

RPTS

CH 83 Denominational Research Paper

A Biblical Women's Ministry for Every Congregation

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Thesis

A WIC Council should be established and developed in every local PCA congregation whose priority or focus would be to spearhead the discipling of women and the provision of godly counsel and assistance to the ordained leadership in matters impacting both women in the church and the congregation at large.

I. Introduction

The role and function of women in the church of Jesus Christ is one of the most controversial and divisive topics in modern church history. This subject was in fact one of the watershed issues that led to the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 1973, as a body seeking to remain faithful to the biblical teachings on male headship in home and marriage, as well as the delimiting of ordained church office (elders and deacons) to men. This is not to say, however, that controversy regarding this topic has been absent in the PCA, as evidenced by the current debates surrounding the possible biblical warrant for a role of “deaconess” in the local congregation.

The Book of Church Order (BCO) of the PCA contains precious little regarding women or women’s ministry in the church (making mention only of women functioning as deacon assistants¹ and the Women in the Church (WIC) as a “special group” being under control of the Session²) and yet the Scriptures contain a clear biblical mandate and model for women’s discipleship in Titus 2:3-5³ that is sadly neglected in Christ’s church in our day. It will be my contention in this paper that that the PCA institution of Women in the Church (WIC) provides local PCA congregations with a sound mechanism to implement effective biblical ministry to women along the lines of Titus 2, and should be utilized to that end, rather than the mere logistical roles in managing/organizing church social events or children’s

¹ *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 2013), 9-7.

² *Ibid.*, 12-5.

³ All Scripture references from *ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

ministries that define many (perhaps the majority?) of WIC ministries in PCA churches. In addition, consideration of the role and function of women from a framework of biblical complementarity yields a vital potential ministry of counsel and assistance to the ordained officers of the church that appears largely untapped.

The thesis to be argued in this paper is this: a WIC Council should be established and developed in every local PCA congregation, whose priority and focus should be to spearhead the discipling of women as well as provide godly counsel and assistance to the ordained leadership in matters impacting both women in the church, and the congregation at large. My burden will be to first establish the biblical call to discipleship in the church, and specifically to the discipling of women based on Titus 2. I will then outline a biblical apologetic for Women's ministry in the church as described above, leaning heavily on the excellent work of Susan Hunt and Ligon Duncan. The goal of this paper is thus to provide a positive biblical motivation and model for practical and biblical women's ministry that is life-giving to women and to the Body of Christ as a whole. While touching on issues such as biblical complementarity, this paper will not wade into the waters of debate over the complementarian vs. egalitarian views of women's roles and function in the church of Christ; those matters are left for others to address (as some would say has been done ad nauseum). It is this author's conviction that the collective time and energy of the body of Christ is far better spent in seeking ways to unleash the gifts and talents of godly women in biblical ministry rather than debating permitted or forbidden roles and engaging in endless examination of texts like I Timothy 2:9-15 or I Corinthians 11:3-16 to underscore the supposed limitations (or lack thereof) on women in the church. There is much truly kingdom work to be done in the PCA by godly women and we have an excellent mechanism in the institution of WIC to further such work; such will be the limited focus of this study.

II. Historical Ambivalence, Misunderstanding and Confusion Regarding the Role and Function of Women in the Church

While an entire paper could (but will not) be devoted to this sub-heading, suffice it to say that the church of Jesus Christ has been woefully characterized by its contents: ambivalence, misunderstanding and confusion regarding the role and function of women in the church. This is especially true in the last fifty years or so as radical feminism and post-modern thinking have infiltrated the church and its teaching, as captured by Jaye Martin and Terri Stovall:

“...evangelical feminism has begun to affect the sight, sound, and taste of the church. Women are leading where women should not lead, men are left sitting on the sidelines (if they were even out there at all), and pastors are struggling to figure it all out.”⁴

This topic has tragically engendered much heat but precious little light, and can even be intensely personal:

