

**WORLD CONVENTION WORKSHOP**  
**Presented by Marj Dredge, Church of Christ, Australia**  
**August 3 to 6, 2008**  
**Nashville, USA**

**THE UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION WOMEN MAKE TO THE  
PROFESSIONAL MINISTRY.**  
**or**  
**WHY WOMEN MINISTERS?**

To put this workshop together, I wrote to a number of women who are involved in ministry within Australia, US and Africa. I received responses from ten of these women and two men who have had significant roles in dealing with churches and ministry issues. I have used their comments as the basis for this next hour. I invited them to share their reflections on why women make effective ministers. There were a large number of common themes and then others which were pertinent to their own working environment.

**PREAMBLE**

Historically, women have been excluded from professional ministry. But, this has not been exclusive within the church. For centuries women have been placed on a lower tier in society and they have become indoctrinated to accept that is their place. Over this time there have been women who have believed that is not true and who have fought for recognition in science, business and professional sectors. In the last 100 years or so women have begun to claim their rightful place alongside men in the professional realm. The church has not kept up with this movement and pastoral/professional ministry has traditionally been male dominated. From a number of the papers I received, it would appear that as late as the 1970s women were a distinct minority in seminaries and theological colleges. Those who were allowed into those hallowed halls were usually training for missionary service or hoping to marry a minister!! Or very well trained Sunday school teachers!! Some women graduated from these colleges but were certainly not recognized as being suitable to lead a church. History is much poorer for this mindset.

Praise God that this mindset has partially been broken down and women have graduated with equal qualifications to their male counterparts---but even today they still struggle to receive acknowledgement and recognition from the churches. Many of these very gifted women have found it very difficult to be accepted and received as a minister. Interestingly, the resistance is often from women!

Claudia Ewing Grant who provided a paper for me commented *“In the early 1970s as I began my ministry, I regularly heard comments lamenting the churches resistance to accept women clergy.”*

Marie Fleming wrote, *“The experience, at the age of 8, of a nascent call to ministry brought me face to face with the paradox of that time and place (early 50s). That God could gift and call a girl to ministry but there were limits on what that ministry could entail. I accepted*

*without question that God might call a girl to be a minister's wife or a foreign missionary, but not a pastor or scholar."*

This was still a prevalent thought when she was a college student in the 1970s.

Today, debate and controversy continues to abound when the role of women in leadership or ministry is discussed in most conservative evangelical circles. At present in Sydney, Australia, the Anglican Church is ordaining women as deacons but not priests. There, in both Catholic and Anglican churches, women are allowed to preach but not lead the Eucharist (communion) service. Presbyterians have voted to revoke the ordination of their women ministers. Women are predominant in some theological schools, but are in a minority in Churches of Christ and Baptist colleges. The principal/president of the Churches of Christ Theological College in Melbourne is a woman, but that is the exception rather than the rule. As I suggested earlier, women have been trained and graduated from our colleges in Churches of Christ in Australia for over thirty years—but many of them have not been invited to take up ministry in their own right.

The format for the next hour will be a brief overview of the biblical understanding of women and their role in community and therefore the church. Following that will be reflections of some "clergy women" and the final 30 minutes or so will be an opportunity for some general discussion around the theme.

*We accept the bible as authoritative in matters of faith and practice, so what does the bible have to say? How do we interpret the words we find in Scripture? Do we choose our interpretation before we come to the text or do we allow the text to inform our understanding?*

## **BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS**

In this first section we will look at:

- (a) The ideal of person hood seen in the creation stories and the difference made when human sin entered into the relationship with God.
- (b) An overview of the stories of different women featured in the New Testament, their tales of triumph, faith and also of terror.
- (c) The relationship Jesus had with women as expressed in the Gospels
- (d) The reflection of the early church on the role of women as expressed in the epistles
- (e) The way we, as Christians who value the biblical traditions, can respond to, and reflect upon, the ministering roles of women in our churches.

## **CREATION**

In the beginning was God. Genesis 1-3 directs us to God's creative nature and intention. We are consistently reminded that God created and it was good! Genesis 1:26-28 men and women are equal bearers of God's image and jointly responsible for the tasks they have been given

Genesis 2 reminds us that male and female roles are unique but at the same time complimentary. Also, male and female roles are not hierarchical.

Genesis 3 reminds us that the man AND the woman are equally responsible for their disobedience.

Sheila Pritchard, a lecturer at the New Zealand Bible College says this “*When we have only one sex (male or female) involved in positions of decision making and leadership, do we presume to know better than the Creator how this fullness of God’s image may best be conveyed?*”

Genesis 3:16 points out the sad pronouncement of the results of disobedience and sin.

