

“Gender Inclusivity in Church of Christ Congregations”

An Executive Summary of the Research Project conducted by
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FRAMEWORK

When one pays attention to the way in which a religious community shapes meaning, establishes the rules of participation in the community, and forms individual identity, they are engaging in a very particular form of theology known as practical theology. The discipline of practical theology is often misunderstood. Practical theology does not mean theology that is practical, but asserts that theology is rooted in, evidenced by practice. As Mary Clark Moschella has succinctly put it, “Religious practices... carry or ‘body forth’ theology in the world” (Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 46). Religious practices, she argues, constitute the shared religious life of a community. They function to hold traditions in place – and they play a key role in the course of innovation and change. Moschella’s important work urges that “By studying over time the repeated actions and interactions of people in a particular group, one can catch a glimpse of theology as it is lived out in the life of the group” (Moschella, 47).

In short, the discipline of congregational studies has emerged as an essential component to the study of theology and is especially important for the study of congregational practices related to gender in Churches of Christ. If one wants to really know the theological convictions of a congregation, then the place to begin understanding such convictions is with practice. One might ask questions like: What does this congregation do? How does it engage in its common life? How does it arrange its life?

PURPOSE

As a first phase of congregational research related to gender inclusivity, this project aimed to identify “congregations of Churches of Christ that have understood issues of gender equality or inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively” in their congregation’s life. This research project was not exhaustive and was focused in a specific way. In other words, it did not seek to answer every question about gender in Churches of Christ, but primarily sought *identification* of gender inclusive congregations and some basic *description* about congregational practice related to gender inclusivity.

FINDINGS

Identification, Location, and Chronology

Initially, the sample included 34 congregations located in the United States that were thought to be gender inclusive. A network survey technique, by which those who completed the survey suggested names of other gender-inclusive congregations, was then used to complete the sample. In total, representatives from 66 congregations were identified by this method, and 61 of them were invited to participate in the survey.

Of these 61 congregations, representatives from 45 congregations responded to the survey, yielding a 73.7% response rate. Of those responding, 44 met the criteria for gender inclusivity: 1) they had discussed gender-roles openly and gender inclusivity had become part of their congregation’s discourse, and 2) they had integrated women into their congregation’s public life

in ways they previously had not. Congregations across the United States were represented: South (47.7%), West (29.5%), Northeast (11.4%), and Midwest (9.1%). One congregation from Canada was also included in the sample.

The research found that Church of Christ congregations have been exploring gender equality in congregational life for at least the last 50 years. While a small number of congregations (11.4%) began exploring gender equality in the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of congregations (45.5%) started examining this issue in the 1990s. The next largest group of congregations (40.9%) began exploring this issue within the past decade.

Practices, Roles, and Titles

The research not only identified gender inclusive congregations, it also asked basic information about some, but not all practices related to gender inclusivity. As an initial phase of research, we were interested in practices related to the public, corporate gatherings of the congregation and the formal roles and titles held by women.

Fifteen public religious activities were included in the survey (see Table 1). In the majority of congregations (61.4%), women engage in between nine and 12 of the activities surveyed (see Table 1). Of all the activities included, women most frequently read scripture, pray, and make announcements in corporate worship; lead devotional thoughts; and teach adult Bible classes. While women preach in some capacity (Sunday morning, Sunday evening, or Wednesday night) in 14 (31.8%) of these congregations, women engage least in this activity.

Table 2 depicts the titles women hold for 11 different formal positions in these congregations. Women also hold several “other” formal titles as indicated below. Of the titles included, women most often hold the title of Worship Leader (47.7%), Youth Minister (45.5%), and Deacon (40.9%). They least frequently hold the title of Preacher (4.5%). No women were identified as elders in these congregations. It should be noted that the number of women who hold the Children’s Minister title might be underinflated because this title was inadvertently not included in the survey. It is also important to note that the Ministry Leader title arose from the “other” category. In the open-ended portion of the survey, some respondents indicated their congregations use the formal title “Ministry Leader” for women instead of “Deacon.”

Future Plans for Integration and Barriers

Congregations were split 50/50 on whether they plan to integrate women more extensively into public and/or leadership roles. A little more than 11% of respondents answering “no” indicated they had already integrated women in their congregations.

