

1-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Gentry, Elizabeth K. (2014) "Omission from Our Commission," *Leaven*: Vol. 22: Iss. 2, Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol22/iss2/8>

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Omission from Our Commission

Elizabeth K. Gentry

Thomas Campbell, in his “Declaration and Address,” spoke about the central importance of mission. As he put it, Christians are on mission from God to disciple others towards Christ, not to fight with each other. The founders of the Stone-Campbell Movement fought fearlessly against the “heinous nature and pernicious tendency of religious controversy” in order to complete our God-given mission—making disciples.¹ While no one can deny the Stone-Campbell Movement has controversies and divisions, as do our sister congregations in the Church catholic, at the same time none can deny certain controversies should hold more importance than others. (Indeed, Alexander Campbell himself was known as the Great Debater.)

Problems arise when we succumb to one of two extremes. On the one hand, *conversations* about non-essentials are treated as *controversies* over essentials; on the other hand, church leaders may refuse to engage in conversation. Herein lies the danger to our central mission: matters that the founders saw as conversations within the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ (commonly referred to as “4Cs”) unnecessarily become controversies. In this regard, the gender controversy is prominent—*what does Scripture say about women in ministry?*

In the Restoration spirit of “no creed but Christ,” 4Cs congregations are having this conversation for two reasons. First, no creed exists to give every 4Cs congregation an answer and second, the congregations understand that this conversation affects the essence of their mission. This paper will summarize the particular experiences of four 4Cs congregations that have engaged this conversation and how each has come to the conclusion that women should serve in and lead their churches in some capacity.

University Christian Church (“University”)

University is a well-developed church plant in the urban Cincinnati area. The church began in 1989 in a living room as an outreach to college students and has now expanded to a large building in Uptown with about 250 in attendance on any given Sunday. Along with having a Bible-based foundation, University seeks justice both within its community and around the globe.² The personal experience of Mandy Smith, published author and the plant’s female lead pastor, speaks to University’s journey regarding the women in ministry conversation.

Smith came to University in 1990 and has served on its staff for six years, at first planning and overseeing worship services and now as its lead pastor. When she began her worship ministry, the question of whether she *was permitted* do so was not an issue—the question simply did not come up because it was a non-essential to the budding life of the new church plant. It was not until they saw leadership potential in Smith that University realized they needed to address the issue. In earlier years, when Smith was a member but not on staff, the congregation’s then-pastor preached the traditional complementarian view from the pulpit: women

1. Thomas Campbell, “Declaration and Address,” in *Historical Documents, Advocating Christian Union: Epoch-making Statements by Leaders among the Disciples of Christ for the Restoration of the Christianity of the New Testament: Its Doctrines, its Ordinances, and its Fruits*, edited by Charles Alexander Young (Chicago: The Christian Century Company, 1904).

2. Visit www.universitychristianchurch.net for more information regarding church details.

are loved, but will not be allowed to preach. Needless to say, Smith remembers the traditional sermon shocking the congregation. Women had been serving in supporting roles for years; in fact, one of University's founders was a woman. Sadly, Smith notes that a close friend, who was working towards a PhD in leadership, left University the Sunday that message was delivered.

By the early 2000s, University had hired a new lead pastor as well as a woman as their children's pastor and by the mid-2000s women were serving in top leadership positions in the church with much encouragement from the lead pastor. In 2007, the church leadership began to recognize strong leadership capabilities in Smith. Because of the potential they saw in her, Smith gradually stepped into the lead pastor position. In addition, three women were added to the lead team, and multiple women on staff were allowed to preach on occasion. Spurred in part by Smith's new role, the leaders of the church began the women-in-ministry conversation over the next two years. The conversation took place across every level of leadership in the church from the elders' meetings to a Sunday morning sermon series.³ Because of the leaders' missional mindset—desiring to share the love of Jesus with their neighborhood and develop lifelong kingdom leaders—University decided to allow women into all areas of leadership.

