

when they are at their best: fully present, aware, and participating without ego in God's transformation of the world. Because, in the end, ministry effectiveness in the postmodern turn is not the result of a leader's gender, but the degree to which they are embedded in the new world, how little their personal identity is tied to power and position, and how clearly they get what needs to happen now that the show is over.

move to the people of God dispersed, a displacement more absolute than that of the first century. And in this new landscape of radical dispersion – beyond buildings, beyond programs, beyond pedestal personalities - what leadership qualities are most needed? What are the practices and gifts of those who minister well within such a context of deconstruction, chaos, and uncertainty?

To be certain, this reframed conversation is not for the faint of heart or closed of mind. For here, the findings of Senge and Bergquist may prove to be true. The new frame of reference most needed may indeed be skewed toward the feminine. And if that skew is accurate, traditional gender conversations in the Church, i.e., the inclusion of women in essentially male systems, will seem like pre-school banter compared to what it means to shift out of those systems altogether.

The encouraging news is, this new conversation is happening – perhaps at decibels audible only over quiet coffee tables, but it is happening. Even a few pastors are acknowledging that their patterns of dominance and control are getting in the way of reaching a waiting world, and they are looking to women and “type B” men who can help them learn new ways of functioning. At a recent workshop on collaborative leadership, one leader admitted, “I’ve never had a problem figuring out the game plan all by myself. I just find that, increasingly, I’m playing the game and no one else is remotely interested.”

Ideally, what may now be viewed as feminine practices of leadership and ministry in the postmodern turn will ultimately be seen as what humans do

tolerate ambiguity. Most importantly, the postmodern leader will acknowledge and even generally anticipate the occurrence and impact of rogue events (i.e., those unforeseen incidents that occur from within the system or outside of it.)”²

Peter Senge, one of the world’s most respected voices on leadership and culture, is struck by the disproportionate number of women who are, “making things happen,” especially when it comes to durable, organizational change. They are risking short-term rewards, image, and security for what they know - deep down - is right. He observes,

“Women managers and executives are leading many of the most important sustainability innovations...They seem especially willing to take on long-term issues that deal with imbalances in the system as a whole.”³

As questions of Christianity and gender are placed within the deeper context of ecclesiology (what is the Church and what is it supposed to accomplish) and missiology (what is the church’s present context), the conversation will change substantively. Where the former dialogue has centered on equal gender influence within the top-down, institutional systems of modern Christendom, the new conversation reframes questions of gender outside of those systems. In the flattened, post-institutional realm shaped by the equalizing forces of digital communication and globalization, the focus must

² William Bergquist, *The Postmodern Organization: Mastering the Art of Irreversible Change*, (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1993), 113.

³ Peter Senge, *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Society for Organizational Learning, 2004), 131.

Whether male or female, our questions must ultimately move beyond power and equality to those of ecclesiastical integrity. As important as mutuality is in the kingdom of God, it is quite conceivable to be mutually and equally participating in a failing and misguided enterprise. What Laurel knew in her gut after three decades of institutional Christendom was that the boat was sinking, and she could either choose to go down with it...complete with ordination certificate and door plaque...or she could jump into the water and help guide the lost to shore.

What inspired Laurel to get out of the system and into the world no doubt reflects her own renegade nature. But it might also reflect something that has broader implications. Is it possible that women have been better prepared for the flattened world that is now reality? If so, might Christian women be better equipped to innovate ministry beyond a dying Christendom? Marginalization encourages alternate thinking and strategies, and nowhere is that more true than in the journeys of women influencers. Recent research reports that women are often more aggressive in taking risks, demonstrating more comfort with ambiguity, unpredictability, and crisis than their male counterparts. Not surprisingly, all three of these realities are inherent to the postmodern context. William Bergquist, in his groundbreaking book, *Postmodern Organization* (1993), described the kind of leader the postmodern world requires, and he places women at the forefront:

“What will be the nature of the newly emerging postmodern leader? He or she will be one who can master the unexpected, and often unwanted. He or she (and more often, it will be she) must be able to

Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century,¹ Laurel is finding out just how well wired she is for the de-hierarchied, interactive landscape of the new millennium. She may have spent thirty long years burying huge chunks of her connective, collaborative self just to survive in top-down religion, but no more. Here, in this incarnational space of ordinary life, Laurel is free to live and lead magnanimously, to function out of her authentic self: savvy, whole-brained, and refreshingly tuned to the now.

Laurel's field of choices and her effectiveness as a result of those choices are conspicuously off the radar in current discussions about women and leadership in the Church. Could it be that women have spent so long trying to climb the ladder inside old church and leadership systems that the very questions they're asking about gender equality, opportunity, and power are stuck? Perhaps the real questions go more like this: what does it mean to seek biblical quality if the Church itself is no longer functioning in biblical ways? What does it mean for women to pursue the full use of their gifts in the Church if western Christianity has lost its missional purpose? What does it mean to hitch ones' star to the Christian status quo, especially if that status quo is a narcissistic, capitalistic perversion of the Gospel? In summary, what does it really mean for a woman to be released into her potential, to be trusted with a ministry role, or to secure a salaried ministry position only to find that, for all her new-found freedom, authority, and seeming equality, she is only rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic?

