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**A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF BELIEFS RELATED TO GENDER EQUALITY IN THE
CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**A Research Project
Presented to the Faculty of
The Graziadio Business School
Pepperdine University**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
in
Organization Development**

**by
Timothy J. Priestley**

August 2023

This research project, completed by

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under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of The Graziadio Business School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

In recent years, American Christian churches, including the Church of Christ, have grappled with the role of women in their congregations. As women have gained legal rights, expanded social roles, and access to leadership, certain churches, including the Church of Christ, have lagged in adapting to these changes. This study aims to understand the organizational change process within these churches, exploring why belief systems can be slow to change and how some congregations have successfully transitioned from a complementarian to an egalitarian stance related to women's leadership roles. The research employs a contextual lens, considering how human psychology influences beliefs and behavior. Cognitive psychology reveals the challenge of changing rigid beliefs as humans are wired to hold onto preconceived notions. Organizational culture change is hindered by this resistance, leading to cognitive inflexibility and reduced adaptability.

The study examines 12 congregations within the Church of Christ denomination that have successfully shifted towards egalitarian practices using the methodology of structured interviews. Qualitative analysis of interview results uncovered themes related to successful transitions and factors impeding change. In order of relative strength, the themes were a) Biblical interpretation; b) exposure to women in leadership; c) cognitive flexibility; d) dialogue; e) age demographics; and f) time. Identifying common themes promoting or hindering belief system changes, this research offers valuable insights for facilitating social change within these communities and useful directions for future research and practice, and the expansion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their leadership roles.

Keywords: Church, Church of Christ, Gender Equality, Women Leadership, Belief, Complementarian, Egalitarian

Table of Contents

Abstract3

Chapter 1: Introduction7

 Gender Roles in the Church of Christ8

 The Underlying Psychology of Belief10

 The Challenge of Organizational Culture Change12

 Purpose & Research Objectives.14

Chapter 2: Literature Review.....16

 The Psychology of Belief.....16

 Groupthink17

 Changing Organizational Beliefs17

 Beliefs in the Church Regarding Gender Roles19

 Resistance to Change in the Church.....22

 Demographic Factors.....23

 Benefits of Women in Church Leadership.....23

 Summary24

Chapter 3: Methodology.....26

 Research Design26

 Research Informants27

 Research Instrument27

Source of Information.....	28
Data Gathering Procedure.....	30
Role of the Researcher.....	31
Trustworthiness of the Study	31
Human Subjects Considerations.....	32
Analysis of Data	32
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Research Findings.....	34
Sampling Methodology	34
Key Themes	34
Biblical Interpretation.....	35
Exposure to Women in Leadership	37
Cognitive Flexibility.....	38
Community Dialogue	39
Age Demographics	40
Time.....	41
Summary.....	41
Chapter 5: Discussion	43
Introduction.....	43
Summary of the Study	43
Summary of Findings	43

Conclusions44

Implications of the Study47

Limitations of Study50

Recommendations for Future Research.....51

Overall Summary52

References54

Appendix: Interview Questions58

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, a large number of American Christian churches have wrestled with the role of women in their congregations. As women have made gains in modern society with legal rights, expansion of social roles, and access to new levels of leadership, this evolution within many churches, including the Church of Christ, has lagged behind.

The belief system that will be examined revolves around the church's view of women's roles within the church—specifically, does the church provide women the ability to assume leadership roles? The view that holds that men and women have different but complementary roles in the church is called “complementarianism.” According to this view, men are called to be the spiritual leaders and thus should be the only ones holding authority and filling the lead roles within a congregation—such as an elder or lead minister (Dizon et al., 2014).

The alternative view is called “egalitarianism,”—the belief that men and women are created equal in the eyes of God and, thus, should have equal roles and opportunities within the church. The view asserts that there is no spiritual or moral superiority of men over women and that leadership is based on unique gifts or strengths rather than gender. Thus, women retain full rights and access to any and all leadership positions (Dizon et al., 2014).

The purpose of this study is to discover what factors promote and what factors impede a church community's transition toward gender equality in positions of leadership. This qualitative analysis explores related themes for 1) why belief systems within a community can be difficult and slow to change and 2) how and why churches within the Church of Christ network have successfully transitioned from complementarian to egalitarian-practicing communities. With a better understanding of what helps facilitate social change within church communities, there should be better support for these transitions in the future.

Gender Roles in the Church of Christ

As of 2022, the total membership of Churches of Christ is estimated to be between 1,700,000 and 2,000,000, with over 40,000 individual congregations worldwide (ChurchZip Statistical Summary, 2023). Over the last 40 years, a large number of American Christian churches have wrestled with the role of women in their congregations—although the struggle has been happening since the early 1800s (Dizon et al., 2014). This is essentially a result of the theological stance many individual churches take regarding their relationship with Scripture, *Sola Scriptura*—which means the Bible is believed to be God's literal, inerrant, and divinely inspired word. Church doctrine and practices rely on the Bible and draw on the early Christian Church as described in the New Testament.

This also means that as women have made gains in modern society with legal rights, expansion of social roles, and access to new levels of leadership, many Church of Christ congregations have failed to adapt to the new cultural context. Most of these congregations maintain that the *Sola Scriptura* doctrine supports the complementarian view.

The Church of Christ—along with its offshoot, the International Church of Christ—is unique in that individual churches are loosely associated and autonomous congregations without hierarchical central governance (Berry, 2003). Doctrinal positions can vary somewhat between communities, meaning individual churches also fall along a continuum between complementarian and egalitarian practicing. This allows for an insightful window into the processes experienced by a local church with limited influence from external sources (such as a denominational hierarchy) to make significant cultural change.

Their interpretation of scripture is often at the core of what obstructs a church's openness to considering alternative, more flexible, and contextual perspectives to evolve in step with the

larger culture—even among members of the church who would prefer an egalitarian doctrine and practices.

Based on the theory of cognitive flexibility, the obstacle to transition can be understood as a perceived threat to both individual and group belief systems related to the essence and identity of the church (Elen et al., 2011). Resistance to changing beliefs creates a natural obstacle for churches trying to evolve cooperatively to become egalitarian. It also introduces the possibility of splintering or suffering attrition, which threatens the unity and stability within a congregation or even an entire denomination. For example, in 2023, the Southern Baptist Convention disfellowshipped one of the United States' largest and best-known megachurches—the Saddleback Church—after they brought on a female teaching pastor the prior year (Shellnutt, 2023).

And yet, some Church of Christ congregations have adjusted their view and are moving from a complementarian position to an egalitarian stance. As of 2021, 100 Church of Christ congregations reported having already changed or are currently in some kind of formal process of switching to an egalitarian stance concerning the roles of women in leadership (Directory of Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage, 2021). This often includes the adoption of statements of belief as follows (Directory of Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage, 2021):

1. Women have the ability to publicly lead in worship services (leading prayer, communion talks, reading scripture, serving communion, etc.)
2. Women have the ability to preach from the pulpit.
3. Women have the ability to provide Biblical instruction and to teach groups regardless of their age and gender.

4. Women have the ability to serve in leadership roles, including pulpit minister, worship leader, deacon, and elder.

When women are given the opportunity to become church pastors and lead within the congregation, according to Durham (2016), they bring distinct qualities that positively impact the community. According to her research, they exhibit an informal and personable approach, emphasizing egalitarian values and a deep commitment to social justice—preferring open-ended, inclusive discussions and using intuition in decision-making. Lehman Jr. (1993) found that women leaders are more likely to strive to empower their members and avoid magnifying their own power, actively advocating for increased church member influence in their religious experiences.