The University congregation responded with grace. Though one couple was uncomfortable, the congregation as a whole embraced the change. Because the culture of University tended to be part of a majority anti-high church and post-Christian mindset, the congregation did not see why the issue should come up. For University, having women in high levels of leadership has bolstered their mission in their context and has allowed it to develop the *entire* congregation into leaders. Its leadership realized God was working in and through the lives of Smith and other women, so they allowed the spirit of the culture to coincide with the spirit of the biblical text. In the end, though University held the conversation, they did not suffer a controversy.

Community Christian Church (“CCC”)

Community Christian Church in White Marsh, a suburb of Baltimore, is a church planted by multiple larger churches, including Mountain Christian Church in nearby Joppa and Orchard Group, a church-planting organization. Dave Robinson is the senior minister at CCC and was on staff at Mountain when that church worked through its vision of planting twenty area churches by the year 2020. CCC launched on March 5, 2006, with the help of Orchard Group and the full support of Mountain, Fork Christian, and New Life Church. Within the first year, CCC grew to about 500 people and, as of this year, has doubled in attendance. At its inception, an external management team from Mountain, Fork Christian, New Life, Avoca Christian Church, and Orchard Group served CCC in order to insure a healthy beginning. CCC began with four people on staff, two of which were women. On two occasions, women in the congregation co-preached alongside Robinson.

For the congregation, having women lead publically was never an issue. As Robinson pointed out, the issue of women in ministry was a non-essential; thus, it did not become a controversy. Even so, Robinson and the leadership did realize that because CCC's practice of women in ministry was more open than that of their founding congregations, they needed to discern what they believed Scripture said about this issue. So, in year four of CCC's existence, they brought on their own team of elders and decided it was time to have the conversation about women in ministry.

The CCC staff and leadership team went on a retreat to study the scriptures relating to women in ministry. In conjunction with this retreat, CCC had conversations with three area senior pastors. They also had a panel discussion to hear both the complementarian and egalitarian arguments with Robin Underhill (a local professor) and Ethan Magness (pastor of spiritual formation at Mountain) respectively. While the leadership engrossed itself in the texts, Robinson and the other teaching pastors began a six-week sermon series titled “Questions.” For two of the six weeks, CCC led the congregation through biblical passages regarding women in leadership; the second week was about eldership in particular. The “Questions” series took place in the spring and, in the fall of the same year, CCC presented those who had been through the extensive process of becoming an elder; one of these prospects was a woman. As Robinson made the point

3. Smith could not give me any documentation of their elders' meetings due to a fire they had at the church.

to the congregation, “the Bible allows for two different positions and landing outside those two positions is not being true to the biblical text.”⁴

CCC’s leadership received no criticism from the congregation. Essentially everyone in the church affirmed the female candidate as superb choices for eldership and, from Robinson’s observation, some of the women in the congregation were refreshed to see women in leadership after being told throughout their lives that women were not allowed to perform certain ministries in the church. Robinson did, however, receive negative criticism from two area churches in the church-planting network. As Robinson described it, the network had three main propositions to which CCC had to subscribe: communion each Sunday, baptism by immersion, and “Christ” or “Christian” in the name. Apparently, after CCC’s decision to include women as elders, there was talk of adding the exclusion of women in high-level leadership as another requirement because of concern over CCC’s decision. Ultimately, this restraint was not added as a requirement because it was deemed a non-essential issue, not a salvation issue. CCC continues to grow in number and is a light to the White Marsh community. The careful manner in which they engaged the conversation avoided any harmful conflict.

SouthBrook Christian Church (“SouthBrook”)

SouthBrook is a fairly large church planted twenty-seven years ago in Miamisburg, a suburb of Dayton, Ohio, by Tom Jones, now executive director of the church-planting organization Stadia. Spiritual Formation Pastor Laura Buffington describes SouthBrook as “a church for people who don’t like church.”⁵ SouthBrook’s leadership first raised this conversation for practical reasons. In the spirit of the movement, SouthBrook did not want to be held back by traditions or creeds, which told them “this is how church needs to be.” Because of this philosophy, the leadership never wanted to make the gender conversation a controversy. The first time a woman preached on a Sunday was Mother’s Day and no one in the congregation raised concerns about her speaking.

