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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Oneness in Christ:

A Qualitative Study of Women's Initial Experiences Leading in Public Worship at Broadway Church of Christ

Shannon Rains, Jennifer Dabbs, and Kaley Ihfe

Abstract: Few Church of Christ women have had experience with taking an active leadership role in a worship service since these congregations have traditionally believed women leading worship is unscriptural. Recently more Churches of Christ have begun to change their understanding of Scripture in ways that are more inclusive of women. In March 2019, after a six-month church-wide Bible study at the historic Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, TX, women took on public roles in a worship service in what was for most of them the first time to serve in front of a congregation.

To document their experiences, the researchers conducted interviews with thirty-two women who participated in a leading worship role during the first year of this change. Participants described their evolving beliefs about women's roles in worship; their experience as they participated in worship; meanings they assigned to their participation; and how their changing roles affected their experience of worship and community at Broadway.

Introduction

In March of 2019, Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas made a fundamental shift by expanding the roles of women in worship services to include every position except preaching from the pulpit and serving as an elder. In the year following, a significant number of female members of Broadway led audibly and visibly in worship, often for the first time in their lives. This study documents the experiences of women and

girls who have served in new roles during worship services since the policy change and the meanings women and girls assign to that service.¹

Women's Roles in the Churches of Christ

Many leaders in the Churches of Christ have studied scripture as they have sought to affirm or change their traditional understandings of women's roles. Adding to other published resources, John Mark Hicks published the book *Women Serving God: My Journey in Understanding Their Story in the Bible*, in which he explores this specific question: "Does God invite women to fully participate through audible and visible leadership in all the assemblies of the saints where men and women are gathered to glorify God and edify each other?"² To answer this question, Hicks describes three prominent positions on women's roles:

- 1) No Leadership in the Assembly: Churches with this view do not permit women to "audibly or visibly lead the assembly in any way."³
- 2) Limited Leadership in the Assembly: These churches retain the emphasis on male-headship or authority, but women may participate "audibly or visibly" in leadership of the worship service. Most policies do not permit women to preach, hold the position of preaching minister, or become an elder.⁴
- 3) Full Participation in the Assembly: Women may serve in all leadership positions, according to giftedness.⁵

Traditionally, Churches of Christ have not allowed women to "audibly or visibly lead" worship service. But as more churches have studied Scripture and adopted new policies, women have now found a voice and leadership in the public assembly.⁶

¹ This research received full review from the Institutional Review Board at Lubbock Christian University and was approved on February 13, 2020.

² John Mark Hicks, *Women Serving God: My Journey in Understanding Their Story in the Bible* (Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, 2020), 16.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ Since Churches of Christ are autonomous and do not have a central governing board, leaders within each congregation make policy decisions based on their own study and conclusions. In the past few decades, some Churches of Christ have studied the role of women and enacted a variety of policy changes. Wiley Clarkson's website *Where the Spirit Leads* has attempted to create a directory of churches that have adopted a non-

Context

Churches of Christ descended from the Stone-Campbell Movement, which began in the United States in the 1830s. Ideas about women were greatly influenced by the “Cult of True Womanhood” or “Cult of Domesticity.”⁷ The prevailing idea in the culture was that women were not suited for business or the public world but were created to take care of their homes and children, morally guiding their children and husbands while remaining submissive to their husbands. Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Stone-Campbell movement, believed that women were second to men. He wrote in *The Millennial Harbinger* in 1854:

The first great fact is, that Adam was first formed, then Eve. Hence the man is not of the woman, but the woman is of the man. He is first and she is second. . . . They are, therefore, neither equal in rank nor in age. Their office in the world is also unlike. . . . His lordship was earth wide, her queenship is naturally and rightfully only house wide.⁸

Leaders of the Churches of Christ believed that they were looking to Scripture rather than to culture as they restricted women’s activity in the church. They pointed to scriptures such as 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, highlighting the need for women to remain quiet in the church, ask their husbands questions at home, and have no authority over men. All other scriptures about women were interpreted through this lens, as is evident by David Lipscomb, one of the most prominent church leaders after the Civil War. He wrote that the daughters of Philip were inspired and prophesied but did so “modestly and in private.”⁹ There was some pushback in the late 1800s and early 1900s as questions were raised about where to draw the line on women’s silence. Silena Holman, the wife of an elder at a church in Tennessee, wrote numerous letters to the *Gospel*

traditional policy of inclusion of women in leadership as well as other materials related to the role of women in the Churches of Christ: www.wherethespiritleads.org.

⁷ John Mark Hicks, “Quiet Please: Churches of Christ in the Early Twentieth Century and the ‘Woman Question,’” *Discipliana* 68 (2): 7–24.

⁸ Alexander Campbell, “Woman’s Rights,” *Millennial Harbinger* (April 1854): 203-7. https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/ac3.html. Accessed Dec. 17, 2020.

⁹ David Lipscomb, “A Woman’s Work,” *Gospel Advocate* (Dec. 1, 1892). https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/sholman/holman26.html. Accessed Dec. 11, 2020.

Advocate advocating for women to be more involved in public roles in church. She did not ignore the scriptures that called for women to be quiet in church, but she looked at Scripture as a whole and recognized scriptures that seemed to contradict the command to be quiet in church.¹⁰ However, the dominant way of thinking in Churches of Christ remained that women should stay silent in the public assembly. By the 1950s, the traditional view was solidified—women could teach children’s classes, take care of food, and serve behind the scenes.¹¹ Women were important to the church but could not lead publicly or teach baptized males.

As the struggle for gender equality strengthened in the 1970s, some denominations began to open the door for more women to participate in public and leadership roles, but the Churches of Christ resisted. Many viewed the Equal Rights Amendment and the fight for gender equality to be against their way of life, believing families would be destroyed as women went to work.¹² It is possible that as more and more women began to go to work over the next two decades, ideas about what women could do began to change even in Churches of Christ. By the late 1990s, conferences were being held on “The Role of Women,” and in the next two decades, a small percentage of Churches of Christ began to open up opportunities for women to publicly participate in worship and lead various ministries.¹³

Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas reflects the history of the broader Church of Christ movement. It is evident from reading through *Broadway Memories*, a book assembled in 1991 on the 100th anniversary of the church, women were responsible for much of the traditionally women’s work of the church, such as children’s education, food for funerals and potlucks, benevolence, and fellowship. It is also evident that a few women were active in less traditional ways. In 1925, Hattie Ewing, a missionary to Japan, spoke to the congregation one evening. Geneva Allen Adams wrote about it in 1991, “Now that I look back on that event, the thing that impresses me most is that a woman was allowed to speak to the whole assembly. No one thought it unusual back then. To a ten-year-old girl, she

¹⁰ Silena Holman, “Woman’s Scriptural Status Again,” *Gospel Advocate* (November 21, 1888).

¹¹ Jeff W. Childers, Douglas A. Foster, and Jack R. Reese, *The Crux of the Matter: Crisis, Tradition, and the Future of the Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2002), 8.

¹² D. Newell Williams, Douglas A. Foster, and Paul M. Blowers, eds., *The Stone-Campbell Movement: A Global History* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 216-219.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 217-219.

was a true inspiration.”¹⁴ In the same book, Viola Mae West Robbins remembered reading Scripture out loud in a high school senior/college class of 75 people in 1931.¹⁵ Helen Young, the wife of Norvel Young, a prominent preacher at Broadway in the 1940s and 1950s, continues to be remembered as a strong teacher to young women while she was at Broadway. Irene Johnson, a single female missionary in Germany right after WWII remembers an elder telling her, “Irene, you must train these women to do church work. The women are the backbone of the church.”¹⁶ So, while the roles for women were mainly traditional at Broadway, they and their work were held in high esteem.

As time went on, there were ways in which more women participated beyond the traditional roles of women in Churches of Christ although the “official” policy never changed. At least one woman taught an adult Sunday school class in the 1980s, and women were known to teach the youth group in the 1990s-2010s. During this time, couples would occasionally teach adult Bible classes together, and occasionally women baptized their children along with their husbands during the worship service. By the early 1990s, the title of deacon was changed to “ministry leader” so that women could lead ministries. By 2012, women not only led food and children’s ministries but also led the finance committee. In worship, women began singing on the praise team and occasionally performed in dramas. Various preachers through these decades would occasionally interview women during Sunday worship when speaking of specific ministries, such as mission points, homeless ministry, or children’s ministry. Female missionaries were recognized; and women held paid ministry positions in children’s ministry, the youth group, and campus ministry (although they were usually secondary ministry positions to a man). Women were featured in videos during the worship service talking about ministries or occasionally giving testimonies. In 2015, the church moved from live announcements to a prerecorded “Broadway Today” always hosted by a woman and played during the service. It is interesting to note that in 1999, Dr. Ken Cukrowski taught a class on women’s roles teaching people there was another way to read Scripture that allowed for the expansion of women’s involvement in worship. Though changing women’s roles was discussed at that time, nothing “officially” changed due to the Broadway elders’ belief change would lead to division.

¹⁴ Geneva Allen Adams, *Broadway Memories* (1991), 3.

¹⁵ Viola Mae West Robbins, *Broadway Memories* (1991), 11.

¹⁶ Irene Johnson, *Broadway Memories* (1991), 49.

In August 2018, the Broadway elders announced that the church would begin a study called the “Oneness Study,” based on Galatians 3:26-28,

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (NIV).

In the previous year, as the elders had studied the role of deacons, they looked at whether women could serve officially as “deacons,” which led them further into a study on women’s roles. The “Oneness” study began with Dr. Cukrowski coming for a weekend conference in October 2018, open to all members of Broadway. He led members through a study in which he primarily highlighted the different ways in which scriptures on women are interpreted and emphasized that everyone is making some kind of interpretation, even if they believe they are reading “literally.” Over the next eight weeks, each adult Bible class (and the youth group) was taught by an elder, with a lesson centered around Galatians 3:26-28.¹⁷ The study culminated with Mike Cope teaching and preaching the weekend of February 16-17, 2019. After this study and prayer and discussion, the elders announced that by the end of February all worship roles and leadership roles would now be open to women except preaching and being an elder. On March 10, 2019, the first woman took her place at the podium to offer the welcome to the congregation. Gradually, women took on the roles of reading Scripture, speaking during the Lord’s Supper, leading worship, and serving the Lord’s Supper. By February 2020, over sixty women and girls had participated in the worship services.

Methodology

To document the experience of these women and identify the meanings associated with these experiences, the authors conducted a qualitative study. Fifty-two women and girls took part in roles previously reserved for men in the first year after Broadway Church of Christ announced that women would have the opportunity to serve during worship. Each of these women and girls was invited to participate in a semi-

¹⁷ Executive Minister, Rodney Thomas, wrote *The Oneness in Christ* curriculum for the churchwide study. This resources is available on Broadway’s website at: <https://www.bwaychurch.org/?s=oneness>.

structured interview addressing their experience. Women who had participated in worship services were identified by reviewing archived worship bulletins and consulting the person in charge of organizing the Lord's Supper. In addition, recruitment flyers requesting women to self-select into the study were distributed in Bible classes and group emails.

Once identified as having participated in worship, women were contacted by phone to ascertain their interest in participating in the research. The women were provided a brief description of the study, confidentiality procedures, and assured that the study was voluntary. An interview time was scheduled with those who were willing. Thirty-two women agreed to take part in the research. Those women identified a private location at the participant's home, office, or the church building to conduct the interview.

At the scheduled interview, each participant was provided with a consent form. Parental permission and child assent was obtained from the one participant who was under the age of 18. Interviews commenced after consent was obtained. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes.

The women answered open-ended questions related to their childhood understanding of what women could do to serve the church; how their views of women's roles in the church changed over time; their reaction to the congregation's decision to allow women to take on new roles; their experience serving during worship; and their experience of worship services and the church community since the change in worship roles (For a complete interview questionnaire, see the Appendix).

Recordings of the interviews were de-identified during the transcription process. An analysis of themes was made to determine previous experiences of women in worship; beliefs regarding women's roles in worship; the experience of performing new roles in worship; and the meaning of performing those roles.