“If ever there was an emotionally charged issue, women in ministry is it. Some men (and women) find it profoundly disturbing to see a woman mount the pulpit or exercise authority in the church. On the other hand, to be barred from certain ministries exclusively on the grounds of gender has threatened many women to the very core of their personhood, causing some to lose their emotional balance; others, their faith.”⁵

Another author suggested several stereotypical fears that might be held by male church leadership regarding women’s ministry:

“Women want to take over the church. They want to make all the decisions.”
“Women will take off on their own without consulting men.”
“Women will do a better job with their ministries than men.”⁶

Finally, serious errors in biblical interpretation and application relating to this subject are not uncommon, such as the following account of a woman’s counsel from her pastor:

⁴ Jaye Martin and Terri Stovall, *Women Leading Women: The Biblical Model for the Church* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2008), 1-2.

⁵ George and Dora Winston, *Recovering Biblical Ministry by Women: An Exegetical Response to Traditionalism and Feminism* (Xulon Press, 2003), 4.

⁶ Carol Porter and Mike Hamel, eds. *Women’s Ministry Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), 19.

“A physician in family practice was summoned to her pastor’s study and there was informed that her chosen medical specialty was outside God’s will for her life. The pastor insisted that only two specialties were open to her: obstetrics/gynecology and pediatrics. The electrified young women asked why God could not see fit to use her gifts in implementing healing for families. The answer was that I Timothy 2:12 forbade her having only authority over men, and that therefore she could not enter into a patient/physician relationship with a man. The woman left the church...”⁷

A detailed history of the controversies surrounding the role or function of women in the church is beyond the scope of this paper. Contra the negative history, it will be our intent going forward to sound a more positive note, like the one voiced by Irish pastor Ted Donnelly in a brief monograph:

“...the Bible is “pro-women:” That is, it prescribes what is best for women and is therefore gloriously positive. We...acknowledge the vital role women play in the church of Jesus Christ and do not hold any brief for that patronizing attitude which would sentence women to the church kitchen or see flower –arranging as their most visible contribution to church life.”⁸

The remainder of our study will be given to a look at the “vital role” that godly women are called to by the Scriptures and which can be made to fit well within PCA polity. We will contend that an organized biblical ministry for and by women is indeed a necessary and life-giving endeavor for every PCA congregation as part of its mission in the world.

III. Discipleship – THE Biblical Priority for the Church

Before considering the specific callings and contributions of women’s ministry in the church, we must first see its place in the overall context of the church’s mission, as outlined in the Scriptures. Briefly, it could be argued that the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28:19-20, as given by the King and Head of the church, Jesus Christ, to his disciples (represented by the eleven apostles assembled in Galilee after the resurrection) represents the seminal call to the work of discipleship in His church. This work is certainly a task of church officers, but via their representative role is extended to all the

⁷ Richard Clark Kroeger and Catherine Clark Kroeger, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 11.

⁸ Edward Donnelly, *Women in the Church* (booklet, n.d.), 2.

people of God without distinction.⁹ The priority of discipleship in the early church can be seen as the gathered body “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” in Acts 2:42. The apostle Paul’s burden in his general epistles was sound teaching and the growth of the body of Christ as a whole; this can be clearly seen in Ephesians 4:11-16, where the ordained leadership equips “the saints for the work of ministry” (v. 12), with the overall goal to “make the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (v.16). His exhortation in Colossians 3:16 to the Colossian saints was to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...” Earlier in the epistle Paul unequivocally states the goal of his teaching ministry: “that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Col. 1:28). So there is a general New Testament call to discipleship for every believer in Jesus that is mediated via a number of means such as the public proclamation of the Word of God, Bible studies and small groups, as well as the private life-on-life interaction seen in Colossians 3. The elders and pastors of the church are certainly key players in this process, as seen in Ephesians 4:11-12. Indeed, a teaching/discipleship gift is a unique qualification for elders given in I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9. The biblically –oriented congregation should be focused on discipleship as a core aspect of its mission from King Jesus; a full-orbed biblical and “kingdom” approach to discipleship is laid out in an excellent work on the subject by Charles Dunahoo.¹⁰

IV. Women’s Discipleship – The Titus 2 Model

As part of this central New Testament focus on general discipleship to help members of the body of Christ move toward maturity, the local church is given a more specific call to the discipleship of women in Titus 2:3-5:

“Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.”

⁹ R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 237.

¹⁰ Charles Dunahoo, *Making Kingdom Disciples* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2005).

The context of these verses is one of the “pastoral epistles,” consisting of 1st and 2nd Timothy and Titus. These were letters Paul wrote to two pastors that he had himself disciplined, regarding the structuring and ministry of their respective church bodies in Ephesus (Timothy) and Crete (Titus). Part of that structure in Titus 2 involves gender –specific discipleship. We should note, however, that such work is part of a larger whole as described in the previous section of this paper. Susan Hunt and Ligon Duncan emphasize this point in their superb analysis of Titus 2 as a portion of their biblical apologetic for women’s ministry (which we will explore in more detail subsequently).

“This text is one of Paul’s strategy for the discipleship, or Christian education, of a congregation. He challenges Titus and the church in all ages to guard the truth by equipping the people to show and tell truth to the next generation.”¹¹

Hunt and Duncan further note that this is not a new strategy, but instead builds on important OT texts like the family discipleship of the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4-7, as well as Psalm 78.¹² There is thus a generational component in this text that is vital to solid discipleship in the church. We will later state the need for a covenantal focus in women’s ministry; the model displayed in Titus 2:3-5 is a crystal clear example of such an emphasis.

Hunt and Duncan helpfully point out seven (7) discipleship principles in Titus 2 that can help the local church meld both the need for a congregation-wide “kingdom approach” to disciple-making as described by Dunahoo¹³ with the specific call for “spiritual mothering” given to women in 2:3-5 and laid out comprehensively in earlier work on those verses by Hunt.¹⁴ The discipleship principles begin in 2:1, where Paul directs Pastor Titus to “teach what accords with sound doctrine,” a directive which first grounds the discipleship of a congregation in its pulpit ministry. This verse also points to what John Stott describes as “an indissoluble connection between Christian doctrine and Christian duty, between

¹¹ J. Ligon Duncan and Susan Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 117-118.

¹³ Dunahoo, *Making Kingdom Disciples*, 11-12

¹⁴ Susan Hunt, *Spiritual Mothering: The Titus 2 Model for Women Mentoring Women* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992).

theology and ethics.”¹⁵ Verses 2-10 then detail those ethics in the context of relationships, i.e. in the presence of community. So the teaching of truth to the people of God flows both from the ordained leadership (pastor-teachers) but also between members of the body, who exercise care for each other as an expression of “the communion of saints.”¹⁶ The reference to “older” men and women in Titus 2:2-3 need not be tied to chronological age alone, though the life experience of a women certainly comes into play in a discipleship scenario. The identification of the “older woman” in v. 3 is likely better tied to a level of spiritual maturity, so that the combination of maturity and life experience qualify women to train a younger woman.¹⁷ The age of the women involved is really relative - a thirty year-old may well be in a position to mentor teenage women, while at the same time being mentored herself by a woman in her 50’s or even 80’s.

Four of the discipleship principles distilled from Titus 2 by Hunt and Duncan¹⁸ surround the tangible effects of the teaching “in accord with sound doctrine” – it is transformative! The gospel has clear behavioral effects on the categories of people delineated in 2:2-10, and also has a redemptive effect on the surrounding watching world (v. 5, 8). Paul then points to that gospel in v. 11-13 as providing the necessary motivation for the costly investment and relational risks involved in such life-on-life discipleship.

Finally, Paul’s exhortation to Titus regarding discipleship underscores the unity of disciples brought by the gospel in verse 14:

“...(Jesus) gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

Duncan and Hunt provide this excellent summary of the “teaching in accord with sound doctrine” promoted in this section of our study:

¹⁵ John Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 185-186.

¹⁶ Duncan and Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church*, 120.

¹⁷ Hunt, *Spiritual Mothering*, 77.

¹⁸ Duncan and Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church*, 121-123.

“Biblical discipleship is not simply imparting facts or inculcating personal habits of Bible study, prayer, and evangelism, as helpful as those disciplines are. It is transmitting a way of thinking and living that unites all the parts into the glorious whole of glorifying God. It is passing on a legacy of biblical faith and life to the next generation. It is the impulse of our union with Christ. It is part and parcel of the covenant way. It is not optional. Women discipling women is one part of this strategy.”¹⁹

V. **Biblical Complementarity and Women’s Ministry in the PCA – A Biblical Apologetic**

The last two sections of this study have labored to establish the first half of our thesis laid out in the introduction:

A Women in the Church (WIC) Council should be established and developed In every local PCA congregation, whose priority and focus should be to spearhead the discipling of women as well as godly counsel and assistance to the ordained leadership in matters impacting both women in the church, and the congregation at large.

The following two sections will now seek to address the latter half, with the overall vision the establishment of a vital and biblical women’s ministry in every local PCA congregation. It is the settled conviction of this author, in harmony with the comprehensive treatment of this subject by Hunt and Duncan,²⁰ that both a covenantal as well as a complementarian approach is a key foundational need for any such ministry. They lucidly explain that just as the biblical covenants give us a framework to understand Scripture, and the covenant of grace defines our relationship to God and one another, so biblical complementarianism “gives the relational framework for men and women to live out their covenantal privileges and responsibilities.”²¹ Related to the second half of our thesis, we will in fact argue that this concept is a beautiful and wise design by the sovereign God to meld the unique gifts and callings of women and men to serve His bride, the church of Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ Ibid., 123.

²⁰ Ibid., 32-33, 38-42.

²¹ Ibid., 32.

Biblical complementarianism has been described and defined by a number of authors, but is succinctly and compellingly laid out in a short essay by John Piper.²² The concept in simple terms teaches that men and women have been created equal in their essence and personhood (or “ontologically equal” according to Martin and Stovall²³) but differentiated and complementary in their function. Thus male spiritual leadership in the home and church is understood to be a part of God’s design. Men and women are both image-bearers of God, according to Genesis 1:27, “equals before the cross,”²⁴ but with distinction in their roles and function. This is contrasted sharply with an egalitarian view of manhood and womanhood, which would posit no legitimate differences in role or function of the sexes while maintaining the truth of equal personhood. Hunt and Duncan contend that the egalitarian view “cannot come to grips with the uniqueness of man created as male and female,” and actually “devalues God’s creation design and redemptive calling of women.”²⁵ This is a huge point for our study, in that the uniqueness of God’s design, calling and gifting of women forms the basis for both the gender-specific discipleship efforts discussed previously as well as the helper functions of counsel and assistance to be addressed subsequently. It also provides a foundation for a biblical apologetic of womanhood and women’s ministry in the church. Susan Hunt has eloquently articulated in fullness the biblical design and calling of women and its practical implications in the home, church and world at large in her excellent works.²⁶

Hunt and Duncan have given the church a real gift in their comprehensive work, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church*. Duncan first asserts five (5) reasons why a women’s ministry is important in every healthy evangelical church.²⁷ Susan Hunt²⁸ then fleshes out the framework of a biblical apologetic

²² John Piper, *What’s the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 47-49.

²³ Martin and Stovall, *Women Leading Women*, 5.

²⁴ Duncan and Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church*, 33.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ cf. Susan Hunt & Peggy Hutcheson, *Leadership for Women in the Church* (Grand Rapids :Zondervan, 1991); Susan Hunt, *By Design: God’s Distinctive Calling for Women* (Franklin, TN: Legacy Communications, 1994); Susan Hunt, *Spiritual Mothering – the Titus 2 Model for Women Mentoring Women* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992).

