diocesan and national developments in light of women's growing involvement in ministry, noted Sister Mary Sullivan, RSM, who chaired the task force that aided Bishop Clark in preparing the pastoral.

"There was a gradual, evolving sense in the diocese of the contributions of women in the diocese," re-

marked Sister Sullivan, a professor of language and literature at Rochester Institute of Technology.

The letter also provided an opportunity to examine some differences of opinion over women's growing role in the church, Bishop Clark noted. "I discovered a rather wide diversity in the points of view about the themes I included in *The Fire in the Thornbush*," he recalled.

Bishop Clark was not alone in sensing a need to address the concerns of women in the church, observed Sister Maureen Aggeler, RSCJ, author of the 1991 book, *Mind Your Metaphors: A Critique of Language in the Bishops' Pastoral Letters on the Role of Women*.

At the time Bishop Clark released his pastoral letter, other members of the

other bishops developed their documents using consultative processes. These attempts to seek out input from lay people in the writing of the letters on women were among the first times that U.S. bishops sought such insights while writing pastorals, she added.

"These twelve letters are clearly the outcome of the U.S. church in renewal since the Second Vatican Council," Sister Aggeler wrote in her book. "Those bishops who wrote pastoral letters to their local churches have recognized the need for new ways of talking about and promoting women's dignity and rights as baptized members of the church."

Bishop Clark's letter helped to promote awareness of women's dignity and rights, and to make people aware

My strongest sense is that so much of (The Fire in the Thornbush) remains current. And isn't that too bad? So much of it could have been written yesterday.

Sister Kathleen Hughes, RSCJ

U.S. Catholic hierarchy were releasing similar pastoral letters. *The Fire in the Thornbush*, however, remains one of only 12 such pastoral letters produced in U.S. dioceses and archdioceses since the Second Vatican Council, Sister Aggeler observed.

In a telephone interview with the *Courier*, Sister Aggeler also observed that Bishop Clark's pastoral stands apart from the other letters.

"I found it the most ambitious of all the pastoral letters, and clearly the most compassionate," Sister Aggeler said from her office at Mission College in Santa Clara, Calif. "I think there was a real effort to reach out to women in their pain and to seek healing."

Sister Hughes, in fact, proclaimed the pastoral "a prophetic document. It names the issues clearly and boldly. It names the pain of women both inside and outside the church. It acknowledges that sexism is sinful."

On a national level, Sister Aggeler noted, the process Bishop Clark and other bishops employed in writing their own pastoral letters has helped set the direction for the subsequent pastorals being developed by the U.S. bishops' conference.

All of these 12 diocesan and archdiocesan letters were rooted in Vatican II teachings about the essential dignity of the human person, Sister Aggeler observed. Bishop Clark and several

of women's frustration over how they felt they were treated by the church, Sister Sullivan remarked.

"It has, over the 10 years, educated a lot of people," Sister Sullivan said, "if not directly through reading the document, then indirectly by contact with people who are acting on the document."

Gail Riina, who arrived in the diocese eight years ago, noticed that the climate here was different from that of other dioceses in which she had served.

"There is affirmation for women throughout the diocese," observed Riina, currently the pastoral associate at All Saints Parish in Lansing. "I've noticed it in attitudes of the clergy and the lay people working for the diocese — an openness to face the issues."

"I feel that the pastoral did have an effect," Riina continued, "in that it is one of the vehicles that made ministry of women welcome in this diocese. Not just ministry of women, but ministry of the laity."

In the 10 years since Bishop Clark issued the pastoral, there have been some improvements in the Diocese of Rochester in terms of women's involvement, noted Sister Moore, who joined the pastoral's task force in 1982 as it was conducting diocesan-wide hearings and study sessions following publication of the document.

Women have served as parish ad-

ministrators, have become directors at the diocesan Pastoral Center, have assumed roles as pastoral assistants, and are studying for advanced degrees in theology with financial assistance from the diocese, Sister Moore said.

"I think it's better in the sense that awareness has been raised," Sister Moore said. "But in a way, it's almost worse because once your consciousness has been raised, you see that you have to live without things being changed."

Among the most glaring of the "things" that have not changed, Sister Moore explained, is the rule prohibiting the ordination of women priests.

Sister Hughes, likewise observed that Bishop Clark's pastoral offered a good summary of the opposing sides of the ordination debate and made several practical suggestions to help counter sexism in the church. "But until the issue (of ordination of women to the priesthood) is resolved," she said, "I think whatever else we do will all have secondary results."

Bishop Clark acknowledged that the issue of women's ordination still causes pain to some women. "I understand that pain, and I even identify with it," he said.

"It's difficult to deal with that kind of pain," he continued. "Those are friends that we are dealing with. There are no ready answers to it."

Bishop Clark's willingness to acknowledge the pain women feel is one of the strengths of his pastoral, noted Sara McLaughlin, who co-chaired the diocesan task force overseeing the post-publication dissemination of the pastoral letter.

"I think one important thing Bishop Clark did just in writing the pastoral letter is the acknowledging of the pain women feel just because of the official attitudes of the church, and he didn't set himself apart from that," observed McLaughlin, a member of the committee overseeing the Women's Scholarship Fund at St. Bernard's Institute.

Nevertheless, McLaughlin and other observers expressed a sense that the church as a whole is less open to such acknowledgements today than it was when Bishop Clark wrote his letter.

"The prospects for women of my daughter's generation are not bright," McLaughlin declared.

"Basically, I have to agree that we're in a more cautious environment now," Bishop Clark said.

Yet he added that "change of this kind, even in an individual, is sometimes very slow and painful." And in the case of the church, those changes are occurring "in a vast institution with a long history."

Nevertheless, Bishop Clark remained optimistic.


"The church is a living body," he said. "It's not a museum. It's not a relic. It's a living community of people who are continuing to experience Christ's redeeming love."

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