



Telling our Story: **Women in** **Ministry**

**A resource proudly brought to you by
Churches of Christ in Australia**

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Introduction

-- **Craig Brown**

Federal Coordinator, Churches of Christ in Australia

2012 marks the 100th anniversary of the first woman studying at Stirling College (College of the Bible, then CCTC). This is a significant milestone that is worth reflecting on as part of our DNA as Churches of Christ.

Much has changed since those early days when women could study to be missionaries on foreign fields, but not study for local pastoral ministry. As we look around, we can now see examples of women in ministry in our local churches, our State Conferences and our agencies.

However...the transition is not yet complete. Nor has it been easy. There have been times in our Movement where the contributions of women have been sidelined to the margins, where they have often worked tirelessly and without recognition. There have been instances where their ministry has been compromised by male “gatekeepers” who, for whatever reasons, have seen fit to keep the status quo by overlaying one interpretation of Scripture as law.

This resource is intended to remind us all of the contribution of women to the story of Churches of Christ. It also serves, in part, as a plea. In the coming decade many of our local church ministers will retire. This has caused consternation in some quarters as to how we will deal with this impending “crisis”. Yet with crisis comes opportunity. Already in our churches there are many, many Spirit filled leaders waiting in the wings who happen to be women. Many of us can reflect on how our own ministry journeys were inspired by, and aided by, women exercising ministry. I would not be here today if it were not for the likes of heroes of my faith journey like Jan Blackmore, Karen Webster, Merryl Blair and my wife, Danni Brown.

Let us continue as a Movement to cultivate leadership by all sexes, ages and races. Let us be partners in God’s call to ministry. Let us uphold the

call of Galatians 3:28: *there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

For, at our best, we are a people who know that every member of the Body is gifted to serve, and the Body is only at its best when all of its parts are serving.

PLEASE NOTE: It is our goal to have contributions from all of our states in this resource, it will be updated once they are received.

A Historical Overview of Women's Ministry in Australian Churches of Christ

-- Kerrie Handasyde

Honourary Historian for Churches of Christ Vic/Tas
Editor, Historical Digest, for Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society

Do you know when a woman was first called to minister in Churches of Christ? It was as early as 1931. Our first woman deacon? Way back in 1863. It sounds like we were ahead of our time, breaking down societal expectations and ushering in "neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). But these ministries were each like a brief flash of light in the darkness heralding a new day that would only come much later. They were truncated by resistance from within the church. In each case it was decades before sufficient acceptance and courage grew for such ministries to be attempted again.

This article tells the story of how women's ministry grew to become the norm in Churches of Christ in Australia. It tells how our Movement's lack of centralised control provided no structural barriers to women's ministry and, at the same time, was unable to protect and nurture pioneers. It also tells how our understanding of mutual ministry was implemented yet tempered by social expectation. In the end, however, the tide of equality has rolled in from *outside* the church. Rather than leading the way with a cohesive sense of prophetic vision, we have, for the most part, woken to find the world has changed around us and that our expectations, support of women's ministry and willingness to interpret scripture with complexity, have progressed with it. Despite the radicalism of the New Testament, the church has often reflected the society.

The first Churches of Christ member from Australia (male or female) to serve on an international mission was Mary Thompson

In the mid-1800s all Churches of Christ ministry was unpaid lay ministry. Men controlled religion in the public sphere. Women stayed home. Still, Nettie Thurgood saw an opportunity to expand women's roles out of the private sphere and into the streets. She established a Sisters' Auxiliary, then a district women's conference in 1884, and a colonial (state) conference in 1886 in Melbourne. Her goal was to engage "every sister in the church to more effective effort for the Lord". In other words, she was mobilising women for lay ministries in fund-raising, hospital and orphanage visitation, and clothing the needy. She ensured that women's meetings involved bible-study, prayer and the kind of procedural formalities that would ensure good order and respect from the men. This early work was very much limited by nineteenth-century expectations of domestic piety. But under Nettie's guidance, women's ministry grew beyond the home to include the care of those outside the church and the important business of financially supporting missions.

In a time when money was men's business, women raised significant sums to support the mission fields overseas – and it was often women missionaries they were supporting. The first Churches of Christ member from Australia (male *or* female) to serve on an international mission was Mary Thompson from Collingwood (Vic.). She responded in 1891 to an appeal for men to serve in India and, when no men volunteered, her offer was accepted. Her ministry in India endured for over 40 years, ably assisted by local women whom she trained: women training women for missionary service. From 1912, the College of the Bible (now Stirling Theological College) acknowledged the call of women to overseas mission by enrolling them to study for the Foreign Mission Certificate. In the decades after Thompson, many others came: Tonkin, Cameron, Blake, Pfrunder, Strutton, Coventry, Waterman and more. Some served in partnership with husbands: some on their own. Tellingly, in 1936, a New Zealand Churches of Christ woman, Miss Eadie, came to the 'foreign field' of Australia to establish the Indigenous Mission at Norseman in WA.

Why women were deemed good enough to minister to people of colour in foreign climes but not at home speaks of both pragmatic resourcefulness and an unspoken hierarchy of the faithful: sexism and racism brought together 'second-class ministers' with 'second-class

parishioners'. In their day these pioneer women were celebrated as "good-spirited" and "gentle", which were acceptable virtues for the time. But we might call them courageous, persevering, strong, and quite beyond questions of class.

As the twentieth century progressed, Australian society began to question the assumption that a woman's place was in the home or on a foreign mission field. Perhaps someone trained for overseas mission could serve in a local church? In 1931, a belief in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, combined with a congregation's right to call their own minister, enabled history to be made. Miss Violet Maud Callanan - equipped with intelligence, confidence and a Foreign Mission Certificate - was inducted into pastoral ministry in Hawthorne, Queensland. That brief appointment made Vi Callanan the very first Australian Churches of Christ woman minister. It also made Churches of Christ the second denomination in Australia, after the Congregational Church, to employ women in ministry. Having made history, Vi Callanan moved south to work in the church's Social Service Department in Melbourne.

Until 1941 ministers were inducted into Churches of Christ, rather than ordained. This reflected our denomination's belief in mutual ministry *and* our concern that ordination would set ministers apart (and above) the lay preachers and the governing elders and deacons. But our understanding of ministry gradually changed, the professionalisation of ministry grew and ordination was introduced. In 1946 Miss Alice Barton was the first woman ordained into the ministry of Churches of Christ in Australia. Her fiancé was ordained at the same time and they married shortly after. They ministered at a church in NSW where Mrs Alice Saunders (as she was then known) quickly became 'the minister's wife'. She said she was 'not unhappy' with the way of things (though not rocking the boat can be necessary to retain employment). Our model of church governance has made women's path to ministry straightforward, imposing no legal obstacle. But the ability of churches to call (and sack) their own ministers has also allowed inertia and resistance to fester unchallenged, and many talented women have had to wait for the slow tide of popular church opinion to turn.

In the 1960s and 70s women's expectations expanded and the tide did begin to change. While growing up in Castlemaine, Victoria, Norma Hall had been thrilled when she stood behind the pulpit as a girls' club Good Companion. As a child she understood the power of the Word. As a young woman she felt called, despite the opposition she encountered, to preach. She travelled to World Convention and studied in Vancouver, Canada. Then she served as the ordained minister at the Church of Christ in Winnipeg. Returning to Australia in 1973, Norma Hall became the minister at the Warracknabeal-Brim circuit in Victoria: the first ordained woman in a full-time congregational ministry in Churches of Christ in Australia.¹ The first women to be ordained and trained locally were Pam Bowers and Robyn Haskell: Pam serving 38 years in ministry. The move toward team ministries has seen large numbers of women work in either full- or part-time ministry roles, though few in team leadership. That challenge remains.

Our pioneering women of the 1970s and 80s were part of a wider movement toward equality in society and women's ordination in the Christian church. By the mid-70s there were still only 15 ordained women in Australian denominations – but four of those were in Churches of Christ. We were among the leaders. Yet, simultaneously, some congregations chose to deny women members full participation in the life of the church. A 1976 survey found that women were still prevented from presiding over the Lord's Table, reading the bible in worship and standing for election to the church board in a majority of churches. That situation changed quickly in the decade to follow. The few churches which resisted change often held up biblical precedent to justify their approach to women as second-class Christians. Consequently, the expertise of our New Testament scholars was called upon. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, when the debate was still current, these scholars proved again and again women's involvement in the

Scholars proved women's involvement in the ministry of the early church by uncovering the evidence obscured by history

¹ Hall is often reported as our *first woman minister* because she was employed in solo ministry and ordained (reflecting other denominations' understanding of ministry).

ministry of the early church by uncovering the evidence obscured by history and interpreting Paul's words with depth of understanding. They argued persuasively that the sexism (and slavery and injustice) of first century society was not part of Christ's vision for the Kingdom of God: indeed Christ's vision was radically inclusive. In recent decades women's involvement in every aspect of worship, church governance and ministry of the Word has become the norm.

Our history as Churches of Christ demands that we pursue the Restoration of the spirit of the New Testament and Unity in mission. With women and men united as equals in ministry we move closer to restoring the spirit of that time - when Jesus' words were ringing in the ears of followers; when his heart for humanity was first seared into the souls of disciples; when the Kingdom of God seemed so suddenly near that there might truly be "neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus".

Churches of Christ in Australia

Women's Ministry — a Timeline of Firsts

- 1863 First woman to serve as a deacon, Church of Christ at Brighton, SA
- 1884 First Churches of Christ Women's Conference, Sisters' Auxiliary Conference, Ballarat, VIC
- 1885 First woman with a regularly published column in a national, Churches of Christ journal, Nettie Thurgood, Australian Christian Standard
- 1886 First state (colonial) Women's Conference, VIC
- 1891 First Australian missionary (male or female) to serve in an overseas mission, Mary Thompson, India
- 1912 First women enter theological study, College of the Bible
- 1931 First woman to be paid as minister of a congregation, Violet Callanan, Church of Christ at Hawthorne, QLD
- 1946 First woman ordained, Alice Barton (Mrs Saunders), Ordination was introduced in the 1940s
- 1973 First women to be ordained *and* enter solo ministry, Norma Hall and Pam Bowers
- 2000 First woman Principal of Churches of Christ Theological College, Merrill Kitchen OA

When did the first woman preside at the Lord's Table, preach or lead a congregation in worship? We may never know precisely when. But we do know that, through the 1960s, 70s and 80s, women's involvement in worship and church governance increased and became the norm in Churches of Christ in Australia.

'My Journey'

-- **Lynette Leach**

Former CEO, Churches of Christ Vic/Tas

Former Minister, Williamstown, Vic

Currently Pastor, UNOH

My journey in ministry has combined influences from my family of origin, marriage and family, work as a teacher, friendships, involvement in community and church groups, and study. As a lay person, I was involved in leadership in the local church from a young age. I inherited a love for the church from my parents, and as my father was a minister, I absorbed his dedication, care for people and commitment to discipleship. After studying at the University of Melbourne, gaining a Bachelor of Arts degree and Diploma of Education, I was a secondary school teacher for a number of years.

I studied part-time at the Churches of Christ Theological College, now Stirling, obtaining a Bachelor of Theology degree. In 1992 I was appointed to a broader church role with the Department of Mission, Education and Development in Churches of Christ Vic-Tas. This was a field role helping churches to be resourced in education, training, leadership development and women's ministry. Following this, I became the Conference Executive Officer for Vic-Tas, 1996-2003. Then the Williamstown Church of Christ appointed me as their Pastor for 8 years, 2004-2012. In April 2012, I accepted an invitation from Urban Neighbours of Hope to become a Pastor to their workers and teams in Australia and overseas. Committed to lifelong learning and professional development, I have continued to study in a cohort of ministers in the Master of Theological Studies program through Stirling.

Recognising and affirming a person's gifts for ministry and leadership reinforces a call that sometimes lies deep within

Three of the four ministry and leadership roles I had were the direct result of being invited into those appointments by others. The exception to that was the CEO role which I applied for. My reflection on this is that

recognising and affirming a person's gifts for ministry and leadership reinforces a call that sometimes lies deep within a person. Vocationally I was on a pathway of ministry from a young age and was being shaped during my work as a teacher. When I made the transition from teaching into full-time work in the church, I did not immediately see myself as a minister, probably because I had not taken what was then regarded as the official path of theological study followed by ministry. However, I knew that I was ministering to and in the broader church. Ordination confirmed that, some years later (2004).

To encourage more women to enter ministry, I suggest that ministers and leaders have a responsibility to encourage gifted women to consider theological study and ministry formation. Formation in ministry is vitally important, balanced by theological study and reflection. In local churches, give women the opportunity to preach and teach, as well as fulfil the usual pastoral care roles. Appoint them to Boards. Trust them with developing and leading mission projects.

In the broader church context, ensure that active recruitment of gifted women to decision-making and governance bodies occurs. Develop succession plans for such groups which include younger women to make sure that ongoing participation happens. Wise decision-making will include many voices around a table, reflecting the diversity of society.

Overall, I did not experience overt negativity to my ministry and leadership. As CEO, I was aware of a very small number of churches where women were not permitted to preach. I took the view that maintaining a positive relationship with them was necessary, so that in the long-term my response to them would not hinder a change of perspective. I did not hesitate to engage in conversation on the matter of women in ministry when the opportune moments came. A self-inflicted negative assumption was that I did not want to let down the cause of women and so at times I placed undue expectations on myself. Thankfully, I learned to moderate that aspect with grace and wisdom.

I have deeply appreciated the opportunities I have had to exercise ministry and leadership, and to encourage women, younger and older, to

have a voice in decision-making. Mentoring women has enabled me to urge them to consider study and ministry, particularly where a vocational call is discerned. As a local church minister, I encouraged women and men to develop and exercise their gifts. An inclusive church, where women and men participate on the basis of gifting, is a powerful witness in society.

Naked Feminine Leadership

-- Tania Watson

Executive Minister, Churches of Christ WA

If we were honest, we would acknowledge that women have always played a leadership role in the local church.

As a young girl I learned leadership lessons as I played around the skirts of women in CWF meetings, church fellowship meetings and church services. Women were not allowed to lead the church, but they could certainly influence their husbands at home and pass on 'helpful' suggestions as discussed in Bible studies and ladies meetings.

As a young married Christian woman, with a leadership gift that I didn't know how to express in the context of my local church, I followed the same pattern. I tried to make (push) my quiet, steadfast husband into a leadership role within the church because I could see that there were many things that the church needed to do better! I tried to submit to what I had been taught was the Biblical pattern of submission. It would be true to say that such was my zeal that I did a great deal of damage in the process.

Were we to survey the history of women's ministries within the life of most churches, I would suggest that we would find a history of hurt and damage amongst women. Certainly I can see this pattern in churches of which I have been a part. I have been both a recipient of great pain and damage and have been the perpetrator as well. I'm not for a minute dismissing the incredible and wonderful ministry of women through our churches, but they were not immune from their own brand of feminine power struggles.

I think that the kind of leadership expressed by women through their husbands was "subversive". Not that any of these women would have intended it to be so. Suppressed gifts will always find a way to be expressed. However, a suppressed gift is generally not a healthy

manifestation of what God intended to be good or beneficial for the Body.

When my own local church voted to allow women into the role of Eldership (not too many years ago), I distinctly sensed God say to me “Now is the time for naked female leadership.” Its shocking language, however, I clearly understood to mean that women were to lead out in the *open* – transparent and upfront. The days of leading behind others were to end. Open, honest and accountable leadership is what all of God’s people are called to model and reflect.

I was 35 before the Minister of my church called me out into the open as someone with a leadership gift. I was challenged to wrestle with the Scriptures and went through a few years of the painful recognition that perhaps my inherited theology and view of God was limited. It was a slow process to come to terms with a call on my life at age 16 to be a Minister and to begin to understand what that could look like within a family of Churches that I love with all my heart.

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For that reason, I’ve never wanted to be a poster girl for women in leadership. I know what it took for me to wrestle with theology and I continue to honour and acknowledge that there are valid perspectives on how the New Testament may be read and understood. I can only testify to a clear conscience before God and what I hope is a living testimony of being a female Christian leader who leads with ‘naked integrity’.

It is a miracle to me that God’s call on my life has brought me to a place of leadership within the Churches of Christ in WA. The story of how I came to hold in my open hands the role of Executive Minister continues to fill me with wonder ... I still find it hard to believe that I have this incredible and sacred privilege.

I view my years of wandering about in the ministry and leadership wilderness as a sheer gift from God. I have no doubt that had I been in a ministry role as a young woman that I would have perpetuated much damage in the lives of others out of raw zeal and passion. What I learned in the wilderness was gentleness, compassion and the kind of resilience that can only come when one submits to the loving discipline of the Father who does his work of conforming us to the image of Christ.

Those years in the wilderness were also years of observation

Those years in the wilderness were also years of observation. I had the benefit of watching leaders and leadership with the kind of distance that can only come when one is not directly involved or caught up in responsibility. I had the benefit of observing, thinking and reflecting on the ways in which the Church has wrestled with rapidly changing culture. And then I was given the amazing gift of being called into a ministry role where I was nurtured and challenged by a group of people who patiently loved me with my all of my weaknesses and strengths. They provided a safe place for me to grow and together we learned the lessons of being a robust and diverse team.

My conviction is that it is not my responsibility to be an advocate for women's rights in the church. It is my responsibility to lead in such a way that both men and women see Christ revealed in my life and leadership. It's my responsibility to model open, honest and transparent leadership that echoes the humility of Christ and to call others to that kind of leadership.

A Woman in Ministry

Merryl Blair

Former President, Churches of Christ Vic/Tas
Currently Lecturer, Stirling Theological College

I was called unexpectedly into ministry. I originally came to COB as a nurse, planning to head overseas to work in a mission hospital. Instead, I fell in love with theological study. I was encouraged to 'keep my options open' by completing the Diploma in Ministry, alongside the BTheol studies. I had no plans to go into pastoral ministry, but was surprised by God when Hartwell Church of Christ called me into youth ministry shortly before my graduation.

Having grown up in a minister's family, my resistance to entering ministry was due to my experiences of seeing my parents' lives completely submerged in the needs of the congregation. I did not want to live like that! However, I discovered that urge to total obedience to God's call on my life. I also discovered that it is possible to be in ministry and to set appropriate boundaries on family life. As a mother of two small children, I learnt to organise my time around school pick-ups and drop-offs, and around school holidays. The church was very understanding, and fitted in perfectly well with my family rhythms. This made me wonder to what extent ministers have made burdens for themselves by not setting appropriate boundaries in their pastoral responsibilities.

I experienced no negative responses within my local church or wider community. These came when I joined the faculty at CCTC, the first woman ever appointed as a lecturer. Because of my position, I was asked to preach at numerous churches, and at a number of these, I was the first woman ever to preach. At a couple of churches, an older man walked out when I stood up to preach. At several others, I was told that I had changed that person's mind about women in ministry. One in particular told me that, had he known I'd be speaking, he wouldn't have attended

church that morning. He felt it was God's action that he didn't know, as he needed to be re-educated by hearing me preach!

