

Becoming Colleagues:

Women and Men Serving Together in Faith

Carol E.Becker

Chapter 1

BRIAN AND MARTHA CREATING A SUCCESSFUL MIXED-GENDER TEAM

For twelve years beginning in 1985, Brian and Martha worked together in a large United Methodist parish in a conservative midwestern city. Brian was the senior pastor and head of a large staff. Martha came to the congregation to work in the nursery school, eventually went to seminary, worked with the youth group, and upon graduation was appointed as an associate pastor in the congregation. Her appointment to the same congregation in which she had worked as a layperson prior to her ordination was unusual, Brian and Martha agree, but this gave them an even greater opportunity to get to know each other over a long period of time. The congregation had the same opportunity to get to know them both. That was part of the formula of their successful shared ministry.

Then quite suddenly, in late 1997, Martha was reassigned to a small solo pastorate just twenty minutes away from the congregation where she had served with Brian. The United Methodist Church has itinerant clergy who agree to move at the will of the denomination. Martha actually moved within weeks of being reassigned. Originally asked by the conference not to reveal her reassignment to Brian until after her interview with the new church, Martha objected and was permitted the time to say goodbye.

Martha's Commitment

I see a lot of senior-associate teams doing effective parallel ministry, but they don't know each other. We had a deeper relationship, and it served the congregation well. Our relationship included deep respect for each other, a sense of safety in sharing our theological ideas with each other, deep listening to each other personally as well as professionally, speaking the truth to each other and to others on our team, and a commitment to helping each other see things from our individual perspectives. These things were most important in building our relationship.

Getting to this point definitely required personal preparation. For one thing, I had to be secure in who I am as a woman. I learned that I do not have to be like a man, but I don't have to force feminism on anyone either. I must confront what's wrong but also be able to step back when it's my issue. I must also be very secure in my own calling to ministry but at the same time flexible enough to realize that change takes time. It's not fair, but that's the way it is. I have to be willing to love people into change. Knowing all this was important since I was the first woman pastor in this congregation.

It helped to have clear boundaries. We got to the point that we could be with each other in emotionally intimate ways as work colleagues without breaking boundaries. We also set working boundaries using a process Brian initiated. We looked at my gifts and his gifts and decided who would do what, how to trade assignments if we found the other

could do better, what to do together, and so forth. Some activities, like Bible study, we chose to do together because they require both men's and women's perspectives. This kind of careful boundary setting helped us acknowledge each other.

At the same time I had to be willing to speak my truth. It's hard when you disagree with your partner. I had to do this about a youth worker who said he was supportive of my ministry but who was not supportive in his actions. Brian didn't see it, so I had to tell him. We strongly disagreed. I kept at it when I thought Brian was not hearing me. Partners need to do that because trust stops somewhere when the misunderstandings begin to creep in. It hurt a lot of the time-for both of us. Had either of us stopped talking, it would have been a major problem, and both of us are conflict avoiders. So it was hard work to keep at it. But that's part of acknowledging your partner too.

Eventually the dialogue brought us to a deeper trust. If you're not connecting with your partner, you don't just throw up your hands and walk away from it. You've got to keep at it. In our debriefing later I could see where I had not been clear and Brian could not hear what I was saying. I needed to hear that I had some issues on my own to work on, and I needed to trust Brian to tell me. It was a rough time in our partnership, but we did have the advantage of some common ground even in the disagreement. We are in the same place theologically. We enjoy each other's company, and we have a similar philosophy about how to treat people.

A lot of our success had to do with Brian's leadership. He made the vision for the staff team very clear. We helped each other see our gifts. The women (and men) still on staff are all strong because they are affirmed and constantly encouraged to improve. I can think of one especially memorable time when this happened during my ministry with Brian. We were at a conference together. The "old boy network" was very much in evidence. Yet Brian treated me as an equal, assuming I would go everywhere the others went. Because he treated me that way, I was accepted that way. It was extremely affirming.

It was clear that Brian was the senior pastor in our situation, but I never saw him buying into hierarchy. He gave me a lot of power to do what I wanted. There were some differences that came with knowing that we were not copastors, but those were put in place by the system, not by Brian. Equality was in place in the team so effectively that I was able to take over Brian's role managing a building project when he went on leave for six weeks. The congregation perceived my power as equal to Brian's. Throughout our ministry together Brian had done things to make that happen. He always treated me as though I had equal responsibility. He made me visible on Sunday. We did team teaching together. And there were areas where I was definitely the one in charge. In the building project, I was always included in the leadership meetings and always consulted when decisions were made. When the architects ignored me, Brian turned the situation around to make sure I was visible. He set the standard with the committee that I was also in charge of the project. Every team member here gets that same kind of treatment.