In the early stages of the congregation, much like White Marsh’s CCC, the staff and leadership spent a weekend away studying the biblical texts relating to women in ministry. While they studied an array of texts, the bulk of their study focused on the creation narrative in Genesis. After that weekend, the leadership decided they would allow women to participate in all aspects of ministry in the church.⁶ In the lifetime of SouthBrook, there has never been a “women-can’t-teach-adults stigma,” according to Buffington.⁷ Women lead teams, plant churches, serve communion, preach, and participate as elders. Buffington has been on staff for ten years and, because of her position on staff and her giftedness to teach, it made sense for her to become one of the prominent preachers. In her role, she does not receive much negative feedback; some have come up to her and said rather informally, “I didn’t think this was okay—but you were good, so it’s all okay.”

Buffington says SouthBrook’s decision to allow women to serve in these ways has disconnected them from the 4Cs as a whole, despite SouthBrook’s list of essentials clearly defining them as a part of the Stone-Campbell movement. Its decision to include women has also been defining because of the conservative south Dayton landscape: it is not “normal” for a 4Cs church in south Dayton to allow women to be elders or to preach. While there has been negative pushback from Stone-Campbell churches in the area, SouthBrook continues to reach people for Christ and is growing rapidly. In a section titled “The Role of Women in the Church,” their *Leader’s Guide* states, “[t]hrough serving beside each other, we have the chance to show the world that the things that are broken in the world do not have to stay that way.”⁸ SouthBrook’s study of Genesis chapters 1–3 led it to promoting women in the church beyond traditional roles. They realized that prohibiting women from using the gifts God has given them would be following in the footsteps of the Fall. By allowing women to serve, they fulfill God’s mission by showing the world that life does not have to stay broken. Once again, a congregation’s careful conversation held a potential controversy at bay.

4. Dave Robinson (senior minister, Community Christian Church), in interview with the author, October 12, 2013.

5. Laura Buffington (spiritual formation pastor, SouthBrook Christian Church), in interview with the author, October 24, 2013.

6. For a full discussion of their views on women in ministry, view page 20 of their *Leader’s Guide*: <http://www.southbrook.org/ourstory/believe.html>.

7. Buffington, interview.

8. See page 22 of the *Leader’s Guide*.

Grace Fellowship Church

Grace Fellowship is a community church that meets in Timonium, Maryland, about twenty-five minutes away from White Marsh's CCC.⁹ Danny O'Brien, senior pastor, describes its beginnings as "four couples who envisioned a different kind of church."¹⁰ Within twenty years, Grace grew from those four couples to averaging 3000 people per week. O'Brien became the senior pastor in 2006 after serving on the board of elders for a number of years.

Not long after O'Brien came on as senior pastor, he noticed their ministry *practice* was somewhat inclusive of women, although Grace had had no discussion on the issue theologically. O'Brien discerned that the question of Grace's official position on women in ministry needed to be raised because more than half the people in the church were women. At the time, one of the women in leadership was a gifted speaker and O'Brien believed she should be allowed to preach on Sundays. Grace had already been allowing women to lead worship from time to time, but it had not been ordaining women who were called and gifted for ministry. Ultimately, the elders decided to put the women-in-ministry conversation on the meeting docket. Over three years, the elders pored over the biblical text to discern what *their church* should believe and practice regarding women in ministry. In the end, the elders unanimously voted to allow women to preach, be ordained, become elders, and to lead or serve in any capacity, compiling a forty-page document outlining how they came to their conclusion!

Although the process went beautifully among the elders, the leadership completely underestimated how the church would respond to the change. A foundational problem was that the congregation did not know the elders had been having the discussion. The elders did not want lay members to form factions over the issue and thus change the conversation into a controversy. O'Brien regretfully admitted that everyone in the congregation found out about the decision on a Sunday morning when it was announced in the service. Tragically, hundreds of people left Grace Fellowship as a result. O'Brien said it was hard to know exactly why each person left. Some were legitimately against the decision; they believed the church was sliding down a slippery slope. Some high-level but non-staff leaders left because they felt they should have been included in the conversation. Others followed the crowd.

