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CAUGHT BY THE FENCE:  
CHALLENGES FACING WOMEN IN MINISTRY LEADERSHIP  
IN THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

by

Kathleen Rempel Neufeld

A project-dissertation submitted to the Faculty of St. Stephen's College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to my family who has lovingly walked with me not only through this process but through my life:

- to my parents, George and Elizabeth Rempel, and my siblings, Herta, Abe, Clint, Don and Ted, who believed in me,
- to my husband Don for all his support and encouragement in whatever I do,
- to my children, Carolyn, Brian, and Gordon, for their inspiration,
- to Dave, Barb and Leslie for their support, and
- to my grandchildren, Ruth, Emma, Sophia, Zach, Simon and Avery, who will carry on the work of justice in their generation.

## ABSTRACT

*An abstract of the project-dissertation of Kathleen Rempel Neufeld for the Doctor of Ministry degree at St. Stephen's College. Project dissertation title: Caught By the Fence: Challenges Facing Women in Ministry Leadership in the Mennonite Brethren Church.*

The purpose of this project was to examine the challenges women face in ministry leadership in the Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada. A historical study of the role of women in the church was conducted. The Mennonite Brethren Church attempted to attract women into leadership positions by examining the biblical texts used to restrict women, by holding study conferences, and by passing resolutions. In the larger context of society leadership models moved from a patriarchal to a visionary approach that included women. In addition, the concept of the leader as servant was developed and third wave feminism drew attention to an inclusive approach without hierarchal structures based on inherited privilege. A study of Jesus' instructions to his disciples confirmed a servant leadership model for his followers. The servant leadership model created a dilemma for women who historically were asked to serve while men provided official leadership. This narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of three women in ministry leadership. They told stories of attitudes, language, and structures that did not recognize their leadership in equal partnership with men. The voices of the women in this study are a crucial piece in understanding the shifts that must occur in the church debate if women are to be attracted to ministry leadership.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Rev. Dr. Geoff Wilfong-Pritchard, Dr. Fran Hare and Dr. Barbara Rice skillfully guided me through my research and writing of this project-dissertation. I appreciated their insights, comments, and direction as I worked at each aspect of this project. They challenged me to think critically about my research and to reflect deeply on the issues I was exploring.

"Sarah" and "Madeline" were willing to share their stories and their lives with me. I am grateful for their courage to give voice to some difficult experiences in ministry. It is my desire that their stories will be an encouragement to other women who are struggling with their role in ministry leadership in the church.

A special thank you to Don Neufeld and Carolyn Wagner for their work in editing and proof-reading the many drafts of my work. Their input was invaluable.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: An Introduction to the Study	
Historical Background .....	1
Context for the Study .....	3
Personal Story of Ministry Leadership .....	6
Focus of Research .....	13
Purpose of Research.....	14
Scope of Study .....	14
Chapter 2: The Mennonite Brethren Church and Women	
Introduction.....	15
Historical Perspectives of the Role of Women in the MB Church ...	16
Dealing with the Biblical Texts about the Role of Women .....	21
Genesis 1-3 The Two Stories of Creation and the Fall .....	22
The Old Testament.....	24
Proverbs 31.10-31 The Ideal Woman .....	24
Galatians 3.28.....	25
Ephesians 5. 21-23 and 1 Timothy 2.11-12 .....	26
1 Corinthians 11. 2-16 Head Coverings for Women .....	27
Pauline Texts in General .....	28
Biblical Issues From the Perspective of the Laity.....	29
The Role of the Board of Faith and Life .....	31
Issues Raised by Contributors to the MB Herald.....	36
A Matter of Unity.....	36
Some Assumptions.....	37
Patriarchy .....	38
Feminism.....	40
Women’s Conferences and Instruction in the MB Herald .....	41
Language and Image .....	48
Issues Addressed by Women .....	52
Summary .....	55
Chapter 3: Servant Leadership and the Place of Women	
Introduction.....	57
The Influence of Patriarchy .....	57
Moving From a Patriarchal Understanding of Leadership .....	58
Feminism.....	62
Servant Leadership.....	63
Jesus as Leader.....	67
Women and Leadership .....	76
Biology.....	80
Communication.....	83
Values.....	84
Women’s Reality.....	85
Conclusion .....	87

Chapter 4: Approach to the Research	
Background of the Study .....	89
Choosing Narrative Inquiry .....	90
Personal Perspective .....	93
Beginning the Study.....	94
Identifying the Crucial Piece .....	96
Perspective of this Research .....	97
The Process .....	97
Ethical Considerations .....	99
Consent to Participate .....	100
Conducting the Interviews .....	100
Using the Interviews .....	102
Chapter 5: Two Stories of Ministry	
Introduction.....	104
Sarah’s Story.....	105
Early Years.....	105
Reflections on the Early Years.....	106
Formative Years .....	108
Hopeful Years .....	109
Another Setback.....	110
New Hope .....	111
Past Teachings Surface Again.....	112
New Opportunities .....	113
Questioning Her Style.....	114
Reflections on Leadership.....	115
Madeline’s Story.....	116
Early Adult Years.....	116
Call to Pastoral Ministry .....	117
Growing into Pastoral Ministry.....	118
Old Worries Surface Again.....	118
A Turning Point .....	119
Blossoming in Ministry.....	120
A Setback.....	120
New Beginnings.....	121
A Crisis in Ministry.....	122
Understanding Leadership .....	122
Challenges in Ministry .....	123
Joys of Living Out Her Calling.....	126
Reflections on Pastoral Ministry.....	126
Reflecting on My Own Story.....	128
The Value of Our Leadership.....	129
Gender Role Expectations and Inner Knowing.....	131
The Need for Wholeness.....	134
The Need for Women to Find Their Voices .....	136

The Desire for Interdependence .....	137
Conclusion .....	139
Chapter 6: Using Women's Stories to Move Forward	
Introduction.....	140
Why Stay in the Church? .....	140
Seeking Change .....	141
Listening to Women.....	142
Finding Wholeness.....	143
Moving Forward .....	145
Starting Points for the MB Church .....	149
Language.....	149
Approach to Leadership.....	153
Personal Reflections on Changes Needed.....	156
Conclusion .....	159
Bibliography .....	163
Appendix A Mennonite Brethren General Conference Resolution .....	185
Appendix B Patriarchal Thinking Reflected in the MB Herald.....	187
Appendix C Themes for Women's Conferences in the 1980s.....	190
Appendix D Consent to Participate in Research.....	192

# CHAPTER ONE

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### Historical Background

At its 1981 convention the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren (MB) Churches attempted to deal with the question of women in ministry leadership by passing a resolution.<sup>1</sup> While this resolution affirmed the high calling of women to be wives and mothers it also recognized their work in the church and affirmed them in ministry.<sup>2</sup> In part the resolution stated:

We acknowledge the great contribution of our sisters to the work of the Lord in the local church, in mission fields, and other areas of kingdom work, and we would encourage our churches to continue to discover and to draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries in the church and in the world. This may also include participation in local church and conference ministries.<sup>3</sup>

Later during the same convention the words “if the Local Church so chooses” were added to the resolution. Also included was the statement that “while we recognize that women played a significant role in the early church – something we would encourage them to do in our day as well – we do not believe that the Mennonite Brethren Church should ordain women to pastoral leadership.”<sup>4</sup> The moderator explained that the intent of

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<sup>1</sup> The Mennonite Brethren Church is a denomination with fewer than 35,000 members in 225 churches in Canada. An Anabaptist denomination, it is part of the larger evangelical movement. The MB Conference is organized into boards at the provincial and Canadian levels. Before 2002 the Canadian and United States churches were part of a General Conference of MB Churches but the Conferences in the two countries have since organized independently. The MB Church uses the term “ministry leadership” to refer to leadership positions. These positions have traditionally been held by men and include pastoral ministry as well as the leadership of church and Conference boards and committees.

<sup>2</sup> The full resolution can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>3</sup> *Yearbook 55<sup>th</sup> Session General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches*, August 7-11, 1981, St. Catharines, Ontario. 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

the motion was to encourage the expanded involvement of women in the work of the church, not to limit their ministry.<sup>5</sup>

After the 1981 resolution the MB Conference encouraged women to be leaders in the local churches and in the Conference. To make this happen, the Conference reinterpreted the biblical passages that appear to restrict women.<sup>6</sup> In spite of study conferences in 1980, 1989 and 2004 and a published study guide in 1992, relatively few women have been attracted to leadership in the local churches and the Conference.

By 1996, 15 years after the resolution was passed, women held 9.7% of the Canadian pastoral positions.<sup>7</sup> In 2005, almost 25 years after the resolution, 9.8% of the positions listed in the 2004/2005 Planner Directory were women.<sup>8</sup> Of the 54 women identified in 2004/2005, four were listed with their husbands as part of a pastoral couple.

A survey covering 1980 to 1995 indicated an increase in the number of women holding leadership positions. The number in Canada and the United States increased from 118 in 1980 to 349 in 1995. The ratio of men to women was not given. According to John Redekop, the author of the survey, this was a modest increase. No woman has served as moderator or assistant moderator of the General Conference, the US or Canadian Conferences, or any district/provincial conference.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>6</sup> The passages that are most often cited in this regard are Genesis 1-2, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 14:34-36, 1 Timothy 2:8-15, and Ephesians 5:21-33.

<sup>7</sup> John H. Redekop, "Women in Ministry: A statistical analysis of women in major church and conference offices in North American Mennonite Brethren churches 1980-1995" (Unpublished paper, 1997), 30.

<sup>8</sup> The Planner Directory is published bi-annually by Kindred Productions and lists all the MB churches in the United States and Canada with their pastors and or leadership team members. The executive of each provincial conference is also listed. There are other statistics that can be used to measure women's involvement as well.

<sup>9</sup> Connie Faber, "A new look at women in ministry," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (September 26, 1997, available at <http://old.mbconf.ca/mb/mbh3618/faber.htm>, accessed September 21, 2009).

## Context for This Study

The 1981 resolution affirming women for ministry leadership was significant in light of the historical perspective of the MB Church. The attitudes and understandings that the church brought to the issue provide context for the resolution.

Tim Geddert summarized the stance of evangelical churches in the 1950s and 60s in this way:

1. The first three chapters of Genesis (creation, fall and curse narratives) were understood as a clear statement of God's "creation order" – women were created by God to assist and be subordinate to men.
2. The Gospels were read as evidence that although Jesus did much to restore the dignity of women, he did nothing to change their roles. Women served in supportive roles during Christ's ministry; they were excluded from apostleship. Thus Jesus upheld the original "creation order" and provided a basis for subsequent restrictions on women's ministries in the church.
3. Galatians 3:28 was understood as a statement about "equality before God in terms of salvation," but not as an indication that in Christ the subordination of women to men, established at creation and confirmed after the fall, had been or should be eliminated.
4. "Restriction texts" (such as 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and 1 Tim. 2:11-15) were understood as permanently binding implications of God's "creation order." These texts establish boundaries within which women are to worship and minister in the church. Since arguments from "nature" and "creation" are used to support the restrictions, the restrictions are clearly intended for all situations for all time.<sup>10</sup>

The Canadian Board of Faith and Life (BFL) began to move the MB Conference from the above understanding to the implementation of the resolution.<sup>11</sup> It identified biblical interpretation as the key issue.<sup>12</sup> The restricting biblical texts needed to be re-examined in the light of their original meaning.

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<sup>10</sup>Tim Geddert, "The Ministry of Women: A Proposal for Mennonite Brethren" *Direction* (Fall 1989), 59.

<sup>11</sup> The primary duty of the Canadian Board of Faith and Life (BFL), formerly known as the Board of Reference and Council (BORAC), is to give guidance to the MB churches in matters of faith and ethics.

<sup>12</sup> John E. Toews, "Why This Book?" *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 13.

In the 1970s, two women identified some other issues regarding the freeing of women for ministry leadership. In the first volume of *Direction* in 1972 Katie Funk Wiebe wrote an article titled “Women’s Freedom – The Church’s Necessity.”<sup>13</sup> Wiebe argued that the issue of women in the church was deeper than allowing women to participate in certain roles. She identified three myths about women that had a stronghold in the church: women are 1) a force to be feared, 2) objects to be used, and 3) bodies to be played with. These myths had shaped women’s attitudes toward themselves as well as men’s attitudes toward women. As a result women did not expand their roles in the church beyond being wives and mothers; women feared stepping out of what seemed to be God-appointed roles in order to take prominent public positions, and as a result the church was basically a male monopoly using men’s brains and women’s hands.<sup>14</sup>

Wiebe drew two conclusions:

To free women will also free men and break down the walls separating men’s and women’s participation in the church. We have shackled ourselves when truth is unconsciously divided into male and female roles ... [and] as women move into greater freedom in all other walks of life, the secularization of our day will claim them completely. The church will mean less and less to them because it is a place of limitations, not of opportunity. It will become a nonessential extra in their lives.<sup>15</sup>

In 1974 Luetta Reimer discussed what was known at the time as the women’s liberation movement in *Direction* and identified issues that impacted MB women and the church’s understanding of feminism. She pointed out that women were as valued as men but not always in the same way, that every woman has the right to become the best

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<sup>13</sup> *Direction* is a scholarly journal of the Mennonite Brethren post-secondary schools. It is presently published by Bethany College, Hepburn, SK; Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, MB; Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, BC; Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, CA; Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, CA/Langley, BC/Winnipeg, MB; and Tabor College, Hillsboro, KS.

<sup>14</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, “Women’s Freedom – The Church’s Necessity,” *Direction* 1 no.3 (July 1972), 82-84.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

person she can be by using her abilities and talents, and that she has the choice to be a homemaker or to work outside the home without being judged. She continued to say that women have held back so that they do not appear too competent or too strong next to men. There is a fear that if women are given freedom, they will take over the church.<sup>16</sup>

Both Wiebe and Reimer identified major obstacles for women in pursuing ministry leadership roles in the church. Their writings were ignored. The attitudes to which both women and men had been exposed for years or how teachings about gender roles have impacted them were not addressed.

Philip Zimbardo in his book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* cites numerous studies that show how people will put aside their personal beliefs and conform to an authority figure or to group values.<sup>17</sup> Society and the church have for centuries taught directly as well as indirectly through assigned gender roles that women do not have the same leadership abilities as men. A resolution passed at a convention does not mean that all these attitudes and beliefs will immediately change and that women will step into or be accepted into new positions in the church. For change to happen, people need to become aware of how the identities of both men and women have been shaped. The conditioning of the group and the authority role given to leaders can have a more powerful effect than the words of a resolution.

M. Snyder showed the power of these attitudes and beliefs in determining people's behaviour:

Our sense of identity is in large measure conferred on us by others in ways they treat or mistreat us, recognize or ignore us, praise us or punish us. Some people

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<sup>16</sup> Luetta Reimer, "A Christian Response to the Women's Liberation Movement," *Direction* 3 no.1. (April 1974), 167-172.

<sup>17</sup> Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007).

make us timid and shy; others elicit our sex appeal and dominance. In some groups we are made leaders, while in others we are reduced to being followers. We come to live up to or down to expectations others have of us. The expectations of others often become self-fulfilling prophecies. Without realizing it, we often behave in ways that confirm the beliefs others have about us. Those subjective beliefs can create new realities for us. We often become who other people think we are, in their eyes and in our behavior.<sup>18</sup>

The identity and behaviour of women and men in the church have to a large extent been determined by gender roles that have been assigned to them.

The question of women in leadership is complex and cannot be resolved by passing a resolution. This study explores factors that may be preventing women from entering ministry leadership. It seeks to allow the voices of women to be heard in the debate.

### **Personal Story of Ministry Leadership**

As long as I can remember I wanted to be a teacher. The joy of learning and helping others gain knowledge through education is part of my DNA. How clearly I remember teaching my first grade one class and experiencing the thrill of seeing these inner-city youngsters read their first words. I felt I had helped them find the key that could open the world for them. That was what teaching was all about.

I began my teaching career in 1962 after one year of teachers' college in Manitoba. I taught at the elementary level where teachers were female and principals were male. It was the way the world worked. I was involved with my students and did not give any thought to the patriarchal system. I was free to do what I loved to do and that was what mattered.

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<sup>18</sup> M. Snyder, "When Belief Creates Reality" *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol.18, ed. L. Berkowitz (New York: Academic Press, 1984), 247-305.

In 1969 I stepped out of my teaching career to be a stay-at-home mother. Then, after 13 years away from my career I returned to university and completed my Bachelor of Education degree. The passion to teach was still part of my life. In 1981 I returned to teaching and noticed some significant changes. Women had started moving into administrative positions, including those of principal and associate superintendent. At the same time it was not unusual to hear comments such as, “How will there be enough jobs for men who want to be principals if they start letting women in?”

In 1984-85 I was granted a sabbatical and returned to university to complete my Masters in Education. When I came back to the classroom I was encouraged to apply for administrative positions. I enjoyed the classroom and had not thought of doing anything other than teaching but after repeated affirmations I applied for an administrative position. I became a curriculum coordinator, a position comparable to that of an assistant principal. It was a wonderful opportunity to teach part-time and to be involved in administration.

After a few years I was encouraged to take the next step of becoming a principal. In a conversation with my male associate superintendent, he informed me that I was too gentle and could never be a principal. In my mind that translated into “You need to be bold and aggressive if you want to be a leader.” As a child I had been encouraged to be and do the things I was good at. All doors were open if I was willing to walk through them. Now the seeds of doubt were sown and I began to question myself. Were the people who were encouraging me to take the next step wrong? I felt unrest in my life at the thought that I had the education, the experience, and the affirmation to become a

principal but could not do so because I was gentle. I began to think more seriously about what it meant to be a leader.

The following year my supervisor was a female associate superintendent. She had a different perspective of what it meant to be an effective leader. She encouraged me to move on to a principalship because she saw in me a gentle way of listening to people and drawing them out. This careful listening helped me to identify issues and suggest ways to move forward. Being a leader did not mean being bold but rather drawing out people to be the best they could be.

I did become a principal and after two years in an inner-city environment was transferred to a large bilingual school that was being torn apart by dissension at the teacher, staff, parent, and community levels. The school needed leadership, someone who could listen and bring people together. I was chosen as a leader who could do that.

As I reflect on the eighties and nineties I notice a significant shift in the role of the principal. There was recognition in society that women were effective leaders and this acceptance of women impacted the school system. Leadership styles emerged that allowed women to lead in ways that were comfortable for them. The authoritative male model of leadership changed to include approaches that were more compatible with women's ways of leading. The authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* conclude their studies by noting the way in which women tend to function:

Educators can help women develop their own authentic voices if they emphasize connection over separation, understanding and acceptance over assessment, and collaboration over debate; if they accord respect to allow time for knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience; if instead of imposing their own expectations and arbitrary requirements, they encourage students to evolve their own patterns

of work based on the problems they are pursuing. These are the lessons we have learned in listening to women's voices.<sup>19</sup>

This shift appeared to have taken place in the school system.

When I took an early retirement package in 1998 I moved into church work. In 1999 I was approached by the leadership of my local MB church to be an interim associate pastor for one year. After I had served in the position for a few months, the congregation called me to serve in this position for a three year term. I had served in a variety of leadership positions in the MB church over the past 20 years, which included chairing the Missions and Services Commission, the Discipleship Ministries Commission, and the Caring Ministries Commission in my church. I had been on the church board almost continuously since 1990 and had served as chair of the church board for three years. At the Conference level I had been part of a study group that revised the Confession of Faith for the denomination and I was on the board of the denominational seminary from 1999 to 2007. I had been a member of the board of the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers and had served as chair of that board.<sup>20</sup> I had served as the interim co-director of Community Justice Ministries, a program of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) that works with inmates in federal penitentiaries and assists them when they are released.

I moved into pastoral work with the same passion and energy that I had as a young teacher. The joy of walking with people in their lives to help them discover their

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<sup>19</sup> Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1986), 229.

<sup>20</sup> The Mennonite Centre for Newcomers began as a project of the Mennonite churches in Edmonton in response to the coming of Vietnamese boat people in the 1980s. It is an agency that helps refugees settle into their new life in Canada.

gifts, the creativity of providing meaningful worship services, and the anguish of sitting with people in times of great need or sorrow were all life-giving for me. I felt at home, as if I could just be who I was meant to be.

But another reality awaited me. Pastoral positions had been shaped and held by men in the church and I had now entered a world like the one I had faced 20 years earlier in my teaching career. I had developed a leadership style that was true to who I was as a person and that was compatible with my beliefs about what it meant to lead. Now I faced a world of hierarchy, a world that had historically seen women in subordinate roles, and a world that had entitlement attached to men.

After spending some time in the position of pastor I felt isolated. I was not included in staff decision-making or planning. And so I asked for a meeting with the male senior pastor and the male moderator to discuss my role. I needed to know where I could take initiative and make decisions in my position as associate pastor. After six months of asking I was invited to a meeting. When I arrived with my list of questions I was told that the agenda had been set and I could not have input into what would be discussed. At the end of the meeting I asked whether we could set the time for another meeting to discuss my role and was told, “No.” My questions and comments were ignored.

Church staff meetings were tense for me. As a principal I had been affirmed for the very skills that I thought the church needed but now I could not find my voice. One day I asked to speak to the pastor after a staff meeting. He invited me into his office and I told him that I did not know where I had a voice on staff. I needed to know where I fit into the team. He looked at me and said, “You can cry any time you like. That doesn’t bother me.” End of conversation.

