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Imagining the Potential: Ministry of Women in the Twenty-First Century

KATHY PULLEY

Don Quixote, “The Man of La Mancha,” lives on today in his quest to see beyond the despair of ordinary life. His quest was to pursue the “absurdly idealistic” as the root “quixotic” implies. When he encounters the prostitute Aldonza he imagines her to be the saintly Dulcinea. He sees her differently from everyone else, and in that moment there are wonderful possibilities for who she might become. Today, as we look at Christendom in the West, there is reason for concern. Most Christian churches are in flux. The significance and number of denominational churches in America continues to decline.¹ Community churches, claiming a detachment from all traditions, are springing up across the nation. As noted in other articles in this issue, there are many challenges ahead.

The Churches of Christ could move in a variety of directions from the extreme of not surviving at all, to splitting into another branch, to something in between such as transforming into a more emergent model of church; or, perhaps the growth in the Churches of Christ outside the United States will transform them into something altogether new. Given the critical challenges facing the church, I contend that the churches that have the greatest chance to survive successfully (those who meet the challenges presented by the twenty-first century world), will be those who openly welcome all the creativity, energy, intellect, and other gifts that each member has to offer, including the women.

An ancient Chinese proverb says, “If you want to know your past, look into your present conditions; if you want to know your future, look into your present actions.” As we consider the future of women’s ministries, the past is important because our history serves as a helpful reminder of our journey so far, and it aids in our understanding of our present condition. Additionally, I want to look at three different theological and cultural factors that may be valid indicators of where we are going. Finally, much of what comes to pass will depend upon our hopes and aspirations, and how much “absurd idealism” we can imagine for the children and grandchildren who come after us.

Historically, the Stone-Campbell churches first encountered conflict over women’s ministries in the 1880s and 1890s, and the disagreements continued until the first split in 1906. At that time the more conservative churches that came to be the Churches of Christ were against modernity, and they opposed women’s ordination and any public role for women. Thus, when the two new branches had reconstituted themselves, the Churches of Christ rejected women’s ordination and any formal recognition of women ministers; whereas, the other branch, the Disciples of Christ, continued to ordain women from the 1880s forward. As the twentieth century unfolded, the Churches of Christ maintained their strong stand against any public and/or formal roles for women.

By the 1970s, the Churches of Christ entered a second period of conflict over the role of women, and

1. Alan Wolfe’s *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), and Roger Finke and Rodney Stark’s, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), are both excellent resources about the direction organized religions are going in the United States.

tensions over this issue have continued to the present. During both periods the conflicts about women's roles were closely tied to the women's movements of the day. Those movements pushed for gender equality and had an impact on the debates taking place in some Churches of Christ and in some church publications, as well as in some church-related forums and lectureships.² If we look at such church publications as *Mission*, *Integrity*, and *Leaven* we find articles that attempted to articulate a less restrictive approach toward the public ministries of women. The more traditional publications, however, continued to reinforce the tradition of women keeping silent in matters of the church. By the mid-1990s Abilene Christian University Professor Carroll Osburn's two-volume series, *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* had been published. Although some of the forty-plus articles were more cautious than others, it remains the largest collection of scholarly work to date on women's roles in the church, and among other things, the size of the collection illustrates the relevance of the topic for the period.

The publications are far from being the whole story. From the 1970s forward growing numbers of women have been involved in paid ministries by the church. A very small number have been paid to be pulpit ministers, but increasing numbers have been and are on church payrolls as children's ministers, campus ministers, youth and family ministers, and a variety of other specific ministries that serve the needs of particular congregations. Because of congregational autonomy it is difficult to know how many women may be involved in these ministries. One indicator of the growing acceptance of women in such positions is the "Women in Ministry Network," a networking group for women ministers in Churches of Christ. The Network now has about fifty members who are in a variety of paid ministries in local congregations. These examples by no means represent everything in which women are involved, but they do point to the fact that the spiritual and intellectual gifts of women are being recognized and used in official capacities by a growing number of Churches of Christ. This is a positive sign. It is true that some churches have sought to recognize women as full members and full participants in the church in growing numbers of ways, but many other churches have not shifted in any measurable way over the last thirty-plus years.

If we look at how churches are responding to women's ministry today it may be helpful to think of three different sub-groupings within mainline Churches of Christ, because the mainline does not speak with one voice on this topic. Please recognize that the suggested groupings are imperfect and there will be churches that do not "fit" well into these three categories.

