



## A PRIEST FOREVER: THE STORY OF REV. FLORENCE LI TIM-OI

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CHINA

*[Florence Li] exercised her priesthood with such faithfulness and quiet dignity that she won tremendous respect for herself and increasing support for other women seeking ordination. . . The very quality of Ms. Li's ministry in China and in Canada and the grace with which she exercised her priesthood helped convince many people through the communion and beyond that the Holy Spirit was certainly working in and through women priests.*

—General Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, 2004 Resolution

Apart from sectarian movements, the institutionalized protestant churches by and large did not provide women with opportunities for ministry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Tucker & Liefeld, 1987, pp. 243-244). Nevertheless, the issue of women in ministry has become a hot topic for discussion since the 1970s and 1980s, even in a relatively smaller denomination such as the Church of God in Anderson, Indiana (Leonard, 1989, p. xiii). The ordination of women priests in the Anglican churches officially began in 1971 (Jones, 2004, p. 20). However, the fact that the ordination of the first woman priest within the Anglican Communion actually happened during World War II in wartime China remains unknown to many within the flock and beyond.

Florence Tim-Oi Li (hereafter referred to as Rev. Florence Li), a deaconess of the Anglican Diocese of Victoria, Hong Kong and South China, was ordained by her bishop in 1944 to address the sacramental needs of a congregation in a particular situation caused by Japanese invasion of China. She surrendered her license in 1946 when she became aware of the pressure



on her bishop and of the dispute her ordination had caused within the Anglican Communion. She continued to serve faithfully for the next 39 years under extremely difficult circumstances, especially during the decades of political upheavals in Communist China.

Ted Harrison (1985) recognized that the story of Rev. Florence Li is “a story of the Anglican Church. . . a story of revolutionary China. . . but above all it is the story of a rare and extraordinary person” (p. viii). A study and examination of such a leader can indeed improve our ability to lead. With understanding that a biographical study allows us to learn from the weaknesses and strong points of its subject, I will explore the life and times of Rev. Florence Li with the intent of examining whether her leadership demonstrated Greenleaf’s (1977) idea of servant-leadership.

The advantage of examining the life of Rev. Florence Li against the concept of servant-leadership is twofold: (a) appraising Rev. Florence Li’s experience may help Anglican and other Protestants understand a significant yet somewhat unfamiliar ministry leader who provided pastoral leadership without recognition under very challenging conditions; and (b) the study might help bring insights concerning certain aspects of Greenleaf’s model of the servant-leader through engaging specific examples of her essential thoughts.

The structure of this essay provides an overview of servant-leadership and a description of the life and times of Rev. Florence Li before examining her leadership. The essay concludes by summarizing the findings from the examination, and specifically whether the leadership of Rev. Florence Li demonstrated Greenleaf’s (1977) idea of servant-leadership.

#### SERVANT-LEADERSHIP THEORY—A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The idea of the servant-leader was first proposed by Robert Greenleaf (1977):

The servant-leader *is* servant first. . . It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one



to aspire to lead. . . [Servant-leadership] manifests itself in the care taken. . . to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (pp. 13-14)

Greenleaf crystallized his thought on the subject in the 1960s after reading Hermann Hesse's story about a spiritual pilgrimage, *Journey to the East*. The central figure in this story happens to be a servant serving a team of people embarking on a spiritual journey, but whose real identity is the head of the Order that sponsored the journey. For Greenleaf, the essential meaning of the story was that the great leader is first a servant to others. Greenleaf emphasized the importance of the motivation of a leader, to serve or to lead, as an identification of true leadership (Spears, 1998, p. 30).

