

What the Other Half is Doing: An Analysis of Gender Inclusivity in Church of Christ Congregations

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When Stephen's daughter was quite young, he was having a conversation with her about church when she looked up at him and said, "Girls can't do that." She was referring specifically to preaching, but it became apparent that she had formed a very clear set of gender-delimited roles related to religious practice. There were many things that boys might do, but only some things that girls might do and the most public things, the ones that seemingly carried the most weight or received the most attention, were reserved only for "boys."

Sophie, Lynette's daughter, was not even four when she articulated her first thoughts about gender roles and religious practices. She and her brother were busily preparing to play communion at the dining room table when she abruptly sat down and became very serious. When asked why she had sat down, Sophie quickly replied, "That [serving communion] is what boys do." At an early age and with no verbal instruction or in-depth scriptural study, Sophie knew her role and played it well.

Whether or not our daughters received the right message (and we wish to be clear that we believe they did not), it is important to ask the question: how did our daughters arrive at the same conclusion and at such young ages? As far as we are aware and our daughters are able to recall, they never heard a sermon or sat in a Bible class that taught them these things. In other words, they received no formal, explicit instruction delimiting the rules of participation in the life of the community based upon one's gender. They learned the rules at a very young age by simply being present and observing, non-critically, the practices of a religious community in specific instances. Over a relatively short period of time, our daughters had been formed in gender-specific ways such that they could, in a rather matter-of-fact manner, articulate, "*Girls* can't do that" and "That is what *boys* do."

When one pays attention to the way in which a religious community shapes meaning, establishes the rules of participation in the community, and forms individual identity, they are engaging in a very particular form of theology known as practical theology. The discipline of practical theology is often misunderstood. Practical theology does not mean theology that is practical, but asserts that theology is rooted in, evidenced by practice.¹ As Mary Clark Moschella has succinctly put it, "Religious practices...carry or 'body forth' theology in the world."² Religious practices, she argues, constitute the shared religious life of a community. They function to hold traditions in place—and they play a key role in the course of innovation and change. Moschella's important work urges that "By studying over time the repeated actions and interactions of people in a particular group, one can catch a glimpse of theology as it is lived out in the life of the group."³ In a similar way, Elaine Graham asserts that the proper focus of pastoral theology is on the practice of the faith community itself. She writes:

1. For an excellent discussion of the meaning of "practical theology," see: Terry A. Veiling, *Practical Theology: On Earth As It Is In Heaven* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 3–22.

2. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography: as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 46.

3. *Ibid.*, 47.

By focusing on the reality of practice, we are able to recognize that theory and practice do not exist independently... The arena of Christian *praxis*—value-directed and value-laden action—is understood as the medium through which the Christian community embodies and enacts its fundamental vision of the Gospel. Theology is properly conceived as a performative discipline, in which the criterion for authenticity is deemed to be *orthopraxis*, or authentic transformatory action, rather than *orthodoxy* (right belief).⁴

While many practices could be used to illustrate practical theology, hymn singing provides a good example because it is a common practice in most contemporary Christian congregations. Many have studied the role of hymn singing in congregational life noting how both the form and content of hymns shapes the faith of the congregation. It is commonly understood that if you really want to know what a congregation believes, then you should listen to what it sings. Within Churches of Christ, one would certainly want to examine the role of congregational singing by paying close attention not only to the content of the hymns that are sung but also to the fact that hymn singing in Churches of Christ is done without instruments. Attention to this practice would no doubt reveal much about the history of these churches, the role of scripture in congregational life, and something of how scripture has been interpreted and applied in congregations belonging to this tradition. Generally, Churches of Christ have argued that hymn singing in the congregation's worship should be without instruments because there is no explicit command, example, or inference allowing such in the New Testament. Another way of examining the practice of hymn singing in Churches of Christ might be to examine the theological and sociological aspects of singing without instruments. One might note that singing without instruments in four-part harmony is a practice that is passed on from generation to generation requiring congregants to listen, to blend, and to attend to rhythm, voice and harmony. This practice allows everyone to have voice in the congregation while simultaneously requiring blending one's voice with all the other voices of the congregation. The way in which congregational singing is practiced in Churches of Christ embodies a certain theology. God, confessed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is three diverse things that are perfectly one. The unity and diversity of God is embodied in Churches of Christ in the practice of congregational singing without instruments insofar as that practice gives each member voice (diversity) and expresses the blending or unifying of these voices into one voice (unity). Congregational hymn singing in Churches of Christ is practiced in a way that embodies a particular theological claim and forms of the congregation a community that lives unified in the midst of diversity.

