

# LAY MINISTRY AND LEADERSHIP IN TODAY'S CHURCH

## *Not Nympha nor Apphia but a Woman of Our Time*

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I FEEL LIKE Nympha or perhaps Apphia, women of the Christ community at Colossae and the Lycus Valley. At least I feel like Nympha as long as she is understood to be a woman as there is some doubt about the translation of the name in Col 4:15.<sup>1</sup> All we hear of Nympha in the letter to the Colossians is her mention in the greetings to the assembly in her house. And Apphia is also meagerly attested as 'the sister' in Philemon 2, also in the greetings. These are women of their time in the early communities of believers, followers of Christ, identified 'in Christ' (Col 1:2). Their leadership is notable by the mention of their names among others who are notable leaders of the community.

I am the Pastoral Associate of one of three parishes now in a Cluster with one parish priest. The three churches are about four kilometres apart from each other, a little less than the distance between the ancient cities of the Lycus Valley in modern day Turkey: Colossae, Laodikeia and Hierapolis.

The churches of these ancient cities were a cluster in the sense of being instructed to read the letter in each of the churches. Nympha hosted one of these churches in her house.

Indeed I do not host a 'church' or assembly in my house; however, I am the ministry presence in the parish. The Parish Priest resides in the neighbouring parish and visits once a week for weekday mass and occasionally on the weekend. Regular weekend eucharist is presided by a priest who does not live in the Cluster and has no pastoral role there. I be-

long to a Cluster Ministry Team that consists of a Parish Priest, Assistant Priest, a Deacon and two Pastoral Associates (one a religious sister and myself a lay woman).

So what I am led to reflect on is my role in this time of transition, where the church as we knew it no longer exists and the emerging church is not yet developed fully but is groaning into birth. In looking for answers and for models, as a scripture scholar in training, I turn to the subject area of my doctoral thesis and thus my preoccupation with the ancient city of Colossae and the Letter to the Colossians.<sup>2</sup> The women named here, Nympha and Apphia, offer a surprising insight for me in the paucity of information. Firstly they are named. Nympha hosts the assembly in her house and Apphia is 'the sister' as Timothy is 'the brother' (Col 1:1) denoting leadership in the community.

Recently I gave a reflection at the weekend eucharists and my reflection was well received and yet the community is not sure how to name me. They know I am a lay Pastoral Associate, a married woman with grown up children. Yet in this Cluster I am their first experience of a lay Pastoral Associate. Their experience is of religious sisters. Often I am referred to as 'sister' not in the sense of The Letter to Philemon and Apphia, but as a member of a religious community. This is clearly not who I am. Another parishioner joked about me being 'Father Rosemary' and that is such an oxymoron I have difficulty even laughing about it. It appears usual for the Ministry Team

to be listed beginning with the Parish Priest and working through the recognizable ordained titles before coming to the Pastoral Associates who are then distinguished between religious and lay. The tension between 'team' and 'hierarchy' is in the nomenclature and the reality of the new ways that we share ministry and leadership are not easily communicated through this.

This dilemma of language has brought me to an understanding of what it really means to be a part of the non-ordained priesthood of believers, what it means to take up the call to leadership and ministry of the baptized faithful in an authoritative appointed role. I can see that the grappling with the role of Pastoral Associate, which for me is but two days of my week while a full-time doctoral student, is about the growing of a new model of church. We do not really have the language or ritual for what is emerging and that is still to come. I am very aware that my role as a Pastoral Associate is different to others who hold the same title. The title embraces such a broad spectrum of work that it evolves for each person in the role according to their gifts and the needs of the parish or parishes of work.

It is possible for us to imagine the life that Nympha might have had and why she was able to be named as hosting an assembly in her house. I prefer to think of her as a woman of her time and context able to live out her baptismal call to ministry in the community of the faithful. She is likely a model for other women of her time. Similarly, Apphia offers an image of a woman of her time and context where the community knew what it meant to call her 'the sister'. She also was able to live out her call to ministry in the community of believers.

My overwhelming call is to teach and it is that enlightenment that drew me to study scripture and complete a Bachelor of Theology and



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Honours and undertake a doctorate. My ministry in the parish and the Cluster brings together a career of management and training with the scriptural and theological study, tutoring and lecturing in practical grounded life in our church. Ministry keeps my teaching real, human and relevant. The opportunity to give a reflection draws on all of my learning as an opening to a conversation with others on the journey in this time of transition.

There are many models of church and ministry being tested and refined and offered for discussion. My sharing of my experience is to add to the mix of the richness that is being discovered as we try to understand our way forward with fewer priests. I do not have a magic solution but reflecting on the early church helps me make sense of where we are today. Nympha and Apphia cannot be described within the modern terms of Pastoral Associate nor Pastoral Director or any one of a number of similar designations. They were known by their relationship to their community as hosting an assembly or as 'the sister'. We have no idea of their particular gifts but they remain as names among the community leaders. There is no doubt that we need a range of leadership in our communities now and into the future. Whatever their designation, they will be women and men of our time ministering in the context of their call through baptism.

1. *The disagreement about whether Nympha is the name of a woman centres on the fact that both male and female options are possible. It is the placing of accents on the name that differentiates it between male or female and yet these accents would not have been part of the original text, thus the ambiguity.*
2. *My doctoral thesis is entitled 'Clothing the Body of Christ in Colossae: a visual construction of identity'*