Greenleaf asserted that leadership is for the most part the result of personal characteristics rather than special leadership skills. In other words, it is performed not so much by doing as by "being" (Zohar, 1997, p. 146). At the same time, Greenleaf mentioned in his writings that a servant-leader must display a number of special abilities, such as listening and persuading (Greenleaf, 1977, pp. 16-17, 29-30). Drawing upon Greenleaf's writings, Spears (1998) listed ten central characteristics of the servant-leader that "communicate the power and promise that the concept offers to those who are open to its invitation and challenge." The ten characteristics of the servant-leader are as follows:

1. Listening: The servant-leader "listens receptively to what is being said and unsaid."
2. Empathy: The "servant-leader strives to understand and empathize with others."
3. Healing: The "servant-leaders recognize that they have an opportunity to *help make whole* those with whom they come in contact."
4. Awareness: "General awareness, and especially self-awareness, strengthens the servant-leader."



5. Persuasion: The “servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance.”
6. Conceptualization: The “servant-leaders seek to nurture their abilities to *dream great dreams*.”
7. Foresight: “A characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future.”
8. Stewardship: “Servant-leadership, like stewardship, assumes first and foremost a commitment to serving the needs of others.”
9. Commitment to the growth of people: The “servant-leader recognizes the tremendous responsibility to do everything in his or her power to nurture the personal and professional growth of employees and colleagues.”
10. Building community: “Servant-leadership suggests that true community can be created among those who work in businesses and other institutions.” (pp. 4-6)

These ten characteristics of the servant-leader will be used to examine the leadership of Rev. Florence Li after a brief description of her life and times.

#### THE STORY OF FLORENCE LI

Rev. Florence Li was born in Shek Pai Bay, Aberdeen, a little village in the British colony of Hong Kong, on May 5, 1907. Her father, a physician turned headmaster of a local government school, gave her an interesting name: “Tim-Oi,” which means “another much beloved daughter” in Chinese. Girls were generally undervalued and “despised” in Chinese society, but her father “was determined to show that a daughter can be loved and cherished” (MacDonald, 1999, p. 34). At medical school, Mr. Li was a classmate and roommate of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the physician turned revolutionary.

Rev. Florence Li joined the congregation of the Anglican Church of St. Paul in her early twenties. She chose the name “Florence” as her Christian name at her baptism in remembrance of her role model, Florence Nightin-





gale. Harrison (1985) reported her sharing, “I so much wanted to be a self-less lady like (Nightingale). I admired her and the way she had comforted the wounded soldiers, as the lady with the lamp” (p. 18).

In 1932, shortly after Rev. Li joined the Anglican Church, Bishop Ronald Hall became the bishop of the diocese in 1849. Bishop Hall would later play a very significant role in Rev. Li’s life.

Rev. Florence Li (1996) described hearing the call to ministry while attending the ordination of a deaconess in 1931. She wrote that she “knelt down reverently and responded to God, ‘I am here. Please send me.’” She also wrote that she asked, “Am I suitable?” She discerned God’s calling reverberating in her “ears” (p. 7).

She started her theological training at the Union Theological College in Guangzhou, China in 1934. She was ordained a deaconess on May 22, 1941 by Bishop Ronald Hall. She was then assigned to serve a congregation in the Portuguese colony of Macau, where a great number of refugees had fled as a result of the Japanese invasion of China. According to Harrison (1985), Portugal was not at war with Japan and “although the Japanese made life difficult for the people of the colony, they never invaded it” (p. 28). After Japan’s occupation of Hong Kong on Christmas Day of 1941, Bishop Hall could no longer get permission to send the priests from Hong Kong to Macau, and there was no one to administer the Sacrament.

Harrison (1985) reported that the bishop wrote a long letter to his friend, William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury, concerning his intention to ordain Rev. Florence Li, the then deaconess serving in Macau, to satisfy the pastoral needs of the congregation:

I am not an advocate for the ordination of women. I am however determined that no prejudices should prevent the congregations committed to my care having the sacraments of the church. (p. 42)

In late December 1943, Rev. Florence Li received a letter from Bishop Ronald Hall inviting her to the Anglican Church of Shaoping, Guangdong, to be ordained as priest (Li, 1996, p. 20). On January 25, 1944, the Feast of



the Conversion of St. Paul, she was ordained and thus became the first woman priest in the Anglican Communion (Jones, 2004, p. 20).

