

1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Robinson, Thomas L. and Henegar, Amy Bost (2012) "Women Fully Using Their Gifts: The Journey of the Manhattan Church of Christ," *Leaven*: Vol. 20: Iss. 2, Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol20/iss2/7>

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Women Fully Using Their Gifts: The Journey of the Manhattan Church of Christ

THOMAS L. ROBINSON AND AMY BOST HENEGAR

Since January 2000 the Manhattan Church of Christ has regularly included women participating in the leadership of our worship services. Women also participate in many ways in leading various teaching and service ministries of the church outside of our worship services. Our aim is for every person in the church to be able to use their spiritual gifts fully as part of their growth in discipleship and to build up the church.

As we try briefly to tell the story of the journey that led our congregation to this point, it's in some ways hard to remember what it was like before. For those of us who have been part of the congregation for several years, it's hard to imagine worship without the voices of both women and men in prayer, reading, communion meditation, teaching and leading in worship. The historical part of this narrative will be primarily from the point of view of Tom Robinson, a member of the congregation since 1979, an elder since 1993 and preaching minister since 1996. Amy Bost Henegar came to New York City in 1999 as a hospital chaplain and in 2001 joined the church staff as family life minister as well as having other responsibilities. She will especially reflect on the impact of women's participation on the spiritual life of the congregation.

Early Steps and Discussions

For many years, members of the Manhattan Church of Christ (MCOC) often thought of themselves as a kind of mission outpost church—mostly of members from the South and Southwest who for one reason or another were in New York City for a limited period of time. We continue to have a strong southern presence with many Christian university graduates. Every Sunday, almost without fail, we have at least one visitor from Nashville. But since the 1980s, the congregation has had a growing percentage of permanent or native New Yorkers, as well as people who have come to New York City from other parts of the world (Africa, Europe, South America, Asia, Australia). When I (TR) first came to MCOC in 1979, there were already people here who were discussing the issue of women's roles in the church with active interest, though in practice, women's roles were identical to those in most other Churches of Christ.

One of the earliest sparks that I remember took place on a congregational retreat in the mid-1980s when an older woman read scripture to the assembled group including men. There was no negative reaction from those present, but later one of the elders who had not been on the retreat was sufficiently upset that the retreat was cancelled for the next year. The incident stimulated increased discussion and Bible study.

In that period, I was especially involved in the church as a Bible teacher. I taught classes on Genesis, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, the Gospels and other texts that repeatedly touched on the Biblical description of women's discipleship. There was always lively interest in discussing those issues when they came up, but the issues around women were simply one of many topics that helped us explore how the Bible—and especially the New Testament—functions to guide Christian life. God has given us the scriptures in a distinct and remarkable way that shapes the kind of community and individuals he wants us to be.

One context in which extensive discussion of women in the church occurred was an extended series of classes in the early 1990s on Restoration Movement history. There was strong interest in the development of our hermeneutic of scriptural authority, as well as in such fascinating characters as Selina Holman in the 1880s and other women.

Studies in the Congregation

In the period after those classes, I talked with the elders of the congregation and soon began a long series of studies for adults on Sunday morning that explicitly dealt with the many scriptures throughout the Bible that might affect our understanding of women's leadership in worship and other functions of the church.

The elders were largely in agreement that it was biblical, or at least not unbiblical, for women to have increased roles of leadership, but there was considerable diversity of feeling about the pace or timetable on which actual changes might emerge. There were natural concerns about whether changes would alienate some members or would cause our congregation to offend the many visitors we have from other parts of the country. Some felt that the danger of division was so great that changes would likely occur only several decades into the future. Others felt equally strongly that we were already losing many people—many young people, potential converts in New York City and others—because our worship services were exclusively male in leadership.

The elders were all in agreement, however, that the most fundamental issue was biblical teaching, and thus we devoted several months to a Sunday study of the scriptures open to all adults. The discussions ranged very widely from the creation in Genesis to the visions in Revelation and often brought out expressions of people's personal experiences in many congregations. The class discussion led to studies in small groups and innumerable individual conversations. It's impossible to summarize such an experience, but a growing conviction emerged in the congregation about several points that can be highlighted:

