

Gifted, Called
and
Affirmed

A pastoral application and commentary on the
Women in Ministry Leadership resolution of Gathering 2006

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CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

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Introduction

At its national convention in July of 2006, a delegation representing the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches adopted a resolution by the Board of Faith and Life that “recommends that the Conference bless each member church in its own discernment of Scripture, conviction and practice to call and affirm gifted men and women to serve in ministry and pastoral leadership.”

Previous to this decision, the Mennonite Brethren Church had, since 1981, affirmed the participation of women in all ministries of the church other than as lead pastor. Since that time we have seen an increase in the number of women serving in various pastoral staff positions. The 2006 decision provides approval and freedom for those churches ready to call and affirm a woman to the role of lead pastor without making that congregation’s freedom binding on those churches that would not have the freedom of conscience, based on their understanding of biblical teaching and their specific missional context, to call and affirm women into lead pastoral positions.¹

Using a question-and-answer format, this booklet is an instrument for individual study and for use in churches. It seeks to provide a concise expression of the essence of our belief and practices in order to:

Explain the denomination’s position regarding women in ministry leadership;

Equip members with reasoned responses when asked about this subject;

Encourage women and men to use their gifts in ministry for the advancement of the gospel and the kingdom of God;

1. The 2006 Resolution included a rationale, in part which stated, “Let it be our choice that this diversity of practice regarding the churches’ freedom to call women into ministry and pastoral leadership will not undermine our unity. This resolution is not prescriptive, but enabling. No member or member church is compelled to act outside their understanding of Scripture on the matter of women in ministry leadership. Rather, let us covenant with one another to offer encouragement, love, prayer and support for each church and its mission until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:16; Matt. 28:18-20; John 17:17-19; 20:21-23).”

Remain centred on Jesus Christ as our example and teacher, keep the Bible as our anchor for understanding, and locate our decisions and forms of ministry within the mission God has given us as individuals and congregations.

There are 2 main sections:

- A. The pastoral application and commentary section is designed to help people understand how to live and remain missional with the new resolution now in place.
- B. A rationale section reflects on various questions and issues from the biblical text. This is designed to help people understand how and why the BFL came to its decision, and to assist in summarizing the reasons for opening pastoral leadership to both women and men.

Section A

Pastoral Applications

What do the Mennonite Brethren believe about women in pastoral roles and other ministry and leadership positions within the church?

The Mennonite Brethren Church affirms women in all ministry and leadership positions within the church. We believe that the biblical basis for service in the body of Christ is a calling of God, giftedness for ministry, godly character and affirmation from the body of Christ—not gender.

Orientation to the Topic

Mennonite Brethren begin the discussion regarding women in ministry leadership with Jesus. Why is that?

Mennonite Brethren today are spiritual heirs of the Anabaptist reformation of the 16th century. As Anabaptists, Mennonite Brethren not only stress belief in Jesus Christ but also stress the importance of following him.

“Faith is expressed in holy living. In Christ, salvation and ethics come together. Not only are we to be saved through Christ, but we are also to follow him daily in obedient living....Anabaptists continue to teach that salvation makes us followers of Jesus Christ and that he is the model for the way we are to live.”²

Jesus modeled and taught how men and women should treat one another, in life and in ministry. He challenged prevailing unjust practices toward women. He set forth a new paradigm that saw women as persons equal to men and rejected the practices of his day that devalued women (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 5:21-43; 10:11-12; 15:40-41, 47; Luke 10:38-42; 13:10-17; 24:10-11; John 4:7-42; 11:2-45; 12:1-8). Jesus had female disciples who travelled with him, supported him out of their means (Luke 8:1-3) and who received spiritual instruction from our Lord (Matt. 12:46-50; 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 10:39).

Jesus taught and practiced servant leadership that looked out for the interests of others. Jesus corrected his followers regarding leadership: it was about servanthood, not autocratic authority. Jesus’ teaching (Luke 22:24-30; John 13:13-17) was subversive to pre-existing social patterns based on hierarchy, power and authority.

2. BFL Pamphlet, *Anabaptism: The Basic Beliefs*

Scripture texts point both toward freeing and restricting women. How do Mennonite Brethren view this dilemma?

The God-breathed scriptures were borne within the life-contexts of God's people. Every book was written to address very real issues and challenges facing them. Thus there is both an element of divine inspiration and human story in the Bible.

The scripture is clear about the fundamental equality of men and women in creation, and the role of humanity in "having dominion" over creation (Gen. 1). The fall and subsequent redemption through the law, and ultimate redemption through Christ provides a window into the heart of God for both the possibilities of human achievement as well as the realities of human fallenness.

As regards to women in ministry leadership, there are texts which point to completely equal inclusion of women and men in faith and involvement in the church, including modelling by Jesus, and the modelling and teaching of the apostles. There are also texts which restrict women from certain activity in the church. Between the regime of the law and the new regime of Christ's redemption we also see differences in opportunity given to women and restrictions.

Thus, the leadership of the Mennonite Brethren have sought to find a path which honours the intention and heart of God for opportunity and restriction. Because the biblical text is located within the life and times of the people of God, even though divinely inspired, it is incumbent upon us to discern how to locate the inspired text within the life and times of God's people now—in the 3rd millennium after Christ.

