

# Learning curve

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue



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Amy Plantinga Pauw's [article](#) about theologian Elizabeth Johnson sent me to the bookshelves to retrieve Johnson's 1993 book *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. I loved the book, learned from it and underlined passages like these: "Absolutizing any particular expression as if it were adequate to divine reality is tantamount to a diminishment of truth about God" and "An encounter with holy mystery lies at the root of all religious doctrine."

Now another book, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*, has landed Johnson in trouble with the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Bishops. You would think the committee would have learned that the most effective way to express disagreement with a theologian is to ignore her or

him. Fortunately for the rest of us, the bishops have not learned; their critique has dramatically enhanced interest in Johnson and her work. Johnson's thinking is openly ecumenical, yet she does not dismiss the traditions of her church. She notes that in recent years women's religious orders (she is a member of one) have become contested sites for shifting understanding of clerical power.

It is a stretch for a mainline Protestant, particularly a male, to get his mind around the power of the monastic experience for women who are denied ordination by their church. We can, however, observe and celebrate what we learn from our female colleagues: primarily, that our own sense of ordained ministry is unthinkable without them.

Many men my age have had to come a long way in regard to gender equality in our profession. I suspect that I am not alone in cringing in embarrassment over positions I held and things I said decades ago. A particularly painful memory is of my participation on a synod committee when I was young. We were discussing synod staff compensation and making recommendations about raises. As always, the budget was tight. I came up with the bright idea of not granting a raise to the one woman on the synod staff so that we could give all her male colleagues raises and yet stay within the budget. I argued that most of her male colleagues were the sole wage earners in their households, while the woman had a husband who was employed and therefore really didn't need the raise. Fortunately, the response to my creative solution was stony silence. The synod council took a dim view of my idea and granted equal raises to each staff person.

Since then, women colleagues, fellow clergy and denominational executives have taught me patiently and sometimes impatiently. Two decades ago the church I was serving called a woman to join our staff. The first crisis came a few weeks after she arrived. One of the church's older stalwarts invited the new minister and me to lunch at his downtown club. I had been to that club a few times and remembered that only men were allowed to enter through the front door; there was a special entrance in back for women. I told my colleague about the invitation and the club rule and said I'd go through the back door with her. She thought for a moment and said, "I can't do that. I won't be going to lunch." I pondered this for a while and then proposed, "If you go to lunch, we'll walk through the front door together." She didn't want to begin her ministry by being a troublemaker, she said, but eventually she agreed. We went through the front door together and no one said a word. I learned a lesson about the

pain and humiliation of gender discrimination.

I'm grateful to all the amazing colleagues I've met and been honored to work with—and for Elizabeth Johnson, who is bringing in a new day, a day more reflective of the kingdom Jesus talked about and demonstrated.