

# “It’s My Church and I Love it!”: The Young Catholic Women’s Interfaith Fellowship Experience 2006-2009

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**Abstract:** *The Young Catholic Women’s Interfaith Fellowship was initiated in 2006, under the auspices of the then Commission for Australian Catholic Women (CACW) and the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference (ACBC). It was advertised as aiming “to enhance the participation of young women in the Catholic Church, fostering both academic and faith formation for future female Church leaders.” In 2011 a research report on the post-course experience of the Fellowship graduates was commissioned which found that, while participation in the Fellowship had changed the lives of a group of young Catholic women, at the same time it raised questions about how well prepared the Church is to receive a new generation of theologically-educated Catholic lay faithful.<sup>1</sup>*

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**Key Words:** women; interfaith; faith formation; education for leadership; peace-building; participation; lay faithful

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**T**he Young Catholic Women’s Interfaith Fellowship was initiated in 2006, the result of collaboration between the then Commission for Australian Catholic Women<sup>2</sup> and Australian Catholic University (ACU). It was advertised as aiming “to enhance the participation of young women in the Catholic Church, fostering both academic and faith formation for future female Church leaders.”

It was a practical response growing out of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ *Woman and Man One in Christ Jesus: Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia* (1999) which recommended that “women’s talents and gifts be utilised more fully in the service of the Church.” *Woman and Man* stressed the importance of providing a range of educational and training opportunities for women with suitable qualifications and background so that leadership positions could be taken up by an informed laity. It was thought that,

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<sup>1</sup> The full report “It’s My Church and I love it!” is available at <http://www.cimer.org.au/documents/REPORTFINALpdf.pdf> (Accessed 9 Aug. 13).

<sup>2</sup> The Council for Australian Catholic Women (CACW), formerly the Commission for Australian Catholic Women, is an initiative of the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference following the Report of the Research Project on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia, *Woman and Man One in Christ Jesus: Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia*, presented to the ACBC in April 1999. The Council exists at the “national level to ensure that the dignity of women is honoured and their gifts are given space to flourish for the sake of the Church’s life and mission” (ACBC *Social Justice Statement 2000*).

women's wisdom and experience would benefit the whole Church. Acknowledgement and affirmation of the diversity of women's experience and strengths, which could be offered to the Church and wider community.<sup>3</sup>

The intensive 16-week Fellowship program was offered to young Catholic women (aged mainly from mid-20s to mid-30s) who had completed a first degree or equivalent. It consisted of a Graduate Certificate in Interfaith Relations, ongoing engagement in interfaith experience and contacts, opportunity for personal and group reflection in the processing of course content, personal, faith, and leadership development, and the development of interfaith dialogue skills. The academic program was delivered through the ACU's Signadou Campus in Canberra.

Following the completion of the Fellowship program by three separate cohorts of young Catholic women in 2006, 2007 and 2009, a research report on the post-course experience of the participants in the Young Catholic Women's Interfaith Fellowship (YCWIF) was commissioned by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference (ACBC) and carried out under the auspices of the Office for the Participation of Women (OPW).<sup>4</sup>

The research aimed to evaluate the post-course experience of the 27 graduates of the first three years of the Fellowship in terms of their finding employment in church/society relevant to their newly acquired knowledge and skills, and their experience of ecclesial openness to receiving their contribution as new graduates of YCWIF. It also aimed to make some recommendations about ways in which post-course outcomes for future graduates could be improved. This report was to supplement the *YCWIF Evaluation Report* of 2009 which assessed the success of the three elements of the Fellowship itself: the Academic Program; the Formation Program; and the Public Lecture Series.

## FELLOWSHIP PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Twenty-seven young women participated in the Fellowship program during the three years it was offered.

Most have at some time been employed by the Catholic Church. Nine have worked or are working in Catholic Education in a variety of administrative, pastoral and teaching roles. Three are working in Catholic Health Care as Directors of Mission, Co-ordinators of Pastoral Care or as Chaplains in hospitals. Three have worked or are working in Campus Ministry or some other form of Youth Ministry.

