

From Rhetoric to Reality
Putting into Practice Our Century-Old Polity of Gender Partnership in Ministry
Dr. Janine T. Metcalf

“Welcome Pastor! Welcome Pastor!”

As we stepped out of the car to attend our new congregation’s July 4th picnic, my husband and I were overwhelmed by the fanfare. Children ran to us with arms waving. Senior adults ambled closer with their canes and walkers. Young adults suspended their softball game to join the march and spontaneous cheer. “Pastor’s here! Pastor’s here!”

The many roles that have defined my life journey – “wife,” “mother,” “professor,” “evangelist,” “staff minister,” “television reporter” – converged the moment I was called “PASTOR.”

Ed smiled and said, “PASTOR, I like the sound of that!”

I nodded and replied, “I do to.”

Ironically, the call to serve El Cajon Church of the Nazarene almost did not happen. A week before the pastoral vote, a regular attendant mailed a six-page letter to each family denouncing women in church leadership. He chastised the church board for not heeding what he defined as the biblical prohibition of women in pastoral office. He warned members that calling a woman to preach and pastor would incur the wrath of God and jeopardize the church’s future. Despite his fierce campaign, the church overwhelmingly voted to call me.

I am exceedingly thankful. Not just for me, not just for my congregation, but also for the sake of Christ-centered mutuality that should typify Christian churches everywhere. This congregation represents a small but steadily growing number of Nazarene churches willing to embrace our century old polity of gender partnership in leadership ministry. How did a Southern California church family in a community strongly influenced by conservative fundamentalism call a woman to be their shepherd? The call was probably the result of

- intentional education and affirmation from the district superintendent,
- consistent prayer to seek God’s guidance,
- courage to address dissension with grace, and,
- an ultimate resolve to do what was biblically sound and morally right.

I long to see this pattern repeated by churches throughout our denomination. The destiny of hundreds of women currently preparing for pastoral ministry depends on it. Encouraged by what appears to be more ministerial options and cultural changes that foster gender mutuality, impressive numbers of Nazarene women have entered the ordination track. Women constitute more than fifty percent of the religion majors at Northwest Nazarene University. Similarly, more than forty percent of the students at Nazarene Theological Seminary are women. These seminarians are following the footsteps of our Nazarene foremothers whose sacrifice and holy boldness helped shape the identity and mission of our denomination.

The opportunity for women to preach and lead the church was sanctioned as early as 1892 when the Central Evangelical Holiness Association, a parent body of the Church of the Nazarene, ordained Anna Hanscome. Hanscome, pastor of a holiness congregation in Malden, Massachusetts, became one of the first women ordained in America. Three years

later, charter members of the First Church of the Nazarene in Los Angeles included the following gender-inclusive statement in their 1895 incorporation papers. “We recognize the equal right of both men and women to all offices of the church, including the ministry” (*Minutes* 3).

First Church founder Phineas Bresee contended that the Holy Spirit who dispensed gifts and graces to the first Christians, still equipped men and women to spread the gospel, regardless of gender. Moving beyond rhetoric, Bresee ordained Elsie Wallace in 1902. Wallace was the founding pastor of Spokane, Washington First Church and the first woman to be appointed a Nazarene district superintendent in North America (Laird 63). The following year, he ordained Lucy Knott, pastor of the Mateo Street Mission in Los Angeles (46). Bresee acknowledged Knott’s effectiveness in a tribute to his coworkers, “As a preacher and leader in the church,” he said, “she has shown peculiar ability. The Lord has greatly blessed her work, giving her a constant tide of salvation among all classes, from little children to old people” (44).

Knott and Wallace were among many Nazarene matriarchs who stepped beyond cultural and ecclesial barriers to share the gospel. Other dynamic leaders include Rev. Mary Lee Cagle, who organized eighteen churches in four southern states, and Rev. Lucia Carmen de Costa, who planted seventeen churches in the provincial capitals of Argentina (Ingersol 13).

Aside from pastoring, Nazarene women expressed their leadership gifts by helping to launch the denomination’s foreign missionary work, youth work, social programs, and its first educational institution. The Pacific Bible School to train up Christian workers was organized in 1901 by three laywomen. In two years, the faculty consisted of five women and three men headed by a female principal (Smith 137-38).

