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Change During A Time of Transition

Todd Edmundson

In the fall of 2010, the First Christian Church in Erwin, Tennessee, was entering a period of transition. This was a congregation with a long and rich history, and with strong roots in the community. However, in more recent years they had experienced a number of setbacks and trials that had some members reeling. Several families had left the church, either because of external factors such as dwindling employment opportunities or because of rifts within the congregation. In the summer of that year, following a series of intense trials in both the life of the senior minister and his family as well as the life of the congregation, the elders had made the heartbreaking decision to call for the minister's resignation and began the search for someone to fill the position. Dr. David Roberts, a former minister and a retired professor of Bible and ministry, was a strong choice to serve in an interim capacity and provide a positive voice in a difficult time.

Nevertheless, those first few months of Dr. Roberts's tenure were filled with uncertainty about what the future might hold for the congregation. By nearly every conceivable measure, it hardly seemed the best time to embark on any widespread changes to the church's policies. Most congregations would undoubtedly have been tempted to remain in a holding pattern until the dust settled from some of the recent upheavals. Yet it was at this time, in the late fall of 2010, that the First Christian Church of Erwin began to explore and discuss one of the boldest shifts in church policy that the congregation had ever undertaken: the decision to include women in all areas of church leadership.

This brief article is an attempt to trace that shift—from its early stages as a nascent idea among those in leadership through its implementation as a congregation-wide change—and also to evaluate (albeit with a limited sample size) the impact that the decision is having on the church's life together. My perspective on this process is unique in that I am both an insider and an outsider to the story. On the one hand, I am the current senior minister at First Christian Church, and therefore I am deeply involved at every level of leadership and decision-making within the congregation. I have already benefited greatly from this decision, and often it is up to me to verbalize or provide a rationale for what such an approach to leadership means for the church. At various times, this role has been both challenging and rewarding. On the other hand, this shift took place in the months preceding my arrival at First Christian Church. In fact, the congregation made the final decision to amend the church's bylaws on the same day they decided to call me as the new minister. Therefore the bulk of my knowledge about the process that brought the congregation to this decision has come from listening to what others have to share, from attending to the stories and the insights that those around me have to offer. This has been a blessing, and is just one of the many ways that I have been able to learn about the special people who make up this congregation I have been called to serve.

In what follows, I will try to do justice to both the past decisions and the current implications involved in this move. I hope also to do justice to the journey of First Christian Church through somewhat sketchy terrain, a journey that we are still on and, by God's grace, continues to challenge us and enrich us. Finally, I hope to offer encouragement to other congregations who may be wrestling with similar issues and are wondering what the best way forward might be.

Exploring the Possibility and Need for Change

In September of 2010, David Roberts presented before the church board the suggestion that they undertake a reevaluation and, where necessary, a revision of portions of the church's constitution and bylaws. The primary focus of this reevaluation was language about various aspects of leadership, from expectations and requirements for leadership to the relationships among various leaders as well as between the leadership and membership of the congregation. The issue of women in leadership was not the sole or even the main concern of the church board at the time. What was needed, according to both Roberts and the elders of First Christian Church, was an extended discussion of the vision of the congregation moving forward and the need to train up and affirm good, capable leaders from among the membership.

There was both a negative and a positive aspect to this conversation. Like so many matters that the church faces from day to day, there was an element of faith as well as an element of fear present in these discussions about what the future held. Many of those involved were committed to the belief that God had plans for First Christian Church, that there was much work to be done in Erwin and beyond for God's kingdom, and that God would be faithful in providing the opportunities and abilities necessary to complete that work. These members of the congregation saw good things ahead. They believed that any discussion about vision, mission, and leadership could provide clarity and courage for the body of believers. At the same time, even among these committed members of First Christian, there was also a sense of anxiety about how this kingdom vision might be implemented and whether, among a declining membership, there would be enough hands and feet, enough hearts and minds, to carry out the work.

Such feelings were unavoidable, and inescapably shaped the ensuing conversations among leadership and membership. However, even more important to those involved was the principle that any discussion of this magnitude should unfold within the context of examining the scriptures together, of working to discern what God's word had to say about leadership and the mission of the church. Dr. Roberts and the elders engaged for several months in a study of what the scriptures said (and didn't say) about the leadership of God's people, including an examination of what roles women could assume within the community. Throughout their study, those involved adhered to the hermeneutical principle that isolated passages, particularly "problem passages," would be interpreted in light of the larger witness of scripture concerning God's work among God's people, rather than used as proof texts or knockdown arguments. Regarding the matter of women in leadership, there were two passages that presented some concerns from the start. The first was from 1 Corinthians 14:33–35:

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people. Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (NIV)

The second problem passage came from 1 Timothy 2:11–15:

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (NIV)

Because these two passages have often been used as arguments against the conviction that women might serve in positions of leadership, and because they also contained much that was unclear, the elders wrestled with the insights contained in these verses. Through reference to a number of commentaries, as well as to the larger context of the church's life in the first century and beyond, they reached the conclusion that whatever specific rules or conventions these passages may be describing, the regulations outlined in these two passages cannot have been binding for all times and all places. The silence of women was not strictly commanded or even observed within other passages of 1 Corinthians, let alone in the ministry of Jesus and the earliest Christian communities.

Adding to the complexity of the discussion was the fact that, as observed by the elders of First Christian Church, this was an area in which the practices and policies of the congregation had been inconsistent for quite some time. Apart from any official sanction or decision, women had been serving in leadership among the congregation for years—and not just in the contexts of kitchen and nursery. Women had been offering communion meditations and prayers in Sunday morning worship. Women had been serving on committees and helping to shape the decisions of the church board. At the time when this conversation was occurring, one woman was serving as the head of the search committee for the new senior minister. Therefore, the elders concluded that to expect women to serve in those ways, while officially denying them access to positions of leadership and—in theory at least—silencing their voices, was dishonest and even somewhat unjust. A change in how they as church leaders handled these matters was necessary.

The Congregation Moves Toward Change

After much prayer and study of these passages and others, and after much discussion about what God was doing among the congregation, including the women of the congregation who had been serving faithfully in so many ways, the decision was made by the elders to present a proposal to the church board regarding the potential inclusion of women in some areas of church leadership. At the December 2010 board meeting, a letter was presented by Shelton Thompson on behalf of the elders asking the board chairman and the other members of the board to prayerfully consider amending the church constitution to reflect this change by removing the word *male* from the list of required qualifications for deacons. The matter was revisited at two subsequent board meetings and, after further discussion, in May of 2010 the board approved a revised set of bylaws to the church constitution, pending congregational input. The new bylaws removed the word *male* from the list of qualifications for both elders and deacons. During this time, Dr. Roberts preached a series of sermons on church leadership, and a number of groups within the congregation began to study and discuss the issues of church leadership in general and women in leadership specifically.

One particular group that engaged in an extended study of these matters was the young adults Sunday school class. While it might be assumed that this comparatively young group would be the first to embrace change simply for the sake of change, that assumption would be incorrect. In fact, among the younger members of the congregation, there was an intense desire to be faithful and careful in how they approached the decision of whether to endorse or to oppose women in positions of leadership over the congregation. Like the elders, this group also diligently and deliberately weighed a number of problem passages in light of the larger context of scripture as well as the life of the church, and many of these young adults were also persuaded that this was the right decision for First Christian Church.

It was also during this time that I first entered into conversation with First Christian Church about the possibility of coming to serve as their senior minister. During my first visit with the congregation, I sat in on the young adults' Sunday school class. I listened as they wrestled with these issues together, and I was moved by the ways in which they seemed to be practicing communal discernment about an issue of great significance for the church. I could tell that some of the members in that class, as well as those on the search committee, were hesitant to ask my opinions on the matter, perhaps for fear that a strong disagreement in this area might cloud the decision about my hiring. I expressed that I was excited to see them having such a difficult conversation and that, while I was personally in favor of women serving in leadership positions, I would support whatever decision the congregation made. On May 22 and June 12, 2011, in a pair of congregational meetings, the congregation was given the opportunity to vote on the proposed amendments to the church constitution. The decision passed, and the revisions to the bylaws took effect in June of that year.

Implementing the Change

The decision reached by the congregation at First Christian in June of 2011 was significant, but it is one thing for a church body to make such a decision and quite another to be faithful in the way it is implemented. Later that year, after I had served two months as the senior minister, the elders and the church board asked me to be a part of the committee to nominate church officers for the coming term. Every member of the committee knew that this was an awesome responsibility—and not just because of the potential that we might nominate

female candidates for office for the first time in the history of the congregation. On the contrary, we were careful about not seeing that particular nomination process as a sort of Rubicon moment, a chance to make a grand statement about gender equality in the church. Our task was more important than that. As a congregation, we had continued to discuss and pray about our collective vision for ministry and service, and we all believed that selecting the right leaders—whether male or female—was an integral, even necessary, element to developing and living out this vision going forward. Therefore, we approached the task with a measure of gravity, and each of us saw his or her appointment to the committee not just as an obligation to be fulfilled, but also as an opportunity for theological reflection about what leadership looked like.

My role on the committee was to help guide this reflection. I led the other members through a study of the narratives of scripture in which we saw leadership on display. We looked at stories of Deborah, David and Daniel; of Elijah, Ezra and Esther; and of Peter, Paul, and others as well. At each turn, we evaluated what it was about these men and women that made them leaders: what qualities they exhibited, what sort of services they performed, and what strengths they embodied. The conclusion that we reached as we engaged these stories together was that leadership is not just a matter of talk or popularity or outward appearance. True leadership among God's people is a matter of service, of having a spirit submitted to the Lord and a life that is poured out for others.

We decided that those who would be nominated for leadership in the coming term would be chosen because they were already leaders. Not because they had been in the church membership rolls for the longest time. Not because they fulfilled the minimum requirements laid out in the constitution. Not because they were warm bodies to fill a chair and provide a vote. Rather, they would be chosen because they were doing the work and would continue to do the work, because they were serving faithfully and sacrificially and would continue to serve faithfully and sacrificially. After several meetings and much prayer, we nominated a slate of five new leaders to be set aside as elders and deacons. Two of these five candidates were men and three were women.

While we tried to avoid focusing exclusively on the issue of women in leadership throughout the nomination committee, we nevertheless understood that there was a lot resting on the shoulders of those first female leaders, and consequently we understood that, perhaps even more than any of our other nominations, it was crucially important to get these nominations right. The women we selected were chosen because we knew they were viewed as models of Christian service and leadership throughout the congregation. Each one of these women had given countless hours to the work of the church, often toiling behind the scenes with little or no recognition. Each of them was gifted with wisdom, humility, and a commitment to the body of Christ. They were respected by those outside the church as women who had made positive impacts on the larger community. In short, while they were no more perfect than anyone else in the church, they were certainly “above reproach” and therefore strong choices to bear the awesome responsibility of serving as the first female elder and deacons at First Christian Church. In January of 2012, these three women were installed and have continued to serve faithfully in a number of church ministries and to impact a number of church decisions in the months since.

Conclusion: Assessing the Change

The congregation at First Christian Church in Erwin has been gathering for worship for almost 125 years. The decision to include women in leadership positions is two years old. Therefore, any attempt to assess, in any large-scale way, the impact that this decision has made on the congregation would likely be premature and woefully inadequate. Even at this early date, however, there are a few statements I can make concerning how this decision has been received, and what effects it has had in the short-term.

First, some issues that have not arisen as a result of this decision: the roof of the sanctuary has not caved in; church board meetings have not been “hijacked” or directed unnecessarily toward “women’s concerns”; and the work and worship of the congregation has not come to a screeching halt. In fact, congregational life has in many ways continued as it was before the decision. Women still play a prominent role in worship—leading in singing and prayer, giving a call to worship, reading scripture, and offering communion meditations. Only two facets of worship have seen much change due to the congregation’s decision: women now serve

communion alongside the male deacons and occasionally preside at the table as well. In addition, the contributions that women have made at the meetings of the church board have been valuable, as they have brought fresh insights and wisdom to the proceedings. (In January of 2013, the original three female board members were joined by two more, so that the church board is fairly balanced. This balance has not had any negative effects as far as I can tell and I, for one, am honored and blessed to serve alongside these five women as we strive together with their male counterparts to make decisions that will benefit the church and glorify our God.)

Outside of our congregation there has been little or no resistance to the decision, and other churches in the area have either been supportive or have acknowledged that a difference of opinion in this matter does not constitute a grounds for refusal to work, worship, and fellowship together as sister churches. The gracious response of these local congregations has been an especially pleasant surprise. I must confess that at first I felt some hesitancy about whether to enter into these discussions with other pastors and leaders of churches in the community. Now, however, I am proud to be a part of a congregation that has made this decision and is moving forward prayerfully and humbly while implementing it. I am delighted that my daughter will grow up in a church congregation where her gifts are not just honored but are seen as equally important as those of the boys. I will be the first to admit that on this issue, as with any issue of significance, we still have much to learn. But I am proud to serve with a body of believers who are submitting themselves to the process of figuring tough things out together, and I look forward to seeing how God will continue to work in our midst.

TODD EDMONDSON ENJOYS PLAYING MUSIC AND HELPS LEAD WORSHIP AT FIRST CHRISTIAN, WHERE HE IS STILL SERVING AS SENIOR PASTOR. HE LIVES IN ERWIN, A SMALL TOWN SURROUNDED BY THE CHEROKEE NATIONAL FOREST, AND LOVES HIKING AND BEING OUTDOORS WITH HIS FAMILY (TEDMONDSON@MILLIGAN.EDU).