Two have worked in offices of the ACBC (Office for the Participation of Women, and Media) and six have worked or are working in diocesan offices of Evangelization, Justice and Peace, Youth Ministry, and World Youth Day. Mostly they are Directors and Coordinators of these offices. One is a parish Pastoral Associate.

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<sup>3</sup> *Woman and Man*, 389-390.

<sup>4</sup> The Office for the Participation of Women (OPW), an agency established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, is mandated to act as a focal point for ongoing dialogue and the integration of ideas pertaining to women and their participation in the Catholic Church in Australia. It has the responsibility to undertake projects as determined by the Bishops' Commission for Church Ministry (BCCM) in implementing the recommendations of the ACBC *Social Justice Statement 2000* on the participation of women in the Church.

Five of the Fellowship participants have never been employed by the Catholic Church. One is a lawyer with a legal firm, one is a senior policy advisor to the Queensland Government, one is an occupational therapist in a public hospital, one is self-employed as Director of her own employment agency and stood for Liberal-National Party pre-selection in Queensland, one is a social worker in a government department.

Three of the young women are engaged full-time at present with family duties, and at least four are still unemployed/travelling/studying and have not yet found regular employment.

These numbers are necessarily quite fluid. One reason is the mobility of the young women at this stage of their lives, and secondly, although around nineteen of the young women have stable employment with a single employer, some are combining one or more part-time positions with volunteer work etc.

## PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN OF FAITH IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Much of the best contemporary literature addressing the issue of the participation of women of faith in church and society places it within the framework of women's contribution to building communities of peace. For example, Pope Pius XII, speaking less than ten years after the conclusion of the Second World War stated,

If more attention were paid to the anxieties of feminine sentiment, the work of consolidating peace would move ahead more rapidly.<sup>5</sup>

Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* identified the women's movement as one of the three most significant "signs of the times", while Paul VI expressed support for the aims of the 1975 International Women's Year—equality, development and peace.<sup>6</sup> John Paul II in his 1995 *Letter to Women* described the process of women's liberation as "still unfinished," on a later occasion also emphasising,

It is...important to point out that women's new self-awareness also helps men to reconsider their way of looking at things, the way they understand themselves in history and how they interpret it, and the way they organize social, political, economic, religious and ecclesial life ... It is (therefore) ... urgently necessary to take concrete steps by *providing room for women to participate* in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves.<sup>7</sup>

And from Benedict XVI:

I believe that women themselves, with their energy and strength, with their predominance, so to speak, with what I would call their "spiritual power", will know how to make their own space. And we will have to try and listen to God so as not to

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<sup>5</sup> Pius XII, Address to a pilgrimage sponsored by the Federation of Italian Women, 14 October 1956, *The Pope Speaks*, 3 (1957): 367-375.

<sup>6</sup> *Woman and Man*, 27.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, (1996), n.57-58, (emphasis in the original).

oppose him but, on the contrary, to rejoice when the female element achieves the fully effective place in the Church best suited to it, starting with the Mother of God and with Mary Magdalene.<sup>8</sup>

Benedict XVI has called on the Church to always invoke the Holy Spirit so that women, “developing the gifts they have received from God,” might “make their own special and valuable contribution to the spiritual development of our communities and of the Church in our time.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN OF FAITH IN BUILDING PEACE

In contemporary literature “peacebuilding” is understood as extending far beyond simple conflict resolution to the broader development of communities and relationships—working for justice, equality and well-being for all, as well as awareness of the need for harmony with nature.

Studies such as *Women in Religious Peacebuilding*, by Kathryn Marshall and Susan Hayward, published jointly in 2011 by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) and US Institute of Peace (USIP), and Jane McGrory’s 2008 report *Faithful Peace, Peaceful Faith: The Role of Women of Faith in Building Peace*, published by Progressio, the Catholic Institute for International Relations in the UK, draw attention to the fact that although women of faith are strategic actors for peace and justice, and although much has been written on the topic of women and peacebuilding in the last decade, there has been scant reference to faith. One conclusion is that the poor understanding of faith in relation to both women and peacebuilding has done a great disservice to women of faith.

