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Women's Participation in the Worship, Life and Work of the University Church of Christ, Malibu, California

STUART L. LOVE

I want to thank Kathy Pulley for the opportunity of recounting at least some of the process and progress of women's participation in various ministries and worship leadership roles in the University Church of Christ in Malibu, California. At times the collective memory and my memory of this series of actions are not precise, and, at other times written evidence is no longer available. With these disclaimers I will follow the story of change in this particular congregation, as I best know it. Today, if you visit our church, women lead in prayer, read scripture, serve the Lord's Supper, alongside men present Lord's Supper meditations, make announcements, teach adult Bible classes for both men and women and fulfill various tasks as servant leaders in our servant ministry system. At one time our youth minister was a woman, and presently one of our campus ministers is a woman, a position that she has held for approximately twelve years. In other words, the congregation today is gender-inclusive for the most part, except for those who serve as elders and the person hired as the preaching minister of the church.

A "formal" history can be dated from as early as 1988. From that time a slow process of change has taken place that spans a period of about twenty-three years. Needless to say, a number of elders and church members have been involved but none of the elders who began the course of change through a study of scripture in 1988 serve as church leaders today. Several have died. Others have moved away or attend nearby churches. In addition, beyond what I refer to as the "formal" sequence of change, other significant events can be identified from as early as 1979 that have had bearing on our current outlook and practices. I would suggest the following key moments.

1. In the fall of 1979, adults and college students met together in a combined class of adults and were taught by a man and a woman on Wednesday evening in the worship location of the church, Elkins Auditorium. The occasion stirred considerable reaction, both positive and negative, within the congregation.
2. Beginning in 1988, the elders at their meetings and members in homes studied the gender question deliberately and sporadically for nearly ten years.
3. In 1992 Pepperdine University made a decision for women's full inclusion in religious services sponsored by the University.
4. In the mid-1990s a gender-inclusive worship service was conducted at least once a month in the home of one of the members.
5. In the month of November 1997, the chairperson of the elders raised the women's question as an agenda item to be acted upon by the elders.
6. In February 1998, the church lost one of its noted leaders and elders.
7. In early 1998 focus groups of women from within the congregation met with the elders. These meetings constituted moments of listening on the part of the elders. The basic questions asked were, "How well are women able to utilize their gifts in the church's life and work? Was there a need for change?"
8. In 1998, the elders conducted a retreat. A number of issues were addressed that led to an initial set of actions that the elders believed the church could accept and implement.

9. In March 1998, a group of faculty women at Seaver College composed a draft entitled an "Affirmation for Women's Inclusion." This document was e-mailed to a large portion of the University's faculty and staff that created a challenge for the leadership of the church.
10. On May 17, 1998, a statement of change in the use of women in the worship services was read to the congregation in a combined adult Bible class.
11. On July 1, 1998, the earliest changes were implemented.
12. Finally, from 1998 to the present, subsequent changes have taken place in an ongoing process of greater gender inclusion that reflects women's participation as outlined in the introduction of this document.

I will now develop these twelve points more fully.

1. 1979.

In 1979, my wife D'Esta and I were invited by the pulpit minister to teach a Bible class on John 13 to a mixed group of adults and college students at a Wednesday evening meeting of the church. We asked whether the congregation was far enough along for this to happen because it would be the only option for members to attend and visitors would be present. The pulpit minister could think of only one person who might object and he felt that he could handle the situation if a problem arose. We were encouraged to teach the class. The person he had in mind proved not to be a problem but a male congregant at the end of the class publicly questioned what had transpired and reminded those present that what he had witnessed, a woman teaching men the word of God, was a dangerous precedent even though he admitted that he had learned from my wife. He reminded her and me that the holy women of old adorned themselves with "the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God's sight" (1 Pet 3.4). Needless to say, not only was D'Esta shamed publicly, but in addition, based on what happened, it was implied that as her husband, I had not exercised my proper marital leadership responsibility. The incident subsequently created a stir that rippled through the church and possibly served as a catalyst for future events that I will now document.