The Underlying Psychology of Belief

Beliefs are powerful and difficult to change. Beliefs about the role of women in the Churches of Christ have changed particularly slowly in contrast with modern society in the United States (Johnson & Penya, 2012). These deep-rooted beliefs relate to the authority structure between men and women, grounded in Scripture “that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man” (New International Version Bible, 2011, 1 Corinthians 11:3). As interpreted in many congregations in the Church of Christ, women should not become leaders with authority over men—which includes becoming elders or lead pastors or even, in most instances, preaching to a congregation.

For the purpose of this study, a belief is defined as an opinion or a conviction about the truth of something that may not be readily obvious or subject to systematic verification (Armenakis et al., 2007). In other words, beliefs are ideas that people give credence to and rely on but are not based on facts that can be proven.

Research suggests that the accumulation and restructuring of beliefs happen throughout one's lifespan (Dillon & Wink, 2007). Depending on how a person learns to make meaning from their experiences, they will develop more or less nuanced, complex, flexible, and contextually adaptive beliefs (McHugh et al., 2019).

When beliefs are less flexible and more rigid, they become resistant to change. And inflexible beliefs can lead to rigid behavior that is not contextually aligned with the core values of a particular individual or organization in any given situation. When this happens, people can lack the awareness, openness, and commitment to act in ways congruent with their deeply held values (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

Cognitive scientists posit that one reason changing our minds is difficult is because human beings are wired to stick to whatever initial beliefs they form. There is a neuroscientific basis for this cognitive bias: scientists have found through functional magnetic resonance imaging that holding firm to preconceived beliefs activates the brain's pleasure center: the nucleus accumbens. Alternatively, changing one's belief stimulates the insula, the area triggered by anxiety, fear, or disgust (Gorman & Gorman, 2016). Said another way, beliefs are hard to change in part because of the hard wiring that makes it feel good to defend one's beliefs.

In his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, psychologist and author Daniel Kahneman also describes the rigid adherence to pre-conceived beliefs that people adopt as a bias towards "overconfidence" (Kahneman, 2011). Kahneman explains that humans are so wired to invest in what they think that they are not only unwilling to consider other points of view but also committed to defending their beliefs or simply to "being right."

The bias towards rigid beliefs is supported by research showing that humans are evolutionarily wired to survive by learning and developing beliefs about how we should behave

(Boyd & Richerson, 1985), e.g., don't go looking for lunch on the Savannah when the tigers are feeding, or you'll become lunch. In other words, persisting in our beliefs was historically helpful for preserving lives. As we evolved, this propensity expanded into all beliefs. This means that once people decide what they believe, they tend to think they are right and can quickly feel threatened when those beliefs are challenged (Elliot & Devine, 1994).

However, the nature of threat has changed significantly over time as humans have evolved. Throughout much of history, threats to our survival were primarily physical—but in the twenty-first century, threats are far more likely to come in the form of challenges to what we believe about ourselves and the world at large (Epley & Gilovich, 2016). Instead of just being afraid for our survival, we have evolved to fear any threat to what we think about ourselves, individually and collectively. This includes our larger social identities in connection with organizational membership and affiliation. And in the case of churches—and more specifically in many Church of Christ congregations—the threat to beliefs extends to what they think about themselves and any meaning related to changing their views about scripture and gender roles in leadership.

The Challenge of Organizational Culture Change

In groups and organizations, resistance to changing beliefs naturally leads to more resistance and less openness to change. And given that organizational culture relies on changing belief systems, evolution is often slow. The resulting impact on organizations is that people cannot adapt their behavior in context. And, with accelerated technological advancements, people and organizations increasingly live in a more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world—also known as VUCA (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). This means that what has historically allowed them to succeed will not allow them to succeed in the future. Rigid beliefs and behavior

do not sustainably provide the kind of agile and adaptable thinking and behavior that organizations and their members need in order to thrive in the face of ever-changing social and economic conditions (Teece et al., 2016).

The bias towards preconceived, pre-established beliefs in groups hinders culture change in at least three ways:

First, as discussed above, humans are evolutionarily wired to survive by believing what they already think. This lack of openness to alternative perspectives leads to low levels of what is known as cognitive flexibility—the ability to adapt thinking and behavior to new and unexpected context-specific environmental conditions (Elen et al., 2011). As West (2021) said another way, rigid, inflexible beliefs may function to offer a level of certainty, coherence, and comfort that help people feel safe, secure, and “good” about themselves, but they don’t always work as well for aligning people with their values within a specific context. When people are less cognitively flexible, they are less likely to entertain other beliefs, even if they more closely align with their deeper core values (West, 2021). This means even though a church that values diversity and inclusion may prohibit members from participating because of their rigid adherence to or unwillingness to reconsider a particular interpretation of scripture related to gender roles.

Secondly, there is a well-known social psychology phenomenon known as Groupthink (Whyte, 1952), which perpetuates and reinforces norms and narratives within groups (Braun et al., 2015). This phenomenon means that people are less likely to voice alternative opinions that diverge from the group, reducing opportunities for expansion and growth. This is visible in church communities which may be comprised of members who hold divergent beliefs but who do not want to disturb the overall cohesion and unity of the congregation. This leads to a lack of

diversity in thinking that may not serve the church's deeper core values or mission. Thus, rigid thinking promotes a more stable community and sense of belongingness.

Third, cognitive inflexibility leads to behavior that is inflexible—a lack of cognitive flexibility means people cannot adapt to what matters most to them, individually or collectively (Uddin, 2021). In an organizational context, people with inflexible behavior may move away from what they care most about instead of moving toward an organization's higher purpose, mission, or vision (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). In addition, a lack of cognitive flexibility has been shown to decrease overall well-being and flourishing (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

Given the challenge of creating contextually adaptive organizations that can functionally evolve in line with their core values, being able to assess, evaluate, and address belief systems in organizations is critical (Cummings & Worley, 2019).

Purpose & Research Objectives.

The intention of this study is to examine themes surrounding changing belief systems among congregations within Churches of Christ transitioning to an egalitarian stance. This study will seek to shed light on common themes that could help to identify future areas for research and practice as further congregations consider a more egalitarian stance. As such, interviews were conducted with Church of Christ leaders to identify any processes reported that either promote or impede changing belief systems which facilitate the transition from a complementarian to an egalitarian stance.

Specifically, this study will seek to identify themes that illuminate the following:

- the impetus within individual congregations for expanding views of gender roles in leadership;
- underlying processes that impede a change in beliefs within the church community;

- underlying processes that accelerate a change in beliefs within the church;
- demographic factors that may impact the level and timing of change; and,
- any outside influences or resources that hastened systemic belief changes

The results of this study may aid in future research on how organizations can successfully evolve belief systems that function to better support a contextually-adaptive stance for its members that supports diversity, equality, and inclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to discover what factors promote and what factors impede a church community's transition toward gender equality in positions of leadership. This work will survey various aspects that affect a group's ability to experience culture change based on transforming core belief systems they may hold dear.