In spite of the fact that my name was often excluded from the pastoral team I thoroughly enjoyed the work and was strongly affirmed by the congregation. But I realized how difficult it was for a woman to break through the barriers that still existed. When the invitation came to attend the provincial pastors' retreat, the sessions were designated for pastors and for pastors' wives. There was no place where my husband and I fit in.

I often raised the issue of language. Male language was used for God and for people in our worship services. On numerous occasions I asked that inclusive language be used from the pulpit but was told that people understood male language and pronouns to include women so changes were not needed. Leaders in the church and pastors were referred to using male pronouns even when I was part of the group. When BFL developed a covenant, it was worded as being for the pastor and *his* church and *his* family. The writers did not acknowledge that there were women who were pastors as well.<sup>21</sup>

I came to realize that although I was officially accepted as a pastor, in practice there were still barriers based on beliefs about women and men and their gender roles that were so firmly established that it was difficult as a woman to be fully accepted into a pastoral position. Women had not been included in the shaping of pastoral roles and therefore I, as a woman, was not recognized as a key player or accepted on an equal basis.

I had been a successful teacher and principal, but being a pastor was still considered male territory. The church had opened the door for women to be in leadership ministry, the congregation had recognized my gifts and called me into pastoral ministry, but somehow I was stopped at the white picket fence around the church. I could not walk

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<sup>21</sup> Mennonite Brethren Herald, "Board of Faith and Life," (May 17, 2002): 27.

through the door and have an equal place at the table. As a woman I could cook the food, serve the meal, and wash the dishes but the places at the table were reserved for the men.

My journey in pastoral leadership led me through times of confusion, frustration, and anger as I tried to find my place within the structure of the church. I did not fit the mold. The years of male leadership and the teachings of the church made it difficult for me to use my gifts for ministry. My experience was reminiscent of Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers's journal entry recorded in her book *Finding the Treasure Within: A Woman's Journey into Preaching*:

I can no longer ignore that I am submitting myself to a formation process preparing me for leadership in the Church. Being thus seized by the call of the Gospel to choose life in Christ upsets my applecart, spilling the apples all over my carefully tidied alleys and pathways, forcefully throwing out the well thought-out goals. The Gospel of Life still has the power to roll the stone away from the tombs we bury ourselves in, even if those tombs are church traditions that compromise the proclamation and practice of the Gospel. With shock and pain I realize that my theological, psychological and political position in the Church is one of silence and invisibility. My practical stance in the Church is one of being willing to offer my gifts in times of absolute emergencies, a poor substitute for "the real thing." I am slowly taking my place with the many women who feel in their bones the blatant discrepancy between this injustice and the person of Jesus who offered women and men God's promise of life in abundance. Again I kick and scream silently as I open my eyes to the blinding call of the Gospel to me, a woman in the Roman Catholic Church. I had no idea that it could hurt so much when one has more to offer God's church than bringing the pumpkin pies to the church supper, when all that is wanted and asked for are pumpkin pies. I'm not even good at baking pies.<sup>22</sup>

Through exclusion and isolation, I was marginalized as a female pastor in the church. As I talked with other women pastors I realized that my experience was not isolated or unique. My research is underpinned by this intimate connection to the marginalization of women in church leadership and by my desire to create awareness in

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<sup>22</sup> Marie-Louise Ternier-Gommers, *Finding the Treasure Within: A Woman's Journey into Preaching* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2002), 58.

the MB denomination, as well as in the larger church community, of the beliefs and attitudes that keep women from entering ministry leadership.

In the introduction to her book *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd states:

In these pages I've tried to tell you about the deep and immense journey a woman makes as she searches for and finds a feminine spirituality that affirms her life. It is about the quest for the female soul, the missing Feminine Divine, and the wholeness women have lost within patriarchy. It's also about the fear, anger, pain, questions, healing, transformation, bliss, power, and freedom that come with such a journey.<sup>23</sup>

In the same way, my research speaks of the journey of two women as well as my own experience in the MB Church and our struggle to find a place to use our gifts in leadership ministry.

### **Focus of Research**

In my work in the MB Church at both the local and denominational levels I was marginalized. Although the church has opened the door to ministry leadership for women, there are attitudes and structures that still prevent women from fully embracing leadership roles. My experience in ministry led me to believe that the issues Wiebe and Reimer raised in the 1970s have as much of an impact on women entering ministry leadership as does biblical interpretation. These issues need to be examined so that women and men can move forward together to use their gifts freely in the church.

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<sup>23</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey From the Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 1.

## **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research is to give women a voice in the debate concerning their role in ministry leadership in the Canadian MB Church. Stories of their lived experiences will identify challenges that they face and assist churches in attracting women to leadership roles.

## **Scope of the Study**

I touch on some events prior to the 1981 resolution that affirmed women for ministry leadership but concentrate my study in the period from 1980 to the present. It was during this time that the MB Conference made efforts to open doors for women to enter leadership in the church.

In 2002 the General Conference of MB Churches ceased to exist. Canada and the United States began to operate their own conferences. While some of the resolutions and study conferences were joint efforts between Canada and the United States, I focus on Canadian materials for this research.

There are different Mennonite groups, some of whom have accepted women in all ministry leadership positions for years and others who are more restrictive. For this project I limit my research specifically to the Mennonite Brethren denomination.

I interviewed two women. One has been in ministry leadership but is no longer serving in such a capacity. The other is presently in leadership in the church. My intent was to find out whether my and others' concerns about women in leadership in the church were reflected in their stories. I want to give women a voice and to listen for other issues that the church must address regarding women in leadership.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH AND WOMEN

#### Introduction

The Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church bases its teachings on biblical theology, considering the Bible the central focus for study and guidelines for living. In the past the role of women in the church has been defined by a literal reading of the Bible that restricts women to positions that are under the supervision of a man. Although women have played a significant role in the MB church they have historically not been recognized as leaders. In 2006 the Canadian Conference of MB Churches passed a resolution giving local churches the option of calling women into any leadership position, including that of senior pastor, if they understand that biblical Scripture permits them to do so.

Deciding which positions can be held by women in the church has been and continues to be a theological issue for the MB church. This chapter examines

- the historical perspectives of the role of women in the MB church
- the biblical texts that appear to restrict women and how they have been interpreted by scholars, pastors, and laity in the MB church
- the role of the Board of Faith and Life (BFL) in the process<sup>24</sup>
- the issues raised by contributors to the MB Herald<sup>25</sup> and
- the perspectives of women on the issue of women in leadership.

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<sup>24</sup> The Board of Faith and Life (BFL) gives guidance to MB Churches in matters of faith and ethics.

<sup>25</sup> The MB Herald is a monthly magazine distributed to all members of the MB Church in Canada.

The aim of examining how the role of women has been addressed in the MB church is to identify a variety of issues that surround the question of women in ministry leadership.

### **Historical Perspectives of the Role of Women in the MB Church**

A number of authors have explored the historical place of women in the MB church. *Women Among the Brethren: Stories of Fifteen Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Women* was published in 1979.<sup>26</sup> The stories in this volume portray MB women from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. They are stories of faith, midwifery, and mission work, including accounts of times of terror when the Russian revolution destroyed these Mennonites' way of life. These biographies tell of the creativity and leadership skills of women who were free to work in many positions in society and in the church. Pastoral leadership positions were not open to them but they used their gifts to support their husbands and to build the church. Although women provided leadership they were not officially recognized as leaders.

Marilyn Peters traced the history of women from the early Christian church to the present-day MB church. She observed:

New movements and churches that are focused outward in mission are more open to the ministry of women. When the church is in flux because of reform or when the church is overwhelmed by the work that needs to be done, it seems less concerned about who does what. As churches become institutionalized and turn inward toward maintenance, they tend to restrict the ministry of women.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, ed. *Women Among the Brethren: Stories of Fifteen Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Women* (Hillsboro, Kansas: The Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1979).

<sup>27</sup> Marilyn G. Peters, "Women in the Christian Church" in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 171.

Her statements are reflected in the decision by the Canadian Conference to no longer ordain women in the MB church in 1957. As long as the church faced persecution in the Soviet Union and hardship in becoming established in Canada women were unrestricted in the work they did but when the church became established and secure women were restricted. This change in policy also appears to have been the MB Church's response to the larger fundamentalist movement in North America.

Katie Funk Wiebe examined the history books of the MBs and found that for the most part women were missing from these records. She did note that women strongly supported their husbands in leadership and worked alongside them. Since many of the early churches were situated in homes, not only was the hospitality of women in hosting these churches significant but they taught Sunday school, discussed missionary affairs, and engaged in direct evangelism and teaching. Their sewing circles almost became a parallel church.<sup>28</sup>

In *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century* the writers speak to the issues of church and state, theology, economics, women and culture.<sup>29</sup> The book contains three chapters on women, all of them dealing with the history of women's movements within the church. Women in both the United States and Canada began to organize in what were known as Ladies Sewing Circles as early as 1881. Women gathered in their churches to work on projects to support missionaries. When women from various churches attempted to organize and seek recognition at the

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<sup>28</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Women in the Mennonite Brethren Church" in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 180-183.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Toews, ed., *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 1995), 147-180.

conference level they experienced opposition because there were those who feared that if women were on the conference agenda, they would gradually take over the Conference.<sup>30</sup>

As she considered the women's movement in the period 1940 to 1960, Gloria Neufeld Redekop observed:

It may be significant that the flowering of Mennonite women's societies occurred concurrently with both the emphasis on women's role as homemaker and the reinforcement of women's subordinate role within the church. In the 1950s both society and the church promoted the "happy homemaker" image for women. Besides this emphasis on the role of Mennonite women as homemakers and mothers, there seemed to be an increased restriction for Mennonite women within the church. One indication of this trend was the rescindment of ordination for women. Before 1957, the MB Church ordained both married and single MB female missionaries for mission work; the ordination procedure was the same for both men and women. But in 1957, after three years of study, the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches accepted a resolution changing the former method of ordination of women to commissioning.<sup>31</sup>

In the early days of women's groups in the church the men gathered for Bible study while the women met to sew. Men came to the women's meetings to do the devotionals. A poem from the late 1940s expresses a viewpoint about the women and their meetings.

Once a few men were standing outside the church door  
As if they knew everything, and were thankful for it too.  
They talked about this and that, about women's societies.  
It's not all good that they said, "Yes," one interrupted,  
"Why do they sew so much; it's just to pass the time.  
They only gossip and turn their heads from their bodies."  
"Yes" said a second man, "They let everything else go;  
They neglect household duties."  
The third one said quietly, "We need money badly.  
Where in all the world will we get it?  
We need this and that in church.

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<sup>30</sup> Valerie Rempel, "She Hath Done What She Could: The Development of the Women's Missionary Services in the Mennonite Brethren Churches of the United States" in *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century*, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions 1995), 153.

<sup>31</sup> Gloria Neufeld Redekop, "Canadian Mennonite Women's Societies: More Than Meets the Eye" in *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century*, ed. Paul Toews (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 1995), 167.

We're sitting deep in debt, what can we do?"  
Then they all agreed to approach the *Verein*.  
It wasn't the first time they had done this.  
And when they asked the women's society if they would help,  
An auction was held and see how the money rolled in.<sup>32</sup>

Eventually women were permitted to lead their own devotionals and to run their own meetings fully. They used leadership skills to lead their meetings and develop projects. Redekop comments on what happened:

Women's societies became the context where Mennonite women, motivated by the biblical text, could serve God through the support of missions, fellowship with the sisterhood, receive spiritual nourishment, and fully participate in every aspect of their worship ritual. While restricted in their roles in the larger church institution, they made up for it in their own *Verein* meetings, in which, de facto, they formed their own *ekklesia*, in many ways parallel to the local Mennonite church.<sup>33</sup>

While women were missing from the official records of the church it is evident from the historical records that they were involved in leadership opportunities that were open to them.

These leadership roles are also reflected in *All Are Witnesses*, a book of 41 sermons preached by MB women.<sup>34</sup> Although the book does not directly address the question of women in ministry, it highlights the gifts of women in preaching. Four of the women in the book are identified as pastors while the others are listed as missionaries, farmers, artists, teachers, professors, poets, chaplains, editors, counselors, and therapists. These women provided a wide range of leadership in the church and community.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 165-166.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>34</sup> Delores Friesen, ed., *All Are Witnesses: A Collection of Sermons by Mennonite Brethren Women* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Kindred Productions, 1996).

In *Direction*, Sandra Plett reviewed the attitudes toward women as reflected in the Mennonite Brethren periodicals prior to 1980.<sup>35</sup> For the most part women were encouraged to concentrate on their husbands, children, and family life. Until 1965 a homemaker's column in the MB Herald focused on topics such as keeping baby books, writing cheerful letters, and planning children's birthday parties. The feature did not "touch on important social or church issues." Women were encouraged to sing, teach children's Sunday classes, and provide child care but not to hold authority over a man.<sup>36</sup> These perspectives on the role of women were expressed by women as well as by a male pastor.

In this same article Plett discussed the feminist movement. In Church periodicals, the main messages to readers placed the sole responsibility for rising divorce rates on women, identified the women's movement in its entirety with offbeat organizations such as WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Confederacy from Hell) and SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men), and blamed disharmony and strife in the church on feminist ideas. Women's desire for equality was seen as an unchristian attitude.<sup>37</sup> These published comments were all attributed to women.

By contrast, the scholars highlighted in Plett's articles all supported women in leadership roles. John Redekop stated that we "have made much ado about overcoming racial, educational, and economic barriers: it is high time we put into practice the notion that Christian extends to women as well."<sup>38</sup> In 1973 Allen Guenther and Herbert

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<sup>35</sup> The three major publications of the Mennonite Brethren Church are the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* in Canada, the *Christian Leader* in the United States, and *Direction*, a publication of the post-secondary Mennonite Brethren schools.

<sup>36</sup> Sandra Plett, "Attitudes Toward Women as Reflected in Mennonite Periodicals" *Direction* 9 no. 1 (January 1980): 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Schwartz wrote two lead articles for an issue of the *MB Herald* that focused on women. They made four main points: 1) the Word affirms equality before God in privileges and in gifts, 2) women prophets must be accepted as evidence of women's right to lead and teach, 3) Paul's teachings refer to marriage relationships and not church offices, and 4) women should be encouraged to use their gifts in all areas.<sup>39</sup> The writer of a letter to the editor following this issue disapproved of women going to seminaries because they were needed at home. This same sentiment was expressed by other readers as well as by a prominent pastor in the denomination.<sup>40</sup>

Historical records indicate that MB women exercised their leadership gifts in a variety of ways. But there is evidence that the leadership by women was not considered of equal importance to leadership by men. Even in their leadership roles, women were seen as subservient to men.

### **Dealing With the Biblical Texts about the Role of Women**

In 1989 the Board of Reference and Council of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches commissioned a book to deal specifically with the issue of women in ministry leadership in the Mennonite Brethren Church.<sup>41</sup> *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church* was published in 1992 along with a study guide.<sup>42</sup> This book was sent to all MB churches in North America for members to study in preparation for the 1993 convention of the General Conference of MB Churches in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>41</sup> The Board of Reference and Council (BORAC) is now known as the Board of Faith and Life (BFL).

<sup>42</sup> John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe, eds., *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church* (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992).

Winnipeg. A resolution was to be brought forward at that time that would free women to serve in any ministry leadership position in the church.

The primary purpose of this book was Bible study. John Toews stated, “the issue in the church is defined as one of biblical interpretation. Mennonite Brethren, with other evangelicals, believe the Bible is the sole and ultimate authority for questions of belief and practice.”<sup>43</sup> The Bible was accepted as the inspired Word of God and as the infallible (incapable of error) and inerrant (free from error) rule of faith and life for humankind. This principle of authority (*sola scriptura*) controlled the way Mennonite Brethren interpreted the Bible.<sup>44</sup> With this stated purpose in mind, nine of the 13 chapters in the book dealt directly with biblical texts.

Key biblical texts were used either to support or to deny ministry leadership positions for women. These texts formed the basis for decision-making.

### *Genesis 1-3 The two stories of creation and the fall*

Several scholars addressed the implications of creation order. Elmer Martens stated that the “critical issue in the biblical interpretation of women in church ministry is the starting point.”<sup>45</sup> He chose Genesis 1-2 as this starting point and explored the importance of the creation order. He recognized that men and women have equal worth but he noted the differentiation of roles:

Clearly women, to whom dignity is to be accorded, have broad avenues for public ministry. At the same time it seems necessary that a respect for role differentiation

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<sup>43</sup> John E. Toews, “Why This Book?” in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 13.

<sup>44</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, *Who Are the Mennonite Brethren?* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1984), 22.

<sup>45</sup> Elmer Martens, “Adam Named Her Eve” in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 31.

be maintained. One might envision, for example, that women would preach, serve on boards, perhaps be ordained (given an understanding of ordination as affirmation, rather than entitlement to authority). But officially designated leadership roles, such as that of senior pastor, would be reserved for men.<sup>46</sup>

Although he stated that men and women had equal worth, he underscored that men were to be leaders and women were to work in subordinate roles. In practice this restriction did not make them equal.

Ed Boschman supported this view in his interpretation of the creation story.

Headship meant that the husband was the leader and the wife was submissive. He continued:

Man was a created being and the woman a derived being. The woman is man's counterpart and is his glory because she demonstrates how suitable a being God could create from man, whereas man is described as the crown of creation demonstrating the apex of God's creative work.<sup>47</sup>

Allen Guenther took the same Genesis passages and interpreted them differently.

He stated that Genesis taught the equality and complementarity of men and women in their being and calling. He concluded that the subordination of women could not be argued from Genesis 2-3. The account of Eve sinning first did not restrict women in ministry. Man's sin was more severe but his ministry was not restricted. Guenther stated that men and women in their full equality were given the mandate to rule the created order and to procreate.<sup>48</sup>

John Toews and Valerie Rempel concluded:

Neither creation order nor headship as a hierarchical structure can be used to argue that women may exercise their gifts (the point on which all authors agreed) only under the leadership of men (the point on which the authors disagree). We

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>47</sup> Ed Boschman, "Women's Role in Ministry" *Direction* 18 no. 2 (Fall 1989), 46.

<sup>48</sup> Allen Guenther, "Equality or Subordination?" in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 59.

believe the evidence favors the full equality of men and women in creation, redemption and ministry, and therefore, frees women to exercise the gifts of ministry given by the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the church.<sup>49</sup>

The Genesis passage was considered to be the basis for understanding the relationship between men and women when New Testament passages were interpreted.

### *The Old Testament*

Lorraine Matties and Gordon Matties examined the Old Testament perspectives about women, pointing out that the women who took major leadership roles were never prohibited from doing so. Three main factors that limited women's opportunity for leadership were patriarchy, which defined identity through the family line of the male, the lack of formal education for women, and the restrictions of the priesthood. The priesthood also restricted men who were not descendants of Aaron.<sup>50</sup> They concluded that no writer in the Old Testament ever advocated the subordination of women based on Genesis 3. The creation order was never mentioned as the basis for the theological viewpoints or practice with regard to the place of women in Israel.<sup>51</sup>

### *Proverbs 31.10-31 The ideal woman*

Boschman stated that this passage "makes an unmistakable case for wives/mothers to have significant responsibility for home management."<sup>52</sup> He did not consider the fact that the woman in the passage was also involved in business.

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<sup>49</sup> John E. Toews and Valerie Rempel, "What is at Stake?" in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 200.

<sup>50</sup> Lorraine E. Matties and Gordon H. Matties, "She Speaks With Wisdom" in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 71.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>52</sup> Ed Boschman, "Women's Role in Ministry," 50.

Boschman's approach stood in sharp contrast to both the attitude of the BFL and the writings of most MB scholars. As a pastor he may have had a greater influence on members of the congregation than the scholars, who mostly influenced the academic community.

*Galatians 3.28*

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ.”

A number of MB scholars dealt with this text. David Ewert concluded that there was no difference between male and female and that “Christian women share in all the blessings of God's redeeming grace as Christian men do. It would be difficult to show from the Scripture that women are less endowed with the gifts of the Spirit (*charismata*) than men.”<sup>53</sup> However, he further concluded:

After considering the various options, we should encourage women to participate actively at the various levels of church, mission, and denominational activity. However, given the fact that the apostles put some restrictions on women, we should leave the leadership of the churches in the hands of men who have been equipped by God and are called by the congregation for this ministry.<sup>54</sup>

Ewert on one hand noted that women were no less endowed with gifts of the Spirit than men but on the other hand stated that men were equipped by God to lead.

Raymond Bystrom included other Pauline texts in his discussion of this scripture and concluded that Paul intended his message of male and female equality in Christ to be understood both spiritually and socially. He asked the question, “If this is so, how can we

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<sup>53</sup> David Ewert, “Members By Grace” in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

welcome women to ministry but restrict their functions? We should either open all functions of ministry to them or keep them from all ministries.”<sup>55</sup>

Timothy Geddert discussed Galatians 3.28 in the context of the New Testament world, specifically in the light of Jesus’ ministry and how he treated women. He concluded:

The challenge for today is to keep implementing the vision of Galatians 3.28. Several decades passed before the church understood that “neither Jew nor Greek” meant Jews and Greeks could be equal partners within the renewed humanity. Many centuries passed before the church understood that “neither slave nor free” meant that slavery could and should be abolished. We do not know how long it will take until the church understands that “neither male nor female” means both genders are called equally to the ministries of the church.<sup>56</sup>

Geddert continued by saying that “we must never lose sight of the radical principles Jesus so clearly instituted in his ministry. If we practice these principles, we will certainly make progress in dealing with the sexual discrimination still existing in the church.”<sup>57</sup> Geddert moved the focus of the debate from giftedness to sexual discrimination.

