

# Exploring gendered and leadership within a church espousing an egalitarian theology.

## Introduction

This essay uses Laurie Green's model of theological reflection<sup>1</sup> to examine whether leadership style is influenced by gender and hence to consider whether in one local church context male models of leadership and could be excluding female leadership. We will conclude that even churches holding egalitarian positions on female leadership may still exhibit biasing behaviours that diminish female leadership. We shall begin by describing the specific experience that instigates this reflection and then as we will explore it through the secular lenses of sociology, psychology, biology and history. From here we shall consider a theological response to our explorations before then responding to our reflection with actions for the local church in question.

The writer, being male, acknowledges potential unconscious bias in this reflection. To mitigate this, we have prioritised female voices to gain insights potentially overlooked by male perspectives.

## Experience

The church under consideration is a Baptist Church with congregationally governed and lead by a single appointed team. Theologically the membership consensus is for egalitarian leadership. The church has female leaders, preachers and previously assistant pastors. Given this theological position it is notable that recent leadership teams have consistently been less than 25% female. During a discussion about this skew one of the female leaders suggested women may not be willing to serve because the church leadership operated in a male way. This assertion instigated this reflection.

We must ask ourselves why in a church where members articulate a belief that women are equal in God's eyes and that no role or gift from God is limited by gender, that this belief is not evidenced in the gender balance of its leadership. The suggested answer by the female leader whose comment initiated this reflection is that there are patterns of male leadership which are organisationally normative and excluding (or at least off-putting) to women. For many of the male leaders this is a surprisingly assertion, for them they were not operating with a male pattern of leadership, they were just operating as leaders. We need to explore then whether we should consider there to be a gender difference in leadership approach. To become a leader, you must be approved by the members following a nomination and so we must also consider selection bias of leaders. We can posit that two barriers may exist here, that females are nominated in lower proportions than men, and that females are less willing to accept a nomination. We must explore then how we perceive leadership behaviour that would indicate leadership potential, and whether gender differences may be a source of bias in our perceptions. We can helpfully explore a cultural perspective but we must hold this against the

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<sup>1</sup> Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology*, 2nd edn (Bloomsbury Continuum, 2009), pp. 54–134.

true voice of scripture. The church is the product of 2000 years of theological and cultural tradition and this entangle organisation will need unpicking through scripture.

I also recognise my personal views in this matter. I hold an egalitarian theological position on leadership previously thought I displayed this best by considering male and female as being indistinct in leadership approach. I must be open to the fact that in denying differences in gender I may have inadvertently been causing the bias that I had carefully been trying to avoid. If there is unconscious bias operating to deny a distinctively female approach to leadership and which instead reinforces a male pattern of leadership, then I am blind to this. It is important that I listen carefully to the female voices on this issue to overcome my deafness.

It seems then essential to explore several important and interrelated questions. Should we recognise gender distinctive patterns to leadership? And if so what would this look like within the context of this church? We may also then ask how the culture of the church may have been malformed due to the suppression of female leadership through much of its history<sup>2</sup>? Finally, we must understand how we can work to correct any patterns of gender bias or oppression that exist in order to lead the church in the way God intended for his church to be led.

## Exploration

Within our exploration we will now explore these issues. The scope of the topic at hand is extensive and so here we will outline a few key voices in this field. Here we will restrict ourselves to four key secular perspectives; Sociological, Biological, Psychological & Historical factors. We will then seek to engage these voices in conversation with theology within our reflection.

### **Gender and Sex: exploring the Sociological and Biological differences**

We must seek to understand whether any difference in leadership style by females may be considered to be biological i.e immutably within God's design, or whether such difference is formed by sociological context and therefore mutable. We shall use the standard term sex to discuss matters of biological distinctiveness (that which we are born with) and the term gender to discuss aspects of femininity that are socially constructed (that which is achieved)<sup>3</sup>.

Sociologist Linda Lindsey argues that what we perceive as gender is formed by 'the expected attitudes and behaviors a society associates with each sex'<sup>4</sup>. Lindsey argues our society is androcentric (male-centred) and acts to seek to maintain the status quo of the traditionally defined female roles of child-bearing and subsequent domestic help<sup>5</sup>. She argues gender is socially constructed through the scripts (patterns of standardising behaviours) we teach as gender roles which includes a positive feedback loop to rewards the fulfilling of these scripts. Simply put, once society produces a gender imbalance in power it is easier for the gender with more power to act to retain this power by rewarding the fulfilling of gender scripts.<sup>6</sup>

Against the view of socially constructed gender we can set biological sex differences in brain structure. Neurobiologist Cynthia Darlington reviews the research in the field of brain structure and concludes that 'There are structural differences between the brains of females and males in

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<sup>2</sup> It is not the intention of this essay to recover the validity of female leadership arguments, for this reflection we take this as a given conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> Linda L. Lindsey, *Gender*, 7th edn (Routledge, 2020), p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> Lindsey, *Gender*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Lindsey, *Gender*, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> Lindsey, *Gender*, pp. 45–46.

areas not directly associated with sexual function or behavior'<sup>7</sup> she concludes that these differences lead to male brains displaying strength in quick decision making and within analytical tasks involving spatial manipulation, whereas the female brains display strength in analysing verbal and visual information. She also concludes that female brains are better at remembering specific detailed information whereas the male brain is more suited to remembering global information.<sup>8</sup>

We will give space in this reflection to ideas of both gender and sex within our exploration of female leadership. There are sex differences that give reason to conclude male and female patterns of leadership may be expressed differently. We must also give space to existing biasing scripts within an androcentric culture that seek to normalise the roles of gender in subordinating ways.

### **Psychology: Understanding female patterns of leadership**

As biological sex difference may contribute to difference in leadership style we now ask in what way this difference may be seen. For elucidation we turn to research within the field of business leadership.

In their book *Through the Labyrinth*, Carli & Eagly provide a fruitful summary of research in this area.<sup>9</sup> Their research concluded differences in sex leadership styles are present, where male leaders tend towards transactional approaches, female leaders tend towards transformational<sup>10</sup>. These terms were first defined by James Burns in his seminal work *Leadership*. Transactional leaders tend to be initiative-holding and goal-orientated, focussing on reward for achievement. Contrasting this, transformational leaders tend to be more relational and invite collective participation in the act of leadership by building motivation and engagement with those around the leader<sup>11</sup>. Their research contains an important conclusion; they conclude the presence of transformational leadership (which is a female trait) is a generally more effective predictor of organisational success than transactional leadership (which is a male trait)<sup>12</sup>. They conclude that the 'contemporary claim that women have superior leadership skills...is bolstered by our meta-analysis'<sup>13</sup> which is cause for thought when there remains discrepancy in the proportion of organisations led by female leaders<sup>14</sup>.

Why then do we still see business leadership preferencing male leadership? To Carli & Eagly they conclude simply that 'because men have long held such roles, people have based their notions of leadership on men'. Here then we see the impact of biasing gendered scripts – when we think about the behaviours we expect from our leaders, we are actually thinking about a male pattern of leadership. Carli & Eagly note that there is gender-script expectation that male leaders assert, and female leaders acquiesce which contributes to the sustaining of

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<sup>7</sup> Cynthia L. Darlington, *The Female Brain*, 2nd edn (CRC Press, 2009), p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> Darlington, *The Female Brain*, pp. 106–35.

<sup>9</sup> Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2007), p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> Eagly and Carli, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 130.

