

LETTY M. RUSSELL: A FEMINIST LIBERATION APPROACH TO EDUCATING FOR JUSTICE

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Abstract

This article examines the Rev. Dr. Letty M. Russell's feminist liberation approach to educating for justice by reviewing the major themes in her writings. First and foremost is the primacy of God's mission to reconcile the world through Jesus Christ (2 Cor.5:18-20). God's mission draws women and men to join together with God in the work of justice. Second, Russell proposes partnership as central to the work of justice: partnership with God and with people in community. When people work together in service, they join with God in the struggle to effect justice so the reign of God may be realized. In a world of ever growing diversity Russell proposes hospitality as essential for the community. As God has welcomed us so we too are invited to welcome the stranger and those on the margins of society. Hospitality involves willingness to acknowledge the giftedness of others, which frees us to act in solidarity with them to work to transform society. Of special interest is Letty Russell's continuing work for justice: coordinating with J. Shannon Clarkson the Doctor of Ministry Program (San Francisco Theological Seminary) for women from Africa, Asia, Latin America, North America, and Europe and working with African women theologians in the post-doctoral program at Yale Divinity School's Women's Initiative on HIV/AIDs in Africa.

Justice is at the heart of the Rev. Dr. Letty M. Russell's life and ministry. Educating for justice flows from the central themes in Russell's theology, namely, a sense of God's mission to reconcile and mend the world; partnership as sharing in God's mission to effect justice; and hospitality as a means of welcoming all to the table of fellowship and of life. Russell's use of an action/reflection model is based in experience, draws on Scripture and theology, and works toward transformation. Her experience of being marginalized--as a Christian educator and then as a woman pastor in East Harlem where she learned firsthand how injustice and oppression marginalized her parishioners--developed into a concern for and solidarity with those on the margins of society. Letty Russell is a dedicated traveler on a journey whose goal is to achieve justice and celebrate the reign of God in our midst. In effect educating for justice is at the core of Letty Russell's life and work.

In a world of rapid-fire communication the media convey news that glorifies crime and tragedy. Violent acts dominate daily events. As a result many people choose not to listen, watch, or read the news. Some people who watch the news on a regular basis can become casualties of overexposure to the toxicity that bad news can evoke. They absorb so much negativity that their whole outlook is tainted by stories of evil. Many persons readily admit that they need to conserve

their energy and concentrate on surviving: life is so challenging that they need to care for their own and not be distracted or disheartened by stories of strangers. Meanwhile, others know evil personally as well as in the lives of people they know, the community where they live, and the world of which they are citizens. But their worldview is broader and they acknowledge that these are problems of injustice. These individuals believe that God is active in the world and that even as creation groans, there is a role for them to play with God and with others of good will to mend creation (Rom. 8: 20-25). This is the story of Letty M. Russell, a woman who loves God and people, whose optimism is visceral, and whose hope in the midst of injustice springs from the experience of being loved by God.

GOD'S MISSION AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Russell has been making connections between Christian education and the efforts of Christian faith communities to practice justice in the world for over fifty years. In her early work on education, Russell discussed this connection primarily in terms of the mission of the Church. For instance, in *Christian Education in Mission*, Russell based her analysis on what she identified as “three perspectives.” The first perspective is *God's mission* and the mission of the church “to participate in God's mission of reconciling the world to” God's self “through Jesus Christ... The second perspective is that of *the world of history as the arena of God's mission*. God is at work in the world.” Additionally, “The third perspective is that of the need for *new structures in the life of the church*. The present organization of local congregations and the present denominational structures are not adequate to the task of joining in God's mission or of taking the world seriously.” (Russell 1967, 14)

In her work, *Christian Education in Mission*, Russell's emphasis was on new structures for Christian education so that practices of faith formation were related more fully to the mission of the church in the world. In presenting such a restructuring, Russell contended that, “Christian education is participation in Christ's invitation to join in God's mission of restoring men to their true humanity.” (28) Christian education as envisioned by Russell is a gift of God's love in the context of a witnessing community. It can and, indeed, should be seen as missionary education that directs the attention of Christians outward toward seeking justice in the world by emphasizing God's presence and action in the world and in recognizing the call of Christians to participate in God's mission in the world.