Since the 1970s, there are a few churches that might be called "integrating churches," churches in which there are no longer any differences made between how women and men participate in the life of the church. The opportunities for teaching, preaching, and leadership are all open to gifted women and men. Women are full participants, and there are seldom any conversations about the topic because it is the accepted practice. The full participation of women is the routine.

A larger percentage of churches are "cultivating." Generally speaking, the range of church actions in this category is broad. Perhaps the easiest way to categorize this group is to say that these churches are either "intentionally" exploring or studying women's roles and/or they are "intentionally" acting in ways that are more inclusive. Women's service might be voluntary, but it is more likely that some women are employed by the church. The degree to which they speak or teach in the public assembly varies. They might be called ministers or servant leaders or by other names descriptive of what they do. If they oversee programs they are usually responsible for making the decisions for those programs.

The third group, "hibernating churches," are those churches that maintain the same stance toward women's ministries as they had prior to the 1970s. These churches are not actively having discussions about the greater inclusion of women, or the topic may have been raised but it was quickly rejected. Such services as preparing and serving food, ministering to small children and other women (whether voluntarily or paid)

2. For more information about this period and the church's response see Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 375-385.

and husband and wife teams serving as missionaries are acceptable. The women have no recognized decision-making authority, they do not teach when men are present, and their voices are not heard in worship beyond their participation in congregational singing.

All three of these sub-groups within the mainline will argue that the Bible supports their position. In the future, it is likely to be the “cultivating churches” that will continue to be challenged the most by questions regarding gender roles. If the “best predictor of the future is the past,” then those churches that have not experienced any change at this point will not encounter change in the near future—that is, change is unlikely unless they come to believe their survival is threatened. Finally, those churches that have completely integrated women as full participants in the church are likely to continue as they are. Although I have no quantitative data, it appears that the “hibernating churches” outnumber the “cultivating churches” by a significant percentage. Despite the numbers, however, the momentum seems to be with the “cultivating churches.”

Given the change in women’s roles that is occurring in some churches—and change doesn’t occur in a vacuum—what are some of the theological and cultural factors significantly influencing the direction of the cultivating churches?

The first factor is the role of the Bible. In regard to the “ministries of women,” I’m not sure that the biblical texts themselves have as much to do with the church’s position as I once thought.³ I have intuitively known for a long time that continuing to look at scripture, scripture only, is not going to resolve the question about women’s ministries—even as important as the scriptures are to our tradition and to the question of ministry. From scripture the case can be made to exclude a woman from ministries in which her voice is heard publicly. Many pulpit ministers have preached on such passages as 1 Corinthians 14.34-35 and 1 Timothy 2.11-12 as evidence of the wrongfulness of such ministries. A more thorough study of the biblical texts reveals that the case can also be made to include women in ministries in which their voices are heard and valued. Such passages as 1 Corinthians 11.4-5 and Galatians 3.28, among others, lend themselves to that conclusion. In his book *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations*, Mark Chaves claims that there is ambiguity in the Bible on this issue, and he makes two important points.⁴ First, he notes that when one compares the women’s movements of the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, the arguments made, both for and against women’s ordination, are basically the same, and the same biblical texts are used in each era. The Bible stays the same, but different conclusions are reached; therefore, he concludes that there must be something more than the Bible that causes a church to emphasize one set of passages over another. He believes that “something else” is primarily the liberal modernism emerging in the nineteenth century:

Before women’s ordination became symbolically tied to the broader theme of liberal modernism, those committed to biblical authority commonly went both ways on the question. But as the issue took on the symbolic weight of liberalism and modernity, and as strict inerrancy became firmly institutionalized as a symbol of resistance to the modern world, it became more and more difficult to be both an inerrantist and a supporter of women’s ordination. The difficulty is mainly cultural.⁵

3. When I use the phrase “ministries of women” I am specifically talking about the “intentional” expansion of women’s service in the church in ways that in the past had been viewed as violating such biblical scriptures as 1 Corinthians 14.34-35. These are positions and roles sanctioned by the local congregation. It is hard to develop a comprehensive list. Many of these ministries are paid positions; however, women acting in oversight positions are usually volunteers. A woman’s participation in worship could be because she is employed, and it is part of her job, or because she has been asked to do something such as lead a prayer. Basically I’m talking about opening up opportunities for gifted women that weren’t there before, with the intention of enriching the church.