Much has changed in our social structures and cultural milieu since the Old Testament and since the times of Christ and the apostles. Today, we will discover that there are again many opportunities for both freeing and restricting—but they may be found in different places than our biblical text presented in its day. Certainly the scholars of the past and today have differed, though diligently seeking to honour the authority of the Bible.

So the resolution stands as our resolve to free congregations where God calls them to be free, and retain restrictions as God calls for those. In some cases a church may be called to change its position—either way!—in response to the missional context in which it finds itself. In this regard we believe we are being faithful to the Scriptures.

The “missional context” is a prominent factor. What is that about?

The New Testament text was written as “theology on the run.” The authors of the epistles and gospels were learning to understand what God was doing, while spreading the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. As they wrote, they had a need to address and clarify concerns of theology and practice. They also had to encourage people who were sorely tested for their faith and convictions.

For application, then, the biblical text is to be located within a missional context as propositional or theological truth. This builds in flexibility for application into life. It also has power to anchor us to truth and principles that God intends for us to abide by.

If we start with Jesus Christ as the centre and core of our thinking and application, retaining the authority of Scripture as divinely inspired (in both restricting and freeing), and locating everything within the mission-context of our life and times—as the biblical authors did—we have a lot of freedom to use many different forms and approaches as we reach out to our world with the good news of Jesus Christ—Saviour of the world.

The matter of who leads becomes a form and approach (a polity matter) within the mission of the church. Of course, those who lead the mission are carefully chosen under the guidance of God into the missional context.

What are the implications of the Conference adoption of the 2006 resolution?

At Gathering 2006, where the “Women in Ministry Leadership” resolution was adopted, the Board of Faith and Life outlined five implications for

Mennonite Brethren across Canada. They are:

1. Reality, not moral failure nor biblical infidelity, nor spiritual immaturity dictates that there will be many ways, not just one way of looking at the issue of the role of women in ministry leadership. “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Rom. 14: 13, 19).
2. In the spirit of unity (John 17: 20,21), the Board of Faith and Life requests that we all proceed with a raised awareness of the significance our decision has upon our collective witness to our communities and country. It is a unified church that advances the gospel (1 Cor. 8:12, 13; 10:23, 24).
3. The role of women in ministry leadership has been previously discerned and treated as a non-confessional issue by previous convention and study conference delegations. It is the counsel of the present Board of Faith and Life that this issue remain at the level of polity.
4. The purpose of this resolution is to empower congregations to exercise freedom of conscience before Christ in determining what leadership polity will reflect their faithfulness to the Word of God. The Board of Faith and Life encourages congregations to articulate the means and method of reaching that consensus for its members and adherents.
5. As a matter of polity, the Board of Faith and Life requests all constituent members, leaders and congregations to exercise a spirit of unity, charity and respect for every church’s discerned ministry context, including its resolve regarding women in ministry leadership roles.

Local Church Positions

What does the acceptance of the 2006 resolution on Women in Ministry Leadership mean for a Mennonite Brethren Church that holds a restrictive view on the subject?

The intent of the 2006 resolution was to move the mission of the church forward and to remove potential impediments to that mission. As noted above, mission flexibility is governed by the centrality of Christ. It is also understood that there are various positions concerning the freedom and restrictions regarding the leadership of women held by leaders with a high regard for Scripture and the Great Commission.

The adoption or retention of a restrictive view ought to be located within the mission of the church, governed by the centrality of Christ. A church that decides to be restrictive may do so because it may be necessary to maintain unity in the congregation, or because to change may upset the equilibrium of the body. Or, the context may require a restrictive stance. For example, some communities in Canada broadly accept male leadership in the home, business and other social contexts, and to place a woman in pastoral leadership would cause confusion or rejection of the gospel witness.

Where a church takes a restrictive stand on women in pastoral leadership, it is still encouraged to reflect and respond to the decisions of the past to release women to serve in all areas of the church apart from pastoral leadership.

All of our congregations will be stronger in mission and ministry by being careful, intentional stewards of the resources God has given them.

Since the Conference has affirmed this policy, will not some churches that disagree with it see themselves as compromised?

The Mennonite Brethren have always committed themselves to a strong covenant community that has enjoyed congregational autonomy even while denominational leadership has provided support and services to build up local ministry initiatives. At its heart, the Mennonite Brethren are

a people in mission, often working together to accomplish what cannot be done in isolation from each other.

Because of the nature of this voluntary association each congregation commits itself to live out to the best of its ability the teachings of our Confession of Faith. As to the shape, form or substance of any church—its staffing, its philosophy of ministry or its programming—each church is unique and collectively provides wonderful diversity amidst our confessional unity. The issue of women in ministry leadership is a non-confessional issue. It remains, like many other issues the church faces, a polity issue.

Pastors and church leadership are entrusted with articulating the means and methods of advancing the gospel in their particular ministry context and to draw the people of God into mission. Pastors, leadership and the congregations at large have the freedom and responsibility to pray, converse, study and resolve with a clear conscience before the Holy Spirit their own vision for mission.

What is the local church's responsibility to a woman who feels the call of God into vocational ministry?

Women who believe they are called into vocational ministry have a responsibility to authenticate that calling. Conversely, every church is called to encourage and equip all men and women who seek to serve the church through their contribution of leadership gifts. In large measure it is the ministry context of the local church that provides opportunity for women to test gifting and receive the necessary affirmation to pursue the call.