The thirty-two participants ranged from 17 to 84 years of age, with a mean age of 51.4 years. One woman had been a member of the congregation for just a little over a year. Another woman had been with the congregation for 73 years. On average the participants had worshiped with the church for 19.7 years. Sixty-six percent of the women had been members of a Church of Christ congregation their entire lives.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts contained valuable insight into the participants' changing understanding of women's roles over the course of time: during their childhood, before the Oneness study, and after the

Oneness study was completed and the new policy was announced. Full of emotion, they described the deep meaning that leading in the assembly held for them. They also spoke openly about some challenges they faced as they embraced their leadership. To understand the meaning that women assigned to their public leadership, the researchers asked women to recall their childhood experiences of women serving in the church.

Childhood Experiences of Women Serving in the Church

Not surprising, 72% of the women interviewed grew up in traditional congregations in which they observed women serving in traditional roles such as “teaching ladies Bible class,” “serving others,” “cooking,” “visiting people,” “throwing showers,” and “cleaning the church building.” In these settings, women typically only taught children under the age of twelve, so that they would not intentionally or accidentally teach a baptized male student, thus usurping his “spiritual authority.” So, how were these women taught about their role in the church? Some described a situation in which these roles were, “just understood” and “that’s just all they [women] did.” Others, though, were overtly taught male headship, “that men lead worship and all public roles.” In fact, one woman recalls that,

I did continually hear the admonition from Corinthians about women keeping silent . . . and that Christ is the head of the man and the man is the head of the hierarchy that was established . . . but, “Women, keep silent,” was the refrain I heard most often growing up.

Without the example of women audibly and visibly leading, some women concluded “. . . that church wasn’t the place for women to do anything but to sit and listen.” Unfortunately, to question this arrangement was offensive and, as one woman recalls, “we were taught that we don’t want to offend people . . . to change . . . might offend people, and we *don’t* want to offend people.”

The remaining one-quarter of women had early experiences in non-traditional churches with opportunities for limited or full leadership, most outside of the Churches of Christ. These women described early experiences of public leadership which had a significant impact on them. One respondent said, “I don’t ever recall feeling inhibited by being a woman—even as a little girl—because I was always up there singing and I felt called to do that since I was 12 years old.” Another reported that she

read Scripture during worship in high school, but then she lamented that the “young men didn’t take leadership roles in the youth group . . . it was college before I saw young men take leadership roles.”

Childhood Experiences Shape Adult Belief

Childhood experiences in traditional churches shaped the women’s perception of how they relate to the church and to the men serving in the church. Women perceived themselves as “underneath men” with little to give to the church other than their presence and support. In fact, one woman recalled attending an adult Bible class as a young woman and the married women would “not even speak up in a classroom if there were men present because they were supposed to keep silent.” But these restrictions were not consistently applied, even within the same church. At times, in some churches, there was a noticeable disconnect between doctrine and practice as women who were restricted from the teacher role in an adult class would “lead class from the pews.” Others were able to “teach or lead in youth group” when a male teacher was not available. This inconsistency led one woman to conclude that “even as a little girl, this never made sense to me . . . it just always bothered me that there were never women doing things in the worship service. . . . I accepted it though and stayed in the church my entire life.” The inconsistent application of these policies led some women to embrace a call to ministry and pursue formal education. In this study, four women majored in Bible in college. But, even for these women, the pressures to conform to the system finally won out. “Two years in I quit because I was not willing to fight that battle to have a job in the Church of Christ, and I didn’t want a job in another organized religious group.” Others changed their majors. Even so, some of these women did eventually take on formal ministry roles in the church.

Changed Beliefs Before the Oneness Study

When asked, “over time how has your view of what women could do to serve the church changed? If it has changed?” three-quarters of the women said that their view had changed some before the Oneness study. For example, college experiences influenced several of the participants’ views regarding their public leadership as they participated in “praise team” or attended “a college-level Bible class about women in the church.” One participant said, “I was able to see that there were lots of women leading Bible studies, leading classes that even had men in it.” A few women mentioned having college ministers who mentored them; for example, speaking of her college minister, a woman said the person “made

me feel important to the church . . . valued everyone's voice and gender . . . got us up in front of the church to share about [college ministry]."