As Christians and Christian communities look outward toward the world, Russell has suggested that the purpose of Christian education as missionary activity should be understood in terms of celebration, especially celebration of freedom, and dedication to service. More fully, Russell contended that Christian education should help to enable us to embrace and celebrate the perspective that God is at work in the world. She claimed that the purpose of Christian education is “the celebration of what God has done and is doing in the world by means of witness and service. Such education is celebration education. It cannot be otherwise, for it is no education at all unless it is participation in the joy of the Lord.” (146) Russell also suggested that a central dimension of Christian education as celebration is celebration of freedom, that is, a “celebration of God's mighty acts of salvation by which” God “has saved” God's “people and set them free.” (135)

Additionally, Russell claimed that Christians can find a “parable of freedom” in the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25: 31-40). In this parable those who are righteous did not

know that they were serving the Lord when they were feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. Similarly, Russell argued, as Christians we can never know whether or not we are truly doing good deeds, but that our lack of knowledge should not lead to a sense of “doom.” Rather, we should regard our lack of knowledge as setting us free from worrying about the effectiveness of our actions so that we can serve others and be people for others. Russell claimed that when we are set free from worry about ourselves, we are set free to celebrate God and God’s activity in the world, that is free “to celebrate the fact that men are helped, the lame walk, the blind see as signs of the New Age of Christ in our midst (Mt. 11:1-6).” (134)

Overall, Russell’s analysis suggested that educating for justice requires more than educating people to seek greater justice in the world. It requires that first we teach people to celebrate and give thanks for the ways in which God’s actions and presence foster greater justice in the world, and how our efforts to seek greater justice in the world are made possible only by the grace of God.

This sense of mission as God’s action is illustrated by Russell’s ever-widening circle of concern. Her books and articles reveal how mission is essential for working with people of different races, religions, and backgrounds. While her ministry was rooted in the local church, Russell became actively involved with the World Council of Churches in their study of the life and mission of the church at national and international levels, an activity which enabled her to establish contacts for global partnership [as a member of the Working Committee on Studies in Evangelism for five years] (Russell 1967, 13; 1974, 21). A natural outgrowth of her desire to “reclaim the power of God’s liberating word for those struggling to be free” was her involvement in the civil rights movement in the United States and her actions to involve women as equal partners. (Russell, et al 1988, 147) In Russell’s words, her “concern for sisterhood in the context of the thrust for the elimination of racism” had intensified as a result of “working with the National Board of the YWCA of the United States and with the YWCA of India.” (Russell 1974, 21) International travel and the experience of listening to and speaking with women of the Third World broadened her thinking and deepened her analysis. An example of newfound meaning is her writing on mission. In her early writings she defined mission as reconciling the world to God through Jesus Christ (Russell 1967, 14) More recently in a book honoring Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye, Russell (2006a) shows how the gospel mandate to bring the good news of Jesus, the mission to the Gentiles (Mt. 28:16-20), was both used and abused by Christian churches so that “colonialism, proselytism, and racism are often linked with mission” in ways that many people suffered at the hands of those bringing the good news (45). Russell proposes another meaning for mission when she states that “God’s coming to be with us as Emmanuel, ‘God-with-us,’” shows how “God’s mission is one of justice and righteousness as God goes about the work of mending the creation through the life and teaching of Jesus” and throughout time, “through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.” (45) In this way Russell recognizes God as reconciler whose justice abrogates the misguided actions of missionaries who disregarded local cultures and imposed their colonizers’ views. In fact there is a need to undo wrongs so people of all cultures, races, and religions can truly be partners with God in welcoming New Creation.