The Psychology of Belief

People do not easily change their beliefs. This is because we are disposed to believe we are correct to the point where we tend to ignore information inconsistent with those beliefs. This leaves us “fused” with our beliefs and unwilling to entertain other perspectives. As psychologist and author Aprilia West notes, “It’s like your mind is selling one incredibly righteous holier-than-thou perspective, and you are buying it hook, line, and sinker. And when you’re convinced that you’re right, you’ll have a very hard time seeing things any other way.” (West, 2021, p. 180)

This rigidity shows up in organizations by their inability to see things differently that might cause them to change—even when change might be in their best interest. Nathan Furr says, “Organizational members come to view the organization, its activities, and the environment in a rigid manner such that they are unable to receive, interpret and integrate information signaling a need to change” (2009, p. 21).

Furr (2009) notes three reasons for organizational rigidity. First, because cognitive inflexibility stems from historical resourcing relying on past successes, organizations tend to miss seeing how the environmental demands may have changed and then adjust their behavior appropriately. A second reason he describes for organizational rigidity is associated with business model preservation—because making change, even to fit new environmental considerations, feels like too much of a risk. And thirdly, he suggests that cognitive rigidity

comes from identity adherence. This means that organizations develop identities from their history, successes, and relationships, forming their beliefs and actions.

Groupthink

The phenomenon called Groupthink, a term coined by William H. Whyte (1952), is also appropriate when understanding why organizations do not change their thinking and belief systems. It is “the idea that a desire for consensus overrides the realistic appraisals of alternatives and leads to poor decision making” (Pol et al., 2020, p. 1). Symptoms of Groupthink include the following:

1. False impression of invulnerability—meaning high conformity of members’ views and beliefs makes them overconfident.
2. Willingness to take high risks leads group members not to take negative feedback seriously—meaning members avoid questioning their fundamental beliefs when facing a challenging decision.
3. Labeling members with a different opinion as incompetent.
4. Pressure toward conformity exerted by the leadership or the majority of the group—meaning self-censorship processes make members assume that silence means approval (Braun et al., 2015).

“The risk of Groupthink is amplified when groups are homogeneous, when group structures are markedly hierarchical, and when a strong commitment to particular decision alternatives exists before group discussion begins” (Braun et al., 2015, p. 409).

Changing Organizational Beliefs

There is some research that suggests there are ways to manage beliefs to facilitate organizational change. Nystrom and Starbuck observed that “clever managers have executed

remarkable turnarounds by changing their organizations' beliefs and values" (1984, p. 53) and then identified the top actions these managers could take would be "to accept dissents, to interpret events as learning opportunities, and to characterize actions as experiments." (1984, p. 54). It follows that for organizational leaders to be as effective as possible, they also need to bring the same flexible mindset to confront the inevitable errors in their perceptions and beliefs—it requires an elevated level of objectivity, humility, and security to confront the errors within themselves (Kahneman, 2011). Nystrom and Starbuck (1984) go on to say that it's easier for the leader to keep the organization's "cognitive structures continuously realistic and up-to-date than to try abruptly to correct errors that have added up and reinforced each other. And it is easier to correct cognitive structures while things are going well than to do so after troubles develop." (p. 58). So intentional processes to regularly evaluate and modify beliefs tend to be more beneficial than the change prompted by crisis (Armenakis et al., 1993).

As Nystrom and Starbuck explained in their work *To Avoid Organizational Crises, Unlearn* (1984), complaints, dissent, and disagreement within the organization can also be helpful in leading to the unlearning necessary to unwind the beliefs of the group. They go on to speak about how dissent is often suppressed since this kind of messaging within the organization can lead members to suddenly think something is wrong with the organization or its leadership. This suppression may be enacted by the leaders themselves or may result from members distorting or silencing the messages so that it is never even received by the leadership. The dissent is attributed to ignorance or bad intentions, which keeps the organization stuck by continuing to reinforce the old beliefs. Those who dissent are often forced to leave the organization or become completely disengaged (Kassing, 2011).

There are currently a handful of models for changing belief systems that have been developed for operationalizing culture change in organizations. One such prototype is Lewin's Change Management Model, which proposes three stages of organizational change (Lewin, 1958):

1. "unfreezing" the beliefs in an organization through critical events to assess, name, and validate the culture;
2. "change" by reframing the cultural narrative through role modeling and communicating to create new behaviors and beliefs; and,
3. "refreezing" the organization to lock in a new culture to reinforce a new belief system.

While such models can be helpful for understanding what organizations do to implement change, they fail to address how organizations operationalize belief systems change on an individual, much less collective level (Butkus & Green, 1999).

Beliefs in the Church Regarding Gender Roles

The church has been a focal point for discussions on gender roles, especially concerning the ordination of women. Theological arguments both in favor and against the inclusion of women in priesthood roles have emerged, shaping the views of Catholics and non-Catholics alike (Duncan, 2004; Durham, 2016).

Opponents of women's ordination often cite the maleness of God and traditional gender roles, considering men as more suitable for priestly duties. According to these beliefs, men's role as priests is justified by the idea that during rituals, priests act as representatives of God, exercising so-called "male qualities" (Hewitt & Hiatt, 1973, p. 58). Additionally, the notion "that God and Christ are male is used to assert that clergy must also be male" (Smith & Stevens, 2003,

p. 421). Additionally, some argue that the all-male selection of Jesus' 12 followers serves as a further basis for denying women's ordination to the priesthood (Hewitt & Hiatt, 1973).

Two primary arguments are often raised to counter female ordination. The first argument focuses on the priesthood itself, maintaining it as a male domain due to the perceived male attributes priests embody during rituals. This perspective draws on the idea that women were excluded from the incarnation and, therefore, should not be ordained. The second argument concentrates on women's "proper role" as wives and mothers (Smith & Stevens, 2003, p. 420). Additionally, "another legitimation for denying ordination to women is that incarnation excluded women, therefore, only males should be ordained to the priesthood" (Smith & Stevens, 2003, p. 421).

Within the complementarian perspective, there are two leading stereotypes that are described using Biblical language:

These can be termed the "weaker vessel" stereotype (1 Peter 3:7) and the "helpmeet" stereotype (Genesis 2:18). A person holding the "weaker vessel" stereotype is simply one who believes women to be inferior in some critical respect...By contrast, the "helpmeet" stereotype involves a belief in the superior capabilities of women in certain "female" spheres of activity. A person holding the helpmeet stereotype is likely to believe that women have special competence in the roles of nurturing, mothering, and supporting (Jelen, 1989, p. 580).

Conversely, those who support the ordination of women tend to adopt a more liberal gender ideology. "Those with more liberal gender ideologies would be more likely to hold a feminine image of deity, and this was the case for non-Catholics" (Smith & Stevens, 2003, p.

427). They reject the notion that women are inherently different from men and argue for gender equality, advocating for women to fully integrate into ministry roles.

There are some Scriptures that, when interpreted literally, seem to discourage female leadership in the Christian church. However, more progressive people within Christianity present arguments that challenge these Bible passages and offer more egalitarian understandings. Along this vein, Christians

who support women in ministry call attention to God's selection of Mary of Magdala to herald the good news of Christ's resurrection. Orthodox Jews recognize Miriam, the prophetess who led all the women in song after Pharaoh's army was drowned when God brings the sea back over them (Exodus 15:20), and the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22) as examples of Biblical female leaders. (Durham, 2016, p. 9).

This egalitarian view is based on a biblical understanding of the equality of men and women in creation and redemption. It affirms that the Gospel message proclaims freedom and equality for all people, regardless of gender, race, or social status.

