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The Decatur/Northlake Narrative

PATRICK GRAHAM

The Northlake Church of Christ (<http://www.northlake.org/>) began as the Decatur Church of Christ in 1958 as a church planting effort of the Druid Hills Church of Christ (Atlanta, Georgia). Later, the congregation would absorb the Stone Mountain Church of Christ and the Druid Hills congregation, building its Sunday morning attendance to more than six hundred and necessitating a move in 1995 four miles away to the current Northlake location in Tucker, Georgia.

Congregational Theme: Personal Spirituality

The Decatur Church of Christ was often regarded in its early days as innovative and with a strong concern for personal Christian spirituality. Many recent college graduates came to the church in the Exodus Atlanta program, met together for weeknight devotionals, where they shared their life struggles, worshipped together and encouraged one another. These sessions were largely unstructured, and they encouraged individual participation, men and women alike. One of the early participants, Lois Pippin, described it in this way:

The college/post-college age group members who had been raised in the Church of Christ were seeking their own relationship with the Lord and definitely wanted to move away from the legalism in which they had been raised. Many of the Tuesday night sessions were focused on sharing our daily growth experiences in those personal relationships with God and how God was working in our lives. There was a real sense of searching and study among the group and an openness into reading the Bible with fresh eyes.

Another of these, Mary Shearon, characterized it as:

When I came to Decatur after college, I had been told by a lifelong friend in Nashville that Decatur was the church to visit. Never had I experienced the love, freedom, grace and mercy that I found. It was such a freeing experience spiritually, having grown up with too many do's and don'ts. Rarely had I been so encouraged to share and participate in devotionals, retreats, small groups, etc. These were so new to me then.

These early members at Decatur were not uniform in their convictions on religious matters but nevertheless accorded one another substantial latitude.

In the early 1970s, there was also an early Sunday morning worship service. These services were also unstructured or spontaneous and let everyone (male or female) feel free to start a song or share a need or blessing. Another feature of these early years in the life of the Decatur Church was the semiannual retreat at Callaway Gardens or other locations. The retreats included keynote speakers who were well-known among Churches of Christ (e.g., Lynn Anderson, Bill Banowsky, K. C. Moser, Tom Olbricht, Landon Saunders), and Christians from throughout Georgia and the Southeast attended. Small groups were used for discussing the

presentations, providing opportunity for sharing personal concerns and praying. Women participated in the discussions and sharing, and when the question was raised about women participating in the prayers, the instruction given to group leaders was to ask if anyone had a problem with this, and if there were no objections, all could participate actively in the prayer. Lois Pippin recalls:

Most of the time there were not any objections. At one Callaway [retreat], I was asked by a campus minister to read a selection at the Friday night devotional... I don't recall a woman ever reading anything again, and if anyone made an issue of my reading the selection, I was never told about it. I remember one person telling me that these experiences at Decatur during this time were their personal spiritual yardstick used to measure all other spiritual experiences he had since that time. I agree with him—the main reason was the focus at the time was individual growth as a Christian. Being able to share my growth with my brothers' as well as sisters' growth enhanced my faith tremendously along with the love and acceptance I experienced in that fellowship. As far as I know, none of the women at that time had any issues with regards to non-participation in a formal worship service, but perhaps it was due to the amount of unstructured worship experiences available to us for participation.

Congregational Theme: Christian Service

The Decatur Church of Christ also had a strong service impulse that led it to sponsor medical missions in Liberia, Belize and Honduras, found an HMO in Decatur and establish two facilities for subsidized, senior housing (Christian Towers and Gwinnett Christian Towers). Women played an important role in these, and their involvement grew in a very natural way over many years. By the 1990s, the mission in Honduras, Predisan, was led by two women, Doris Clark and Amanda Madrid. The many Northlake members who went on mission trips to Honduras witnessed the powerful leadership and examples of these women and so the entire church came to accord them great respect and acknowledge their moral authority. So, when Doris or Amanda returned to Atlanta to give reports to the church, it was very natural for them to speak to the congregation directly about their work. Sometimes it was to Bible classes or at a Sunday morning worship service via an interview format. On at least one occasion it was from the pulpit at a Sunday morning service. These presentations included expressions of thanksgiving for the church's support of Predisan and exhortations to Christian love and service. While some church members felt uncomfortable about the presentation from the pulpit, most accepted the moral authority of these women and therefore allowed them to do what would not have been granted to others. Doris Clark sketches her experience in this way,