In a recent article, “God, Gold, Glory and Gender: A Postcolonial View of Mission,” Russell recounted the experience of a workshop that she taught in Manila. As the participants (women and men, clergy and lay) worked together in large and small groups, they “struggled to find a new vision of the church which would be one of peace, justice, and the inclusion of

women, as well as men, in all aspects of leadership and decision-making.” (Russell 2004a, 39) She contrasts the reality of Christian mission with that of God’s mission. Viewed from a postcolonial analysis, “Christian mission has been part of the colonial project of destroying people’s culture and self-esteem. . .” (41) And yet, God’s mission of sharing God’s love and life calls us in this postcolonial time to “witness to God’s justice and care” in every place and for all people. (44) God embraces all people with such total care that truly God can be called their liberator. In Russell’s words,

God shows no partiality, and rejects all attempts to use domination to rule over others in God’s name (Acts 10:34; Gen. 11:1-9). From a Christian feminist perspective, a sending God is a mending and welcoming God who invites us to be part of the work of restoring the creation that God intends to make new (Isa. 43:18-21; Rev. 21:5). (45)

PARTNERSHIP—JOURNEY TOWARD LIBERATION

Russell has written extensively about partnership in education, and many of the issues and concerns she raises when discussing partnership relate directly or indirectly to the theme of educating for justice. For instance, Russell has discussed the communal dimensions of education for justice in terms of partnership and the call to partnership. Specifically, in *The Future of Partnership* (1979) Russell posited that partnership links us with God and God’s mission, and with a community that works together to effect justice. As she noted, “In partnership we dream and work together for justice and peace and for the establishment of God’s rule on earth.” Mindful of the fact that, “the Kingdom for which the church works and prays is God’s,” she also stated that, “it will come in God’s own time as a gracious gift.” She considered this “a source of great hope, for it is not all up to the church!” (116) It is the mission of the church to partner with God and to celebrate the Lord’s presence and, Russell suggested, God is especially present in the Eucharist and among the poor (Mt. 25).

Russell’s understanding of educating for justice is built on an understanding of the importance of partnership in education. Critical of school systems in which people learn to be competitors not partners, conformists and not questioners, Russell has labeled such learning “miseducation.” She has also affirmed Henri Nouwen’s ideas that education should be a redemptive rather than a violent process.¹ Russell noted that education can become a violent process when teaching and learning are competitive, unilateral, and alienating. In contrast, Russell contended that when students and teachers become partners in learning, education can become a redemptive process that offers the possibility of “being *evocative* in encouraging the sharing of life experiences, *bilateral* with joint learning of teacher and students, and *actualizing* in modeling present behavior that relates to the wider community.” (Russell 1979, 143)

Russell cited participation in a seminary program that involved students’ working with faculty members and resource persons in an action-reflection model as an example of dialogic education that models authentic partnership. The students met in small groups that included two resource persons (“a faculty member and a local pastor, social worker, pastoral counselor”). In the small groups students had the opportunity to share their concerns about their personal experience in their field placement and were able to address theological content. The small groups met simultaneously after which the resource persons met to plan the large group

¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), 2-14.

discussion that included both students and resource persons. Russell noted how important it was to model “inclusive teamwork among people of various sexes, races, and backgrounds” so students could “learn to minister *with* others and not just *to* or *at* them.” (143) By including both faculty members and people working in pastoral settings, this program effectively broke down the wall of separation between the academic and the practical, demonstrating that what might at first appear to be two different worlds is in reality one world. Russell was convinced that, “Education as a growth process is always participatory.” (144) In the varied educational contexts and situations in which she worked, Russell concluded that, “Christian Education or nurture had to do with God’s initiative, and our partnership or participation, together with others, in an ongoing process.” (144)²

Educating for justice based on partnership shares common goals with liberation. For Paulo Freire liberation is “a praxis of action/reflection of people on their world in order to transform it.”³ In Freire’s thought, “Education is seen as a process of liberation in community that includes ‘conscientization’ as ‘learning to perceive the social, economic, political contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality.’” Using Freire’s ideas,⁴ Russell reflected on how people throughout the world have struggled to “become partners who share together in the journey of freedom” with the hope of “shaping their future.” Russell contended that as people achieve liberation in many areas of life, it would be a “false dichotomy” to separate “Christian education from other forms of education.” For Russell, Christian education includes all of life for “education that leads toward Christ is a total process of learning that happens as the witnessing community shares as partners of all ages in reflection and study, and in action in the world.” Christ the Liberator is the center of liberation in a Christian community, “but the thrust of that liberation... is on behalf of others.” (146)

God’s partnership with us, Russell claimed, is the beginning of all true partnership, and is, moreover, a source of hope. As envisioned by Russell, “God is a hopeless optimist about us, calling us over and over again to righteousness and faithfulness.” Russell added that, “It is this *incurable optimism of God* that gives us a *future to hope in* as we become partners in learning, loving the questions and living them out in our shared communities of action and reflection.” (155) For Russell, “A key to our understanding of partnership is hope, for we hope in God and in others. We have no guarantee, simply an expectation of faithfulness and love (Jer. 29:11).” (176) In terms of educating for justice, we can say, following Russell, that we need to encourage people to find the primary support for their efforts to seek greater justice in the world in their partnership with and hope in God.