Respondents listed a variety of ways they plan to integrate women more extensively. While some indicated they want to increase the amount of female participation, others cited specific positions they would like to see women fill. For some congregations, these included deacon, preacher, and elder. A few congregations noted women have been nominated as elders in their congregations in the past but have not yet been chosen for that position. Several respondents mentioned seeking out women who have a sense of calling and spiritual giftedness. Others emphasized the importance of training women and giving them experience in leadership roles to build their confidence.

Respondents listed a variety of barriers to integrating women more extensively into public and/or leadership roles in their congregations. They cited tradition and lack of consensus most often in their responses. Specifically regarding tradition, they noted men and women have

traditionally held particular roles in religious contexts, and there would be concern or dissension if these roles were changed. Respondents also often noted the lack of consensus on gender-role issues and the importance of maintaining congregational harmony. They cited concerns about some members being uncomfortable with change, what other Church of Christ family members might think, and how relationships with other congregations might be affected. Ultimately, several respondents expressed concerns about losing membership if further integration occurred. Apart from tradition and consensus, respondents also cited concerns about emotional discomfort, the belief that deacons, elders, and preachers are viewed as “male,” and the desire to make slow, incremental changes rather than fast, sweeping ones.

IMPLICATIONS

Congregational Autonomy and Standards of Belief and Practice among Churches of Christ

Religious groups, such as Churches of Christ, maintain standards of belief and practice through formal and informal means. In the case of Churches of Christ, a congregational polity by which individual congregations are expressly understood as autonomous and yet related as a larger group produces an informal yet sophisticated means of maintaining standards of belief and practice. While more sophisticated and diverse than these three elements, we suggest that the current research mitigates **against** the following.

- (1) *The assumption that there are only one or two, maybe a handful, of Church of Christ congregations which practice gender inclusivity.* The identification of 66 congregations of Churches of Christ that have found gender equality or inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively means that Churches of Christ can no longer assume that there are only one or two instances in which a Church of Christ congregation has discerned this change in belief and practice to not only be permissible, but preferable. While 66 congregations may be a small percentage of the total number of Church of Christ congregations, this finding represents a growing number of congregations that are actively seeking greater gender inclusivity, a fact that mitigates against attempts to radicalize these congregations.
- (2) *A mythology that congregations of Churches of Christ who practice gender inclusivity are geographically located on the far coasts of the United States.* If this mythology were allowed to stand, it might be easier for Churches of Christ to assume that gender inclusive belief and practice is relegated to the extreme edges of American cultural and religious life – on the far coasts, so far as they represent social progression and innovation. This is significant as the greater concentration of Churches of Christ exist in the Southern United States thereby making possible the assumption that the belief and practice of greater gender inclusivity is far from “us” and therefore “foreign” to Churches of Christ, as if these congregations were not really a part of the “us.” This research finds that congregations of Churches of Christ who have found gender inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively exist in every region of the country and that the number of gender inclusive congregations in the South are not only greater than any other region, but greater than the West and Northeast combined. This would seem to make sense given that the greater concentration of Churches of Christ is in the Southern United States. Gender inclusive congregations of Churches of Christ are not geographically distant from the concentration of congregations in the South. In fact, they are mostly among that concentration.
- (3) *A false chronology that names the emergence of the practice of gender inclusivity in congregations of Churches of Christ as a recent phenomenon created by the present social, cultural, or political climate.* If it were true that the congregations identified in this study

represented a shift in gender inclusive belief and practice merely over the last ten years, then one might be obligated to think about the immediate time period of the first decade of the 21st century. However, these congregations represent a change in congregational belief and practice beginning in the 1960's, a full half-century ago. It is important to consider the time period between 1960-2010 more carefully. At the very least, this research will not allow the emergence of more gender inclusive congregations in Churches of Christ to be minimized or delegitimized as a recent phenomenon in the last few years.

Gender-Inclusive Practices in Churches of Christ

While the findings of this research provide an occasion to reflect on how gender-inclusive practices among the congregations identified relates to the overall beliefs and practices of Churches of Christ on the whole, the research also provides insight into the nature of the gender-inclusive practices taking place in these congregations. Before addressing specific practices, it is important to note that gender-role changes in these congregations resulted from in-depth study of scriptures at various levels, including among ministers and elders, in Bible classes, and at the congregational level.