*Ephesians 5. 21-23 and 1 Timothy 2.11-12*

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior.”

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<sup>55</sup> Raymond Bystrom, “Neither Male Nor Female” in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 102.

<sup>56</sup> Timothy Geddert, “Jesus and Women” in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church* eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 86.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

“Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent.”

Toews examined these passages regarding husband and wife relations and concluded that the texts were about family order and had nothing to do with church order and could therefore not be used in that context.<sup>58</sup> These verses did not prohibit women from taking leadership roles in the church but rather that the “point of the text [was] that the unlearned wife is taught by her husband, thus giving theological content to the marriage relationship.”<sup>59</sup>

Boschman on the other hand saw this text not as a cultural mandate but rather as a God-ordained practice for all time. He wrote:

The return of dignity for the woman, who led humankind into sin, is now derived through a return of the divinely ordained role of suitable helper as faithful, loving, holy and proprietous woman and mother. Mothering is a God ordained and ordered way that restores women to rightful dignity.<sup>60</sup>

Toews, the scholar, recommended freeing women for ministry while Boschman, the pastor, placed restrictions on them.

### *1 Corinthians 11. 2-16 Head coverings for women*

Katrina Poetker tackled the question of head coverings for women. As a background to these passages she saw the creation order speaking to relatedness rather than to authority.<sup>61</sup> Sexual distinctions remained between men and women and the head

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<sup>58</sup> John E. Toews, “The Husband is the Head of the Wife” in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church*, eds. John Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 133.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>60</sup> Ed Boschman, “Women’s Role in Ministry,” 49.

<sup>61</sup> Katrina Poetker, “Covered and Quiet” in *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church* eds. John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel and Katie Funk Wiebe (Winnipeg, MB: Christian Press, 1992), 109.

coverings in the Corinthian church were symbols of that distinction. The distinction did not mean that women and men were not equal in terms of receiving divine gifts.<sup>62</sup> Poetker concluded that Paul's concern was that women be women and that they retain their sexual identity in leadership. Men and women in God's kingdom were to be compatible and mutually interdependent, maintaining family and marriage commitments while being involved in Christian worship.<sup>63</sup>

While Ewert and Martins used the differentiation of roles to give men leadership roles and to place women in subordinate roles, Poetker argued that the differentiation rested on the fact that men and women should both be free to be who they are, keeping their identities as they become leaders. Women did not have to become like men when they entered leadership roles. She saw them as being equal and different.

For the most part scholars did not mention that equality does not mean sameness. Toews and Rempel noted that role definition had changed in our society. Rather than being assigned roles on the basis of class, religion, race, gender, ethnic identity, marital status, or geographic location, people now made decisions on the basis of choice and ability.<sup>64</sup> Scholars addressed biblical interpretation but did not address other dynamics in the church and society that restricted women.

### *Pauline texts in general*

Toews examined the restrictive Pauline texts regarding women and concluded that these Scriptures did not deal with either the exercise of gifts or the question of office in the church. The issue in these texts linked ministry and decorum that disrupted worship

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>64</sup> John E. Toews and Valerie Rempel, "What is at Stake?" 202.

and marriage. The focus was on married women and not on women in general. Although Toews stated that women should be encouraged and freed to use their gifts in the church, he cautioned that the church should prophetically oppose as unbiblical any espousal of women's liberation within the church that disrupted the marriage relationship.<sup>65</sup> He did not address spousal abuse as part of this injunction.

*Biblical issues from the perspective of the laity*

The Board of Faith and Life (BFL) focused on interpreting the restricting biblical passages about women as it tried to open leadership positions for women. Writers of articles and letters to the editor in the MB Herald raised two main issues about using the Scriptures in this context. The first was the understanding of Genesis 1-3 and the second was the application of a literal reading of Scripture to our present culture.

The letters to the editor showed how a literal reading of the Bible guided people's understanding. In 1986 a reader wrote that women were not allowed to teach or exercise authority over a man, providing reasons related to creation and the fall. These precepts were not to be changed from year to year and from culture to culture.<sup>66</sup>

In 1992 a reader stated that Scriptural teaching had nothing to do with culture, particularly with institutions God had put into place. Regarding the ministry of women, what it should and should not be went back to creation and the Garden of Eden.<sup>67</sup> In 2005 a reader maintained that male headship was clearly established in the creation account in

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<sup>65</sup> John E. Toews, "The Role of Women in the Church: The Pauline Perspective," *Direction* 9 no. 1 (January 1980): 25-35.

<sup>66</sup> Kirk Durston, "Letter to the Editor," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (December 12, 1986): 11.

<sup>67</sup> Henry Klassen, "Letter to the Editor," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (May 15, 1992): 10.

Genesis 2. A woman should not have spiritual authority over a man. Men were not better than women. It was just a chain of command that God required.<sup>68</sup>

In 1987 a reader stated that letters defending women had a low view of Scripture. The reader continued to say that if the Scriptures were interpreted literally and reliance was placed on the whole Bible rather than making cultural “rationalizations,” the church would find itself so busy leading others to Christ and helping others grow in their faith that there would be no time to debate the issue of women’s role in ministry.<sup>69</sup>

Over the years similar statements were made:

It doesn’t matter what [women] feel any more than it matters what I feel. It only matters what God says in His Word. Scripture does not say that women cannot lead but it does say that they are not to have authority over men. This is if they lead, they are to lead women and children, but not men. I say to these women and others that if you desire true fulfillment, then obey Christ and forget what you “feel”.<sup>70</sup>

Another reader remarked that if the restricting passages did not apply to our culture, nothing in Paul’s letters did.<sup>71</sup>

In the late 1980s letters began affirming a new way of interpreting the Scriptures. Some readers argued that because people no longer believed that the earth was the center of the universe, they could also change their way of thinking about women.<sup>72</sup> Neither did we believe that women were saved in child bearing.<sup>73</sup>

In 1993 a reader raised the concern that churches were sending women to seminary and then denying them pastoral positions.<sup>74</sup> Another reader later agreed that it was unjust to encourage female seminary students to take pastoral training when they

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<sup>68</sup> David Da Silva, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (September 23, 2005): 13.

<sup>69</sup> Leonard Reiss, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 20, 1987): 10.

<sup>70</sup> Ken Davis, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 16, 1993): 9.

<sup>71</sup> Henry Klassen, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (November 4, 2005): 13.

<sup>72</sup> Irene Jantzen, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 20, 1987): 11.

<sup>73</sup> F. Sawatzky, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 20, 1987): 11.

<sup>74</sup> Alfred Penner, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (June 25, 1993): 11.

were barred from such ministry in our churches. The just thing would be to encourage them to take other courses.<sup>75</sup>

In spite of the efforts of the BFL to address the matter of women in leadership, there were pastors, conference leaders, and laity who insisted on a subordinate role for women on the basis of Genesis 1-3. For them the literal reading of isolated texts provided the answer to the question of women in leadership. In 1988 James Pankratz touched on pastors' understanding of the issue. "For some pastors, this is a dilemma: they recognize the practical need for female ministers of pastoral care, but they struggle with their own understanding of the Bible's teaching about women in ministry."<sup>76</sup> There was no consensus in the constituency on how to read the Scriptures in relation to the role of women in ministry leadership.

### **The Role of the Board of Faith and Life**

The Board of Faith and Life (BFL) led the MB Conference in addressing the issue of women in leadership. The resolution passed at the 1981 convention was the start of a deliberate process to involve women in leadership. In 1984 the moderator of the Conference affirmed that the intent of the resolution was to encourage women to expand their involvement in the church rather than to limit it.<sup>77</sup> The report on the 1987 convention stated that the stance of the church was to affirm and free women in the church. But that report also carried other responses.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Andy Doerksen, "Letter to the Editor," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (August 6, 1993): 18.

<sup>76</sup> James Pankratz, "Pray for your pastor," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (June 10, 1988): 23.

<sup>77</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Ministry of women in our churches" (August 31, 1984): 8.

<sup>78</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Resolution on women in ministry" (June 26, 1987): 5.

Ed Boschman, a pastor, reported that the issue being discussed concerned not the value of women, but their function. He noted that the church could not leap from affirming women to making practical suggestions for ministry.<sup>79</sup> James Nickel, CEO of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches Board of Evangelism, stated that the resolution placed Scripture in doubt or conflict and that congregations could not keep up with the academic institutions.<sup>80</sup> Readers were left with arguments for both sides of the position and no clear direction.

In 1989 the MB Herald carried a summary of the two main papers on women in leadership that were presented at a study conference on August 2-4 in Normal, Illinois. While Boschman argued against women having authority over men, Timothy Geddert suggested that churches be granted freedom to practice their convictions, even when others did not share them. He urged churches that felt led by God to call women into leadership roles do so while churches that did not feel led should not be pressured. Geddert stated that we “simply cannot call on each other as churches, districts or conferences to live in ways which are inconsistent with our understanding of what the Bible teaches.”<sup>81</sup> As happened two years earlier, readers were confronted with two messages, one limiting women and the other freeing them.

In 1993 the BFL published a clear resolution to be brought to the convention: “We resolve not to break the bond of fellowship with one another on this issue, but allow for diversity of conviction and practice in the appointment of women to pastoral

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<sup>79</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “Women in ministry” (August 28, 1987): 16.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>81</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “MBs study, but don’t resolve” (August 25, 1989): 15.

leadership in ways that are consistent with the governance patterns of the local congregation.”<sup>82</sup> The motion was defeated at the convention in Winnipeg.

In 1994 the Executive Board of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches published the following statement in response to the defeated motion at the 1993 convention:

The Executive Board of the MB Canadian Conference has affirmed the role of women in ministry in our churches and endorsed the following statement.

We will continue in prayerful study of the Scriptures and affirm that the Bible remain authoritative and normative for us. We will continue to seek consensus in our Biblical interpretation.

We understand our existing conference resolutions to mean that women are encouraged to minister in the church in every function other than the leading pastorate. This also means that women are invited to exercise leadership on conference boards, in pastoral staff positions and in congregations, institutions and agencies. We ask them to minister as gifted, called and affirmed.

We encourage the church to be increasingly alert to the gifts of women and to become more active in calling them to minister. We, furthermore, call people in the Spirit of Christ to relate to one another in mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>83</sup>

The constituency concerns of biblical authority, unity, and freeing women to lead were all addressed in this statement. The issue of a literal interpretation of the Bible was not addressed.

In 1997 the BFL reported on a survey about women in ministry. It stated that in 1996 women held 7.9% of pastoral staff positions in the US and Canadian Mennonite Brethren congregations. These positions were primarily in music and Christian education. The BFL was concerned that the 1993 vote had left too many jagged edges. The vote that sounded like a decisive rejection of women in senior pastoral ministry was very painful

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<sup>82</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “Women in leadership” (June 11, 1993): 10.

<sup>83</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “Women in ministry” (February 18, 1994): 16.

for both men and women. Again the BFL was sympathetic to the stress this issue caused people in the constituency.

After the 1999 convention John H. Redekop wrote that the actual wording of the Conference position had not changed from the 1981 resolution but that the emphasis under the leadership of the BFL had shifted from *allowing* churches to engage women in leadership to *encouraging them to utilize* the gifts of women in all leadership positions other than that of senior pastor.<sup>84</sup>

In 2002 the Canadian Conference of MB Churches developed a leadership initiative. It included helping women to recognize and develop their leadership gifts and encouraged participation in the Leading Women Conference.<sup>85</sup> Although these initiatives were taken at the Conference level, it is unclear how the information filtered to the local churches and what action was taken. It is difficult to determine how women in the pews were affected by the initiative.

In 2004 the MB Herald reported on study sessions about the role of women in leadership that were held in each province. The reports presented a mixture of opinions for and against women in leadership. In 2005 the BFL published another resolution that it intended to bring forward at the 2006 convention:

It is Christ Himself who provides the gifts of leadership to the church (Ephesians 4:11-16). Therefore, we recommend that our churches receive all our Lord's gifts and be free to discern men and women for leadership roles to which the congregation calls them and to which they are called, gifted and affirmed, including the position of lead pastor. Our desire is to empower all our members,

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<sup>84</sup> John H. Redekop, "Personal Opinion," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (August 6, 1999, available at <http://old.mbconf.ca/mb/mbh3815/redekop.htm>, accessed September 29, 2009).

<sup>85</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Leadership development a priority for Conference" (January 11, 2002, available at <http://old.mbherald.com/41-01/news-3.html>, accessed September 29, 2009).

thus moving forward the mission of God to proclaim to the world “the boundless riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8).<sup>86</sup>

The constituency was given a year to process this resolution at the local church level. It is not clear how churches actually dealt with the question.

With the exception of the report from the 1987 convention where two men spoke against women in ministry, the BFL consistently supported the concept of women in ministry. Although the study conferences dealt with interpreting the restricting passages, the reports in the MB Herald generally spoke about reactions to the sessions rather than about the biblical interpretations. While scholars and some leaders in the Conference addressed the interpretation of Scripture, it appears that people in local churches did not have access to the details of how the restricting Scriptures were reinterpreted. They continued to interpret these Scriptures literally.

Sandra Plett observed:

The academic community appears not to have the reservations concerning the changing role of women as does the broader church constituency. In the course of the 1970's women in Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches were given the right to serve as delegates at conferences, were permitted to vote, and a few began to serve on conference committees, Often much of this talk about freedom did not filter through to local churches.<sup>87</sup>

In 1997 Lynn Jost and other BFL members expressed disappointment at women's apparent lack of interest in pursuing the various roles now open to them. They wondered whether women had found more productive ways to use their energy than in Conference positions. It seemed that in the mid-1980s there had been more interest than there was now. Maybe because of discussions and dissension, women had chosen to retreat or had decided it was not worth the hassle. Jost observed “I don't really think we have a large

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<sup>86</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “Board of Faith and Life resolution on Women in Ministry Leadership June, 2005” (July 22, 2005): 15.

<sup>87</sup> Sandra Plett, “Attitudes Toward Women as Reflected in Mennonite Periodicals,” 20.

group of women trying to beat down the door to get into these (conference) positions.”<sup>88</sup>

The BFL addressed the problem by studying biblical passages but when that approach did not attract more women into ministry, no other approaches were explored.

### **Issues Raised By Contributors to the MB Herald**

Articles and letters to the editor in the MB Herald provide perspectives of the members of the MB constituency across Canada. A number of issues surfaced in the comments of church members.

#### *A matter of unity*

In 1989 Tim Geddert stated that the church should not feel pressured into consensus on this issue.<sup>89</sup> In 2005 David Wiebe, the executive director of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches, wrote that in some communities a woman in leadership would be a stumbling block to furthering the gospel. In other communities, churches needed to be freed to assign women any role, including leadership, because to restrict women would be a stumbling block to the gospel.<sup>90</sup> These leaders were open to diversity among the churches.

By contrast, the matter of unity appeared to be a high priority for the BFL and the Conference. In 1993 the BFL resolved “not to break the bond of fellowship with one another on this issue.”<sup>91</sup> The report from the convention stressed the fact that the issue of unity clouded the resolution. It was unclear whether people had actually voted for or

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<sup>88</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “A new look at women in ministry” (September 26, 1997, available at <http://old.mbconf.ca/mb/mbh3618/faber.htm>, accessed September 29, 2009).

<sup>89</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “MBs study, but don’t resolve” (August 25, 1989): 15.

<sup>90</sup> David Wiebe. “A different view of leadership” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 22, 2005): 12-13.

<sup>91</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “Women in leadership” (June 11, 1993): 10.

against women in leadership or whether they had chosen to vote against the motion in order to keep peace.<sup>92</sup>

In 1997 the BFL wrestled with the issue of unity as it pondered how to encourage the group that felt betrayed by the negative vote without alienating those who felt the issue had been settled.<sup>93</sup> In a July 2005 editorial, Dora Dueck stated:

Choosing to stay together over this issue means, essentially, choosing to yield to the outcome of the process and next July's vote before it is known. This will not be easy for those who care deeply about Yes or No to the resolution. It is this great love for one another, however, in this humble interdependence, that we will experience the Spirit's wisdom and joy among us as we decide together.<sup>94</sup>

The church's desire for peace and consensus was strong. Because the issue of women in leadership was not a confessional one but one of polity, the Conference offered the option of allowing diversity in the churches. Just as it did not ask all churches to have the same music or to follow a prescribed governance structure, the matter of unity did not need to be given priority in this situation. But the issue surrounding women was so volatile that unity nevertheless became a significant issue.

### *Some assumptions*

Several assumptions surfaced in the discussions. One assumption was that if women were in leadership men would fade away and congregations would dwindle.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Women in leadership" (August 6, 1993): 9.

<sup>93</sup> Connie Faber, "A new look at women in ministry" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (September 26, 1997, available at <http://old.mbconf.ca/mb/mbh3618/faber.htm>, accessed September 29, 2009).

<sup>94</sup> Dora Dueck, "Decide on unity first" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 22, 2005): 2.

<sup>95</sup> Maxine Siemens (King), "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (October 16, 1987): 11.

Men would not attend churches where women were pastors.<sup>96</sup> Some asked whether women could take care of children at home and still be pastors, available 24/7.<sup>97</sup>

Readers assumed that men might not be comfortable in a church led by women although it was accepted that women felt comfortable with men leading. Men were assumed to be available 24/7 and not to be involved in childcare. It was assumed that men could not look after the children in the same way women did when their husbands were pastors. These attitudes may have prevented women from stepping into leadership positions.

### *Patriarchy*

The above assumptions raised the question of how heavily patriarchy had shaped people's thoughts on the issue of women in leadership. Ron Toews remarked that the "church's powerful seldom fully appreciate the degree to which sexism, authoritarianism, racism and chauvinism are experienced by those less powerful."<sup>98</sup> This lack of awareness may have prevented some people from fully exploring the issue of women in leadership. It was safer to confine the problem to biblical interpretation at an academic level than to address the practical issues.

An overview of statements that reflect patriarchal thinking in the MB Herald over the years shows that ideas regarding patriarchy have not changed significantly in the past 25 years. Statements by both men and women from a variety of provinces demonstrate

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<sup>96</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Alberta hosts third BFL study conference on women in ministry leadership" (November 26, 2004):15.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>98</sup> Ron Toews, "An Invitation to Rethink Biblical Theology," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (November 20, 1992): 10.

that these understandings were pervasive not only over the years but also across Canada.<sup>99</sup>

Patriarchy gave power to men. Ken Braun believed that the recommendation by the BFL to allow women to assume any leadership role in the church threatened the authority of those leaders who had built their churches around the authoritarian model of church government.<sup>100</sup> Julia Toews' view was that to use one's gifts, one had to have power to exercise them.<sup>101</sup> If women were kept in gender-defined roles that denied them power, they did not have the freedom to use their gifts.

At the opening session of the Alberta convention of MB Churches on March 14, 2008 the Executive Director of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches used an illustration in his opening remarks. He indicated that he was among friends and then gave an example of how you can tell who your true friends are. If you lock your spouse and your dog in the trunk of your car for an hour and then let them out you will be able to tell which one is your true friend by the greeting you get. When confronted in an email exchange regarding the appropriateness of such a story he expressed the view that using 'spouse' instead of wife made the story work either way. He admitted that men would 'enjoy' the story more than women and that listeners did in fact hear 'wife' instead of 'spouse.' The fact that the top executive in the MB Conference would use an illustration that suggests it is all right to abuse your spouse and then to expect unconditional love shows that patriarchy is still part of the church.

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<sup>99</sup> Appendix B summarizes the comments made.

<sup>100</sup> Ken Braun, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (August 27, 1993): 10.

<sup>101</sup> Julia Toews, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 18, 2005): 13.

## *Feminism*

In a 1980 article Edna Froese observed that “[t]here has to be some other alternative for women than simply a choice between the world’s model of irresponsible selfishness that often depreciates men and children and the current Christian model of fulltime super-servant to all the family.”<sup>102</sup> The letters to the editor prompted by this article tended to focus on how feminism had affected women’s roles in regard to their husbands and families. In 1987 a man summed up his thinking about feminism. He said feminism had given women the right to vote, to work outside the home, and to join professions that were formerly just open to men. It had also given women the right to drop their children off at a daycare where someone else taught them morals and values. It advocated wholesale murder of the unborn. It was a movement of Satan and must be rejected. It had done enough damage and had no place in the church.<sup>103</sup>

John Redekop attempted to explain the feminist movement by describing two types of feminism. Type One feminists were those that were not driven by ideology but rather sought to improve conditions for those who faced unfair discrimination. Their aim was to promote equality and respect for both men and women. He described Type Two feminists as those who had a deeply seated anti-male bias, were critical of traditional family roles, and supported the notion that fairness and equality could be achieved by transforming the previously oppressed groups into oppressors.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Edna Froese, “Superwoman or Christian companion?” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (January 18, 1980): 7.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Riggs, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (April 3, 1987): 10.