¹ Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005).

her granddaughters had been found murdered, the result of a domestic fight. Her son-in-law had killed them both. One granddaughter survived. Laurel entered a darkness she'd never known - a careening, agonizing descent into unimaginable pain. After six months, Laurel began to share portions of her grief journal with friends: a few e-mail snippets, tendril-like, stretching out to connect with life. Those e-mails were forwarded to friends of friends, then onward to a conflagration of unknown but hurting recipients. What started as Laurel's missives of private grief - her own brave step toward survival - became a lifeline for hundreds of people. She now writes an e-devotional sent across continents.

When the question is asked, "What is it to lead the church in the postmodern context?" and then, more specifically, "What is it for *women* to lead in the postmodern context?," it is hard to get around the refreshing, contrarian turns in Laurel's journey. At base, the way she influences, whether at Target or through her e-devotional, is unapologetically organic. There are no top-down systems here, no grandiose, lone-ranger dreams, no mega-church blueprints. Rather, here is a woman, showing up with her full self, her full story, and in full presence - on the people's turf and in the rhythm of their lives. Surely, she must have earned A's in Missiology.

Her organic style of influencing is indeed radical. But it is Laurel's persistence in working the cracks of life - far from the reach and drone of the institution - that is more radical still. If it is true that change comes from the fringe, then Laurel is living on the fringe of the fringe. Echoing the small-company, turn-on-a-dime world of Thomas Friedman's, *The World is*

Laurel simply couldn't be a woman of the great machine any longer. Besides, she'd been witnessing a quiet but significant shift in her community's spiritual temperament. Since the late nineties, what had been at least a little stream of unchurched visitors had dwindled to less than a trickle. Even the megachurches down the street from her little red-brick congregation were hurting for new faces, their 1980's, "if we build it, they will come" approach operating on fumes. To Laurel, the community both she and these megachurches served had moved on. One could not simply put up a billboard sign and expect the unchurched to come knocking, even if you showed up in the neighborhood with the formula intact: a cute-sounding church name, killer band, concert-venue tech system, and a golden-haired pastor-boy.

No, as Laurel saw it, the audacious, "we've got just the thing for you" years were over. For years, she'd had the nasty habit of spending time with people totally disconnected from religion (it was her secret solace), and she knew first hand that none of them had the slightest interest in checking out the show under the big top. They were more interested in eating pancakes, lingering in the parking lot at their kids' soccer games, drinking beer at the local grill, or playing Texas Hold'em on Saturday night. Their sacred space was wherever life was happening, and after all these years stuck inside the redbrick ghetto, Laurel wanted to be there.

It was more than just burnout and cultural analysis that propelled Laurel into her gutsy decision, however. It was a life-crisis of major proportions. Her last redbrick church had been in the mid-west, close to her daughter and two grandchildren. The call came after midnight: Laurel's daughter and one of

laws sound like a multi-level marketing come-on. At 12:30 a.m., Laurel and Suzanne are doubling over in laughter about Suzanne's Match.com disaster on Saturday night. At 2:25 a.m., Laurel hefts big boxes of laundry detergent onto her motorized cart and tries to help 26-year-old Jennifer figure out what to do about her autistic son's latest bout. At 4:05 a.m., Laurel is stocking dog-food, engrossed in Bob's tirade about his alcoholic wife. At 7:33, she's punching out, heading to the pancake house for breakfast where the coffee, pancakes, teasing, guffaws, and conversation will be flowing non-stop. At 9:00 a.m., she's driving home to have a last cup of coffee before her pastor-husband leaves for work. Maybe she'll be able to catch a few hours of sleep before her grandson arrives at 3:30, but only after she checks out that quirky journal article on Kierkegaard she's been waiting to read. She's been a Kierkegaard fan since seminary days. *Her* seminary days.

In many ways, Laurel is an anomaly within American religion and most certainly, within evangelicalism. Ordained and newly planted in a rural/bedroom community, Laurel rejected a comfortable church job (her husband had secured a pastoral position only twenty miles away), striking out in ministry completely on her own. What could have been the picture-perfect scenario – “clergy couple pastors neighboring parishes” - became “middle-aged woman hangs out with Target misfits.”

Even at fifty-five, Laurel is more postmodern than modern. Perhaps it was a gradual transition. Perhaps she woke up one day and screamed, “This isn't working!” Perhaps it was one too many budget meetings, one too many building committees, or one too many worship wars. Whatever the case,

After the Show is Over: The Rise of the Feminine in the Postmodern Turn

By Sally Morgenthaler

Laurel is fifty-five. Her mid-western face is crinkly around the edges, her figure rounder in places than she would like. At five feet one, Laurel has never escaped the petite section at the local department store. But one thing is certain: her faith does not match her size. Here is a woman whose life is lived in radical outward-momentum: whether loved ones, unloved ones, perfect or imperfect strangers, Laurel's Christ-following is atypically risk-taking and expansive.

At first meeting, Laurel would seem like the poster child for one of those large evangelical women's conferences. Maybe it's her uncompromised presence. Attending to the well-being of others might easily mistaken for the invisibility and inaudibility tantamount to sainthood in conservative circles. Never mind that both of these have been the battleground on which millions of women fought over the last century. To be unseen and unheard - in effect, to be as organizationally impotent as possible - remain prerequisites to acceptability in more "contemporary" and emerging evangelical congregations than we'd like to admit.

Yet, Laurel's presence is the antithesis of impotent. Laurel's late-night co-workers who stock the wide-aisle shelves at Target know her as a powerhouse of a woman. Not only is she a hydrant of comedy (Laurel believes life is comic relief to the weight of eternity). The way she invests time in her co-workers, Laurel's lived spirituality makes the four spiritual