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Two Churches Two Journeys

Women at Cahaba Valley Church of Christ

by Mac Dauphin and Emily Jones Rushing

Women at Cahaba Valley Church of Christ have long embraced a tradition of involvement in Bible study, worship, and teaching. From the earliest days of our small congregation in the 1970s, members recall a Bible study class led by one of the older women. This was, as one woman recalled recently, an occasion for much reading and study—and the eventual recognition that what others had said about the Bible was not the whole picture of its treasures.

The middle years at Cahaba Valley, the church's adolescence, found women teaching Sunday school classes at all levels, leading devotionals at nighttime services or retreats, and serving as chairpersons of committees. In the latter positions, one elder said, these women took on responsibilities that would have made them deacons if they were men. At the same time, they handled the commitments of the church that required daytime, weekday work—Vacation Bible School, noon meals for the mental health association's half-way house, and other community outreach.

The latter part of our adolescence as a church was a difficult one, as the church leadership considered what our position should be in terms of tough issues such as abortion. We tackled these issues using a model of churchwide discussion, prayer, Bible study, and personal testimony. This model served us well, particularly as we moved on to the issue of women serving as deacons and participating in what we began to refer to as "public worship" (Sunday morning assembly).

What was different about that gathering? Was it somehow holier, more special than our other assemblies—

praying or praising God on Sunday night or Wednesday night, or studying God's word in a Sunday morning class for adults? In all these other gatherings, women had long been full participants when led to do so.

Our elders first studied this incongruity in their own regular meetings and found that they did not agree among themselves. Since a decision seemed to be called for, however, they addressed the congregation at a Sunday evening gathering in June of 1984. Each man presented his own beliefs, and the group as a whole stated its decision to make no change in our existing practice at that time.

As the years went by, the elders as a group changed their beliefs. Seeing the church at what they believed to be a crisis point over the issue, they began to lead a detailed, congregation-wide study in the fall of 1989. As one elder recalled, the existing practice prevented many women from using their talents to the fullest. Using the example of Acts 15 as the basis of the study, the congregation and the elders looked at the role of women in leadership as well as their role in public worship.

The decision that came at the end of that much-argued, much-discussed, much-prayed-over evaluation was one that might be said to have pleased no one. On the one hand, the elders stated that they could find no direction from biblical evidence or the current leading of God through the Holy Spirit to turn aside any woman from her opportunity/responsibility to serve as a deacon or participate fully in any worship assembly. On the other hand, the elders' decision was to follow a plan that would move the church toward a practice conforming with that belief over a period of at least five years.

On Pentecost Sunday of 1990, four women were appointed deacons along with seven men. No other changes were made, leaving the public worship practice unaffected and people on all sides of the issue wondering just how much things had really changed. The wisdom of the elders included

a provision for continued discussion, often in small prayer groups, and the hope that those who did not want the change would take time during the first twelve months to adjust to the idea. After all, even some of those who agreed with the biblical basis for the elders' decision said they would not be comfortable with the change—or their parents or other family members would not be—and this would make it hard for them to continue to worship at Cahaba Valley under the changed circumstances.

During the second year, the plan called for the addition of women to no fewer than one, and no more than two, of the duty rosters for Sunday morning worship. In our worship, this includes reading scripture, serving and presiding at communion, praying, leading singing, and preaching from the pulpit. We started with the readings and, after adding one or two activities per year, ended in 1994 with the opening of the pulpit to women.

The elders adhered to their original schedule despite a strong feeling by many that those who would be offended by moving more quickly would surely have resolved their concerns or left the congregation after the first year or two. All along, the elders hoped that the deliberate pace of the change would help those who had concerns to come to terms with what was happening, and those who simply felt uncomfortable with the “newness” or different flavor of the service to get used to it gradually. In retrospect, it seems quite possible that there are some still with us who would have left if the changes had come more abruptly. And, for those who wanted full participation from the start, the wait was instructive.

By the time the planned transition was complete, some of those women who favored the change, but themselves had felt uncomfortable participating, were taking part as readers and prayer leaders. And, just as we wondered who might be the first woman to preach from our pulpit, God sent us Katie Hays and Lance Pape as youth ministers, a piece of timing that we cannot call coincidental. Immediately, the elders recognized their talents in the pulpit and made both wife and husband part of our regular preaching rotation.

Today, we may seem to have come a long way from the days when a group, made up mostly of young couples, first struggled to accept the grace of God at Cahaba Valley Church of Christ. Does the picture now include men and women working side by side? Of course—but we always have been yoked together. It is just that now the talents of each individual can be used to the fullest. Only in the eldership itself do we maintain a role that, to this point, is left to men only.

We are still on a journey, a congregation in caravan together, continually examining our way of worship, our service to others, and our very lives in an effort to follow the Lord toward the Kingdom.

Mac Dauphin is an elder and **Emily Jones Rushing** is a deacon of the Cahaba Valley Church of Christ, Cahaba Valley, Alabama.

Brookline and Women: A Personal Reflection

by Kathy J. Pulley

The Brookline Church of Christ in Brookline, Massachusetts (a suburb of Boston) is one model of a church that has successfully integrated women into leadership positions. I am indebted to Robert Randolph, a member of the Brookline Church since the mid-1960s, for his assistance with the reconstruction of Brookline's history.¹ Some of the observations I make come from my own experiences with the Brookline Church from 1983 through 1985. Other observations come from my contact with the church through my sister Micki, who was a member from 1986 through 1988 and served as the first paid woman co-minister during the 1987-88 academic year.

