

SECTION 1

FORMATION, SUPERVISION, AND GENDER DIVERSITY



Editor's Introduction

We live in an era of rapid social changes. One of the most significant changes in westernized cultures in the last seven decades or so has been the shift in how we understand gender and navigate gender issues socially and politically. Terms such as gender equality, homophobia, marriage equality, transgender, LGBTQ rights, sexual orientation, gender fluidity, and even feminism were not in our common vocabulary a generation ago. Not so long ago, we thought that gender and sexuality were the same; now we know differently. Not so long ago, we were considering the idea that gender is a continuum; now, we are trying to embrace the idea that gender is fluid. And on the horizon is the idea that gender, for some, must be chosen post birth. Not so long ago, we were implored to use inclusive language; now, we are trying to embrace nonbinary language. The speed of these changes has been revolutionary, a social and intellectual revolution that is in many ways still unfolding before our eyes.

Even the popular magazine *National Geographic* began 2017 with a special issue titled "Gender Revolution." They wrote: "To a degree unimaginable a decade ago, the intensely personal subject of gender identity has entered the public square."¹ By interviewing nine-year-olds from around the world, the authors remind readers that the gender revolution is a worldwide phenomenon, not just limited to the United States. Further, they note that the gender revolution is largely a revolution of the millennials. This observation leads me to conclude that if the future of our collective "faiths" is in the hands of the millennials, then the future of religion is dependent on a constructive theological understanding of gender diversity.

As an essentially conservative institution, religion has been slow to respond to and incorporate the implications of the gender revolution. The

1 *National Geographic*, January 2017, p. 12.

religions of the West, for example, are deeply rooted in the binary assertion that “God made them male and female.” Yet, among mainline and progressive denominations the revolution has been sharpened by the influx of more and more seminarians who identify with nontraditional gender norms. I find this to be a wonder, given that religious institutions have often marginalized such people. Theological educators have struggled to catch up, to both understand the emerging revolution and to adapt their religious understandings and practices accordingly. To be fair, not all segments of the world of religion have embraced this revolution and welcomed non-normative-gender seminarians. But, clearly, this gender revolution is impacting all segments of society. Even people with conventional gender identities now must question afresh what it means to be a man or a woman.

Through the process of soliciting and reviewing essays for this volume, I have been reminded of the great pain and suffering connected to this subject. Gender diversity is an emotionally charged issue, one that strikes at the heart of who we are as persons and how we fit into the larger society. While there are raging political, social, and ideological conflicts over this subject, the pain is also very personal. Some parents and spouses are in pain, even heartbroken, over the decisions by their loved ones to embrace a nonconventional lifestyle. People who struggle with their own gender, sexual orientation, and gender expression issues also suffer; they have often not been supported or even acknowledged in their struggle. Because there is such personal anguish surrounding this subject, it is challenging for a journal like this one to reflect on it in an impassionate and objective manner. Yet, we must try. That is the mission of this journal—to reflect on the practice of ministry. I commend the authors who have contributed to this issue. They speak with integrity, sensitivity, and compassion.

In this volume of *Reflective Practice*, the Editorial Board wanted to explore how these new understandings of gender and the increasing number of non-traditional-gender seminarians are affecting the way we do formation and supervision in ministry. How is the gender revolution shaping and transforming how we understand formation for religious leadership? Joretta Marshall, dean of the faculty and professor of pastoral theology at Brite Divinity School, leads off this issue with a thoughtful reflection on how the gender revolution has and is impacting pastoral theology and the education of theological students. Stephen Sprinkle, who has worked with seminari-

ans for over twenty-five years as a director of field education and supervised ministry, updates us on the challenges facing LGBTQ seminarians in 2019.

Next, *Reflective Practice* lifts up the voices of ACPE certified educators who are on the front lines of these issues. Michelle Kirby recounts what she has learned about supervising non-gender-normative CPE students over some 30 years of doing CPE work. Then, Liam Robbins shares his first-person account of his supervisory work and role in the larger medical institution as an ACPE educator who is open about being a transgender person. Finally, Mary Martha Thiel writes about the unique joys and challenges of doing a CPE unit in a retirement home for LGBT elders. Her curriculum is a treasure trove of resources and strategies usable for any CPE program or field education program that wants to prepare their students or institution to minister to LGBTQ patients or congregants.

Then, the conversation shifts again to explore the interrelationship of gender and theology/spirituality. Bradley Leger, writing from the perspective of a spiritual director, explores the challenges for non-normative-gender students in discerning a call to ministry, a process that he sees as including sorting out their religious baggage, experiencing God afresh, and embracing their gifts for ministry. Finally, Wendy Farley, professor of Christian spirituality and director of the Program in Christian Spirituality at San Francisco Theological Seminary, challenges the gender binary and well-established gender roles that are rooted deeply within the theistic religious traditions of the West. Farley explores this issue, offering us a passionate, expansive, and at times cosmic vision of God in this age of gender diversity.

And, along the way, Nancy Hall, associate professor of music and director of contextual education at American Baptist Seminary of the West, contributes a few new or revised Christian hymns that embrace LGBTQ-inclusive language and nonbinary concepts.

This first section of the 2019 volume of *Reflective Practice* is a rich, thoughtful, personal, and even powerful collection of essays. I invite readers to read each essay with an open heart and inquiring mind as we seek together how to best form and prepare people for ministry in the twenty-first century.

Scott Sullender
Editor