



Women in the Church

Mother's Day is this month. Not every woman is a mother, but every mother is a woman so let me use this occasion to give thanks to God for the central contribution of women in the life of the church, both clergy and lay.

In the Covenant at our most elemental we are simply people of the Book who have joined together to do mission. So for us, these two questions are always paramount: What does the Bible say? And what does the mission need?

As we read the entirety of Scripture, we are convinced the Bible normatively affirms women in leadership. Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Esther, Anna, Rachel, Hannah, Abigail, Ruth, Tabitha, Lydia, Priscilla—the list of stories of women in leadership goes on. In Romans 16, Paul names twenty-seven people of importance and influence, seven of them women. There appears to be no distinction in leadership roles based on gender, listing both for the same positions, notably Phoebe as a deacon and Junia as an apostle.

In my position I have the opportunity to see the difference women are making every week as senior pastors; church planters; staff ministers; missionaries; military, hospital, and institutional chaplains; faculty; camping staff; leaders at conference and denominational offices; and positions in para-church settings. Our mission and ministry would be irretrievably impaired were we not affirming all the gifts of the entire body of Christ. For me, it's simply this—if the Covenant wants to reach its full missional potential, then our members need to be able to reach their full missional potential.

We are seeing an acceleration of women serving in vocational ministry. Since 2000 we have gone from 76 credentialed women to 445, now one-quarter of our active ministerium.

With a slant toward laity, two Covenanters have recently published insightful materials around the enduring importance of the contribution of women. Jenny Rae Armstrong is from a small town in Wisconsin. She warmly remembers her Grandma Irmadel starting and running the youth group as a volunteer leader in her rural Covenant congregation. In a recent issue of *Relevant* magazine, Armstrong looks at the trend that while women still attend church in greater percentages than men,

women are actually dropping out of the church at a faster rate, and female volunteerism has plunged by more than 30 percent in the past twenty years (source: Barna Research Group). She rightly says, "That a growing number of committed Christian women are fading quietly into the pews, then out the back door, should concern us."

To be sure, there are intersecting aspects to that trend (an increase in the number of dual income families results in less available time to volunteer). However, one factor of growing disenchantment is a gap in volunteer responsibility commensurate to the expertise women bring to the church. Talents go untapped or under-challenged. And so best energies go to the workplace where competence is more easily identified.

Armstrong's challenge to churches is to do a better job of getting to know the particular competencies of all members, especially women, pairing gifts and education with substantive avenues of service rather than defaulting to filling the need of the moment with a willing volunteer.

Helen Lee's book, *The Missional Mom* (Moody), deepens the premise. Lee attends a Covenant church in the Chicago area. Christian moms come from a full range of personal and professional contexts, whether they are homemakers, full-time in the marketplace, or somewhere in between. As the introduction states, Lee's book "affirms Christian mothers who desire to not only build their homes in a Christ-like way, but engage the world with their skills, abilities, and interests." She underscores that being a mom does not subsume one's principal identity as that of a disciple and ambassador of Christ. Motherhood is integrated into that identity, not substituted for it. Nurturing that perspective doesn't minimize the importance of a woman's role with her family, but it will serve as a prompt to not ignore the stirrings God has planted within her to extend her influence. The book's subtitle is its message: "living on purpose in the home and the world."

Not a bad word for missional moms. Or missional dads, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, in-laws, grandparents, cousins. Make that for the whole family of God. ■

Gary Walter is president of the Evangelical Covenant Church.

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