Harrison (1985) noted that Bishop Hall wrote to Archbishop Temple two days later, reporting the ordination and explaining his action:

Please be sure that my reason was not the theoretical views of the equality of men and women but the needs of my people and the manifest gift of the charism. (p. 49)

The Archbishop's response to Bishop Hall's first letter, which stated that he did not approve of Rev. Li's ordination, came after that ordination due to "the unreliability of the wartime postal service" (Harrison, 1985, p. 49).

After the end of World War II in 1945, the war against the ordination of women began in the Anglican Church. The bishops at the Lambeth Conference indicated their opposition to Bishop Hall's ordination of Rev. Florence Li (Harrison, 1985, pp. 57-58). Rev. Li was summoned to Hong Kong in 1946 and was told that either Bishop Hall "must resign as a bishop" or she "must give up the title of priest" (Li, 1996, p. 22).

Rev. Joyce Bennett (cited in Harrison, 1985) reported Rev. Florence Li's response:

Therefore Florence Li wrote to Bishop Hall to say that she was a very tiny person, a mere worm, and her influence was very small, but his position in the world was so important. She did not have to have the name of a priest, but she would continue to do church work. (p. 52)

With the letter, Rev. Florence Li gave up her license as priest, but continued to carry out her priestly ministry. Two years later, the Chinese Communist Party came into power in China. As a result, Rev. Li was forced to minister in extremely difficult conditions; but she persevered (Harrison, 1985, pp. 66-110).

Rev. Florence Li left China in 1983 for Canada to serve in two Anglican churches in Toronto. She was officially reinstated as a priest in 1984, the 40th anniversary of her ordination. She died in 1992.



## AN ASSESSMENT OF REV. FLORENCE LI'S LEADERSHIP

### *Listening*

Greenleaf (1977) quoted one line from the prayer of St. Francis, "Lord, grant that I may not seek so much to be understood as to understand," in two places when he discussed listening (pp. 17 & 301). He believed "a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening *first*" (p. 17).

Rev. Florence Li was a good listener. According to Harrison (1985), she listened to her father's problem of not being wealthy enough to provide for her education after primary school and "for seven years she lived dutifully at home, helping to raise the younger children" (p. 6). She was in her early twenties when she was finally able to attend the Belilios Public School for Girls.

Her listening skill was also evident in her response to the controversy caused by her ordination. Having been told that Bishop Hall had broken the canon law by ordaining her as priest and that either he must resign as a bishop or she must give up her title as priest, she was quite troubled. Yet after meditation, she was able to appreciate the situation:

I voluntarily and whole-heartedly supported Bishop Hall in upholding his holy office as bishop. He was a man of deep spirituality. Not only was he influential in the Chinese Church, but his international contributions were also large. I was willing to give up my title of priest. (Li, 1996, p. 22)

This is very much in tune with Spears' comments about the servant-leader's ability to listen "receptively to what is being said and unsaid" (Spears, 1998, p. 4).

### *Empathy*

"Empathy is the imaginative projection of one's own consciousness



into another being. . . . Leaders who empathize . . . are more likely to be trusted” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 20, 21).

There were many stories concerning Rev. Li’s ministry in Macau that testified to her empathetic spirit. One of those involved a certain Mrs. Leung, “who was scared to go into the morgue to identify her husband after he died” and had no coffin for her husband’s burial due to her lack of money (Li, 1996, p. 16). Rev. Florence Li reported that she “gathered up enough courage to walk straight into the morgue” and guaranteed the payment for the coffin (p. 16).

### *Healing*

Greenleaf stated that “whether professional or amateur, the motive for the healing is the same: for one’s own healing” ( 1977, p. 37).