<sup>11</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (Open Road Media, 2012), p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Eagly and Carli, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> Alice H. Eagly, Mary C. Johannesen-Schmidt, and Marloes L. Van Engen, 'Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-Faire Leadership Styles: A Meta-Analysis Comparing Women and Men.', *Psychological Bulletin*, 129.4 (2003), pp. 569–91 (p. 586), doi:10.1037/0033-2909.129.4.569.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that change is coming in this area yet some distance to go remains. 'Sea-Change in UK Boardrooms as Women Make up Nearly 40% of FTSE 100 Top Table Roles', *GOV.UK* <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/sea-change-in-uk-boardrooms-as-women-make-up-nearly-40-of-ftse-100-top-table-roles>> [accessed 10 January 2025].

androcentric patterns of leadership<sup>15</sup>. Carolyn Moore also explores this issue and concludes that the issue is worsened when we consider the likeability factor. When women break the normalised gender scripts of behaviour, say for example displaying assertive male patterns of leadership, then their peers & subordinates like them less. If the same woman was to instead to acquiesce, a gender script normative to females then we would like them more but would judge them a less competent leader.<sup>16</sup> We expect our leaders to behave like males yet dislike women who operate as males, and we judge women as less competent when they act as females leaders. It is evident that women are disadvantaged in leadership no matter how they pattern their leadership. Such a dynamic is especially important within an organisation in which leaders are chosen from within the organisation – such as a congregational church. Carli & Eagly point out that the culture of an organisation is shaped by its leaders and thus an androcentric organisation will shape itself to normalise male patterns of leadership. The historical church has been shaped in this way over substantive time and so its patterns of androcentric leadership will be deeply ingrained. Such androcentric organisations typically display patterns of gendered social-networks amongst genders i.e male only and female only spaces which typically act to normalise androcentric power and hence maintain the gendered expectations of such an organisation<sup>17</sup>. It is note worthy that the recent Project Violet report into female inequality within Baptist leadership concluded one feature of continuing injustice was ‘that taken-for-granted ways of working can disadvantage women, particularly when they were designed without women’s input’<sup>18</sup>.

We can draw some important conclusions from the secular world of leadership here in which we see the biological and socially-constructed differences of gender play out. We understand that there are typical gender differences in the leadership approaches of men and women and certainly we must recognise the value of typical female leadership approaches as beneficial to an organisation. We must also conclude though that there is much biasing behaviour that results in female patterns of leadership being excluded or considered lesser. Androcentric organisations will maintain the stability of gender role in the organisational culture because the organisation becomes blind to its androcentric bias.

### **Historical considerations: The church as a formed organisation.**

Finally we shall review the historical formation of the organisation that is church to understand how it has been formed, or perhaps malformed, around an androcentric model of leadership. Alice Matthews discerns two normative models of leadership within the NT. Surveying Paul’s writing to churches (and not to named leaders) she concludes that the normative model of leadership in the NT was ‘inconspicuous, discreet, flexible, and ready to intervene if needed’<sup>19</sup>. She notes in comparison within churches in crisis we find models of leadership in which leaders are assertive and central and so ‘for churches in crisis, only the leaders were allowed to do ministry’<sup>20</sup>. We can see a normative model of participative transformational leadership alongside a more assertive model of transactional leadership with being a needed part of leadership. That women were partakers in this leadership clear, Rodney Stark concludes that ‘there is virtual consensus among historians of the early church as well as biblical scholars that

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<sup>15</sup> Eagly and Carli, *Through the Labyrinth*, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Moore, *When Women Lead* (Zondervan, 2022), chap. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Eagly and Carli, *Through the Labyrinth*, pp. 137–45.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Project Violet Findings: An Overview’ (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2024), p. 4  
<<https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=352660>> [accessed 18 January 2025].

<sup>19</sup> Alice Mathews, *Gender Roles and the People of God* (Zondervan, 2017), chap. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Mathews, *Gender Roles and the People of God*, chap. 9.

women held positions of honor and authority within early Christianity<sup>21</sup> and so in the early church we can see for women both a necessary and important place as proponents of transformational leadership.