Russell addressed how we can educate for partnership in *Growth in Partnership* (1981). She claimed that all of us must begin by reaching out to both oppressors and oppressed and imagining ways of bringing all people together at the social table. She remains convinced that “liberation includes changing our ways of relating as partners...we cannot become partners without liberation from all that prevents us from realizing our God-given potential for life...(we need to) dare to image that which we seek.”(Russell 1981, 13) Additionally, to educate for partnership we must create and engage in an educational ministry that “draws the whole

² For a description of applying this process to educating college students for justice on the problems of underdevelopment and world hunger see Suzanne C. Toton, “Theory and Practice of Educating for Justice,” *World Hunger: The Responsibility of Christian Education* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 153-168.

³ *Ibid.*, 145-146 quoting Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, Inc., 1970), 19, 66.

⁴ In a recent interview by the author when asked about educating for justice, Letty Russell stated that, “Paulo Freire is the most important educator.” February 3, 2005 at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, CT.

community into God's service" inviting all to be partners in the "journey toward God's future." (57) Overall, Russell has viewed education as a "process of actualizing and modifying the development of the total person in and through dialogical relationships." (59) Education, for Russell, involves persons in community relating with each other and with their "social environment." In Russell's words,

All ministry is educational...for human beings learn from their social environment through the enculturation process. We learn through participation in a faith community...Ministry can be intentionally educational when there is a process of partnership in learning so that persons of all ages are invited to join in God's continuing actions...As Christians we all share in Christ's ministry or service and thus we are all involved in a lifelong process of becoming partners. (59)

Russell added that since education occurs within the church community, "Liturgy, action, and nurture all represent aspects of church life that can be intentionally and cooperatively educational" and that can contribute to growth in partnership (60). Russell's analysis suggested that if we are to educate for justice, we must seek justice between oppressors and oppressed in the world, and strive to model just relations among people within our faith communities. Our goal must be to foster a greater sense of justice in all relationships.

To foster partnership Russell has proposed education as exodus as a new style of education. Russell claimed that such a new style is needed because education has often been "a tool of oppression in churches and society," serving the economic interests of those in power. Education as exodus would invite teachers and students to take part as a *collective*—the community's learning together as they journey toward freedom. It would require *commitment*—flowing from the waters of baptism wherein people experience God's liberation. Learning in a style of education as exodus would begin "where people are in their own *context*"—with special attention given to the insights of "those who know what it means to be marginalized and oppressed" in order that all might comprehend "the cost of slavery and the gift of freedom." To develop a "*critical* and committed awareness, education as exodus would encourage people to continue their journey of doubt and faith as people of God's covenant and promise." (74)

Russell has envisioned education as exodus as being closely related to Paulo Freire's *conscientization*, "the organic process of changing consciousness." (75, 78) In a spirit of interdependence, Russell suggested, partners on the journey to freedom would begin with where people are in their journey, and people would seek out a common agenda. Then, exposure to new information and different experiences would enable people to participate in a variety of social experiences and provide opportunities to assume different roles and encounter other perspectives (79). In agreement with Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Russell wrote that exposure to different social experiences and perspectives could lead to cognitive conflict with the potential for growth.⁵ Russell added that when persons commit themselves to work for a cause in which they believe deeply, there will be times of "temporary inequality" as individuals experience different roles and responsibilities. Yet, Russell has also advocated "calculated inefficiency," which makes room for all to participate fully in social experiences, and while many take on specific roles calculated inefficiency allows "space for others to act and reflect to learn to multiply their own gifts." (79, 107)

⁵ Lawrence Kohlberg believed that "exposure to the next stage" of moral reasoning by a peer would lead to growth. *Ibid.*, 54.