...[W]omen (whether nurses, doctors, or teachers) are valued participants on the mission field, and when they came home, it seemed appropriate that they have a voice in sharing with the supportive congregation.* This did not usually happen, however, even at Decatur, if there were a male leader to speak for them to the elders or to the church. After Robert [Doris' husband] left Honduras, I remember my first time to come home and meet with the elders and my first time to speak to the Decatur church. To be sure the loving support/relationship of friends/people here made all the difference in the acceptance of my participation before the church, first in combined Sunday school gatherings and later in Amanda's translating for Dr. Alvarez during worship.

Youth and children's ministries were also very important at Decatur/Northlake, and by 1982 both men and women were serving the teens as "huddle leaders." There was also a vibrant women's ministry, which afforded many talented and spiritual women the opportunity to lead in worship and teach, and the church's many service ministries provided women opportunities to use their talents for service and administration. Finally, by the year 2000, women had begun teaching adult classes—both as part of teams that included men but also by themselves. This seemed to be a very natural progression and there were few objections.

Appointment of Deacons, 2005

While there were occasions when women spoke from the pulpit or taught adult classes with men, the precipitating element for the change to accord greater roles for women in congregational life came with the appointment of deacons. For several years when the church would solicit nominations for deacons, members would propose the names of women who were already leading the church in service. The elders would never present the names of women to the congregation for appointment as deacons, in spite of the fact that several of the elders would have favored such.

As the elders of the Northlake congregation began to plan for the appointment of deacons in 2005, they gathered the church's former elders to discuss the appointment of women as deacons or ministry leaders. It became clear that this was not the first time that the congregation's leaders had considered this topic, and the former elders encouraged the current eldership to push ahead with the process.

Therefore, on February 4th, 2006, Professor Carl Holladay (Candler School of Theology, Emory University) met with the elders and church staff to spend a day reviewing pertinent biblical texts. This was followed by a meeting on the topic with the current Northlake deacons and ministry leaders. In June 2007, the idea of appointing women as deacons was proposed to the congregation on the basis of two primary arguments: several New Testament texts support the practice of women serving as deacons, and women had already been serving in this capacity at Decatur/Northlake for many years. Adult classes on the subject were offered in August 2007, and in September two town hall meetings were held on the topic. There were strong reactions from people on both sides of the issue, and so in order to preserve congregational unity and provide time for passions to cool, the elders issued a statement in November 2007 to the effect that no changes in the appointment of deacons would be made for now.

Renewed Study, 2008

Doris Clark returned to America from Honduras in October 2007, and on April 1, 2008, she began serving as a minister on the Northlake staff. While her formal designation as a Northlake "minister" may have raised a few eyebrows, Northlake's support for her service as a missionary in Honduras for two decades paved the way for her new role, and it was also the case that Decatur/Northlake had many years' experience with women as youth ministry interns or associates.

In January–March 2008, Kay Bryant led a women's Wednesday night class that read Carroll Osburn's *Women in the Church: Reclaiming the Ideal*. While not all those in the class were brought to Osburn's view, several did change, and the success of the class led the Northlake elders to believe that it was important to take up this topic again.

Therefore, a Wednesday evening class, using Osburn's book and other resources and led by the church's elders and staff, was heavily publicized and offered, beginning in the fall 2009 and running through January 2010. This study covered biblical texts from Genesis to the New Testament, practices of the early church, the variety of opinion in the Stone-Campbell Movement and theological aspects of the question. It concluded with a five-week period, when Northlake members (men and women) prepared statements and shared their convictions from their diverse points of view. The full eldership concluded the class with each elder sharing his conviction on the matter. All were agreed that women should be accorded broader opportunities for participation in worship and in ministerial leadership. Along the way (October 2009), Professor John York (Lipscomb University) was invited to speak to the congregation on the topic, and in the spring of 2010, a Sunday morning class, taught by two elders and the Northlake preaching minister, was offered for those Northlake members who had been unable to attend the previous Wednesday evening series.

The February 2010 Statement

On February 13th, 2010, the elders issued a statement (Appendix) that summarized their thinking on the topic and the course forward. Some church members responded positively, others negatively (a few assumed that the next step was the appointment of a woman as an elder or preacher), but most made no comment. In the spring of 2010 the elders of another Atlanta congregation, which is commonly regarded as among the more conservative in

the area, expressed concern about Northlake's course and asked to meet with the Northlake elders. Two lengthy, respectful discussions followed, and both elderships left with better understanding of one another.