Other publications such as the United Nations *Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability: Progress of the World’s Women 2008/2009* (UNIFEM) and *In Pursuit of Justice: Progress of the World’s Women 2011/2012* (UN Women), point to the need for gender-based injustices to be addressed so that women’s contribution to peacebuilding might be fully actualized.

As Marshall and Hayward point out,

- A person’s faith can help them bring an enormous inspiration and commitment to the task of leadership—it provides an energy, a supportive community, some intellectual resources, a life-coherency.
- Women are often marginalized in formal religious spaces and rarely hold leadership positions—but this can also free them from institutional constraints. Women can often be found providing creative leadership behind the scenes.
- Women’s engagement is often based on voluntary service, and they often have only informal associations. When women obtain some formal recognition they have often used it to build up the community and improve community relations.

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, Interview in preparation for upcoming journey to Bavaria, August 5, 2006, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/august/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060805\\_intervista\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/august/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060805_intervista_en.html), accessed April 1, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, “Women make a special contribution to theology,” General Audience September 8, 2010, Vatican Information Service, <http://www.vis.va/>, accessed April 1, 2013.

- Women's invisibility means that their leadership contribution is relatively unrecognized. This can lead to difficulty in securing the material and information resources they need. They miss out on funding and are under-resourced.
- There is a need for both faith communities and the wider community to be better educated about the leadership capacities of women—what they are doing and how they go about it. Women often gravitate towards sustained interfaith and intra-faith relationship building, working from a holistic perspective that highlights the community.
- There is a need for strategies to build bridges among women's networks and organizations to strengthen women's capacity for leadership.
- There is a need for a gender balance in all community organizations, including faith organizations.

McGrory's research shows that women of faith have a special role in peacebuilding, especially because of the spirited way they work for peace.

She believes that faith and organized religion have the potential to give women many strengths and resources with which to build peace and justice, enhancing their work in rich and varied ways. Organized religion can play a role in contributing to and strengthening the work of women by providing opportunities for education, arenas of activity and community for women to meet and support each other, and a level of protection for women's projects, especially when civil society is undeveloped.

The concerns and obstacles faced by women of faith in building peace are not only external. Many have struggled with questions of how to live their faith, and how to stay true to its inspiration. This is certainly true of a growing number of young Catholic women in Australia, many of whom are employed in Catholic schools and hospitals, or who work as chaplains, advocates, activists and social workers and as leaders in not-for-profit organizations.

As has been noted, unlike males who seek the priesthood, the institutional church does not support their education or their profession—even though they too spend their lives studying and serving the church. Unlike women living religious life in the traditional way, they do not experience some of the material and spiritual supports which come with vowed religious life.<sup>10</sup>

An important question arises: Could it be that we are seeing new forms of prophetic witness and new forms of women's religious commitment emerging from our midst? And if so, how are we nurturing these fresh expressions of ecclesial life?

## WOMEN OF FAITH IN MULTICULTURAL / MULTIFAITH AUSTRALIA

The role of women of faith, both on the world stage and in multicultural and multifaith Australia, takes on a new urgency today. Some of the religious trends manifesting themselves across the global religious market-place include:

- the resurgence and revitalization of religion
- the emerging and changing profile of Christianity

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<sup>10</sup> Jamie Manson, "The future of religious life and the plight of young adult Catholic women," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 27, 2011.

- the decline of mainstream Christian churches in the developed world
- the rise of Islam from its long and sad history dominated by European colonialism, and
- the emergence of the interfaith movement.<sup>11</sup>

Australia's religious landscape has also been undergoing change. Today Australia is a land of many faiths, many languages and many cultures. Its 23 million residents come from 230 countries, speak more than 260 languages and follow more than 100 religious faiths. Around 44% of Australians were either born overseas or have one or both parents born overseas.<sup>12</sup> The 2011 census shows that one person in 13 practises a religion other than Christianity. The issue of support for women's peacebuilding efforts is important for religious groups because freedom of religion and belief operate best in a socially cohesive society where religious groups and their leaders are making a contribution to the creation of social capital or wealth.<sup>13</sup>

That women are responsible for a disproportionately large amount of that creation of social capital is attested to by several available studies. Amanda Wise<sup>14</sup> of Macquarie University's Centre for the Study of Social Inclusion has identified a certain type of person, most often female, who emerges in this context whom she calls *transversal enablers*—"everyday types of individuals who have the ability to employ forms of exchange or 'gifts' that foster everyday relationships across cultural differences in multicultural settings, and who typically go out of their way to create connections between culturally different people in their local workplace or public space."