By perpetuating the rule of fallen man are we obstructing the rule of God?

### **OLD TESTAMENT TRADITIONS**

So what about the remainder of the Old Testament? What can that tell us about the role of women? How are women regarded there?

There are some dreadful stories reflecting the status of women in the Old Testament.

- ☞ Genesis 16:1-16; 2:19-21---the story of Hagar and Sarah
- ☞ Judges 11:29-40 Jephthar’s daughter.
- ☞ 2 Samuel 13:1-22 Tamar’s story

However, can you remember any women in leadership or ministry mentioned?

- ☞ Exodus 15:20; 38:8
- ☞ 1 Samuel 1:26

What about hidden women prophetesses

- ☞ 2 Samuel 14:1-24
- ☞ 2 Samuel 20:14-26

Is God seen manifesting any feminine qualities?

- ☞ Isaiah 42:13-14; 49:14-16; 66:13

### **HOW DID JESUS VIEW WOMEN?**

*The Place of Women in First Century Palestine*

First century women in the Mediterranean region-whether city or rural dwellers-were generally limited to their households, subservient to their husbands, limited in education and were unable to play a part in civic affairs. In Palestine, women were restricted in their access to female Goddesses and functioned as vestal virgins and oracles. The attitude of men toward women can be discovered in some of the writings of the time e.g., Philo, Aristotle, etc., the legal status of women also varied within the New Testament world.

*Women in the New Testament*

There are some stories in the NT about Jesus’ relationship with women which are generally accepted by the Gospel writers.

- (a) Throughout His ministry, Jesus was accompanied by supportive women.
- (b) At His crucifixion, faithful women ministered to Him and watched by the tomb.
- (c) The first Gospel message was entrusted to a woman. John 4:1-12

- (d) The gospel writers showed that Jesus approached women with respect and no hint of condescension or superiority. John 8: 1-11, Luke 7:36-50
- (e) Women were healed by Jesus (and their lives valued) as often as men were healed. Luke 13:10-17; Mark 5:25-34.
- (f) The disciples could not understand Jesus' attitude to women e.g. John 4:27, Matt 15:23

And there are other aspects which are highlighted by individual authors who each present a carefully structured account of the life and teaching of Jesus, emphasizing some aspects over others and at all times consciously retelling the Jesus story in such a way that will directly communicate the word of God for His own community, within their own social and cultural setting.

- (a) Mark features women the least but male disciples never seem to understand.
- (b) Matthew points out that faithful women have always had a part in God's economy.
- (c) Luke points out that Jesus began His life through the body of an obedient and trustful woman.
- (d) John –five important women demonstrate the equality of people of faith—Mary of Nazareth, Samaritan woman, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene.

## **THE CHURCH**

*Our earliest understanding of Christian practice and belief comes from the epistles.*

Contrary to popular belief, the apostle Paul was a progressive thinker. His statement in Galatians 3:28 would have been an outrageous statement in his time. Even the issue of slavery took a further 19 centuries before Christians really addressed the issue in the light of Paul's teachings.

- (a) Paul worked alongside women referring to them as "fellow workers", deacons, and apostles. See Romans 16:3, Phil 4:3, Romans 16:1
- (b) He approved of women praying and prophesying in public worship 1 Cor 11:5
- (c) It must also be said, however, that some of the women went overboard with their new found freedom, chattering during services, wearing unseemly dresses, and seizing authority for which they were ill equipped. But note that Paul also warns men who do not exercise self control (Titus 1:10-11).

Ultimately, women and men who seek to understand and communicate Christian perspectives on the ministry of women will only be credible if their lives demonstrate a Christ-like character. The radical feminist with a hidden agenda is not reflecting the openness of the Christian gospel, but then neither is the person who gives more credit to traditional patterns of church structure than they do to the word of God. In the final wash-up both end up as idolaters.

## **ANECDOTAL EXPERIENCE.**

I invited a number of women who have been in professional ministry to speak into their own experience of what it means to be a woman in a predominately male dominated area. I also invited some men who are ministers and who have worked with women in professional ministry for their reflections. Both of the men who responded have held key senior positions within the church.

What follows is a summary of those experiences. There were a number of common themes as well as some unique experiences.

### **JULIE SIMPSON**

A young woman in her fifties who works within Churches of Christ in South Australia. She has been in ministry for a number of years and is currently the Executive officer of the Community Care department of Churches of Christ in South Australia. Julie is a gifted singer and often puts her thoughts into songs. Julie suggests that life is a journey along the course of which we encounter both milestones (which encourage and empower us to keep going) and millstones (which are the obstacles or impediments which can cause us to lose our way.) Julie suggests that there have been many people who have encouraged her to honor her sense of call to the professional ministry, but there have also been those who have challenged her that because she is a woman she ought not to be a minister.