²⁷ Duncan and Hunt, *Women’s Ministry in the Local Church*, 38-42.

for womanhood and women's ministry from the pastoral epistles. She first addresses the topic of submission, utilizing I Timothy 2:9-15; then compassion from I Timothy 3:11; then community, citing I Timothy 5:1-16; discipleship as discussed earlier in this paper, using Titus 2:3-5; and finally, Scripture, utilizing 2 Timothy 3:1-17. She argues an apologetic that is both theologically compelling as well as immensely practical and fully applicable at the congregational level.

Duncan's first reason for an organized women's ministry in the local church relates to the critical opportunity to address the nature of manhood and womanhood from a biblical perspective to an increasingly confused culture and church. Both ethical compromise and doctrinal sellout are real threats to the church of Jesus Christ, since, according to Bruce Ware from Southern Baptist Seminary "...the primary areas in which Christianity is pressured to conform are on issues of gender and sexuality."²⁹ A second reason for a vital women's ministry in the local church is because of the Bible's clear and abundant teaching on manhood and womanhood. Some of the issues can be sensitive and may be best addressed in the context of groups of women (large or small) versus address from the pulpit. A third reason relates to the benefit derived from a women's ministry that is prepared to grapple with the fall-out in marriage and family when principles of biblical manhood and womanhood are denied or unpracticed. A vital women's ministry serves to strengthen Christian marriages in the local church. A fourth reason for women's ministry in the local church is "because men and women are different, and these differences need to be recognized, taken into account, and addressed in the course of Christian discipleship."³⁰ The fifth and final reason cited by Duncan is because the denial or twisting of the Bible's clear teaching on manhood and womanhood serves to undermine biblical authority. Thus "the

²⁸ Ibid., 69-144.

²⁹ quoted in Duncan and Hart, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*, 39.

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

manhood-womanhood issue becomes a scriptural authority issue,³¹ and one that can be dealt with by a strong and biblical women's ministry.

Duncan crystallizes the need for vital women's ministry in the local church with this clarion call:

"The crisis of womanhood is too critical for the church to be passive. Scores of evangelical women are functional feminists, because the world's paradigm for womanhood is the only one they have heard. The church should lead the way in equipping God's people to think biblically about all of life, including a biblical perspective of gender roles and relationships.

The church must boldly articulate a robustly positive perspective of womanhood and of women's role in the church, and the church must equip godly older women to disciple younger women to think and live according to this perspective."³²

VI. Practical Matters: A WIC Role in Counsel and Assistance

We now turn our attention to how a women's ministry in the local church can come alongside and enhance the work of the ordained leadership. Following a covenantal and complementarian approach, godly women in the church can utilize their gifts as man's "ezer-kenegdo," or "a helper comparable to him"³³ in a corporate way, analogous to a wife being an ezer-kenegdo to her husband. The term originates from Genesis 2:18-20 when Eve is created from Adam as a "helper fit for him;" the phrase is actually used frequently in the OT to describe God Himself as He defends, cares for the oppressed, supports, shields/protects, rescues the poor, or comforts. Such words, according to Hunt³⁴ are "strong, compassionate, relational, life-giving." The opposite of a Helper/Life-giver is a Hinderer/Life-Taker.³⁵ These concepts can be foundational to a women's ministry in helping to evaluate its various efforts or activities: helping or hindering? Life-giving or life-taking?

³¹ Ibid., 42.

³² Ibid.

³³ Martin and Stovall, *Women Leading Women*, 5.

³⁴ Duncan and Hunt, *Women's Ministry in the Local Church*, 35.

³⁵ Ibid.

This is very clear in the matter of women's roles in diaconal ministry. A woman's design as a helper and life-giver makes her well-suited for such work; and this is acknowledged by BCO 9-7, which states:

It is often expedient that the Session of a church should select and appoint godly...women of the congregation to assist the deacons in caring for the sick, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners and others who may be in any distress or need.