McGrory, in her reflection on the role of women of faith in peacebuilding, concludes that faith empowers women in ways that are both internal and external. The external power comes from the personal respect women of faith command in their communities. Yet this power is largely informal and localised, and therefore limited. Women of faith remain largely marginalized from the centres of power in religious institutions and communities, and so their roles and contributions are rarely recognized by formal institutions—religious or otherwise.

As one Fellowship participant described her efforts:

I have gained respect through the patient building of relationships with staff—that is how I have managed to get some things done. When faced with a barrier, you have to make something of it. You learn to move around obstacles—develop resourcefulness. Other women help women. Having conversations can unlock opportunities.

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<sup>11</sup> Desmond Cahill, "Freedom of Religion in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia: Social Cohesion, Accommodation and the Role of the State," in *Proceedings* (Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand 2011), 84-85.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, *The People of Australia / Australia's Multicultural Policy*, <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/a-multicultural-australia/multicultural-policy/>, accessed March 25, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Cahill, "Freedom of Religion," 87-89.

<sup>14</sup> Amanda Wise, "Multiculturalism from Below: Transversal Crossings and Working Class Cosmopolitans," from *Proceedings of the Everyday Multiculturalism Conference of Macquarie University CRSI*, September 28-29, 2006, ed. Selvaraj Velayutham & Amanda Wise, [http://www.crsi.mq.edu.au/news\\_and\\_events/Everyday\\_Multiculturalism\\_Conference\\_Proceedings.htm](http://www.crsi.mq.edu.au/news_and_events/Everyday_Multiculturalism_Conference_Proceedings.htm), accessed 19 December 2009.

Yet, from their marginalized position, women of faith offer alternative visions and experiences that can challenge and enrich dominant theologies and interpretations of faith, as well as our understanding of development and gender. Women's marginalization, therefore, is paradoxically both part of their strength and their weakness. Women's contribution to peacebuilding remains largely untapped, and much more needs to be done to utilize women's potential to contribute to the ongoing struggle for a more just world.

## APPRECIATION AND CHALLENGES: RESPONSES FROM FELLOWSHIP PARTICIPANTS

Without exception, the responses of the young women expressed overwhelming appreciation for the opportunity they were given to participate in the Fellowship. They spoke warmly and enthusiastically about the Fellowship experience as contributing to their personal, spiritual and professional development. The Fellowship experience had widened their view of church, opened up theological insights, and resourced them to engage more effectively with both church and society.

At the same time they raised important issues about their own needs for ongoing support and development as well as challenges facing the Church as it integrates more lay people, including women, into leadership roles in its ministries and its mission to proclaim the Gospel in the world.

Some typical comments were:

I was just grateful for all of it ... Doing the Fellowship made me more ready for new experiences ... It has made me better grounded in my spiritual development. The fruits of the course come into season weeks, months and years later.

The Fellowship opened so many doors for me. It showed me the wealth of knowledge and experience within the Catholic Church (and its communities). It also gave me more confidence in engaging in dialogue with the people I meet and the places I go.

I am extraordinarily grateful for the Fellowship. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

The Fellowship changed me as a person ... It has helped me personally in understanding other people better ... The way I talk to other people about my beliefs has changed ... I feel God has given me a role to build bridges between the different groups of people.

For many it opened the door to theological studies and a deeper love and appreciation of the Church. Some typical comments were:

The Fellowship was such a gift—it still boggles my mind. We were so supported both academically and spiritually. I have never felt so valued by the Catholic Church—it opened me up to a broader church—what it means to be a Catholic.