Over the following centuries as Christianity flourished female leadership was pushed aside and male leadership became normative and so we must understand the causes of this. Ally Kateusz has surveyed the churches art and writings through the first few centuries of the church and concludes that 'No pope, emperor, theologian, or church council is ever so influential as to immediately change deeply embedded gender roles'<sup>22</sup> yet she concludes that over time the depictions of female leadership were slowly censored from the churches written and artistic records which in turn normalised androcentric leadership because 'one means of social control over the female body is to provide illustrations of right behavior both narrative and iconographic'<sup>23</sup>. For Kateusz there was a slow intentional censoring of female leadership by a male dominated society seeking to normalise androcentrism in the church. Mathews instead points more specifically to an epoch moment of female exclusion. To understand her argument we must understand that in the Roman world the household was the place of female leadership and the public square was the place of male leadership. The early NT church met in the home where women were culturally permitted to exercise their leadership alongside men. For Mathews the malforming of gender balance occurred when Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and the church moved from the home to the Roman Basilica. This building was an institutional place of official public gathering and therefore a place of cultural male leadership. The church moved from the home where it gathered in circular patterns denoting is equality to a church gathered in rows with a presiding official which culturally biased male leadership<sup>24</sup>. These arguments are of course compatible and add nuance to the shifting role of gender in the churches history which was not a design of God but instead a feature of inculturation by the church.

### **Summarising our Exploration**

It is clear that we must give space to biological differences within generalised leadership behaviours. We must set against this the socially constructed gender scripts which create inherent biasing behaviour in our perception of the effectiveness of women in leadership – despite good evidence that patterns of female leadership are beneficial for the effectiveness of an organisation. We must recognise that the church through its history has been shaped in a way that patterns male leadership as normative – not as a result of theology - but instead as a result of imbibing the cultural norms of the world it inhabited.

## **Reflection**

Now that we have explored this topic through secular perspectives we must bring our conclusions into the light of scripture. We shall do so by considering seeking to understand what God intended when he created male and female and thus to seek his view of gender and leadership.

### **God created a helper.**

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<sup>21</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 98.

<sup>22</sup> Ally Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), chap. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, chap. 1.

<sup>24</sup> Mathews, *Gender Roles and the People of God*, chap. 9.

*The LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”*  
(Gen. 2:18 NRSV)

To understand God’s sex and gender design pattern we must begin with an understanding of why God created men and women. We will focus here on gender difference by exploring what God meant when he created woman as a helper. John Piper and Wayne Grudem argue that we should understand the word helper as man’s ‘partner and assistant’<sup>25</sup> and for them the woman’s role is to strengthen and support the male in their own leadership, an important yet subservient position<sup>26</sup>. This is the typical interpretation of those holding a complementarian which restricts leadership to men. There are textual reasons though to doubt this interpretation. Andrew Steinmann points out that often this word is also often used to describe God as helper to mankind (Exod. 18:4; Ps. 10:14; 27:9; 40:17; 118:7)<sup>27</sup>, certainly not a subservient role, and Ross and Oswalt following similar arguments conclude that we should understand this as meaning ‘that the woman would supply what man lacked’<sup>28</sup>. McCarthy and Frankel go further and suggest that the only place in scripture the Hebrew translated as helper is considered subservient is within its use in Gen 2:18 and for them this subservient interpretation is overlaid by those seeking to sustain an androcentric model of leadership<sup>29</sup>. They conclude that ‘Woman is not the inferior or the superior; she is a person who is suited to be an equal partner to the man’<sup>30</sup>

Here then is a theological basis for understanding biological difference as part of God’s intended design – yet without the subservient overlay of the complementarian position. Carrie Sandom adds some helpful depth to this conclusion by relating God’s intended design pattern to the trinity itself. Just as we recognise equality within the trinity we also recognise the distinct and diverse role of the Godhead. Each person of the trinity works in community so that each is helped by the other bringing their distinctiveness to the whole<sup>31</sup>. Similarly being created in God’s image, gender displays how we are ‘made for community and for relationship with one another’<sup>32</sup>. On this foundation we have space for embracing biological difference as part of God’s intended design pattern for leadership. God created male and female to provide what the other lacked and in community and relationship with each other, each bringing their distinctiveness, they fulfil God’s intended design.