Education that nurtures a sense of Christian mission in the world and that encourages growth in partnership, Russell has suggested, could and possibly should include a focus on the Bible. Russell has been deeply committed to the Bible for its “critical or liberating tradition embodied in its ‘prophetic-messianic’ message.”⁶ She noted that in her seventeen years of ministry in “a poor, racially mixed community of struggle and witness in the East Harlem Protestant Parish in New York City...the Bible continued to speak to us in worship and house Bible study groups, in ministries of education and action.” (95-96) Russell also observed that the Bible “came alive” among people who knew poverty, injustice, and racism; its stories infused “hope in the midst of oppression.” Furthermore, with hope and the confidence that the God who suffered was with them, the people were energized to look for answers to confront and change adverse social, political, and economic aspects of their lives.

Russell has developed an educational method whereby individuals and groups can discover the riches of the Bible. In following her method, a collective discussion of the text to learn the context of the text as well as the context of the lives of the readers, is followed by raising questions that provide an interpretive key and break open the text. Oftentimes, Russell suggested, these will be “questions of hope and of the ‘nonperson.’” Russell stated that, “It is important to ask what clues about the biblical message of liberation illuminate, modify, contradict, or echo this text and to look at other texts as a source of interpretation.” (100) In addition, Russell presented four ways of living out the text:

Living with the text in our minds and hearts over a period of time; sharing the stories of the lives of others in the group and especially those of oppressed groups that illuminate the text; looking back at the way our own stories might illuminate the text; and living with it over the years in expectation that God might speak through it to us in other circumstances. (101)

Russell added that we can gain insight and a deeper sense of “critical and committed listening and action” from biblical study, but that “we never reach a conclusion because the “horizon of God’s future moves ahead of us in many and unexpected ways.” (102) Overall, in her understanding of education as exodus and in her approach to Bible study Russell has stressed how education can enable us to recognize and respond to moral issues and concerns more fully, especially concerns about justice.

In her analysis of curriculum Russell has focused on liberating partnerships. Specifically, for Russell curriculum refers to people’s actions rather than particular plans or texts. In her words, “People are the mentors of those who would learn, the source of ideas, the inspiration and support, and the new role models.” (126-127) Russell has been an advocate for a curriculum of subversion that is “an intentional educational component of education for partnership” and that is designed to reach “*those who have been sufficiently challenged by the vision of New Creation that their hearts and minds are...open to new forms of personal and social partnership.*” Moreover, Russell pointed out that the changes in consciousness that subversive curriculum fosters have the potential to “benefit the dominant group as well as those presently in subordinate positions.” (126) A curriculum of subversion may provide opportunities for the conversion and liberation of teachers as well as of students. To the extent that they are part of oppressive groups and contribute to oppressive social structures and unjust institutions, teachers may find themselves challenged and called to new ways of thinking and acting as they work for social

⁶ Ibid., 95. See also Russell, *Christian Education in Mission*, 83-88.

change in partnership with those who suffer because of social injustices. Russell contended that partnerships with those who suffer injustice can enable a person to think “from the other side” and “see things in a new perspective.” (126) While this new perspective may cause discomfort and lead a person to evaluate many aspects of his or her understanding of life and the world, Russell claimed that it may also foster a “critical awareness from inside the problem” (130) that is ultimately a gift of greater understanding from God. As realistic and yet hopeful in her approach to curriculum as in the other dimensions of her analysis, Russell stated that, “we need to explore ways we can become *free from* oppression in order to become *free for* partnership.” (127)