Though not stated, this helper design of women can be extrapolated to any situation where the ordained leadership needs counsel, insight, perspective, or any number of practical helps. Thus the role of women can be seamlessly integrated into the life and work of the local church. This is beautifully described by Dr. Ted Donnelly:

...the church of Jesus Christ is far more than a worshipping assembly. It is a healing, teaching, redemptive community, sent out into the world with the love of Christ. It is commissioned to penetrate every aspect of human life...such a commission demands the employment of all the abilities and the dedication of all the gifts and graces of every Christian. And in that awesome task the woman is not an auxiliary, not a second rate helper, but a full and equal partner, needed, appreciated, and honored.³⁶

VII. Case Study – Women's Ministry at City Reformed PCA

City Reformed Presbyterian Church (CRPC) recently celebrated God's grace in 10 years of ministry to the university community in Pittsburgh, PA. Being situated in the midst of a fast-paced, transient community with many young single and newly-married women in the egalitarian/progressive atmosphere of the university led the Session to see the need early on for vital women's ministry. A strong complementarian emphasis was inherent from the beginning, and a cadre of older mature women from several surrounding PCA churches were part of the core group of the church plant. The church was particularized in 2008, and a formal WIC ministry was instituted soon after. In addition to the much-needed work of coordinating a burgeoning nursery and an active fellowship ministry (church picnics, dinners, etc.), the WIC began increasingly to focus on the discipleship needs of women. An

³⁶ Edward Donnelly, *Women in the Church*, n.d.

annual WIC gathering was instituted with a focus on solid biblical teaching by women on key issues of womanhood. Small group ministry for young mothers and single women was begun.

A significant increased focus on discipleship was launched in 2013 with the appointment of a part-time staff position of Women's Discipleship Coordinator. This woman worked closely with the ordained ruling and teaching elders to develop a network of mature women to function in the key small group ministry of the church (known as Community Groups) as what were termed "WIC liaisons." These women receive regular training and support in an effort to provide discipleship to the women in their respective community groups, all under the leadership of the male CG leaders and the authority of the Session.

Another important piece of the women's ministry at CRPC is the training of potential WIC leaders. They participate in the same foundational theological training course as the prospective male leaders.

The overall result thus far is an encouraging and growing women's ministry with a discipleship emphasis that is also relied upon by the Session for input and counsel on matters affecting the church at large, such as the current issue of securing a new venue for worship. The CRPC diaconate has also partnered with the WIC council on a number of significant family support situations. God's grace has supplied CRPC with a beautiful and flourishing complementarian women's ministry that greatly enhances the overall mission and ministry of the church.³⁷

VIII. Conclusion

Our burden has been to prove the benefit and necessity of a biblically- focused women's ministry for every local congregation in the PCA, and to encourage the church to see the Women in the Church (WIC) institution as an ideal mechanism in our midst to accomplish this goal. The cultural war continues to rage, and our churches need to be situated as field hospitals (not social clubs) to treat the

³⁷ For a fuller sketch of this ministry, see Appendix.

casualties of that war: broken men and women, many of whom do not understand themselves and their God-given, glorious design, nor have tasted the warm, welcoming and beautiful family life for which they were created, with the gentle but strong leadership of a loving father and the astonishingly competent and caring support of a biblical mother. They have yet to *come home* - will the church of Jesus Christ stand in the gap and provide that home that these war-torn folk have never known? Or have known but lost to the ravages of a culture gone berserk with a disorienting and destructive reordering of relationships meant to be life-giving but now actually taking lives?

The church would do well to focus on its identity in Christ as the family of God, in all the richness of that metaphor. As we have sought to do that at CRPC, we have seen fruit from our women's ministry. As Snoke and Koerber explain ³⁸, "young people today (as well as plenty of older people) are desperately looking for a family...they want a community with wise older people who love them and care for them. When people understand the model of the church as a family....many of their objections to complementarianism break down." They have found a true home. May the Lord make that a normative experience for many men and women who come, "bruised and broken by the Fall."

