

INTRODUCTION

I originally wrote this paper as a response to the conference – *Weavings: A Gathering of Women in Baptist Pastoral Leadership*, held at Ashburton Baptist Church, May 1st 2004. I hoped to gather some of the threads of this conversation. I wrote to bring this material to a wider audience of men and women, through the Baptist Urban Ministers Network. I hoped in doing this is to offer some possibilities for how we can continue to spin these threads and gatherings into the fabric of our life, for ourselves, our churches, and our Baptist denomination in Victoria.

Doing a quick count through our 2004 Baptist Union of Victoria Handbook, I calculate that women make up approximately 18.5% of the listing our pastoral leaders.¹ Of these, only three (of four hundred and twenty-one) are listed as senior pastors, three serve in regional ministries for the Union, and two serve at Whitley College. Less than two percent of our 'senior' positions are filled by women. The balance of women in pastoral leadership is far from equal, but when we look at the numbers of women in senior positions there is a sense that we have only just begun to bring our gifts into use in the broader sphere of the denomination. The depressing reality is that of the fifteen thousand three hundred members (approximately) of our denomination, less than three hundred currently experience a woman as sole or senior pastor.

The Ministry Review Task Force Report of 2000 identifies the need for more women in pastoral leadership, as well as the difficulties that women who are called and trained have had in obtaining positions through which to exercise their ministry.² These difficulties resonate with research in both the United States and the United Kingdom. Dianne Tidball reports how women are disadvantaged: they are given low expectations for career paths, and their practical training in churches is limited compared to the opportunities open to men.³ Linda McKinnish Bridges adds that '...women, no matter how large the critical mass, do not move far beyond their original points of entry. These positions are usually small congregations with limited financial and political resources.'⁴ *Weavings* revealed this reality in the stories women told on the day of their experiences of ministry, and the frustrations of being limited by lack of opportunities.

There is resistance to women moving into leadership. At *Weavings*, anecdotal evidence was given about churches who use Anne Wilkinson-Hayes (a Regional Minister for the BUJ) as moderator, but would rule out having a woman in a leadership in their church. The Union has very little scope for addressing the imbalance of genders in our churches. The churches are free to call people of their own choosing into pastoral leadership.

¹ These figures are from 2004 and need to be updated. However, I suspect the changes are fairly minimal. These statistics do not include women in joint pastoral positions with their husbands.

² "Ministry Review Task Force," (Melbourne: Baptist Union of Victoria, 2000), pp. 6 & 9.

³ Dianne Tidball, "Walking a Tightrope: Women Training for Baptist Ministry," *The Baptist Quarterly* 33 (1990). Tidball provides an account of the issues facing women training in the UK. She comments also upon earlier research done in the United States: "Study on Women in the Ministry," (American Baptist Churches, 1979).

⁴ Linda McKinnish Bridges, "Women in Church Leadership," *Review and Expositor* 95 (1998): p. 340.

Many times that means ruling out a whole range of possible pastors simply because of gender.

Furthermore, the BUV has not been able to instigate a policy through the Assembly of seeking affirmative action for women within its own structures (though it is very much the Union's practice in reality). The most recent BUV paper addressing the issues of women in leadership was written in 1978.⁵ It is time to take another look at the position of women within our denomination, and to make some suggestions for the way forward towards a fuller use of the gifts and resources God gives us to use as the Church. Not everyone will see the need for this, and like the workplace in society at large, there is generally a difference of perceptions between men and women about the need for changes in gender relations.⁶

The Ministry Review Task Force suggested that the next ten years will bring an increased need for diversity in church leadership. This diversity will need to include leaders who are specialists, full time and part time leaders, bi-vocational leaders, and leaders who are able to equip and work with an increasing number of lay leaders.⁷ The time is ripe for an expansion of the range of pastoral leaders.

FOUNDATIONS

Let us first affirm that as Baptists we hold dearly the reality of God's ongoing revelation through scripture. 'The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from his word.'⁸ To limit our current understanding of God's word in scripture as the total truth is to have lost something vital from our Baptist heritage. Writing as he did before the advent of feminist theology, we can find new meaning in the words of W. T. Whitley: 'In ecclesiastical history ministers are not the men who count... Baptists beyond others, are especially pledged to recognise and to utilise the priesthood of all believers.'⁹

The beginning point from which to look at the issues of gender and leadership is not the 'equal opportunity' push that is present in society at large. Our discussion on gender issues must begin from our understanding of God's own nature, what this reveals about the nature of the church, and how we are invited to be the body of Christ.