Russell has linked education for partnership (and hence education for justice) to a spirituality of liberation. For Russell, “Spirituality is the way all Christians practice the presence of God’s Spirit in their lives.” The spirituality of liberation is “*the way God interferes in our lives* so that we may become partners in New Creation.” (136) Using the story of a man called Legion as a model (Mark 5:1-20, Mt. 8:28-34, and Luke 8:26-29), Russell illustrated how God can interfere in our lives to cast out all that oppresses and holds us bound, and in the process foster “a new focus of relationship,” “a new history,” and “a new identity and worth” (137, 141) so that in being set free we can serve and enter into life-giving partnerships with others. Moreover, in addition to the usual aspects of Christian life that include “Bible study, prayer, meditation, participation in a community of Word and Sacrament, sharing in the gifts of the Spirit, and service of the neighbor,” a spirituality of liberation, according to Russell, focuses deliberately on “partnership in situations of oppression.” This spirituality involves “growth in sharing in the suffering of Christ as well as learning to give an account of hope on the long march in the wilderness (Eph. 4:11-14).” (142) This partnership is actually a “Christian mysticism of partnership,” which Johannes Metz explains as a “flight ‘forward’ with the world,” whereby the direct experience of God is found in “daring to imitate the unconditional involvement of the divine love for [humanity].”⁷ It is, Russell stated, aligning ourselves with God’s love for the least of God’s sisters and brothers (Mt. 25: 31-46).

GRACIOUS HOSPITALITY

Russell claimed that educating for justice also requires the practice of hospitality. She noted that hospitality is essential for all persons to be welcome at the table of worship and of life and thereby to be members of the community of faith. In relating the mission of the church to hospitality, Russell pointed out that, “Hospitality creates a safe and welcoming space for persons to find their own sense of humanity and worth.” (Russell 1993, 173) Russell suggested that as a community welcomes people of other races and cultures, the community encourages interaction among all the members, and that, “unity without uniformity...makes hospitality and diversity possible.” (174) Russell also argued that the church/we need to move from the center outward to the margins to share in the concerns and struggles of those who are in the margin so that they truly feel welcome and can overcome any sense that they may have of being outside looking in on the community. Welcoming the stranger, Russell noted, can open the community to a larger world and broader concerns, and diversity has the potential to enrich the community provided the community is receptive and open to the giftedness of other people.

Russell has presented ways to educate for justice based on God’s mission, partnership with God and neighbor in a journey toward freedom, and gracious hospitality. These themes

⁷ Ibid., 142-143 quoting Johannes Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 102-104.

provide insights that can guide us in relating with God and each other. Ideally, persons who experience the freedom of the sons and daughters of God in the Christian community have learned to value themselves and other persons, and to work to remove obstacles to full human participation in the world community. Russell's educational approach calls for people to be united in the goal of liberation. While they challenge us to value each person and encourage all persons to be involved in the struggle for justice, Russell's educational themes and methods are also realistic and hope-filled. In effect, they provide a way of welcoming all people of every race, nation, and culture, not only to the table of worship but also to the table of decision making, thus allowing the beauty and power of all people, especially the poor and the oppressed, to shine forth. In this way all persons of good will can work to replace oppressive social, political, and economic structures with those built on the biblical sense of justice: right relationships and a loving concern that all people in our society might live and grow in justice and peace.

“OUTSIDERS WITHIN”

In this section I will consider how Russell's dedication to justice has been formed by her experience of marginality. To speak of Russell as someone on the margins seems a paradox when one views her life and accomplishments: a life of service beginning with the poor in East Harlem in New York City as Christian educator and pastor in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by years as professor of theology at Manhattan College and Yale Divinity School, and now as co-coordinator of an International Feminist Doctorate of Ministry Program at the San Francisco Theological Seminary. In addition Letty Russell is a prolific writer whose career has spanned the second half of the twentieth and continues into the twenty-first centuries. Surely this is a woman recognized for her many achievements and who continues to teach, write, and mentor students from around the world. Why, then, does this competent theologian, pastor, and professor emerita consistently claim the margins?

