

A Study on the Alternative Policies for the Improvement of Theological Education of Women

Han Mi-ra

I. Introduction

A proverb found in the Talmudic tradition says, "Men who teach the Torah to their daughters shall be cursed." This implies that if daughters learn the Torah, they will be corrupted. We find a similar passage in the Bible: I Timothy 2:12 says, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silence."

Statements like these have contributed to the formation of the patriarchal norms and culture in the Christian tradition in the past two thousand years. Thus, the nature and role of women have been defined from the male perspective. The patriarchal tradition in Judaism and the biblical expressions which denigrate women have been conducive to the exclusion and marginalization of women even in today's popular theological education system.

One of the striking changes that occurred in theological institutions in the 1980s was the increase of the number of female applicants. According to our study, in 1980 only about three hundred women applied to theological schools. But in 1986 it grew to more than eight hundred which was equivalent to one fourth of the entire applicants. The background for the increase of female applicants can be found in the changed policies of theological schools. Since the mid-1970s, theological schools added the departments of social work, church music and Christian education to the existing theological departments. They educated not only future professional ministers but also future lay leaders and church workers who would serve the church in their specialized functions.

This change has offered an incentive to women to enter theological schools. As a result, female students constitute more than 50% of the students in the departments of Christian education, social work, and religious music. Yet the number of female students in the theological department is only approximately 10% of the entire theological students. Accordingly, two major factors must be taken into account when the formulation of theological education policies for female students is attempted. First, since theological schools are higher educational institutions for training the future professional ministers, they must put equal effort in educating both female and male students in the theological department. In other words, the primary purpose of educating female students must be to train them to be competent professional ministers. Second, theological schools must be clear about the nature of training for female students in the departments of Christian education, social work, and church music. Thus, education policies for female students in theological schools must distinguish between the different characters of

educating theological students who will be professional pastors and non theological students who will work in other areas of the church ministry.

There are several forces operative in deciding the educational policies for female students. Most of these forces are determined by the process through which theological schools function as a bridge between central administrative organizations of the denominations and local churches. In addition to trying to meet the ministerial needs of denominations and local churches, theological education policies for female students must be sensitive to the social needs of female students as individual women.

This study was undertaken to suggest some strategies to improve institutional problems related to the spiritual ministry of the church. It is also intended to provide resources for correcting problems related to the education of female students whose number increased in the 1980s. It was conducted from August 1986 to December 1987 with a research grant from the Korean Association of Accredited Theological Schools. The following is a summary of the result of the research.

II. Female Education Opportunity and Job Placement in the Church

A. Female Education Opportunity

1. For theological education, as of 1986, women could apply to eighteen accredited theological schools and twenty-three non-accredited schools. Departments available for female students were departments of theology, Christian education, religious music, social work, and philosophy of religion. Of course, not all theological schools had all these departments.

2. As of 1986, women constituted 22% of the entire applicants to theological schools. Yet their percentage in the theological department was less than 13%. The primary reason for the low ratio of women applicants is that female students have institutionally limited opportunities for employment in church and society after graduation. Under the present condition, the maximum ratio of female applicants cannot be greater than 25%.

3. As of 1986, female graduates constituted 22% of the entire graduates of theological schools. However, their ratio was less than 10% in the theological department. The employment (mostly by churches) ratio of female graduates of the theological department was 38% while that of male graduates was 21%. Female employment ratio was consistently higher than male employment ratio during the period between 1980 and 1986. This indicates that theological education is more effectual for female graduates than for male graduates.

B. Job Placement of Female Graduates of Theological Schools in Church and Society

The following is a summary of the job placement situation of female graduates of theological schools who work in churches and agencies.

1. Education level: 40% of the female respondents who worked as non-ordained ministers (evangelists) graduated from non-accredited theological schools, while only 25% graduated from accredited theological schools.
2. Family situation: The majority (75%) of female ministers were single (never married, widowed, or divorced). Yet the majority (81 %) were family heads or bread winners.
3. Work: The majority(78 %) of female ministers did home-visitation work in the church, paying ten to twenty visits per week.
4. Economic situation: The starting monthly salary of a new female minister who has graduated from an accredited theological school was approximately 180,000 to 200,000 won. It varied significantly according to individual churches. The average monthly salary of the female minister with five years' experience was 266,000 won. It was lower than that of the male minister with the same experience and of career women in society.
5. Job satisfaction: 76% of the female respondents answered that they were trusted by the senior pastor and other session members.
6. Participation in decision-making process: Only 43% of the respondents participated in major decision-making processes in the church and their participation was limited mainly to mere attendance at meetings or casting their votes during collective administrative meetings (40% of the respondents).
7. Professional theological education: 85% of the respondents said that the theological education they received in school was helpful in conducting their work. However, majority of the respondents lacked the opportunity for continuing education to improve their professional skills and knowledge after their graduation from theological schools. They were in need of further education to upgrade their professionalism.
8. Awareness of sexism: Majority (66%) of the female respondents were aware of sexism in their work. They said that they were discriminated against mainly because they were women (31%), and because they were not ordained (17%). Because they were women, they were economically discriminated against and not granted ordination. In a word, the church's discrimination against female ministers could be explained by sexism alone.