The counter to Scriptural texts that seem to back the complementarian view of women frames them as a temporary compromise with the patriarchal culture of ancient times, while the main thrust of Scripture is toward the leveling of gender-based role differences. The stories of Jesus showed how counter-cultural his actions were in liberating women, blowing up hierarchical traditions, and opening the way for women to have full access to ministry roles. (Duncan, 2004)

Another argument against the complementarian view observes that it is selectively literal when it classifies some Biblical commands to be permanently valid and others, like "Don't wear

braided hair,” “Do wear a head covering,” or “Women must be silent” are culturally conditioned and not absolute. (Duncan, 2004)

These beliefs and theological arguments play a significant role in shaping the acceptance or rejection of women in leadership roles within the church. Understanding these belief systems is crucial for fostering meaningful dialogue and progress toward more inclusive and diverse church communities for those seeking gender equality.

Resistance to Change in the Church

The issue of women's ordination has been met with significant resistance within the Church, in both Catholicism and Protestantism. The Catechism of the Catholic Church unequivocally states that the Lord Jesus chose men to be part of the twelve apostles, and the apostles, in turn, continued this tradition by selecting male collaborators for their ministry. The Church considers itself bound by this historical precedent established by Jesus himself, thus concluding that the ordination of women is not permissible (Durham, 2016).

Pope John Paul II sought to put an end to further debate on this matter in his 1994 Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*. He declared that the Church lacked any authority to confer priestly ordination on women and emphasized that this belief should be definitively upheld by all members of the Church (Paul II, 1994).

The resistance to change regarding women's ordination has had tangible effects on the career prospects of women who pursue a religious vocation. Despite excelling during their seminary education, women are less likely to secure pastoral positions within the first six months after graduation. Instead, they often find themselves in roles as associate pastors or religious educators, earning lower salaries and receiving fewer benefits compared to their male counterparts (Durham, 2016).

These entrenched attitudes and official Church doctrines create significant obstacles for women seeking leadership roles within the Church. The combination of scriptural interpretation and papal pronouncements has solidified the stance against women's ordination, leading to resistance and barriers for women seeking equal opportunities within the clergy (Fry, 2021). As the Church grapples with the challenges of adapting to changing societal norms and advocating for greater gender equality, the issue of resistance to change remains a significant and contentious topic within its ranks.

Demographic Factors

Multiple factors influence the support that members may have for females in church leadership roles. Age, education level, commitment toward the church, and, of course, gender impact how people may view a woman in leadership.

Regarding the age and education level of the membership, Smith and Stevens (2003) found that “receptivity toward women clergy also tends to decrease with age and increase with level of education” (p. 420).

Concerning one’s commitment level, “Non-Catholics who attend church frequently, and Catholics who report a strong religious affiliation are less supportive of women clergy.” (Smith & Stevens, 2003, p. 427)

Multiple studies analyzed receptivity based on gender. They consistently observed that “men are found to have more favorable attitudes toward women clergy/priests than women” (Smith & Stevens, 2003, p. 426) and “For all four denominational groups, men are more supportive of female ordination than are women” (Jelen, 1989, p. 582).

Benefits of Women in Church Leadership

Durham (2016) indicates that women in church leadership bring distinctive qualities that contribute positively to the community. Compared to men, she says that female leaders tend to exhibit a more informal and personable approach, emphasizing egalitarian values and a deep commitment to social justice. She notes further differences between men and women leaders:

Women...are more prone to involve or empower congregants in the involvement of church business. They prefer approaching decision-making through unstructured, open-ended, inclusive discussion and by using intuition as much as rationality. Different from the legalistic method used by men, women approach ethical issues with an attitude of 'responsible caring' and concern for the implications decisions or actions have on others. (Durham, 2016, p. 14)

Women in church leadership can also be change agents in places where men leaders cannot because of how the congregants view women leading—as it can inspire more women to get and stay involved (Ecklund, 2006). Additionally, “women are more likely than men to strive to empower their members and to eschew any magnification of their own power over the laity” (Lehman Jr, 1993, p. 59). In short, women tend to be more inclined to actively advocate for increasing the influence of lay church members over their individual and communal religious experiences (Lehman Jr, 1993).

Summary

Changing beliefs within an organization is difficult and slow. Factors like organizational rigidity, cognitive inflexibility, and Groupthink can make the organization stuck. Within churches, dynamics like tradition and their interpretation of Scripture can create resistance to change in their views on women in leadership roles—even though society at large experiences more equality with women leading. While there are numerous stated benefits in allowing women

to lead, many churches resist changing from their complementarian viewpoints. Thus, they risk experiencing membership decline and disengagement. The study will examine what factors might promote and impede the church from deciding to move to an egalitarian perspective in this area.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter 3 of the research paper discusses the methods and procedures used in the study. The focus of the research study is to discover what factors promote and impede a church community's transition toward more gender equality in positions of leadership. The following information provides details on the research design, research informants, research instruments, source of information, the conduct of the interview, the role of the researchers, trustworthiness of the study, ethical consideration, data gathering procedure, and statistical analysis the researcher will use in the study.

Research Design

The researcher used a qualitative design to discover what factors promote and impede a church community's transition toward more gender equality in leadership positions. Polit and Hungler (2013) defined qualitative research as an inductive, holistic, subjective, and process-oriented method used to understand, interpret, describe, and develop a theory on phenomenon or setting. It is a systematic, subjective approach used to describe life experiences and give them meaning. Qualitative research is mostly associated with words, language, and experiences rather than measurements, statistics, and numerical figures. Open-ended questions allow the participants to freely voice their experiences and minimize the influence of the researcher's attitudes and previous findings (Creswell, 2004). It develops an understanding of people's opinions about their lives and the lives of others. It also helps the researcher to generate an in-depth account that will present a lively picture of the research participant's reality. As Creswell noted about qualitative research, "the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2004, p. 203). In this context, the

researcher decided to utilize qualitative design for the study in determining the influencing factors that impact a church in the process of moving toward gender equality in leadership.

Research Informants

The research informants consisted of pastors of Church of Christ (or the branch group International Church of Christ) communities across the United States. The Principal Investigator set out to conduct interviews with approximately 20 individuals. Of the 20 contacted, 14 people accepted the request to be interviewed, of which there were two couples—and each couple shared one interview (so there were 12 total interviews representing 12 different church communities).

The breakdown of the interviewee population was as follows: six were from churches currently in the process toward egalitarianism (including the two couples), and eight were from churches that were fully egalitarian—which is determined based on their adoption of the statements of belief referenced in the Directory of Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage (2021). These lead individuals (or couples, if applicable) either experienced the process themselves or were very informed as to how the process went in their congregation.

The Principal Investigator used the method of purposive sampling, which is a selection method based on the study's purpose, expecting each participant to provide unique and rich information of value to the study (Etikan et al., 2016). The research subjects were interviewed personally by the researcher using a formulated open-ended interview questionnaire. The researcher allowed research informants to use pseudonyms if they desired to protect their identities.

Research Instrument

The research instrument in this study was an open-ended interview questionnaire. The Principal Investigator chose this format because interviews “are flexible, allowing in-depth analysis from a relatively small sample size and place the focus of research on the views of participants” (Young, et al., 2018, p. 17).

Interviewing can explore a greater depth of meaning than can be obtained with other techniques—interpersonal skills can facilitate cooperation and elicit more information. There is also a higher response rate to interviews than questionnaires.