In the larger Mennonite Brethren context, the resolution allows for inter-church cooperation to assist women with discerning their calling. For example, a woman in a church that has chosen a restrictive approach may seek a ministry development opportunity in another church that provides for more freedom. Her home church may assist and support her in discerning that calling by cooperating with and staying in dialogue with the other church that is giving her that opportunity.

What does this resolution mean for a church plant or congregation that is interested in becoming a member church of the Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches?

When new churches come into the faith family of the Mennonite Brethren, it is expected that they will embrace the Confession of Faith. On polity matters such as this one, the conference is open to flexible forms.

In practical terms, this means that when a congregation expresses a desire to associate with the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, they have identified a broad compatibility with the Conference. It is incumbent, therefore, on the representatives of churches interested in joining the denomination to understand and accurately represent our position and practice related to women in leadership to their constituency.

Personal Positions

What does this resolution mean for a Mennonite Brethren pastor who holds a restrictive view of women in ministry leadership?

Pastors who are now being credentialed into the Mennonite Brethren Church are free to hold a position dictated by their conscience and their interpretation of Scripture. It is expected that provincial discernment committees will respect the position held by individuals in the credentialing process. At the same time, credentialing pastors will be encouraged to locate this matter into the missional context of their congregation.

Pastors should encourage women in their congregation to lead and to serve. It is our prayer that every woman will sense this kind of strong affirmation from her pastor. In addition, every pastor and leader should exhibit a collegial spirit to all other Mennonite Brethren pastors and leaders, male or female.

It is also an expectation of responsible pastoral leadership for pastors to nurture and encourage women to serve Jesus Christ in any and all areas they and the body of Christ discern they are called to.

What about me as an individual? What if, after study, prayer and conversation, I disagree with my church's position on the issue of women in ministry leadership?

You may find yourself in a position where either you do not feel comfortable with your church's openness, or you disagree with its restriction to women in ministry leadership.

Non-confessional matters such as a local congregation's view on women in ministry leadership have in the past aroused emotional, sometimes passionate debate, but disagreement on this issue should not be allowed to become a source of division. Self control is a commanded virtue in the Scriptures. Engaging in debate is welcome, but should always be conducted in a spirit of love. This is especially important for any formal dialogue as a congregation discerns its direction on this matter.

Each church is charged with determining its own position on women in ministry leadership based on God's preferred future for their particular missional context. Thus it is possible as an individual that you disagree with your local congregation's discernment. Or you may detect that your church has not adequately considered its missional context. You may wish to raise this observation, but one must also decide at some point to submit to the leading of the congregation and eldership.

Those holding a restrictive position are asked to:

- Respect the convictions of those holding a freeing view;
- Respect and support those women who are called, gifted and affirmed by the local church to serve in ministry and leadership;
- Recognize that your position has a profound effect on the freedom of others to follow God's leading into lay or vocational ministry;
- Exercise caution not to quench the Spirit in the lives of others, and;

- Recognize that while your freedom of conscience will be respected, you also ought to respect and uphold others to live out Christ's call in their lives with freedom of conscience.

Those holding a freeing position are asked to:

- Respect the convictions of those holding a restrictive view;
- Recognize and challenge assumptions where freedom is expressed as "rights" from a secular/humanist perspective, and not a biblical and missional perspective;
- Respect that while the arguments for freedom are valid, they ought to be lived out with respect to the whole counsel of God including those restriction texts present in the Scriptures.
- Exercise caution not to quench the Spirit in the lives of others, and;
- Recognize that while your freedom of conscience will be respected, you also ought to respect and uphold others to live out Christ's call in their lives with freedom of conscience.

Discussion/Decision/Implementation

**What if my church has never had a formal conversation on this issue?
How do I (or we) begin the process?**

The Board of Faith and Life encourages every congregation to foster Bible study, forums, congregational or cell/care/house group meetings on this issue. At some point in the life of the church, the people of the congregation and their leadership ought to clarify their congregational position on their openness to women in ministry leadership.

Congregations will differ as to readiness to discuss the matter. They may be engaged in expansion of their mission, programming or facility. They may

be struggling through a crisis of loss, conflict or other stress. We recommend waiting until the situation allows for patient dialogue and listening to one another. Since this is a sensitive matter for both women and men, the atmosphere ought to be conducive to good will, love, patience, and careful discernment.

On the other hand, the leadership and the congregation are called to exercise courage to approach the discussion. People on a mission tackle the challenges they face. Since this is viewed as a matter of freeing people into the mission, congregations are encouraged to take up the challenge sooner rather than later.

The summary rationale in Section B may be a starting point for group discussion. For deeper study, a bibliography is provided which offers resources on many points of view, including those which would not support our resolution and/or which support restrictions.

It is a matter of balance and theological/missional integrity that people discussing the issue are reading widely the material available that is written on all sides of the debate.

Conclusion

Mennonite Brethren are called to recognize the multifaceted nature of the subject of women in ministry leadership. It includes but is not limited to the following dimensions:

- It's about Christ first. Our identity is first of all in Christ. As his people we follow his lead in his teachings and observed practice.
- It's about mission. It is about the whole church engaged in the task of carrying out Christ's Great Commission and Great Commandment with all of our gifts and abilities.
- It's about discerning. The Scriptures demonstrate there is both opportunity and restriction in this matter. Whatever direction is chosen, we are

responsible and empowered to stay within biblical and godly limits and not stray into directions that go against the whole counsel of God.

