Is there a third way in complementarian women's ministry?

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City Reformed PCA, Pittsburgh, PA, March 21, 2015 (edited October 17, 2025).

In Reformed, complementarian circles, we want to see women using the gifts God has given them and serving the kingdom of God. We read of the women who Paul called co-laborers for the Gospel, we see his command to the older women to teach the younger women, and we know that we are all one Body with many parts, each with a calling from God to do the good works which God has prepared in advance for us to do. Many of us have been blessed by mature women like Timothy's grandmother Lois, who helped to train him up. At the same time, we believe that men and women are not interchangeable. We are convinced, for example, that the precedent of Jesus picking twelve male Apostles, when Jesus was afraid of no man, and Paul's clear words that women should not have authority over men in the church, set the historical pattern.

What structures should a complementarian church have for women's ministry? The Reformed world these days is engaged in ongoing debate about this matter. There are two prevailing models. The first is essentially to have no formal structure for women's ministry, or a minimal structure which is not taken very seriously. The other model is to have women deacons, or deaconesses, who may or may not be ordained. In this essay we look at both of these models, and then present a third way which has worked extremely well in our own church.

Model 1: no formal women's leadership.

Many people who adhere to this model say things like, "What is the need for defined women's leadership roles? In our church, lots of people do ministry without any formal titles. Why are people so hung up on titles?" In these churches, sometimes there is a "women's ministry" program, but the leadership is not examined by session in any formal way; rather, each year somebody asks, "Who can we get to run the women's program this year?" and a woman is found who is known to have a lot of energy, without a lot of attention paid to whether she is mature in the Lord or has theological or biblical knowledge. The program is oriented purely around fellowship, leading some women to stereotype it as the "paper-flower-making society." In many churches this group rarely meets, and then only to have a social function such as a mother-daughter banquet or to make Christmas decorations. While these fellowship times are valuable, many women long for something more, with deeper teaching, more of an outward face to ministry, and significant one-on-one discipleship.

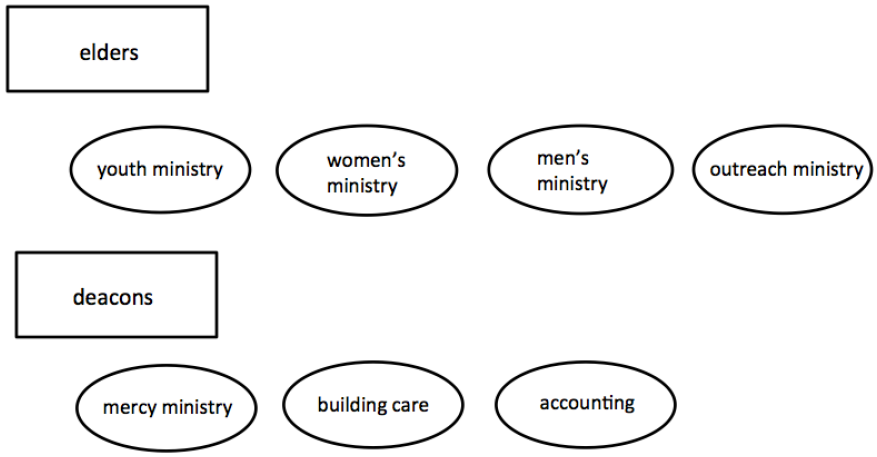

Figure 1. A typical complementarian church structure. Women's ministry is one of many ministries overseen by the elders; elder women have no formal recognition.

Often the people who say "Why are people so hung up on titles?" come from small churches. In a small church, lots of work can get done without titles, by both men and women. Everyone knows everyone else, and the mature people are clearly identified by everyone. People just do stuff that needs to be done, or ask advice, without any formal structure. Sometimes churches that are somewhat larger, of 200-300 people, can operate this way as well, when they have a long history of certain families who run the church.

In a large church, however, or even a medium-sized church which has a lot of turnover with new people (as often is the case in urban churches), titles are very helpful. Consider the case of a young, single woman named Julia with a professional degree, who starts attending a fairly large church. She wants to help mentor young women, and she wants to meet with someone older to mentor her. Who does she call? If there is no defined women's ministry coordinator, she will end up calling the pastor. This points out the first problem of having no defined titles in a large church: the pastor gets phone calls from everyone about everything. Small churches can operate this way, but this will burn out a pastor of even a few hundred people.

Suppose that Julia does call the pastor and he tells her that Mrs. Green would be a good mentor, because he knows Mrs. Green personally. What if he gets calls like this from a dozen or more young women? Does he send them all to Mrs. Green? If not, does he spend a lot of time getting to know a lot of older women personally to find out who are good mentors, essentially running the women's ministry himself? Does he ask Mrs. Green to find other women mentors? Doesn't that make Mrs. Green *de facto* the women's ministry coordinator?