Being involved in the Fellowship was a life changing experience for me, and one for which I will be forever grateful. I gained a confidence in myself to feel at ease around bishops, nuncios, academics and religious. I was able to study and learn about an area of church I had barely considered before, which I now understand is so relevant to our

society in general and important to the peaceful future of Australian society ... I have felt very much more a 'part' of the Church, with a deeper understanding of how it functions, and great networks within it ... I now see the Church less as rules or separate from me. The bishops seem like people I can talk to. I feel more a part of things—it's not all happening on the altar "up there." It's my Church and I love it!

For some who have never studied theology before, it transformed their appreciation of the value of theological studies. A number of the young women were stimulated to continue on their own initiative with theological studies as a result of the Fellowship experience:

I want to study more theology—the Fellowship enlivened my interest. I had not studied any theology before the Fellowship. Before this I thought theology was mainly for priests and nuns.

The learnings were invaluable, and the personal growth. It gave me the opportunity to talk to other young Catholic women about church, about history. It was the first time I had studied theology. It was the first time I had had that depth before and it was invaluable. It has kept me moving to continue this discovery.

Two of the Fellowship participants who returned to work in non-Church related environments were appreciative of the way the Fellowship prepared them for working and living in an Australian multifaith workplace context:

I have benefitted from the Fellowship personally and cherish the experience as one of the happiest things I've ever done ... The Fellowship was a psychological and social preparation for life afterwards ... I feel comfortable in a multifaith [work] environment ... I felt what we did in the Fellowship was really relevant.

The Fellowship was an intense, special and unique experience. It has helped me in my work in the health sector where trans-cultural issues are big—particularly in my field which includes mental health. Interfaith issues are looked at in multidisciplinary teams. Problems are shared, argued about and mutually worked out. It includes understanding the whole spiritual sphere and how different traditions view things.

Several of the young women especially appreciated the live-in aspect of the Fellowship, the supportive environment provided by the opportunity to be in the company of other young Catholic women. One said:

I felt really blessed to be in the Fellowship with other strong women—we'll never get that chance again. It was a really special experience—the participants and the whole learning and growing together. I learned so much about myself and about the others. What was so special was being with such a group—all young Catholic women but across a whole spectrum of experience and belief. The whole experience was very powerful.

Others commented:

The live-in aspect of the Fellowship was valuable in giving a sense of being part of a community, and a (hard to articulate) identity effect being part of the Fellowship group ... We learnt by living with each other the demands of living with people who are different. Often it is differences within one's own church group which are more significant than interaction with people outside.

In the Fellowship we lived community experience intensely ... The relational dimension is important for women ... The Fellowship was an opportunity to leave what was familiar and enter a new space.

The Fellowship gave us confidence and the connection we have with each other. I am still in contact with some of our cohort and we are able to share faith in a regular and structured manner.

However, many also spoke of challenges they faced after completing the Fellowship as young women working in the Church or in the wider context, when the support which they enjoyed during the Fellowship program was no longer available. As one young woman expressed it:

After the Fellowship I experienced “a time of drought.” When I returned, I had to initiate all post-Fellowship endeavours by myself.

The program had expanded their vision, developed their knowledge and skills, and given them a wider understanding of church and society. However, especially if they were employed in Church structures, many found the transition a difficult one. Reflecting on their post-Fellowship experience the young women were able to identify a number of ways in which they would have benefitted from ongoing support.

Many suggestions were made in particular about the need for the young women to experience ongoing support and opportunities for personal development after they completed the program and for assistance with the transition to employment which made use of the experience and skills they had gained as part of the Fellowship.

## TWO SIGNIFICANT AREAS

Two areas of the young women’s reflection which seem to be important for the well-being of the wider Church community were: 1) their experience of being women working in Church structures; and 2) their recognition of the urgent need for more intentionality and resources to be allocated to the formation of lay people working in the Church.

### *1) Women in Church structures*

A large proportion of the young women in the Fellowship program had worked or were working in Church ministries and offices. Some of the women commented:

There is a “culture” in the Church which women can find discouraging, but it is not a conscious one.

