

Equality in Ministry: Wholistic Church Leadership

By: Norman Yergen

Sometimes people don't value a gift until they lose it. Others don't value a gift, because they've never had it to begin with. Most of the people I know who are opposed to women in ministry fit this category. They have never had a female pastor. Nor have the critics of women's ordination that I know actually worked on a day-to day basis with women clergy. I see the issue as similar to the early church's conflict over sending missionaries to the Gentiles. As Peter and Paul suggested, when you see the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles in the same way as it fell on Jewish Christians, how do you argue with the providence of God? If God chooses to pour His Holy Spirit on Gentiles, who are we to withhold full fellowship?

In my first years of ministry I found myself in a men's club. All important positions and committees were filled by men. I had no real complaints. The elders welcomed me and mentored me into the ways of the brethren. No one sensed that anything was amiss. I think of it as the meat and potatoes period of my ministry. A person wouldn't starve but, over time, a person wonders is this all there is.

I remember going to my second church. In God's providence, a woman was voted as local elder. That first Sabbath when she was on the platform I was a bit uneasy. She was calling for the offering. She carried onto the platform a very huge purse. I winced. As she went to the pulpit to make the appeal, she began to assemble from this purse an incredible exhibit. The men had always just gone to the pulpit, pulled out the card provided by the Conference, and bumbled through the appeal. She on the other hand had taken the time in the middle of the week to plan one of the most memorable appeals I have ever heard.

Over time the elders in my church became balanced with 50% being women. Finally, the board even made the head elder and board chair a woman to balance the gender of the pastor. What we found was that the entire operation took on a more healthy equilibrium. Decision making improved because the balance resulted in a better consensus that was more sensitive, practical and ethical. We found the solution to problems to be more creative and doable. Somehow, what men and women separately couldn't do, or struggled to do, came much easier as they worked together.

In time the church finally hired a woman as an associate pastor. We found one-third of the church blossomed as their needs were met for the first time. In particular, GenX members who were

disenfranchised over issues of justice, began to appear. Women whose boundaries had been violated by men found an understanding defender and supporter. People who were broken, marginalized and sidelined were attracted. People no one had listened to were nurtured.

I felt my ministry had gone from a difficult separation to a healthy marriage and family. I believe we returned to the Biblical plan of Genesis. Remember that in the beginning, God created a father and mother. Both were needed for a happy home. But somewhere along the way we've lost sight of God's original plan for a family. We think it's normal to have single parent homes. So also, I think the church is like a home. Just as a broken home is a home with a single parent, so a broken church is a church with only male leadership. All the problems and imbalance you find in a home of a single parent, you will find in a church with single gender leadership. Sure, families survive, but they are not ideal. So also the church with only male leadership may survive but it lacks all God intended.

As I've counseled dysfunctional and broken families, I have been amazed at the ability of people to justify their behavior. I remember one man who physically abused his wife. He felt Ephesians 5:23 gave him biblical support for his actions. Another man beat his children basing his behavior on Proverbs 13:24. In the same way I have watched the church oppress, abuse, and take advantage of women, all in the name of following some self-serving interpretation of scripture.

I've discovered as my own church has become more functional by including everyone in leadership, how unhealthy we had been. What we had been seemed normal until we began to learn how abnormal and pathological we were and what church life could be when it functioned as God intended.

In my most recent transition, I moved to a conference with no conference leaders, pastors, and only a few elders as women. I feel stifled in my work. I feel like I'm missing an arm and leg, an eye or an ear. People whose perspective I've come to depend on to do my work are no longer available to me. So, I'm limping along, dreaming of the day when I can walk again.

You may think you have good reasons not to hire women but if you gave it half a chance you'd quickly learn that you have missed out on what is probably the best gift God gave ministry next to Jesus.

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