Within the Church of the Nazarene’s first thirty years, more than twenty percent of our credentialed ministers were women. These matriarchs risked misunderstanding and, in some cases, their lives to heed God’s call to preach and pastor. Their faithful obedience helped convert countless souls and paved the way for future generations of women to reach their highest ministerial potential. Unfortunately, by the mid to late 1930s Nazarene women began to vanish from the rolls of pastors, evangelists, and ministerial students. Key reasons for their disappearance continue to plague today’s church. Some of these include:

1. *Disagreement over the controversial passages of Paul that would seem to prohibit women from speaking and leading in the church* (1Cor. 14:34-35; 1Tim. 2:11-15): Certain conservative evangelical leaders contend these passages clearly affirm the principle of male-headship in the home and church. However, before issuing a blanket prohibition against women preaching and leading in ministry, the church should take a closer look at the historical and literary context of these passages. Did Paul intend to generally limit ministry roles available to women, or was he addressing specific problems that most likely existed in Corinth and Ephesus? Do these verses support or contradict an overall tenure of Scripture that encourages every believer to use his or her spiritual gifts to help build the Body of Christ?
2. *Discrimination against women throughout history*: Male dominance and female subordination have characterized most cultures since the dawn of recorded

history. In Christ's day, a woman in Palestine had the legal status of slave or animal. Only the husband had the right of divorce and he could turn his wife out of the home for almost any reason of displeasure. C.S. Cowles elaborates,

Jewish literature is full of expressions of joy over the birth of a son and sorrow over the birth of a daughter. The Genesis commentary called the "Rabbah," written by the Rabbis, describes women as "greedy, eavesdroppers, lazy, jealous, querulous, and garrulous." Rabbi Hillel, grandfather of Gamaliel, taught that wherever women gathered together there was much witchcraft. A good Pharisee prayed, "O God, I thank thee that thou didst not create me a Gentile, a dog, or a woman." ("In Praise" 2)

Imagine the joy felt by Jewish as well as gentile women when Jesus addressed them with dignity and allowed them to sit and listen to his teaching. Women who had been barred from the inner courts of the Temple and synagogue worship were encouraged to draw near and receive the truth. A few of those women who had served Christ and faithfully stood by to watch the crucifixion were the first to receive and spread the good news of the resurrection. Later, the book of Acts and Paul's letters indicate that women such as Philip's daughters, Prisca and Phoebe, played key roles in spreading the salvation story (Acts 21:7-9; Rom. 16:1-5).

The right of women to continue to pass on the Gospel, however, was later curtailed by influential Church Fathers. By the middle of the second century, Tertullian offered these principles regarding a woman's role in worship.

It is not permitted for a woman to speak in the church, nor is it permitted for her to teach, nor to baptize, nor to offer [the Eucharist], nor any claim for herself a share in any masculine function—not to mention any priestly office."
(9)

This patriarchal stance was most likely adopted to help spread the Gospel without causing additional social upheaval. It was also used to combat heresies, such as Gnosticism, that often supported women in ministry but also denied that Jesus was a real human being. Regardless of the reason, most women were prohibited from preaching and leadership positions in the Church for the next 1700 years. It was not until the American holiness movement that any sustained challenge to sexual discrimination against women in the church was launched.

3. *A backlash to the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960's and 1970's:*
Outspoken conservative evangelical leaders have blamed most of the ills afflicting families today on radical feminism that emerged in the last four decades. Feminists, who sought equal rights for women in the workplace, were blamed for encouraging women to seek educational and professional fulfillment outside of the home. Many conservatives deplored this movement toward financial and emotional independence, claiming that it undermined "traditional family values."

Is it fair, however, to link all or most of today's family pressures with "women's lib"? Is the woman the only parent responsible for maintaining a

loving, nurturing environment for raising children? Is it possible to model before children a Christlike partnership in which husbands and wives share responsibilities according to their gifts and availability?

My parents modeled this kind of mutual servanthood. My father exemplified spiritual headship by respecting my mother, listening to her, affirming her efforts to grow, and serving her in any needed task (including monotonous housework).

4. *Lack of change agents preserves the status quo:* Nazarene women ministers need advocates in church leadership who are informed and intentional in promoting mutuality. Cowles insists,

All God-called and Spirit-filled potential ministers are ‘dead in the water’ until someone in a position of authority recognizes their gifts, invites them to participate in increasingly responsible forms of ministry, supports them in times of challenge, and encourages them along the way. (*A Woman’s Place* 5)

I thank God for several church leaders who have consistently affirmed God’s call in my life. Unfortunately I know several other women pastors and ministerial students who need spiritual mentors to pray them through the loneliness and numerous challenges of stepping into a male dominated field. Tragically some have left the Church of the Nazarene to pastor churches in denominations that have actively embraced their gifts, pursued, and placed them.