Attending churches that had studied the role of women or incorporated women in active leadership shaped the beliefs of some women before the Oneness study. The mission field shaped a missionary's beliefs about women's roles. She recalled a personally challenging moment when she tried to turn down a request from a Kenyan church elder to pray. She continues "I jabbed my husband and said, 'You do it.' And he told me, 'are you going to usurp the authority of the leaders of the church?' And, I realized . . . what weird lines I had in my head about leadership." Finally, a couple of women recalled the 1990 study with Ken Cukrowski as the catalyst to their changed beliefs:

At Broadway we had Dr. Cukrowski come 20 years ago to do a study. It clicked with me. I was excited. The elders, they were right, decided Broadway was not ready for a change. I respect that. It was for unity. We changed slowly since then.

Two decades later, Dr. Cukrowski led a similar class at Broadway as part of the Oneness study, and this time, the leaders did create a new policy of women's limited leadership in the assembly.

The Oneness Study: Beliefs Regarding Women's Roles in Worship

When the Oneness Study began in 2019, only two of the women interviewed firmly held the viewpoint that women should have no leadership in the assembly. For those two women, the 2019 Oneness Study played a critical role in helping them feel comfortable with the changes. One woman says,

But when we did our study at Broadway, and I heard Ken Cukrowski and Mike Cope, I came to believe that those scriptures had been misunderstood. And for me it was about doing what is right if it's right—if God has not forbidden women to speak—then we were wrong to forbid that.

Additionally, one-third of the women felt that the Oneness Study expanded their understanding, for instance, "It solidified the feeling that I always had, but it gave me something to hang my hat on"

The Announcement

When asked about their first reaction to the announcement that women would take on new roles in worship service, 28% of the women had a purely positive response, such as, “I was really excited. I think whenever they made the announcement in church, I think I actually, [name of female congregation member] and I may have high fived or something.”

Two women described a sense of “relief” that the policy change was “finally happening.”

Only 6% of women reported negative feelings about the announcement. One said, “I wasn’t comfortable at first . . . certain roles didn’t bother me as much as others. At first the greeting, the welcoming, that didn’t bother me . . . but others like the . . . thing before communion, that probably bothered me the most.” Another woman said she was “scared . . . this was so lovely on paper, but I’ve been trained to not do this. I have been told it was wrong. . . . So, when, when it finally comes down to putting your money where your mouth is, am I going to be able to say yes if they ask me?”

Almost half of the women surveyed had a mixed response to the announcement. One woman recalls thinking “it was certainly time to address that; but oh, what we’re going to have to suffer. . . .” Others had a mixed response to an announcement that still included limitations on women. One woman who was thrilled by the change recalls, “. . . when he [elder] went on to say, but they will not be allowed to do this and this . . . the rest of service all I heard in my mind was ‘you can’t, you can’t, you can’t.’” These women did not expect the Broadway elders to adopt the policy of full participation, but they also didn’t expect it “to be put in the announcement as a restriction.” This “policy that draws a line at the most contested issue—preaching and eldering” was perceived as a “necessity” for the unity of the church while also eliciting some strong negative emotions, “like my balloon was being blown up and then it completely deflated.”

New Experiences: Leading in Worship

All the women interviewed took on roles in worship in the first year after the change was made. Of the women interviewed, 44% took on multiple roles. Reading Scripture topped the list of roles performed—fourteen of the thirty-two women read Scripture, twelve did the welcome, eight women passed the plate during the Lord’s Supper, eight talked before the Lord’s Supper, and one led singing.

When they first took on a new role in worship, the experiences of the women ranged from excitement to nervousness. Many of the women were “honored” by the request to lead in worship. One woman said, “I felt a real burden being the first; I wanted [a communion meditation] to be very thoughtful and thought-provoking and that I knew it was such a big step.” And another, “I didn’t want to ‘preach’ to them and then they’d say, ‘See! They shouldn’t be doing that.’”¹⁸ Women were also aware of stereotypes about why women should not lead: “I knew what I would wear, but I didn’t want it to be showy or call attention to me and so I thought about that. And I thought about the fact that I cry very easily, and this was special. And I didn’t want to do that.”

But, without having the example of other women who had led audibly and visibly in worship, they found that “being in that position really made me probably more nervous.” In addition to the lack of female role models in leading in worship, some of the women were also aware that men were often taught to lead in these ways since childhood. For instance, a wife told her husband about serving communion, “you’ve been trained to do this from the time you were eight years old, or whenever you were baptized. . . . but it is a big deal when you are 38 and for the very first time you do a thing.”

