

A Place for Us... in Canada, in 2014?

“The times cry out, not for huddling holy remnants, but for religious groups that can come together and work together to ensure that Canadians can experience the best that faith brings to life... and to death.” Reginald Bibby in *A New Day*

It almost goes without saying that, as religious orders in Canada, many of us are concerned about the viability of our congregations and wondering what ministries we can undertake, given the rising average age of our members. In this article, I aim to draw your attention to some resources that have stimulated my reflection about possible new options and orientations for ministry for religious in our Canadian context, in the hope that these resources may stir your thoughts.

My framework for presenting these resources, and their possible implications for discernment and action, is that of theological reflection in ministry. In this model, three sources of information are considered relevant for arriving at pastoral/ministry decisions: the Christian tradition, cultural resources and personal and/or communal experience. Tradition here refers to all that scripture and Christian history have bestowed to us, including our Church and religious congregation.

Theological reflection involves seeking out significant information from these three sources, examining how each source informs the others and, finally, moving toward communal action. While it is not possible to do a thorough theological reflection in this short article, I will highlight voices from the contemporary experience of women religious, from Canadian culture and from our Church that offer important material for our consideration.

A Voice from Experience

Sandra Schneiders, well-known to many of us as a religious and a theologian writing on religious life, in a 2011 lecture entitled *“That Was Then...This Is Now”*¹ speaks of sisters experiencing a certain “placelessness” in ministry in the post-conciliar Church. She attributes this to the new theology of ministry arising from Vatican II, saying that women religious “are something for which the Church as an ecclesial ministerial structure has, historically, no category.” She sees the decline or disappearance of institutions in which sisters traditionally served as another component of this placelessness.² She speaks both as a theologian and a religious with extensive knowledge of the history and current experience of women religious. While the lecture could be viewed as a theological reflection in itself, well worth reading, what I want to highlight are her observations around age and ministry.

She engages resources from the culture in her reflection by taking into account a new envisioning of the life-cycle pattern by various branches of the social sciences. When this new definition is applied to the active phase of religious life, which used to run from 18 to 55 or 60, it will now run from 30 to 85 or 90 with the most productive part of this life span likely being 50 to 75, rather than 35 to 45.

Approximately a third of the lecture is devoted to the post-conciliar experience of change in the focus and character of sisters’ ministries. Schneiders clusters the varied ministries that have arisen into four main groups: social justice ministries; hands-on ministries to those experiencing social injustice, natural disasters or other misfortunes, and intellectuals, scholars or artists

¹ See sources for full particulars about this lecture.

² *That Was Then...* pp. 26-27.

seeking to express the Gospel in the language of our time. She identifies a fourth cluster of “ever more urgently needed ministries...concerned with the thirst for meaning and transcendence of so many people in our world, whose urgent personal quest for psychological and spiritual growth and wholeness... often finds little or no spiritual nourishment in institutional religion of any stripe.”³

A Voice from Canadian Culture

The extensive sociological research of Reginald Bibby, over 30 years, on religious culture in Canada strongly supports the need for this fourth category of ministries. He believes that the status of religion/no religion in Canada rests upon the good ministry or lack of it of the major church denominations in the country. He underscores the need for ministry to the same category of persons Sandra Schneiders describes.

Here are just a few pertinent nuggets from his vast research. Religion in Canada is not dying, but persisting in new expressions in a changed environment. Many who do not affiliate with a church, or do so only marginally, indicate that faith is important to them. Rather than categorize people as churched or unchurchd, we should view them as having different levels of affiliation with a particular denomination. Religion in Canada would be strengthened by good ministry efforts of churches to reach out to their “marginally affiliated” and “disaffiliated” (terms used by Bibby) members. He envisions these efforts being carried out by intentional networking groups of church congregations. Roman Catholics, the leading group by numbers, have the highest level of identification with their church, whether or not they are practising. It seems we are a ripe field for this kind of outreach ministry.

Voices from Our Tradition

With the arrival of Pope Francis, we are hearing a strong voice for ministry to the marginalized of our Church and the world. (See the articles by Lorraine Caza and Timothy Scott in this Bulletin.) Additionally, national and local Church initiatives around New Evangelization are calling us to what I will term ministries of invitation and accompaniment.

Voices Together

At this point, I muse...Could this - networking, accompaniment, invitation - be a place for ministry for religious in later adulthood?... We have networks that connect us to many people... We know our Church ‘for better or for worse’... It would be meeting people personally in their spiritual quest, as both Schneiders and Bibby suggest is a great need, which we also recognize... Some of us have skills for spiritual accompaniment... It would be a contribution to the religious fabric of Canada.

Thus goes my preliminary attempt to bring together the voices I have heard from experience, culture and Tradition. Continuing with the image of voices, I liken this phase of a theological reflection to attempting to bring the various parts of a song or musical composition together to blend in harmonious and enhancing ways. But this is not the end of the theological reflection, which is complete only when a pastoral action or ministry plan is determined. When the music is together, the choir needs to decide where it will perform or go on tour!

I leave the rest of the reflection to you, **with some questions.**

³ *That Was Then...* p. 31.

1. Does any aspect of this information resonate with you? How?
2. What other voices from Tradition, culture and experience would you add?
3. Does it spark any thoughts about possible new ministry initiatives for you or your congregation?
4. How do you respond to Bibby's challenge quoted at the head of this article?

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Sources

Bibby, Reginald. (2012). *A New Day: The Resilience and Restructuring of Religion in Canada*. Lethbridge: Project Canada Books.

Go to www.reginaldbibby.com for full information on Bibby's research, books and publications.

Schneiders, Sandra M. (2011). *That Was Then...This Is Now: The Past, Present and Future of Women Religious in the United States*. South Bend: Center for Spirituality, Saint Mary's College. Lecture given in conjunction with the exhibit *Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*.

Whitehead, James D. and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead. (1995). *Theological Reflection in Christian Ministry, Revised Edition*. Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward.