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Association Life and Women

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³ J Richard Middleton and Brian J Walsh *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be* (SPCK 1995)

⁴ David F Wells *God in the Wasteland* (IVP 1994)

⁵ Howard A Snyder *Earth Currents* (Abingdon Press 1995)

⁶ See especially *Why do people debate the future of the church when they have not made up their minds about the existence of God?* The Times, Monday April 12 1993

⁷ Ian Aitken *Is Tony promising pie in the sky?* New Statesman and Society 12 April 1996

⁸ Howard Snyder: *Earth Currents* (Abingdon, 1995)

⁹ Jim Packer: *Among God's Giants. The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Kingsway, 1991)

Association Life and Women: Reflections on an Enquiry

Recognition

It is one thing to hold office. It is another to be recognised and accepted. One of my contacts who has held office within an Association had previously served in her local church as secretary. While she is full of praise for the encouragement and support of the men, at all levels, in the Association, she was far from happy with the treatment she received in the otherwise male diaconate within her own church. There was strong opposition to her appointment, which was recorded in the minutes, and a general lack of cooperation and respect until she had proved to the men that she could do the job. She was in post but was neither recognised nor accepted. In that atmosphere she needed all the courage and determination she could muster to keep going.

Some of those who completed questionnaires wrote about being patronised or tolerated. One had to contend with various comments about physical appearance and dress. One commented on the frustration of not being taken seriously; another that the negative attitude of many male church leaders and some ministers was extremely difficult to deal with and often very hurtful; another that her leadership from the chair was totally ignored by two men in a meeting, whose fierce exchange almost came to blows.

And then there is the issue of worship and preaching. There is no doubt that women find it offensive and hurtful when they are prevented from leading worship and preaching in some of our churches. I admire the graciousness and willingness of those who, when making Presidential or Association visits, are willing to sit in the congregation knowing that there is no place for them in the leadership of the service.

I am afraid it is not just the men who are reluctant to recognise women in leadership. There are women who have a similar attitude. When asked whether she had discovered why the post she held had not been previously filled by a woman, one of my correspondents replied that the women in the county prefer not to take leadership roles. This is surely another way of saying that women prefer men to lead.

Without recognition and acceptance, women who are elected as Presidents, Secretaries, Treasurers or chairpersons of Association committees face an unremitting struggle to keep going, let alone to introduce new ideas and initiate change; and it

is understandable if some were unwilling to expose themselves to these pressures. Speaking about her frustration, one of my correspondents added, "Life can be wearying in a male-dominated setting".

Maybe we need to look at background and preparation, qualifications and training, for these are key areas in establishing women in leadership on equal terms with men. Recently, I was given an article from the magazine *Training and Development*, which tackled the subject of sexual differences in the workplace. Under the heading 'Equal Opportunities' comes this paragraph: "In 1990, Prime Minister John Major, launched a business-led campaign called 'Opportunity 2000' to increase the quality and quantity of women's participation in the workforce. This programme provides a manual of 'how-to's' to assist organisations in planning how to utilise women more effectively in organisations. A key factor in maximising women in the workplace is the development of training that helps them not only to prepare for business and the workplace, but also helps them to **optimise** the unique skills that women can bring to a male-orientated work environment".

Re-writing the last sentence of that quotation to put it in a Baptist context we might say: "A key factor in maximising women's involvement in the life of the denomination is the development of training that not only helps them prepare for the tasks waiting to be done, but also helps them optimise their gifts and the unique skills that women can bring to a male-orientated organisation". If such training opportunities were available at Association or Area level, more willing might be willing to come forward to take their rightful and necessary place alongside men.

Affirmation is a further aspect of recognition and plays a valuable part in bringing out the best in people. Women in leadership need this, and have a right to expect it, as they give a lead and call others to follow. I was glad to note that two of my correspondents, one who served as an Association Secretary and the other as a president, paid tribute to their Area Superintendent who had encouraged them to accept the posts and then affirmed them openly.

One woman serving as Association Secretary, writing additional comments at the end of the questionnaire, stressed the need for an in-depth look at encouraging women into leadership: "Men need to create space for women to prove their worth". Or as Elisabeth Moltmann puts it in *His God and Hers*, "Men need to listen to and sit at the feet of women". The Secretary added that the pressures on women needed to be taken seriously and that younger women in particular need to be targeted.

A Woman's Insight

The loss in partnership of half of the human race is an obvious deprivation to its community life. Less clear is the question whether that missing half would bring a special contribution of its own: what, in everyday terms, is frequently labelled a "woman's insight" or "feminine intuition": Ruth Barnhouse, writing on a woman's identity, points out that this entire question is far from being simple and straightforward. She states that, "when we speak of masculine or feminine personality characteristics or behaviour, we are talking about something which has many different variations, something which results from the exceedingly complex interaction between an archetypal predisposition and the total environment of particular individuals, including the rest of their own personality, both conscious and unconscious". The concept of the "archetypal predisposition", to which she refers, comes from Jung's conclusion, following research into history, mythology and the customs of many different cultures, that there are two basic principles forming "part of the given structure of the human psyche - perhaps of the universe". Eastern philosophy agrees with this

observation, going further than Jung in its statement that everything which exists can be divided into 'yang' (masculine) and 'yin' (feminine), and that these two should always be kept in balance supporting and complementing each other.

Despite the complexity of which Professor Barnhouse writes - the variations in feminine personality characteristics and behaviour produced by environmental and other personality influences - it is sense to argue that what is distinctively feminine in this archetypal sense will make its most obvious contribution to community via the women within it. This is true even though within men can be found varying degrees of femininity and within women the corresponding varying degrees of masculinity. Such complexity of individual make-up should certainly warn us all against sexual stereotyping.

In contrast, a simpler starting point to choose is an attempt to define the particular contribution of women to community life taken by many research scholars in recent years. They begin, as Elisabeth and Jurgen Moltmann do, from the "historical experiences....as they can be found today in analyses by social psychologists and personal statement." Similarly, Kathleen Fischer, social worker, therapist and theologian, author of a number of books on these issues, bases her research upon her work experiences with many women and also uses their responses to a questionnaire on the subject of their feminine spirituality. She argues, in particular, that women's experience is "important for understanding God's revelation" - a vital point in the argument of this paper raised under the following section.

Partnership

Community is at the heart of our understanding of the Christian faith. God as Trinity is our model - perfect mutuality. In the beginning God created humanity in his image. Together in mutuality male and female reflect God. In the creation stories of Genesis chapters 1-3, where the writer quotes God as saying "Let us make man" (1:26), the reference here is to humanity, not to a specific male, ie humankind in the sense of all human beings.

In the Gospels we see the beginning of an inclusive community. In talking to the Samaritan woman, Jesus acts against exclusive community. In dealing with a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman, he makes the same point. His mission embraces all outsiders. The Holy Spirit calls us from all forms of exclusivism to all-inclusive attitudes and actions to "a spirituality which refuses to rule out whole areas of human experience and whole groups of human persons". (K Fischer *Women at the Well*) This inclusiveness draws us naturally into partnership.

Paul's picture of the Church as the Body of Christ tells us that we all need each other. We all belong together, women and men in partnership, with gifts ready to be used, in any and every sphere of Christian service.

Partnership means power: not power as expressed in a hierarchical structure with dominant and subordinate relationships, but power as relation and mutuality. Everyone is included in this exercise of power - in receiving as well as giving, in listening as well as speaking. In describing the Church as a body, Paul makes the point that, while Christ is the Head, all the other parts of the body are of equal value and all need each other. This kind of relational power leads to collaboration rather than competition. No one is side-lined; no one is left out. K Fischer suggests that this type of power could well be part of women's contribution to leadership.

When, in my questionnaire, I asked for 'Hopes for the Future', these were some of the comments I received: "That men and women will work together in love,

accepting each other in Christian leadership"; "that we can see women and men firstly as people and avoid aggressive and defensive behaviour"; "that men and women could work together without women being aggressive or men patronising"; "that churches and male leaders will become more open to accepting women in leadership"; "that the denomination will recognise that women have equal but different contributions to make". on this issue, the onus is particularly on men to give way, make room, stand aside, welcome the women alongside.

A final word from Dave Tomlinson, a leader of the British House Church movement for a number of years and Director of Teamwork: "if we men can purge ourselves of our fears and self-centredness and if our women friends can forgive us and break free from their resentment and hurt, together we can once more reflect the image of God in our homes, fellowships and the world in which we live." (From 'Fear and Forgiveness - a Masculine Confession' in *Men, Women and God*)

Neil Hall

The document from which the above is taken, is available from the author. It is called "Waiting in the Wings". This article first appeared in the *Baptist Times*, permission from which has been obtained.

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