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How Change Happens: Reflections on Gender-Inclusive Churches

KENNETH L. CUKROWSKI

The narratives of gender-inclusive churches are important; they detail the ways that congregations have navigated this challenging transition. Through these stories, we gain insight into successes and failures, and these records contribute to our knowledge about this change in our congregations. For instance, a recent article on gender inclusivity in Churches of Christ reveals that 1) at least sixty-six congregations in 2011 practice gender inclusivity; 2) rather than being confined to particular regions, these congregations extend geographically across the United States; and 3) congregations have been exploring this issue “for at least the last fifty years.”

Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill has explained political anomalies in a general election with this line: “All politics is local.” In a general election, we recognize larger movements to be sure, but we also notice complexity and diversity when we look at the local level. What is true for the political landscape is also true for the religious landscape; one can discern both general trends and diversity in the stories of these specific congregations. In what follows, I extract some general observations about change from our authors’ stories, from my personal experiences as a member in three separate congregations, and from my work as a speaker to churches considering this change.

Ten Reflections on Change

1. Change happens slowly. In the United States, consider the issues of slavery, women’s suffrage and the civil rights movement; each of these changes to the fabric of our nation took significant time, and, even now, many years later, changes linked to those movements continue today. If change happens this way in the political and social realms, it’s not surprising that it happens similarly in our churches. Whether it should happen that slowly, however, is a completely different question.
2. Change often does not occur in regular, incremental ways; rather, it begins slowly, a critical mass is reached, and then it moves quickly. For instance, the Arab Spring, which only began in December of 2010, has already resulted in revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, and protests in at least ten other Arab nations. In the context of gender equality, it is significant that books like *Half the Sky*, which addresses the oppression of women, are hitting the bestseller lists and spawning movements on behalf of women worldwide. It isn’t just the church that is noticing the way that women are treated.
3. Change is more difficult in homogenous contexts. For example, it is less likely for a Muslim to convert in rural North Africa than in cosmopolitan Paris; in the former context, more ties secure the populace to the status quo. Churches need to be aware of the demographic factors that influence change, such as tradition, family, ethnicity, politics, class and education, to name only a few.

1. Stephen C. Johnson and Lynette Sharp Penya, “What the Other Half Is Doing: An Analysis of Gender Inclusivity in Church of Christ Congregations,” *RQ* 53 (2011): 221–233, esp. 224–225, 228–229.

4. Change requires some prompt. A prompt can be intellectual (e.g., new information; cognitive dissonance), emotional (e.g., harsh words; injustice), social (e.g., Abilene Christian University's apology to African Americans), or personal (e.g., being led or inspired by a charismatic or respected leader, such as Martin Luther King Jr. or an elder).
5. Change requires taking a risk and making a decision. The risk may be personal or financial; the decision may result in criticism, pain and loss. Nevertheless, faith implies some level of risk; there will not be a time in our congregations when risk is eliminated. Our churches need leaders who will make brave and faithful decisions.
6. Change has a generational aspect; in other words, new default modes are continually being created, often within one generation. For instance, integration on buses, in bathrooms and at lunch counters—all significant issues less than fifty years ago—is a non-issue for people today.
7. Stories motivate change, which is one reason why these authors' stories are so important. It is also important for the voices of women, previously muted, to be heard. On this topic, I recommend the website Half the Church, which collects the stories of women who have experienced a call to ministry (<http://halfthechurch.wordpress.com>).
8. Change in churches on this issue has been based on the study of scripture; that is, churches have become gender-inclusive *because of* and not *despite* scripture. For virtually every member who returns to the Bible, there is new evidence on the table, as people discover what women are doing in the Bible. It has been my experience in general, however, that students on college campuses are more motivated by the stories of women who have experienced a call to ministry than by the study of scripture.
9. People need time to make the transition from head to heart. A person may very well be convinced that women can, for instance, serve communion; actually seeing a women do so for the first time, or actually participating herself, will elicit strong emotions. Individuals should expect to feel strong emotions when gender is addressed. Gender is one of the earliest and most foundational expressions of human identity: at the birth of a child, one often hears "It's a girl!" or "It's a boy!" Leaders need to acknowledge that discussions about gender will stir strong emotion—whether it be butterflies in the stomach, tightness in the chest, or tears on the cheeks; setting this expectation goes a long way toward mitigating the surprise or the deleterious effects of these powerful emotions.
10. Change is aided by positive (versus negative) rationales. For example, it is not likely that a call for change based on "my rights" will (or should) motivate change in churches; instead, leaders should issue calls for the church to live out the Creation narrative, where both men and women are created in God's image, to use the Spirit-given gifts of all the members, and to serve as one body, where there is no male and female in Christ.

Our best efforts, even guided by the experiences of the past, do not guarantee success, because leading change is not so much a matter of finding the right formula; rather, it is a wise mixture of patience, courage, discernment and action. The narratives in this issue demonstrate that such change is possible, and they provide examples and hope for other congregations.

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