Regardless of the insecurities that come with participating in an activity for the first time, the women had almost universally positive experiences. Several participants reported having overwhelming feelings of love and connection to the church body as they stood in front of the congregation and thankfulness for getting to participate more fully in the worship service. One woman said,

I felt extreme joy, extreme love, and I think gratefulness, that I didn’t expect to feel grateful for. I – It’s not like I have been *longing* to be at the pulpit *at all*, but it was just like – it felt *normal* in a weird way. So, gratefulness for something I never knew I wanted.

Others experienced supportive church members as they sought to normalize the new experience. For example, an elder’s wife affirmed one woman, “I think that is the best communion meditation I ever heard in my whole life.” Other women reported receiving “several emails” of

¹⁸ The participant did not want to leave the perception that she was delivering a sermon in her communion meditation thus overstepping the restriction on preaching.

affirmation. “It is our favorite day when you lead worship,” meaningful words expressed by the “grandmas and grandpas” to a female song leader. The members of Broadway went out of their way to affirm the giftedness and leadership of the women.

There were a few occasions that women recalled a negative experience. Just before leading in the worship service, one woman found out that one of the “most substantial parental figure/grandparent type people that were *so special* to us . . . left.” She continues,

And I had to *ask* God in that moment to not take it personal . . . and *that* almost broke the camel’s back for me. . . . I was praying without stopping. Because when I finished, I broke down. [Crying] And, I almost had to be carried out of the church by my husband because I was *so overwhelmed*. Because I had *no idea* that people that I loved and respected so much were so offended by the decision, and it broke my heart. Because I am a people person, and I took it on, I took it personally.

When passing the communion trays, some people refused to take the trays from women servers. A teenager recalls, “. . . and you could tell they were judging, and kind of glaring at me, like shaking their heads. . . . Oooh, and they wouldn’t take it from me . . . they just kind of shook their heads and just like wouldn’t take mine and waited ‘til the guy on the other side would hand them the plate.” But in the face of occasional resistance and judgment, the women made it clear that having the courage to do something new, “to push the agenda forward,” was worth it.

New Meaning: What Changed?

So, what does the opportunity to lead visibly and audibly in worship mean to the women who participated? For one, it sparked a “craving to get to know God more.” And another felt “. . . stronger and freer . . . doing what . . . Scripture says and what God wants you to do.” One of the most powerful statements, “. . . a resurrection for a part of me that I didn’t know was dead,” described the hole that one woman felt because of the lack of inclusion. Before Oneness, the reality was that “an eight-year-old boy [was] up there saying the prayer, and . . . [there were] 80 and 90-year-old women who had . . . *never* said a word.” This was a disconnect for women who believed that “Christ was radical in his inclusion of women. . . . It’s just been sort of a natural next step for the church.” It also gave them the opportunity

to be publicly thankful, a “. . . first chance to talk to the body as a whole to say, ‘This, this, is what you poured into *me* and *my family* and how we see this body.’”

The historical significance was not lost on the women either, “[I]t’s more than just getting up there and doing whatever it is. You’re going against 200 years of tradition.” But, along with honoring God with their spiritual gifts, they found significant meaning connecting their faith to the faith of the generations before and after them. They talked about grandparents and parents, children and grandchildren, and even faithful mentors who had served Broadway many decades ago. Intentionally, one woman who had been asked to lead communion “had with me my mother’s Bible and Dad’s bookmark in my Bible. . . . I wanted this to be from generation to generation.” And, thinking about future generations, a young mom describes the hard decision that she and her husband had been weighing:

I was so hoping that Broadway would do this so that I wouldn’t have to leave Broadway . . . time’s ticking and [young daughter] is growing up. She’s going to get to the age where she’s going to start learning what her place is and her role is in the church and in service to God. Do we cut and run and . . . get all my girls to a place where they’ll never know any different? And so, we were about ready to go, and then all of a sudden [slight pause and quieter] we didn’t have to.”

She was not the only person whose commitment to Broadway Church of Christ changed since the Oneness Study and subsequent announcement. Eighty-eight percent of the women say that their experience of the church service has changed since women took on new roles during worship and 50% of the women say that they have increased commitment to Broadway due to the audible and visible inclusion of women in worship.