- It's about freedom. Under the authority of God through Christ, the church has the authorization and freedom to shape its forms and structure to fit its mission to its context.
- It's about grace. As our denomination opens up a new path—and not without controversy—we are called to be gracious with one another, to dialogue before judging, and to extend love toward one another as individuals, leaders and congregations.
- It's about opening doors. We as a body are called to be watchful for the emerging leaders among our corps of young men and women and open doors for them as faithful stewards of God's generous gifting to the church.
- It's about a clear understanding of grace, redemption and living new kingdom realities. Our salvation has real and measurable social outcomes.

We recognize this brief set of questions and answers cannot cover this subject completely, but we hope it will facilitate understanding and our discernment process as congregations.

Section B

Points of Rationale

The primary purpose of this booklet is to provide pastoral application suggestions and some commentary on the Gathering 2006 Resolution. All through the process leading up to Gathering 2006 the rationale employed by the Board of Faith and Life attempted to be biblical while finding a suitable context for making a shift from our policy already in place. The following points reflect those thoughts.

What is the biblical basis for this position?

We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture. The person, teaching and life of Jesus Christ bring continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament bears witness to Christ, and Christ is the One whom the New Testament proclaims. We accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice.³

Our position on women in ministry flows from our interpretation of the entire biblical witness and is not derived from cultural or societal trends. We believe that “women ought to minister not because society says so but because the Bible leads the Church to such a conclusion.”⁴

There are several interpretive frameworks through which people arrive at their conclusions about the subject of women in ministry. This section unpacks the interpretive framework through which Mennonite Brethren have arrived at their position. We invite those who are in agreement with the resolution, those who are still searching, and those who disagree to look through the same window with us to see what we see.

Please note the comments made at the beginning in the Pastoral Application section.

3. *Confession of Faith*, Article 2: Revelation of God

4. Robert Johnston, Jean Lambert, David Scholer, and Klyne Snodgrass, *A Biblical and Theological Basis for Women in Ministry* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1987).

What did the Spirit of Jesus Christ accomplish at Pentecost that ushered in a new age of life and leadership?

As noted elsewhere, Jesus introduced the kingdom with some new possibilities, the forms of which were only to be discovered and put into place theologically and practically in the early church and on. The Holy Spirit's outpouring ushered in the reality of indwelling and inspiring the followers of Christ to continue in his ways.

At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled both women and men alike. The New Testament writers give witness to the Holy Spirit as sovereign who distributed gifts without preference to person and without regard to the social limitations of a fallen world (Acts 2:1-21; 1 Cor. 12:7, 11; 14:31).

As a result of this unbiased indwelling of the Holy Spirit, women were involved alongside men in all ministry positions and activities, including apostle (Rom. 16:7); prophetic speaking (Acts 1:14; 2:15-18; 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:5, 10); deacon (Rom. 16:1); coworker (Phil. 4:2-3; Rom. 16:3-5; Acts 18:2, 18-19); and teaching others including men (Acts 18:24-26).

The Bible also teaches that after Pentecost, both women and men received spiritual gifts without regard to their gender, both were called to exercise and develop these spiritual gifts, and both were called to be faithful stewards of those gifts that had been freely given to them (1 Pet. 4:10-11). Both men and women are to use these divine gifts to serve one another without restriction (Acts 1:14, 8:4, 21:8-9; Rom. 16:1-7, 12-13, 15; 1 Cor. 12; Phil. 4:2-3; Col. 4:15) in order to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16; Phil. 2:3-11; Gal. 5:13; 1 Pet. 5:2-3).⁵

A church living in the spirit of Pentecost is a church that invests authority in leaders who are affirmed by the body; who are called, gifted, exude godly character and have a servant-heart. The detection and discernment of such

5. Our Confession of Faith, article 6 *The Nature of the Church*, states in part, "Through the Holy Spirit God gives gifts to each member for the well-being of the whole body. These gifts are to be exercised in God's service to build up the church and to minister in the world. God calls people to equip the church for ministry. Leaders are to model Christ in their personal, family, and church life. The church is to discern leaders prayerfully, and to affirm, support, and correct them in a spirit of love."

servant leaders is most properly the result of brothers and sisters living in community and bearing their new image of God (2 Cor. 5:16, 17) in Christ through mutual submission (Eph. 5:21) and interdependence (Eph. 4).

How should the church as New Creation live in an Old Order of Creation diminished by sin?

Sin entered the world through both the man and the woman. They were co-participants in the fall, and are equally culpable (Gen. 3:6; Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22).

One of the key results of sin was—and continues to be—the break in unity and fellowship between humans and God, as well as between Adam and Eve. As a result of sin, Adam began to rule over Eve (Gen. 3:16). This hierarchy is an unwanted result of sin and is not God's prescription. It violates God's original plan for unity, equality, fellowship and community.

Sin has compromised every human culture to the extent that hostility, oppression and exclusion of those considered to be weaker classes—the poor, the sick, women, the unclean—have been commonplace throughout history and still are today. The Old Testament laments these evils as well as longs for the day when all creation would be redeemed. The redemption would include the elimination of barriers and reconciliation between former enemies. Isaiah prophesies, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them” (Isa. 11:6). The Old Testament prophets foretold the Messiah as the one who would bind up the broken-hearted...proclaim freedom for captives and release from darkness for prisoners...proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Isa. 61).