Standing alongside that faith perspective, but pointing outwards to a possible new, richer viewpoint

In each of these cases, I dealt with the issue by not confronting it. If someone wanted to talk to me about it, I was happy to talk, and did so around the issue of 'call of God': What happens when one is reluctantly called into a ministry by God? What does 'obedience' entail? Otherwise, I've always thought that the best I could do was to be as faithful to my calling to ministry as possible, and never to shut down conversation,

even when I disagree with the theological view of the other person. I imagine the conversation (with those who still oppose women in ministry) as trying to affirm the faith of my opponent, standing alongside that faith perspective, but pointing outwards to a possible new, richer viewpoint.

Meanwhile, it has been important that my example, simply *being* a woman in ministry, has been in the public eye for women who may have also been experiencing God's call on their lives, but have been unsure of whether it was possible to become a minister. I have spoken in, or run Bible studies with, several churches who allowed my presence to speak for itself. I have also mentored numerous young women who were exploring the possibilities of ministry, after being brought up in the notion that women couldn't be ministers. I suspect that these dual approaches – example and mentoring – have been far more effective than argument could ever have been.

'Women as Called': Recruiting for our Future

Janet Woodlock

Women's Ministry Director, Churches of Christ Vic/Tas

I believe one of the greatest dangers to the health of Churches of Christ – indeed, the health of the broader church in Australia – is a looming shortage of passionate, gifted, well equipped leaders for local congregations. Churches across Australia of all “brands” are looking down the barrel of a massive shortage of vocational ministers over the next 10 years. <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/21589.htm>. The numbers of ministers approaching retirement age significantly outstrips the numbers of ministers under 40.

Typically a congregation that has a prolonged period without a minister-leader plateaus, and more frequently, declines numerically. As the impending shortage of endorsed ministers starts to “bite”, smaller local churches in particular will have difficulty attracting and retaining suitable ministers. I anticipate churches of all denominations will take a dramatic “hit” in numerical membership numbers as smaller congregations with a leadership vacuum decline (and in many cases, close). According to NCLS data, the average congregation in Australia has 60 – 70 members: small to medium congregations are the “bread and butter” of the Australian church.

We need a multiplication of leaders willing to develop alternative models for mission and church community

<http://www.ncls.org.au/default.aspx?sitemapid=28>. To grow the church in Australia requires a multiplication of high calibre leaders for local churches. For the sake of the Kingdom, we also need a multiplication of leaders willing to develop alternative models for mission and church community to reach all people with the gospel of Christ.

Women as ministry leaders: an under-fished pool?

The easiest way to catch fish is to cast a net in a pool where little fishing has occurred before. In some churches at least, there has been little effort to “fish” for vocational ministry leaders among the pool of women. However, I believe that there are women who might make excellent ministers and leaders who have gained organisational, leadership, and pastoral experience through their careers, families and local churches. It may well be it has never crossed their minds their gifts might be used in vocational ministry leadership, but if enough people “tap them on the shoulder” they might begin a process of discernment, training and formation that will see them equipped and recognised as ministers.

What factors help women enter ministry?

Cheryl Catford-McCallum completed a thesis on women in ministry within the CRC denomination. Her research agreed with most other research in women in leadership demonstrating the following three things are critical to the development of women leaders:

1. Female role models and mentors at key periods
2. Theological and personal conviction that it is OK for women to exercise ministry gifts (this is woven in to a sense of call)
3. Actual ministry opportunities, usually offered through a “gatekeeper” who believes in them and gives them the chance to cut their teeth in ministry

How might this research inform our practice of developing leaders from the ranks of women? I offer the following suggestions that might assist our movement to develop more women for vocational ministry:

Name developing women for leadership and ministry as a priority

I feel that if State Conferences would like to see an increased participation of women in ministry, it needs to be a stated priority. Naming this alone can make a difference: I for one took a very long time to discern a call to vocational ministry, because the thought that women could be vocational ministers for many years was outside of my experience and imagination. Promoting women’s leadership as a priority can begin a process of awareness-raising in local churches and the broader world of Churches of Christ. As noted, research on women in

ministry reveals that a male “gatekeeper/sponsor” is one of the key factors in allowing women to find their way into vocational ministry. Unfortunately, in some local churches, the “invisible woman syndrome” is alive and well. Some male ministers/elders have difficulty recognising leaders and potential ministers if they happen to be women. Regular communication from Conference with churches on this issue may help to bring this to the attention of local church leaders. Local church ministers should be encouraged to mentor *both* men and women into ministry, and be given guidance as to how to do this appropriately.

Provide theological resources to help elders (and in some cases, ministers) to think through the issue of women in ministry, including in “oversight” roles

There are a small number of churches that have a “complementarian” perspective on women. Churches that have adopted this stance should be gently encouraged to revisit their position, and be provided with theological resources. For anyone wishing to drill into this issue by a first-rate evangelical theologian, I highly recommend Stanley J Grenz’s: *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry*. It explores the views of all sides of the issue. I have written a sketch of the egalitarian arguments here: <http://secret-womens-space.blogspot.com.au/2011/12/women-and-ministry-again.html>.