Julie has listened to the encouragers not the detractors and has had a most successful journey to this point. She suggests that there are three crucial aspects which a woman contributes to professional ministry.

Her unique understanding of God

Her unique perspective on life

Her unique gifts and abilities

#### *Unique Understanding of God*

In spite of difficulties, there was a deep awareness of God and the importance off the community of faith. Experiencing the incarnational God. “Hospitality” is a key word to Julie. The reign of God is about the ongoing presence of God in the created world. To understand God as embracing, encouraging and entrusting is to debunk the myth of a patriarchal God who dominates, differentiates and destroys.

The unique contribution women make to professional ministry is to re-present God as the One who is abundantly and unconditionally life giving, loving, inclusive, gracious and hospitable, and is for all of us equally.

#### *Unique Perspective on Life*

Out of a very painful period of time when Julie was excluded from acting within her call and experiencing denial of her worth and identity, Julie has understood that to sit with the abused, the lonely, the cast aside, offering the gift of presence, hospitality and friendship, is to re-present God in the experiences of daily life.

#### *Unique Gifts and Abilities*

Women have a different way of communicating the gospel. Women tend to be more kinesthetic in their preaching –able to ouch the inner core of their listeners. Women are often more creative with rituals and visuals as a means to communicate the gospel.

### **MARIE FLEMING**

A Disciples minister. Currently serves as Minister of Christian Learning at North Christian Church in Columbus, Indiana, and resource Consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations.

God might call a girl like me to be a missionary or a minister's wife, but not a pastor or a scholar.

Surely our congregations have been enriched by the presence of gifted and passionate women, their eloquence and intelligence, spiritual depth, administrative talents, prayerful and authoritative leadership.

Women in ministry have evoked a richer, more varied image of God—no longer white, Anglo Saxon, middle class male.

### **JANET WOODLOCK**

Rather than “unique” maybe “flavor” could be the word to use.

Obvious things women bring to ministry:

- (a) A capacity to relate to other women in the congregation as a woman.
- (b) Many women in leadership roles within the church. A woman minister has a unique capacity to get alongside the women in leadership, in the congregation, and from the community. An ability to connect deeply on issues that affect women's lives; e.g., pregnancy, menopause, women's health issues.
- (c) A “long antennae” i.e. an intuitive sensitivity to the needs of others. (Church camp). “small scale” sensitivity.
- (d) A capacity to “spot” those who might be struggling with a meeting or congregation, but who might be reluctant to put up their hand and ask for prayer or pastoral assistance.
- (e) A desire to work collaboratively. To take time for a leadership group to “own” ideas. People are generally less willing to accept authoritative leadership; e.g., Doctor prescribes check out the web!
- (f) Women are often more comfortable with uncertainty than men. Men are wired to “fix” things. Women seem to “know” when it is ok to sit with someone who is hurting and simply hold a hand. Or are comfortable to cry with another. Or to mind children, or drop off a casserole—or to give someone breathing space.
- (g) Women are often in tune with their creativity. A capacity to initiate creative responses to their community's needs and use their creativity as a means of outreach and service.

### **CLAUDIA EWING GRANT**

Church women were the biggest objectors to women in leadership roles. Many lay women were threatened by professional clergy women and many clergy women became defensive and protective and refused to be identified with “women's groups.”

Clergy women can be encouraging role models for other women.

- (a) Helping empower and release the gifts of all women and girls
- (b) Freeing men to share the burdens as well as the joys of leadership in new ways and to develop their full potential to serve beyond stereotypically limiting jobs.
- (c) Women's contribution to ministry in the church offers a new paradigm of partnership between men and women that can enrich and deepen the life of people of faith.

### **BRENDA ETHERIDGE**

Women produce thought provoking sermons and mediations that relate to the life of women.

Women in ministry bring the same gentle and loving leadership that we bring to our families and homes and workplace.

Other ways of living in community without competition.

Use natural nurturing abilities to give pastoral care and counseling to those within the congregation.

Women in ministry encourage others to become involved in ministry from their doorsteps to the end of the world.

Do it with “grace”

### **DICK HAMM**

I do not believe that women make a unique contribution to ministry *as women*. There is as much difference between the approaches of individual women as there is between the individual approaches of male ministers.