Alternatively, suppose that Julia meets an older woman named Sally at the church who proceeds to give her all kinds of life advice. Unknown to Julia, however, Sally's life is a mess, and her advice is not respected in the church. This is not an uncommon situation—sometimes those most wanting to put themselves forward to give advice are those who are the most self-centered. Should someone in the church take Julia aside and tell her not to

take Sally's advice? Why should Julia believe that person's warning comes with any more credibility than Sally's advice? Doesn't it make sense, instead, to have women mentors (whom the Apostle Paul would call "older women") clearly identified by the church for young women like Julia to turn to? Perhaps in a small church one might say "everyone knows" who the mature women are, but in a large church with a transient population, quite often people don't know.

And what about Julia's desire to mentor others? Does the pastor (or an elder) meet privately with Julia, and other women like her, to determine whether he can recommend her to others? How would he have her trained in this type of personal discipleship, if she is not already mature? Often, it seems, this question doesn't come up because churches are not engaged in one-on-one discipleship at all. If they do start to engage in it, they are faced immediately with the fact that male elders meeting regularly with women on-one-one, privately, to hear and give advice about personal sins, is a very bad idea.

Model 2: Women deaconesses

Because of the need for well-ordered women's discipleship and mentoring, many Reformed complementarians embrace the idea of women deaconesses, either ordained or not ordained. Reformed churches have historically divided on the idea of deaconesses, with some very old branches of the Reformed churches (such as the RPCNA) embracing this role.

Many orthodox scholars have argued about whether the "women" of 1 Tim 3:11 refers to deaconesses, deacons' wives, or a third category of women working for the church. The main issue that our church wrestled with, however, was not the parsing of the words in this text, but the nature of women's ministry as a whole. Is it entirely "diaconate"? Clearly, some of it is—Paul talks in 1 Tim 5:10 of "washing the feet of the saints" (service within the church) and "caring for the afflicted" (mercy ministry to outsiders) as normal ministries of women. But Paul also talks of women "teaching" and "training" other women (Titus 2:3-4). Those duties sound more parallel to what elders do.

As we wrestled with defining women's ministry in our church, we became convinced that those churches that have women leaders as deaconesses either are unbiblically restricting women to only diaconate ministry, or expanding the traditional definition of diaconate work to include all kinds of work normally led by elders when done among men. For example, would the deacons of a church normally be the ones to set up a network of matching young men with older men as mentors/disciplers? No, this would normally fall under the oversight of the elders. So when our women want to set up a network of women mentors/disciplers, why should we call that diaconate work? In the same way, the elders, not the deacons, would normally set up a conference bringing in a theological speaker. Why would women deacons do that for a women's conference?

A variation of this model is to appoint "deacon's assistants," women who are not called deacons or deaconesses but who work alongside the deacons. Again, if these women

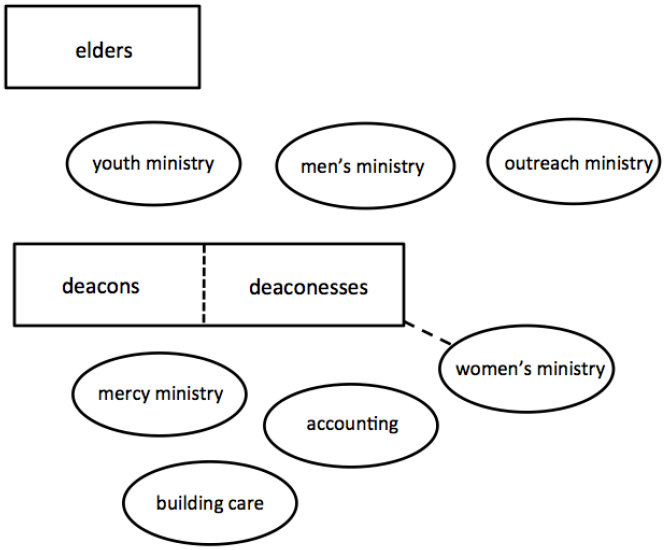

Figure 2. Proposed church structure by many who desire ordained women deacons. Women's ministry is seen as a part of diaconate ministry while men's ministry is overseen the by the elders.

run the teaching/discipleship ministry, this greatly expands the definition of diaconate ministry.

Another variation is to have both women deaconesses and a second group of women who run a teaching/discipleship ministry. This is really the same as Model 1, but with women added to the deacons. In this case, one has the anomalous situation that those with a teaching ministry have no formal title while those with a diaconate ministry do.

Model 3: Parallel helpmates

We thus came up with a "third way" which upon consideration seems much more biblical than either of the above models. This model also fits naturally with what the PCA's national women's ministry leaders have promoted. They want the ministry to be more than just fellowship and making crafts. They want to see women active as disciplers and teachers as well as in diaconate ministry.

