

Change Factors Affecting Women in the Local Church

by Kathy J. Pulley

One of the major unresolved issues facing Churches of Christ today is how to deal with the roles of women in the local churches. Many recognize that as Western society moves toward full and equal participation of women in the workforce and in all other aspects of society, it is impossible for the Churches of Christ to remain isolated and unaffected.

For the most part Churches of Christ have limited their formal discussions about women's roles in the church to what they believe the Bible says—that is, "We speak where the Bible speaks and we are silent where the Bible is silent." In addition to the importance of studying the Bible, there are other factors that must be considered if women's roles in local churches is to change. The issue is complex. If change is to come, those who are in leadership positions must recognize the importance of theological, social and organizational factors.

Biblical Study

The importance of biblical study cannot be denied. Most members of Churches of Christ share the presupposition that the Bible is sacred and is a reliable account of God's actions and revelations in human history. But in order fully to understand the biblical texts regarding women, there must be more intensive work done on the difficult passages. In addition to being more rigorous about our exegetical

work, we must also be more rigorous about our hermeneutical study. Several of our scholars are producing excellent articles about hermeneutical methodologies, and those need to be read and studied. Also, there needs to be a more serious examination of theological matters. What is our ecclesiology? What is our "familyology"—our theology about the family—issues about role expectations, dominance and submission, and domestic violence? What can we learn from church history and the history of our own Restoration Movement about the role of women in leadership? Consideration of these matters and others will help to inform our overall understanding of the biblical perspective.

Social Factors

As human beings we are all social creatures and, as such, are influenced by social and organizational factors in our support of, or our resistance to, the changing roles of women in our culture. There are many social issues that could be mentioned (our families of origin, geography, and education), but for the sake of brevity I will mention only one, and that is a sex-role socialization factor: how are women in our culture socialized to feel about their own leadership and intellectual abilities?

Over the last forty years, many studies have been done relative to this topic. One study conducted

by Matina Horner¹ indicates that women who are motivated toward intellectual achievement and leadership positions worry not only about failure, but also about success. Why do they fear success? Horner cites three reasons: First, they fear social rejection. They may not be liked by those with whom they are associated. Second, they may feel guilt and doubt about their femininity. If they do not live up to what their own community of significant peers expects, are they failing to be "normal females"? Third, they may deny that success is really achievable for women. That is, they may avoid competing for leadership roles because success is not perceived to be a realistic possibility. Many of these fears have diminished since Horner's study, but do these fears have anything to say to Churches of Christ as they face the question of women's leadership? Probably so.

For women who desire greater participation in church leadership and worship, it is unlikely that their fears will be any different from women who attempt leadership in any other area that previously had been closed. They may experience social rejection from some members of the church. They may have doubts about whether they are doing the "right" thing for a female. They may view the task as impossible and opt to put their energies into achievements unrelated to the church. As we open our minds to exploring the many social factors which may contribute to our present attitudes and actions toward women in the church, let us not forget the social reality that in many places a woman's intelligence and her ability to lead are still suspect. This reality affects not only companies' policies and churches' attitudes, but it also affects how women feel about themselves. If intelligent, achievement-oriented women do not always seem fully committed to greater involvement in the life of the church, it may have much to do with their fears about the consequences of such a commitment.

Organizational Maintenance

In addition to social factors, organizational maintenance is also a major concern of the Churches of Christ. The Church of Christ, a voluntary organization, like all other voluntary organizations, must maintain its legitimacy to its members.

Edward Lehman Jr.² has written extensively on women in the religious professions. He points out that the reason churches may be so threatened by the inclusion of women into leadership positions is that if a church loses its scarce resources (members and financial contributions), the church will cease to exist.³ A voluntary organization such as a church cannot coerce membership or funds. He goes on to point out that this threat to the organization itself

may be the reason that members who theologically accept women in leadership positions are opposed (or at least neutral) to the implementation and practice of such an idea in their own local churches. Therefore, if the top priority is to preserve the organization, then any issue which is seen as potentially destructive to the organization will not be supported by the organization's leaders regardless of how much they might agree with it in principle.