Additionally, the prophets pointed to a time when “You will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God” (Isa. 61:6), and to a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on all believers (Joel 2:28-29): young and old, men and women.

The Holy Spirit confirmed that these prophesies had been fulfilled in Jesus through New Testament writers like Peter who wrote, “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood,

offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5), and “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood...” (1 Pet. 2:9). This is confirmed again in the book of Revelation, where it is declared that all those who believe in Christ will be priests: “To him who...made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 1:5-6); “you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God...” (Rev. 5:10); and “...they will be priests of God and of Christ...” (Rev. 20:6). It would appear as a credible interpretation that in the age of the spirit, all may do what at that time only some men could do.

In our day, characteristics such as “maleness” or “femaleness” continue to function as primary markers of personal definition and are often used to assign rank, status and worth. The hierarchical, divisive and patriarchal customs developed by human cultures including those propped up by church structures are, in reference to God’s trajectory of redemption, not God’s ideal order. Plainly stated through the Old Testament prophecies and New Testament reflections about the Messiah, God’s ideal order is one of healing and reconciliation. God’s ideal order eliminates the effects of sin, including class divisions, hierarchy and oppression. It restores the original unity, fellowship and community between God and humans, and between men and women. It re-establishes the God-designed equality of women and men.

For followers of Jesus to continue subordinating other humans because of class, race or gender is contrary to our new identities in Christ and contrary to the new kingdom community. We can choose to model the coming eschatological community (...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven), or we can choose a hierarchical model based on an old created order diminished by sin.

Ecclesial structures reflecting the new creation where differences are not to be of any advantage or disadvantage (Gal. 3:28) means, among other things, that our old identities—those of gender, race or social class—become secondary to our true identity in Christ.

So, even though the church is Christ’s “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:16, 17), it is still resident in an old created order (1 Cor. 8:6) that “waits in eager

anticipation” to be fully “liberated” and “brought into freedom” (Rom. 8:19, 21). Even though their teachings introduced radical social reforms that would in some respect take centuries to work out (e.g. slavery), neither Jesus nor Paul sought to overturn the fallen cultural norms of their day. To do so would have shifted the primary focus away from God’s long-term redemptive mission for the world, namely the advancement of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 4:43, 44; 5:12-14; Acts 16:1-3; 28:31; 1 Cor. 7:21-24; Gal. 5:6; 6:15; Eph. 6:5-9). Though the way was clear to pursue gender equality at every social and ecclesial level, to insist upon it for every congregation might have derailed the mission of God and brought the advancement of the gospel to an abrupt stop.

How do we apply the Biblical Story to our Vision for Mission?

There were expedient social contingencies that informed the apostles and church leaders what could and could not be done in a given situation if the gospel were to proceed. Some New Testament churches in Corinth and Ephesus had their missional effectiveness threatened by false doctrine (Acts 20:29, 30), inappropriate behaviour (1 Tim. 2:1-15; 2 Tim. 3:6-7), a lack of order in public worship (1 Cor. 14: 22-35) and a lack of mutual submission and respect in marriage, the home and the church (Eph. 5:21-6:9).

Many of the problems that Paul confronted in the church were ones in which he was compelled to address women who were in the earliest stages of exploring a new social order brought about by the gospel. Thus, while affirming Christian liberty in some contexts like Galatia, Philippi and Rome, Paul gave restrictions regarding the ministry and conduct of men and women in Ephesus, Corinth and Crete because not to do so would have impeded the gospel (1 Cor. 14:26-28; 34-40; 1 Tim. 2:11,12; 4:1,2,7; 5:20; 6:1-5; 2 Tim. 2:14-19, 23-24; 3:1-4; Titus 1:10,11,13,14; 3:9-11).

What can we learn from the biblical record? Though the Holy Spirit has set both men and women free to serve the church in any capacity including roles and functions of senior leadership, we are called to limit the exercise of our Christian liberty if thereby the greater good and the advancement of the gospel is promoted (Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 10:23, 24; see also 1 Pet. 2:16, 17).

In our day there are church contexts where freedom granted to women in ministry and pastoral leadership would impede the gospel in that particular setting. In such cases, congregations are wise to heed such biblical counsel that restricts women's leadership involvement. It is hoped that in such contexts, churches will abide by the spirit of the Wichita 1999 Resolution of the General Conference of MB Churches that states:

That women be encouraged to minister in the church in every function other than the lead pastorate. The church is to invite women to exercise leadership on Conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in our congregations, institutions, and agencies. We ask women to minister as gifted, called and affirmed. We call the church to be increasingly alert to the gifts of women and to become more active in calling them to minister. We further call people in the Spirit of Christ to relate to one another in mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Likewise, there are church contexts where the gospel would be impeded if women were not granted the complete freedom to minister the gospel as called, gifted and affirmed, including the role of lead pastor.

What about the challenge that women ought not to be in spiritual leadership because it was not intended by God from the dawn of creation?

From the beginning, the Bible reveals God's plan for human beings as one of community, unity, equality and shared responsibility. Both men and women were created in God's image, and God initiated a relationship with both, without preference for one or the other. In addition, God charged both women and men equally with the blessings and responsibilities of childrearing and dominion over the created order (Gen. 1:26-28; 5:1-2).