4. Chaves, Mark, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 91.

5. Chaves, 116.

Could it be that the resistance to the expansion of women's ministries in Churches of Christ has had more to do with not wanting to be associated with liberalism in the last century and less to do with what the biblical texts themselves say? Certainly David Lipscomb's strong opposition to women's ministries was linked to his opposition of the practices he saw coming out of the liberal branch of the Stone-Campbell churches at the turn of the century.⁶ As "cultivating churches" have made moves toward expanding women's ministries, they defend their moves, not by denying the authority of the Bible but rather, by saying they are following the Bible. What the "cultivating churches" have done is shift their emphasis away from one set of restrictive passages toward a different set of inclusive passages and a more comprehensive view of the Bible. This may well be an indicator of more doorways opening for women in certain types of mainline Churches of Christ.

A second factor that impacts Churches of Christ is what Vaclav Havel calls "a crisis in narrative."⁷ Throughout the modern era the West had two meta-narratives running concurrently but in tension; nonetheless, they both claimed to offer "one truth:" science and reason, and Judeo-Christian. As we continue to move away from modernity, the concept of "truth" as offered by science and reason is holding less value. Also, the Judeo-Christian meta-narrative struggles to survive in an environment in which the very assumption that there is one truth, as opposed to truth being relative, is challenged. Thus, it is no surprise to hear church scholars and leaders speak of the "malaise of the church in the West," and of the need for a paradigm shift in how the church operationalizes its mission.⁸

The words "missional" or "emergent church" are being used to describe a model that seeks to recapture the meaning and purpose of the Judeo-Christian meta-narrative for the West. In the broadest sense the goal of the emergent church is to take the church into the world and meet the world where it is, as Jesus did on earth. This is a growing movement, and interest is being shown by a variety of churches including both evangelical churches and other denominational churches.

If the emergent church should succeed in the mainline Churches of Christ, are there any foreseeable implications for the ministries of women? The fluidity of any renewal movement implies a certain openness to change. However, there are at least two characteristics of the emergent church that could be indicators of how women's ministries will be understood in the context of this model. In addition to placing a strong emphasis on the "priesthood of all believers" (1 Pet 2.9), the leadership style calls for broader participation by the entire church in all the decision-making. Second, leadership and the specific functions of church leaders are emphasized.⁹ Both of these characteristics point to a greater interest in using all the gifts of women and men. Historically, both renewal movements and social movements are often led by individuals who do not hold official titles, and women are usually more active in such movements.

These characteristics of the emergent church also reflect the populist principles of the Stone-Campbell Movement, so shifts toward greater inclusion of all members is already part of our heritage; thus, including women in needed leadership roles could be one outcome experienced by churches that are involved in a renewal movement. It must also be noted that all Christendom, at one time or another, has confidently claimed to be "the priesthood of all believers." But that didn't always include African Americans, and it has seldom kept exclusive hierarchies from developing. Despite the idealism of renewal movements and the opportunities they may present, every movement's leaders bring with them their own set of interpretations and practices, and those influences will be a strong force in determining the direction churches go in regard to women's ministries.

6. Hughes, 381.

7. Vaclav Havel, *Prognosis 16*, No. 3, (August 6, 1993): 4, quoted in Neil Postman's *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century: How our Past Can Improve our Future* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 113.

8. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), x.

9. See Frost and Hirsch, 169ff. for an in-depth discussion of the five foundational leadership functions that they believe to be essential with new insights on Ephesians 4.11-13.

There is one more factor that deserves consideration because it too could shed light on the future, and that is sectarianism. Theologically, many claim that the mainline Church of Christ is moving away from sectarianism: the notion that Churches of Christ are the only churches truly following the New Testament. Richard Hughes has defined “sect” to mean “a religious organization that insists that it—and it alone—constitutes the entirety of the kingdom of God.”¹⁰ Many view the move away from sectarianism as a good thing.

Manifestations of the move away from sectarianism have been in process for many years. One example can be traced back to the 1970s when the literature and films of such evangelical family therapists as James Dobson began to be introduced into adult Bible classes in Churches of Christ. This may seem inconsequential now, but it is an early marker of a move away from sectarianism. Churches of Christ (not just individual members) were purchasing and studying materials that were not published or written by members of the Churches of Christ. To go from Jewell Miller filmstrips about the “true church” to Dobson’s films on the family was not only a shift in content but also a shift in the direction mainline churches were going.