To understand her predilection for the margins, one need only read her account written for *Celebrating Our Call: Ordination Stories of Presbyterian Women*. In her article Russell acknowledges that her denomination viewed her as an “outsider within.” (Russell 2006b, 133). In 1952 when she began her work of Christian education in East Harlem, she was a white middleclass, college educated woman-- an outsider among the poor blacks and Puerto Ricans in the East Harlem Protestant Parish. When Russell discovered that the power structure in the male dominated church was an obstacle to her ministry, she recognized that ordination would enable her to work more effectively. Russell applied to study at Harvard Divinity School and was accepted only after successfully appealing their male-only admissions policy. She then went on to earn top honors in her three years of study. Despite the fact that the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. did not ordain women at that time, she wrote that, “many other women and men had caught the Spirit of reform” and in 1958 Russell was the first woman ordained in her presbytery. Rev. Russell was able to return to the Presbyterian Church of the Ascension in East Harlem as pastor (135). In the following years the Rev. Letty Russell went on to study at Union Theological Seminary where she earned a Th.D. degree. This experience of being other—an ordained woman working in a predominantly male authority structure at the beginning of her ministry—had placed Letty Russell at the margins—an outsider who made it within by dint of repeated efforts and through dedicated study. She has continued to be in the minority as a woman pastor, a white woman in a predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood, and a professor

willing to teach feminist liberation theology at Yale Divinity School. In an address to the 2001 Covenant Conference, Russell had commented, “I would not have been able to stick around the church so long if it were not for my *deep trust* that *Christ is God’s welcome in my life*.” She went on to say that like other people searching for welcome and acceptance, she could truly say, “I don’t give up!” (Russell 2001b)

In *Church in the Round* (1993) Russell expressed her preference for the margin. While acknowledging Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s commitment to view history from below “from the perspective of those who suffer”(25)⁷ and Gustavo Gutierrez’ “theology from the underside of history” in his concern for the nonperson,⁸ Russell has preferred *the margin*. As a feminist, she has rejected the hierarchical stance of the patriarchal paradigm with its emphasis on domination and subordination, and has chosen to work from the margin. She has noted that there can be a constant movement from the margin to the center and back again. In the margin one identifies and stands in solidarity with the oppressed, but the goal is always to join the one at the center of life, Jesus Christ. Overall, Russell contrasted patriarchal styles of leadership (standing above, accumulating power) with feminist styles (standing with, sharing authority in community). She suggested that the latter have the most potential for empowering those on the margins.

Over the years Letty Russell has shared a method of doing theology which begins with an experience of marginalization, move to solidarity with the oppressed, and works toward transformation and justice. In the spring of 2006 Professors Letty Russell and Kristen Leslie welcomed me to their course on *Feminist Liberation and Feminist Pastoral Theologies* at Yale Divinity School. This was a unique opportunity to experience the spiral method of action/reflection. The core of the course was dedicated to the major themes of Understanding Difference, Practicing Hospitality, and Creating Community. Learning flowed from professor to student through lecture and questions; among students through small group discussion; and among individuals working in groups on one of the major themes. The method was the theological spiral of action/reflection that included: reflecting on experience; analyzing social reality; questioning biblical or theological traditions; and searching for clues to transformation.⁹ Over the course of weeks students and one of the professors met and worked on these aspects. What looked simple on a chart was far more difficult in practice. Only after hours of discussion and weeks of preparation were the groups ready to share their presentation with the larger group/class. Individuals worked their way into community as they struggled with concepts and debated approaches to problems. The group presentations were provocative, emotional, deeply rooted in scripture and theology, and transformative in scope and nature. Lectures may fade from memory, but the effect of the group presentations was mesmerizing and enduring. After the final class we met at Letty Russell’s home for a shalom meal to celebrate. Here we spoke with our

⁷ quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972), 17.

⁸ Ibid., quoting Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History: Selected Writings*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 178, 193.

⁹ Russell explained the theological spiral as, “a continuing spiral of engagement and reflection (which) begins with *commitment* to the task of raising up signs of God’s new household with those who are struggling for justice and full humanity. It continues by *sharing experiences* of commitment and struggle...leads to a *critical analysis* of the context of the experiences...*questions about biblical and church tradition* that help us gain new insight into the meaning of the gospel as good news for the oppressed and marginalized This new understanding of tradition flows from and leads to action, celebration, and further reflection in the continuing theological spiral.” Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 30-31.

new friends, told stories, recited poetry, sang songs, and prayed together as we shared the food and drink that we each had brought—all against the backdrop of a spring sunset in a home overlooking Long Island Sound. The beauty was overwhelming as had been our introduction to Feminist Liberationist and Feminist Pastoral Theologies.