Some believe that because woman was formed from man the chronology of coming into being creates both pre-eminence and authority for the man. There is nothing in the text that supports this interpretation. Rather, the text emphasizes that man was incomplete, and God created for him a suitable companion (Gen. 2:21-23). God's loving act to alleviate man's loneliness resulted in God's creation of woman: a fellow image-bearer.

Men and women together bear God's image in community. God's plan for community and unity is based on gender equality and interdependence. The Hebrew words *ezer knegdo* are used as a descriptor for woman in Genesis 2:18. *ezer* is frequently translated as "helper," which some have come to interpret or understand as an inferior or one in a supporting role. Unlike the connotations of our English word "helper," the Hebrew *ezer* implies no inferiority; in fact, this word most frequently refers to God in the Old Testament, meaning protector or rescuer.⁶ Its modifier, *knegdo*, means "suitable," "face to face," "equivalent to," or "visible," and indicates that God created an equivalent human being to be a good companion for man. The intention of the creation narrative in the biblical text has to do with men and women in community bearing the image of God in the tasks they were given to do.

How does one understand New Testament passages that restrict women's ministry in the church?

There are passages that seem to advocate a restrictive view of women and their place within the Christian community, such as 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 14:34-35; and 1 Timothy 2:9-15. To ignore any of the passages relevant to this issue is to damage the integrity of the biblical witness and to abdicate our responsibility to be biblical people. However, these passages must not be interpreted in a way that contradicts the rest of Scripture.

Space allows only summary consideration of these texts.⁷ Reflecting on the shortcomings of popular methods of interpretation, Kevin Giles notes that the primary grid for defining meaning, whether patriarchal or feminist,

6. The word *ezer* is used 21 times in the Old Testament, and it refers to God 15 of those times (Exod. 15:2; 18:4; Deut. 33:7, 26, 29; 2 Sam. 22:42; Pss. 33:20; 89:19-20; and 115:9-11). Because the word *ezer* so frequently refers to God, it could be interpreted as implying a *superior* status, except that its modifier *knegdo* seems to point to *equivalency*, not superiority or inferiority. Or, as Andrew Perriman points out, "What the word defines is not essentially the status of the helper (the helper may be either superior or inferior), but the condition of the one in need of help. This is of considerable importance. We cannot conclude from the position of Eve as helper that she was placed under the authority of man" (Andrew C. Perriman, *Speaking of Women: Interpreting Paul* [Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity, London: Apollos, 1998.] p. 179).

7. More full-bodied theological discussions are available elsewhere, in particular articles by Klyne Snodgrass ("Your Slaves—on Account of Jesus': Servant Leadership in the New Testament"), and Doug Heidebrecht's *Direction* (Fall 2004 33 / 2, pp.171-84) article "Reading 1 Tim. 2:9-15 in its Literary Context Cf. Heidebrecht's (Fall 2005 34 / 2, pp. 181-93) article "Distinction and Function in the Church: Reading Gal. 3:28 in Context"

mirrors the perspective of the interpreter, which is then read back onto the text.⁸ While we recognize that we are unable to dislocate ourselves from our own context, any lack of caution about imposing unexamined or even unconscious presuppositions upon the text raises serious concerns. Trevor Hart cautions,

[W]e should never take the fatal step of identifying our interpretations (however careful they may be) with the text itself, or with “the meaning of the text itself.” To do so is to bestow upon them a finality, a sufficiency, which lifts them above the text and out of reach of criticism. Far from establishing the text’s authority, therefore, this is a strategy which effectively overthrows it, and enthrones our interpretation in its place. . . . [We] are no longer genuinely open, therefore, to consider it afresh, or to hear it speaking in any other voice than the one which [we] have now trapped, tamed, and packaged for observation.⁹

Whatever else may be said of 1 Cor. 11:2-16, it is clear that Paul believed the Spirit led both women and men to pray and prophesy. The rub, as with the discussion of the Lord’s Supper that follows, is that many in the Corinthian congregation were using the church to pursue their own worldly agenda. They celebrated the Lord’s Supper in emulation of pagan feasts that reinforced social status. Paul claimed this practice indicated they had not understood the levelling effects of the work of Christ: differences exist but are not to be of any advantage or disadvantage in the body of Christ. Pretentious women at this time chose to go about in public with their heads uncovered. Why did they do this? We don’t know for sure, but their action might have been an attempt to assert their new-found freedom in Christ or display indifference to the existing social order or to present themselves as socially superior. The point Paul makes here, as with the Lord’s Supper, is that he will not tolerate efforts at self-glorification that seek to use the Christian community to achieve that end.

8. See Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 169-93.

9. Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 138.

To “prophecy” in the Bible is to speak God’s Word. Most often this takes the form of cogent teaching delivered to the faithful at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ This is the case in 1 Corinthians, where the term “prophecy” is aimed at instruction and exhortation (14:31).

While the meanings of the allusions to nature, angels and creation are difficult to discern precisely, the central issue in the passage is clear. Women, as men, have their own authority to pray and prophesy: “a woman ought to have authority over her own head...” (11:10). The question is how women should conduct themselves while they pray and prophesy, not whether or not they should pray and prophesy.