Although this consequence of their decision was incredibly negative and challenging, O'Brien still believes the elders made the right decision. He also explained that it is much easier to start a church with women in leadership roles than it is to migrate to such a position. Now that Grace is a few years removed from the devastating exodus, the leadership sees positive effects on the congregation because of its decision to include women. O'Brien said one of the greatest rewards is the positive effect on the eldership. "Because the feminine dimension of the image of God is now present at elders' meetings, better decisions are made for the *whole* church."¹¹ He shared that they have seen a dramatic increase in the diversity of their church. Their preaching team of diverse perspectives now consists of O'Brien (self-described as "the old white guy"), a woman, and an African-American male. Each of these preachers brings a different substance and style to the church, allowing the church to flourish with diversity. This new diversity flows into Grace's mission, which over the past seven years has centered around a heart for justice in the community. Grace desires to be a church where everyone feels welcome so that everyone will hear the gospel; thus, having both an African-American man and a woman preach on Sundays is part of living out God's mission in their context. Grace has indeed moved beyond their controversy, but the controversy could likely have been avoided by involving more people in their conversations.

Observations and Conclusions

So what do the stories of these four churches have to tell 4Cs congregations today? One important observation is that each church began as a plant. While, in a sense, *every* church starts as a plant, church-planting philosophy encourages a more missional focus for a particular context. A church plant in the south side of

9. Although Grace Fellowship does not use the term "Stone-Campbell movement" to describe their church, their doctrine and practices align with 4Cs denominations and are often labeled as such colloquially.

10. Danny O'Brien (senior pastor, Grace Fellowship Church), in phone interview with the author, October 28, 2013.

11. Ibid.

Chicago will look drastically different than a plant in east Tennessee because they are different cultures. As Smith relayed, churches must pay attention to both the spirit of the biblical text *and* the spirit of the culture: “How does the spirit work in *us* as well as the text?”¹²

Perhaps in our efforts to restore the church to “scripture alone” we have forgotten scripture is alive. Hebrews 4:12 states, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (ESV). Church-planting philosophy encourages planters to sense what God is up to in neighborhoods and to then sit in the tension between the text and their culture until a solution is discerned. O’Brien emphasized the women-in-ministry conversation is a matter of discernment. He said, “You can make a case for either kind of model. What is the Lord saying to your local congregation?”¹³ If scripture is alive and if God is at work in our communities, then churches must discern what God is saying to *them* in *their* context. A beautiful feature of the Stone-Campbell movement is that churches can come to different conclusions, have different practices, and still be unified because “women in ministry” can be a *conversation* not a *controversy*.

For many, the church-planting philosophy brings to the surface a common concern: the church is not supposed to look like the culture. However, regarding whether to allow women to minister is not a matter of looking like the culture. These four churches stepped into their cultures and asked, “What is God doing in the neighborhood, and are we doing anything that will inhibit God’s mission?” These churches realized if they omitted women from the ministry of the church, they would be omitting them from their commission to their communities. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”¹⁴

It is time for the churches of the Stone-Campbell movement to have the conversation about women in ministry, without allowing debilitating controversy to develop. Wherever a particular congregation lands in the debate—complementarian, egalitarian or somewhere in-between—our decisions should not obstruct God’s mission within our contexts. Then, once a congregation has decided what it will believe and practice, it should not use its opinion to judge sister churches. As our forefather Thomas Campbell said in his Declaration, “As the Divine word is equally binding upon all, so all lie under an equal obligation to be bound by it, and it alone; and not by any human interpretation of it; and that, therefore, no man has a right to judge his brother.” Let us all lay aside our pride, our desire to be “right;” let us turn the age-old gender controversy into conversation on our mission in our neighborhoods. Let us join hands with the spirit of the word and the spirit of our cultures, and go and make disciples.

ORIGINALLY FROM INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA, **ELIZABETH GENTRY** IS A CURRENT SENIOR AND BIBLE MAJOR AT MILLIGAN COLLEGE. UPON GRADUATION IN MAY OF THIS YEAR, SHE WILL MINISTER AT THE EDGEWATER CAMPUS OF COMMUNITY CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN CHICAGO, ILLINOIS (EKGENTRY14@GMAIL.COM).



12. Mandy Smith (female lead pastor, University Christian Church), in phone interview with the author, October 3, 2013.

13. O’Brien, interview.

14. Mt. 28:19–20a ESV.