2. 1988

Beginning in 1988, the elders over time held a number of discussions in their meetings regarding the possible expansion of the role of women in the worship assembly. They also decided to encourage the study of the issue in the adult Bible classes. In addition, a number of classes were also held in homes. For example, my wife and I taught a class in a home setting for the better part of a year that was attended by fifteen to twenty persons on a regular basis. In addition, several persons outside of the congregation, ministers and Bible scholars, were invited to speak to the elders.

Yet, after these efforts, a former elder apprised me that there was still a division of opinion among the elders as to what should be done. One perspective maintained that "we" have always done things a certain way and continuing in that manner was the safe choice if we could not all agree to change. An opposite perspective maintained that because we have always done things in a certain way did not speak to the question of whether that was what we should be doing. In other words, doing nothing is not necessarily the safer choice.

However, as carefully noted by an elder at that time, "...in the midst of these differences the church maintained its unity." Probably this was because the elders respected each other's sincerity in spite of differences of opinion over the issues. The elders were committed to preserve a united front to the congregation. As that same elder put it, "We were hesitant to move forward too quickly with changes that could split our eldership and membership, though some of the elders were committed to changing opinions over time."

3. 1992

In the summer of 1992 Pepperdine University made a decision for women's full inclusion in all worship services sponsored by the University. This decision was formally set in practice when the dean of students, a woman, led the opening prayer at the first convocation in the fall of 1992. From that point women were included in all

expressions of the spiritual life of Pepperdine University. Pepperdine's president had hoped that University practices would follow the actions of the University Church. In actuality, the opposite took place: the University's policy and practice preceded and probably indirectly influenced what later took place within the congregation.

4. The mid-1990s

Returning to the University Church's odyssey, in the mid-1990s a gender-inclusive worship service was conducted frequently in a home of one of the members. Gender distinctions were ignored in these services. Both women and men led singing, read scripture, led prayer, officiated at the table and preached short sermons. A significant cross section of about fifty persons attended these services. A number of elders and their wives took an active role. Through these efforts numerous women were "trained" for their future roles in the church's Sunday morning services. One woman commented, "Those meetings served to give women of the congregation opportunities to use gifts that they weren't free to use when the church met as an entity on Sunday mornings. I experienced the sharing of insights and prayer life that was broader and deeper because of the inclusion of women's voices."

5. November 1997

In November 1997, the chairperson of the elders raised the women's question as an agenda item to be acted upon by the elders. This important decision opened the way for subsequent changes.

6. February 1998

In February 1998, one of the church's beloved leaders passed away. Many believe that he personally believed in a greater women's participation in the church's life and assembly, but he was sensitive and possibly apprehensive of possible negative signals women's participation would send to other churches and the negative political fallout this might cast on Pepperdine University's image among Churches of Christ as a whole. Also, around this period two other revered elders, who had opposed changing the historic practices of women's participation in the church's worship services, passed away.

7. Early 1998

In a series of focus group meetings, the elders met with a number of the women of the congregation, seeking their opinions about women's activities in the church. By and large the women were grateful that they had an opportunity to sit down with the elders and to express their views and talk about their gifts in the service of Christ. The women commended the elders because they wanted to know what women thought. Even though there was a diversity of viewpoints, a significant number of the women wanted change to take place. For example, a woman in her late fifties testified that she belonged to a generation of women who had little hope that change would take place in their lifetimes. Another revered older woman, whose opinions were universally respected in the congregation, told the elders that as she understood the Bible women could do anything that men could do except serve as an elder or as the preaching minister of the congregation. The focus group meetings probably had a significant effect on the elders' thinking. They were left with the basic question: what does the church do with gifted women?