An incident during the Cultural Revolution provided evidence of Rev. Li’s actions in this area:

For two weeks we were put to work in the YMCA grounds digging. They suspected we had arms hidden, buried underground. . .

They tried their best to break us, to take away our dignity. Sometimes they shouted at those who didn’t do what they were told. I tried my best to be obedient. I just did the digging. We found not a thing, not even a piece of iron.

I try my best to forgive everyone. God understands everything. . . it’s God’s will to train us. I don’t blame the Red Guards. They do not know, they do not understand. One day, I comfort myself, they will know. (Harrison, 1985, p. 94)

Greenleaf suggested that in terms of healing, “one really never makes it. It is always something sought” (1977, p. 36).

### *Awareness*

Greenleaf (1977) defined awareness as “letting something significant



and disturbing develop” (p. 316), and he suggested that “able leaders are sharply awake and reasonably disturbed” (p. 28).

In her year of “re-education” during a political “Cleansing Movement,” Rev. Florence Li was asked to explain why Bishop Hall would break the Anglican tradition and ordain her as the first woman priest (Li, 1996, p. 41), implying sexual indiscretion between her and the Bishop. The same question had been asked by the Guangdong Provincial Ministry of Public Safety in 1958. She was very much aware of the regime’s intention to damage the reputation of her bishop. Her handler finally withdrew after she gave her blunt reply: “Bishop Hall was my superior. His status was holy, and his character, pure. How could he turn from God’s love and holiness to take advantage of his subordinate? I am willing to undergo medical test(s) to prove that I am untainted” (p. 42).

### *Persuasion*

Rev. Florence Li’s persuading ability was seen in action during the final days of her ministry in Macau before her reassignment to Guangdong Province following the controversy over her ordination:

Before my transfer from Macau, I pondered over the fact that the Chunghua Shungkunghui did not have its own church premise. As church members could enjoy peace and a new beginning after the war by the mercy of God, I decided to bravely suggest to each member that he or she offer a thanksgiving donation towards a permanent church building as the home of the Macau parish . . . and for days I travelled around Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Macau without rest, visiting parishioners to invite them to participate in this thanksgiving drive. Consequently, all pitched in. (Li, 1996, p. 23)

Very much like John Woolman’s example in persuading his fellow Quakers to denounce and forbid slavery as referred to by Greenleaf (1977), Rev. Florence Li’s action proved that “leadership by persuasion has the virtue of change by conviction rather than coercion” (p. 30).



### *Conceptualization*

When Rev. Florence Li was sent along with other pastors to work in the factory during the Cultural Revolution, it was still very dangerous for them to share their faith openly. However, they were able to look beyond day-to-day realities:

We didn't talk while we were working. Many of us liked to work honestly, quietly, faithfully and show our Christianity by example. We didn't talk about these things but we acted quietly, patiently, happily. We tried to do our work beautifully to show our Christianity. It was a silent witness.

And the authorities saw what we were doing. The results in our factory were much better than in the other factories. They noticed it and praised us for our honesty.

Sometimes leaders would come and visit us and be very friendly and say good words to us. We were quite different from other factories. We are Christians. (Harrison, 1985, p. 99)

The “delicate balance between conceptual thinking and a day-to-day operational approach” (Spears, 1998, p. 5) was sought and attained by Rev. Florence Li and her fellow pastors in that “Christian factory.”

### *Foresight*

Spears (2004, p. 33) defines foresight as “a characteristic that enables the servant-leader to understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present, and the likely consequence of a decision for the future.”

English teachers were in high demand when China decided to open its door in 1979, and Rev. Florence Li was listed as a potential teacher. She was contacted by the Army Medical School to help a group of Army personnel learn about foreign lifestyles and learn the English language before their study abroad. She declined on medical grounds, as she had just gone



through an eye surgery a year earlier. The true reason behind her decline is recorded in her writing:

In fact I was afraid that, if I obeyed them, I would open myself up to criticism in the event of further political movements. Someone might accuse me of audaciously sneaking into military institutions to attempt counter-revolutionary activities. (Li, 1996, pp. 44-45)

### *Stewardship*

Servant-leaders often regard themselves as stewards (De Pree, 1989, p. 12; Senge, 1990, p. 7). Stewardship is essentially the willingness to be held responsible for the well-being of a larger community by working in the service of those around oneself (Block, 1993, p. 41).