### **Feminine imagery of leadership**

If God created male and female as distinct and yet truly complementary as leaders, we should then ask ourselves where we see this model of complementary leadership expressed within scripture – especially these feminine traits. Whilst we must recognise that much leadership found within scripture is male leadership we can find a basis for this distinctiveness of patterns of gender leadership. Indeed a foundational basis is found within the nature of God himself – who created us in his image. That God has chosen to reveal himself with male characteristics is

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<sup>25</sup> John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Revised Edition)* (Crossway, 2021), chap. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (Revised Edition)*, chap. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. by David G. Firth (Inter-Varsity Press, 2019), I, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Allen Ross and John N. Oswalt, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Genesis, Exodus* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), I, p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> Suzanne McCarthy and Jay Frankel, *Valiant or Virtuous?* (Wipf and Stock, 2019), chap. 5.

<sup>30</sup> McCarthy and Frankel, *Valiant or Virtuous?*, chap. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Carrie Sandom, *Different By Design* (Christian Focus Publication, 2014), chap. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Sandom, *Different By Design*, chap. 5.

clear; He is father, He is son – incarnated as a male, He is King, He is Lord. Yet within God’s self-revelation feminine traits also exist that give space to recognise the image-bearing nature of both the male and the female leader.

We find several consistent revelations of God’s character which reveal feminine leadership qualities. God comforts his children like a mother (Is 66:13), God experiences birth pains for his plans (Is 42:14), God is protective as a mother (Dt 32:11-12) and God is one who nurtures children (Hos 11:3-4). Here God then nurtures, comforts and sacrifices to raise up others (through birthing pain). All of these traits were similarly expressed by the psychological view of patterns of female leadership. What is especially important here is to also recognise that God chose not to use male imagery for himself within these passages as presumably male characteristic imagery is not sufficient to describe the full nature of God. For a full revelation of God we need both patterns of male and female leadership. James McConville reflecting on God’s self-revelation concludes that ‘While masculine modes of representation may predominate, there is nevertheless a parity of kind between masculine and feminine tropes as used to disclose something of the nature of the deity’<sup>33</sup>. Simply put we need both generalised patterns of maleness and femaleness to understand the God in whose image we are made.

Jurgen Moltmann would go further than this. He draws upon the fact that the Hebrew for Spirit, Ruach is a feminine noun to argue that we can understand the Spirit can ‘also be termed a Feminine Spirit’<sup>34</sup>. He argues that if we are to see the Spirit as the person through which we are born again then in some sense we can perceive the Spirit as the mother who gives birth to God’s children. He also considers that The Spirit as the Paraclete, often translated as the comforter, is a nurturing feminine trait of God<sup>35</sup>. For him such understanding of the Spirit as feminine was normative within the early church, but he concludes was eventually suppressed by the cultural weight of the Roman empire which desired a fully male Godhead<sup>36</sup>. We need to be careful here of extending the argument more than we can in this direction. Clark Pinnock argues in a similar fashion to Moltmann but stops short of referring to the Spirit as ‘she’ as he concludes that a, ‘feminine pronoun would not always be right’<sup>37</sup>. For him the full canon of scripture means that he, she or indeed it at times are the right pronouns to use and as this is God’s revelation it is not ours to force feminine pronouns just to rebalance the current issues of female suppression within the church. He does however relate the person of the Spirit to that of the role of Wisdom within creation (see proverbs 8) who is portrayed as a woman<sup>38</sup>. Here he argues for the two hands of God involved in creation being the Son and Spirit – which again gives us a place to see the male and female traits of God working in complimentary action. For Pinnock he concludes that he perceives the ‘Spirit as the power that brings God’s plans into effect, as a gentle but powerful presence...aiming at increasing levels of participating in the fellowship of love’<sup>39</sup>. This articulation of Pinnock’s understanding of the Spirit is noticeable for its close mirroring of the concept of transformational leadership with its relational and enabling qualities we have seen psychologists relating to female leadership.

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<sup>33</sup> James Gordon McConville, ‘Neither Male nor Female: Poetic Imagery and the Nature of God in the Old Testament’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 44.1 (2019), pp. 166–81 (p. 176), doi:10.1177/0309089218778585.

<sup>34</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 1992), p. 157.

<sup>35</sup> Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, p. 148.

<sup>37</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love* (IVP Academic, 2022), p. 286.

<sup>38</sup> Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, pp. 56–57.

<sup>39</sup> Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, p. 65.

We can also see within the leadership of the New Testament church the implications of God's revealed nature expressed. Banks, Ledbetter, and Greenhalgh see within Paul's writings about church leadership a foundation of 'metaphors and analogies drawn from family life. This is not surprising, for the language of family is the primary way of talking about the relationship between God and his people'<sup>40</sup>. Here the metaphor of family gives space for the trinitarian Father and Mother nature of the Godhead to be seen as the primary framework describing the new community that God established. In so doing God is inviting the equality of these feminine and masculine traits to work together within the leadership of such a community – each bringing what the other lacks. For Banks, Ledbetter and Greenhalgh they see a community with organic and non-hierarchical leadership – in which the full community were invited to partake and whose principal place of operation was the home – itself the dominion of both the father and mother working in cooperation<sup>41</sup>. We may reflect here again on the historical malforming that occurred when the church moved from the home out into the culturally normative androcentric Roman public spaces within the basilica.

In the discussion of these feminine traits we need to be careful not to reduce the role of female within the church to just that of biological functionalism, i.e just to be a mother and nurture children. The central image of mother here is not proscriptive to the roles females can fulfil but instead descriptive of the God created biological traits they may exhibit. This is consistent with our reflection on God's revealed nature in that God as mother is not proscribing his role – but is very much descriptive of his traits. Paul as our archetypal leader figure within the NT also uses both male father trait descriptors (1 Cor 4:15) and mother descriptors (1 Thess 2:7, Gal 4:19) of himself – and in no way intends for us to see them as proscriptive to his role either. To Westfall and Long, Paul in applying both feminine and male traits to himself Paul is helping men such as himself move 'out of their culturally defined space [and] in the same way...women were able to stretch beyond their culturally defined limitations'<sup>42</sup>. Paul rejects the proscription of socially constructed gender scripts but embraces the description of gender traits. Here then we see the tension we experience of recognising the biological complimentary purpose in God intended pattern of gender leadership – alongside the rejection of the socially-constructed scripts that define, and in particular constrain the role of both male and female into one of a subordinating dynamic. We are called to be who God has made us to be – and yet are not constrained by negative socially-normalised gender scripts – which still leaves space for recognising God-given generalised patterns created within our sex.

## Response

We now then need to draw our exploration and reflection together and to decide upon actions in our local church context which are pertinent. We will reduce our response into two key questions; how can we enable female leadership within the church? and secondly how do we operate with a healthy gender-balanced model of leadership?

### **Enabling female leadership**

In many ways as a church we should be in a good position to address the malforming patterns of male-only leadership that may be at work within us. We as Baptists do not have a clear hierarchy of authority which our reflection suggests would be a power base for maintaining androcentric models of leadership. We give assent to the member meeting as the place of collective non-hierarchical discernment in which organic leadership is expressed through the

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<sup>40</sup> J. Robert Banks, Bernice M. Ledbetter, and David C. Greenhalgh, *Reviewing Leadership (Engaging Culture)*, 2nd edn (Baker Academic, 2016), chap. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Banks, Ledbetter, and Greenhalgh, *Reviewing Leadership (Engaging Culture)*, chap. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Westfall and Cynthia Long, *Paul and Gender* (Baker Academic, 2016), chap. 2.



priesthood of the whole church. If the early church was malformed when it moved from home to the public sphere -when it was reshaped from the circle around a room within a home, to the rows of a public auditorium – then the Baptist model of congregational governance permits the church to re-circle itself into non-hierarchical modes. The centrality of the members meeting to the churches leadership makes it a good space for us to focus on within our response. This is especially pertinent as we shall soon articulate that for this church in question the meetings do not quite work in the intended manner.