<sup>104</sup> John Redekop, “Two types of feminism” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (November 20, 1992): 32.

In 1993 Shirley Unrau wondered whether women who sought leadership in the church were doing so because they were not fulfilled and respected at home. She stated that the “more feminists get their ‘rights’, the more corrupt society becomes.”<sup>105</sup>

On the other side were men who acknowledged that the church was always influenced by culture and argued that the generations that established a patriarchal system were influenced by the culture of their time just as our generation is influenced by feminism.<sup>106</sup> Women also defended feminism because it represented men and women working together for equality under God rather than being a movement driven by power-hungry women striving for their own agenda.<sup>107</sup>

#### *Women’s conferences and instruction in the MB Herald*

Officially women were affirmed for leadership roles but, like the attitudes about women and their roles expressed above, the themes of the women’s conferences sent conflicting messages to women. Although a few of the conferences encouraged women to take leadership positions, most themes in the 1980s focused on women as servants.<sup>108</sup> Women were instructed to look after their husbands and children. There was little emphasis on their own needs. This attitude was reinforced in a number of articles and Bible studies published during that time.

Vernon Wiebe outlined the Mennonite Brethren Mission Board’s policy on women. Married women were to be wives first, then mothers, then church workers. They were considered to be attached to their husbands. Although the Board made a conscious

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<sup>105</sup> Shirley Unrau, “On the role of women” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (April 16, 1993): 13.

<sup>106</sup> Len Hjalmarson, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (May 14, 1993): 10.

<sup>107</sup> Angela Derksen and Lisa Schellenberg, “Letter to the Editor,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (May 28, 1993): 11.

<sup>108</sup> Appendix C summarizes the conference themes.

effort to encourage women to participate more significantly in continuing education, one cheque was issued to husband and included payment for the work done by the wife. If MB missionary wives accepted outside work, their earnings were returned to the mission.<sup>109</sup>

Bible teacher David Ewert in 1982 wrote a study on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. He used the creation account to support the distinctions between male and female. The married woman was subject to her husband but the husband's headship over his wife could not be divorced from his sacrificial love for her. Man was made directly by God and reflects His glory; woman was made for man, and reflects *his* glory. Both had a dignity given them by the Creator. They retained this dignity by respecting male and female distinctions.

Ewert spelled out some practical applications for this distinction. Unisex clothing should be rejected by Christians because it did not distinguish between male and female.

In the world of Paul "nature" gave a lead by endowing a man with shorter hair than woman. It is dishonouring to the Creator if men wear their hair as long as that of women. Although hair styles differ from culture to culture, and from time to time, there is a law written deeply into mankind, that men and women should wear their hair differently one from the other ... [N]ature itself indicates that woman's head should be covered by providing her with long hair.<sup>110</sup>

Later in the same year Ewert in another study indicated that the submission of the wife to her husband was clearly taught in the Scriptures. This stance was not demeaning or galling, for the church voluntarily submitted to Christ out of love. He continued:

Paul wanted the Christian woman to be fully informed and to share in all the blessings of salvation. It is striking that precisely in the two passages where Paul counsels the woman to be silent (1 Cor. 14; 1 Tim. 2) he wants her to "learn". She shall not be spiritually short-changed because of her sex, but shall enjoy the

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<sup>109</sup> Vernon R. Wiebe, "Women play large role in missions" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 28, 1980): 23.

<sup>110</sup> David Ewert, "Head covering for women" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 26, 1982): 8-10.

richness of redemption with her husband. However to ordain women to pastoral leadership of churches is not in keeping with biblical teaching.<sup>111</sup>

Ewert affirmed women while at the same time limiting them.

In 1990 the MB Herald featured five women in ministry. Each woman shared her experiences and Dora Dueck summed up their reflections. She was impressed by the women's strong sense of commitment to God's task rather than pursuing personal agendas in pastoring, the generous affirmation these women received from their congregations, their joy in ministry, and the role of mentors and encouragers in these women's growth into ministry. Each woman mentioned male pastors who had encouraged her to take on ministry tasks, taught her about ministry, and gave her respect and the freedom to work.<sup>112</sup> The profiling of women in ministry was a significant step in providing readers with positive examples of the effectiveness of the ministry of women.

Peggy Voth was one of the women profiled. She touched on something deep in the lives of women when she described how her husband had given his testimony in church and mentioned that she was struggling with a sense of call in her life.

Later in the fellowship hour, I was bombarded by women, most of them older than I, who came to me with tears in their eyes and said, "We really hope that you don't lose sight of your call. Please hang in there." Many of them said to me. "I feel that my life could have been more than it was, but now I am too old to do anything about it. And I would really like to see someone like you go for it ... one thing it did for me was open my mind and heart to women who are hurting, women who are in pain because they're not sure who they are. They don't value themselves."<sup>113</sup>

After this issue of the MB Herald was published, there was a significant change in the themes of women's conferences. Rather than focusing on looking after the needs of

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<sup>111</sup> David Ewert, "Reconciling the desire for spontaneity with the need for order" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (October 8, 1982): 8.

<sup>112</sup> Dora Dueck, "Women In Ministry" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (April 20, 1990): 5.

<sup>113</sup> Peggy Voth, "Hearing God's Call" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (April 20, 1990): 8.

others and ignoring their own needs, women started to talk about their own needs.

Throughout the 1980s the messages to women had been ambiguous. They were affirmed as leaders by resolutions passed at the MB Conference but the messages at their conferences limited them to traditional gender roles. In the early 1990s that changed.

In 1991 the executive of the Manitoba Women's Conference recognized that the role of women had changed. Women were no longer mainly housewives; many worked outside the home. There were many single mothers and abortion was a serious moral and social issue. The executive led Manitoba MB women to re-examine the role they should be playing, encouraged them to become involved in new areas of ministry, and called them to focus on their practical and spiritual needs. Workshops addressed such topics as sexual abuse, violence, Native concerns, the economic problems faced by farm women, and witness to family members.<sup>114</sup>

In 1992 Conrad Grebel College supported a conference called "In a Mennonite Voice: Women Doing Theology." The conference addressed issues such as the nurturing of women's inner lives. An unidentified speaker assured the gathering that there was a higher principle in Scripture than gender and that the church no longer dared to define women more by their limitations than by their many abilities. Women and men together were called to name the fears which bound them, to pray for a reawakening to the sense of pleasure of being alive in God's image, and together to build community in a manner that anticipated God's future.<sup>115</sup>

Following the trend of addressing issues of concern to women, a British Columbia conference focused on domestic violence and sexual abuse. The organizers recognized

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<sup>114</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "The women of the 90s" (January 11, 1991): 20.

<sup>115</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Women's voices in theology" (May 29, 1992): 16.

that cultural norms were used to interpret the Scriptures. Carolyn Holderread Heggen called on the church to re-evaluate patriarchal interpretations of Scripture that assumed God prescribed the domination of women by men. While affirming that the Scriptures contained complete resources for female wholeness, Heggen also recognized that distortions of sacred text had led to distortions within the church community. The result was an authoritarian model that sacrificed mutuality for power imbalances and marginalized women. The overall context of Scripture should be used to view women. Passages should not be isolated and then used to construct hierarchal models for family and church. The church was admonished to acknowledge its complicity in systems of oppression and to take affirmative action to change structures.<sup>116</sup> A move away from a literal reading of the Bible was underway.

In 1993 the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) sponsored a lecture series on “Women and Men in Transition.” Gayle Gerber Koontz shared a vision of women and men working together in collaborative leadership for the healing of both society and the church. She emphasized that in “women-men relationships” the church must witness to God’s call to partnership, not to the fall.<sup>117</sup>

In 1993 at the Alberta Women’s Conference Katie Funk Wiebe shared how she came to grips with her gifts as a writer and scholar in an age when women were supposed to get all their identity from their husbands and their fulfillment from being model Christian homemakers. Wiebe encouraged participants to find their gifts, to name those

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<sup>116</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “Patriarchy seen as obstacle to shedding light” (December 18, 1992): 19.

<sup>117</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “Women and men in transition” (April 16, 1993): 27.

gifts, and then to use them. She stated that women needed to feel the blessing of the church in their work.<sup>118</sup>

The Women's Network, consisting of MB women concerned with the leadership question, took up the challenge of responding to the General Conference's call for women to be involved. The Network adopted a six point statement to increase the participation of women in the MB church.<sup>119</sup> At the same time women in Quebec tackled the issue of conflict resolution.<sup>120</sup> The Women Doing Theology Conference that year focused on the interaction between theology, women's experience, and the arts. Six papers were presented on atonement, forgiveness, and a new vision for Anabaptist feminism.<sup>121</sup>

As women began to branch out and to find their own voice they ran into difficulties. The organizers of the British Columbia (BC) Women's Conference in 1995 attempted to include practices of women from other cultures. The liturgy planned for the conference included not only Bible readings, hymns, and prayers but also a ritual of cleansing smoke, incense, the ringing of bells or a gong, and references to Mother Earth. Local pastors raised objections and MCC withdrew its support from the conference. MCC of BC felt it could not endorse such a controversial event that threatened to erode constituency confidence and support for the wider ministries of MCC.<sup>122</sup>

A letter to the editor of the MB Herald claimed that the withdrawal of support for this conference was based on fear and mistrust. The writer observed that the local

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<sup>118</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Alberta women connect" (July 16, 1993): 17.

<sup>119</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "The Women's Network" (July 15, 1994): 24-25.

<sup>120</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Women discuss conflict resolution" (September 16, 1994): 15.

<sup>121</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Women doing theology" (September 30, 1994): 21.

<sup>122</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "MCC B.C. withdraws support for women's conference" (June 2, 1995): 20.

pastors' objections were based on mistrust of their own church members as well as mistrust of Christians from other cultures who might express their faith differently.<sup>123</sup>

Another reader responded:

How sad that some clergy sabotaged such a conference. Which of our churches can do without the ministry of women? They feed the hungry, help the needy, care for the sick, comfort the grieving, encourage the broken hearted, teach the children and much more. They do all this, care for their families and sometimes hold down day jobs.<sup>124</sup>

The objections to the conference were raised by local male pastors. MCC put its own interests ahead of supporting women who wanted to explore something that was meaningful to them. The matter of unity and image took precedence over supporting women in a quest to find their voice. The conference went ahead anyway, with the theme "Unity and Uniqueness in Christ: solidarity through suffering, hope for holiness, spiritual nourishment." This proved to be an interesting theme in light of the objections raised. The workshops included topics such as spiritual direction, dance as embodied faith, women and their intellect, women around the world, and mothers and daughters.

In 1995 the Ontario Women's Rally searched out ways to share the message of hope.<sup>125</sup> The Manitoba Women's Conference chose "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God" as a theme and included workshops on parenting, Anabaptist martyrs, finances, and retirement.<sup>126</sup>

In 1997 the Women's Network of Ontario was formed out of a concern for younger women in the church. Their theme for the meeting was "Women joining hands

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<sup>123</sup> Elfrieda Neufeld Schroeder, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 21, 1995): 9.

<sup>124</sup> A.D.J. Janzen, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (August 11, 1995): 17.

<sup>125</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Hope for the journey: Ontario women's rally" (June 2, 1995): 21.

<sup>126</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "29<sup>th</sup> Manitoba Women's Conference" (June 2, 1995): 21.

across North America” and the talks centered on women in the forefront at different times and in different ways.<sup>127</sup>

In 2002 Canadian MBs joined a consortium of well known organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Navigators of Canada, the Salvation Army, Wagner Leadership Institute, and Women Alive to be part of the Leading Women Conference. Conferences were held in Toronto in 2004, in Calgary in March 2006, and in Toronto in February 2008. Sessions were geared to women both in business and in ministry. This conference has replaced the annual conferences for women in the denomination.

The shift in themes for women’s conferences from the 1980s to the 1990s was significant for women. Rather than focusing solely on serving others, they not only addressed social and spiritual issues that affected women’s lives but also tried to find a unique voice in the church.

### *Language and image*

Language and image have been discussed in the MB Herald over the last 25 years. John Redekop in a letter to the editor defended the use of masculine pronouns to refer both to women and to men. He indicated that the term “he” was generic and so could be used for both men and women. He pointed out that the Bible consistently used masculine pronouns for God and the church should accept the description God gave of himself.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “MB women meet” (August 8, 1997).

<sup>128</sup> John Redekop, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (December 2, 1983): 12.

Redekop's letter received a flurry of response. One reader pointed out that it is easy to avoid using male gender in our speaking and writing.<sup>129</sup> Another reader wrote that "it was a slap in the face to all women who are deeply concerned about the exclusivity of religious language and the alienation they feel in the male-oriented, male-dominated setting of our religious life."<sup>130</sup> Someone commented that since females had never been highly regarded in church structure and history, the church needed to put a high priority on the need for sensitivity, understanding, and open minded discussion, as Christ did.<sup>131</sup> Another reader responded that if women were hurting in the body of Christ, the roots were much deeper than the English language.<sup>132</sup>

In 1992 the BFL through the book *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy* affirmed that the church should use inclusive language for people.<sup>133</sup> There was no evidence in the MB Herald that this was put into practice. A reader objected to an editorial that clearly identified pastors as male and spouses as female, saying that it was disrespectful to women pastors to ignore them in this way. The editor responded that he had chosen to use male pronouns because the majority of the pastors were male.<sup>134</sup>

Another thread of responses concerned the use of gender-inclusive language for God. One woman pointed out that God was neither male nor female and that we should not assume that God's full nature is visible through the masculine gender.<sup>135</sup> A male reader stated that there were many uses of feminine imagery for describing God.<sup>136</sup> Some

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<sup>129</sup> E.L. Unrau, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (December 30, 1983): 11.

<sup>130</sup> Peggy Regehr, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (January 13, 1984): 10.

<sup>131</sup> Brigitte Wiebe "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (January 27, 1984): 9.

<sup>132</sup> Judith Hack, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 10, 1984): 10.

<sup>133</sup> John Toews and Valerie Rempel. "What is at Stake?" 207.

<sup>134</sup> Joanne Klassen, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (January 7, 1994): 11.

<sup>135</sup> Dale Taylor, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 10, 1984): 10.

<sup>136</sup> Willy Klassen, "Letter to the Editor" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 24, 1984): 9.

readers were disturbed that God would be referred to in the female gender and saw this “a travesty of biblical teaching” and “a blatant theological transgression.”<sup>137</sup>

The matter of image was raised during this same period. A report on the 1981 Canadian Conference of MB Churches convention included this observation:

While men were invited to offer a public prayer, not one woman received a similar invitation. While overseas male missionaries were interviewed, not one female missionary was interviewed. While male nominees were presented for the General Conference, not one was female. A motion was passed that limited Canadian MCC representation to the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns, thereby disallowing women to this office. While men served at the communion table, no women were permitted to perform this service.<sup>138</sup>

The report on the death of Willy and Elsie Janz also received feedback:

The heading “Conference leader dies” supports the idea, also reinforced in the article, that only Mr. Janz “served”, “was employed”, “was educated”, “devoted his entire life to ministry”, taught”, “was appreciated for his innovative spirit ... The only contribution Mrs. Janz made was to conceive four children and die. That’s painful because I am sure that anyone who knew her would dispute that.”<sup>139</sup>

On March 9, 1990 the MB Herald published an issue on “Brotherhood and Leadership.” A reader responded:

The cover features a handshake against a backdrop of an all-male gathering. The feature article on brotherhood is illustrated with the photograph of four young boys. In the first 19 pages of the magazine, 22 males are pictured in the photographs. The lone picture of a woman is in an advertisement. I wonder what the underlying message is?<sup>140</sup>

In 1995 a reader was disturbed that in an issue of the MB Herald with the theme “Hearing God’s Voice” the five feature articles were all written by men. Only a perspective article on the back page was written by a woman.<sup>141</sup> A reader made a similar observation concerning the February 10 issue of the same year. There were 15 photos of

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<sup>137</sup> Garry and Elizabeth Hiebert, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (January 26, 1990): 13.

<sup>138</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, “What did this convention mean?” (August 7, 1981): 9.

<sup>139</sup> Roberta Simmons, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (October 31, 1986): 10-11.

<sup>140</sup> Judith Dueck, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (April 6, 1990): 12.

<sup>141</sup> Ruth S. R. Wood, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 10, 1995): 12.

men and one (6.25% of the total) of a woman (excluding group photos, advertisements, weddings, and deaths). Seven items and the editorial were authored by men but only two (20%) were authored by women. In the issue on “Leaders in the local church” no personal experience or theological piece by any female writer was included. The reader concluded that “I strongly suggest that you work at achieving some gender balance in our Conference publication and that you do it quickly.”<sup>142</sup>

A male reader responded with the opposite point of view. “According to Scripture, the only place where gender balance needs to be maintained is in marriage: one woman, one man. Furthermore, both by practice and precept, leadership in the home and in the church is entrusted to men.”<sup>143</sup> In the following month a woman wrote about being deeply disturbed and hurt by those comments.<sup>144</sup>

A male MB Herald reader noticed the image issue in the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS) 1995 reports:

Truly MB women have been held below the surface. Not including large group pictures, the ratio of photographed men to women was a staggering 40:6. Five of the six women were missionaries, accompanying their spouses. In the MBBS inset in the same issue, eight males are photographed, five of them carving up the anniversary cake but not a single woman. (Chances are, however, that a woman baked the cake.)<sup>145</sup>

In 1998 a female writer remarked on the continued dominance of the male voice in the MB Herald and asked the poignant question “How long, Lord, how long?” Twelve of 13 named writers in the November 6 issue were male. Less than 9% of the material reflected a female voice.<sup>146</sup> A male reader responded similarly to the convention reports

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<sup>142</sup> Judith Dueck, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 10, 1995): 11.

<sup>143</sup> Rudy Bartel, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (May 19, 1995): 12.

<sup>144</sup> Andrea Moses, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (June 30, 1995): 9.

<sup>145</sup> George Epp, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (September 29, 1995): 19.

<sup>146</sup> Ruth Wood, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (December 18, 1998).

published in 2004. “Looking at the pictures, three words come to mind: Men, Men, Men.”<sup>147</sup> While the BFL and Conference leadership saw the issue as one of biblical interpretation, language and image also had a strong influence on how people perceived leadership in the church.

### **Issues Addressed By Women**

Women writers had different approaches to the question of women’s leadership in the church. For the most part they addressed attitudes and gender roles rather than biblical interpretation.

Esther Wiens identified some stressors for women moving into leadership positions:

- the reluctance of men to accept women in their ranks because they felt threatened by articulate or aggressive women and felt a loss of camaraderie;
- people in the congregation who were offended by a woman’s full participation in all areas of ministry;
- the ambiguities that occurred when both men and women were called to serve as deacons but the men served and the women cleaned up;
- that married women feared that to move into areas of social risk might jeopardize their husbands’ positions in the church;
- the fears that men and women working closely together would be sexually attracted;

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<sup>147</sup> Roger Thiessen, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (September 24, 2004).

- the view that the Conference was led by “pros” and women lacked the experience and knowledge to be involved; and
- that women often did not have the same level of support as men in leadership positions.<sup>148</sup>

Wiens admitted also that women had not always taken advantage of opportunities open to them.<sup>149</sup> She did not explore whether this was due to these stresses, to women’s lack of confidence to take on leadership roles, or to other factors. She concluded that there were no bitter fronts emerging among the women but rather that they continued to be involved in the church with graciousness and a deep commitment to the Kingdom.<sup>150</sup>

Linda Gerbrandt provided another perspective as she reflected on her time as a member of the Faith and Life Commission of the General Conference. She said that when she was nominated, she did not expect to be elected. She had prayed to maintain a “submissive-role” stance while sitting with brothers in “authoritative-role” chairs.<sup>151</sup> She saw praying for the work of the commission as her main focus and “especially appreciated the graciousness of one brother who insisted that a woman could be trusted with confidential matters.”<sup>152</sup>

Karen Hiedebrecht Thiessen examined Jesus’ interaction with women as depicted in John’s gospel. She illustrated how Jesus accepted women and encouraged them to serve him to the best of their abilities. In the end she posed four questions:

- 1) Do we allow women in the church to be individuals as well as women? Do we avoid hiring women as part of pastoral teams because of the sexual temptation

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<sup>148</sup> Esther Wiens, “When Men and Women Work Together in the Church” *Direction* 9 no. 1 (January 1980): 7-10.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>151</sup> Linda Gerbrandt, “My Experience as a Member of the Faith and Life Commission” *Direction* 9 no. 1 (January 1980): 11.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

they may represent to the male members of the staff? Should we not rather call men to be responsible for their own sexual desires?

2) Do we in the church assess the value of women only in terms of their ability to function within the role of wife and mother? Why is it that most of the teaching in women's groups addresses women as to their roles as wives and mothers, while men are much less frequently taught on their roles as husbands and fathers?

3) Do we in the church allow women to serve to the best of their ability? Do we tend to assume that all women have a domestic bent, an artistic eye and a "way with kids"? What do we do with a woman who exhibits special theological insight or has the gift of preaching? Do we equally affirm all women as they take initiative in exercising their unique gifts?

4) Do we appeal to the kingdom norm of equality in Christ or are we constrained by the limits of our own church subculture?<sup>153</sup>

Like other women, Hiedebrecht Thiessen addressed issues of attitude rather than biblical interpretation.

Katie Funk Wiebe in her book *Mennonite Brethren Women* explored how attitudes toward women were shaped in the church. First, an ambivalent theology left women in subordinate roles in a number of areas. The non-resistance stance of Mennonites led to a larger focus on the men who were at risk of being called into military service. Women's needs and roles in relation to the peace position were not a major concern. Women missionaries were ordained for preaching and teaching overseas but were not given the same opportunities at home. The German language used the inclusive word *Geschwister* while the English word *brothers* was exclusive. Translation of the original text could not always be reflected accurately in another language.

A second factor that shaped the attitude toward women was that historians did not recognize women's leadership as being of the same value as men's leadership. Although many women worked alongside their husbands in leadership roles, according to the

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<sup>153</sup> Karen Hiedebrecht Thiessen, "Jesus and Women in the Gospel of John," *Direction* 9 no. 2 (Fall 1990): 62-63.

custom of the day only the husband's name was used. In the early stages of the church, meetings were held in homes and women exercised fully their gifts of hospitality and participation. But these gifts were not recognized in the same way as the preaching ministry of the men. When the men were sent into exile, women also experienced suffering and pain as they managed to keep their families going. The number of women raped and sexually abused was given only casual comment due to the nature of the crime but through all these hardships women kept faith and modeled the Christian life.<sup>154</sup>

Shirley Isaac tackled the issue of God-language and gender. She discussed the assertion by Donald Bloesch that the feminine characteristics of receptivity, openness, spontaneity, and intuitiveness took second place to the masculine characteristics of creativity, initiative, and aggressiveness. Since God was a creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, Bloesch said that God must be referred to in masculine terms. Isaac argued that God was neither male nor female and that by using inclusive and female God-language we could have a more intimate understanding of our relationship with God.<sup>155</sup> The problem Isaac identified was not about hermeneutics but about patriarchy.

### **Summary**

This review of the role of women in the MB Church brings into focus several facets of the question regarding women in ministry leadership. Scholars affirmed women and their gifts. They introduced ways of looking at the Scriptures that gave the Bible central authority and moved away from taking isolated Scriptures literally to restrict

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<sup>154</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Mennonite Brethren Women: Images and Realities of the Early Years" *Direction* 24 no. 2 (Fall 1995): 23-35.

<sup>155</sup> Shirley Isaac, "God-Language and Gender: Some Trinitarian Reflections" *Direction* 29 no. 2 (Fall 2000): 169-184.

women in ministry. However, conflicting messages were sent to the constituency and to women when some pastors and Conference leaders still restricted women. In spite of the work done by scholars, these leaders continued to view patriarchy as biblical. The same ambiguity was reflected in the themes of the conferences for women. The high value placed on unity also clouded the issue.

Conference leaders and pastors who were men saw the issue of the role of women as one of biblical interpretation, while women viewed the issue through the lens of traditional gender roles and attitudes. Language, image, and the expectations women faced regarding children and family life continued to leave women on the sidelines. Women writers raised the question of what it meant to be a leader. The tasks that men did were called leadership while the many things women did were not seen as leading. Leadership was defined in patriarchal terms of male entitlement and hierarchy.

## CHAPTER 3

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND THE PLACE OF WOMEN

#### Introduction

As the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church works to include women at all levels of leadership it is important to understand leadership approaches and the place of women in leadership. This chapter examines:

- how patriarchy has influenced society and the church
- the move from a patriarchal understanding of leadership
- feminism
- servant leadership
- Jesus as leader and
- women and leadership

#### The Influence of Patriarchy

Gerda Lerner in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* explores how gender roles were used as a basis for organizing family units. Men were dominant and considered superior while women were subordinate and accepted as inferior.<sup>156</sup> This understanding was also used to organize society.

Elaine Graham points out that this assignment of roles is based on the assumption that males and females are inherent opposites, discrete categories of being rather than persons who share a common humanity.<sup>157</sup> This gender polarization assigns one set of

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<sup>156</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 217.

<sup>157</sup> Elaine Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995), 215.

attributes—including the ability to do child care, emotional work, and exploited labor—to most women, and another set of attributes—such as the propensity for intellectual work, leadership in society, and better-paid work—to some men.<sup>158</sup> Women were created to give birth while men, since they could not give birth, were made to think and create—a very divine thing.<sup>159</sup> These socially-constructed gender roles did not take into account the talents of individuals to do tasks outside those assigned on the basis of gender. Lerner explains this patriarchal worldview:

Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power.<sup>160</sup>

Men were the decision-makers while women were confined to roles that were considered less significant.

Christian theologians from the time of Augustine have used the Bible to perpetuate these understandings. It was a woman who was deceived by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Women were to be silent, not to teach men, and to be submissive.<sup>161</sup> The church, like society, treated women as subordinate to men.

### **Moving From a Patriarchal Understanding of Leadership**

In the 20th Century there was a dramatic increase in knowledge available to the general population. Post secondary education became common and with the introduction

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<sup>158</sup> Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 108.

<sup>159</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men* (Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Novalis, 1998), 22.

<sup>160</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 239.

<sup>161</sup> The passages most often cited to limit the role of women are Genesis 1-3; 1 Corinthians 11.2-16; 14.34-36; 1 Timothy 2.8-15; Ephesians 5.21-33.

of television and computers people had access to information that had formerly been available to only selected people. During this time leadership approaches began to move away from hierarchical structures toward an understanding that everyone in the organization including women had knowledge that needed to be utilized. There was a movement to identify and develop effective leadership for this new reality.

The trait approach that dominated until the 1940s identified the personality characteristics of leaders by examining great male leaders.<sup>162</sup> These characteristics included intelligence, dominance, confidence, and masculinity. Because little attention was given to the leadership characteristics of great women, the leadership of men was viewed as normative. Masculine traits were more expectable indicators of good leadership.<sup>163</sup>

A skills approach then emerged, bringing some changes in leadership theory. Women were included in the research and were generally seen as more collaborative, having social judgment and interpersonal connectedness.<sup>164</sup> The style approach used until the late 1960s added behavior as an important component of leadership.<sup>165</sup> Leadership was seen to be more than giving directions and being in charge.<sup>166</sup> The actions of the leaders in living out their expectations of others were considered key. The contingency approach used until the late 1980s recognized situational variables as factors that could

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<sup>162</sup> Ken W. Perry and Alan Bryman, "Leadership in Organizations" in *The SAGE Handbook of Organization Studies, Second Edition* ed. Stewart Clegg, Cynthia Hardy, Thomas Lawrence and Walter Nord (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 448.

<sup>163</sup> Jean Lau Chin, "Overview: Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices" in *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices* ed. Jean Lau Chin, Bernice Lott, Joy Rice, and Janis Sanchez-Hucles (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007), 5.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>165</sup> Ken W. Perry and Alan Bryman, "Leadership in Organizations," 448.

<sup>166</sup> Jean Lau Chin, "Overview: Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices," 6.

moderate the effectiveness of different leadership approaches.<sup>167</sup> Context was added as a dimension of how leaders functioned in building and leading organizations.

In these models of leadership there was an assumption that the leader had knowledge that was not generally available to the people in the organization. As knowledge became more widespread through university education and technology there was recognition that people in the organization had knowledge that was valuable for the organization. Solutions initiated by the leader were no longer sufficient in complex situations.

In the 1980s the New Leadership approach emerged. It was identified by such terms as transformational leadership, charismatic leadership, and visionary leadership. The leader defined the organizational reality by articulating vision and reflecting the mission and the values of the organization. This leader was seen as a manager of meaning who had a holistic understanding of how the organization would look when it had met its goals.<sup>168</sup>

Ken Perry and Alan Bryman observed how the New Leadership movement took into account that the people themselves were a valuable part of the system. They identified crucial characteristics of these new leaders. They cared about others, empowered and developed the potential of people, and displayed integrity. They were trustworthy, honest and open, accessible and approachable. They clarified boundaries and involved others in decision making, encouraged critical and strategic thinking, and inspired networking and promotion. They were decisive, determined and self-confident,

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<sup>167</sup> Ken W. Perry and Alan Bryman, "Leadership in Organizations," 449.

<sup>168</sup> Jean Lau Chin, "Overview: Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices," 6.

and politically sensitive and skilled.<sup>169</sup> This leadership model presented a significant shift from the patriarchal “command and control” models of the past. New leaders needed a spiritual maturity that allowed them to recognize both their own limitations and the limitations of others as they involved people in decision-making.<sup>170</sup>

The focus on people and their development as individuals led to a new understanding of organizations as living systems rather than as machines that needed to be reengineered.<sup>171</sup> Peter Senge envisioned these systems as places where people expanded their capacity to create results they truly desired, nurtured new and expansive patterns of thinking, set free their collective aspirations, and learned how to live together.<sup>172</sup> In such systems relationships become important and people are considered to be part of the system rather than apart from it.<sup>173</sup> As relationships develop, communities form.

In order to nurture growth and development of relationships within these communities, people need to listen, converse, and respect one another’s uniqueness.<sup>174</sup> They can no longer hide behind boundaries, trying to survive on their own. They need to test their ideas, share their stories and dreams, forgive, and offer hope to each other.<sup>175</sup> As people feel connected to others, they begin to find their own voices and to flourish.

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<sup>169</sup> Ken W. Perry and Alan Bryman, “Leadership in Organizations,” 452.

<sup>170</sup> Andre L. Delbecq, “Nourishing the Soul of the Leader: Inner Growth Matters,” 498.

<sup>171</sup> Beverly Kaye, “The Leader’s Role in Growing New Leaders: How successful leaders support the learning and growth of their people” in *Leader to Leader 2: Enduring Insights on Leadership from the Leader to Leader Institute’s Award-Winning Journal* eds. Frances Hesselbein and Alan Shrader (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 334.

<sup>172</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 3.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>174</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2006), 39.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

The changes in leadership approaches in the last 50 years have opened the doors for women to lead in ways that are comfortable for them. The emphasis on collaboration, relationships and the formation of communities are congruent with a feminist approach.

## **Feminism**

As with the emergence of the New Leadership approach, feminism developed in stages as it drew attention to the problems created by patriarchy. Anne Clifford identifies the three major waves of feminism that projected new social visions for women:

The first wave, of the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, envisioned women as capable of participating in the public *polis* by voting responsibly. The second wave of feminism, of Euro-American women in the 1960s and 1970s, sought civil rights and equality for women. The third wave of feminism, which began in the 1980s, takes seriously the differences in women's experiences around the globe and envisions justice for all women. In all three waves, feminists have emphasized equality and mutuality in relationships as the basis of the world as it ought to be.<sup>176</sup>

The timing of the rise of feminism paralleled the movement away from patriarchy in the understanding of leadership within organizations. But in addition to giving people in an organization a voice, feminism stresses the equality of individuals. Chittister expands the notion of equality in her definition of feminism:

Feminism commits itself to the equality, dignity, and humanity of all persons to such an extent that it sets out to secure the societal changes necessary to achieve that reality for both women and men. It rests on the notion that God did not make one sex simply for the sake of serving the other and that to the diminishment of its own possibilities. The real development of the human race, the feminist contends, depends on the equal partnership of women and men, not the oppression of one for the indulgence of the other. Feminism makes humans of us all.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 5.

<sup>177</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men* (Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Novalis, 1998), 4.

The rise of feminism introduced a hermeneutic of suspicion which examined the patriarchal approach from the point of who benefited from the structures in place. Rather than focusing on service which had always been the role assigned to women, feminists emphasized the empowering of others as a key aspect of leading. Letty Russell describes how feminist leadership embraces sharing power as a way of serving others:

In feminist styles of leadership, authority is exercised by standing with others by seeking to share power and authority. Power is seen as something to be multiplied and shared rather than accumulated at the top. A feminist leader is one who inspires others to be leaders, especially those on the margins of the church and society who do not think they are “somebody.” Effectiveness is related to how well the leader empowers those who are assigned marginal roles because of systemic racism, heterosexism, classism, sexism, disableism, and the like.<sup>178</sup>

Feminism is not anti-male but rather decries the notion of power as control of others for the benefit of a particular person or group. It values all people for who they are and what they can contribute to the community. Everyone is given a voice and no one is diminished on the basis of sex, education, financial situation or race. Leadership seeks to share *power with* rather than exerting *power over*.

### **Servant Leadership**

In 1982 Robert Greenleaf published a book on the leader as servant. He wrote that “what distinguishes a leader as *religious* is the quality of the consequences of her or his leadership. Does it have a healing or civilizing influence? Does it nurture the servant motive in people, favor their growth as persons, and help them distinguish those who serve from those who destroy?”<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 57.

<sup>179</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Religious Leader* (Peterborough, NH: Windy Row Press, 1982), 7.

Greenleaf developed a concept of servant leadership based on leading by serving. This concept is not to be confused with servitude which suggests a lack of voice for the person serving. Rather a person must first be willing to serve to ensure that other people's highest priorities are being realized. It is only after having served others and gaining their trust that a person can step into a leadership role.<sup>180</sup> Servant leaders connect to the people they lead in an empowering way. They receive the authority to lead from the community they serve because they give voice to the community.

Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges identified two key components of servant leadership. On the one hand leaders must *lead* by setting course and direction, and then they need to “flip the coin” and *serve* by empowering and supporting others in implementation.<sup>181</sup> The focus is on developing people in the organization so that individuals are set free to use their talents and reach their potential. Greenleaf states that the test for a leader who serves is to ask:

Do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? And what is the effect on the least privileged person in society; will he or she benefit, or at least, not be further deprived? No one will knowingly be hurt, directly or indirectly.<sup>182</sup>

Servant leaders build others up and are committed to their growth through encouragement and empowerment. They facilitate dialogue to build community that works for the good of the society. Keeping the well-being of others in mind, a servant leader is not afraid to admit mistakes and lead by example.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>181</sup> Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 84.

<sup>182</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Religious Leader*, 15.

<sup>183</sup> Markus Melliger, “Choosing a Leadership Model: Servant Leadership at a Glance” in *Servant First: Readings and Reflections on the Practice of Servant Leadership* ed. Grace Preedy Barnes (Indianapolis: Precedent Press, 2006), 19.

Andre Delbecq describes these leaders as *integrated*:

Integrated leaders create communities that foster human dignity. Meaningful work experiences are best found in organizations that encompass a noble purpose, are led by individuals who infuse the ethos of the organization with their greater sense of calling, and have cultures that endorse participatory decision processes. Meaningful work is motivating and satisfying; having one's gifts and contributions integrated into decision processes is self-affirming.<sup>184</sup>

The power of servant leadership comes not from position but from principle.

Persons are servant leaders because they believe that it is the right way to lead, not because it is the latest fad.<sup>185</sup> They consider both individual and group dynamics as they work toward consensus, allowing people to have a voice and using persuasion rather than coercion.<sup>186</sup> They are emotionally intelligent, inspirational, and collaborative. They work behind the scenes. They can live with ambiguity and are concerned with connecting rather than organizing.<sup>187</sup>

Mark Attard summarized the practices of servant leaders:

In their own silent, hidden and unobtrusive way, servant leaders get things done while making followers feel that they have accomplished it all by themselves ... [S]ervant leaders influence through example and convince by their presence ... [Their leadership is] characterized by interdependence, mutual responsibility, collegiality and creativity. It is plural in such a way that interdependent group decision-making becomes a normal process, where communal consensus transcends the individual's opinion and leadership is always exercised with others in a corporate way. It is such leadership that sustains trust and guarantees credibility.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Andre L. Delbecq, "Nurturing the Soul of the Leader," 496.

<sup>185</sup> Bill Millard, "Servant Leadership: A Needed Z-axis for Two-dimensional Leadership Thinking" in *Servant First: Readings and Reflections on the Practice of Servant Leadership* ed. Grace Preedy Barnes (Indianapolis: Precedent Press, 2006), 100.

<sup>186</sup> Christine Wood, "The Triangular Dimension of Servant Leadership" in *Servant First: Readings and Reflections on the Practice of Servant Leadership* ed. Grace Preedy Barnes (Indianapolis: Precedent Press, 2006), 32.

<sup>187</sup> Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 130.

<sup>188</sup> Mark V. Attard, "Inspirational Leadership Keynote Address," paper distributed at the servant leadership conference sponsored by the Greenleaf Center, Atlanta, Ga. (June 11, 1987), 6.

Being a servant leader requires inner spiritual development. Kevin Mannoia sees this development as the beginning of true leadership:

Servant leadership is not so much a style of leadership as it is a condition of the leader. Its uniqueness is not in its outcomes but in its genesis. It is not a series of activities to be mimicked or skills to be acquired. Rather, it is a mindset, a life, an identity to be forged. Admittedly, there are behaviors that are descriptive of servant leaders, but they occur as a result of what the person has become . . . . The true power of the servant leadership is ultimately found in the inner being of the leader. It begins with the identity questions that provide a solid foundation out of which skills will naturally flow with integrity and ultimate effectiveness through the various styles of leadership. Therein lies the true genius of servant leadership.<sup>189</sup>

The concept of servant leadership has created a dilemma for women. Since women have historically been designated as servants there is the danger of allowing patriarchy to continue by expecting women to simply be servants. Such an approach is a misunderstanding of servant leadership as well as the feminist view of leadership.

The worldview of feminism sees and values service differently from the patriarchal worldview. It looks with new respect at values traditionally held by women. In a patriarchal system the service of women is seen as servitude. Women are expected to serve without being given a voice. True servant leadership as demonstrated by Jesus is service that draws out the best in others. Such service becomes leadership because it seeks the good of all rather than benefiting a few. It is women's leadership rooted in this form of service that goes unrecognized. The qualities that women bring to society are therefore lacking because they are not valued.<sup>190</sup> Our society and our churches are poorer as a result.

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<sup>189</sup> Kevin W. Mannoia, "Discovering 'Servant' in Servant Leadership" in *Servant First: Readings and Reflections on the Practice of Servant Leadership*, ed. Grace Preedy Barnes (Indianapolis: Precedent Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>190</sup> Joan Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 5.

## Jesus as Leader

Jesus demonstrated a servant leadership approach that freed people to be the human beings they were intended to be. He showed them a way to live that was based on a relationship with God. In doing so he set the course for humanity by declaring himself to be *the way*. Like the great wisdom teachers of the world's religions, he made *the way* the centre of his message.<sup>191</sup> To him God was not a concept but a way of life.<sup>192</sup>

Jesus was a Jew who came to live in a Jewish world. The nation included Essenes, Zealots, Pharisees, and Sadducees, whose common goal was to preserve what was distinctively Jewish.<sup>193</sup> The kingdom Jesus announced did not look like the kingdom these people were expecting.<sup>194</sup> His kingdom was in and through his presence and work.<sup>195</sup> Jürgen Moltman states that Jesus was the *kingdom of God* in person.<sup>196</sup> Jesus was *the way*, a path of transformation leading people to a different way of being.<sup>197</sup> He challenged both Jewish thinking and the patriarchal worldview.

At the outset of his ministry Jesus announced the essence of the kingdom he personified. He stated: "The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor."<sup>198</sup> This vision would bring hope and freedom to all people. It was a vision

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<sup>191</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 191.

<sup>192</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 20

<sup>193</sup> Philip Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 64.

<sup>194</sup> N. T. Wright, "The Mission and Message of Jesus" in, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Versions* by Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 35.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>196</sup> Jürgen Moltman, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>197</sup> Marcus Borg, *Jesus*, 191.

<sup>198</sup> Luke 4.18-19.

that was ongoing, evolving, and hopeful as it stirred the hearts and minds of people.<sup>199</sup>

Jesus introduced a way of being that involved marching to the beat of a “different drummer.”<sup>200</sup> The old systems created by a different worldview needed to be dismantled.

In the prologue to his gospel, John introduces Jesus as the Word, *Logos*. The language of this prologue is similar to that of Genesis 1 where God speaks to bring creation into being. The Hebrews added the feminine Lady Sophia, the *Wisdom of God*, to *Logos*. Wisdom was understood to be present with God at creation. John brings together the *Logos* and the *Wisdom of God* when he introduces Jesus. The *Wisdom of God* was now present in Jesus.<sup>201</sup> Jesus personified this wisdom.

Wisdom, however, is often rejected. The Hebrew prophets called the people to follow the way of God, which would result in a just society for all. But so often the people forgot this message and chose their own way. Jesus, the personification of the *Wisdom of God*, was also rejected by the religious establishment during his time.

Feminism draws attention to the wisdom brought to a community by those who are at the margins of the group and whose voices are often not heard.

Jesus introduced a way of living that meant leaving what he called the *broad* way.

Marcus Borg describes this *broad* way:

The broad way is the way most people live most of the time. It is not that most people are “wicked,” but that most live lives structured by the conventions of their culture, by taken-for-granted notions of what life is about and how to live, by what “everybody knows.” Every culture has its conventions, indeed, is virtually defined by its conventions. Growing up involves internalizing the conventions of one’s culture. Thus we do not simply live in a world of convention: rather, convention lives within us. Our lives are structured, even driven, by the central conventions of our culture. We learn to value what our culture values, pursue

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<sup>199</sup> Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus*, 88.

<sup>200</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus*, 191.

