

A Grand View of Women and Men Working Together

Robert F. Hull Jr.

In 1989 the elders at Grandview Christian Church adopted a gender-neutral policy regarding all formal leadership positions in the church. After more than twenty years' experience with this practice, it is a privilege to review and reflect on the long and difficult path that led us to this position and to share our story.

The congregation was established in 1927 with the unglamorous name of "Fourth Christian Church," the third congregation in Johnson City, Tennessee, to be planted under the auspices of First Christian Church. In 1956 the name was changed to Virginia Street Christian Church and then, in 1967, to Grandview Christian Church. During its first fifty years, attendance seldom bettered 100, but with the relocation into a larger and more modern building, steady growth began. The proximity of the church to Milligan College and Emmanuel School of Religion (now Emmanuel Christian Seminary) partly explains why many faculty and staff members from those institutions gravitate to Grandview. From the 1950s to the present, an increasing number of both volunteer and paid staff in the church also have had connections with either Milligan or Emmanuel, or both.

When my family became regular participants in the life of Grandview in 1977, policy decisions rested with a group of male elders, who were assisted by a larger group of male deacons. They usually met together as a "general board," although elders clearly had the upper hand in decision-making and occasionally met without the deacons present. There were no formal barriers to the participation of women in many visible roles, including teaching men, leading worship, praying in public, speaking from the pulpit as opportunity might arise, and chairing committees of both male and female members. Until the 1980s, however, committee chairs were almost always men, and elders invariably presided at the communion table, while deacons served the elements. Beginning around 1980 there were influential voices within the congregation calling for wider participation of women in visible leadership positions. This led to a ten-year process during which the groundwork was laid to mainstream women into every appointive and elective position of leadership within the congregation. Most of this process, an initiative of the elders, occurred during the ministry of Frank S. Smith.

First Steps

In the summer of 1980 the elders appointed an *ad hoc* committee on leadership and organization. Members of the committee were Charles Taber, a missiologist with expertise in cultural anthropology; Fred Norris, a church historian specializing in patristics; and me (Robert Hull), a New Testament scholar—all faculty members at Emmanuel School of Religion. Although we were to concern ourselves with leadership in general, the role of women was of major interest. Each of us first produced a position paper outlining our own understanding of the biblical teaching on the issues in relation to the historical and cultural realities of our own times. These papers helped us to surface the issues and questions we believed would be most critical for the elders and the congregation to consider.

Then, for five Sunday evenings during January and February in 1981, a study was presented to the congregation systematically surveying their understanding of the Acts of the Apostles and all the Epistles with these questions in mind: Who constituted the church in the New Testament? How can we identify the leaders? What persons had special functions? What are those functions? What titles are used to refer to these persons?

How did they qualify for leadership? How were they selected? In order to make sure that we covered all the bases and also gave everyone in the congregation opportunities to participate, we scheduled three Wednesday evening studies in March—one on spiritual gifts, one on the located ministry, and one on elders and deacons in the New Testament—with a different leader for each topic.

We noted that in the New Testament more attention is given to tasks and functions than to titles and power. There is a “sanctified fluidity and flexibility” in the way congregations function, the gospel is proclaimed, and leaders are identified. We found that “apostles” included not only “the eleven” (Acts 1.13, 26), but also Paul, Barnabas (Acts 14.4, 14), James (Gal 1.19), Andronicus, and Junia (a woman, Rom 16.7). We saw Stephen and Philip, Spirit-filled persons appointed to wait on tables (Acts 6.2), later serving as evangelists (Acts 7–8). We found that those who had the gift of prophecy (Rom 12.6; 1 Cor 12.10) included women (the four virgin daughters of Philip the evangelist in Acts 21.8–9). We noticed that Paul’s co-workers in ministry included women (Phoebe, Rom 16.1–2; Prisca, Rom 16.3; Euodia and Syntyche, Phil 4.2–3). We discussed the meaning of the Greek terms *diakonos* (translated variously as “deacon,” “minister,” “helper,” “assistant”), *episkopos* (“overseer,” “supervisor,” “bishop”), *presbyteros* (“elder”), and *prophetes* (“prophet”), as well as the more generic terms *proistamenous* (“ones who have charge”), and *hegoumenon* (“leaders”). In this broad overview we tried not to allow the discussions to become sidetracked by those who wanted to focus on the issues of power and authority in the home (the “household codes”) and the “problem passages” dealing with dress, decorum, head coverings, hair length, speech, and silence. We tried to stick to congregational leadership and organization.