Discuss this issue with councils, boards, etc

As is true for ANY issue, proactive responses require “buy in” from the gatekeepers of the movement. Our leadership teams need to understand the church is genuinely on the brink of a vocational ministry crisis, and we have a small window of opportunity to respond to this. Developing leadership initiatives only after significant numbers of churches are unable to find minister/leaders will be like trying to close the gate after the horse has bolted. Ministerial formation takes time, and developing Christian leaders to the point where some will discern a call to vocational ministry and begin ministry training takes time. The time to act is now. High calibre

The church is genuinely on the brink of a vocational ministry crisis, and we have a small window of opportunity to respond

leaders have the capacity to grow local churches through missional initiatives: we need to “cast the net wide” to find them, and “fish” in pools that have currently been overlooked! Gatekeepers of our movement will need to “buy in” to this issue to release finance, time, personnel, imagination and promotional space.

Promote theological study marketed for women

To be well equipped for ministry, formal training at some point needs to complement practical ministry opportunities. Somehow the message needs to be clear that women are welcome: theological providers need to ensure this message gets to women with leadership potential. Local church leaders need to consider who they are developing as leaders, and to ensure that women are on their “radar” as they discern those who God may be raising up for leadership.

Proactively encourage women’s leadership through mentoring/coaching emerging leaders

I could tell many stories of how being identified as an emerging leader and being coached has helped to “track” women into various pathways of mission and ministry. It has also assisted women to step into areas of leadership like church eldership. All of this shifts culture over time. Ultimately, I hope this will lead to women’s leadership and ministry being normalised in all (or at least most) local congregations. It is also important to note that women need male mentors also, particularly if they are the first women to enter leadership in a male leadership culture. All people in ministry need the sounding board, timely advice, and modelling provided by a sensitive mentor in order that they make more helpful choices, and fewer unhelpful ones!

Explore / Name/ promote alternative models of church leadership among congregations

One of the strengths of Churches of Christ has been our historical commitment to all members as ministers. The decrease in numbers of candidates for endorsed vocational ministry will increase pressure to look at alternative models to the “full-time, male, employed, pastor’s wife thrown in for free” concept of “minister”. Bi-vocational minister/leaders, or a ministry a team of part time specialists (in areas such as youth,

admin, preaching, pastoral care, worship etc.) may provide healthier and more viable models of “vocational ministry” than the solo “minister”. As well as being one way to address a shortage of endorsed ministers, such approaches should facilitate greater participation in ministry roles by women with young children who may struggle to manage a traditional “full time” ministry role.

Conclusion

Across the Australian church there is a looming shortage of leaders not only for traditional local church ministry, but also for the opportunities that exist for creative and pioneering mission and ministry. As leadership is a key issue in enabling gospel ministry and church development, Churches of Christ should see leadership development as a high priority. The fact that women do not currently participate in ministry in equal numbers with men suggests there remains some subtle (and not so subtle) barriers to women entering ministry. Initiatives to invest in women’s leadership are one possible strategy to address the impending shortage of vocational ministers in our churches. I hope and pray that local churches and our broader movement will be inspired to work toward developing both men and women leaders for mission and ministry.

Matthew 9: 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38 Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Reflecting on being a Woman in Ministry

Jean Milligan

Former President, Churches of Christ QLD

How was I called to ministry and was it an easy step? I didn't ever grow up thinking: "I'm going to come out swinging and change the world for women". Rather, when I think of my entry into ministry, I'm reminded of Eugene Peterson's phrase: "a long obedience in the same direction". The direction God wanted me to take was revealed one step at a time.

What would you want to change about churches that would encourage more women to enter ministry, based on your experiences? These changes will happen over time as the women already in leadership provide healthy role models for younger women, and as the men in our Christian culture realise we are not in competition with them and are therefore not a threat to them.

These changes will happen over time as the women already in leadership provide healthy role models for younger women

Did you experience any negative response to your ministry based on being a woman? I don't think this is the forum to debate and defend women's role in churches. But then, I don't know what the appropriate forum would be as I have never had such a conversation, i.e. no one has ever challenged me personally.

Because the majority of leadership/ministry roles are held by men, I have always felt a little on the outer. There are different conversational/bonding conventions between a group of men and a group of women, so I'm not able to enter into the "You're getting a bit thin on top" or "My team beat your team" banter. This is not a deliberate snub on the part of the men I spend time with, so I don't take it as such. I just need to recognise that there will always be some distance in the group dynamic when I am the lone woman.