The researcher used a basic note-taking method to summarize the conversation for decoding purposes in this study’s later stages. Additionally, each interview was transcribed using the Otter.ai application.

Source of Information

The researcher made the interview guide questions based on the research questions since the study is qualitative. The main objective was to obtain complete and thorough information on the perception and ideas of the participants. Initial questions in the interview were designed to understand specific information about the change process—from congregation size and demographics before and after the process, along with the overall duration. Then several open-ended questions were constructed for the respondents to give a full picture of their viewpoints and experiences of the process—to describe the factors that promoted and impeded their change toward egalitarianism.

The interview questions are as follows:

1. Where would you say your church community lands on the spectrum of women's role in church leadership—from Complementary (women must submit, not teach, or

- speak) to Egalitarianism (women can take on any role that a man can take—full equality)?
2. How long was your church community (or how long have they been) in an active and intentional process of moving to Egalitarianism?
 3. When did that process complete (if it has already)?
 4. What was the size and demographic of the community when you started the intentional process?
 5. What was the size and demographic of the community when the process ended (or what is the current size of the community)?
 6. In your estimation, how many people left your community as a result of this movement?
 7. What is the current size and demographic of the community?
 8. What was the impetus for beginning the transition to egalitarianism? Please describe what that process looked like.
 9. What were the main accelerators during that process?
 10. What events/experiences were most helpful in moving the community forward?
 11. What were the main factors that held the community back?
 12. In your opinion, what could have helped the process go faster?
 13. In what specific ways did people's theological beliefs shift in order to make this community change?
 14. How did you go about making a belief system change?
 15. Did you engage any outside resources (people, books, articles, etc.) during this process? What were they?

16. Were there any other churches that you modeled your process after? If so, what was similar and what was different about your process?
17. To what extent do you think that views of women in leadership are driven by dualistic (black and white) thinking that is widespread in our church culture?
18. To what extent do you think that views of women in leadership are driven by a Sola Scriptura that is widespread in our church culture?
19. Does your church promote insight/self-reflection, and if so, how?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to add that might be helpful in understanding how churches can make this change?

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher was directed by the following guidelines in conducting the interview:

Asking Permission to Conduct Study. Selected church ministry leaders were initially sent a formal request via email to conduct a personal interview. For those who accepted the request, another email was sent to the prospective respondents, notifying them that the interview would be conducted in a virtual meeting (Microsoft Teams). After the invitees agreed to participate, the researcher scheduled the personal interview based on the convenient schedules of the respondents.

Conduct of Personal Interview. Once the time was scheduled for the interview, the purpose of the interview was fully explained, and the interviewee was assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Additionally, the format of the interview, its purpose, and expectations, along with the timeframe of the interview, was explained.

The interviews were conducted by a virtual meeting (Microsoft Teams) between May 1 and July 15, 2023. They were conducted in an informal, conversational manner with the guide

questions (Appendix) to allow freedom and adaptability in gathering the information from the interviewee. Questions were asked one at a time, giving ample time for the interviewee to think and respond. The entire dialogue of the interview was transcribed electronically in addition to the notes taken by the researcher. The Principal Investigator then used the transcripts to perform coding analysis.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, the researcher played the role of the interviewer and note-taker, and an app called Otter.ai transcribed the dialogue in gathering the data. As an interviewer, the researcher used the interview guide questions to get deeper answers from the participants. Bailey (2008, p. 127) mentioned that the presentation of data—audibly and visually—in written form is an informative procedure, thus, the first step in evaluating the data. In this study, the researcher took notes and transcription of the dialogue. These were then uploaded into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software called ATLAS.ti, ensuring it was accurately and appropriately coded.

At the time of the study, the researcher was a current member of the Church of Christ. As an insider within the community being researched, the researcher's personal involvement and familiarity with the group may introduce a potential bias in the study. Their intimate knowledge of the community's norms, practices, and beliefs could influence the interpretation of data and the way in which findings are presented. However, the researcher strove to maintain objectivity and critical self-reflection throughout the research process to minimize the impact of this bias and ensure the validity and reliability of the study's outcomes.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In constructing a qualitative study project, several design elements can be included to improve trustworthiness (Baxter & Jack, 2010). Credibility, according to Dzakiria (2004, pp. 70-71), refers to the conscious effort to establish confidence in an accurate understanding of the significance of the data or the setting in a believable way. The researcher addressed credibility in this study by building and ensuring that a pool of experts validated the research interview questions. Likewise, the researcher returned the transcriptions to the participants to affirm the veracity of the information that would be gathered.

Human Subjects Considerations

As this study makes use of human participants, the focus of the research study is to discover what factors promote and impede a church community's transition toward more gender equality in positions of leadership. It is necessary to offer privacy and confidentiality for the participants. The research and published content must reflect confidentiality for the participants' stories and details, consent to include their data and protection of their identity.

The interview questions were written in a brief and straightforward way to avoid discrepancies among the participants. Participants were given sufficient time to answer the questions asked to prevent inaccuracies in their answers. A waiver was given to the respondents to ensure their confidentiality and to secure the information. They were guaranteed that the information collected from them would be handled with the strictest confidence, and data processes were structured to ensure the anonymity of each participant—with all identifying information being obfuscated once the interviews were completed.

Analysis of Data

Aligned with the qualitative process Creswell (2004) outlined, the data gathered through the interview was transcribed, analyzed, coded, and interpreted. The narrative analysis was

guided by the frequency of the emergent themes, and these themes were coded and interpreted accordingly. Words and phrases that appeared similar were grouped into the same category. These categories were gradually replaced and re-evaluated to determine how they were linked. In essence, the analysis involved extracting significant statements from the transcribed interviews so that key phrases and statements that spoke directly to the phenomenon in question could be extracted.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Research Findings

The purpose of this research was to discover what factors promote and what factors impede a Church of Christ community's transition from a Complementarian-practicing church to an Egalitarian-practicing one.

This chapter summarizes an in-depth content analysis of the qualitative data gathered. Key themes will be presented that emerged as a result of this content analysis and data around each of the emerging themes from the perspective of the 14 interviewees. The remainder of chapter 4 describes these key themes.

Sampling Methodology

The target population consisted of pastors of Church of Christ communities across the United States. As outlined in Chapter 3, the Principal Investigator set out to conduct interviews with approximately 20 individuals. Of the 20 contacted, 14 people accepted the request to be interviewed, of which there were two couples—and each couple shared one interview. So, there were 12 total interviews representing 12 different church communities.

The breakdown of the interviewee population was as follows: six were from churches currently in the process toward egalitarianism (including the two couples), and eight were from churches that were fully egalitarian based on their adoption of the statements of belief referenced in the Directory of Gender Inclusive and Egalitarian Churches in the Church of Christ Heritage (2021).

Coding of the interview responses to the open-ended questions offers rich descriptions of participants' church processes and their perspectives on what made things move forward as they did.

Key Themes

After collecting the data, the transcripts were uploaded into the research tracking software Atlas.ti and, after analysis, some key themes were identified. While more than 20 different influencing factors were described by the respondents, this analysis will focus on the top six occurring themes. These overarching themes included: Biblical interpretation, exposure to women in leadership, cognitive flexibility, community dialogue, age demographics, and time.