The God we profess is triune. God's own nature consists of three persons in one being. These persons are distinct yet interdependent, and their relating to each other is described as 'actively receptive'.¹⁰ In her work on the Trinity and Christian life, Catherine Mowrey LaCugna includes discussion about

⁵ Mervyn Himbury and Graeme Garrett, "Report on the Study Commission on Ordination," (Melbourne: Baptist Union of Victoria, 1978).

⁶ Amanda Sinclair, *Doing Leadership Differently: Gender, Power and Sexuality in a Changing Business Culture* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998) p. 131.

⁷ "Ministry Review Task Force," p. 9.

⁸ George Rawson, "We limit not the truth of God," in *Baptist Praise and Worship*, ed. The Psalms and Hymns Trust (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 73.

⁹ Karen E. Smith, "Beyond Public and Private Spheres: Another Look at Women in Baptist History and Historiography," *The Baptist Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1991): p.80.

¹⁰ Catherine Mowrey LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1973) p. 280.

gender issues in the light of the life of the Trinity. 'Sexuality does not condemn us to unequal stations in life but, properly understood, gender is a mode by which persons relate equally, mutually, reciprocally to other persons'.¹¹

God's own nature is one of mutuality and reciprocity, but not for God's own sake. The *perichoresis* (defined as: 'being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion'), is 'divine life as all creatures partake and literally exist in it... Everything comes from God, and everything returns to God, through Christ in the Spirit'.¹² This is seen most clearly in Jesus' prayer for his disciples (John 17:20-21). For the church to be a true expression of God's own nature we must all be free to use the gifts we have been given. Otherwise, 'the end result is half a loaf'.¹³

For the health and well being of our denomination we need to be encouraging the use of all people's giftedness.

All Christians are called to service or ministry through their baptism and this is exercised through the many gifts of the Spirit to the church community. In 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul reminds us that there are a variety of gifts recognised in the congregations.¹⁴

Excellent work has been done exploring the biblical basis of the equality of all peoples.¹⁵ The evidence used against women taking leadership is not based on good scholarship, and must be judged in the light of the larger picture of God's own dealing with humankind, both in the Hebrew scriptures, in the writings of the early church, and in the record of Jesus' own life.

WHAT DO WE HAVE TO OFFER?

It is necessary to say at the outset that the attributes discussed here are not limited to women, nor are they expressed by all women. There are always exceptions to the rule. But for the purposes of our discussion we shall need to speak in general terms.

There is much to indicate that women and men have different styles of leadership, in the church and in society at large.¹⁶ Women's leadership is perceived to be 'relational, connectonal, flexible and intimate and passionate'.¹⁷ Dianne Tidball reports from her research that,

¹¹ LaCugna, *God For Us* p. 281.

¹² LaCugna, *God For Us* p. 274.

¹³ C. Anne Davis, "Liberation, Not Separation," *Review and Expositor* 72 (1975): p. 67.

¹⁴ Letty M. Russell, "Feminism and the Church: A Quest for New Styles of Ministry," *Ministerial Formation*, no. 55 (1991): p. 28.

¹⁵ See Gretchen Gaebelien Hull, *Equal To Serve: Women and Men in the Church and Home* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1987). Also Val Webb, *Why We're Equal: Introducing Feminist Theology* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 1999).

¹⁶ For comment on women in the church see Carol E. Becker, *Leading Women: How Church Women Can Avoid Leadership Traps and Negotiate the Gender Maze* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).. A study based on working women in Australian society is Maria Gardiner, "Women and Australian Leadership: Beyond the Current Paradigms," in *The Heart And Soul Of Leadership*, ed. Australian Institute of Management (Australia: McGraw-Hill, 2002). Also Sinclair, *Doing Leadership Differently*.

¹⁷ Russell, "Feminism and the Church," p. 33.

Women ministers were seen as being more gentle, sympathetic, intuitive, democratic and pastorally adept; less authoritative, dictatorial and competitive, and better with people and at counselling.¹⁸

Letty Russell affirms feminist styles of leadership, describing them as using a partnership paradigm, 'shared authority in community'.¹⁹ Historians have noted the difference between women's ministry exercised in the 'private' sphere and men's ministry being exercised in the 'public' sphere.²⁰ This would certainly be the case for many of the women of the BUV handbook who are not in senior or sole pastor positions. They work in children's ministries, women's ministries, pastoral care, counselling, and chaplaincy positions.