III. Strategies for the Improvement of Theological Education Policies for Women

The church's discrimination against women and the needs of churches must be taken into consideration when the formulation and improvement of theological

education policies for women are attempted. For the improvement of the policies concerning female education, I will suggest some strategies that must be implemented at the levels of denomination, church, and theological school.

Suggestion 1. Strategies for the Improvement of Women Ministers' Status at the Level of Denominations

1. Denominations must improve the legal status of women ministers. To do it, denominations must remove sexist elements from their regulations concerning the qualification and job description of women ministers. Clerical ordination, especially, must be legally granted to those women who have finished the required education and training. Those denominations which grant women's ordination must remove regulations that prohibit the ministry of married clergywomen.

2. The salary of incumbent female ordained ministers and non-ordained ministers must be equivalent to that of their male counterparts. The differential wage system between the sexes is a manifestation of sexism and is much criticized by society. I suggest that denominations introduce a formal standard wage system to which individual churches can refer to indiscriminately when they decide the salary of male and female ministers.

3. For the improvement of the professional competence of female ministers, I suggest that denominations establish training centers jointly with theological schools. In order for female ministers to have time for continuing education, denominations must secure opportunities for them to have an official study leave or vacation and provide financial resources so that poor female ministers can also participate.

Suggestion 2. Strategies for the Improvement of Female Ministers' Status at the Level of Local Churches

1. Local churches must increase the number of female ministers for the ministry of women. Presently, although there are variations among local churches, they usually hire only one or two full-time female non-ordained ministers. On the other hand, non-ordained male ministers are hired for each work of Sunday school, youth group, and many other church groups. Since churches do not hire non-ordained female ministers for leading residential worship services for laywomen and activities of laywomen's associations, laywomen leaders (deacons and honorary elders) are functioning as such. In order to meet the increasing needs of church women, churches must hire more full-time female ministers who have received regular theological education.

2. Churches must classify the work of female ministers into the ministry of home-visitation, education, counseling, and other work, and hire those who are specialized in these areas. In particular, education and counseling must be taken care of by those female ministers who studied Christian education, women's studies (or feminist theology) and the like in the theological school. Or, churches can encourage the incumbent female ministers to study these subjects in the continuing

education programs. Either way, the professional competence of female ministers must be strengthened by the support of local churches.

3. Sexism must be eliminated from churches. First of all, churches must correct the present differential wage system between male and female ministers and change stereotypical arrangements regarding the work of male and female ministers. Churches must allow non-ordained female ministers to participate in the major decision-making processes by securing their right to speak and vote.

4. Sexism must be eliminated from the ministry of laywomen. Still, only a few denominations allow women to be ordained as elders. Pastors must play a leading role in democratizing the church by treating equally both laywomen and laymen and encouraging them to be equally active in the church programs. Churches must submit the matter of the ordination of women as elders to their presbyteries or conferences so that denominational general assemblies will legalize it.

Suggestion 3. Strategies for the Improvement of the Status of Female Students at the Level of Theological Schools

1. Theological schools must expand admission opportunities for female applicants and correct their sex-biased selection of the applicants.

2. Theological schools must amend their education curricula to include subjects needed for conducting female ministry. For example, women's studies, psychology of women, sociology of women, counseling, feminist theology, history of church women, mission and women, Bible and women, and other women-related subjects must be included in the regular courses to be taken by both male and female students.

3. There must be at least one or more female faculty members in the theological department to be advisors to female students. Theological schools must guarantee employment security for faculty members and correct the sex-biased system of promotion and administration.

4. Theological schools must enhance the relationship between local churches and female students by strengthening their field training programs. For example, during the summer vacation female students can follow female ministers to their home visitations and other mission activities. In this way theological schools can offer holistic education and combine theology and ministry.

5. Jointly with their denominations, theological schools need to establish education centers to expand educational opportunities and leadership training for laywomen. Since presently the number of female ministers is not sufficient to meet the needs of modern church women, theological schools need to offer opportunities for laywomen leaders to have a thorough theological education and to work with female ministers.

Judging from the present capacity of the denominations, churches and theological schools, I assume that the above suggestions for the improvement of the policies concerning women can be implemented with no great difficulty. I believe that these suggestions or alternatives are the relevant criteria for the formulation of theological education policies that can lead to the improvement of the status of Korean women ministers and to further the professionalization of women's ministry and the ministry in general.

I hope that the result of this study will urge Korean church women, who constitute the majority of the membership, to do the work of God by living not as 'others' but as disciples of Jesus, proclaimers of the gospel, and by carrying on the mission along with church men. Sexism is the most persistent and dehumanizing of all the oppressive systems which have existed on earth. Furthermore, that women, who are created in God's image, are discriminated against because of their sex contradicts the Christian conception of the equality of all people and its teaching that there is no male and female, no masters and slaves in Christ. I believe that the transformation of the view about women, from the male chauvinist perspective to one which sees them as whole person or as the creation of God, is the most urgent task of the Korean church to undertake as it hopes to be democratized while approaching the twenty-first century.

This article was published in Chon'guk Sinhak Taehak Hyobuigoe [Korean Association of Accredited Theological Schools], Sinhak Kyoyuk [Theological Education]5 (January 1989), pp.4-6.

Dr. Ms. Han Mi-ra is a former professor of Seoul Theological School.

Aus: In God's Image, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1992.