Over the past 25 years, Brookline has struggled with women's roles, and since 1987, has allowed full participation of women in every aspect of its fellowship. In the spring of 1989 the church printed a short statement of its reasoning concerning this issue; the statement is now available to visitors who may have questions. Brookline has not split over this issue; it is a church that spent much time in in-depth biblical, hermeneutical, and theological study. There are many sociological factors that have undoubtedly contributed to Brookline's success. It is a small congregation in the Northeast, isolated from the political influences of southern Churches of Christ. It has had a high percentage of educated women who have been successful in graduate work and in leadership positions in their chosen professions. There are many other factors that contributed to Brookline's mediation of this change in just one generation. I have selected the following seven factors because they seem especially important.

Factors Mediating Change

1. Congregational input was critical to organizational maintenance. The entire congregation were aware of the issue, and their individual concerns were taken seriously.

2. There was tolerance for differing viewpoints. This was evidenced, for example, in the planning of Sunday worship. For many years individuals had signed up for planning the Sunday worship and recruiting participants for that worship. When a given individual opposed the participation of women in the worship, he/she simply did not include women when he/she planned the service—and the converse of that worked as well.

3. The majority of the men in leadership positions believed that “women's roles” was an issue for the whole church, not just for the women. The men made it their issue too, because the entire congregation would be affected by those who participated.

4. Visualizing was extremely important. To see an event helps to confirm its reality. Early on, women served on

the steering committee and read Scripture; later, they led prayers and singing, and served communion. Finally, they taught adult classes and preached. All of these events were witnessed and experienced, and they did not prove to be earth-shattering, as some had expected. In fact, once it was actually seen and experienced, the inclusion of women was quickly normalized. (The Churches of Christ have more to overcome in this area than most other traditions because we provide few, if any, opportunities for women or children to be in or to speak from the front of our auditoriums. Other traditions may have members of both sexes giving testimonies or singing solos from the front. In our churches even the practice of confessing sins publicly usually means that men have the option of publicly confessing, whereas women are asked to write down their confessions and have the minister or an elder read them to the congregation.)

5. There was a reluctance to concretize, or to put into writing, any policy statement about women's participation. The statement written in 1989 is descriptive of what is, not prescriptive of what should be, and it evolved after twenty years of discussion. There was an accepted recognition that not everyone was in agreement about when or how much women should participate, but there was a willingness to make an effort to attain greater equality. From year to year it was questionable what new members would think, and no one knew if visitors would walk out, or how any negative consequences would affect the life of the church and its effort to maintain itself.

6. The question of women's full and public participation was never the only issue that occupied the concern and the time of the church. During the 1970s Brookline was also concerned with racial issues and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. In the 1980s it was concerned about the Boston Church of Christ and the impact that church was having on students in the greater Boston area. In the 1990s it has addressed AIDS and related subjects.

7. There was sensitivity to one another's differing viewpoints. To my knowledge there was no name-calling (like "feminist") or put-downs (like "sexist"). Neither were there judgments that some were more knowledgeable and desirous of following the Bible than others.

The Value of Change

What were the benefits produced by this change? The first was that the worship service itself improved. Let me mention a few examples of this. Prayers changed. When women led prayers, most of the jargon that had often accompanied the men's prayers began to disappear. Such phrases as "guide, guard, and direct us" vanished because the women

had never claimed these phrases. The prayers they prayed were more personal than distant, more spontaneous than formal. Singing also changed. Women who had great sopranic voices were often more effective song leaders than the available men, and Brookline has had an unusually high number of women with superior voices. Overall, the worship was more dynamic with new participants. Worship was not taken for granted. More compliments were given for others' contributions. Since most of the women had not participated in public worship, there were many fears to be overcome, and there was excitement generated as women were encouraged by each other and by the men to take risks, to act courageously, and to sing or pray or speak as a full and equal member in the fellowship.

Another positive implication is an obvious one: when all members were free to participate in the life of the church equally, the gifts and talents of the church were doubled. Each person was free to give his/her gift to the church. There were fewer times when one had to be forced to participate simply because there was no one else willing to do so. There was a greater interest on the part of women to participate if they, too, could do so by using their natural talents instead of attempting to develop skills which were of no interest to them.

Overall, the life of the Brookline Church has been enriched by the inclusion of women as equal members in all aspects of the leadership and of the public worship. The practice of full participation by women has somewhat normalized at Brookline now, and it has lost its character of newness and/or uniqueness for most members.

This does not mean that what happened at Brookline came easily. There were struggles, and there were times when feelings were hurt. But for the most part, the struggles and hurt feelings were less than what one might have expected. The church did not split over the issue, and it has proven to be much less troublesome to visitors than was initially anticipated. The consensus at this point is that the church is more completely the body of Christ, as Christ intended it to be, when in both theory and practice women and men are free to participate and serve equally.

Kathy J. Pulley teaches religious studies at Southwest Missouri State University and is a member of the Editorial Board of *Leaven*.

¹Robert Randolph, "Brookline: A Model for Change," Seminar: Women's Role in the Church, (Brookline Church of Christ, Brookline, MA, March 19, 1988).