Discussion of the Results - Oneness in Christ

The Oneness in Christ study and subsequent policy changes at Broadway Church of Christ provided new opportunities for women to deepen their spiritual formation and to increase their sense of belonging to the community of faith. In addition, women joyfully embraced the opportunity to lead in worship and bless their church family. Sadly, some church members left when the new policy was announced. Grief

overshadowed the excitement of the new opportunity, prompting women to need the courage to step into public leadership.

Believing: Grief, Courage, and Honor

The transition that occurred at Broadway during the Oneness study and the implementation of the new policy was difficult for many women. Some church members could not accept the new policy, initially challenging the new direction, and then leaving to join more traditional churches. In addition, some women hindered the change, sometimes stating that they were already able to do everything they wanted to do. The resistance to the policy and the decision to leave Broadway harmed relationships between families that had known and supported each other for years, causing a deep sense of loss. The women leaders grieved that their opportunity to exercise their spiritual giftedness caused others to leave their church home. Also, women worried about disappointing family members as their leadership broke from the traditional position on women's roles that had shaped the Churches of Christ. Finally, some women grieved that the policy still limited their leadership as they longed for full equality of women in the leadership of worship.

Therefore, courage was needed to lead publicly, to do something new, and to overcome fear that followed them after friends left and traditions were changed. Almost universally, women used the word "honored" to describe how they felt when asked to lead and when participating in a public role in worship. As a verb, honor means "to regard or treat someone with admiration and respect."¹⁹ For some women, the sense of honor was attached to the opportunity they had longed for to use their spiritual giftedness. However, more often, the women were surprised to be asked to lead in worship, and their sense of honor stems from an unexpected recognition of unrealized giftedness by a minister in the place of authority. As such, courage was needed to overcome the obstacles discussed above. Out of the courageous act of saying "yes" to a new opportunity, they were embracing a new discipline of spiritual formation, increasing their connection to the church.

¹⁹ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. "honor," accessed February 5, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/honor>.

Becoming: Spiritual Formation Through Leadership

Christian discipleship begins with a commitment to spiritual formation. In his book, *The Great Omission*, Dallas Willard asserts that Christians ought to be disciples, “students, apprentices, practitioners—of Jesus Christ” who are “steadily learning from him how to live the life of the Kingdom of the Heavens into every corner of human existence.”²⁰ Discipleship leads to spiritual formation as described by Paul in Romans 12:1-2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will (NIV).

Spiritual formation requires that individuals seek to take on the “quality or character of Jesus himself” as they embrace God’s mission of reconciliation within the New Creation.²¹ Each part makes up the whole. “For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12: 4-5; (NIV).

There are no exclusions from the body based on gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic situation to communal participation.²² God has gifted each body—for the body—with individual gifts used for the sake of the community.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, the prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully (Romans 12:6-8; NIV).

²⁰Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’s Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (HarperCollins e-Books: New York, 2006), 165.

²¹Ibid., 54.

²²Hicks, *Women Serving God*, 150.

Women have been denied the opportunity to utilize their spiritual gifts in the leadership of communal worship. Denying women this opportunity has created needless barriers to their spiritual formation as they have had no choice but to say “no” to utilizing the gifts they received by God’s grace. Without the opportunity to utilize their gifts, one avenue of spiritual transformation is cut off, not by God but by tradition. As described in the previous section, the opportunity to lead visibly and audibly in worship has encouraged their personal study habits and led to an expression of joy, honor, and thankfulness as they are now released to more fully participate in kingdom work.

Belonging: Leading the church through spiritual giftedness

After leading in worship, women felt an increased sense of belonging to Broadway. These women understood that utilizing their spiritual giftedness was for the “common good” of the church and were honored to utilize their gifts for the sake of others.²³ Once women received the opportunity to lead visibly and audibly in worship, they found a new sense of connection to the church. Interestingly, they felt this connection with the past, present, and future of the church. Obviously, the ability to lead those present in the moment in worship was deeply meaningful for the women. But, surprisingly, many spoke of their family members and mentors of faith in their past who had nurtured the gifts of the Spirit in them. And, the women were keenly aware of the effect their service may have for the future, as more people are released to lead as fully as possible through their spiritual giftedness. There was an excitement that the future generations will only know a church that embraced Oneness.