There are, however, inherent gifts in being a female minister:

- (a) There are women (and men) who will not trust male ministers as quickly as they would female ministers. Conversely—there are male members of the congregation who would not trust female ministers.
- (b) Women ministers typically identify with female figures in the bible more than do most men and often bring sensitivities to those stories that men could not.
- (c) Women ministers provide positive role models for girls and reinforce in men and women the equality of the sexes.
- (d) Women ministers demonstrate the biblical truth that both men and women are made in God’s image. To the degree that ministers represent God, it is important that they represent the fullness of God. Women help us to remember that God is neither male nor female.
- (e) One unique contribution of women to ministry is that they understand what it means to be female in a way that a man in ministry never will. There is an important and irreplaceable role for both men and women.

### **NANCY HEIMER**

God has created both male and female in God’s own image. God has called both to professional ministry. If God’s church is to represent the wholeness of humanity, both are compelled to bring their unique gifts as they answer God’s call.

Girls who hear the call of God to ministry need to experience the accepted ministry of women to know their call is valid. Women need to be encouraged and supported in their intentions to enter professional ministry.

As women have been recognized as theological and biblical teachers, they bring their unique insights and experiences as women into new understandings of the word of God and its meaning for all humanity. Male interpretations are only a part of the story. It is the role of professional women ministers to bring the foremothers of the faith to light, to enable all women to claim the bible as their own story and to interpret the faith through their own life story. Restore wholeness to the churches story.

Expressions of compassion. Both men and women tend to be compassionate by nature. But women are expected - even conditioned - to express compassion.

A strong sense of community and partnership. Generally speaking, women are better listeners and more sensitive to the thoughts and needs of others.

Women are generally better “peacemakers” than men. Has something to do with male testosterone and competitiveness. Cooperation rather than confrontation is more comfortable for women. Women often seek an inclusive, participatory, accepting environment. Decision-making by consensus. Through discussion, negotiation, compromise and re-visioning to reach an outcome. Women are much more willing to embrace such processes believing that they more adequately exemplify a Christ-like community.

### **NANCY PHIRI**

From a very practical point of view, women can share in God’s work of formation by ensuring the church of God is organized, clean, looks good, well designed and that things are in their rightful place.

Care and compassion

Women seem to have a greater ability to love and forgive.

Women are often much more fluent in actually being able to put into words the faith story.

### **RUTH MAY**

Women respond quickly through our feelings

Men and women act and respond differently. When solving problems men are inclined to shift gear, disengage and put issues aside. Women try to connect with the issue, ask questions and share the problem.

Women have better developed skills in relationship areas, sensitivity to the emotions of others, emotional aesthetic appreciation and language skills. They are also adept at performing detailed, planned tasks.

To expect men and women to act and think alike is counterproductive—the church needs both genders. Being equal does not mean being the same!

*We as women must recognize that we are different and believe in and appreciate those differences within ourselves and not attempt to imitate the male way of ministry.*

Historically, the woman's role in the church has been relegated to things like the kitchen, the flowers, preparing communion. Because of this women understand the pain of being ignored and not valued. Hence we come from a place of struggle and worthlessness. The content of women's preaching will therefore reflect this. Our struggle allows women to more easily relate to the struggles of both men and women in our congregations.

Women often reject more traditional methods of preaching and bring their creativity to the task.

Women are much more inclined to relate God in the same manner as they care for their family, keep, house or as they undertake their daily work situations rather than looking for deep theological answers. A rather "hands on" practical spirituality is frequently reflected in their preaching.

Women are generally more willing to use their abilities to imagine and dream and these can become powerful ministry tools.

Women express their spirituality very strongly through their senses, their feelings, their hopes and dreams and their own lived experience, the gifts that they can bring to ministry are not only very diverse but compliment the manner in which men operate.

### **COLIN DREDGE**

Each ministry is unique to the person exercising it. The contribution of women is not so much as a group as through individual expression.

Women have different emphases;

- (a) Love in a more sensitive way;
- (b) Compassion;
- (c) Different insights in understanding another's story; and
- (d) Deeper relationships.
- (e) Significant relationships with other women. Confidence in allowing the story to be told, with the belief that it will actually be heard and understood.
- (f) The ministry of women was accepted by the early church.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

Marie Fleming, in her paper, raises the question: ***“One wonders that the steady rise of women’s ordination rate in mainline protestant churches coincides with the steady decline of the same denominations they have sought to serve. Meanwhile Evangelical churches are booming, many of them bastions of male domination and the retrenchment of more traditional and limiting roles for women. Does their thriving constitute an escape from the presence of women in leadership elsewhere?”***

“Emergent” communities are challenging long cherished assumptions about what constitutes “church” and they are reaching a whole generation of believers. ***What role will clergy women***

*play in this faith frontier? Are women in their 30's and younger more apt to feel disadvantaged by age than gender, especially in relation to the Baby Boomers generation continued cultural dominance? How do the contributions of women over prior decades enrich this new context?*

## CONTRIBUTORS

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