Based on your experiences, what would you want to change about churches that would encourage more women to enter ministry? The traditional perception is that you need to display stereotypical masculine characteristics to qualify as a leader – traits such as assertiveness, control, ambition, competitiveness. The traits which are more natural to me (I look on them as feminine characteristics) can also be effectively used in leadership – especially Christian leadership: qualities such as being a nurturer, gentleness, encouraging, and peacemaking. When society’s view of leadership changes to recognise these traits, I believe women will be truly valued and sought as leaders.

What Women Bring to Church Leadership in the 21st Century

Di Feldmann

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One could easily imagine that a set of characteristics, specific to women, would be named here. However, each individual woman, who demonstrates leadership in the church either formally or informally, brings all of *her* uniqueness to opportunities and situations. Similarly, men bring all of *their* uniqueness to church ministry.

Can women in leadership roles in ministry make a contribution and a difference? The answer is, yes. Can they speak for, and on behalf of, the community they serve? The answer is, yes.

Is leadership a gender issue? The answer is no

Is leadership a gender issue? The answer is, no. Inevitably, when gender is raised, there are much more complex underlying agendas which are essentially at work.

There is plenty of evidence (both theological and societal) that women have demonstrated leadership in the community (church, business, health and community) for centuries. They've demonstrated their capacity to lead throughout history (both biblical and modern history), often stepping into more formal leadership roles when societal needs have required this of them – for example, during cultural or national uprisings, periods of war, and in times of natural disasters. Women have for centuries taken a lead role in addressing community issues like education, drug/alcohol/physical/emotional abuse, and health reform (eg midwifery, recovery programs, cancer research and support). So, women demonstrating leadership – formally or informally - is the norm.

A more important question to ask is: *what are the opportunities and*

barriers women meet as they seek to live a life of godly purpose? What are the expectations and challenges that women carry as they demonstrate leadership within ministry and missional settings?

These would include:

- 1. Being in roles of leadership that represent or serve women exclusively.**
 - This is often a system, structure or organizational norm and issue. Women have the capacity to work well in women's ministry because they are women themselves. However, this isn't the only capacity that women in leadership can offer the church.
 - The challenges of women's ministry are often underestimated. It is a ministry area with enormous breadth – serving single women (of any age), married (in all seasons of life), have a family, who are widowed or divorced, and addressing the needs of women in the workplace. This ministry tends to be assigned to a sole-woman leader. Yet, a ministry team makes more sense to more effectively serve the diversity of the demographic.
- 2. Being the voice for "all" women.**
 - Being asked to give an opinion, as a woman, on issues impacting *all* women;
 - In meetings the opinions of women only being sought about issues likely to impact or affect women, or their families.
- 3. When accepting the opportunity of formal leadership roles offered, women may accept inequities because they value the opportunity to lead more.**
 - Women find it more challenging to discuss and negotiate fair and equitable pay and conditions;
 - Women don't tend to question the level of delegated authority, and ensure equitable comparison of these across similar roles and responsibilities within an organisation (eg. the church).
 - Women often accept inequities in performance expectations and monitoring and reporting requirements because their focus tends to be on achieving "good outcomes" in their role.

4. Being an exceptional role model for other women.

- Women are underrepresented in formal leadership roles, and those who do attain these roles feel the added burden of being a pioneer role model for *all* women (often a self-imposed burden);
- Women seek, as role models for others, to be perfect or achieve above expectations in any role. This creates ever-increasing expectations than really required, and depletes the energy and effort from a broader set of priorities to be achieved. Over time, this becomes unattainable, and finding balance in all areas of life becomes more complex and difficult.

There are some additional (wider) barriers which women in leadership meet. The research shows that:

- Women are still paid less (and receive lower non-salary benefits) than a male in a comparable role;
- Women often have more restricted levels of autonomous decision-making within the organisational structure;
- Breaks in ministry for women (study, maternity, or to undertake elder care needs) are regarded as a major disturbance, yet organisations have been accommodating men studying, taking sabbaticals, or moving to part-time or semi-retirement roles. Breaks in ministry are a human-norm, *not* gender-specific.
- At least in the last 60 years, whenever an occupation becomes more predominately female (teaching, GPs, HR, marketing and public relations etc.) the status and worth of that professional grouping is perceived by society as being of less value. The concern for women seeking ministry leadership, then, is to ensure that the value of ministry (both male and female) is not eroded by community or society, but rather is increasingly valued. This is a challenge when the church itself is not seen as a significantly valued part of society.

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It is interesting to note that the largest population in Australian higher educational institutions is women. Women no longer experience as

many barriers to further education. Women recognize the value of education in charting a life purpose, and ensuring their impact is one of significance and excellence.

Women who hold formal leadership roles (either paid or volunteer) must find their voice, speak it confidently and respectfully in these settings, and use their education and experience to bring a breadth and depth to discussions and decisions. There is still a danger of believing that *one* woman can speak on behalf of *all* women. This is a huge fallacy. Women *can* represent the needs of a broader cohort, and are now aided by community consultation to hear more voices on any given issue.