<sup>201</sup> Richard A. Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 134-5.

what our culture tells us to pursue, and see as our culture sees. In short, we commonly live in a world of conventional wisdom.<sup>202</sup>

Jesus overturned the conventional understanding of the people who envisioned a kingdom where they would be the conquerors rather than the conquered. In his Sermon on the Mountain and his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus teaches the *narrow* way of living.<sup>203</sup> Power is turned into service. Peace is to be the norm. The Romans envisioned an empire of peace but they based it on a theology of religion, war, victory, and finally peace.<sup>204</sup> Jesus introduced a theology based on religion, nonviolence, and justice leading to peace.<sup>205</sup> This was a revolutionary announcement.

John Dominic Crossan reworded Jesus' mission statement: "[T]he Christian Bible presents the radicality of a just and non-violent God repeatedly and relentlessly confronting the normalcy of an unjust and violent civilization."<sup>206</sup> Violence and oppression were to become non-violent and liberating forces. This mission demanded a radical perceptual shift in thinking and being.<sup>207</sup> Jesus was a leader who demanded that the interests of others be placed ahead of one's own interests.<sup>208</sup> Leaders were to help people fulfill their inner longings and find purpose in their lives.

Jesus personified the *narrow* way in his daily life. Peterson describes this way of living:

One of the things that comes into focus as we consider Jesus the Way is that we cannot account for the distinctiveness of Jesus' way by assembling pertinent adjectives and adverbs for who he is and how he acts. The way is not an

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<sup>202</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus*, 194.

<sup>203</sup> Matthew 5-7; Luke 6.17-49.

<sup>204</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *God & Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 23.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>207</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus*, 196.

<sup>208</sup> Christopher White, *seismic shifts: Leading in Times of Change* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2006), 126.

abstraction, a slogan, a principle. It is a metaphor: a road, a path, a street, a highway, a trail, and simultaneously a person, a body that we can see and a spirit that we cannot see, speaking words that we can understand, sitting down to dinner with friends, teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum and along the shores of Galilee Lake, sailing in a boat and riding on a donkey, throwing a picnic featuring bread and fish for five thousand men and women with their children, spending the night praying for us in the mountains, dying on that Golgotha cross, rising from the dead and breathing his resurrection life into us.<sup>209</sup>

Jesus' spirituality was theology with legs.<sup>210</sup> He valued others by meeting them where they were and drawing them to a new way of living.

Jesus uses various metaphors when referring to himself. In the Gospel of John Jesus describes himself as the bread of life (6.35, 41, 51), the light of the world (8.12, 9.5), the resurrection and the life (11.25), the door of the sheepfold (10.7, 9), the good shepherd (10.11, 14), the way, the truth, and the life (14.6), and the true vine (15.1, 5). His descriptors touch people at the point of their inner longings. Bread sustains them and light is the wisdom they need to live their lives fully. A shepherd cares for them and a vine connects them to God.

Jesus was a leader filled with passion for his mission and compassion for the people. Christopher White elaborates:

Passion is not an emotion. In terms of leadership, it is a complete commitment to, and belief in, what you are doing. It is the feeling to the depth of your soul that you are doing what you were created to do with your life. Passion allows focus and creates energy that attracts the interest of others. It builds excitement and commitment. Passion is infectious. ... Passion has a companion, compassion. While passion can be selfish, compassion allows us to identify with the other. It gives us the imagination to walk in another's shoes and reach out. Christian compassion is grounded in the words and ministry of Jesus.<sup>211</sup>

As a leader Jesus drew people to himself through his passion and compassion.

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<sup>209</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way: a conversation on the ways that Jesus is the way* (Grand Rapids Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 37-38.

<sup>210</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 19.

<sup>211</sup> Christopher White, *seismic shifts: Leading in Times of Change*, 120-21.

To live in the *narrow* way Jesus called on his followers to serve. He modeled the servant role for his disciples when he washed their feet.<sup>212</sup> The act was symbolic of how he expected his followers to treat each other. He taught them about status reversal as a way of leading. When the mother of James and John requested places of honor in Jesus' household for her sons, the other disciples became angry. Jesus explained how his household operated.<sup>213</sup> He reminded the disciples that to be great in his household they must be servants and to be first among the others they needed to be slaves.<sup>214</sup>

The teaching that the disciples needed to become servants or slaves was a radical notion at the time of Jesus. Slaves were at the outer margins of society with no voice. Now Jesus taught that to be great his followers needed to deliberately become slaves and to serve others in humility and love.

The Apostle Paul describes this love when he instructs his readers to humbly regard others as better than themselves and to look after their interests. He quotes an early Christian hymn as an example of how Jesus took on the role of a servant.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross.<sup>215</sup>

Christ Jesus took on the form of a slave and through his self-giving, he empowered others through the gift of his spirit.<sup>216</sup> He served like a slave while loving as God. Any follower who wanted to live this new kingdom life had to leave the *broad* way and embark on the

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<sup>212</sup> John 13.1-20.

<sup>213</sup> Letty Russell uses the word 'household' instead of 'kingdom' as a gender neutral term.

<sup>214</sup> Matthew 20.20-28; Mark 10.35-45; Luke 22.26.

<sup>215</sup> Philippians 2.5-8.

<sup>216</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, 54.

*narrow* way that called for a transformed life, a life based on the *Wisdom of God* personified in Jesus. Through a life of service Jesus taught his followers how to lead.

Jesus was able to live this life of service to others because he was radically centered in God in his teaching and in his life.<sup>217</sup> God was his source of wisdom, compassion, and courage.<sup>218</sup> He *beloved* God as he yearned for, committed to, and valued his relationship with God.<sup>219</sup> He recognized that the power he had belonged to God.<sup>220</sup> Because he was firmly grounded in his relationship with God, he personified a way of living that was true to his mission.<sup>221</sup>

Living the way of wisdom dismantled the power of patriarchy that operated, as Chittister aptly states, “in offices and titles, in webs and undergrounds, in social clubs and brotherhoods.”<sup>222</sup> Jesus demonstrated this when he included women at all levels in his ministry. He healed them, he taught them, and he revealed himself to them as the Messiah. When he invited people to follow him he did not exclude women. He used the widow with two coins as an example of generosity.<sup>223</sup> It was women who first learned of his resurrection and were sent to tell other followers that Jesus was alive. Jesus’ service empowered people and as they cared for and supported one another, communities formed. These communities became known as the church.

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<sup>217</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus*, 221.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-23.

<sup>220</sup> Mark 1.11; 2.10; Luke 22.69.

<sup>221</sup> Jesus demonstrated how his life was rooted in his relationship with God throughout his life; preparing for ministry (Matthew 4.1-11; Mark 1.12-13; Luke 4.1-12), revealing his identity (Matthew 3.13-17; Mark 1.9-11; Luke 3.21-22; Matthew 17.1-9; Mark 9.2-10; Luke 9.28-36), teaching and healing (Matthew 14.23; Mark 1.35; Mark 6.46), feeling threatened (John 6; Luke 5.16), making decisions (Luke 6.12-13; John 17) and when he was facing a crisis (John 11; Matthew 14.13; Matthew 26.36,39; Luke 22.41).

<sup>222</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 61.

<sup>223</sup> Mark 12.41-44; Luke 21.1-4.

In the New Testament the church is called the body of Christ, with its individual members connected to one another.<sup>224</sup> Members in this body are asked to love one another.<sup>225</sup> They are to carry one another's burdens and to serve each other.<sup>226</sup> Christ is the head who binds the church together in all its diversity.<sup>227</sup> The members of the church bring diverse gifts to the community and use these gifts for the common good of all.<sup>228</sup>

Letty Russell uses the metaphor of a round table to describe the church. She states that "the round table in itself emphasizes connection, for when we gather around we are connected, in an association or relationship with one another."<sup>229</sup> Russell continues:

*The critical principle of feminist ecclesiology is a table principle. It looks for ways that God reaches out to include all those whom society and religion have declared outsiders and invites them to gather round God's table of hospitality. The measure of adequacy of the life of the church is how it is connected to those on the margin, whether those the NRSV calls "the least of these who are members of my family" are receiving the attention to their needs for justice and hope (Matt. 25:40).*<sup>230</sup>

There was no hierarchy of who Jesus and his followers served. He connected with those outside the commonly-accepted boundaries of the religious establishment. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He touched those who were considered unclean and he healed people from other cultures. All shared in ministry to each other.

Delbecq states: "[T]he litmus test of authentic spirituality in all traditions is attention to those in need."<sup>231</sup> This emphasis supports Jesus' approach as well as the

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<sup>224</sup> Romans 12.5; 1 Corinthians 10.17; 12.12; Colossians 1.24

<sup>225</sup> John 13.34; John 15.12; Romans 13.8; 1 Peter 1.22; 1 Thessalonians 4.9; 1 John 3.11; 1 John 4.7; 2 John 5.

<sup>226</sup> Galatians 5.13, 6.2; Romans 12.7.

<sup>227</sup> Colossians 1.18; 2.19.

<sup>228</sup> 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4.11-12, 16.

<sup>229</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, 18.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>231</sup> Andre L. Delbecq, "Nourishing the Soul of the Leader: Inner Growth Matters," 500.

feminist concern to include people on the margins of society. It dismantles the worldview underlying patriarchy.

Yosi Amram confirms the need of individuals to reach beyond themselves in service to others. He states that meaning, the experiencing of significance in daily activities, is a crucial component of spiritual well-being. He says that “the most frequently mentioned source of meaning for participants [is] a call to service, service to others and/or to the divine, which often leads to service to others.”<sup>232</sup>

Russell points out that the church can be such a community because it is inspired by love and not control at its source:

Power understood as the ability to accomplish desired ends is present in human relationships no matter how particular communities or societies are organized. Nevertheless, Christian communities recognize that the source of power in their life is the love of Christ which inspires and directs them. This is a style of power not of coercion but empowerment of others. Those who exercise legitimated power or authority are those who assist members of the congregation in making use of their gifts in the service of Christ’s love in the world.<sup>233</sup>

When leaders acknowledge and support authority in community rather than seeing leadership as power over others, partnerships develop that bring healing and set people free.<sup>234</sup>

The church is a unique community because its power is based on the love of Christ. To carry out its mission, the church needs the individual contributions of its members, especially those who have not traditionally been considered leaders in the church. Jesus accepted women as equal partners in his mission.

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<sup>232</sup> Yosi Amram. “What is Spiritual Intelligence?” (available at [http://www.yosiamram.net/docs/what\\_is\\_SI\\_Amram\\_wrkg\\_paper.pdf](http://www.yosiamram.net/docs/what_is_SI_Amram_wrkg_paper.pdf), accessed on 9 July 2009),

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<sup>233</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, 66.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

The apostle Paul affirmed Jesus' teaching of the inclusion of women when he stated that "there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."<sup>235</sup> He called Phoebe *diakonos* (minister, missionary, servant) and *protatis* (leading officer, president, governor, superintendent).<sup>236</sup> He accepted Priscilla as a co-worker, a missionary, and a leader in the early church.<sup>237</sup> He listed Junia as an apostle.<sup>238</sup> Lydia, a business woman, was a leader in the Christian community.<sup>239</sup> It is clear that the early church included women in leadership but over the years the church moved from including to excluding women from leadership.

In the history of the church the contributions and perspectives of women were channeled into particular areas and Scripture was used to deny women leadership positions. Christian women were socialized by church and family to view themselves as inferior human beings by reason of forced subordination.<sup>240</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian reflects on how this exclusion affects women.

As an educator, I have worked with generations of college students among whom were the bright, godly, and gifted young women whose spirits had been crushed under the impact of abusive theologies that demeaned them. Some of them have been damaged to the extent that they feel comfortable in the position of nonentities assigned to them within the patriarchal structure. Inconceivably, they have been beaten down into the state of subjection to the point of taking pride in hiding their light under a bushel and burying their talent in obedience to a false gospel presented to them as truth.<sup>241</sup>

As organizations and leadership evolved to include women, many churches re-examined biblical passages that had been used to restrict women, taking into account the

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<sup>235</sup> Galatians 3.28.

<sup>236</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, 61.

<sup>237</sup> Acts 18-19; Romans 16.3-4; 1 Corinthians 16.19.

<sup>238</sup> Romans 16.7.

<sup>239</sup> Acts 16.6-40.

<sup>240</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 162.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

context in which they were written as well as the overall teachings of the Scriptures. Slowly doors opened for women to enter formal leadership positions. But further changes are needed. Healing for women can come when churches recognize and value their contributions. Concern for human well-being is a priority for many women but it is often not valued in an individualistic and competitive society. Marilyn French states that “all feminist goals are ultimately connected to the quality of life, autonomy, pride, dignity, freedom, joy, meaningfulness, and the sense of self.”<sup>242</sup> Women need courage and support to stay true to these goals and the church needs to accept and value women who hold to them.

### **Women and Leadership**

The issue of women in leadership has led to new research in why and how women and men might lead differently. Clearly both genders have a variety of approaches to leadership and biology does not determine destiny. There are, however, tendencies that need to be considered as women move into leadership positions that have been shaped and held by men.

The rise of feminism in the 20th Century raised questions about the differences between men and women. Gender legislation and second-wave feminism were attempts to bring about equality between the sexes. Maxine Hancock states that “together they created the expectation that *all* differences between men and women were created by unjust practices and therefore could be erased by changing the same.”<sup>243</sup> Society moved

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<sup>242</sup> Marilyn French, *From Eve to Dawn: A History of Women: Volume III: Infernos and Paradises* (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2003), 816.

<sup>243</sup> Maxine Hancock, *Christian Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality, and Community* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 9.

from binary thinking about men and women to viewing differences as culturally-imposed and assuming that there were no inherent differences.

Women were invited to move into roles that had been held by men in the past. Problems arose when they were expected to behave the same way as men. In the musical *My Fair Lady*, Henry Higgins sings “Why Can’t a Woman Be More Like a Man?” as he expresses his frustration in working with Eliza Doolittle.<sup>244</sup> As he sees it, men are normative. He cannot understand why a girl cannot grow up to be like her father rather than like her mother.

Although men and women have a variety of leadership styles women do not always feel comfortable in leadership positions that have been created on a patriarchal framework. Alice Eagly and Linda Carli note differences in leadership styles between men and women:

The demands of leadership roles promote similarity in male and female leaders. Still, even among managers in the same role, some sex differences have been detected. Women, more than men, have a democratic, participatory, collaborative style. However, this tendency erodes somewhat when women are in male-dominated roles. Because women in senior management are rare, particularly in large corporations, they very often lead in much the same way as their male counterparts do. It is when leader roles are more integrated that women are more likely to exceed men in displaying democratic, participatory styles as well as interpersonally oriented styles.<sup>245</sup>

Peter Senge confirms that women have a role to play in less hierarchal organizations. “It is also clear that women gravitate toward longer-term issues that lie at the periphery of most businesses’ attention, like sustainability, and approach these from a standpoint of collaboration and discovery rather than solutions and plans.”<sup>246</sup> It is

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<sup>244</sup> *My Fair Lady* is a Warner Studio production released in 1964. The lyrics were written by Alan Jay Lerner.

<sup>245</sup> Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth*, 133.

<sup>246</sup> Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, 368.

important to foster openness that allows for change in leadership approaches.<sup>247</sup> These changes must incorporate interests and attributes women may bring to leadership.

Feminism stresses shared power in leadership to bring about change. Chittister explains that when power is shared, people become everything they can be, and the power of the group rises with new clarity.<sup>248</sup> This power does not control. Instead, it releases the gifts of individuals. It moves away from the hierarchical structure and opens another way of leading for both women and men.

As women are freed to live out this understanding of leadership change happens. Carol Becker found that the styles of leadership multiplied when women entered church leadership in significant numbers. She identified the willingness to share information, the ability to negotiate, a concern for human relationships, the ability to juggle many tasks at once, and a preference for participatory management as some characteristics of women in church leadership.<sup>249</sup>

Russell found that women clergy emphasized the contextual aspect of their ministry and preferred not to be “set apart” from the congregation. This emphasis on relationship is a new style in ministry.<sup>250</sup> Joan Campbell describes the style of women’s leadership as relational, connectional, flexible, intimate, and passionate.<sup>251</sup>

Kim Campbell, former Canadian prime minister, made similar observations about women in organizations. “What I think is interesting is when women become present in greater numbers, they have greater confidence in being women. And not only do they

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<sup>247</sup> Peter M. Senge, “Peter Senge and the Learning Organization,” 6.

<sup>248</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 68.

<sup>249</sup> Carol E. Becker, *Leading Women; How Church Women Can Avoid Leadership Traps and Negotiate the Gender Maze* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 38-42.

<sup>250</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, 52.

<sup>251</sup> Joan Brown Campbell, “Toward a Renewed Community of Women and Men,” in *Women and the Church: The Challenge of Ecumenical Solidarity in an Age of Alienation*, ed. Melanie A. May (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 85-87.

then speak in different voices—and perhaps we begin to see if there are any differences in the outlook—but they also change the culture.”<sup>252</sup>

Dee Dee Meyers, who served as press secretary to President Clinton, worked at a high profile job that had always been held by men. She noted:

Sometimes, it takes one woman; sometimes it takes many. Almost always, I’ve found, when there are enough women in the room so that everyone stops counting, women become free to act like women. It’s then that we can eliminate double standards and accept that men and women are different—and that they bring a different range of experiences, skills, and strengths to public life. It’s then that we can start to value women as much as men and to retool our institutions to fit a broad range of choices that women—and men—make. It’s then that we can expand our definition of leadership—and of the language we use to describe it . . . We’ll have stronger communities and a fairer society. We’ll be able to reduce conflict and build a better future.<sup>253</sup>

Although current leadership approaches embrace women’s skills in communication and networking, there are still attitudes that discourage women. Jean Lau Chin found women faced a complexity of issues that included perceptions and expectations:

Many women commented about how they are diminished when they demonstrate “feminine traits” in their leadership styles. They also felt constrained by how they should behave given gender attributions placed on their behaviors. All too often, behaviors associated with femininity are rated as negative with respect to leadership. Tears signal weakness while nurturing leadership styles are viewed as lacking substance. Conversely, women are also viewed negatively when they adopt styles and characteristics of men leaders. An aggressive and direct man is often viewed as forthright and taking charge as a leader while the same behavior in women is viewed as overbearing and angry.<sup>254</sup>

In spite of changes in leadership approaches, a patriarchal worldview can still set the standard for what is valued. Competition, rather than the feminist mindset which

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<sup>252</sup> Kim Campbell quoted in Dee Dee Myers, *Why Women Should Rule the World*, 240.

<sup>253</sup> Dee Dee Myers, *Why Women Should Rule the World*, 240.

<sup>254</sup> Jean Lau Chin, “Overview: Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices” in *Women and Leadership: Transforming Visions and Diverse Voices* eds. Jean Lau Chin, Bernice Lott, Joy K. Rice and Janis Sanchez-Hucles (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 14.

assumes that the test of humanity lies in making sure that all the paths in life are open and that no one gets left behind, is valued.<sup>255</sup> A challenge for the church is to understand and value the variety of approaches that women and men bring to leadership positions. If, as research suggests, women tend to use a more participatory form of leadership the church must examine its structures and policies so that it can accept this approach as equally valid to a hierarchical structure.

### *Biology*

Brain research reveals significant differences in the construction and operation of women's and men's brains. Louann Brizendine explains:

Under a microscope or an fMRI scan, the differences between male and female brains are revealed to be complex and widespread. In the brain centers for language and hearing, for example, women have 11 percent more neurons than men. The principal hub of both emotion and memory formation—the hippocampus—is also larger in the female brain, as is the brain circuitry for language and observing emotions in others. This means that women are, on average, better at expressing emotions and remembering details of emotional events. Men, by contrast, have two and a half times the brain space devoted to sexual drive as well as larger brain centers for action and aggression.<sup>256</sup>

Brain structures show that females perform the same cognitive functions as males but use different brain circuits.<sup>257</sup> One type of brain should not be considered superior to the other.

Patriarchy has distorted the value of the attributes possessed by both men and women. Reasoning has been accepted as a superior attribute while emotions are generally viewed as a sign of weakness. In the WordPerfect thesaurus there are 29 synonyms for

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<sup>255</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 134.

<sup>256</sup> Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 7.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

emotional, 22 of which appear negative.<sup>258</sup> While men and women may have strengths in different areas, it is wrong to ignore both men's emotions and women's ability to reason.

Women are often described negatively as relying on their feelings. Chittister explains the importance of feelings:

Without feeling, living becomes one long journey to nowhere that tastes of nothing. Take feeling away, and we take away life. Feeling warns us of our excesses and alerts us to possibilities. It attaches us and opens us and warns us of danger. Because of our feelings we are able to persevere through hard times and find our way in good times. Feelings lead us to people who love us through life and satisfy our souls when nothing else about the situation can sustain us at all. Feelings, devoid of thought, made only of mist, become the inner lights that lead us out of harm's way and home to our better selves. Feeling leads us to love the God we can not see and to see the God around us whom we have yet to come to love. To talk about a spiritual life without feeling, to talk about any life at all without feeling, turns the soul to dust and reduces spirituality to the most sterile of initiatives.<sup>259</sup>

To diminish the value of feelings is to lose our humanity.

The centre for aggression is larger in men. Patriarchal societies have traditionally given men power to be aggressive in both public and private domains. Social conventions have diminished both men and women by teaching men to make gains by force and women to make their way by seduction.<sup>260</sup> Patriarchy tends to devalue women's responses of compassion and conciliation.<sup>261</sup> It is these traits, however, which are often more comfortable for women. Chittister comments on how these differences are seen in practice:

A system organized in pyramids, on the one in control of the many, needs force to maintain it .... Uniformed conquerors are a dime a dozen. What is lacking in this picture of the parades that celebrate them is the faces of their victims, the thousands of women made refugees, the children starved to death, the families destroyed by force masking as reason. But from a spiritual perspective, it is none

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<sup>258</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 51.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

of these. It is patriarchy untempered by feminism. It is everything associated with femaleness depreciated. It is reason without feeling and feeling without reason. In systems like this, when women get emotional, they call it hysteria and sedate them. When men get emotional, they call it war and pronounce it holy.<sup>262</sup>

Feminism rejects patriarchy with its the acceptance of violence and centers instead on nurturing life.

Biological factors cause women and men to handle stress differently. Studies by Laura Cousino Klein and Shelley Taylor showed that “when men are stressed, they get in someone’s face—or retreat into their proverbial caves .... Women were more likely to respond to stress in their own way; by hanging out with their kids or talking things over with a friend or family member, a pattern of behavior which they called ‘tend and befriend.’”<sup>263</sup> Women tend to form relationships and in this way establish support systems for themselves.

Evidence suggests that differences in the brains of women and men influence their behaviors and emotions. Patriarchy has placed a greater value on male attributes. As a result, feminist commitments to peace, freedom, dignity, respect, compassion, and mutuality have paled in the shadow of masculinist power, force, control, and domination.<sup>264</sup> Again, both women and men reflect a range of attributes but the church must recognize that as women enter leadership positions they may emphasize characteristics that have not been highly valued in the past. Openness to these attributes is needed so that women can incorporate them into their leadership approaches.

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>263</sup> Dee Dee Myers, *Why Women Should Rule the World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 86-87.

<sup>264</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 6.

## *Communication*

The physical make-up of male and female brains impacts the skills each develop. Susan Pinker concludes that the “female edge in verbal fluency appears so early in life and is so consistent over time and across cultures that the science of sex differences must be involved.”<sup>265</sup> Changes in the teen years have further effects on these differences.

Brizendine explains:

As estrogen floods the female brain, females start to focus intensely on their emotions and on communication—talking on the phone and connecting with girlfriends at the mall. At the same time, as testosterone takes over the male brain, boys grow less communicative and become obsessed with scoring—in games and in the backseat of a car. At the point when boys and girls begin deciding trajectories of their careers, girls start to lose interest in pursuits that require solitary work and fewer interactions with others, while boys can easily retreat alone to their rooms for hours of computer time.<sup>266</sup>

These verbal and communication skills have an impact on the careers women choose and how they view leadership.

Pinker found that most cognitive scientists and “difference” feminists share the portrait that on the average “women have more expansive interests, better social and communication skills than men, and are better at guessing the impact of their words and behavior on others.”<sup>267</sup> She found that girls and women, on average, make more eye contact than men when communicating and show more empathy towards friends and family. They demonstrate signs of these skills from early infancy, well before they can absorb any cultural expectations about women as nurturers.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Susan Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap* (Toronto: Random House, 2008), 37.

<sup>266</sup> Louann Brizendine, *The Female Brain*, 7.

<sup>267</sup> Susan Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox*, 75.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

The greater desire for communication and the need for relationships in women confirm that women may be more comfortable with collaborative rather than hierarchical leadership approaches. Introducing structures that allow for more collaboration rather than top-down decision-making may help to attract women into leadership positions.

### *Values*

The differences between women and men cause them to hold different values. In every society, women show more nurturing behavior, and often value their relationships more than they value competition.<sup>269</sup> A 2005 survey of Ivy League students showed that 60 percent of the women had already decided that when they became mothers, they planned to cut back or stop working altogether.<sup>270</sup> The desire to care for others was there before they were married or had a family. Need did not dictate their choices.

Minnesota labor sociologist Phyllis Moen interviewed 760 people about why they chose to retire early. The majority of the women gave caring for a loved one as the reason they stepped down. Most men said they had retired early because they hated their jobs or were offered a buyout.<sup>271</sup> Other research indicates that the primary reason women take time out from work is for “family time,” while men do so to change careers.<sup>272</sup> Even later in life many women tend to choose family and loved ones over a career.

For generations, differences between men and women have been used to define women as less competent, less intelligent, and less valuable. These painful experiences

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<sup>269</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>270</sup> Louise Story, “Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2005.

<sup>271</sup> Phyllis Moen and Joyce Altobelli, *Strategic Selection as a Retirement Project, the Crown of Life: Dynamics of the Early Postretirement Period*, *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, ed. Jacqueline Boone James and Paul Wink, vol. 26 (New York: Springer, 2006).

<sup>272</sup> Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 57.

have at times discouraged not only research, but even honest conversation.<sup>273</sup> Even if the conflict between having a high-powered job and having a family is eliminated, the mysteries of innate aptitude and interest are unraveled, and discrimination is rooted out, there will *still* be more women in social psychology and more men in engineering.<sup>274</sup> It is important to recognize these differences not in terms of superiority and inferiority but rather as genuine gifts that must be valued and used.

Devaluing women's preferences is an unintended aspect of expecting the sexes to be the same. To accept and honor the differences can help create a better and more just society. A danger for the church is to accept women as nurturers who look after the needs of others behind the scenes without giving them a voice in leadership. As the church incorporates the nurturing values of women as part of leadership it will grow toward a greater sense of wholeness

### *Women's Reality*

Women's desire for part time work and flexible hours puts them at a disadvantage when they compete for jobs with men who do not have the same responsibilities. Eagly and Carli found that women still carry more responsibilities at home than men do:

Women's domestic work far exceeds that of men. Women spend more time doing housework and caring for children than men do. Typically women are also responsible for making appointments for family members, caring for old and sick family members, and arranging children's activities. They provide the glue that holds families together by maintaining connections with extended family, preparing celebrations for family events, sending cards, visiting neighbours and so on.<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Dee Dee Myers, *Why Women Should Rule the World*, 80.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>275</sup> Alice H. Eagly and Linda L. Carli, *Through the Labyrinth*, 49.

Married women, even those at the top of their professions, still provide 2.1 hours of childcare for every hour contributed by their husbands.<sup>276</sup>

While many women want to be available to their families, this responsibility is not always seen as positive. Time spent at home is sometimes labeled as tending to the mundane matters of hearth and home.<sup>277</sup> Devaluing the work women do in the home can lead to feelings of insecurity. Emma Keller in her book *The Comeback* tells stories of women who chose to step out of their careers to look after their families. She found that the greatest hurdle in returning to work was a lack of self esteem.<sup>278</sup> When the work women do in the home is not considered to be of great significance, their self esteem suffers. Valuing family relationships more than careers can have a negative impact on women. Loss of self-worth and reduced career opportunities affect not only how women see themselves but also how society views them.

Many women, especially single mothers, face another reality. These women are often forced to work part-time and do not receive benefits. Chittister points out that “lawmakers cut back on welfare payments in order to force people to work and then blame working mothers for the deteriorating state of child development.”<sup>279</sup> As resources dwindle, patriarchy and feminism are locked in a battle. Patriarchy calls for competitiveness and considers it fair that some should suffer while others prosper. But feminism seeks the common good for all in society and calls it justice.<sup>280</sup> The church must find ways to support women in leadership who face these realities.

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>277</sup> E. Lee Grady, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women: How the Bible has been used to keep women in spiritual bondage* (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2000), 204.

<sup>278</sup> Emma Gilbey Keller, *The Comeback* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 220.

<sup>279</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 135.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 136.

## Conclusion

The transformational and servant leader approaches began a journey of changing how people viewed organizations and leaders. People were valued for their skills and the input they provided in fulfilling the mission of the organization. Systems thinking focused on the interconnectedness of actions and people. Relationships became important. As people accepted a way of seeing beyond gender roles, change started to happen.

The church was slower to address traditional gender roles because the Scriptures were used to support the leadership of men and the subordination of women. When a faith system is based on a particular reading of the sacred writings changes are difficult. Questions are raised about what else will be changed. Changes will threaten present structures as well as those who presently hold power.

Jesus introduced a radical way of living by personifying the *Wisdom of God* through living and teaching a God-centered life, a life of service to others based on love. Feminist spirituality is a call to live this gospel, not the prevailing culture.<sup>281</sup> It seeks to dismantle patriarchy that has bound people by benefiting some men and devaluing women.

Chittister explains how feminism calls us to a new worldview:

Like patriarchy, feminism, too, is a worldview, a way of relating to the rest of the world, a consciousness of the equality of differences. The difference between patriarchy and feminism is that feminism looks at life from the other side, the underside, the forgotten side. Feminism critiques cultures built on power for some and powerlessness for many. Feminism makes us ask what it would take to build societies in which some people were not written out of the public arena before they ever had a chance to get into it in the first place. When we seek the right to quit the power game, to render the face of humanity to include the excluded, to

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<sup>281</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh*, 37.

realize that no one part of us is the norm for all of us, feminism becomes a reality.<sup>282</sup>

This worldview calls for the radical living that Jesus called the *narrow way*.

Feminist theologians are calling people to faith-based actions that bring healing in our culture. They remind us that the Spirit of God is central to all social transformation.<sup>283</sup> Feminists need to continue challenging systems that marginalize women. Caitriona Reed explains that “masculine and feminine are not absolute opposites, abstract points at either end of a continuum . . . . Masculinity and femininity are like points on the compass. We move between them in an ocean of limitless possible manifestation, among attributes that are interchangeable and overlapping.”<sup>284</sup> When the barrier between the genders is broken, countless possibilities emerge for both women and men to respond to their inner calling in an authentic way.

The spirituality of leaders needs to be radically God-centered. Chittister insists that “any spirituality that justifies oppression, invisibility, domination, and exploitation mocks the very essence of Christianity.”<sup>285</sup> Russell echoes this view when she states that leadership “will only truly be in the round when it functions to carry out the calling of Jesus Christ to make all persons welcome as they gather around God’s table of New Creation.”<sup>286</sup> Women and men, people of various races, sexual orientations, and economic and educational backgrounds must be given a voice. Leadership then becomes a shared responsibility where no one is oppressed.

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 37-38.

<sup>283</sup> Helen LaKelly Hunt, *faith and feminism: A Holy Alliance* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), xxv.

<sup>284</sup> Caitriona Reed, “not a man” in *what makes a man: 22 writers imagine the future* ed. Rebecca Walker (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 162.

<sup>285</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *A Heart of Flesh*, 47.

<sup>286</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, 73-74.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### APPROACH TO THE RESEARCH

#### Background of the Study

This research project broadens the debate concerning women in ministry leadership in the MB Church by retelling the stories of two women who have served as leaders in the church. To this point the discussions in the church have focussed on biblical interpretation. Examining the experiences of two women in leadership will add another dimension to the debate. Thomas Schram states that the purpose of a study like this is “not so much to achieve closure in the form of definitive answers to problems but rather to generate questions that raise fresh critical awareness and understanding of the problem.”<sup>287</sup> The stories of women’s experiences in leadership offer insight for the MB Church as it continues to encourage women to accept these positions.

These stories have broader implications. Feminism asserts that all of creation needs to be freed from oppression. We must respect the dignity of all. Rosemary Radford Ruether explains:

Women, as the denigrated half of the human species, must reach for a continually expanding definition of inclusive humanity—inclusive of both genders, inclusive of all social groups and races. Any principle of religion or society that marginalizes one group of persons as less than fully human diminishes all of us. In rejecting androcentrism (males as norms of humanity), women must also criticize all other forms of chauvinism: making white Westerners the norm of humanity, making Christians the norm of humanity, making privileged classes the norm for humanity. Women must also criticize humanocentrism, that is, making humans the norm and the crown of creation that diminishes the other beings in the community of creation. This is not a question of sameness but a recognition of value, which at the same time affirms genuine variety and particularity. It reaches for a new mode of relationship, neither a hierarchical model that diminishes the potential of the “other” nor an “equality”

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<sup>287</sup> Thomas H. Schram, *Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry: Mindwork for Fieldwork in Education and the Social Sciences* (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), 6.

defined by a ruling norm drawn from the dominant group; rather a mutuality that allows us to affirm different ways of being.<sup>288</sup>

Stories of the lived experiences of women help us understand how other marginalized groups experience the church. In turn, we can extend this understanding not only to other people but to all of creation.

### **Choosing Narrative Inquiry**

I was drawn to the narrative inquiry approach because it was congruent for me both theoretically and emotionally. Human beings are “storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Thus the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world.”<sup>289</sup> Scholars and researchers have examined the history of women in the church and studied the Scripture passages that appear to restrict the ministry of women. Missing from the research are the stories of the lived experience of women in ministry leadership.

Feminist theology provided a background to help me understand the tensions I was experiencing around the issue of women in leadership. Anne Clifford defines feminism as “women’s critical awareness of how a culture controlled in meaning and action by men, for their own advantage, oppresses women and dehumanizes men.”<sup>290</sup> The structures and practices of the church have been based on a reading of the Bible that placed women in subordinate positions.

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<sup>288</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 20.

<sup>289</sup> F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” *Educational Researcher* 19, no. 5 (1990): 1.

<sup>290</sup> Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 268.

These biblical texts were reinterpreted and a resolution was passed in the MB Church to allow women into leadership positions. But churches need to hear the stories of women if they want to know whether the practices and attitudes of the past still affect women in ministry. This research tells the stories of women and gives them a voice as part of the process of exploring changes the MB Church needs to make to attract women into leadership ministry.

This research approach recognizes the importance of listening to the voices of others' experiences. Like feminist theology, narrative inquiry emphasizes 1) not speaking for another, 2) using the experience of individuals as primary data, and 3) engaging this ongoing process of awareness to bring about change.

When study conferences were held across Canada to debate the issue of women in leadership, men made the presentations. From the perspective of a feminist theologian the time has come for women to tell their stories to provide a perspective that is missing from the debate. Their stories are a way of understanding the challenges they face. The narrative approach that describes the experiences of a particular racial, ethnic, geographic, or, as in this case, gendered experience in a particular context is suited to extending the debate about women in leadership in the MB Church.

Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly examined a framework for narrative inquiry. This framework allows the researcher to travel inward and outward, backward and forward situated within place.<sup>291</sup> Storytellers move through all these dimensions as they talk about and reflect on their experiences. Travelling in all these directions lets us examine the interrelatedness and complexity of a series of experiences. As I listened to

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<sup>291</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2000), 19.

their stories, the women moved from external experiences to inner realities. They were able to reflect on their past experiences but to also project hope for the future.

While narrative inquiry examines the stories of individuals and groups, it is not to be confused with ethnography, which has a different focus. Narrative inquiry examines the stories of individuals or groups, while ethnography focuses on culture. The focus of narrative inquiry is the phenomena that can be observed.

Narrative inquiry may not lead to a right or wrong answer to a question. Instead, it may raise more questions or lead to a better understanding of the complexity of an issue.

Thomas Schram states:

Qualitative inquiry is not a search for knowledge for the knowledge's sake (or for knowledge that is simply "out there"), but a search for the *significance* of knowledge. In this sense interpretation really has nothing to do with proving things right or wrong, predicting or controlling. Interpretation demonstrates its worth through its explanatory power and its capacity to impact or inspire the practice of others.<sup>292</sup>

We need the stories of women in ministry to inspire men and women in the MB Church to find ways of using their gifts for ministry. These stories will lead to better understandings of how women experience leadership in the church and what changes might attract women into ministry leadership.

By telling the stories of women in ministry leadership I hope to raise awareness in the MB Church constituency of how two women experienced church leadership. The reality of their lived experiences moves the debate from an abstract, theological discussion to a personal conversation with a human face.

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<sup>292</sup> Thomas H. Schram, *Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry*, 10.

## Personal Perspective

As a researcher I came to this study with first-hand experience in leadership in the church. I grew up in the MB Church and served in various positions in my local church and in the MB Conference. These were life-giving experiences and I was able to use my interests to serve. In spite of the joy of ministry there was a dissonance between who I was as a person and what was expected of me in the various ministries. This tension led me to question attitudes and expectations in the church.

Schram describes this stage of inquiry as “working at a level of creative discomfort with any number of hunches, nagging concerns, and curiosities. Casual observations into others’ experiences, political commitments, scholarly or professional interest, and even serendipity are playing off each other to bring into question the way you are viewing an issue or set of circumstances.”<sup>293</sup> My discomfort led to further questioning.

I wondered whether my experience of being marginalized was unique or whether other women had similar experiences. Through informal conversations I heard other women’s stories and was intrigued. It seemed that the challenges they faced were not the issues that had been addressed by the church. Rather, like me, they struggled to match their gifts to the structures and policies in the church. These talented women had a heart for ministry but there were tensions in their lives as they worked in leadership positions in the church.

These tensions appeared to be related to the context in which they worked. Although they had been successful in their careers outside the church, there was a thread of dis-ease in their lives as they worked in the church. Schram recognized the importance of the context when he stated that “ideas, people, and events cannot be fully understood if

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<sup>293</sup> Thomas H. Schram, *Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry*, 18-19.

isolated from the circumstances in which and through which they naturally occur.”<sup>294</sup> I realized that recording the stories of women in ministry in the church would add a significant piece of research to the question of women in leadership.

My first-hand knowledge and experience made it clear that the problem of attracting women into leadership was more than a question of biblical interpretation. Schram indicates that for the researcher direct personal experience feeds substantially into the practical purposes of the research. These purposes, distinct from the researchable aims, pertain to real-life applications directed at change, improvement, or advocacy that the research will inform.<sup>295</sup> My experience prompted me to examine the perspectives and insights of women in leadership so I could understand the challenges they face in ministry. Their stories offer insights that have not been addressed in the process of encouraging women to be involved in leadership in the MB Church. The aim of my research is to show that the problem of attracting women into leadership is too complex to be solved by passing a resolution.

### **Beginning the Study**

The first component of my study involved researching what has been done to include women in ministry in the MB Church. My journey began in two places:

1. I visited the Canadian MB Conference headquarters in Winnipeg.<sup>296</sup> I began a journey of reading material specifically written about women in the MB Church.
2. I read the research done by Douglas Heidebrecht about the hermeneutical strategies that have been applied by the Mennonite Brethren to understand the role

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>296</sup> The offices are located at 1310 Taylor Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

of women in church leadership.<sup>297</sup> This work provided me with insight about how the issue has been addressed in the past. I also found sources for further reading.

Next, I examined writings about and by MB women in the church. Katie Funk Wiebe explored the history books of the MBs and found that for the most part women were missing from these records.<sup>298</sup> Marilyn Peters traced the history of women from the early Christian church. She discovered that when the church faced difficult times women worked alongside men but in good times the church tended to become institutionalized and women were restricted in their ministry.<sup>299</sup> Sewing circles that developed to support missionary activities gave women an avenue for leadership in the church.<sup>300</sup>

Much of the writing about women in the church since the 1980s has focused on the role of women in ministry leadership. The debate has taken place at a scholarly level, involving seminary teachers and conference leaders. The main topic of discussion has been biblical interpretation.

Other historical writings that have surfaced recently are biographies and novels about women, especially about life during the Russian revolution and the early years of the Mennonites in Canada. These books tell the stories of women who struggled in difficult times and provided leadership in their families, but they do not address theological perspectives or the influence of women in the church.

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<sup>297</sup> Douglas Heidebrecht, *Sisters Leading Brothers? The Hermeneutical Journey of the Mennonite Brethren*. An unpublished thesis for the degree of Master of Sacred Theology, March 2003.

<sup>298</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Women in the Mennonite Brethren Church," 173-189.

<sup>299</sup> Marilyn G Peters, "Women in the Christian Church," 157-171.

<sup>300</sup> Gloria Neufeld Redekop, "Canadian Mennonite Women's Societies: More Than Meets the Eye" *Bridging Troubled Waters: The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Twentieth Century*, 165-174.

The second component of my study involved researching Mennonite Brethren publications to see how scholars and laity in the church have understood the question of women in ministry leadership.

*Direction* began publication in 1972 and has published scholarly articles written by both men and women on the subject of the role of women in the church. In the 1970s women identified challenges to leadership ministry from their perspective. These writings have largely been ignored in subsequent discussions about the role of women.

Sandra Plett has reviewed the attitudes toward women reflected in Mennonite periodicals prior to 1980.<sup>301</sup> I reviewed MB Herald articles from 1980 to the present to examine the issues raised regarding women. Articles, reports of conferences, and letters to the editor all addressed the question of women's roles in the church.

Contributors to the MB Herald addressed the topics of unity in the denomination, assumptions about women, patriarchy, feminism, instructions for women, language, and image.

### **Identifying the Crucial Piece**

Missing in the writings about women were the personal stories of women who held leadership positions in the church. The MB Conference dealt with the Scripture passages that appeared to restrict women and passed a resolution allowing women to serve in all leadership positions if the local church permitted them to be involved. The study conferences held to discuss the role of women were led by men. The voices of women and their actual experiences in leadership have not been heard.

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<sup>301</sup> Sandra Plett, "Attitudes Toward Women as Reflected in Mennonite Periodicals," 13-24.

## **Perspective of This Research**

History books and policies of governments and institutions are written from the perspective of the people in power. But personal stories tell about lived experiences not from the point of view of the powerful but from the perspective of daily life. They reveal thoughts and feelings that are missing from official records. These perspectives can provide valuable information about situations that may be more complex than they appear on the surface.