This illustration of attention to congregational practice is a good one because it represents how one might norm religious practice by appealing to different authoritative sources. In the case of congregational singing without instruments, one might argue that this practice is simply replicating a biblical injunction (argued from the silence of scripture) or one might argue for the practice of singing without instruments on the basis of how it functions and forms the community of faith in ways that reflect the nature and life of God. Churches of Christ, it seems to us, have paid more attention to replicating a biblical pattern in congregational practices than to the question of how (or how not) those practices express or make a theological claim and substantially form (or malform) the congregation in the image or life of God. The Hebrew prophets often address those points in the life of God's people when they seem to be quite capable of effectively keeping practices related to their worship life, but they fail to consider the way in which those same practices were or were not forming the community to act in ways consistent with the nature and life of God.

congregation's life in worship of God. One could discern the *content* (what kind of language is used and who says it) relative to these practices. And practical theology would also ask questions of *mode* (the manner in which these acts are engaged). These observations reveal the way in which theology is embodied in the congregation's practice and how the practice is forming (or malforming) the people of God.

When the Lord's Supper, one of the most central and revered moments in worship, is practiced in a way in which only males are allowed to serve, to speak at the table, or to pray, the congregation is both receiving and constructing certain theological and ecclesiological assumptions. The image, week after week, of only males sometimes processing to the front of the worship space, lined across the front of the worship space, carries with it formative and constitutive power in congregational life. Further, when the voice that speaks from the pulpit in the proclamation of the gospel is only male, certain assumptions about the nature and person of God are being received and constructed. It is not surprising to learn that when a recent classroom poll of several hundred university students asked students if their God was male or female, 98% responded male. And it should not be surprising, then, when we hear young girls in Churches of Christ say, at a very young age, that they wish they were boys so that they could lead, serve and participate in the life of the church, verbalizing both deeply embedded theological and anthropological assumptions related to gender.

In short, the discipline of congregational studies has emerged as an essential component to the study of theology and is especially important for the study of congregational practices related to gender in Churches of Christ.⁵ If one wants to really know the theological convictions of a congregation, then the place to begin understanding such convictions is with practice. One might ask questions like: What does this congregation do? How does it engage in its common life? How does it arrange its life?

For these reasons and with the voices of our daughters (and countless other voices as well) ringing in our ears, we sought to engage the practices of Church of Christ congregations related to gender. As a first phase of congregational research related to gender inclusivity, the project aimed to identify congregations of Churches of Christ that have understood issues of gender equality or inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively in their congregation's life. The research project was not exhaustive and was focused in a specific way. In other words, it did not seek to answer every question about gender in Churches of Christ, but it primarily sought to *identify* gender-inclusive congregations and to *describe* basic congregational practice related to gender inclusivity.

Survey Design and Findings

Congregational representatives from Churches of Christ identified as gender-inclusive completed a short online survey investigating gender equity in public congregational life. Respondents indicated when their congregation began to explore the topic of gender inclusivity, specific ways in which women serve the congregation publicly, titles held by women, whether the congregation plans to integrate women more extensively in leadership roles, and obstacles that may thwart further integration.

Identification, Location and Chronology

Initially, the sample included 34 congregations located in the United States identified as gender-inclusive.⁶ We used a network sampling technique,⁷ by which those who completed the survey suggested names of other gender-inclusive congregations, to complete the sample. In total, we identified representatives from 66 congregations using this method and invited 61 of them to participate in the survey.⁸

5. Patrick R. Keifert, "The Return of the Congregation to Theological Education," *Testing the Spirits: How Theology Informs the Study of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 13–26.

6. These congregations were identified by consulting two sources: (1) a gender justice website for Churches of Christ (Gal328.org) and (2) expert informants who work among congregations of Churches of Christ on matters pertaining to gender.

7. Jason S. Wrench, Candice Thomas-Maddox, Virginia Peck Richmond & James C. McCroskey, *Quantitative research methods for communication: A hands-on approach* (New York: Oxford Press, 2008).

8. We were unable to establish contact with five of the congregations identified by the network sampling technique. It should also be noted that we continue to receive names of congregations for this survey.

Of these 61 congregations, representatives from 45 congregations responded to the survey, yielding a 73.7% response rate. Of those responding, 44 met the criteria for gender inclusivity: 1) they had discussed gender roles openly and gender inclusivity had become part of their congregation's discourse, and 2) they had integrated women into their congregation's public life in ways they previously had not.⁹ Congregations across the United States participated: South (47.7%), West (29.5%), Northeast (11.4%), and Midwest (9.1%). One congregation from Canada was also included in the sample.

The research found that Church of Christ congregations have been exploring gender equality in congregational life for at least the last 50 years. While a small number of congregations (11.4%) began exploring gender equality in the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of congregations (45.5%) started examining this issue in the 1990s. The next largest group of congregations (40.9%) began exploring this issue within the past decade.

Practices, Roles and Titles

We not only identified gender-inclusive congregations but also asked basic information about some, but not all, practices related to gender inclusivity. As an initial phase of research, we were interested in practices related to the public, corporate gatherings of the congregation and the formal roles and titles held by women.

We included 15 public religious activities in the survey. Table 1 displays the frequency with which women engage in these activities in these congregations. In the majority of congregations (61.4%), women engage in between 9 and 12 of the activities surveyed (see Table 1). Of all the activities included, women most frequently read scripture, pray and make announcements in corporate worship; lead devotional thoughts; and teach adult Bible classes. While women preach in some capacity (Sunday morning, Sunday evening, or Wednesday night) in 14 (31.8%) of these congregations, women engage least in this activity.

Frequency Distribution of Ways Women Participate Publicly in Congregations		
Public Role	<i>f</i>	%
Read scripture in corporate worship	43	97.7%
Team teach an adult class with a male as a co-teacher	41	93.2%
Make announcements in corporate worship	40	90.9%
Teach an adult class with adult males attending class	39	88.6%
Lead devotional thoughts	36	81.8%
Pray in corporate worship	34	77.3%
Wait on communion table	30	68.2%
Deliver the welcome in corporate worship	30	68.2%
Offer communion thoughts	29	65.9%
Baptize any person	29	65.9%
Lead singing in corporate worship	25	56.8%
Direct a worship team	22	50.0%
Preach on Wednesday night	9	20.5%
Preach on Sunday morning	9	20.5%
Other	8	18.2%
Preach on Sunday night	3	6.8%

Table 1

There was no relationship between the number of years a congregation has been exploring the topic of gender equality and the number of ways women participate publicly ($r(42) = .17, p > .05$). This indicates women do not take on a greater number of roles over time. However, there was a small, significant relationship between the number of years a congregation has been exploring the topic of gender equality and women preaching on

9. One responding congregation did not fit the gender-inclusive criteria and was not included in the data analysis.

Sunday morning ($r(42) = .31, p = .04$). This indicates having a female preach on Sunday mornings is related to the length of time congregations study gender inclusivity, with congregations who have explored inclusivity longer having a greater tendency to have female preachers on Sunday mornings.

Respondents also noted the way in which women engage in these activities (sitting, standing, or both). While women always stand when they participate in these activities in 36.4% of the congregations, whether they sit or stand depends on the activity in the majority of congregations (63.6%).