Women who already hold leadership roles in ministry speak of the need for both formal and informal support as they address the challenges of any leadership role, but also the challenges for women in leadership. Ensuring that women leaders are aided and guided by mentors or coaches is vitally important as they achieve in their roles, and meet challenges, barriers, and organizational systems which disable rather than enable.

Regardless of gender, what is critical is that *any* leader develops their capacity to listen: to see, hear and feel the needs of others; to apply foresight into understanding the shaping of today for the future; and to use the opportunity serve through leadership and co-create a better society for all. Most importantly, the uniqueness of each leader, their sense of call or purpose, and their commitment to God, will enable them to discern what is needed and required, and embark on making this happen.

Personal Reflection

-- **Edwina Blair**

Associate Minister, Campbelltown, NSW

1. How were you called into ministry? Was the entry *into* ministry an easy step? Why/Why not?

I am 42 and grew up in the church. I began attending a Church of Christ (Wollongong) when I was 16 and from that time began serving in various ministry areas according to my interests and abilities. My Ministers encouraged my leadership gift in a gradual way and by the time I was 26 I was a key lay leader in the life of our church.

I had a successful career in Nuclear Medicine when both my husband and I felt the "call into ministry". My husband left his career and began studying his Bachelor of Theology (BTh) full time while I supported him financially and began studying my BTh part time. I knew I was equipping myself for "ministry" but had no idea what that would look like.

I began a 1 day per week role at my church while I was still a student and when Troy had completed his degree we moved to another church for him to take up an Associate Minister position. I took on a student minister position and within 4 years I had completed my BTh and was a full time Associate.

Entry into ministry was fairly easy in the sense that there were no real obstacles.

One of the biggest reasons that my entry into ministry was so positive (and continues to be so) was because I had Senior Ministers who:

- Saw the gift and calling of leadership on my life and actively encouraged it
- Creating a pathway for me
- Were not threatened by having a woman on their team
- Valued not only me personally but the importance of having a

visible female leader within the senior ranks of their teams.

2. Based on your experiences, what would you want to change about churches that would encourage more women to enter ministry?

I have been an Associate Minister in 3 medium sized churches in the last 12 years and I have seen a pattern emerge. In each ministry setting I join there has been a rise in the number of younger women pursuing the call on their life as begin to see the possibilities of their calling a little clearer. Seeing someone else doing what they feel called to do has been very releasing for them. Seeing me live out what I have been called, gifted and graced to do gives them "permission" to move forward into their own calling.

I don't believe this has anything to do with me personally but rather I believe God uses others to encourage us and shows us where he might be taking us. I love the fact that there are now women in ministry in my previous churches who are at various stages of equipping themselves and stepping into the places God has for them and have confidence that the churches and leaders they are in will be just as supportive of them as they were of me. It is my hope that these women will in turn support those coming up behind them as well.

It may be idealistic but I believe every church needs a visible female leader in the core team, not only to help lead the church (usually consisting on at least 50% women) but also to encourage and forge a path for the next generation of women leaders. I believe you will lose the next generation of women leaders in your church if this is not the case.

3. Did you experience any negative response to your ministry based on being a woman?

In short my answer is no. I have not personally experienced any negativity even though I know of peers who have. I think this is due to the churches I have worked in.

The only comment I would make is that in each of the churches I have worked, one of my key roles has been a regular part of the Preaching Team. For a great number of people I am the first female preacher they have ever heard. They sometimes ask me about theological issues surrounding women speaking in church but after that discussion they never raise it again. It becomes “normal” to have both men and women preach and is never mentioned again.

The only other challenge I have faced has been because I have always worked on a ministry team with my husband. After-hours team meetings or other church events (that we are both required to be at) can often be difficult from a parenting point of view but this is a minor issue that we manage.

In short, I love what I get to do each and every day and I love seeing so many young women coming up behind me. I am so grateful for the many women who have gone before me and broken down barriers that may have existed at one time. I do not see myself as a “woman in ministry” but rather I am simply a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ... I just happen to be a woman as well!

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Other Resources

From the Council of Churches of Christ in Australia

Asking the Unasked Questions

A Booklet that encourages creating healthy church environments for youth leaders to thrive in.

The D&A is part of our DNA

A Booklet examining and celebrating the origins and key themes of Churches of Christ.

The Open Table

A Booklet exploring the radical and gentle nature of our approach to celebrating the Lord's Supper.

Every Member Ministry

A Booklet exploring our practice of encouraging all believers to exercise their gifts and abilities in the local church context (and beyond).

Christ Alone

A Booklet celebrating the prominence of Christ in belief and practice in Churches of Christ.

The Journey of Baptism

A new Booklet for those considering baptism.

These resources are all available in electronic PDF format but also in hard copy format (a small postage and handling fee may apply).

You can download any of these helpful resources at
www.cofcaustralia.org



A Churches of Christ in Australia Resource

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