I think you have to have a deliberate desire to do ministry in partnership to be a team. Otherwise, it's real easy to go along in parallel tracks. Then you lose the enormous amount of goodness that comes from having a relationship. You lose the mutual trust and the deep caring. To do partnership ministry, at some level you have to stretch the boundaries to become friends. You have to like one another.

I miss being in a team now. I can do effective ministry in my present congregation-I am doing so-but I miss the energy of a team. I also question why our team was split up when we had worked so hard to become effective. The conference says they want good male-

female teams. At one point they asked us to do some work mentoring other teams. Then suddenly they split us up.

Brian's Leadership

Getting to know one another does not happen in isolation. We did a lot to build our team. We talked constantly. We spent time together, both working and socializing. And we spent structured time building the team. We also used team reflection as a structured activity to consider our decisions together before we announced them. For me, all of this was an outgrowth of my personal reflection, which was-and is-an integral part of how I do ministry. That is precisely why the reflective tasks must come first. I need to balance the activity by getting away from it. I need to know where the Spirit is leading me. I also spend lots of personal time thinking about where we are going as a congregation. I write my reflections, sometimes for me, sometimes for the congregation. So, yes, the criteria ring true in terms of our experience. But they begin with me.

It must come first from the senior pastor, especially if the senior is male. White males particularly are part of the dominant structure. That has to change. We change not only by how we act but also by how we talk about how we act. I try to talk about women's right to be clergy. We intentionally address this both biblically and theologically in this congregation. It's especially important in this community where most churches belong to denominations that do not ordain women. Everything we can do to build the case-to help men understand what women have to offer-is important. And we benefit. I think women provide a whole way of understanding ministry that is so good for men. It's good for women too, of course, but it's very good for men to see women in ministry. The benefits for me personally have been many. I've learned to understand my spouse better. I had a colleague with whom I could share about my kids, something men don't do so easily together. And I had the opportunity to talk theologically with Martha about how women and men perceive things differently. I could also see how effective Martha was as a counselor and role model for the women in this congregation. The things some of them said about her were truly humbling for me. As far as the congregation as a whole is concerned ... Martha and I presented a more well-rounded understanding of the nature of God than I or any man could do alone.

I was surprised by the ease with which the congregation accepted a woman in ministry. Much of the groundwork was laid here before Martha became a pastor, since she was with us as a lay staff member first. But when she became my clergy colleague, we began right away by stating boundaries. Here again, it was my responsibility to take the lead. Martha has talked about how we set work assignments, but that's not where we started. The first issue we decided was what to do about the intimacy issues that are present in a mixed-gender team. We were explicit in recognizing them, in stating that we would both honor our marriages and respect our spouses. At the same time, we decided not to build in boundaries that were unnatural to the working relationship. Pastors working together have to meet in private sometimes. We had to develop trust in each other and model that. Then the congregation could develop a sense of ease about the appropriateness of our relationship. After that we could go on to two other boundary-setting activities: writing a staff philosophy for working together and making work assignments.

We spent a long time developing trust. It wasn't just between Martha and me, but among all the staff. Whenever anything happened to crash that, it was a pretty tough time.

The disagreement we had over another staff member who was not supportive of Martha's ministry was largely a disagreement about how we would respond to that person. I needed to hear what Martha had to say because I did not have the whole picture. I needed

the opportunity to get her response to what I was planning to do. And when the final confrontation came, I needed her to be there. I can't overstate how important the trust between us was in that situation. I felt enormously relieved by the sense that we could have that kind of back-and-forth. You have to reach beyond the conflict to preserve the integrity of the team.

Unfortunately, I know from subsequent experience this does not always happen. Having had one good mixed-gender team, you can't necessarily translate that experience to all situations. My very next mixed-gender team did not work well at all. Many things contributed to a bad situation that the people in it could not resolve. Martha was moved suddenly and quickly. She was placed on her own in a small congregation within twenty minutes of us, even though she was open about her preference to be in a team. We waited seven months before requesting another appointment. We asked for a woman because we felt that's what the congregation needed. But it didn't work out. Asking for a woman again didn't mean she would be a woman like Martha or that we would be a good fit as a team. For me to expect that would be stereotyping of women. But I did hope for another good teammate. Martha's close proximity and the difficulty we had accepting the conference decision to move her in the first place also affected my ability to form a new team. It seemed that the conference was moving Martha more for their benefit than for the congregation's. I would now say that any appointment ought to have a three-month trial period attached. It just takes that long for people to know if they can develop the trust that a strong team requires.