1. Jesus in both word and practice shows that he treated both men and women exactly the same, taking each person seriously and treating each person with honor and respect. He was very aware of the strong prejudices and legal disabilities against women in the society around him and actively broke down those barriers. He welcomed women in the group of disciples traveling with him in spite of potential disapproval. He never gave any indication that women were to be silent or take no leadership role among the disciples. After his resurrection, he revealed himself first to women, in spite of the fact that women's testimony was not acceptable in the courts of the time.
2. In the early church the gift of the Holy Spirit was given explicitly to both men and women with the intention that both sexes participate in spreading the gospel: "Your sons and daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2.17). Paul describes how, in fact, in the church in Corinth both men and women pray and prophesy, which he defines as speaking to people for their upbuilding, encouragement and consolation (1 Cor 11.4–5; 14.3–5). Paul is very aware of how shameful it was, in that society, for a respectable woman to speak publicly, and thus he urges them to wear head-coverings but not to silence their prophetic gifts. Rather, Paul insists that he hopes that all the Corinthian believers will be able to prophesy. In other words, the early church, like the circle around Jesus, was a place where women experienced a freedom to use their spiritual gifts to teach and lead, a freedom that they would be permitted practically nowhere else in society.
3. The well-known limitations on women speaking that are given in 1 Corinthians 14.34–35 and 1 Timothy 2.11–15 are given for specific causes and were never intended to limit all women for all time. The situations that they deal with were much clearer to the recipients of the letters, who knew the situation, than they are to us, but the biblical texts include clear indications that specific problems are involved. In Corinth the problem that was causing unnecessary shame may well have been wives participating in the public evaluation and questioning of their husbands' prophecies when they could ask their questions at home. The situation in Ephesus (1 Tim) is much disputed. Paul's strange reference to women being saved by bearing children may be explained by the fact that many women in Ephesus were caught up in the heresy that Timothy was fighting there, a teaching that forbade Christians to marry. In both cases the scriptures show that these texts were not intended as universal laws.

4. The outcome of these studies was that the New Testament expects women to receive gifts of the Holy Spirit just as men do, and it intends for women to use those gifts just as men do. The scriptural limitations arise when the use of those gifts brings a public shame that blocks people from hearing the gospel or when the gifts are being used to promote a heresy.

Changing our Doctrine

Notes from the long series of studies were partly brought together in a published form that came to be called "A Community without Barriers." The ideas were discussed in small groups, other classes, private conversations and in-depth conversations among the elders.

Gradually, as the 1990s were coming to an end, the elders came to a consensus that the scriptures were calling us to recognize spiritual gifts of women and to stop blocking their full use. We knew that we had discussed the issue with practically everyone in the congregation in one way or another. We believed that the time had come to act, but we were still cautious of the pastoral impact that such change might have.

We thought seriously about polling the congregation for a sort of vote on the issue. The idea was rejected, however, because we all believed that the decision was a matter of leading the congregation to follow the teaching of scripture rather than seeking a majority vote. We all decided that we would announce the coming changes in December 1999 and begin implementing them in January 2000. In connection with the announcement, I preached a sermon summarizing the scriptural rationale for the changes and how the scripture calls us to continued restoration.

On Sunday, January 23, 2000, an elderly woman named Garnetta Lovett, one of the most beloved matriarchs of the congregation, got up to read scripture. She also extemporized a brief exhortation to the whole congregation and received loud amens. We were on our way.

At first, the participation of women was limited to reading, prayer, serving communion and making announcements. In January 2003 women began participating in all worship roles, including communion meditations, leading the congregation in singing and preaching.

Positive and Negative Responses

The response of the congregation to these changes was overwhelmingly positive, but not without exception. After the initial changes, we had one large family who withdrew in protest and began going to a congregation closer to their home. Another family stayed with us but expressed strong objections to the changes. These were in the English language portion of our congregation. We also had a much smaller Spanish language section of our congregation. There, I and the other elders had not been as effective in communicating the biblical reasons for the changes. Almost half of the congregation, about twenty to twenty-five people, felt they could not accept the changes and decided to start a new Spanish congregation in the Bronx. This was a hard blow for our Spanish language ministry, but it has since built back up stronger than ever, and there are now two Spanish congregations in the place of one.

I do not know of anyone whose faith in Jesus was damaged by the changes, but many have expressed the sense that they would not have considered attending our congregation if only men were allowed to lead. We occasionally have visitors who are surprised and troubled by our worship. Some will walk out while others stay and observe. Often we receive a "Welcome" card with the visitor's name and a question such as, "Haven't you ever read 1 Corinthians 14.34-36?" We, of course, welcome such visitors and want to understand their thoughts to whatever extent they are willing to share.

We do not know how many members of the Church of Christ come to New York City and attend other congregations rather than ours because of this issue. Since we pray for God's blessings on all other congregations, we don't see this as a problem. The addition of women's leadership in worship and other areas has been such a blessing that our congregation could hardly imagine going back.

In the final sections of this narrative Amy Bost Henegar shares her own reflections and several statements from a variety of our members about their experiences.