8. Elders' Retreat of 1998

In 1998 a retreat was held by the elders to determine what should or could be done or not done in the near future. A number of issues were resolved and coming out of the retreat a set of actions were decided upon that the elders believed the church could accept and implement at that time. Looking back, these were extremely modest steps but given the church's history they were significant and groundbreaking. Women could do the following:

1. Serve the Lord's Supper;
2. Read scripture; and
3. Join men in community prayer settings of the church.

9. March 26, 1998

On March 26, 1998, the student newspaper of Seaver College, the *Graphic*, reported in an article that twelve faculty women and one female student had composed a draft of their "Affirmation for Women's Inclusion" and e-mailed it to a large portion of the University's faculty and staff. The central affirmation of the letter was a vision statement that "women should be fully included in all aspects of public worship and church life..." Those who signed the draft were part of an informal weekly lunch group that had been discussing a series of letters and articles in the *Graphic* concerning the woman's role in the church. One of those who signed the document wrote, "It's not a manifesto. It's not a call-to-arms. It's not a petition. It's not an angry piece. These are things we believe." A list of the thirteen women who signed the original draft of the letter included both members and non-members of the University Church of Christ. From the elders' perspective, this action came at an inopportune time because their schedule for action was about to commence. The elders did not want their initiative, a product of prayerful labor for months and years, to be construed as a knee-jerk response to the women's vision statement. However, in spite of what they perceived as bad timing, the elders moved ahead and presented the changes they believed the church was ready to accept in the Sunday morning worship services.

10. May 17, 1998

A statement of change along with a theological rationale for the change was delivered by one of the elders at a combined adult Bible class of the church. Following the presentation all of the elders made oral statements of support for the impending changes and several in tears confessed their own imperfections over the issue. Prayer took place.

I have looked in vain for a copy of that statement of change, but apparently, it has been lost. The elders were concerned that the general disbursement of public, written statements of a decision that pertained only to the University Church of Christ, might be quoted and used out of context. It was believed as well that the Church and the University could be placed in an unwarranted defensive posture.

Reaction to the statement of the elders was diverse. Most of the congregation eagerly accepted the changes. Very few members decided to leave the congregation. Perhaps the most notable group was a small group of the women, perhaps no more than four in number, who had signed the statement of affirmation mentioned above. Two of the women who signed the document remained and have made significant contributions to the life and work of the congregation since that occasion. The rest were not members of the University Church of Christ. No one openly declared that they would change their membership because of what was decided. However, the elders realized that a small number of families disagreed with the decision. Pastoral care was given to these families and for a relatively short period of time (a few months) an alternative worship service took place and those who disagreed met separately. As one person put it, "As women's vocal participation came to seem more natural and less revolutionary, that group ceased to meet." They did not leave. Rather, they attended the worship services of the congregation as a whole.

11. July 1, 1998

The changes outlined by the elders were implemented in the worship services.

12. Present Practices

Since 1998 additional changes have taken place. The elders believed that none of these changes required a public statement of change and/or presentation to the church. The process, this writer believes, is still ongoing.

Conclusion

What concluding observations can be made of the University Church of Christ's story? First, it is evident that the church pursued a policy of gradualism. For many, the changes came at a snail's pace. This approach had a positive effect: the church remained unified over a twenty-three-year period of flux. This is quite significant when a fresh group of students enters the church each year and as new faculty and staff are hired by the

University. A negative effect is expressed in the frustrated conviction of one man in the church who is capable of preaching, praying, leading singing and teaching adult classes. "I refuse to take part in any activity of the church if a woman is not permitted to participate in the same way."

Second, changes within the church were and are tied inextricably to what transpires in the University. On the positive side the church has benefitted from the University's decision not to discriminate against women in its religious services and activities. That decision and ensuing practice is a powerful testimony at chapel services, annual Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations and at the yearly Baccalaureate Service. Church members and students witness and participate in these events that in turn shape their views of Christianity and the church. In addition, the Religion Division has a course that is frequently taught entitled "Women in the Early Church." On the downside, some would see the University as casting an overwhelming shadow over the church. For example, when a woman, the dean of students, led the opening prayer of the school year in 1992, the event was documented in numerous Church of Christ worship bulletins around the world. One person remarked, "That was a prayer heard around the world." Also, when University administrators serve as church elders, the mix makes for potential challenging political dynamics. Perhaps a twenty-three-year process could have been shortened without harm if the congregation was not the University Church of Christ.

Third, certain changes remain for the time being off the table. These include the appointment of women elders and the possibility of a paid woman serving as the preaching minister. To this writer, major hermeneutical shifts are required for these beliefs and practices to change.

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