For three months after the February announcement no major changes were made in Northlake worship services. Women participated in doing only what had done in the past—occasional announcements and reading scripture from their seats (with microphone). Thereafter, though, Northlake slowly began to include additional roles for women in worship: serving communion, reading scripture from table or pulpit, presiding at the table with their husbands and leading a song. When asked how she thought Northlake women who participated in these things regarded the changes, Doris Graham wrote,

I think many of the younger women really value the changes, because they have always felt this is the way it should be and find it very affirming. Many of us find it a push to participate but value the refreshing, freeing experience and a different type of participation in worship than we've ever had before. Some value it because of other people in their families and communities who may be more open to the gospel because of it.

In the fall of 2010 the Northlake elders placed their names before the congregation for reaffirmation and asked for additional nominations. Three of the eight elders decided not to stand for reappointment for personal reasons, and three new elders (each of whom had served as elders before) were appointed.

Reflections

Northlake's leaders thought that the congregation's history of love, fellowship in ministry and tolerance for dissent would make it possible for the church to study with fresh eyes the issue of women's roles in congregational life and be open to any changes that the study warranted. While this was indeed the case for most Northlake members, for many it was not. Some had principled objections and just did not agree with the exegesis or other aspects of the study. Others were concerned about what their parents or extended families might think or felt a strong commitment to what long-deceased parents and grandparents had thought and practiced, and so were unwilling to consider changes. Still others read political motivations into the study and interpreted changes in this area to be driven by the political left.

The study of the role of women in congregational life led all the elders to change their views, so that what began as a somewhat practical issue (the congregation needed new deacons) became a matter of conviction. A larger role for women in worship and ministry leadership seemed warranted by the New Testament and church history, and it seemed unfair to allow women to lead in ministry but refuse to acknowledge this through the designations given to men who did the same work. Northlake's elders continue to be committed to the course set for the congregation in the February 2010 Statement, but they have no plans for radical developments beyond what's been done already. Various worship-planning teams have been organized, and so worship practices generally (and the involvement of women in them) are largely in the congregation's hands.

One of the most painful aspects of Northlake's experience was the loss of longtime, committed members who left for other churches (usually Churches of Christ). Some left immediately, but others left over a period of many months. Many who stayed continued to grieve over the loss of close friends and were greatly discouraged. Some of those who left for other area congregations have continued to attend midweek classes at Northlake, men's breakfast meetings, women's Bible study, or participate in Northlake's ministries in which they had been involved. This has been a welcome surprise, and our hope is that some of these will find their way back to Northlake.

The willingness of new people to come, participate in congregational life, and respond to the gospel, unfazed by all the protest against the changes, was welcome and unanticipated. While some Northlake members seemed consumed by the experience, many newcomers were not at all concerned and didn't understand the fuss. This has been a great encouragement to the congregation's leadership and has helped them direct their attention to issues of mission, service and evangelism.

While the church and its leaders are not naive about the road ahead and know that there will be financial and other struggles along the way, we have seen the congregation grow spiritually, discern more clearly what is most

critical to our calling as children of God and resolve to look beyond ourselves and respond to opportunities for ministry and proclamation of the gospel. We understand the Christian faith to be international in scope and intend to take advantage of our setting in one of the most ethnically and economically diverse regions in the country. We will continue involvement in international missions, but we will also engage internationals who live on our doorstep. Each week Northlake welcomes Koreans, Japanese, Africans, Bhutanese, Mexicans and many others. For all this we're enormously grateful and can't imagine a better place for learning what it means to be servants of Christ.

APPENDIX

The Role of Women at Northlake Church of Christ

Northlake Elders

February 13, 2010

Over the past five months we have led the congregation in study and conversation about the role of women in ministry and worship. It is time for us to provide a summary of what we are learning from Scripture and how we plan to move forward.