Carol Becker summarises:

Many authors observing both the secular and the religious leadership spheres characterize the leadership style of this new breed of women as *interactive* because they 'encourage participation, share power and information, enhance other people's self-worth, and get others excited about their work.'²¹

Does this not match well with the description by the Ministry Review Task Force of the type of leaders our churches will need by the year 2010? Women leaders have gifts to help take our churches forward into the future.

Changes are needed in the paradigms of church. These changes are not just about the increasing involvement of women in leadership, they are about looking for new ways of being the church together. The old ways will not take us forward. A great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity is ahead for those in leadership as well as for those whom they serve. We have not yet engaged fully in God's own trinitarian life. We have ignored Christ's own statement of call (Luke 4:18-21) and the example of his ministry of welcome and inclusivity. Jesus engaged and dialogued with women, affirmed their faith, did not shun their bodily functions, encouraged them in discussion and debate, and allowed women to challenge him and stretch his understanding of his own mission. He was not bound by rules or traditions, and sought to bring others into freedom and the fullness of life. This is our call too.

DIFFICULTIES TO BE AWARE OF:

Weavings highlighted some of the practical difficulties for Victorian women in pastoral leadership at this time. There are problems that have been identified that hold women back. Some of these are structural and organisational. As already mentioned, not all of our churches are willing to consider women for pastoral leadership. But other difficulties arise within women themselves as they approach leadership roles. There is ambivalence for many women about how they exercise their leadership gifts. Women must learn the balance between servant-hood and leadership, between openness and authority,

¹⁸ Tidball, "Walking a Tightrope," p. 391.

¹⁹ Russell, "Feminism and the Church," p. 30.

²⁰ Smith, "Beyond Public and Private Spheres." See also Bridges, "Women in Church Leadership."

²¹ Becker, *Leading Women* p. 52.

vulnerability and strength. This is the tension that is needed for healthy relationships. Women can too easily find themselves stepping back from conflict or challenge. Some of this is about women's natural style that is relational and caring, but some of it is an abdication of our own power. Many are afraid of being branded 'feminist' because of negative experiences of women who have been destructive in their pursuit of equality. Speaking again of her research Tidball reports that, 'Women were afraid to be seen as formidable or strident and yet recognised the need for firm leadership.'²² Donald Messer writing about images of leadership in general terms addresses one of the dangers for women in particular:

The danger today is that women adopt the servant leader model of ministry and live only on the servant side of the equation. Women need not surrender their caring, nurturing qualities, but they do need to assert their vision and values in leadership ways... Many contemporary churches are hurt more by pastoral default than by pastoral domination.²³

Carol Becker identifies in her book, *Leading Women*, a number of themes raised by men and women about women in leadership. She addresses each of these, and offers practical advice for responding that is useful for both men and women to read. These issues and the examples Becker cites would be a useful starting point to pick up the conversations from *Weavings* and to look more systematically at what is possible in our current situation.

Themes from Men and Women²⁴

1. Since women have entered church leadership in significant numbers, the acceptable styles of leadership have multiplied.
2. Women in leadership must compromise.
3. Women get a mixed message from the church.
4. In the patriarchal environment of the denominations, theology and language work against women.
5. Women work as immigrants in a foreign land.
6. Issues of invisibility are the most common traps for women.
7. Women in leadership burn out quickly.
8. Women feel unsafe because their physical boundaries are routinely compromised.
9. In striving to work successfully with women, men are trapped too.
10. There are tasks for men and tasks for women. Men's tasks come first.
11. Women want men to listen.
12. Childhood experience teaches men how to work with women.
13. Women are ambivalent about power.
14. Women need mentoring.

²² Tidball, "Walking a Tightrope," p. 391.

²³ Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989) p.104.

²⁴ Becker, *Leading Women*. These themes run throughout the book, but a summary is presented on pp. 29-33.

At *Weavings*, Gwyn Milne gave a presentation entitled, 'Leather and Lace: Elements of Women's Ministry in 2004'.²⁵ In it she encouraged us as women to 'Rejoice in our diversity, share and treasure our unity.' Gwyn offered ways for women to support each other, how to deal with lack of support and disappointments, and how to become more resilient.

Her presentation also touched upon many issues that simply are not a concern for men in pastoral leadership. These included:

- Remuneration – 'You can't put a bunch of flowers in the petrol tank.'
- Clothes – 'Especially undies - well fitting, but not too well fitting!!'
- Grooming – including hair, fingernails, toenails. 'What about hairy legs and hairy underarms, facial hair????'

I wonder how many men would expect to have a discussion about the fit of your underwear and how that impacts upon others. I cannot decide yet whether to be outraged that women (and not men) have to take this on board, or to value this as a significant insight. It seems to me that women must be conscious of how they present themselves at all times. Poor grooming can be forgiven in a man, but a woman cannot afford to be careless about her appearance or she will not be taken seriously. This is not fair, but it is a reality that has to be worked with as Becker highlighted above.

Sexuality is very much a gender issue. Sex is a topic that is avoided in churches, and there are still many prejudices about sex and women in particular that I suspect are powerful but unspoken barriers for women. Our sexuality cannot be denied. But as women in leadership it is a difficult area to negotiate, one that has the potential to be our undoing completely. The difficulties are many faceted. For example:

- What do I wear when conducting a baptism?
- What is the line between being attractive and being provocative in my choice of clothing? Who decides this? Who tells me and how?
- How am I to sit?

Some of these issues are humorous, and at *Weavings* we were blessed to be able to have a laugh at some of ridiculous situations in which we find ourselves. But there is an edge to this. How much is this about positively managing the perceptions of others and how much being reactive to the expectations and demands of how I 'should' be?

Although we have had women in pastoral leadership in the BUV for some decades now, and it has been more than twenty-five years since Marita Munroe became the first woman ordained here, most of us have not had women as role models. We are very much seeking to make our own way, and generally we do this based on our own experiences of how we ourselves have been led. We now need to explore these other models of leadership, as exercised by women and men, inside and outside the institution of the church. We need to become more self-aware about how we are leading. Increased consciousness will free us in our choices for exercising leadership that will be

²⁵ Gwyn Milne is currently the National President of the Baptist Union of Australia.

a better fit both ourselves and the situations into which we are called. There is no 'one size fits all'.

Out of the conference some key themes were named for attention. These are presented in Appendix 1. Four principle areas for action were recognised: the BUV, Whitley College, the churches, and women themselves. These resonate with Maria Gardiner's 'Model for changing the paradigm' which is included below. These key areas are by no means exhaustive of the issues that these women would like to see addressed, but are a few points where we recognise some action is possible. These are the focus for now because we recognise that 'real freedom is experienced in specifics only.'²⁶

Model for changing the paradigm²⁷

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Leader <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop and live by personal values • driven by personal values | | |
| | | |
| The organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • change what you can (and factor in the personal cost!) • aim for small wins | The people in the organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • decide on the type of rapport <i>you</i> want from people • find a mentor to support you in achieving <i>your</i> definition of success (not the organisation's!) | You in the organisation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop resilience • let go of what you can't change (generally others!) • embrace what you can change (generally yourself!) |

HOW CAN WE HELP OURSELVES?

One interesting idea that has appeared in several places is that of women taking responsibility for themselves.²⁸ I do not mean women should accept the blame for their position within our churches or society. Far from it! But the only place that any of us can initiate change is where we are. And the only part of where we are that we have any control over is ourselves. Women have a responsibility to do what they can, where they can. Unless we are getting involved and working for change we have no right to complain about what is not happening, or how slowly things are changing.

Anne Davis writes strongly on this point, and is worth quoting at length.

²⁶ Davis, "Liberation, Not Separation," p. 63.

²⁷ Gardiner, "Women and Australian Leadership."

²⁸ Any of these authors: Becker, *Leading Women.*, Davis, "Liberation, Not Separation.", Gardiner, "Women and Australian Leadership.", Patricia Gundry, *Neither Slave Nor Free: Helping Women Answer the Call to Church Leadership* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

First, most groups in their struggle for recognition see themselves as powerless. This may be the way that they feel, but it is a distortion of reality and an abdication of adult responsibility. Secondly, for every powerless feeling, that group must identify another group and attribute to that group all power. This all-powerful group becomes 'the enemy.' This is a distortion also. No group is ever all-powerful.

Having said this, women bear responsibility for acknowledging they are powerful and that they should cease playing the powerless game. Men must begin to acknowledge that they have power but not all power. When this happens, there is the possibility that the mutual willingness to give up power for another's good can be actualized in a redemptive encounter.²⁹

Helping women face the realities and to engage with their own capacity for leadership, mixed as it always is with issues of power, authority and control, requires resilience. Maria Gardiner offers these in her conclusion to encourage women not to change to fit in better with their male-dominated environment, but to change so that they can cope better with it.