How can our denomination prevent the further exodus of anointed women leaders? Not by mandate! Henri Nouwen wisely observed, “Nobody can force the soul of a community. The only possibility open is to create conditions in which the community can freely develop and discover the ways that lead to redemption” (81). Nazarene leaders, numbed by the complexities of gender discrimination, should seriously consider this precept. The volatile issue of endorsing women in church leadership will not be solved by force OR neglect. Our most viable recourse is to help congregations examine the effects of gender hierarchy versus mutuality in ministry and provide strategies for change.

Here are five personal proposals to end the stalemate:

1. *Pray for wisdom and courage:* Sexism in and outside the Church is far more than a social ill. It is a spiritual battle that continues to divide believers and undermine the message and witness of congregations. Thus prayer must envelop all our endeavors to promote mutuality. Gretchen Gaebelein Hull contends, “In all warfare, an effective strategy is to divide and conquer, and Satan will use any method possible to divide believers and trick them into competing with one another for kingdom posts” (218).

May we prayerfully seek God’s guidance to build healthy relationships between men and women in our homes and churches, to cherish and celebrate our God given differences. May Christ’s love prompt male pastors to invite women into the conversation, to hear them and value their input. May Christ’s love free women pastors from resentment and self pity so that we may channel our attention to the Gospel mission. This battle will require an ongoing commitment to pray that God’s kingdom reign will prevail, that strongholds of prejudice will

come down, and that the church will become the model of reconciliation God intends it to be.

2. *Post our apologetic:* The 2001 amendment to the *Manual* regarding women in ministry is an important tool to defend mutuality (904.6). To expand its exposure, the statement could be posted on our denomination's official web site. This would provide easier access to our official stance. It also allows for expansion of the rationale. While Bible verses are sprinkled throughout the apologetic, more information is required to reveal their meaning and relevance. Thus, the statement could provide "links" to further explanations of each passage cited. Nazarenes need to know why Paul's restrictive passages should be examined in their literary and cultural context. By clicking on the highlighted 1 Corinthians 14:33-34, they would receive an in-depth exegesis of the passage prepared by a Nazarene biblical scholar. By clicking Romans 16:1, 3-7, they would receive a description of six or seven women leaders commended by Paul.
3. *Provide Mutuality Curricula:* Much of the responsibility for acknowledging, affirming, and actualizing the calls of women ministers falls on Nazarene senior pastors. Their interpretation of Scripture and attitudes toward women as pastoral colleagues often shape the consensus of congregations. Hence they need the vision of mutuality repeated by Nazarene leadership, pertinent preaching and teaching tools.

The curricula should reexamine the texts often used to limit women's roles in the church. In light of Paul's overall positive attitude toward women in ministry, (note his commendations of women in Acts 18:24-26; Rom.16:1, 6, 12) his command for silence in 1 Corinthians 14 appears to be in response to a specific problem in Corinth. The issue probably was noisy disruption of worship by women. Those who had been denied access to the Scriptures were abusing their newfound freedom to receive and speak truth.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Paul states an injunction against women speaking in Church. He adds, "I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man" (NIV). The rationale given for this prohibition is the "order of creation" of Rabbinical tradition. Man has preeminence over the woman because he was created first. This traditionalist view, however, is countered by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:11-12 when he states "... in the Lord, woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman." In other words, after the first Adam, every man would originate from a woman. "In the Lord," one is not above the other.

Paul seems to offer a second reason to bar women from leadership in 1 Timothy 2:14. Since "the woman being quite deceived, fell into transgression," she cannot be trusted with teaching. In Romans 5:12-14, however, Paul contends that Adam, and not Eve, is responsible for the entrance of sin into the world. Paul neither mentions nor blames Eve for sin.

Again, the passages used to limit a woman's ministerial role in the church must be seen in light of both Jesus' and Paul's teaching elsewhere. It is imperative

that we carefully study the conditions that prompted the author to issue these directives.

Pastors also need access to texts that support gender mutuality. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached from Joel's prophecy that says "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy," and "upon both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit, and they shall prophesy" (proclaim, preach) (Acts 2:17-19). These verses indicate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit issued a new age of ministerial equality.

Paul seems to confirm this in his first letter to the Corinthians by making no distinction between men and women regarding the exercise of spiritual gifts. He writes "to each is given the manifestations of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor.12: 7). Limiting a woman's range of expression only divide and impair the Church. Instead, men and women should rejoice with Paul that in Christ "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

4. *Acknowledge our Wesleyan tradition that promotes women in ministry:* John Wesley originally opposed allowing women to preach. However, through the influence of his gifted mother, Susanna, the rising need for more lay preachers, and God's apparent anointing on several women speakers, he began to change his mind. He described Mary Fletcher's preaching as "fire, conveying both light and heat to all that heard her" (*Journal* 7:247).

Adam Clarke, biblical scholar and close Wesley associate, concurred with the promotion of women in ministry. "Under the blessed spirit of Christianity, they have equal rights, equal privileges and equal blessing, and let me add, they are equally useful" (qtd. in Roberts 59).

More than 100 years later, J.B. Chapman, General Superintendent of the Church of the Nazarene, defended the young denomination's positive stance on women preachers. "The fact is that God calls men and women to preach the gospel, and when He does so call them, they should gladly obey Him and members of the church and of the ministry should encourage and help them in the fulfillment of their task" (5).

With or without this encouragement, many early Nazarene women stepped out of their traditional roles in the home to obey God's call to preach. Their ministries along with the contributions of countless women in a variety of denominations are an inspiration to women today, who must not hinge their obedience on the church's formal sanction. Women who are called to preach and lead must remain faithful to the Caller.

Our obedience must also be coupled with Christlike love for our opponents. Rather than nursing bitterness over sexual discrimination we must prayerfully ask God for grace to forgive and to make the most of present opportunities to serve the Kingdom. We must also take advantage of current avenues of support. Newsletters and conferences such as the "Come To the Water" gathering of more than 500 clergywomen in Wesleyan/Holiness churches provide a rich pool of ministry resources and mutual affirmation.

Every time I approach a Nazarene pulpit, I thank God for the privilege to use my preaching gifts. I am linked to a Judeo-Christian heritage of valiant women who braved

condemnation and intense suffering to actively participate in God's redemptive story. Their epitaphs, writings, portraits, and photographs are forever etched in my memory and somehow woven into the way I preach, teach, and pastor. I am also linked to today's women ministers whose faith and servanthood often transcend current streams of sexism.

I am painfully aware of sisters in other denominations who have been denied ordination on the basis that they do not bear a "natural resemblance to Christ," or that they are perennially cursed with Eve's weak temperament and fate of subordination. I empathize now more than ever with their quest for reformation and reconciliation in the body of Christ.

Their struggle has become mine; even more so since I have chosen to step aside from teaching to become a senior pastor in the Church of the Nazarene. My husband and I want to model the ministerial partnership that characterized so many early Nazarene ministry couples.

From the day my congregation ran to me bestowing the beloved title "pastor," I have earnestly tried to discern the priorities and perimeters of this divine assignment. I seek:

- the holy boldness of evangelist Estelle Crutcher to preach with power,
- the fortitude of missionary Louise Chapman to overcome insurmountable obstacles,
- the winsome attitude of missionary Mary Anderson to counter discouragement,
- the confidence of pastor Agnes Diffie to expand the vision of my congregation, and,
- the love of church planter Mary Lee Cagle to gracefully respond to criticism.

Remember the author of those letters to undermine my pastoral vote? He now attends worship every Sunday and has become a faithful supporter. I am wise enough to know that I did not change his mind. It was the One who transformed my heart and set my life on a course of glorious love. I AM PASTOR. May many more anointed Nazarene women join me in this holy enterprise.

WORKS CITED

The Bible. New International Version.

Chapman, James Blaine. "October Gleanings." *Herald of Holiness*. 15 Oct. 1930:5.

Cowles, C.S. *A Woman's Place? Leadership in the Church*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1993.

---. "In Praise of Women Preachers." Lecture. Northwest Nazarene College, Nampa, ID, 9 May 1991.

Hull, Gretchen Gaebelein, *Equal to Serve: Women and Men Working Together Revealing the Gospel*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991.

Ingersol, Robert Stanley. "Knowledge and vital Piety: Lucia de Costa's Enduring Witness," *Herald of Holiness* (April 96): 13.

Laird, Rebecca. *The First Generation of Ordained Women in the Church of the Nazarene*. Kansas City, MO: Nazarene, 1993.

Manual: Church of the Nazarene. Kansas City, MO: Nazarene, 2001.

Minutes of the Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene Incorporation Meeting, Richard Willis Collection, Point Loma Nazarene University Archives. 30 Oct. 1895.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Creative Ministry*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978.

Roberts, B.T. *Ordaining Women*. Rochester, NY: Earnest Christian, 1981.

Smith, Timothy L. *Called unto Holiness: The Story of the Nazarenes: The Formative Years*. 2nd ed. Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing, 1962.

Tertullian. "On the Veiling of Virgins," *Ante Nicene Fathers*. Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995. 4: 27-38.

Wesley, John. *The Journal of Rev. John Wesley*. Ed. Nehemiah Curnock. London: Epworth, 1938.