Table 2 depicts the frequency with which women hold titles for 11 different formal positions in these congregations. Women also hold several "other" formal titles as indicated below. Of the titles included, women most often hold the titles of worship leader (47.7%), youth minister (45.5%) and deacon (40.9%). They least frequently hold the title of preacher (4.5%) and none hold the title of elder in these congregations. It should be noted that the number of women who hold the children's minister title might be underinflated because this title was inadvertently not included in the survey. It is also important to note that the ministry leader title arose from the "other" category. In the open-ended portion of the survey, some respondents indicated their congregations use the formal title "ministry leader" for women instead of "deacon."

Frequency Distribution of Formal Titles Women Hold in Congregations		
Title	<i>f</i>	%
Worship leader	21	47.7%
Youth minister	20	45.5%
Deacon	18	40.9%
Education minister	15	34.1%
Ministry leader	15	34.1%
Other	13	29.5%
Children's minister	12	27.3%
Benevolence minister	10	22.7%
Involvement minister	10	22.7%
Campus minister	6	13.6%
Preacher	2	4.5%
Elder	0	0.0%

Table 2

Future Plans for Integration and Barriers

Congregations were split 50/50 on whether they plan to integrate women more extensively into public and/or leadership roles. A little more than 11% of respondents answering "no" indicated they had already integrated women in their congregations.

Respondents listed a variety of ways they plan to integrate women more extensively. While some indicated they want to increase the amount of female participation, others cited specific positions they would like to see women fill. For some congregations, these included deacon, preacher and elder. A few congregations noted women have been nominated as elders in their congregations in the past but have not yet been chosen for that position. Several respondents mentioned seeking out women who have a sense of calling and spiritual giftedness. Others emphasized the importance of training women and giving them experience in leadership roles to build their confidence.

Respondents listed a variety of barriers to integrating women more extensively into public and/or leadership roles in their congregations. They cited tradition and lack of consensus most often in their responses. Specifically regarding tradition, they noted men and women have traditionally held particular roles in religious contexts, and there would be concern or dissension if these roles were changed. Respondents also often noted the lack of consensus on gender-role issues and the importance of maintaining congregational harmony. They cited concerns about some members being uncomfortable with change, what other Church of Christ family members might think,

and how relationships with other congregations might be affected. Ultimately, several respondents expressed concerns about losing membership if further integration occurred. Apart from tradition and consensus, respondents also cited concerns about emotional discomfort, the belief that deacons, elders and preachers are viewed as “male,” and the desire to make slow, incremental changes rather than fast, sweeping ones.

Implications

Congregational Autonomy, the Larger “Fellowship,” and Standards of Belief and Practice Identification of gender-inclusive congregations of Churches of Christ, their geographical location and the chronology of when these congregations began exploring gender equality or inclusivity in their congregation’s life are all important because each of these things directly relate to how groups construct and maintain standards of belief and practice. Once a group arrives at a standard of belief and practice, it monitors and reinforces those beliefs across the group by formal and informal means. Beliefs and practices that vary from the established norms are challenged and rejected by minimizing or isolating the belief and practice in question that deviates from the established norm. Minimizing or isolating beliefs or practices within the larger group can take place in a number of ways. The larger group may radicalize the practice by assigning the practice to such a few instances or groups that the new practice is rendered insignificant. The larger group may distance itself geographically from the new practice and thereby render the new practice extreme or foreign. Or the larger group may minimize the new practice by labeling it a mere recent innovation and therefore illegitimate. The more the larger group can label a belief or practice as extreme or perpetuate a mythology that supports such, the more effective the larger group is at maintaining its established standards of belief and practice.