There are two areas for action which will move the church further towards truly complementary equality of gender in leadership: Firstly, the Members meeting does not operate with the theology it espouses, and secondly as Kateusz has pointed out there have been systematic attempts in the tradition of the church to remove the modelling of female leadership within the church. Let's take each in turn and expand upon them to articulate a response.

Firstly then we shall consider the actual practice of the member meeting. It is the normative model of church member meetings that they take place with a leader presenting reports to the gathered members, sometimes for information and sometimes for approval. Typically, the room is arranged in rows and collective organic and non-hierarchical leadership is supplanted by what our reflection suggests is an androcentric approach. Here hierarchical leadership asserts their decisions and through their charismatic influence and the cut and thrust of question and answer (which women perceive as male patterned and inherently suppressing<sup>43</sup>) the goal is to ensure the organisation gives assent to the proposed decision. Ruth Moriarty has conducted research on reforming the Member meeting she concludes such an approach is typically male-dominated, or at least a male patterned environment<sup>44</sup>. She argues that to bring back the gender balance we must re-shape the member meeting in a way that permits the whole body to be engaged in the speaking and listening<sup>45</sup>. A clear action then is to work at addressing the imbalance in the way member meetings are held – organising it into listening circles, instead of hierarchical rows. Agenda for such meetings will also need careful consideration. Though the nature of charitable law requires reporting items it is the nature of God's kingdom that should carry the day. Creative ways to efficiently report that are inline with constitutional requirements should be considered but time should be given over to meaningfully listening to all voices in the discernment process – and not with prebaked ideas.

Secondly and importantly, we must recognise that female leaders are not being afforded the opportunity to see modelled female approaches to leadership – as much of the conduct of meetings, and indeed church life, is male shaped. Here a place for education. The contents of the reflection here are likely not well understood by many within the church and so dissemination through teaching, discussion and communication are important. For so long the debate has been about the validity of female leadership that scant time has been spent on the essential contribution female patterns of leadership bring - after all as Oswalt and Ross observed earlier God created women to bring what men lack. There is a place for educating the church in the feminine traits of God – and drawing out from the trinity what the tradition has lost - to ensure that feminine traits of leadership as seen as essential and important within the

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<sup>43</sup> Clare Hooper, 'What Does Affirming Women Leaders in Our Association Look Like?' (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2024), p. 3 <<https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=349595>> [accessed 18 January 2025].

<sup>44</sup> Ruth Moriarty, 'Discernment and the Church Meeting', *The Pacific Journal of Theological Research*, 14.2 (2019), pp. 36–41 (p. 39).

<sup>45</sup> Moriarty, 'Discernment and the Church Meeting', p. 41.

community of God. It is in light of this that the church needs to be brought to awareness of the selection bias against female leaders within the membership discernment process, due in part to cultural gender scripts. We need to be consciously aware when discerning leaders that we may be overlooking those who are not operating in typically male ways – in fact our model of looking around for leader types is inherently bias against women. Here then is a place for prayer and for seeking the discernment of God. There is a place for seeking forgiveness for the hidden sin within our selection bias and asking God to open our eyes to what we do not always see. Our reflection opens ours to the sin within and as such we can in turn open the eyes of others. The cause would be further by intentional action to affirm female leadership by ensuring that female role models within the church and its history are on display. One request for action from Project violet for the local churches was to ‘that under-represented groups are also asked to act as role models and be seen in positions of leadership’<sup>46</sup>. Balance in all parts of church life would be beneficial but particularly in the visible areas of worship and story-sharing.

There are risks. We must be careful here always to understand we are discussing generalised patterns of male and female leadership but we must give space to our individuality – we are all made and gifted differently. We should not expect people to fit into moulds based on their sex. We can also easily offend by stating that God made male and female biologically differently – we do not have time to raise the gender identification debate but such fixed biological views are not universally held in our culture. If we avoid the conversation though because of the risk of conflict we risk continuing to miss the God given gifts of leadership that the church contains and as such, risk must be taken.