³⁸ David Snoke and Matt Koerber, *A Case Study in Women's Ministry* (unpublished paper – see Appendix)

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Appendix

A Case Study in Women's Ministry
City Reformed Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
David Snoke (RE) and Matt Koerber (TE)

Six years ago we planted a church in the university district of Pittsburgh. Today we have attendance of around 230. Most of these people are young men and women in their 20's and early 30's. Most are highly educated. Most do not come from PCA or Reformed backgrounds, although a substantial minority does. We have a large number of young female students, and several of these were involved from the very beginning in the launch team. At the same time, we operate in full accord with the Book of Church Order of the PCA; we do not ordain women or commission them as deacons, and we have all male elders and deacons. Yet in all the years of our existence, we have not had a single controversy about men's and women's roles in the church. Quite the opposite. We have a thriving women's ministry, and general sense that women are using their gifts and are encouraged. How is this possible in a university setting where feminism presumably reigns? In this essay we discuss some of the principles and processes we used.

1. Mothers and fathers.

One of the most helpful teachings we presented was the model of the church as a family and not a business. In a business, leaders are chosen according to how well they perform and are removed if they don't perform; roles are earned and competed for. Many women have done quite well in that type of competitive environment. By contrast, in a family your position in the family is not earned and cannot be lost; you are always in the family. Your role is not changed; you are always either the father or the mother or a child.

In our experience, young people today (as well as plenty of older people) are desperately looking for a family. Ours is the society of the broken family. Most young people we encounter are not highly idealistic; they are just looking to get by in a world where they have been deeply hurt by divorced and dysfunctional families. They want, but can hardly believe in, a community where you do not have to compete for roles or just to stay in, and they want a community with wise older people who love them and care for them.

When people understand the model of the church as a family, and not a business, many of their objections to complementarianism break down. We are not choosing as elders the people who run businesses best. If we did that, then indeed we might want to choose women with business acumen or high intelligence. Rather, we are choosing our "fathers." We are choosing men who want to and have the ability to be like a father to the rest of the church. Many people, even those not raised in the church, accept that fathers and mothers play

different roles in a family, and the father is the head of the home, even while he lovingly upholds the role of the mother.

A corollary of this is that we also identify our “mothers.” These are women who are not ordained (which would convey a sense of headship) but who play a motherly role in the church, as Paul discusses in Titus 2:3-5. When young people in our church look at our leadership, they see both men and women in leadership, but the fathers are clearly the head of the home. This is comforting to many people who, despite what society may say, long for a functional family with a strong father and a caring mother who is not fighting the father for leadership.

2. A full-orbed ministry

Early on, we came to the conviction that the proper vehicle for women’s leadership is not to make them deaconesses, whether ordained or unordained. The reason is that diaconate ministry is typically narrowly focused on mercy ministry, while Paul clearly encourages women to teach and counsel other women (see also Proverbs 31:26), which may be termed a spiritual ministry. As we prayed about the matter, we came to the conclusion that we needed women to work alongside both the elders and the deacons in complementary ministries. We realized that our denomination already has a structure for this, known as WIC (Women in the Church). At the national level, the WIC organization has emphasized the importance of mentoring and teaching of women. Some women came to our church with past experience of WIC in other PCA churches which could be termed “the paper-flower-making society.” Unfortunately, for various reasons, in many churches WIC has a purely social/fellowship role. These women, and a great number of younger women with no PCA background, became excited about setting up a mentoring/discipling network under the auspices of WIC.