Paul’s argument about nature appears not to reference the created order (after all, Genesis 1 asserts that male and female together are the image of God, and as a Jew, Paul was aware of the vow mentioned in Numbers 6:1-7 by which men did not cut their hair but allowed it to grow long), but rather the then common cultural order of Roman civilization. This is confirmed in verse 11 where the “natural” pattern of gender hierarchy is set in contradistinction to the very different pattern of the Christian community in which woman is as essential to man as man is to woman.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul writes that women should keep silent in the churches, that they should be submissive, and that if they want to be taught, they should ask their husbands at home. At first blush this seems a rather unbending injunction. However, we must remember that Paul has already argued that women may pray and prophesy (chapter 11). We should also not fail to note that Paul has in view not women generally but wives whose questions about Christian theology and practice have apparently disturbed the worship service. Paul’s call for silence is repeated three times (14:28, 30, 34); highlighting, in the Corinthian church, his larger concern for order when they worship. Another possibility is that the word “silent” relates to objecting or arguing a point. Acts 15:12 and Acts 21:14 relate to this, with the latter text focused on the arguments against Paul going to Jerusalem.

10. Prediction of the future is an important but minor definition of prophecy in the Bible.

One rendering reads, “We were silent and said...” In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 Paul commends letting women learn, but urges them to seek instruction at home where they can argue points in that context.

In what is generally regarded as the most restrictive passage in Paul’s letters, 1 Timothy 2:9-15, Paul claims that he permits no woman to teach or to have authority. While this passage frequently is used to support the claim that Paul (or the Bible as a whole) is against women having authority in matters of Christian faith and practice, this claim can only be maintained if his letters (Rom., 1 Cor.), among other New Testament documents, are removed from consideration. If Paul did not intend this text as a universal practice for all Christian communities at all times, then the case for restricting women in ministry in this instance still beckons to be understood.

Hermeneutics, the practice of investigating original intent, deriving meaning in that context and then determining appropriate application for today, as always, must look at historical and literary context. There are several reasonable explanations of this passage that do not lead to the conclusion that Paul restricts women from ministry leadership for all time.¹¹ As one example, Doug Heidebrecht urges “us to read the passage within the flow of the entire conversation of the larger context. The context provides a check on the perspective we bring to the text in the midst of the current debate over women in ministry leadership. A “hermeneutic of hearing” invites the church to listen with openness and discernment to God’s Word together.” Heidebrecht goes on to say,

Reading 1 Timothy 2:9-15 within its literary context demonstrates that Paul’s instructions for women are integrated with his larger purpose for writing Timothy: a proper response to the presence of different teaching in the church. Women, most likely the younger widows, were involved in some way with the promotion

11. Please refer to the attached bibliography for a further reading in this area. Much scholarship has been done on these passages, and there are many fine books and articles that elaborate on the hermeneutical ambiguities presented by these texts and more fully develop the thoughts presented here. Collectively, they present a compelling case that these texts do not adequately support a traditional hierarchical view of women in ministry.

of different teaching, and Paul seeks to prohibit them from continuing to deceive others. Paul's overarching concern that women reflect godliness through good works acts as a counter-balance to the deceptive temptation and destructive effects of the different teaching. Paul's response is consistent with both his instructions for the entire church and his concern for Timothy, thereby indicating that he is not addressing women here simply because they are women.

The relevance of 1 Timothy 2:9-15 for the life of the contemporary church is grounded within the purpose of the entire book. Instead of using a selective "cut and paste" approach to application, the significance of this passage emerges out of a holistic reading of the text within its context. The correction of those who were caught in deception was to be done with gentleness because "God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil" (2 Tim. 2:25-26). Sometimes the appropriate response was even to "rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in faith" (Titus 1:13).

Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 is an example of his correction of women who were involved in promoting different teaching in the church. In the face of threats to the faith of the church, the goal of Paul's instruction was the call to godliness: true knowledge of God reflected in a consistent lifestyle. Godliness is to be evidenced by self-control, quietness, submission, and continuing in faith, love, and holiness. This is a message the church also needs to hear today.¹²

One can conclude that it is possible that in these passages Paul offers injunctions against women in leadership roles within the Christian community. But, if so, they stand in stark contrast to other clearly authoritative passages where Paul strongly supports, expresses appreciation for and advocates for women in leadership roles in the church. Since the totality of Scripture must inform our thinking and practice, and since

12. Heidebrecht, pp. 181, 182.

Paul's basic convictions about women and ministry ought to be consistent throughout his letters, the passages seem to make the most sense when read as suggested above.

What about the idea that the Bible's reference to God as male is an argument that supports the exclusion of women from spiritual leadership?

Jesus affirmed that God is spirit (John 4:24) therefore has no body or biological sex, as we do. That did not prevent Jesus from using familial metaphors to communicate with God whom he refers to as Father and Abba. The apostles also use familial language when referring to the relationships represented within the community of our triune God in the salutation of their letters; (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:2-3; 1 John 1:3), as well as in their instruction to the churches: (Romans 15:6) but nowhere more pronounced than in the teaching in 1 and 2 John. The relational language employed by Jesus and the New Testament authors focuses readers' attention on Jesus, the Son of God's identity and affiliation with God the Father; likewise John in his letter insists our identity as *believers* in God must be consistent with our identity as *followers* of Jesus.