One of the ways that our church has presented complementarianism to a skeptical younger generation has been to present the picture of the church as a family, not a business. In a business, people obtain positions by out-competing each other and winning. In a family, people have roles which they are born to. In a well-adjusted complementarian Christian family, the father and mother have different roles but work alongside each other. The father has the "final word" as head of the home, but listens to his wife and respects her opinions. This model appeals to many in our generation who are desperately seeking family and community in a world of broken relationships. The idea of having defined roles

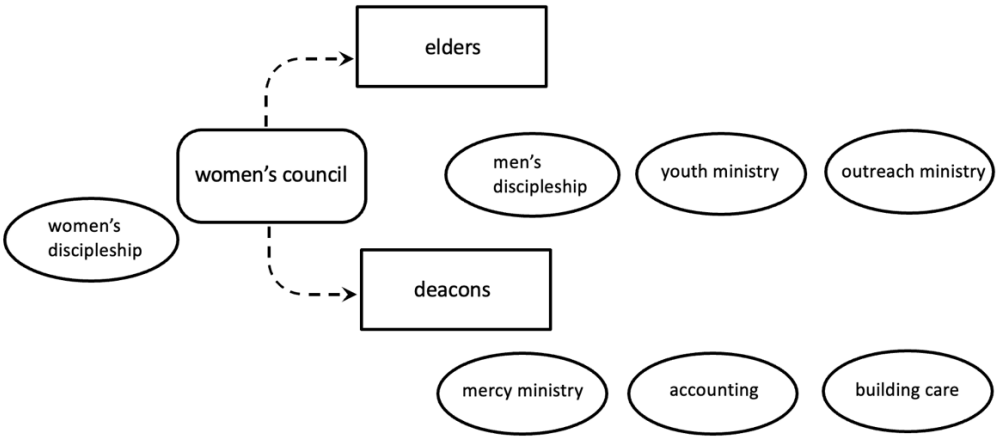

Figure 3. The "third way": women are appointed by the elders after a nomination, examination, and election process, and work alongside both elders and deacons in various ministries, as well as directly overseeing women's discipleship.

contrasts sharply with the experience of many of a power struggle for control and authority in the home.

Leadership roles in the church follow the same pattern. The church has its "fathers" and "mothers" (1 Tim 5:1-2) who take care of the "sisters" and "brothers," just as a family does. Following this to its logical conclusion, the men in the offices of elder and deacon in the church should each have their "helpmates" who work in parallel with them. In our model, then, we have women leaders who work in both types of ministry. Our Session frequently calls upon our women leaders for advice and input on major decisions, refers women with spiritual and emotional issues to our women leaders, and trusts these women leaders to set up educational conferences and discipling networks for the women in the church. Our deacons work with women leaders to help the poor and those in crisis in our church. The Women's Council is very visible to the church as a whole in both of these types of ministry.

The "third way," then, is to have women leaders who are well known to the church but do not take the office of either elder or deacon. In some large churches, such women are installed as paid staff, e.g., a paid Director of Women's Ministry or a paid woman counselor. This can be a good thing, but in the presbyterian model, a lot of ministry is to be done by non-professionals. Having only paid staff do ministry creates a ministry bottleneck. God has gifted all his people for ministry of various types.

The appeal of paid staff is that our society recognizes those with paid jobs as experts. But the presbyterian model has another way of giving recognition: appointment to a role by the Session. Our Session takes this job very seriously. When women have been nominated to be elected to the Women's Council, Session takes the lead in giving theological and biblical training to the nominees, and then examines these women in Bible

knowledge, theology, and Christian experience. Only after they pass these exams are they allowed to stand for election by the women of the church.

When we first started this policy, the women nominees had some fear and trepidation about the exams. But they rose to the task and passed wonderfully. Having been examined, approved, and elected, they now have much more sense that the Session and church trust them to do their jobs.

Having done this now for several years, with wonderful women leaders working alongside us, it is hard to understand why so many Reformed churches, which generally believe in strongly guarding the theology of the church, are willing to turn over whole swaths of theological education to women who have never been examined in these basic areas. In many churches, as in our church, women are in charge of the education of children. Why would we put the education of our children, the whole next generation, in the hands of someone we have never examined on theology? In the same way, as discussed above, in any church that takes one-on-one discipleship seriously, fully half the one-on-one discipleship in the church cannot be done by members of Session. Why would we put half of our discipleship program in the hands of organizers who have never been in examined on Bible knowledge or Christian character?

Shepherding and a "voice"

Many of the young women in Reformed churches talk of the need for "empowerment" and a "voice" in the church. These terms rankle some in the older generation who hear in them echoes of feminism. But these young women would not be in complementarian denominations like the PCA if they wanted men and women to be interchangeable. There are plenty of other denominations out there for egalitarians. What these young women are asking is how they may legitimately communicate with the leadership of the church. Again, in a small church, this seems obvious—go talk to a pastor or elder. But in a large church, pastors and elders can't even be acquainted with every woman in the church, much less sit down with every one of them to hear their concerns.