Another maintenance consideration is that one's understanding of the church also affects his/her acceptance of women in leadership positions. For some, the main understanding of "church" is a specific local congregation, in a certain building, with a certain set of ministries and daily routines. Lehman labels this understanding of the church as "ecclesiological localism."⁴ For others, the "church" is broader than a building and is not limited to one geographic spot with one specific group of people. Rather, the church is universal, global, coterminous with Christians throughout the world. It is a community which stretches both backward and forward in time. Lehman refers to those who have this concept of the "church" as "ecclesiological cosmopolitans."⁵ His studies support the thesis that there is a correlation between sexism and localism—that is, those who oppose women in ministry also tend to view the church in local terms. If Lehman is correct, his research is extremely informative for those of us in Churches of Christ. Based on his evidence, we may expect to see that our churches with a large number of members who are "ecclesiological cosmopolitans" will be more receptive to women in ministry than will be the churches who focus on localism.

Another factor of particular concern for Churches of Christ is our structural form. Congregational autonomy does not provide for a national and/or regional group to place women into leadership positions on the local level, as is the case in many Protestant traditions. For the most part, congregational autonomy has served us well. When decisions must be made about giving women leadership roles, however, local church leaders may find themselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, they may want to move in a positive direction, and yet they may resist such movement in order to avoid a controversy that might create a schism in the local group. Regardless of how "ecclesiological cosmopolitan" the leadership may be, they remain local leaders who have a strong vested interest in maintaining the legitimacy of their local church.⁶

Lehman believes that if a woman is to overcome the challenge of organizational maintenance, she must establish her own legitimacy by working through the formal structures of the organization,

and she must use her contacts with executive males in the organization to help further legitimize her position. For most women, this is an uphill struggle. The specific means through which this might be worked out in churches that practice congregational autonomy is a wide-open proposition. Despite what our theology may be, churches still may be reluctant to move away from the traditional role of women because of their fear of losing organizational viability. We must be conscious of this real fear and not allow the fear to determine our exegetical and hermeneutic stances. Rather, we must search for a way to work through the fear from an organizational perspective. Literature on organizational change might serve us well in resolving this essentially methodological issue.

To achieve the full and equal participation of women in the church, the men who are in leadership positions must examine their beliefs and attitudes thoroughly. They must also raise their awareness of the multiple dimensions of gender roles in our society. Theological, social and organizational issues must be taken seriously. The questions are complex; nonetheless, the leaders have a responsibility to seek resolutions. Lay members (both women and men) must also recognize the value of working "from the ground up." Even a small change can be an important first step.⁷

Kathy J. Pulley teaches religious studies at Southwest Missouri State University and is a member of the Editorial Board of *Leaven*.

Questions for Discussion

1. Would you describe your church as "ecclesiological cosmopolitan" or "ecclesiological local?" Explain. Are these labels helpful for understanding how a church maintains itself? Why or why not?
2. Discuss Horner's points about why women leaders may worry about success. If you are female, could you share an example of a situation in which you feared succeeding (this could be from church, family, school, etc.)? If you are male, have you observed females who feared intellectual and leadership successes? Share examples. How did you feel when you experienced this fear or observed it?
3. Do you agree with the author that there are other issues, besides traditional interpretations of biblical scriptures, that influence churches' positions about women's participation? Can you think of other issues that are not addressed by this article?
4. Would you like for your church to explore women's roles in greater depth? If so, how might your church do so constructively?

Notes

¹Matina Horner, "Fail: Bright Women," *Psychology Today* (November 1969) 36-38, 62.

²Edward C. Lehman Jr., *Gender and Work: The Case of the Clergy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 1-22.

³_____. "Sexism, Organizational Maintenance, and Localism: A Research Note," *Sociological Analysis* 48 (Fall 1987): 275.

⁴*Ibid.*, 278.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶_____. "Placement of Men and Women in the Ministry," *Review of Religious Research* 22 (September 1980) 37.

⁷An example of one church that has dealt with significant changes in women's roles is the Brookline Church of Christ in Brookline, MA. Later in this issue I elaborate on some of the specific ways the Brookline church has created a Christian community in which women are full participants.