Rev. Florence Li's commitment to serve the needs of others was evident even before her ministry days. She accepted a position teaching children of fishermen upon graduation from secondary school. She "trekked over land and sea to render service with all heart and mind" (Li, 1996, p. 6).

### *Commitment to the Growth of People*

"Servant-leaders believe that people have an intrinsic value beyond their tangible contributions as workers. As such, the servant-leader is deeply committed to the growth of each and every individual within his or her organization" (Spears, 1998, p. 6).

When Rev. Florence Li was transferred from Macau to Guangdong Province, she also took up a teaching position at a Provincial secondary school as an English teacher. She developed deep friendships with her colleagues and students. She formed both a Chinese and an English Bible study class for youth catechism. She also organized a Friends of Christ Society "so that young people could learn to love the church through fellowship life" (Li, 1996, p.27). She did everything in her power to nurture her parishioners.



### *Building community*

Spears (1998) quoted Greenleaf in summarizing building community:

All that is needed to rebuild community as a viable life form for large numbers of people is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating his or her unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group. (p. 6)

Rev. Florence Li's (1996) writings indicate that she chose to support the Movement for the Ordination of Women in her final years even though she didn't fight to defend her ordination in her younger years:

As Christians, we should understand God's will. God created both male and female, and we are all His children. He surely wants His children to work with each other and support each other in making "heaven on earth" a reality. Why are there unenlightened, intransigent, and obstinate people who want to strip away women's freedom to serve the Lord, and suppress their work? Could that be in accordance with Christ's teachings? (pp. 56-57)

In essence, Rev. Florence Li was working hard in her last days to build community within the Anglican Communion.

### CONCLUSION

Rev. Florence Li heard others' ideas and valued them. She understood what was happening in others' lives and how they were affected. She was resolved to heal herself and her relationships with others. She had a strong awareness of what was going on. She sought to convince rather than to coerce. She was able to attain a balance between vision and reality. She was able to foresee a likely outcome of her situation based on lessons of her past and the realities of her days. She was willing to work for the well-being of those around her. She was committed to helping others grow. She





created a sense of community among the women in ministry. She was a servant-leader.

Comments made by Archbishop Ted Scott in Toronto at the golden jubilee of her ordination illustrate the depth of both her servanthood and leadership:

I do not think Florence was ever aware of the tremendous influence she had, both on individual persons and on the church. She influenced me very deeply and I know that she also influenced many leaders of the World Council of Churches. She had a great influence upon the thinking of the church. She modeled faithfulness, and when she was given the authority to do so, she modeled priesthood at its best. Her example led many people struggling with the issue, among them Archbishop Runcie, to move to a more positive stance vis a vis the ordination of women (Li, 1996, p. 94).

Christopher Hall, son of the bishop who ordained Florence Li, commented that “she was not a woman who just happened to be around at that time and place. God had prepared her for her role in His story. . . . In the warmth of God’s love, ‘she showed us how the Christ she talked about is living now’” (Li, 1996, p. 99).

I have selected from Rev. Florence Li’s life history a tapestry of stories that help illumine the characteristics of Greenleaf’s servant-leadership. I want the stories to give voice to the life and essence of Rev. Florence Li. My hope is that in the interpretation I offer here a good beginning has been made for further research into the story of Rev. Florence Li, and that her story can contribute to furthering the understanding of women in ministry.

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Peter Lim works for an international NGO and travels extensively. His primary work is in East Asia. He is currently working on his dissertation and his research interest is leadership development in developing countries. Peter is blessed with a wonderful wife, Stephanie, and four children.



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