Some of us men also came with a negative experience of male-female relations in other churches. For example, in a discipline case in another church, a woman was brought before session for charges. No other women were present. Not only was this woman intimidated, but after a decision was rendered, session could not divulge details of the case without breaking confidentiality, and were subject to complaints about a session of all males not understanding this woman’s situation. In another case, a session wanted the input of women on certain issues. A few women were called on the phone, but other women resented not being consulted. Both these situations could have been avoided if a well-defined set of women leaders were available who were recognized for wisdom, upon whom session could call both as advocates for accused women and for advice. In the model of the church as a family, the father is the head of the home, but a man who never consults his wife has a dysfunctional family. We thus came up with the following list of responsibilities for women leaders, under the auspices of WIC:

1. Teaching: women’s Bible studies and discipleship groups; inviting outside speakers for women’s meetings; recommending books for women; children’s education (up through junior high)
2. Counseling: setting up mentoring networks for women; personal counseling; setting up marriage counseling of couples to couples
3. Prayer: setting up prayer networks and prayer meetings
4. Mercy: working alongside the deacons as appointed by session (BCO 9-7)
5. Hospitality: greeter’s table; nursery during worship; planning and organizing fellowship hours, church dinners and picnics, and fellowship for special events
6. Advocacy: being present at a session meeting at which a woman is accused of some sin (BCO 32-19)
7. Advice: offering advice when called upon by session; annual joint meetings of session and WIC leadership council; shared minutes of session and WIC leadership council.
8. Physical elements of worship: flowers and seasonal decorations; communion elements and furnishings

This is no short list! At first it seemed almost overwhelming to our women leaders, quite the opposite of those who would claim the PCA has no role for women.

3. Examining and electing women leaders

As we started to view women in these roles, we came to the conclusion that the leaders of WIC should be examined by session. If women are to invite theological speakers to women’s groups, recommend books, evaluate

educational literature, and recommend leaders of women's Bible studies, they must be theologically astute. If they are to counsel, mentor, and advocate, they must be wise and have a practical knowledge of the Bible. We therefore set in the WIC bylaws that all candidates for office in WIC must be examined by session on the following topics: 1) theological knowledge including agreement with the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, 2) Bible knowledge, and 3) Christian experience. Our process for installing WIC leaders runs parallel to that for elders and deacons: after nomination (by women members of the church), they are then trained and examined by session, after which session presents those who are approved to the women of the church for election.

When we first proposed this, our nominees were quite daunted; none of them had ever been examined on theology in their lives! We set up a rigorous training series and then gave them serious exams.

An unexpected benefit came from this. All our women leaders began to feel more comfortable in talking about mentoring and counseling other women. Before the exams, most of the women asked to serve had reactions akin to, "Who am I to tell other women anything? I am nothing!" After being duly nominated, examined by session, and elected by the other women, they began to humbly serve, accepting that the church had chosen them to serve in this way. Younger women are happy to listen to them, even grad students with no church background at all.

4. A diversity of women

In many churches, the pastor's wife is the de facto leader of women's ministries. Some churches add to this the elders' wives. While many of these women are mature, it opens up the session to the accusation that the women leaders are really chosen by virtue of nepotism, not their wisdom and maturity in Christ. Also, many elders' wives are not at a time in their lives where they have a lot of time to give to other women (this can be a huge burden to some pastors' wives). Last, sometimes very mature women have husbands who should not be elders for various reasons, or have no husbands.

In our first WIC leadership council, women nominated, and session approved, the following group of women: one elder's wife (not the pastor's wife), three older women whose children had grown and whose husbands were not elders, and one mature young woman in her twenties. They worked very well with each other and continued to have the respect of the whole church as "mothers". Other elders' wives and the pastor's wife are very involved in the ministry of the church but do not serve as officers on the WIC leadership council. Since then we have added one elder's wife and two young women whose husbands have no church office.

Our experience is that the educated young women in our congregation continue to come to these women for advice and private counsel and to respond well to their requests for help in ministry. In fact, our WIC leaders are overbooked for how many young women they can meet with! Far from viewing this as a "patriarchal" structure, our experience is that young women are searching for a family with older mother figures. A telling experience is that women who come to our church from outside the PCA usually do not know right up front what our leadership structure is. They often only find out about our complementarianism at membership classes. Yet we have not had any women go through membership and refuse to join because of our leadership structure.

Our church is only a few years old, so we cannot claim to have a long track record on this. We can only say that right now, both men and women of all ages feel blessed by the way we are working together.