Below in Table 1 are the key themes from the interviews, including the number of interviews where that theme was mentioned, along with the percentage of interviews where it was mentioned from the total interviews.

Table 1

Factors in the Process Toward Egalitarianism

Theme	# of Interviews Where Cited (n = 12)	% of Interviews Where Cited
Biblical Interpretation	12	100%
Exposure to Women in Leadership	9	75%
Cognitive Flexibility	8	67%
Community Dialogue	8	67%
Age Demographics	6	50%
Time	6	50%

Biblical Interpretation

The most common factor that all the pastors referred to was changing how they interpreted the Scriptures—it came up in 100% of the interviews. While some particular passages might seem to be directive in limiting women’s role within the church, most pastors didn’t combat those Scriptures directly. Instead, they spoke about framing the Bible in a whole new way—less literal or rules-based and more contextual, historical, and values-based. As one respondent asserted about Biblical interpretation, “I think underneath that are sort of layers of cultural and historical biases that impact the reading of Scripture.”

One respondent described it as moving away from reading specific passages as rules but rather as a part of a whole arc:

A lot of it is putting the Bible in its historical and literary context, and so the history, the time, the situation of those churches that are being written about in Paul's letters—we need to look at the broader story of Scripture. And so that it's not just looking at two passages in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians, and that's the end of the story. So it's kind of opening up that there's a broader story of Scripture and how Scripture looks at gender and women that starts in Genesis. And so kind of opening the lens, I would say.

Similarly, another respondent put it this way:

One of the largest [ways that people's theological beliefs shifted] was the reading of some of the texts that seem to be restrictive in light of a larger theological conclusion related to the role of women across the scope of the story of God. Rather than the other way around, using the text of 1 Corinthians that seems to be restrictive, to say “everything else that we see in Scripture has to be read in light of this one text” and instead sort of reversing that and saying, “Okay, let's try to get a handle on the broad brush—what are God's feelings about women and about gender and their role within the people of God across time in history, and then how does that then inform the way that we might read a text that appears to be restrictive?”

Another interviewed pastor described it more personally:

I think it's just a shift in the lens of which we approach scripture to, as I mean, at least my understanding of growing up Church of Christ... there's this coming to Scripture, and like everything is right and it's exact, and that's what we follow. And the more time I think I

spend with scripture, and the more I grow in my relationship with God, the more I realize how much is not that exact, and there are plenty of things that I am willing to ignore.

And finally, one respondent put it succinctly:

I think theologically, we had to learn better hermeneutics—we had to learn how to read the Bible better—because that changed how we saw God and how we could study this stuff out.

Exposure to Women in Leadership

Another central theme that came up during 75% of the interviews was that of the community's (or individuals' within the community) exposure to women acting in leadership roles—whether a specific event such as a Sunday sermon or a longer-term position not typical for women such as a deacon or worship leader. One respondent observed,

I think...the experience of gifted women who preach and shepherd is a big factor, and it's been a big factor in people's journeys. I know more people who have moved, but they didn't move because we had a May 1 panel event or they read three books on it. They moved because they experienced gifted women leading them to look more like Jesus or sharing preaching gifts in a way that said, “Oh, my goodness, that has to be the work of God. But my Bible, or at least my reading of the Bible, doesn't allow for that. So I need to rethink my reading of the Bible because that experience is of God.”

Another respondent noted how their community's views were impacted by the experience of seeing women actively engaged in the church:

Also, our practice of allowing women to do nearly everything in a church service created a receptivity to a more healthy, Biblical understanding of the role of women and men. So, the practice did affect even our understanding.

Two of the respondents noted that it was an elderly woman doing public speaking that “broke the ice” within their communities and helped people to realize that it was not only something that was okay, but really positive. One described it as:

The first Sunday [women were able to speak up front in church]—I’m not sure if she was scheduled or if she just got up and did it to show support—but one of the elderly women of the church whom everyone loved and respected, when she got up there and spoke it was like, “Oh, it's okay. She's leading the way; she’s kind of the grandmother of the church, and so we can relax a little bit.”

Another respondent described his congregation’s first experience like this:

One Sunday in January of 2000, we had for the very first time a woman get up and read a scripture, and that was kind of the first break in the wall. And it's something that, for all of those who were there, it stuck in our memory because it was an elderly woman who had been one of the pillars of the church for a long, long time—an African American woman—and she got up. All that she was asked to do was read the scripture, but she gave a little talk to this congregation that she loved and had been a part of for a long, long time. And just celebrating the fact that we had been on this journey together.

Cognitive Flexibility

The theme of cognitive flexibility was articulated in different ways in 67% of the interviews—from flexibility and open-mindedness to contrasting rigidity or black/white thinking. In all cases, the respondents agreed that cognitive flexibility was expressed as something necessary to move a congregation toward change—the individuals had to become more open or receptive and less rigid and black and white. One of the interviewed pastors described this level of flexibility as non-binary thinking when he noted,

Real spiritual formation moves us to non-binary thinking, right? If we're really being spiritually formed well, there are black and whites in our faith, but the way that we discuss if we're going to live into the ethic of love, it requires some non-binary thinking.

Another respondent described the kind of flexible church he was trying to create,

What began as a discovery, “we want to discover the truth together,” became a “we found the truth, and now we need to protect it against all the enemies at the gate that are looking to water it down or destroy it. And if you don't believe the right way, then you're an enemy of the truth or gospel.” So I would say we don't want to be a church that feels like we have discovered the truth and we have got to protect it from false doctrine.

For one respondent, he tried to emphasize to his congregation that going through this process and potentially getting things wrong was not going to ruin their relationship with God. He said, “Let's be very clear; our standing before God—as the people of God—is not based on us getting this precisely right.”

Community Dialogue

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that the practice of having active discussions within the community—whether in small groups or on a congregational level—was a healthy catalyst for moving everyone forward in the process. One respondent described the environment of their church, which influenced the movement of the process:

Many of the Bible classes are discussion-oriented, you know, leaving space for people to ask questions and express disagreements and to talk about those together.

Another respondent described their community's dynamic with dialogue similarly:

And I think we have pretty challenging Bible classes where people are pretty open and honest. And you know, they're not people who are not afraid to butt heads and share their

views. And I think that ultimately can provide kind of a feedback loop or get things on the table. For a number of things, so I think those settings provide kind of opportunities to debrief and process.

A third respondent, when asked what might have made the process go faster, indicated that discussion would have helped,

So I do think what would have sped things up was if we could have been meeting face to face and studied it out and had more discussion as a group, you know, face to face. That could have helped us speed it along.

Age Demographics

The age of their membership came up 50% of the time—older church members tending to resist change and younger members pushing for it. For several pastors, this greatly influenced their urgency to deal with the issue. One young pastor talked about the differences between the different generations:

I've noticed that with my generation, with millennials, with Gen Z, and then we're kind of starting to see in Gen A—so many of these things like egalitarian, like affirming—these are justice issues to my generation and the generations lower than me. That is not true for Gen X and for boomers, and so it's really difficult. If they actually felt it was a justice issue, I think that they might feel more impressed to make decisions more quickly.

Another respondent noted that to experience community change, sometimes the older people need to move on:

But I think where we're at as a movement, just like in our church, is one fellow had to pass away before change could happen. I think maybe a generation of people that have

connected their habits and their practice with their understanding of Scripture would have to pass away before that could really be fully embraced.