These pioneering congregations demonstrate gender inclusivity in their public congregational practices in a variety of ways. In all of these congregations, women hold various formal titles and are participating in a variety of public roles. Women engage in roles from teaching adult classes with males attending to preaching, and women hold titles like Ministry Leader, Deacon, Youth Minister, and even Preacher. Some of these roles represent practices that are particularly important to congregational life. For example, in more than half of these congregations, women participate in sacramental acts of leadership like waiting on the communion table and baptizing congregants. In most of these congregations (97.7%), women read scripture in corporate worship. Additionally, in 14 (almost one-third) of these congregations, women engage in preaching. In the majority of these congregations, women fill between nine and 12 public roles. This number is likely to be underinflated since almost 20% of the respondents indicated women also participate in "other" public roles in their congregations.

While on the whole, the roles women fill and titles they hold in these congregations illustrate that these Church of Christ congregations have moved toward gender inclusivity, we can make some observations about areas in which integration has been difficult. These observations provide us with various insights into congregational beliefs and teach us some important lessons about gender inclusivity.

- (1) *Examining the qualitative differences among these roles may provide further insight into barriers to greater gender inclusivity.* Both tradition and context may play an important role in change. Respondents indicated tradition was one of the biggest obstacles to further integrating women into public roles in worship. In Churches of Christ, women traditionally have been expected to read scripture in their individual study in the private sphere. In more recent tradition, women have read scripture aloud in small groups and Bible classes. Therefore, reading scripture in the public sphere in corporate worship may seem to be a rather natural extension of the tradition of women reading scripture in other semi-public and private contexts. Teaching in an adult class with males present may also be viewed as an extension of the female tradition of teaching children. However, serving communion, offering communion thoughts, and preaching are activities that only occur in a public context and are activities in which men traditionally engage. Therefore, a male tradition and singular context may interact to make these activities seem unnatural for women.

(2) *Congregations illustrate the importance they place on relationships among members by recognition of and desire to reduce the emotional impact of changes in gender-roles.* Many of these congregations seem to have engaged in various strategies to soften the move to inclusivity. First, they have made incremental changes in gender roles over time. A typical integration pattern might begin with scripture reading, move to prayer, and then to communion service, and end with preaching. Some congregations began with structural changes (e.g., incorporating women as Ministry Leaders) and then began to integrate women into public roles in worship. Second, some congregations may have mitigated the effect of women participating in the public sphere by making female presence in public spaces less obvious. For example, one congregation began integrating women into public worship by having them serve communion from the back of the congregation. Additionally, in more than half of the congregations surveyed, women sometimes sit while engaging in public roles in worship.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Based upon this research, future areas of inquiry might include:

- (1) Continued research to identify gender inclusive Church of Christ congregations.
- (2) Exploration of the decision-making processes of local congregations, particularly as they are related to gender inclusivity.
- (3) Exploring the role of perceived authority, context, and tradition in congregational decision-making.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of Ways Women Participate Publicly in Congregations		
Public Role	<i>f</i>	%
Read scripture in corporate worship	43	97.7%
Team teach an adult class with a male as a co-teacher	41	93.2%
Make announcements in corporate worship	40	90.9%
Teach an adult class with adult males attending class	39	88.6%
Lead devotional thoughts	36	81.8%
Pray in corporate worship	34	77.3%
Wait on communion table	30	68.2%
Deliver the welcome in corporate worship	30	68.2%
Offer communion thoughts	29	65.9%
Baptize any person	29	65.9%
Lead singing in corporate worship	25	56.8%
Direct a worship team	22	50.0%
Preach on Wednesday night	9	20.5%
Preach on Sunday morning	9	20.5%
Other	8	18.2%
Preach on Sunday night	3	6.8%

Table 2

Frequency Distribution of Formal Titles Women Hold in Congregations		
Title	<i>f</i>	%
Worship Leader	21	47.7%
Youth Minister	20	45.5%
Deacon	18	40.9%
Education Minister	15	34.1%
Ministry Leader	15	34.1%
Other	13	29.5%
Children's Minister	12	27.3%
Benevolence Minister	10	22.7%
Involvement Minister	10	22.7%
Campus Minister	6	13.6%
Preacher	2	4.5%
Elder	0	0.0%