It was clear from the vigorous discussions that occurred over these five weeks that the journey on which we had embarked would be long and arduous. We did not press for any change in policy as a result of these studies. Not only was there significant resistance to change within the congregation, but the elders also were nowhere near consensus. We had succeeded in beginning the conversation and we had distributed detailed handouts that we hoped would lead to further reflection and discussion, both in the privacy of homes and in small groups, formal and informal.

In looking back at official board minutes, as well as lists of committees and even church newsletters, it became clear to me that crucially important changes are not always marked by formal policy decisions, for there is evidence in these documents of a developing openness to including women in more visible leadership roles, even without recorded discussions leading to new rules. Women more often appear as committee leaders who, as such, met with the general board to make reports and recommendations. Then, in 1982, the church called a female student at Emmanuel to be a youth coordinator. She was so effective in her ministry that she was eventually invited to offer a communion meditation, thus breaking with the longstanding tradition that only males were called upon to fulfill this function.

A Second Round of Studies

In the fall of 1983 a three-week series of studies was offered on “Leadership and Ministry in the Early Church.” Although it was not patterned after the first series, it covered the same territory, but more systematically. We gave attention to both gifted and appointed ministries, looking in detail at what the New Testament says both about the character and the specific functions of leaders. The list of “concluding observations, reflections, and questions for further discussion” included the following:

- The New Testament does not furnish a single pattern for leadership and ministry.
- From first to last, there are both informal and formal ministries, i.e., gifts operating alongside offices.
- The terms *elder*, *overseer*, and *pastor* refer to the same office.
- The deacon serves in more of an assisting than a directing role.
- No directions are given for the mechanics of obtaining leaders.
- No specific list of functions of these leaders can be found.
- The place of women in church leadership cannot be determined from any one text or set of texts: The lists of gifts for service (Rom 12.6–8; 1 Cor 12.4–11, 28; Eph 4.11) are not sex-specific, and we find evidence for women publicly praying and prophesying (1 Cor 11.5), serving as deacons (Rom 16.1; 1

Tim 3.11), and serving alongside Paul as “co-workers” in ministry (Rom 16.3–15; Phil 4.2–3). We note women among the disciples of Jesus (Mark 15.40–41; Luke 8.3). On the other hand, we find some strictures against women’s public speaking in the assembly (1 Cor 14.34–36) and exercising authority over men (1 Tim 2.11–12). Moreover, 1 Tim 3.2 stipulates that an *episkopos* (“overseer”) must be a *mias gunaikos andra* (literally “one-woman man”). How to resolve these tensions?

In November 1983 a change occurred in the process for nominating candidates for the various elective positions (elders, deacons, committee chairs, trustees). The nominating committee appointed by the elders suggested that the committee would prefer that nominations be received from the congregation at large. The result was that the names of four women were submitted as nominees for deacon. That the elders approved these names and allowed them to be placed on the ballot suggests that the elders had confidence in the wisdom of the congregation to act on their collective understanding. All four women were selected to serve as deacons for the year 1984, although not without a fair number of dissenting votes. And not all congregants were willing initially to receive the communion trays from the hands of women serving the elements alongside men. In a communion meditation a young man observed that, whether we receive the elements from someone standing in the aisle or someone sitting beside us, we are all “serving communion” to each other, a point simply and eloquently made.

Despite some disagreement about the propriety of women serving as deacons, the move to include them was a relatively easy step, largely because of Paul’s reference to Phoebe as a *diakonos* in Rom 16.1. The sticking point came with the question of women elders. The congregation remained sharply divided, as did the elders themselves. At the very least, more study and discussion would be needed. In 1986 Mary Ellen Lantzer, a student at Emmanuel preparing a thesis on 1 Tim 2.8–15, offered a six-week study on 1 and 2 Timothy. Although her emphasis was not on women, she dealt carefully with the “hot topic” texts of the letters, being scrupulously fair to the variety of opinions, scholarly and personal, on these issues. By that time, we had already called our second woman as youth coordinator. We had also been several times blessed by the preaching of women. On the other hand, in the eight years since the question of women’s leadership had first been raised publicly, many new people had come into the church, while others had moved on. There were also new people among the elders and deacons who had not been part of the 1983 decision.