### **Operating with gender balance in leadership**

The second action area is ensuring that the way in which leadership operates is balanced and not as our experience asserts patterned around male leadership. Here then it is helpful to articulate how transactional church leadership is exhibited with its goal-orientated and reward-based approach. Here we may see a pastor setting out a stepped vision for a church with a “what” we want to achieve goal. Such steps may become agenda items subdividing the goal into mapped steps. Roles of people would be clearly defined, actions and responsibility given, and measures would be in place to check on the progress and effectiveness of the role in meeting such delegated parts of the plan that have been assigned. Achievement of goals would receive public acclaim perhaps with prayers of thanksgiving or other ways of marking “fruitful” ministry. There is certainly a place for this approach, yet as this male writer reflects, this is very much descriptive of his own personal leadership approach and to a significant degree descriptive what would be seen at a leadership meeting. We should therefore ask how a transformation leader may instead lead. Here instead vision would be orientated to the “who” nature of the who we are to be – not do. Building up others within the church empowers the collective to find their place within the vision. Leadership would build relationships and people would be encouraged to find their own place in the church vision – time will be allocated to conversation. Delegation would be prioritised but not just to achieve goals, but also within deciding goals. People, not goals, would be a central part of the leadership conversation.

A key place to consider the application of this reflection is the leadership meeting. Meetings at this church have been shaped by cultural norms and indeed are indistinct to that of secular board rooms in format (though not content). This should be pause for thought – if the way we

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<sup>46</sup> ‘Project Violet Report for Local Churches’ (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2024), p. 7  
<<https://www.baptist.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?ID=352661>> [accessed 18 January 2025].

lead looks like a secular organisation – then have we missed what it means to be a called-out people in the Kingdom of God? Agendas are drawn up by the male chair of the leadership team. Items tend to be orientated to decision making from pre-conceived thoughts. The leadership meeting is primarily an approval meeting with action delegated to carry out away from the table to progress the goals of the meeting. Discussion present is modelled around the cut and thrust of male pattern debate. Questions are typically asked for clarification or to win people to a perspective, they are not typically asked to encourage collective discussion which invites all to participate. One clear action is to be intentional about building a leadership culture that listens more, invites all views to be shared, which thinks slowly and collectively. The meeting agendas themselves should be more collaborative, ensuring leadership does not become hierarchical with power belonging to a few – after all it is only the balanced team of leaders who will bring a balanced agenda. There needs to be space given to the collective discussion and decision making with all participating. Such an approach though will need cultivating as androcentric patterns are normative with organisation blindness to know how to work in other ways. Activities designed to promote collective team discussion and collaboration around action areas would be of benefit. A good model of one such way is a Problem Solving Team Building meeting approach<sup>47</sup> in which a problem holder, supported by a activity facilitator work within a team context to solve a problem. The team generate solutions for the problem holder, after which the problem holder prioritises preferred solutions and then again collectively the team generate problems and thoughts around each proposed solution finally leading to the decided upon preferred solution. Such a model blends well the transactional leadership of goal setting with the transformational leadership of listening to all and team enabling.

### **Conclusion**

There is a certain irony here that a male writer after reflecting on female leadership now undertakes to give actions to address the problem – mansplaining if you will to an attentive female audience. Such an approach is required for the purposes of this reflection but such response to the reflection should invite the full range of voices to participate in – and indeed on unwritten action would be do just this. We must of course recognise we have only begun to scratch the surface of this topic, here covering with scant detail what could be delved for much for deeper revelation– which in turn would produce more effective action. We could write extensively on many of the threads touched on within this reflection and there implication for church life. The heart of our reflection though has been the pursuit of truth, to rediscover the truth about the church as an organisation that God created it to be, with male and female each acting collaboratively in the distinctiveness of their created being, and we so leave our final words of exhortation on this matter to God himself;

*But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. Eph 4:15–16 (NRSV)*

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<sup>47</sup> Anamika Das, 'Interventions for Organisational Development', *Educational Quest-An International Journal of Education and Applied Social Sciences*, 10.2 (2019), pp. 107–18 (p. 114).

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