The six characteristics of a resilient person³⁰

A resilient person:

1. puts things into perspective and does not catastrophise or magnify disappointments;
2. doesn't believe in luck or fate, but believes that actions, skill and sometimes chance makes things happen;
3. doesn't demand that life be fair or just (because quite often it isn't)'
4. doesn't mistake feelings for facts, and knows that sometime you feel life is difficult and awful, but that doesn't make it so—not every day is wonderful;
5. gets on with what is happening in the here and now and doesn't dwell on past disappointments (a sure-fire recipe for inaction);
6. and, most importantly, can do all the above because they know where their values lie and what motivates them in work and life.

I need to make special mention of Patricia Gundry's book *Neither Slave Nor Free: Helping Women Answer the Call to Church Leadership*.³¹ She offers practical strategies for women that range from taking care of your own needs to change-making in our organisations. She includes too a chapter called, 'A Message to the Church Hierarchy' which offers some particular suggestions for men in leadership positions, what they can do to assist women, and what will happen if they don't.

As women in leadership already, we have a responsibility to keep working to expand the possibilities for ourselves, and for other women who will follow. The networks we create can help sustain us. We have the capacity to be role

²⁹ Davis, "Liberation, Not Separation," p. 67.

³⁰ Gardiner, "Women and Australian Leadership."

³¹ Gundry, *Neither Slave Nor Free*.

models and mentors for younger women, who will eventually reach far beyond where we have gone. The life of God is in the community we live in the here and now, and in the future we are helping to build.

It has been a difficult task for me to address these issues. Despair has walked with me as I have focussed on the limited opportunities for women at present. But I have to believe that God's Spirit is still at work in the Church, drawing us all towards the fullness of life that is God's own self. The choice I make is to continue to move with God's own longing for our full participation in God's life. Let the dance of the Trinity continue to draw us all in.

The next steps are ours to make. Weavings has identified some key areas to address. The pattern has been laid out. Let us see how we can cut the cloth to fit in a way that will bring joy and life to all our people. Let us clothe the body of Christ with all the richness that is ours to share.

POST-SCRIPT (May 2005)

Since the writing of this paper, the Victorian Baptist Women's Ministry (VBWM) has been established.³² It has sought to meet a need amongst women in our churches by offering a network and activities specifically designed by women, for women. What this group has not yet been able to do is to link with women in pastoral leadership or women training for pastoral ministry. The portfolio dedicated to this area (Nurture), has been vacant since the group's establishment.³³ The needs and interests of women as pastoral leaders are not yet being met by this group. I am not confident that under their current style of presenting themselves that they will be able to do that in a way that is able to be taken seriously as a significant voice for women in the ongoing discussions of women's contribution to pastoral leadership in our churches.

³² See http://www.buv.com.au/int_womens.html

³³ But I believe that this position has now been filled.

APPENDIX 1

| Weavings Conference - Key Themes to address |
|--|
| For the BUV |
| 1. Encourage the BUV to have an Equal Opportunities Policy |
| 2. Encourage BUV to produce and up-to-date paper on Women in Ministry – last one was in 1978. Monitor the changes. Develop a study guide for small group use on the issue. |
| 3. Encourage BUV to keep monitoring representation on committees, at Assembly and encourage each other to get involved. To change the culture we need to normalise the participation of women and the hearing of women's voices. |
| 4. Tell women's stories in the Witness. Have an editorial policy to ensure equal representation of men and women in articles and photos, (and non-Anglo?) |
| 5. Look after Alan Marr – he is a supportive DOM and we wouldn't like to lose him. Give thanks too for all those men who are advocates for Women in ministry. |
| 6. Ensure that we keep our lists open to include all women in ministry, not just those the churches choose to list. Keep up to date database, and circulate this for prayer and encouragement. |
| 7. Do we need a Co-ordinator for Women's Issues? |
| For Whitley |
| 8. Theological education – concern that everyone undertaking ministerial training should have to work on the theology of women in ministry – compulsory courses or papers should be set. Prejudices should be challenged. |
| For our churches |
| 9. Encourage the use of inclusive language Bibles in our churches – do we write an article for the Witness – doing reviews of the best versions, and saying why they are important? |
| 10. How do we encourage the better support of partners and children in ministry? |
| 11. Encourage holistic models and understandings of church |
| For ourselves |
| 12. Expand peer-group networks. Encourage networks to assist us to pray for each other |
| 13. Recognise that we are all role models for other women, and we need to do this intentionally, and well. |
| 14. Affirm and encourage each other's ministries |
| 15. Be aware of wounded women and help in their healing |
| 16. Take opportunities as they arise. They may not always be ideal, but we need to get in there as a starting point. |

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