For two years the church took no formal action on the issue, but those favoring a change in policy (both among the elders and at large in the congregation) concluded that “not to decide is to decide.” In February 1989, the elders undertook another round of intensive study and discussion among themselves. We considered the following observations and questions:

- Whenever we read the Bible, our understanding is shaped by a complex web of psychological, sociological, political, sexual, and religious factors. Our tendency is to read the text in such a way as to support our self-interests. How can we allow the text to function, not just as a mirror to reflect only our own thoughts back to us, but as a window through which we may see things that challenge the comfortable assumptions we already have?
- None of us treats all parts of scripture as equally normative for us. Few of us practice foot washing or the holy kiss. Our churches do not have a widow roll such as 1 Tim 5.3–16 prescribes. How do we decide which texts to privilege over others?
- Despite the different viewpoints and emphases in the Bible, the New Testament is united in its message that the gospel gives the people of God power to live and serve under the rule of God. In what ways does the gospel itself help us to solve the problem of male/female roles?
- Have any of us come to different understandings of the Bible than we once had? Can you think of one issue about which your opinion has changed? What led to your changed understanding?

There were also sessions in March and April, with the last study devoted specifically to key texts in 1 Timothy and Titus. Using distinctions suggested by Charles Taber, we looked at the relevant texts to try to discover whether the instructions therein were *normative* for all times, *descriptive* (just describing how things were) or *prudential* (offering guidelines for a particular situation, not necessarily our own). We discussed whether the list of items

describing overseers/elders and deacons in 1 Tim 3.1–13 and Titus 6–9 should be understood as strict qualifications, or instead as descriptors of character. This led to questions about whether an elder *must* be male, *must* be married, *must* not ever have divorced, and *must* have obedient, Christian children. We looked at some of the assumptions “in the air” in Graeco-Roman society about male/female psychological and biological differences, educational levels, and fitness for involvement in public life. Since I was responsible for some of the teaching in this session, I take the liberty here to quote from my concluding observations about the fitness of women to serve as elders:

I believe the instructions about church leaders in 1 Tim and Titus presuppose certain assumptions about the social realities of their day. It was entirely reasonable for Paul to *assume* that church leaders would be married (This was an expectation one would hold for leaders of almost any kind in Paul’s society); similarly, it was *assumed* that they would have children. What was *required* of them was that they be certain kinds of persons—faithful, fair, honest, reputable, etc. By the same token, Paul *assumed* that church leaders would be male (just as members of the city council would be male, elders of the synagogue would be male, most teachers would be male, and most people of social standing would be male). In fact, it might have been a prudent thing in that heavily male-dominated society to *require* that elders be male. The question is whether there is any responsibility, or behavior, or character trait of elders that *requires* maleness for its fulfillment. May it not be the case that we are justified in a situation where women are no longer automatically seen as second-class in allowing them to exercise their gifts for ministry of any sort alongside males, so long as they have the requisite character and maturity?

The Turning Point

In May 1989, the elders decided to take a stronger step than simply waiting for someone to nominate a woman for elder. Although the elders did not take formal votes during these discussions, we did sometimes take a straw poll. It was clear that a plurality favored seeing women on the eldership; among the opposition were some who simply argued that there was no New Testament precedent for women elders and others who favored the more inclusive position in principle, but did not “think the time was right.” Unfortunately, it was announced in the church newsletter that the elders, “by a vote of six to four,” wanted to make it clear that gender would not disqualify any person from serving in any elective position. Understandably, there was considerable negative reaction by some in the congregation who thought a new policy was being forced upon them by only a slight majority of the elders. The result was that the chairman of the general board (the board of both elders and deacons) announced in the newsletter the following month that “church members with clear opinions and emotions on the issue are urged to speak with their elder/shepherd” (by this time each elder had been assigned a “shepherding group”); after some months of such individual conversations the elders would again hold a more general forum.