The Impact of the Changes on Our Congregation

The decision to include women in full congregational leadership and participation was initiated out of a commitment to follow the biblical witness as accurately as possible, but numerous unintended blessings have come to us as we minister and worship in an environment of gender inclusivity.

I (ABH) became a part of the ministry staff just six months after the first set of changes took place. Although my primary responsibilities at the beginning were ministry to the children of the congregation, within two years I was invited to preach the Sunday morning sermon on the subject of children and their place within our faith community. It just made sense that I, the children's minister, would communicate our vision for children to the rest of the congregation. For the first time in seven years, my three preaching classes at Fuller Seminary came into use in my own congregation. In the years that have followed I have had the joy of preaching for various services. In 2006, the elders asked me to re-envision our celebration of Mother's Day. We decided to broaden our Mother's Day services to celebrate not only those who are biologically mothers, but also our spiritual mothers. This has become an annual day to celebrate women in the church, from Genesis until the present.

I am continually grateful for the way in which men and women work together at the Manhattan Church of Christ. I spent some time discussing our inclusive community with some of our members. In the following sections I share some of their quotes along with my reflections on the blessings we have received as a result of these changes.

A New Understanding of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Through women and men working side by side in leading worship and ministry, we have experienced that the body of Christ is made up of wonderfully unique and gifted individuals, gifted by the Holy Spirit to participate in the life-giving work of the gospel. These gifts aren't limited by race or class or gender, but they are given freely by God, and we are privileged and responsible to discover what our gifts are and to use them in his kingdom. Service in the kingdom of God is not simply "volunteer work" or "lending a helping hand." Rather, it is using one's divinely provided gifts to spread the gospel, in word and deed. Consider the following statement from one of the women in our congregation:

For me, the study that we did from the perspective of spiritual gifts, rather than from the perspectives of race, class and gender that I had heard throughout my life, brought my beliefs in sync. I already believed that I was formed in God's image and cared for before I was born, and the understanding I came to regarding my own role in the church was powerful and overwhelmingly emotional. Not only did God make me purposefully, but he has a plan for me in his church. The gifts he has given me can be used for his purpose and for his glory—right among his people, and without limits. And I do not take this opportunity for granted. Each time I am asked to read a scripture, offer a congregational prayer or provide a communion meditation, my faith is strengthened and deepened by participating, fully, in these holy acts of worship.

A Re-ordering of Our Priorities

Our congregation takes no delight in upsetting people, and our hearts are broken every time a visitor feels the need to leave the service as a matter of conscience. However, the fact that people are offended doesn't negate the call to continually strive to worship God in spirit and in truth. These priorities are expressed in the following statement from one of the women in our congregation:

I remember after a communion meditation being told that a visitor had left, seemingly because I'm a female. My first response was, "Oh no. That's not what I want to have happen. I don't want to be the cause of someone leaving a church service." But then I thought about my daughters. How would I have felt if it was one of them who was walked out on? I want my children to have such a strong faith that they feel comfortable going in front of a church body to talk about what God

has done in their lives. Do I ever want my daughters to feel like they can't profess their faith, especially inside of their own church, simply because they are women? Absolutely not. I'm so thankful that my two daughters and my son have many wonderful male and female role models who are leaders in our community of faith.

A New Understanding of the Kingdom of God

While the world tells us we must prove our worth, and justify our right to be heard, in the kingdom of God a person's value comes directly from their creator, and from their identity as disciples of Jesus. By the grace of God with ever-increasing clarity, we strive to live out these values in the church. The following statement from one of the women in our congregation beautifully explains these truths:

The inclusion of women at Manhattan reminds me that the church is to be a group of people who are governed by Kingdom values, not the world's values. I've heard it argued that this is exactly why we should stick closely to the passages like the one admonishing women to be silent—we're to "value God's Word" above whatever "man" tells us is acceptable. But I've come to understand the opposite: God's Word tells us that there is no male nor female in Christ, and scripture is rich with examples of women who were leaders in the early church. Although women enjoy more recognition of their rights in our society than ever before, we still face regular discrimination, harassment, disparity in access to resources, and violence based on our gender. A gender-inclusive church, as a place where women's voices are welcomed and their inclusion is invited, proclaims to the world that we allow God's vision to define us. This serves as a constant reminder to me and my sisters of what our true identity is in Christ.

Demystifying Motherhood

As a result of the limits placed on women in Christian service, the church has historically elevated the value of motherhood beyond a biblical perspective (see Luke 11.27–28). By seeing women first and foremost as disciples of Jesus, equally called and responsible, we are able, as a community, to treat motherhood honestly. This has become pastorally significant for those who have painful memories regarding their own mothers, as well as for women in our congregation who have experienced difficulty in their personal roles as mothers (infertility, singleness, divorce, difficulties in raising children and more).