Having a "voice" is just the complement of "shepherding." Shepherding is the process by which the Session finds out who is suffering in the church, who is in need of spiritual counsel, etc. Session actively inquires about the physical and spiritual needs of the people and then addresses those needs—a top-down process. The notion of a "voice" is having the possibility for the people to actively communicate up to Session—a bottom-up process. They might want to communicate an idea for a new program, a complaint that something is not happening as it should, or to alert the Session of a group of people falling through the cracks, as in the case of the widows in Acts 6. If there are no clear lines of communication by which such concerns can be communicated, the result is widespread grumbling, which can kill a church.

One route for this type of up-down communication in many churches is through community groups, small house groups in which a leader is aware of the spiritual state of

the members of the group. But a young woman not might not feel comfortable telling a male community group leader, deacon, or member that they should change something in the church. This is especially true if male leadership is not conveying "we want to listen to you." Having designated women leaders in the church actively conveys to women in the church that the male leadership is listening. Women leaders who have been examined by Session "have the ear" of Session.

"Empowerment" is also a term with a bad reputation in some quarters, but has a positive side. There are many people, both men and women, who would never put themselves forward as disciplers or mentors, but in fact would do very well at one-on-one discipleship. Sometimes these people have too much humility—"Who am I to tell anyone anything?" Sometimes they just are patient—"No one has asked me." In our experience, when people are nominated as leaders, trained, and examined, they can't fall back on these excuses. They have been asked, and they have been accredited. They take up the good work and move forward—they have been "empowered."

Here's an example of how this might work. Suppose that a number of women in the church are suffering from past sexual abuse. It would be very helpful to have a support group to talk through these issues. Will any of these young women be comfortable directly approaching a male leader and saying "I've been abused—can you create a support group for me?" But suppose that Session-appointed women leaders and women disciplers under the oversight of these women hear a number of stories of these women. These leaders have already been entrusted by Session to create women's discipleship groups, and after discussion, they create such a group (they are "empowered," not "micromanaged.") They then approach Session to coordinate the advertising of the new group to whole church and to raise awareness of sexual abuse (a "voice"—they have "standing" to speak to the Session).

Fathers and mothers versus husbands and wives

Some churches have a variation of our model, in which the wives of the elders and deacons function as the women's leadership. Sometimes this happens by default, and sometimes it is explicit policy in which Session requires that all the male leaders' wives take up leadership responsibility.

Just a little thought exposes problems with this model. What if a church has a small Session with several unmarried men? Shall we, like some Korean churches, require all elders to marry? What if a wife of an elder is less mature than he is, or has an illness, or a job, or child-raising responsibilities that make it hard for her to serve? What if there is an obviously mature and gifted widow or unmarried woman in the church? What if there is a mature woman married to a much less mature man?

It is clearly the case that some women are "mothers" in the church even though they are not wives. These are exactly the sort of women Paul talks about in 1 Timothy 5. And

there are some wives of elders who ought not be leading women's ministry, for any number of reasons.

While marriage is rightly to be celebrated and honored, the example of Paul himself shows that it is not a requirement for a man to do effective ministry. The same holds for women. Single women, like Corrie ten Boom, can be mature in the Lord. Far better for a young woman to hold off marriage to an immature man, than to marry just to certify herself for ministry!

Conclusion

Perhaps we are closer than we think. Even the most arch-traditionalist men in our denomination generally think it is a good idea to have women following the command of Paul in Titus 2 to teach and train other women. They often would like to see discipleship/mentoring networks for women happen but have no idea how to set that up in their churches. They can be frustrated with women who are not mature but push themselves forward, and would like a way to gently direct younger women to more mature, but less outspoken older women. They would like to see the women's conferences have sound theological content. Examining and appointing designated women leaders would help in all these things.

On the other side, in our experience many young, urban men and women really like being part of a complementarian structure, but nevertheless feel that women don't have clear paths for using their gifts or interacting with the leadership. Some are pushing for a more egalitarian structure, but most are not—in most cases they could easily go to other churches which have full interchangeability of men and women in leadership, but don't because they agree with the basic family structure taught by complementarianism. They embrace the idea of fathers and mothers of the church, but are frustrated at structures that don't seem to allow spiritual mothers to step forward. Rather than pushing for this to happen through the office of deacon, they could find that women are more empowered for full-orbed ministry in a parallel structure that works alongside both elders and deacons but is distinct from them.

This hasn't been just theory for us. We've been doing it for more than twenty years at City Reformed, and have been blessed in seeing relationships of trust and respect between men and women leaders growing, and in a complementarian system.