Women leading will impact future generations. Recently, Knoll and Bolin released research utilizing a “mixed-methods” social-science approach. One of their key questions was, “What effect do female clergy and congregational policies regarding female clergy have on the personal empowerment, religious attitudes, and behaviors of parishioners in those congregations?”²⁴ In terms of belonging, their findings are unsettling. When

²³ I Corinthians 12:7

²⁴ Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word: Women’s Ordination in Modern America*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 14. Knoll and Bolin specifically investigate the effect on individuals and the congregation when woman is the principal leader of the congregation, a role that Broadway limited by the policy that women cannot preach or hold the office of elder. In the Churches of Christ, preachers are typically given more authority, whether perceived or real. However, the findings of Knoll and Bolin are applicable to any environment in which women are able to lead in worship.

women do not have a female role model in leadership positions, they are more likely to internalize leadership as only a masculine behavior.²⁵ Sadly, they found that “fewer than one in ten [of the people surveyed] say that their most influential spiritual leader growing up was a woman.”²⁶ Developmentally, during a time in the lives of young men and women in which their identity is being formed, most church-going people only have a male role model in a (primary) leadership position.²⁷ But, the research found that the self-esteem and self-efficacy of young women were boosted when the (primary) leadership position of the congregation is a woman.²⁸ For women to view themselves as capable and able to lead in worship will create ripples in the church for years to come.

Conclusion

This study considered the experiences and meanings that women made by leading in worship for the first time at Broadway Church of Christ. Overall, women had a positive experience that was also spiritually formative and increased their sense of belonging to the church. In a time of declining membership, this new sense of belonging felt by women, not just by the women interviewed in this survey but also by the women they will influence for years to come.²⁹ A second project focused on the experiences and meanings of the ministers and elders as they led the church through the Oneness study and implemented the new policy is now underway. The results of these studies may support church leaders as they consider and implement changes in their policies regarding the public leadership of women.

²⁵ Ibid., 124.

²⁶ Ibid., 128.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ In addition, they found that that the self-efficacy of adult women is boosted by almost 12% when the primary leader of the congregation is a female, suggesting that having a female role model in a religious leadership position is important to women well into their adult years. Finally, women in leadership had no real appreciative effect on the self-esteem of men and only effects the self-efficacy of men to a small degree.

²⁹ Broadway Church of Christ experienced an initial decline in membership. However, these changes are too recent to determine the longer-term impact on church membership. Also, while the membership of a local church may decline, the new connection felt by women to the church and the possibility of an increase in self-esteem and self-efficacy of women throughout their younger years may have a positive impact further into the future.

Appendix

Interview Questionnaire

- 1) What was your understanding of what women could do to serve the church you grew up in?
- 2) Over time, how has your view of what women could do to serve the church changed? If it has changed.
- 3) Can you identify what you believed in the year or so before Broadway began the Oneness study?
- 4) Did the Oneness study change your view of what women could do to serve the church?
- 5) What was your first reaction when you heard Broadway Church of Christ was going to allow women to take on new roles in worship services?
- 6) What role(s) have you taken on this year in a worship service that women had not done in the past?
- 7) Can you tell me how you were asked to participate in worship the first time?
 - a. Who contacted you?
 - b. How did they get in touch with you?
 - c. What were you asked to do?
 - d. How did it make you feel?
 - e. Do you remember what you said to _____?
 - f. Did you expect to be contacted?
 - g. Did you have any concerns about taking on this role?
 - h. Did you feel prepared to do this?
 - i. What instructions did you receive?
- 8) Can you tell me about your experience the first time you went before the congregation and did _____?
- 9) With that experience in mind, what emotions did you experience that first time you _____?
- 10) How did people in the congregation respond to your doing _____?
- 11) Have you done other things in the worship service since then?
- 12) Has your experience of the church service changed since women took on new roles during worship at Broadway Church of Christ?
- 13) Has your experience of the Broadway community changed since women took on new roles during worship at Broadway Church of Christ?
- 14) What is your age?

- 15) How many years have you worshiped in a Church of Christ congregation?
- 16) How many years have you worshiped at Broadway Church of Christ?
- 17) Is there anything else you want to tell me that I did not ask?

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