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Women's ordination movement takes interfaith approach

Jamie Manson | Aug. 23, 2013 Grace on the Margins

"You're not alone" isn't a message members of most prophetic movements are accustomed to hearing. But in the struggle over the ordination of women, a new interfaith collaboration seems to be emerging.

On Monday, women and men from multiple faith traditions will gather in Washington, D.C., and Salt Lake City for a day of prayer called "Equal in Faith: Women Fast for Gender Justice."

After a day of fasting, participants will gather at St. Stephen and the Incarnation in Washington and at the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple for an interfaith service of prayer for the equal treatment of women in all faith communities.

"While women have access to spiritual authority in a growing number of religions, far too many women are still being denied equal participation and leadership in their faith traditions," said Erin Saiz Hanna, executive director of the Women's Ordination Conference, the largest and oldest organization advocating for the ordination of women in the Catholic church. The conference is one of the principal sponsors of the event.

Those who can't be in either city Monday are still invited to participate through the event's Facebook page [1].

"Our supporters can be in solidarity wherever they are," Hanna said in an interview earlier this week. "They can pray with us and, if they are able, fast." Messages of encouragement and hope can also be added to the Facebook page.

The use of Facebook in this action is especially appropriate since the interfaith collaboration was initially born out of social media.

Late last year, Women's Ordination Conference staffers and friends produced and posted to YouTube a humorous music video called "Ordain a Lady [2]" that advocated for the full inclusion of women in the Catholic church. Not surprisingly, the video elicited strong reactions from both supporters and detractors of the women's ordination movement.

To Hanna's surprise, though, the video also generated a number of blog responses from Mormon women who have been fighting for full inclusion into the priesthood of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"I think this video was so striking to us because few Mormon feminists, let alone Mormon women, publicly articulate their desire for priesthood," Caroline Klein wrote in a blog post for Feminism and Religion [3].

In March, members of the newly developed organization Ordain Women [4] launched a website to give a public voice to Mormons who believe in full inclusion of women in their church. The website features profiles of LDS church members and their statements of support for women's ordination.

Ordain Women held its first public meeting in April in Salt Lake City, running it concurrently with the priesthood session of the LDS General Conference.

Around that time, several of the leaders of Ordain Women also reached out to the Women's Ordination Conference and scheduled a lunch meeting with Hanna.

Hanna said she was struck by the strong sense of solidarity that exists between Roman Catholic and Mormon women. "As sisters in the struggle, we understand one another's pain and longing for justice," Hanna said.

"They were looking at WOC as one of their models," she said. "It was a real shot in the arm."

Their shared passion led them to quickly plan an event to coincide with National Women's Equality Day, which has been held annually on Aug. 26 since 1971.

With short notice, they were able to widen their collaboration to include members of the Jewish group called Women of the Wall [5], an organization whose "central mission is to achieve the social and legal recognition of our right, as women, to wear prayer shawls, pray, and read from the Torah collectively and out loud at the Western Wall," according to their website.

Leaders from Ordain Women Now, a group that advocates for dialogue on the ordination of women in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, will also participate in the prayer service.

Given that planning began only recently, organizers expect this year's day of prayer will be of a smaller scale. "The goal is to build momentum for a larger action next year," Hanna said. That includes increasing the number of faith traditions represented in the event.

When participants gather in Washington for prayer at St. Stephen and the Incarnation to pray for the transformation of religious communities that exclude the leadership of women, they will be praying in a sanctuary that is a living memorial to women's advances within the institutional church.

In November 1974, St. Stephen's became the first Episcopal church where a woman publicly celebrated the Eucharist. The celebrant, the Rev. Alison Cheek, was one of 11 women who had been "irregularly" ordained five months earlier in Philadelphia.

Nearly 40 years later, true gender equality still cannot find its way through the doors of so many churches, synagogues, mosques and temples. Discrimination that would never be tolerated in society somehow continues to find acceptance in religious institutions.

It's a reality that frustrates women and men across many faiths, but through this new initiative, those who support women's equality are finding new energy and momentum in their solidarity -- and, hopefully, feeling a little less alone in the struggle.

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