Religious groups, such as Churches of Christ, maintain standards of belief and practice as well. In the case of Churches of Christ, a congregational polity by which individual congregations are expressly understood as autonomous and yet related as a larger group produces an informal, yet sophisticated, means of maintaining standards of belief and practice. While more sophisticated and diverse than these three elements, we suggest that the current research mitigates against the following:

1. The assumption that there are only one or two, maybe a handful, of Church of Christ congregations which practice gender inclusivity. The identification of 66 congregations of Churches of Christ that have found gender equality or inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively means that Churches of Christ can no longer assume that there are only one or two instances in which a Church of Christ congregation has discerned this change in belief and practice not only to be permissible, but preferable. While 66 congregations may be a small percentage of the total number of Church of Christ congregations, this finding represents a growing number of congregations that are actively seeking greater gender inclusivity, a fact that mitigates against attempts to radicalize these congregations.
2. A mythology that congregations of Churches of Christ who practice gender inclusivity are geographically located on the far coasts of the United States. If this mythology were allowed to stand, it might be easier for Churches of Christ to assume that gender-inclusive belief and practice is relegated to the extreme edges of American cultural and religious life—on the far coasts, so far as they represent social progression and innovation. This is significant as the greater concentration of Churches of Christ exist in the southern United States, thereby making possible the assumption that the belief and practice of greater gender inclusivity is far from “us” and therefore “foreign” to Churches of Christ, as if these congregations were not really a part of the “us.” We found that congregations of Churches of Christ who have found gender inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively exist in every region of the country and that the number of gender-inclusive congregations in the South are not only greater than any other region, but they are also greater than the West and Northeast combined. This would seem to make sense given that the greater concentration of Churches of Christ is in the southern United States. Gender-inclusive congregations of Churches of Christ are not geographically distant from the concentration of congregations in the South. In fact, they are mostly among that concentration.

3. A false chronology that names the emergence of the practice of gender inclusivity in congregations of Churches of Christ as a recent phenomenon created by the present social, cultural, or political climate. If it were true that the congregations identified in this study represented a shift in gender-inclusive belief and practice merely over the last ten years, then one might be obligated to think about the immediate time period of the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, these congregations represent a change in congregational belief and practice beginning in the 1960s, a full half-century ago. It is important to consider the time period between 1960–2010 more carefully. At the very least, this research will not allow the emergence of more gender-inclusive congregations in Churches of Christ to be minimized or delegitimized as a recent phenomenon in the last few years.

In summary, our research identifies a variety of Church of Christ congregations that have found gender equality or inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively. The number of gender-inclusive congregations we identified, their widely dispersed locations, and the number of years they have addressed gender inclusivity demonstrate that these congregations cannot be rendered radical or extreme or illegitimate.

While the findings of this research provide an occasion to reflect on how gender-inclusive practice among the congregations identified relates to the overall belief and practice of Churches of Christ on the whole, the research also provides insight into the nature of the gender-inclusive practices taking place in these congregations. Before addressing specific practices, it is important to note that gender-role changes in these congregations resulted from in-depth study of scriptures at various levels, including among ministers and elders, in Bible classes, and at the congregational level.

Gender-Inclusive Practice in Churches of Christ

These pioneering congregations demonstrate gender inclusivity in their public congregational practices in a variety of ways. In all of these congregations, women hold various formal titles and are participating in a variety of public roles. Women engage in roles from teaching adult classes with males attending to preaching, and women hold titles like ministry leader, deacon, youth minister and even preacher. Some of these roles represent practices that are particularly important to congregational life. For example, in more than half of these congregations, women participate in sacramental acts of leadership like waiting on the communion table and baptizing congregants. In most of these congregations (97.7%), women read scripture in corporate worship. Additionally, in 14 (almost 1/3) of these congregations, women engage in preaching. In the majority of these congregations, women fill between 9 and 12 public roles. This number is likely to be underinflated since almost 20% of the respondents indicated women also participate in “other” public roles in their congregations.

While on the whole, the roles women fill and titles they hold in these congregations illustrate that these Church of Christ congregations have moved toward gender inclusivity, we can make some observations about areas in which integration has been difficult. First, although some respondents indicated women have been nominated for elder positions in their congregations, no women currently serve as elders in the Churches of Christ we examined. Additionally, few women hold the title of preacher (4.5%). Second, there are qualitative differences among these congregations in the nature of the roles women fill. For example, in most of these congregations, women read scripture in corporate worship (97.7%) and teach Bible classes with men attending (88.6%). In fewer congregations, women wait on the communion table (68.2%) and offer communion thoughts (65.9%). In the least number of congregations, women preach on Sunday morning (20.5%). These differences in practice provide us with various insights into congregational beliefs and teach us some important lessons about gender inclusivity:

1. We believe this data provides insight into the complexity of change in congregational practices related to gender roles. According to respondents, changes in gender-inclusive practices appear to have occurred incrementally. The data did not show a relationship between the length of time a congregation has been exploring the topic of gender equality and the number of public roles women fill. However, this was probably due to an unsophisticated measure of changes in individual

congregation's gender-role practices over time. There was a positive relationship between length of time a congregation has been exploring the topic of gender equality and having women preach on Sunday morning. The longer a congregation has been addressing the issue, the more likely it is that the congregation will incorporate women as preachers on Sunday morning. However, there were clearly other important factors in assigning public roles. When citing obstacles to further integrating women, respondents referenced members' reliance on tradition and consensus in decision making and their desire to avoid emotional strain.

2. Examining the qualitative differences among these roles may provide further insight into barriers to greater gender inclusivity. Both tradition and context may play an important role in change. Respondents indicated tradition was one of the biggest obstacles to further integrating women into public roles in worship. In Churches of Christ, women traditionally have been expected to read scripture in their individual study in the private sphere. In more recent tradition, women have read scripture aloud in small groups and Bible classes. Therefore, reading scripture in the public sphere in corporate worship may seem to be a rather natural extension of the tradition of women reading scripture in other semi-public and private contexts. Teaching in an adult class with males present may also be viewed as an extension of the female tradition of teaching children. However, serving communion, offering communion thoughts and preaching are activities that only occur in a public context and are activities in which men traditionally engage. Therefore, a male tradition and singular context may interact to make these activities seem unnatural for women. Visibility and voice may also play an important role in change. While women may have a physical presence when they engage in any of these roles, activities like scripture reading and prayer typically take less time than participating in the communion service or preaching. Therefore, women have less of a public presence when they fill the former rather than the latter roles. This makes them less visible in the public sphere. Similarly, the activities in which women engage demonstrate qualitative differences in the voice women have in public worship. For example, when reading scripture, the passage is usually preselected and the reader simply recites the scripture as written. We hear women speaking; however, we do not hear their voices (their ideas, beliefs, opinions and feelings). In prayer, the intercessor is perceived as speaking with God, not directing the congregation. However, in the communion service, the speaker is said to "direct our thoughts" toward the occasion, a role with greater voice and a role less often filled by women. The preaching role, least filled by women, offers the greatest opportunity for voice.
3. Congregations illustrate the importance they place on relationships among members by recognition of and desire to reduce the emotional impact of gender-role changes. Many of these congregations seem to have engaged in various strategies to soften the move to inclusivity. First, they have made incremental changes in gender roles over time. A typical integration pattern might begin with scripture reading, move to prayer, then to communion service and end with preaching. Some congregations began with structural changes (e.g., incorporating women as ministry leaders) and then began to integrate women into public roles in worship. Second, some congregations may have mitigated the effect of women participating in the public sphere by making female presence in public spaces less obvious. For example, one congregation began integrating women into public worship by having them serve communion from the back of the congregation. Additionally, in more than half of the congregations surveyed, women sometimes sit while engaging in public roles in worship. Finally, some congregations may have reduced the emotional impact of gender-role changes by using a title like ministry leader rather than deacon, a title traditionally reserved for males in Churches of Christ since the mid-nineteenth century,¹⁰ or by not integrating women into positions of perceived authority like preacher and elder.

10. B. Grasham, "The Role of Women in the American Restoration Movement," *Restoration Quarterly* (1999), 41:211–239. Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996).

Limitations and Future Research

While our research provides some important insights into gender-inclusive belief and practice among Church of Christ congregations, we would like to acknowledge several limitations in our research. Additionally, based on these limitations and other observations from our results, we propose several directions for future research.