DEFINING MOMENTS

The Rev. Dr. Letty Russell has identified her experience in East Harlem as the most defining moment in terms of her ministry and learning. She wrote that, “Those seventeen years shaped my understanding of the way God is at work in the midst of brokenness, and taught me the importance of solidarity in struggles for justice.” (Russell 2004b, 47) And so it is appropriate to remember her November 2004 address on Urban Ministry at the New York Theological Seminary entitled “Difference: God’s Gift to the Church”. The Rev. Dr. George W. Webber introduced his former colleague and praised her absolute dedication to the Presbyterian Church of the Ascension. His introduction made clear that the Rev. Dr. Letty Russell was the driving force in the East Harlem Protestant Parish that worked across denominational lines. Uppermost in her mind was the question, what should happen in this community? Their ministry of “equipping the congregation...to claim their voices as leaders in the parish and the community” required that each member of the pastoral team was involved in bible study, prayer/worship, and actions for justice. Russell insisted on daily meetings of the staff for prayer and planning. Each family had Bible study materials complete with illustrations that Russell developed; families met with a leader for the weekly Bible study in the parishioners’ apartments. The families gathered together with their neighbors in small groups to listen to the good news, to study Scripture and relate it to their lives; the leader would then share the participants’ thoughts and reflections at the staff meeting. Finally Rev. Russell would integrate the observations from the groups into her sermon for the Sunday worship service. In this way God’s word was woven together into a living tapestry that sustained and supported the community in their prayer life and in their quest for justice.

In her talk on “Difference: God’s Gift to the Church” (2004c) the Rev. Dr. Letty M. Russell used scripture to show how God delights in the exciting diversity of creation. In the Genesis account of creation we hear repeatedly that God saw that it was good. In Acts 2:1-21 Pentecost revealed the gift of understanding wherein communication brought unity among people gathered from many nations with different languages and customs. Difference or as Russell said that evening, “riotous diversity” provides the opportunity for the community to work with the Spirit to achieve understanding. Russell referred to hospitality as an invitation for the guests to learn from the stranger like Abraham and Sarah when they entertained the three messengers of God (Gen. 18), and the disciples who welcomed the stranger on the way to Emmaus (Lk. 24: 13-35). Rom. 15:7 encourages us to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us. In the process of offering hospitality, the guest and host enter a new relationship; they become partners in the sharing of food, clothing, and shelter. Hospitality is an expression of community. Genuine acts of hospitality are the basis of justice for in working to overcome obstacles to inclusion we become partners with one another with a common task. In Russell’s words, “It takes a community to resist structural domination.”

In conclusion the Rev. Dr. Letty M. Russell has consistently and persistently worked for justice by educating parishioners and students through the themes of the mission of God,

partnership with God and other people, and hospitality that welcomes all. Russell has the ability to be with and for people—women and men of all races, nationalities, and creeds—moving from the margins to the center (Christ). In her writings and teaching she has identified liberation theology as “an attempt to reflect upon the experience of oppression and our actions for the new creation of a more humane society.” (Russell 1974, 20) Russell regarded both feminist and liberation theologies as emerging from an experience of oppression; both hope for salvation which they view as a journey toward freedom; both require a working together and hope for inclusiveness as part of God’s plan for human liberation. (21)

Russell’s single-minded dedication reminds me of an early summer morning when I attended mass in a church in Manhattan. It was a perfect day--sunny but cool, with low humidity. The freshness of the air contrasted with the church’s interior where there were only a few stationary fans. Someone opened the church doors—no doubt with the hope that the clear, cool air would then circulate inside. As the air improved, there was another unanticipated result. The calm, peaceful interior was disrupted by the sounds of a busy downtown street: the din of traffic as cars, cross-town buses, trucks, and people rushed to their destinations. Gone was the quiet; it became difficult to hear the Scripture readings. Amidst the confusion arose the thought that this was like Letty Russell’s East Harlem church for she too threw open the doors of the church so worshippers would go forth to be with and for those in need. Church was not meant to be a cocoon, but rather a springboard for actions of love and justice. Life offers many opportunities vying for our attention. We need to educate for justice so people will be equipped to join together in community to work with God as partners in welcoming the stranger and mending creation with the hope that in God’s time the New Creation awaits us.

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