It is one thing to get a job in church (or society)—the reality in negotiating one’s way through one’s role is sometimes difficult for women. There is a difficulty in finding other women in diocesan structures for positions which require a level of authority. As a young lay woman, it requires a certain level of confidence and comfort with being often the only woman in the room at meetings. Although it is not difficult to find women to do work, it becomes more difficult to find women for committees doing strategic planning tasks and steering committees ... Sometimes committees which are compiled with an eye to attaining a better gender-balance, may end up having less authority because of the lack of women in Church structures who exercise authority. There is a

difference between your experience of church as your community and carer and church as your employer.

Some of the young women were conscious of the difference that gender made to their opportunities for career advancement within Church structures and a culture designed to favour the advancement of men:

There is a difference in leadership pathways for women—there is no coherence with pathways for seminarians. Bishops don't recognize that gap—they see religious life is for women. They don't see the need of providing any other pathway for women ... Women's role in the Church is a topic in itself that needs addressing. We are now in a very different landscape. The question of women's participation needs continuous reflection and discernment. There is a need to make the idea of women's leadership more explicit ... Women feel disenfranchisement from the Church, but not from their faith. The challenge is to find the 'connect' again ... Being on the frontline is exhausting—it is about 'enduring,' not 'enjoying.' In the classroom [in contrast to working in other Church spaces] there is slightly more freedom. But it is more and more difficult for women.

If we were seminarians the bishops would meet with us regularly ... It's not malice on their part, but the bishops don't see any need to support us [in the way they would support seminarians]. This is also reflected in the way that some seminarians I have met in the course of my church ministry have related to me—with arrogance in some cases.

In contrast, one Fellowship participant who is now employed in a non-Church related workplace commented:

I find that being a woman is not an issue in my work environment. Many of the bosses are women. It is jarring to go into a Church environment and find it is such an issue. Structurally in the Catholic Church there is nowhere to go [for women].

Some of the young women questioned the lack of interest they experienced when, as Fellowship graduates, they offered their services in Church-related contexts:

After I finished the Fellowship, I went to see the Bishop and other diocesan leaders but nothing very solid resulted. After putting such resources into offering me the Fellowship, the Catholic community didn't ask anything of me. It was just 'Go back and change the world in your own space.' It astounded me that the Church would invest such resources, without looking for a return on their investment. I anticipated that I would become more involved in the Church as an organization, putting my learnings toward the betterment of the wider church community.

Does the Church expect anything of us? If we knew there was an expectation we would be able to set goals. What are the key performance indicators? We could then say what support we need to reach these indicators ... The Catholic Church is disappointing when it comes to leadership roles for women. The Fellowship program was billed as developing young Catholic women for same. However I understand that largely, we are an untapped resource, despite many of us having the desire to serve the Church.

## *2) Formation of lay people for leadership in mission*

The experience of the Fellowship had opened up for the young women a wider vision of church and its mission in society. A few expressed some concern about how the Church

was preparing laity who hold positions of responsibility in the Church to fulfil their roles and to see themselves as engaging in the Church's mission.

The Catholic Church needs to look at how it is forming lay-people who work in its offices. I have to deal with a diocesan Business Manager who is not Catholic and has had few, if any, formation opportunities. He seems to have little understanding of ministry needs in the diocese. Many people presently on church Boards of various kinds are Catholic, but are not well formed. When you get people on Boards with little formation—they argue from the disciplines they were trained in [not from a sense of church and mission].

## CONCLUSION

Without exception, the responses of the young women expressed overwhelming appreciation for the opportunity they were given to participate in the Fellowship.

They spoke warmly and enthusiastically about their Fellowship experience as contributing to their personal, spiritual and professional development. The Fellowship experience had widened their view of church, had opened up theological insights, and had resourced them to engage more effectively with both church and society.

Many of the young women who completed the Fellowship are now contributing their knowledge and skills in both church and society through various forms of "peacebuilding"—understood as extending far beyond simple conflict resolution to the broader development of communities and relationships—working for justice, equality and well-being for all.

At the same time as they expressed their appreciation, they raised important issues about their own needs for ongoing support and development as well as challenges facing the Church as it integrates more lay people, including women, into leadership roles in its ministries and its mission to proclaim the Gospel in the world. While participation in the Fellowship had changed the lives of a group of young Catholic women, at the same time it raised question about how well prepared the Church is to receive a new generation of theologically educated Catholic lay faithful.

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