Time

Another 50% of the respondents specifically mentioned that it's a slow process—and getting to a decision takes several years of intentional process (and often, many more years of unintentional processes) to move to an egalitarian practicing church. A respondent talked about their frustration with how long things can take when trying to deal with change in a church community:

The other processes we've had to go through in the last 14 years, I think about how it's taken us a decade to come to terms with things in our building and multiple years now of studying other beliefs, and so from a ministerial side, that's incredibly frustrating at times, because it's so slow. And also, when we are in a church system where its volunteers helping decide, I mean, elders or volunteers who are deciding some of these major things. Volunteers take longer—it takes time.

Another respondent described the process as being slow by design:

It was extraordinarily slow. And intentionally so. Just sort of slow, methodical, giving people lots of opportunities to process and provide feedback and ask questions and absolutely no sense of rush.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research findings and summarized the key themes that became salient through data analysis. Chapter 5 will discuss the summary of the study, its process and results, the findings in relation to the literature, limitations of the study, recommendations of how

churches can consider moving their communities toward an egalitarian viewpoint of women in leadership, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter includes seven sections. The first section contributes to an overall summary of the study, followed by a summary of the findings and their conclusions. After this are the implications of the study, and its limitations, followed by recommendations for future research and the final summary.

Summary of the Study

This study aimed to examine the process that local Church of Christ congregations have taken to transition from a Complementarian-practicing church to an Egalitarian-practicing one concerning women in leadership. The research objectives were to discover what factors promote and what factors impede a church community's process toward more gender equality. Along the same lines, the interviews also revealed how a church community changes its belief system.

Summary of Findings

The results of this study do not provide definitive answers; however, they offer valuable insights into how the change process works in a church community for something that is a part of their belief system. The results provide an in-depth content analysis of qualitative data gathered from 14 interviews with pastors from Church of Christ communities in the United States. The sampling methodology targeted pastors, aiming for approximately 20 interviews, but 14 participants ultimately agreed to be interviewed, representing 12 different church communities. Six of the interviewees were from churches in the process of becoming egalitarian, while the remaining eight were from fully egalitarian churches.

The content analysis revealed six significant themes that consistently emerged during the interviews: Biblical interpretation, exposure to women in leadership, cognitive flexibility, community dialogue, age demographics, and time.

Conclusions

The conclusions of the findings for the research question based on the interviews were as follows:

1. To make this transition, all churches had to address how they interpret Scripture (100% of the interviewees made reference to this at some point.) And while they did this in different ways, none of the respondents expressed that it was taking the specific restrictive texts in Scripture and arguing a new interpretation of those passages. Instead, they described a new way of seeing the Bible and reading it. It became less of a rule book or set of commands and more of a historical, cultural narrative that needs to be taken in context. This fell in line with what the research suggested about how an egalitarian interpretation goes beyond the words and into the context and historical culture (Duncan, 2004). Structured congregational teaching was consistently a part of this change in interpretation—whether during Sunday sermons or classes during the week. And these pastors often expressed that when they taught, they wanted to model this way of reading the Bible to help the people they were teaching.
2. It was challenging for respondents to give an exact duration of their congregation's intentional process because it might stop and start again over the years. But it was evident that the process took a long time—longer than the respondents expected—usually between four and sixteen years of active (or somewhat active) engagement with the topic. Fifty percent of respondents said that the process went through multiple stages of

development—they would intentionally address the topic of women in leadership for a time and see progress as far as what women could do, even if it was not full equality. And then, after a break, a few years later they came back, dealt with the issue, and further progressed toward equal opportunity. The responses backed up the research indicating that there is strong resistance to change in the church and that change happens over years (Braun et al., 2015; Durham, 2016).

3. The age demographics of members made a difference in how accepting of change they were. While young people tended to want to push the topic forward and older people were more resistant, several of the interviewed pastors leading the movement were in their 60s and even 70s—so age is not a conclusive factor. But young people tended to be the people that left when the process went slow, and older members were the ones leaving (if any did) when the process moved forward. This supported the research that showed younger people are more accepting of women in church leadership (Smith & Stevens, 2003).
4. According to most respondents, exposure to women speaking or in leadership roles seemed to be the most significant accelerant to church members becoming more open-minded. Accomplishing this exposure can be challenging since a church enforcing the Complementary view's restrictions won't allow women in those spaces in order to create exposure (Duncan, 2004). Some respondents would often find workarounds when they could to get women in front of the congregation doing different activities. Additionally, sometimes it took members visiting other churches and experiencing women doing things that were not allowable in their home churches. Often, it was older, more trusted women who would “break the ice” for women leading in new situations. Multiple respondents

indicated that they personally became convinced that it was okay for women to lead the more they had exposure to women preaching. Lastly, for some of the interviewed pastors, creating exposure opportunities was almost a “back door” to dealing with contentious theology issues—getting people to become more comfortable with women in those positions. This aligns with the wealth of research emphasizing the role of exposure to new experiences in organizational transformation (Crossan et al., 1999).

5. Society’s cultural issues were often an impetus for addressing the women’s equality issue in the church context. Yet some churches actively resist being influenced by the outside culture—viewing it as “worldly” and always against their values. This was observed to make the process slower. As one respondent commented, “I think we have had a very difficult time—I don’t mean this rudely—but transitioning into this century.”
6. One theme that kept surfacing as necessary was that of cognitive flexibility. The respondents consistently used different language for it, including non-binary thinking, not black and white, non-dualistic, flexible, and open-mindedness. Several respondents communicated that this was a vital factor—and one they were eager to foster in their communities. This supported the extensive research on cognitive flexibility (West, 2021). But respondents could not express a clear path toward getting the congregation here. Two of the respondents said that they intentionally attempted to model a flexible approach. However, from what each shared, one could conclude that most interviewees were already modeling this attitude (even though they didn’t speak directly about it).
7. Those respondents whose churches have fully made the move to being egalitarian expressed many benefits that came after the decision had been made. One noted that it elevated the level of planning and intention for everyone involved in planning a worship

service. They said that when women started speaking, they "prepared very thoroughly for the things that they did, and it raised the bar on the experience of prayers and communion meditations and all the expressions of people in the congregation in our worship service." They also said that once women were actually serving within the congregations, it became very evident to them how much women were being suppressed prior to the decision. Some respondents included stories of how oppressed women had felt in these churches over the years by the restrictions. Unable to use their gifts and talents within the church, they began to feel shut down. One interviewed pastor made the following statement:

I really wish that church leaders who are making or considering making the change could realize the kind of life that comes out of that decision. What it really looks like for half of their church is that they don't even realize how much they're being suppressed. And how much life immediately comes out of that [the change]. And that's something I get to see all the time...as churches make those decisions...I feel like their lives are so much more enriched. I really wish that leadership would see that as they're making those decisions. I really wish that they would maybe reach out to churches who have already made those changes and actually talk with them and find out what that was like and what benefits they've seen.

This was supported by the research on the different ways women's leadership in the church benefits everyone (Durham, 2016).