We acknowledge these truths:

1. We believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the timeless truth of God's word as revealed in the Bible. However, the unchanging truth of the gospel has to be applied in the ever-changing contexts of contemporary life.
2. In the few specific comments relating to the role of women, Paul was concerned that certain activities were creating a barrier to the gospel. For Paul, the life of the church should honor the gospel and create an environment conducive to the spread of the gospel. This concern is the context of the two prohibitive texts on gender (1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2). Men and women were acting in ways that hindered the gospel message. Following Paul's example, we believe that our practice of restricting women's roles creates a barrier for the gospel today.
3. We believe in God's call to unity for matters of faith and tolerance in other matters. Each of us has a sacred task to maintain the unity that God has created in the church (Eph 4.1-3). But we also know that in every generation, the journey of the church means that we must find our way into new circumstances and new situations. The way that we negotiate those new circumstances is by faithful reading of Scripture, prayer, discernment, conversation, and by the use of an important principle that became a core value for the Stone-Campbell movement. "In matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion, liberty; in all things, charity." Thus in these matters of judgment and practice we are convicted by the importance of exercising love and restraint toward each other.
4. Although the gospel does not change, cultures do. Current American society allows women essentially the same rights and privileges as men—making discrimination on the basis of gender illegal. When we fail to reckon with such cultural realities, we hinder the spread of the gospel and bring reproach upon the church's witness. It took years to do so, but we have come to recognize this with regard to the institution of slavery, but still we linger over the matter of gender.
5. Over a century ago the Stone-Campbell churches wrestled with gender issues. The response was not uniform and different congregations took different routes. This historical backdrop reminds us of the particular task that falls to Northlake in Atlanta today—to constantly ask anew what it means for the church to faithfully demonstrate the gospel.

God's Sons and Daughters

God's promise through the ages came to fruition on the day of Pentecost not long after Jesus' resurrection. The promise was that God would send His Spirit upon all people, young and old, men and women (Acts 2.17ff.). God's gift was available to all—without distinction. This release of God's Spirit in the preaching of

Jesus Christ launched the beginnings of a new turn in history. The curse of the fall (Gen 3) finds reversal in Jesus Christ. The church is the new community, reflecting God's redemptive intention for the whole world.

We see how the gift of the Spirit upon God's people is worked out through the lens of Paul's letters. In Galatians 3.26ff., Paul makes the remarkable claim that in baptism the barriers of race, social status and gender are altered. That is why Paul can argue so vigorously in 1 Corinthians that every Christian is a recipient of the Holy Spirit's gift and each person should be valued in the practice of that gift (1 Cor 12). To allow some to use their gifts and others to be restricted runs counter to the inclusive nature of the gospel message.

To be sure, there are two texts that set restrictions on women's participation in the church's life (1 Cor 14 and 1 Tim 2). However, when we work our way through the New Testament we also discover examples of women who are praying (1 Cor 11.5), prophesying (Acts 21.9), teaching (Acts 18.26), co-working, serving, and leading congregations (see Rom 16 and Phil 4). Since we believe that we must hear all of what Scripture has to say on a matter, our commitment is to hold the breadth of these wide claims together and seek for a "common sense" understanding. After much study and prayer, we have concluded that Paul made his restrictive statements to specific and limited circumstances.

The power of the gospel to transform hearts and lives launches a new creation, a new community. We are to share the good news of Jesus and the foundation of that sharing begins by the way in which we embody the gospel of Jesus Christ in our life together. That is why practices, such as the roles men and women play in our ministry and in our worship, matter.

Our vision for Northlake is for it to be a church where the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, so that people may be reconciled to God and their lives transformed. We long to see Northlake be a community where the sons and the daughters of God are free to exercise the gifts that God has given to them to build up the body and bear witness to the gospel in all aspects of our congregation's life. Thus, we encourage all—men and women alike—who have been blessed with talents to use them in full participation in Northlake's ministries and worship.

Thus, with confidence in God's leading, we affirm that both men and women who have the desire to serve should be permitted to fully participate in our assemblies, including activities such as reading Scripture, serving communion, teaching or offering prayers. Further, both men and women have served Northlake in the past as ministry leaders, and we re-affirm this practice. As a living community, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," we can do no less as we embody the truth of the gospel (1 Pet 2.9).

Because we are a community bound together by the grace of God and nurtured by love and mutual respect, pursuing such a path means that we do so aware of a wide range of convictions. So our path forward is one characterized by sensitivity and appreciation for the many opinions that exist. We call upon the whole congregation to show forbearance and love to all, so that the gospel of Jesus Christ is honored by our words and our conduct.

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