In our community motherhood is neither elevated nor denigrated; rather it is celebrated as one of God's great blessings and challenges. The following statement from one of the men in our congregation illustrates this dynamic:

One of the most memorable times for me was on Mother's Day several years ago when my wife was asked to lead the prayer for the congregation and speak a few words about motherhood. I am sure she was asked because she is a mother of three children, but what emerged was something unexpected. Her mother had a tough time filling the role of mother so her role model was her grandmother. For her, Mother's Day has always been a time for reflection about our family but not a time for warm memories about her mother. Sharing this insight was hard and uncomfortable for her. However, it was liberating for her to be able to be truthful in front of an audience of her Christian family. It allowed her to speak of an experience that resonated with many, but on past Mother's Days had to experience alone and with a sad emptiness. I could see how others were affected by her testimony and I was gratified that this brave, strong Christian woman could share her life with others because our congregation gave her a voice to speak.

Participating in Worship Is Taken Seriously

We have noticed that women, perhaps because most have not grown up in churches that invited them to participate in public leadership, take the task of speaking in the worship service very seriously. They often

come prepared with written prayers, communion meditations, testimonies and more. This has reminded all of us of the awesome privilege and responsibility we have when we lead God's people in worship. Consider the following statement from one of the men in our congregation:

One of the most striking things that I have noticed is the way the women have prepared for their participation. The carefully thought-out and written notes that have been used for prayers and meditations have stimulated the men, too, to be more prepared and not just settle for "off the cuff" comments that too often become trite. Women have raised the bar and helped us all be better participants in worship.

A Challenge for Women (and Everyone) to Profess Their Faith Boldly

Being silent is always easier than prayerfully, thoughtfully speaking words of faith. In our congregation all Christians are challenged to overcome their fears and grow into spiritual leaders. Instead of worrying about "who cannot" be involved in our services, we now ask "who can" be involved? Instead of creating a list of those who are not qualified to publicly speak, we rather spend our energy encouraging members of our congregation to prayerfully reflect on the work of God in their lives, and courageously share their faith for the edification of others. The two statements below from women in our congregation illustrate the personal challenge they experienced to prayerfully and courageously step into leadership roles.

Growing up I was never taught, nurtured, nor asked to pray out loud, aside from a simple prayer at the family dinner table. All other prayer I engaged in was private—in my head, under my breath, or alone in my room. Like anything in life that you don't have much experience with, it became a point of anxiety and fear for me. I'm not a shy person, but being part of an inclusive community and being asked to pray out loud made me irrationally nervous! I would feel the pull to speak but then be choked by this voice that said, "What if I sound stupid or I fumble my words?" I'm four years into being a part of an egalitarian community and only in the past six months has that fear almost subsided. It has taken three years for me to make up for that lost time. We as people learn through doing, through action, and I've learned so much about prayer in the past three years, so much about my relationships with my brothers and sisters, and so much about the character and person of God through engaging with God in public prayer both on Sunday morning and in small group settings. It's a whole other area that I've just recently tapped into, and it has drawn me so much closer to my community and to God.

Coming from a traditional Church of Christ, I was very skeptical when I first attended MCOC. But I stayed. I heard the inspired voices and hearts of the women at this church. I read "A Community without Barriers." And for the first time, I finally heard my own voice read a scripture, give a testimony, and pray out loud. The women at MCOC have taught me so much about God and my own ability to tell his story. However, I cannot help but feel sad that I wasn't able to hear the voices of the great women with whom I grew up.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I'd like to share one more quote from a woman in our congregation.

One Sunday last spring I was sitting next to a visitor (probably 60-something male from a Bible-belt Church of Christ). I had a nice conversation with him during the greeting time. Part of the conversation was what I like to call "Church of Christ credentialing" where he asks various questions including where I grew up, where I went to college, etc. At the end of the service I spoke with him again and he was tiptoeing around a question for a while. Finally, he

asked me if it ever bothered me having women speaking in the service. I assured him that it did not make me uncomfortable at all and told him it was the first time worship has ever truly felt right to me. Until he asked me the question, I don't think I'd ever articulated how it had never felt right to me before.

We know as well as anyone the dangers of making decisions based on what "feels right." However, with decisions made prayerfully, in the context of rigorous study of holy scripture, we have found rest and joy in the knowledge that God's will is being done in our midst. For further information see our website: manhattanchurch.org and communitywithoutbarriers.com (the study book "A Community without Barriers" is available for download as a pdf file.)

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