

PERSISTENT VOICE WEB EXTRA
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A New Paradigm in Ministry

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In our continuing series on paradigm shifts in ministry, *The Persistent Voice* interviewed Rev. Lynn Ronsberg and Rev. Mike Carlson who serve respectively as Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, a congregation of over one thousand members. Ronsberg is one of only 27 female senior pastors who, as reported in our last edition, serve ELCA congregations with a weekly attendance of more than 300 worshippers. Carlson, therefore, has the distinction of being one of a very small minority of associate male pastors working with a female senior pastor. The ministry team at Zion also includes a full-time Youth Minister and a full-time Music Minister.

Ronsberg and Carlson focus on ministry through a common theology and way of doing ministry centered in a proclamation of the gospel with social justice. Carlson says "We proclaim a message of grace with teeth to it." What that looks like in practice is this: Zion Lutheran Church opens its doors daily from 5:30 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. to house and feed homeless people. Commenting on the congregation's commitment to this ministry, Ronsberg notes, "no one has asked 'how much is this costing us in electricity' or whatever."

Looking back to her ordination in 1979, Ronsberg who was one of the first fifty women ordained in the American Lutheran Church says "I had no role models, so I just had to make up the role and do it." She is still redefining pastoral roles according to Carlson, who served for thirteen years as a youth and family minister before seeking ordination. Carlson asserts that "there is much less hierarchy" at Zion than in his previous experiences of working with a Senior Pastor.

Another defining characteristic of their team ministry is the ability to come and go in leadership roles, to take turns being front and center. Ronsberg notes that "most people here would say that their child was baptized by Pastors Lynn and Mike" because both of them regularly participate in every baptismal service, and both sign the baptismal certificates. They also switch preaching duties at Christmas and Easter from year to year, so that each one is responsible for one of the major festivals.

Ronsberg asks, "Why do we need hierarchy? Let's be a team." Within that team each person has particular responsibilities, she for administration, he for education. Successful team ministry, according to Ronsberg, "requires trust within the team and living it out for the congregation."

As Senior Pastor, Ronsberg is ultimately the person who must make the final decisions if and when disagreements among the ministry team arise. Carlson describes Ronsberg's practice as highly collaborative, taking into account everyone's point of view. He asserts that while the final decision is Ronsberg's it is never presented to the congregation as such, but rather, "This is what has been decided..."

Both call into question the assumption held by many that an associate pastor position is just a stepping stone to a solo or senior pastor role. Carlson asks, "Does everyone's goal have to be attaining the role of senior pastor? Is it possible to have a faithful call to be a long term associate pastor?" Ronsberg adds, "Being a senior pastor is not all the glory it's cracked up to be....What's wrong with focusing on what you're good at? Eliminate the titles." Paradigm shifts inevitably cause us to re-evaluate the ways and the whys of what we are doing.