Due to the Church of Christ's practice of congregational autonomy, it was difficult to identify all congregations that have found gender inclusivity important enough to talk about openly and act upon positively. We are currently in the process of extending our sample of gender-inclusive congregations.¹¹ We plan to learn from and work with these congregations to form mutual, supportive relationships. Examining a larger number of gender-inclusive congregations may provide us with greater insights into belief and practice related to gender inclusivity.

The method we used to collect our data may have limited our results. We identified an individual in a leadership position in each congregation to complete the survey. This method may not have affected our results concerning women's current roles and titles since these practices should be obvious to all members. However, it could have affected other results related to experience or opinion. For example, it could have affected reports about when a congregation began discussing gender inclusivity, whether the congregation plans to further integrate women into public roles, and potential obstacles to future integration. Future research should include both congregational leaders and members. This would allow us to investigate gender-inclusive belief and practice from multiple perspectives and ultimately produce a deeper understanding of the issue.

We suspect our use of closed-ended questions may have restricted the roles and titles we discovered, and our conclusions. For example, when asked to select from a list to indicate the public titles women hold, respondents reported women have not served as elders. This may provide some insight into congregational practices. However, choosing from a list of typical roles or titles neither provides a complete picture of congregational practices nor illuminates the underlying structures that could provide a clearer understanding of congregational life. Open-ended responses provided some glimpses into the ways in which these congregations may be structurally different. For example, a couple of congregations indicated they have used advisory boards or business meetings in lieu of elders to make congregational decisions, and women served in these groups. These illustrations indicate women may be serving in roles comparable to elders but with different titles. If women are filling leadership positions but are given different titles (e.g., ministry leader instead of deacon and board member instead of elder), then future research should explore why this is occurring. Additionally, future research should examine in greater depth congregational structure and the nature and function of the leadership roles women fill.

An important question for future research concerns congregational decision making related to gender inclusivity.¹² Future research should explore decision-making processes of local congregations in depth. Although decision making was not the focus of our research, we identified several factors (e.g., scripture, tradition, consensus, unity, relationships and emotion) that may be important in choices congregations make concerning gender inclusivity. These factors lead to the following questions. What kinds of resources (e.g., Bible, religious books, secular books, scholars, experiences, etc.) are used in decision making? Who makes decisions about gender-inclusive practices? How do power and relationships affect decision making? How do

10. See the Half the Church website at <http://halfthechurch.wordpress.com>. This site was launched in September 2010 as a companion to two presentations titled "Half the Church," which were a part of a track on Women in Ministry in Churches of Christ at Abilene Christian University's Summit. The results of one of these presentations are reported in this article.

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12. For research on congregational decision making in Churches of Christ see: Joseph Cardot III, *An Analysis of the Decision-Making Process and the Role of Women in Churches of Christ* (paper presented at the Christian Scholars' Conference, Nashville, TN, June 2009); Joseph Cardot III, *A Systems Analysis of the Role of Women in Churches of Christ through the Lens of Social Change Theory* (presented at the Christian Scholars' Conference, Nashville, TN, June 2010).

relationships among members of congregations, family members and congregations play a role in decision making? What types of decisions-making procedures are involved (e.g., compromise, consensus, majority, leader, etc.)? What factors promote a move toward inclusivity and what factors inhibit the move?

As explained earlier, we believe religious traditions, contexts or settings in which religious practices occur (e.g., home, bible class, or corporate worship) and the perceived authority of various practices or titles may interact to affect perceptions of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” practices. Future research should pursue the question of perceived authority, context and tradition as a matrix for gender inclusivity or exclusivity.

Conclusion

Our research represents an initial attempt to identify gender-inclusive Church of Christ congregations and to describe basic congregational practice and belief related to gender inclusivity. Gender inclusivity is an established practice that exists in a small but growing number of Church of Christ congregations across the United States. While gender-inclusive practice and belief manifests itself in a variety of ways, we have identified some common practices in these congregations. Gender-role issues are complex, and a variety of barriers to change and greater inclusivity exist. Future research should provide us with greater insights into the practices that are forming our communities, whether these practices are consistent with the nature and life of God, and ways to influence change when they are not.

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