Implications of the Study

The findings in this study have contributed to understanding how the process toward equal opportunity for women moves in a church leadership context. This study has yielded results indicating several factors influencing the process, providing theoretical and practical implications for other churches considering this issue. The implications are as follows:

1. While many churches are in this process, it can take several years (and even decades) to fully become an egalitarian church in belief. And even then, it may take several more years for women to be able to be placed in the roles previously limited to them (such as elders and lead pastors). Without intentional teaching, discussion, and movement, the process can tend to go on for a long time and frustrate many members. Also, the process can sometimes be experienced in multiple stages—where women may be allowed more involvement than previously, but perhaps not full equal opportunity. Some churches experienced as many as three distinct stages in coming to the decision that women can do anything a man can within the church.
2. This process has similarities and implications for how churches may deal with the LGBTQ population. Five of the 14 respondents mentioned that the two issues have relevant associations in the church context. One respondent said they felt their church became open and affirming of the LGBTQ community in a shorter timeframe because of the earlier women's issue process. Another determined that their new way of reading the Bible about women was the same kind of framing to be accepting and supportive of LGBTQ people. A third respondent said their congregation was wary of moving forward with the women's issue because it might lead them towards becoming affirming of the LGBTQ community—and they did not want to do that.

3. When considering a change, retaining members is always a motivation for the church leadership. Sometimes this works to push churches to deal with the women's issue—as many people (typically the younger population) are considering leaving if they feel the church is not dealing with giving equal opportunity to women. Although sometimes, the fear of members leaving holds churches back from making a forward movement—as some people threaten to leave if change is being considered. Multiple respondents indicated that more and more young people are leaving due to non-movement.
4. As change occurs toward allowing women more opportunities, according to two of the respondents, it can trigger a feeling of oppression in the past. While these are not felt for years as the church structure is normalized in a complementarian context, as women become more educated and exposed to communities where there is equality—they can start to feel like they have been disempowered, suppressed, and silenced. They can feel like their God-given gifts are being blocked from being used. Women in these situations may start to see their church communities as a source of trauma, which can impede their future engagement in the church.
5. Whether one comes from a sociologist's context or a Christian perspective, there is a sense that the groups we are a part of (whether society or a church) will experience growth in knowledge and understanding—and this will positively impact how we act. A sociologist might refer to this as social evolution, while a Christian might see it as “the Spirit's guiding.” In none of the interviews did respondents describe anyone they were aware of moving from an egalitarian perspective to a complementary one. As small as the sample was, it would seem to signal that this is a forward movement in the church's evolution—or, as some might put it, where the Spirit is leading. Author and human rights

activist Arundhati Roy mentions how people tend not to go backward, saying, “The trouble is that once you see it, you can’t unsee it” (Roy, 2000). The Bible itself speaks about those who, in their religious fervor, may actually move opposite to how God’s Spirit is moving in Acts 5:39 (TPT), “But if this movement is of God, you won’t be able to stop it. And you might discover that you were fighting God all along!”

Limitations of Study

While the outcomes of this study are revealing and deserve further consideration and research, several factors must be considered concerning the study’s limitations. The following are several factors that present potential confounds:

1. Sample size. The sample size of local church congregations was small (n=12)
2. Diversity of sample. This study lacked participant diversity by age, culture, ethnicity, and geographical region.
3. Researcher characteristics. The Principal Investigator is a known Church of Christ community member, which could have impacted participant responses.
4. Researcher bias. Because the Principal Investigator was an active member of the Church of Christ at the time of the study, that may introduce potential bias in the study. The insider knowledge of the church’s norms, practices, and beliefs could influence the interpretation of the data and the way in which findings are presented.
5. Rigor. How the Principal Investigator conducts each interview can be challenging to maintain, assess, and demonstrate.
6. Experimenter Expectancy Effect. The researcher's presence during data gathering, often unavoidable in qualitative research, can affect the subjects' responses.

7. Respondents were interviewed as a couple. Two interviews were conducted with a couple rather than as individuals, which can sometimes influence each other's responses (and cause them not to be forthright).

For these reasons, the outcomes of this study should not be considered generalizable to a larger population and should be interpreted with caution.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has contributed to understanding how beliefs change in a church community. As the study progressed, a few areas surfaced as suggested areas for future studies. The recommendations are as follows:

1. A study that was able to research churches that were just beginning the process of intentionally addressing the women's role in the church and following them through the entire process would be beneficial. The entire membership could be surveyed at the beginning as to their current beliefs and, as the process went on, they might be surveyed multiple more times. The study could see quantitatively how many members were changing their beliefs and, qualitatively, they might be asked what activities were influencing their personal changes. If enough churches were included in the study, one might be able to determine a "tipping point" for the number of members to believe similarly before a church can fully transition to an egalitarian stance.
2. Another helpful study would be one that investigates how exposure influences a change in belief. The study might identify church members who have complementarian beliefs and provide them structured exposure either to videos or live experiences of women preaching (either in individual instances or multiple over time) and survey them multiple times to evaluate how the exposure influences their beliefs over time.

3. The current study included eight churches that were fully egalitarian and four churches that were in an intentional process dealing with the women's role. It is recommended to conduct a study with churches at different stages of the process—such as churches initially considering an intentional strategy or churches who decided to allow women to new roles but have not yet had any serve there to compare what themes might be salient.
4. Outside of the two couples who participated in the interviews, only one other woman responded. It would be extremely valuable to include more women in the study to see how their personal experience as women now in leadership roles impacted their views.
5. This study had little diversity in the size of church communities—another recommendation would be to intentionally select pastors from congregations of small, medium, and large sizes and compare their processes.
6. Similar to above, getting representative churches from different geographic regions or different-sized cities would be interesting to compare and contrast how their communities go about changing their beliefs and practices.
7. Lastly, it may be interesting to find churches that may have gone through the process and decided to stay Complementarian or find churches that took steps to go in a direction away from Egalitarianism and see what factors led their communities in that path.

Overall Summary

Since many churches have long looked at Bible scripture as being prescriptive for how they should function, this has often led to women being prohibited or sidelined from being a part of the leadership and authority within their congregations. According to the respondents here, this is a relevant issue that is prompting many members to be frustrated with and even leave their

church communities—so it is critical for churches to address the issue. This study highlights themes that could be valuable for church leaders as they consider ways to address gender equity.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

The interview questions are as follows:

1. Where would you say your church community lands on the spectrum of women's role in church leadership—from Complementary (women must submit, not teach, or speak) to Egalitarianism (women can take on any role that a man can take—full equality)?
2. How long was your church community (or how long have they been) in an active and intentional process of moving to Egalitarianism?
3. When did that process complete (if it has already)?
4. What was the size and demographic of the community when you started the intentional process?
5. What was the size and demographic of the community when the process ended (or what is the current size of the community)?
6. In your estimation, how many people left your community as a result of this movement?
7. What is the current size and demographic of the community?
8. What was the impetus for beginning the transition to egalitarianism? Please describe what that process looked like.
9. What were the main accelerators during that process?
10. What events/experiences were most helpful in moving the community forward?
11. What were the main factors that held the community back?
12. In your opinion, what could have helped the process go faster?

13. In what specific ways did people's theological beliefs shift in order to make this community change?
14. How did you go about making a belief system change?
15. Did you engage any outside resources (people, books, articles, etc.) during this process? What were they?
16. Were there any other churches that you modeled your process after? If so, what was similar and what was different about your process?
17. To what extent do you think that views of women in leadership are driven by dualistic (black and white) thinking that is widespread in our church culture?
18. To what extent do you think that views of women in leadership are driven by a Sola Scriptura that is widespread in our church culture?
19. Does your church promote insight/self-reflection, and if so, how?
20. Is there anything else you'd like to add that might be helpful in understanding how churches can make this change?