From September through November 1989, we held congregational study sessions on either Sunday or Wednesday evenings, looking at the same texts we had been discussing since 1981 and trying to find new approaches to wrestling with old questions. Mary Ellen Lantzer filled in a much neglected area by summarizing the history of the debate about women’s preaching and leadership in the 1892–93 issues of *The Christian Standard* and introducing us to several women preachers, ordained and not, in the early Restoration Movement. This period of study ended with a forum in which those who had led the sessions of the last three months formed a panel and responded to questions from the congregation. It was clear when this forum was over that we had still not attained a consensus in the congregation. Nevertheless, the elders stood by their majority decision that nomination forms for elective positions would not mention gender. Our best hope was to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4.3).

We approached the season of nominations for the coming year with some trepidation. We had our first female nominee for elder: a longstanding member of the congregation, gentle and much-loved. After considerable inner struggle, she allowed her name to be placed on the ballot. The outcome (as she later related it to me) was painful: Although she received several “no” votes, she was elected. Afterward, however, two of her oldest and dearest women friends (both now deceased) came to her and implored her to decline to serve. With a heavy heart, she did so. Then two young fathers came to her and expressed their disappointment that

she had withdrawn. “What are we going to say to our daughters?” was their question. The following year she was re-nominated and elected, and she did serve. Thus, we had our first female elder in 1991. A second woman joined her in 1993. From that time to the present we have never been without women elders and deacons.

Aftermath

When I have recounted in conversation the history of Grandview’s decision on women’s leadership, a frequent question is “How many people did you lose?” I’m not sure anyone has the answer. I am aware of only a very few persons who left the congregation over this issue. One elder (now deceased) resigned his position, but continued to be an active member of the church, telling me that he did not believe the matter was sufficient cause to justify leaving a congregation he loved. I am aware of persons, notably some women, who were bitterly disappointed in the decision and the process by which it was reached, but who have remained for all these years stalwart and dependable members of the congregation.

Now, twenty-three years into our policy of shared leadership, a stranger walking into one of our worship services is likely to see just as many women up front as men. Thus far three women have sought and obtained ordination into ministry at Grandview. One of them, Mary Ellen (Lantzer) Pereira, taught Bible and ministry courses for several years at Puget Sound Christian College and Northwest Christian University. More recently she served for four years as minister at Winema Christian Church on the coast of Oregon. The other two, Betsy Bryant Magness and Theresa Garbe, have each served professionally in worship ministry at Grandview and have both preached on occasion. Betsy is currently the worship arts pastor at Mountain Christian Church, Joppa, Maryland. To be sure, we have not had a woman as our senior minister, although we did invite a woman to apply at the beginning of our last ministerial search, but she declined. Now that many people in our congregation have grown from childhood through college age with women sharing in all aspects of leadership, it seems entirely natural to them. After they move away, they come back and tell us how strange it feels to be unable to find a similar church within the Stone-Campbell tradition. We can only hope and pray that this situation is changing for the better.

What I Have Learned from Our Experience

- Important changes take time to enact. We were right to spend ten years on the process.
- Even under the most favorable circumstances and with the best will in the world, this is still an emotionally draining and stressful experience. It requires fortitude, patience, and love for one another.
- This matter is never solved simply by studying the Bible. Even long-term, detailed, exegetical treatments will not provide all the answers. There are issues involving tradition, power, and personality that inevitably color the discussion.
- There will be winners and losers in the outcome. Losers need to know their opinions have been adequately represented and they have been treated fairly. I think Grandview could have done a better job in this respect.
- Once a decision has been made to begin a process that might lead to greater public leadership of women, there can be no waffling on the issue. To think that one can avoid hurting people by simply staying with the traditional practice is a mistake: whatever you decide will hurt some people. This means that we must be willing to take the risk of being wrong, because none of us has perfect understanding. I believe our shared male/female leadership at Grandview Christian Church has been of enormous benefit to us and to all whom we seek to serve.

ROBERT F. HULL JR. RETIRED FROM EMMANUEL AFTER 32 YEARS OF TEACHING, DURING WHICH HE WAS ALSO DEAN FOR NINE YEARS. HE IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF *THE STORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT TEXT: MOVERS, MATERIALS, MOTIVES, METHODS, AND MODELS* (SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE, 2010). BOB AND HIS WIFE HAVE THREE CHILDREN AND FIVE GRANDCHILDREN (RHULL@ECS.EDU).