Biblical reference to the maleness of Jesus and our familial relationship with God can, and often does limit our understanding of God. The biblical writers do not employ language to describe God as male, but use male familial reference to describe a God of relationship. Such language stands alongside other biblical metaphors to describe God. Our *Confession of Faith* employs these biblical metaphors in its introductory statement on God:

God comforts like a loving mother, trains and disciplines like a caring father, and persists in covenant love like a faithful husband. We confess God as eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹³

Finally, in Jesus God assumed particularity. That is, Jesus was a male

13. Confession of Faith, Article 1 *God*

14. The Greek word here, commonly translated "all men," is *pantas*, which means simply "all."

Palestinian Jew. Yet neither his being a Jew nor his maleness is meant to be a standard used to exclude Gentiles or women or people from a particular class or demographic from full participation in the Christian community. The New Testament affirms that in this particularity Jesus becomes the one for all, the one who draws all to him (John 12:32).¹⁴ Paul lays considerable emphasis on the oneness of being in Christ in his letters to the Galatians (ch. 2, 3), Ephesians (2:11-22; 4:1-6) and Corinthians (2 Cor. 5).

Conclusion

As noted elsewhere, this brief rationale cannot cover this subject, but we hope it will facilitate understanding and our discernment process as congregations. For a deeper study on the subject, the bibliography that follows offers a rich diversity of readings from a number of perspectives and convictions.

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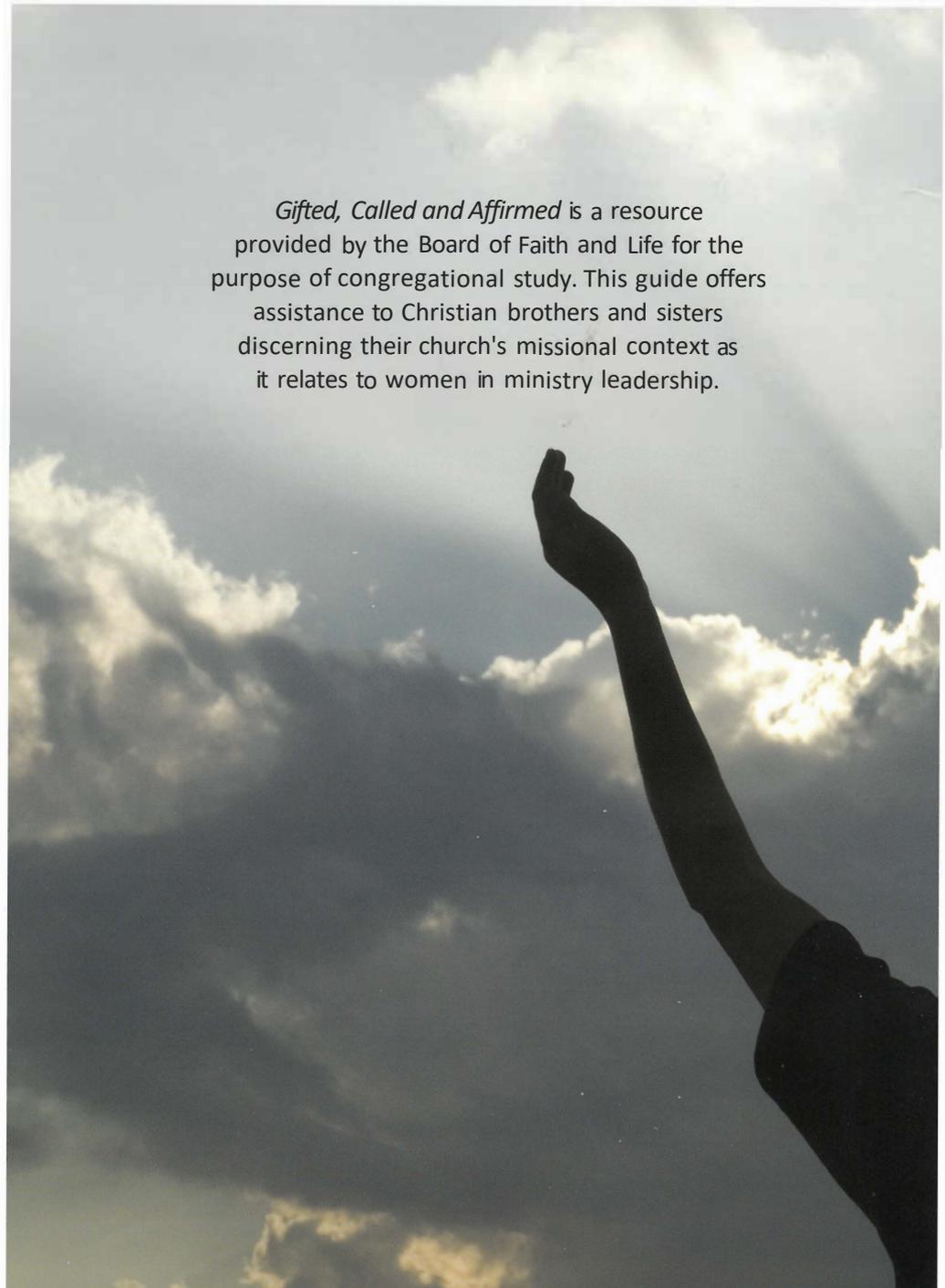
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Gifted, Called and Affirmed is a resource provided by the Board of Faith and Life for the purpose of congregational study. This guide offers assistance to Christian brothers and sisters discerning their church's missional context as it relates to women in ministry leadership.

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