Another major manifestation of the shift away from sectarianism may be seen in the unity efforts currently underway between Churches of Christ and Independent Christian Churches. The notion of reconciliation, with a body of believers outside the Church of Christ, perhaps more than any other issue, tests the premise of whether there has been a move away from sectarianism. That is, if a sect believes that it alone represents the “true” church, then that sect moves to extend fellowship to another religious group (a group that historically had been deemed to be “wrong” about at least one doctrinal belief), and the sectarian group announces such acceptance publicly, it is a shift away from how the sect originally identified itself. (For the sake of the discussion of sectarianism I’d like to separate the issue of extending fellowship from the issue of music. The two may be woven together tightly in this debate, but they are not the same).¹¹

The reality of the tension over the issue of extending fellowship to those in the Independent Christian Churches may be seen in recent articles of *The Christian Chronicle*. In the August 2006 issue the headline on the cover read, “Ministers exchange Bibles at convention,” and in smaller type it continued, “North American Christian Convention, with ‘Together in Christ’ as the theme, focuses on fostering better relations between instrumental and *a capella* fellowships—but not all celebrate the discussions.”

Not all celebrate? In a variety of places church scholars, ministers, and church members are discussing the implications of developing closer ties to Independent Christian Churches. There is some legitimate discomfort and fear both from those who believe unity is doctrinally acceptable and from those who believe it is doctrinally unacceptable. How the Church resolves this issue says much about whether the Churches of Christ have moved away from their sectarian identity.

If the Church is moving away from sectarianism, does that move influence women’s ministries? To return briefly to James Dobson’s writings, I suspect that the reason behind the introduction of Dobson and other family therapists into adult Bible classes in many Churches of Christ in the 1970s was the serious concern about the crisis of the family in our society. In addition to reading evangelical family counselors’ writings some churches either sought voluntary help or hired family counselors, and some even set up family

10. Hughes, xiii.

11. In the unity discussion, my argument is that instrumental music is the stated theological difference, but music (regardless of type) is not the primary issue in the discussion about unity with “Independent” Churches of Christ. It is a secondary issue and should not be confused with the primary issue. That is, specific theological differences will vary depending on which “outsider” group is under consideration for mutual fellowship. For a sectarian group, the point is whether to recognize any “outsider” group, regardless of what the stated differences may be. Another way to illustrate this point is to think about the one-cup Churches of Christ. If unity between that group and mainline Churches of Christ were being considered then it is likely that the one-cup churches would have to deal with whether they wanted to compromise one of their theological beliefs (one cup only as the biblical pattern for communion) for the sake of fellowshiping with the mainline Church of Christ. If they chose to recognize the mainline, then it could be said that they were moving away from sectarianism toward more openness. This would be true regardless of whether the one-cup churches themselves ever shifted to using multiple cups.

counseling centers. Professionally trained men and women were often employed and brought into the local church's "ministerial team," where their voices were able to influence the churches they served. These early, publicly-recognized and accepted, paid positions that included women are an important part of the story of changing women's roles in the cultivating churches.

Does the move toward reconciliation with Independent Christian Churches potentially affect women's ministries? If a significant shift away from sectarianism has occurred or is occurring, then by definition, a move away from a more closed system toward a more open system means that the openness may influence change in more areas than one. Given the ongoing interest in the Church of Christ about women's roles, it is probable that those churches that embrace less sectarian identities will also embrace more openness to the inclusion of women.

Many factors, both theological and cultural, will continue to affect the destiny of the Churches of Christ and the roles women will have in those churches. For those of us who have some of the Don Quixote spirit of "absurd idealism" we can imagine what the church could become. If we look back, there was another one who might be called an "absurd idealist:" God. In the creation narrative it is clear that God's original plan was that humankind live together harmoniously in the paradise of the Garden of Eden. God's dreams and intentions for humankind were thwarted by the temptation and desire of humans. The consequences of Adam's and Eve's actions brought on the curse that has continued to distort human existence. Old Testament scholar Rick Marrs reflects on the implications of the fall: "In challenging the divine design for creation, the human couple tragically alter their vital relationships. . . . In their relationship to each other, equality, mutual concern, and care are replaced by struggle, conflict, and obsession with hierarchical order."¹² The text tells us that God wanted things to be different, but the curse changed that idyllic plan and humankind was left to be in tension with each other. With the coming of Jesus, however, the curse was reversed.¹³ A new day dawned. Paul emphatically makes this point to the church in Corinth, "From now on . . . we regard no one from a human point of view. . . . So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5.16-18).

Despite the reality of the challenges ahead for the church, we need to take more moments to imagine what it would be like to be a part of a community in which reconciliation has permeated all human relationships—one in which the curse has been reversed! We also need moments to reflect upon that Chinese proverb, ". . . if you want to know your future, look into your present actions."

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12. Rick R. Marrs, "In the Beginning: Male and Female (Gen 1-3)," in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Carroll D. Osburn 2 (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995), 36.

13. I am indebted to Deron Smith, minister of the East Sunshine Church of Christ, Springfield, MO, for his emphasis on the language of "reversing the curse" in his spring 2006 series on women's ministries.