I have always been fascinated by the stories people tell about themselves. Whether I am on an airplane, standing at a bus stop, or visiting people in prison, I find people willing to share stories from their lives. My parents told stories of their childhood years in the country of their birth and it was through these stories that I came to understand their struggles, joys, pain, and relationships. Recently when I had the opportunity to travel to Ukraine and to visit the villages that were the setting for my parents' stories, I realized that these stories were as valuable as the history books written about that era.

Thomas King says “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”<sup>302</sup> It is our stories in their particular context that give meaning to our lives. As we listen to the stories of others we discover who they are and how they see their world. Stories bring to life the people who tell them.

## **The Process**

I listened to the stories which are the focus of this inquiry in face-to-face interviews. One storyteller was a woman I have known for 20 years. I have observed both her dedication to and her leadership in the church. Her parents were part of the MB Church

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<sup>302</sup> Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: Anansi Press Inc., 2003), 153.

and she is a member of this denomination. She is an educated, articulate woman. The second storyteller also has a background in the MB Church and has served as pastor for over a decade. I had met her only once before the interview, although we had a number of telephone conversations. She too was articulate and reflective in her storytelling.

The stories of their experiences in leadership and the meanings given to these stories constitute the basis of this inquiry. Catherine Riessman affirms that “narrativization tells not only about past actions but how the individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning.”<sup>303</sup> The focus of the research is on the subjective reality of two women in ministry.

During the interviews my own story intersected with the experiences of the storytellers. When I affirmed their stories by acknowledging that parts of their stories were also my story, they expanded their stories and moved to a deeper level in exploring their meanings. This interaction between the researcher and the storyteller is part of the collaborative nature of the research process. Connelly and Clandinin describe this process:

In narrative inquiry, it is important that the researcher listen to the practitioner’s story, and that it is the practitioner who first tells his or her story. This does not mean that the researcher is silenced in the process of narrative inquiry. It does mean that the practitioner, who has long been silenced in the research relationship, is given the time and space to tell his or her story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the research story has long had. ... Narrative inquiry is, however, a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorytelling as the research proceeds. In the process of beginning to live the shared story of narrative inquiry, the researcher needs to be aware of constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Catherine Riessman, *Narrative Analysis: Qualitative Research Methods Series Volume 30* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 19.

<sup>304</sup> F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin, “Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry,” 4.

The intertwining of my story with theirs stimulated both memory and reflection on our experiences.

These stories of two women's experiences in leadership can inspire both men and women to find ways to use their gifts in the church. Max van Manen explains that we can gain deeper understandings by "turning to experience as we live it rather than as we represent it in abstract theory and in binary oppositions like thinking and feeling, cognition and emotion, action and reflection."<sup>305</sup> Like well-known fables, stories can give us new perspectives on practices that we have taken for granted in the past.

The intent of this narrative inquiry is to study the challenges that women face in church leadership by reflecting on woman's lived experience. I tell their stories with the aim of giving women a voice as the MB Church encourages women to enter ministry leadership.

### **Ethical Considerations**

My primary ethical consideration for this project was to preserve the anonymity of the participants. I anticipated that the women would share experiences that had been difficult for them. Since the number of women who have served in leadership roles in the MB Church is limited, I needed to be sensitive about using materials from the interviews that identified them and cause a reaction from the people who may have marginalized or patronized them in their work in the church. A breach of anonymity could have damaging effects on the storytellers' relationships with their colleagues and leaders in the church. I

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<sup>305</sup> Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (London, Ontario: The Althouse Press, 1997), xvii.

have given each woman a pseudonym. Names, locations, and identifying facts that do not distort the essence of the stories have been altered to protect their identities.

### **Consent to Participate**

Obtaining informed consent was an essential feature of this research project. I needed to guarantee that the participants fully understood and appreciated the nature and the quality of the project, the potential risks, the steps I was taking to minimize those risks, the potential benefits of the project, and the possible results of the project.

I designed a comprehensive consent form and reviewed it with the participants. They had the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns. The Consent to Participate in Research form is found in Appendix D. Each participant signed and dated a consent form. The participants knew that even though they consented to participate in the project, they could withdraw their consent at anytime without penalty.

### **Conducting the Interviews**

After researching the literature I interviewed the two women. We met in locations and at times of their choosing. For both interviews we sat in a quiet room that was free of distractions. We chatted briefly before starting the interview so we were relaxed in each other's presence.

I began each interview by asking the participant to tell me about her life in ministry. The interviews were a two-way interactive sharing of our experiences. The women's comments brought to mind some of my own experiences and stimulated me to probe

more deeply into their experiences. As I allowed the sharing to flow, I kept in mind two further questions that I wove into our conversation.

1. What, in your experience, have been the blocks to pursuing leadership in the church?
2. Do the official statements of the church affirming women in leadership mirror your experience? How and how not? Tell me about them.

I felt comfortable with Riessman's preference for "less structure in interview instruments, in the interest of giving greater control to respondents."<sup>306</sup> I did not want to guide the participants too directly by asking specific questions.

Narrative inquiry has a sense of informality that allows participants to tell their stories from their point of view and to move into areas that the researcher may not have anticipated as being part of their experiences. Schram states that the "focus of a qualitative study unfolds naturally in that it has no predetermined course established or manipulated by the researcher such as would occur in a laboratory or other controlled setting. Researchers get personally engaged where the action is and in a way that draws upon all their senses, including the capacity to experience affect no less than cognition."<sup>307</sup> My interviews were invitations for the women to share their experiences in leadership from their perspective.

My experience as a teacher and as a pastoral counsellor provided me with communication tools and a personal comfort level to have conversations that invited the participants to tell their stories. As I have worked with students and with prisoners in federal penitentiaries I have developed a respect for people's stories because these stories

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<sup>306</sup> Catherine Riessman, *Narrative Analysis*, 55.

<sup>307</sup> Thomas H. Schram, *Conceptualizing Qualitative Inquiry*, 7.

represent their realities. Narrative inquiry accepts the unfolding of a story as a natural process and is suited to an open-ended conversation as a way of exploring an experience.

I audio-recorded the conversations and transcribed the tapes. I provided each participant with the transcription of her interview. As they read through them, the women added additional thoughts to my notes. When I had validated the transcriptions in this way, I read and reread the notes, looking for patterns or themes within and across their experiences. After I identified the themes I returned to my notes, reading them again and looking for deeper layers of meaning. I trusted my relationship with the women and I knew that they were sharing their experiences with integrity and depth.

I wrote the stories and gave each woman a copy of her narrative. Each made some editorial changes and indicated that the narrative accurately reflected her experiences.

### **Using the Interviews**

In the final step I compared the themes in the stories to the themes I had identified in the background literature. Having explored some beliefs and attitudes of church leaders and laity, I was able to determine whether these were reflected in the participants' stories. A narrative approach determines generalizability on the basis of empathic understanding and meaning rather than on factuality. I was able to make connections between the themes from my reading and their stories. My desire is that through these stories women will have a voice in the leadership debate and church leadership will find additional ways to include women in ministry leadership in the MB Church.

Narrative inquiry honours the ongoing process of understanding. Like feminist theology, it values how the lived experiences of individuals affect their way of seeing

their situation. It seeks to give individuals a voice that they may not have had previously.

This narrative inquiry is not an endpoint, but a way of opening a conversation in the church to include the voices of women.

## CHAPTER 5

### TWO STORIES OF MINISTRY

Discovering our personal stories is a spiritual quest.  
Without such stories we cannot be fully human, for without them we are unable to  
articulate or even understand our deepest experiences.

Sue Monk Kidd <sup>308</sup>

#### Introduction

Our lives are like the patterns that Jack Frost paints on a poorly insulated window. Crystals grow, spread, are absorbed, or fade into the background as the mosaic formed by the collision of inside and outside temperatures slowly moves across the glass. Sometimes the crystals become so intertwined that it is difficult to say which one was there first. But we know that somehow they are connected.

Stories have a way of connecting people. As we reflect on our stories we begin to see patterns. For this study I interviewed two women. I asked them to tell about the challenges they faced in their leadership experiences in the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church. The common threads in the stories provide insight into attitudes and understandings that affect women.

Sarah and Madeline are articulate, educated women who are deeply aware of who they are and of how a myriad of forces have shaped their lives. Like frost on a window, they weave their inner thoughts into the outer circumstances of their lives to form patterns of understanding. Their past has influenced their present but they are moving into the future with deeper awareness of the forces that have shaped them.

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<sup>308</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 16.

Madeline and Sarah tell their stories of joy and pain, of deep satisfaction and troubled memories, of tensions in finding their way as leaders in the church. While the MB Church speaks of women in leadership as an “issue,” Madeline and Sarah graciously offer their personal stories as a way of putting faces to what often feels like an abstract discussion. I designed the interviews to identify tension points in their ministries rather than focusing on their overall ministry. The common themes of these tensions in Sarah’s, Madeline’s, and my stories identify issues that are broader than the isolated incidents.

### **Sarah’s Story**

As Sarah explored her leadership experiences in the MB Church she identified her personality, her home and church environment, as well as attitudes in the church as factors that shaped her thinking about leadership.

#### *Early years*

Sarah grew up in a rural setting as the third eldest child in a family of nine siblings. As a girl she helped with the outdoor chores, working alongside her brothers under her father’s supervision. After the outside work was done she came into the house to learn the art of housekeeping and cooking with her sisters. She was given a great deal of responsibility in the home. Rather than being discouraged, she thrived on the opportunity to carry out the tasks given to her. Her ability to organize and do jobs which were beyond her years gave her a sense of pride and well-being.

Sarah’s mother died when there were still six children at home. This was a traumatic and life-shaping event for her. Her mother had made a huge impression on her

by modeling a strong drive to learn and achieve. Her death not only removed this inspiration from Sarah but also placed demands on her that were not normally part of a teenager's life. Her elder sister and then Sarah, followed by her younger sisters, delayed their careers to look after their siblings. They shouldered the responsibility of looking after the family while completing their high school studies. Sarah did not question the expectation that she fill this role. She faced the challenge with determination to provide the family with the care and support it needed in the absence of a mother.

But there was another side to Sarah's life. As a youngster she often got into trouble because of her natural tendency to take charge. As a keen observer of life she saw some patterns in her home life. Although she did outside chores as well as housework, her brothers were not required to help with any of the work in the house. Whenever the family went anywhere her father drove the car and so, to her elder sister's chagrin, it was her brother who got to drive the car to choir practice while his sisters were expected to ride along. When her mother died she never expected that her brothers or father might step up to take her mother's place in the roles of housekeeper, cook, and caregiver. Those duties were assumed by the girls.

### *Reflections on the Early Years*

As a child Sarah not only shouldered responsibilities beyond her years but she also experienced the domination of her father. As she grew up she came to accept the fact that as a female she could expect to be dominated by the males in her life. At an early age she felt a conflict between her natural gifts to lead and the external expectations to be a follower. While men were encouraged to be self-confident in providing leadership she

was verbally shamed for any hint of self-confidence. A woman was expected to put her “confidence in God” as she took on a subordinate role. She was taught that in herself she was nothing and could do nothing. Sarah remembers consciously squelching the part of her personality that equipped her to provide leadership because it seemed to get her into trouble. Slowly she began to believe that it was a bad thing for her to lead. As a result of this tension she started to feel that no matter how hard she tried she could never live up to the expectations placed on her as a female because her natural abilities to provide leadership always seemed to collide with the attitude of subordination expected of her.

As a result of the negative response to taking leadership, Sarah grew up feeling ashamed of her natural gifts to provide direction in various situations. She also came to realize that men did the important things in life while women worked in the background. She did not expect to be valued by others and so she did not value herself. As she conformed to these roles she observed, even as a child, that the roles did not always mesh with people’s gifts but were set solely on the basis of gender.

The clear gender roles set in her home were also part of her church experience. In church, men had all the leadership and public roles while women worked in the kitchen and taught Sunday school for the younger children. Women were not given leadership roles in the presence of men. Sarah observed that while some men who did not have leadership skills were given positions, it was their wives who did the actual leading from behind the scenes. It was not uncommon to hear derogatory comments about strong women who took on leadership roles. Sarah determined that she did not want to be known as one of “those” women.

### *Formative Years*

As a teenager Sarah continued to live with this tension in her life. Her mother's strong desire to learn and achieve guided her. Sarah was given a lot of responsibility in the house, sometimes too much, but she thrived on the challenge. She was given lead parts in school plays. She organized, recruited workers, and taught successful backyard Bible clubs in the city where she worked for the summer. She blossomed as a camp counsellor and Sunday school teacher. While she had been taught that her role as a girl was to follow, her natural abilities moved her into leadership roles at home, in school, and in the neighbourhood. In church she took on positions like playing piano and teaching children while the young men were asked to preach and lead Sunday morning Bible studies.

Sarah accepted the differing roles for men and women as natural. She did not question them, even when they left her in the background. Then she discovered an article by Katie Funk Wiebe in the Mennonite Brethren Herald. Sarah was delighted to read this refreshing author who openly encouraged women to use their gifts. Sarah felt affirmed and excited at the thought that she too could provide leadership without stepping back when there were men around. Her joy turned to dismay when she listened to the men around the Sunday dinner table writing off this inspirational author as "one of those feminists." She knew that there was still a long uphill battle ahead of her before she would feel free to use her leadership gifts.

Even after completing four years of Bible School and two university degrees, Sarah still found limited opportunities to serve in the church. She could be a deacon but was not allowed to serve communion. She had training as a choir conductor and had

preached in her homiletics class but in her home church males with little training were elected to conduct the choir and no one ever asked her to speak. The gender roles that she had observed as a child were still in play as she grew into womanhood.

### *Hopeful Years*

Sarah followed her love of teaching and completed her teacher training. After marriage she and her husband moved from their farm to attend a denominational Bible college. There a ray of hope emerged. With a move to an urban MB church she began to blossom. She was in her early thirties and it was here that she began the long journey of accepting herself and what she had to offer. She pursued her studies, becoming involved in writing, public speaking, and working as an executive assistant. As a young mother she organized and coordinated a large Mom's Morning Out program for women in the church and the community. She planned the program and scheduled volunteers. She used her leadership skills and her creativity to do the things she loved to do.

The door had been opened for Sarah and she confidently took the next step. She was hired as an interim assistant to the executive director of communications for Mennonite Brethren Missions and Services. The man who had been recruited for the job was not able to start work immediately so Sarah was hired for a ten-month period. She was assured that she was a colleague and so she traveled to the head office to learn about the job. She took notes and asked questions, trying to understand the writing and publishing criteria and deadlines.

But then her world crashed. When she returned from the meetings she was dismayed to discover that the head office staff saw her as the executive director's

secretary and had taken exception to her involvement in learning about the job. They thought she was pushing herself forward. The dreaded image of the “strong” woman from her childhood came back to haunt her. Her colleague assured her that she indeed was his assistant and that the misunderstanding had been cleared up. Although she was never invited to be part of conference calls between directors, she was given a great deal of responsibility and found the work challenging and rewarding.

At the end of her term Sarah came across a document stating the terms set out for the young man who was coming to do the job. Although he had less training and experience than she did, he was to start at a much higher rate of pay than she had been given. Offended, she confronted the colleague who was in charge of setting the wages. He had prided himself in his liberal attitude towards women and was horrified at what he had done. Although he apologized, the damage was done. When the crunch came, even Sarah’s close friend and a colleague was unable to overcome his socially- ingrained view that men were worth more than women.

### *Another Setback*

After having had this opportunity to exercise her gifts in leadership, Sarah and her family moved again. Here she experienced a setback as she faced the limitations of her gender role in her new setting. She had been taught as a child that leadership was a high calling from God with huge responsibilities of humility and spirituality. She noticed that in the church it was only men who received this high calling. Male pastors were seen as anointed of God and she could not dare say anything to oppose them. When she

questioned some of the teachings of these men she was reminded that if she were abiding in Christ she would not question the pastor.

To others, it was obvious that Sarah's place was to be in submission to male leadership in the church and in the home. While it was wrong for a woman to question authority figures, it was perfectly acceptable for a man to dominate without question. Women were expected to have responsibilities in the home while men served on elder boards, making decisions in the church. The different standards for men and for women in leadership continued to cause tension in her life.

### *New Hope*

Sarah and her husband began attending another MB church. In this church Sarah was invited to take leadership positions. She accepted a position as worship planner and later became chair of the worship commission. Her creative energies, her organizational abilities, and her Bible school training all came together in a key leadership position in the church.

Sarah was part of a leadership team that led the church through a difficult process of setting a direction for music in worship. While some people preferred traditional church music with organ and piano accompaniment, others wanted to move to contemporary music led by a worship band. Both sides seemed deeply entrenched but Sarah worked with a team to provide leadership and resolve the issue in a way that created consensus in the church. Through her team approach to leadership she used her own skills as well as the skills of other leaders to identify issues and resolve conflict.

During this time Sarah had the opportunity to serve on a board for the provincial MB Conference. She started as a board member and was then asked to be the chair. By this time she had grown confident in her ability to lead and was not intimidated at the thought of taking leadership even when there were men on the committee. She had a vision for the work and knew that time spent in meetings could be used more efficiently than it had been in the past. She chaired the board for three years and thoroughly enjoyed the work. She had a sense that this was where God wanted her to be, using her gifts to contribute to the church and the conference. Other people strongly affirmed her in this work.

It seemed that Sarah had moved past the teachings from her earlier life that restricted her role as a woman. She felt satisfied and rewarded in taking a major leadership position and doing it well.

#### *Past Teachings Surface Again*

The next step followed. Sarah was asked to let her name stand as moderator of the provincial conference. She had led a commission successfully, been affirmed by others, and felt personal satisfaction at having done well in this position. But when asked to take the next step she declined. She did not feel that she would have the support of the constituency to be elected. The decision would not be based on whether she could do the job but rather on her gender. She strongly sensed that people would not vote for her simply because she was a woman.

The MB Conference had passed a resolution in 1981 and had over a period of years reaffirmed its position of calling women into leadership ministry. But Sarah's

experience of past teachings overpowered the resolutions. The opposition to a woman serving as moderator of the Conference may not have been explicitly stated but the underlying currents in the denomination were still there. Such a position was not appropriate for a woman.

### *New Opportunities*

After having served as worship planner and worship commission chair in her local church, Sarah was again asked to let her name stand as moderator but this time in her local church. She reflected on her experience at the Conference level and initially did not want to accept such a position. But the outgoing male moderator took the time to talk to her about the position and to encourage her to accept the nomination. In this way she could use her gifts to serve the church. She was elected to the position of moderator at the annual general meeting of the church. She explained the struggle she faced. “When I was asked to consider heading up the church board as moderator, I declined too, but felt convicted that I should do this, so with fear and trepidation, but with the prayer backing of a lot of people, I accepted the nomination. On one hand, I enjoyed the work, but on the other I was plagued by fear that I wasn't measuring up to people's expectations.”

Sarah's organizational skills and analytical ability helped her approach this leadership position. For the most part the moderators of the recent past had been men who took charge as they would in a business setting. She did not see the position as hierarchical but rather saw herself as a servant leader modeled after Christ's example. She was at the service of the church. She facilitated discussion to discern the church's agenda so that she could work with the leaders to do what the congregation wanted. She

used the collaborative style of leadership she had developed earlier. She was aware of her responsibility not only to the church as a whole but also to each of the leaders in the church. It was her role to give direction, provide support, mentor, and encourage as needed.

### *Questioning Her Style*

Six years later doubts of another kind surfaced for Sarah. While she felt confident about her approach to leadership she questioned whether the people in the church who had a patriarchal worldview saw her as a weak leader because she was not boldly setting a direction. As a servant leader she was less concerned about focusing on her own agenda than with ensuring that people felt that they were being heard and that they were important as part of the congregation. She saw her role as one of supporting the leaders in the various church ministries by allowing them to use their giftedness rather than being bold and aggressive as the male leaders of the past had been.

In reflecting on the two approaches to leadership Sarah realized that both types of leadership are needed. Sarah observed that one of the dangers of the ‘mover and shaker’ leader is that people tend to blindly accept the directions they propose without questioning what is happening. When a charismatic leader steps up people agree to do the strangest things, things they would not consider doing if they had taken the time to think through the issues.

## *Reflections on Leadership*

In reflecting on her leadership experience in the church Sarah feels a sense of accomplishment and affirmation. She was able to use her gifts for ministry. When she was in church settings where her leadership gifts were recognized and accepted she thrived on the opportunities to lead.

Sarah developed a leadership style that suited her personality and beliefs. She preferred to work in a team rather than in a hierarchy, using the strengths of the people around her to accomplish the tasks at hand. While some moderators saw themselves as administrators only, Sarah accepted the responsibility of spiritual leadership in the church. She saw leadership not as a position of power but as a sacred trust that calls the person to lead in the spirit of Christ. It flows from a spiritual base. Sarah summarized her struggle:

Because as a child you are used to the domination of your father and were punished if you challenged him many of us have grown up not being valued. You don't expect yourself to be valued so you don't value yourself. Inside you know you are valuable and have things to contribute so you are fighting an inner battle. I think it is a long road to maturity and sometimes you have to have help and counselling in order to discover that person inside of you that's of value. You have wounds from the ways people have related to you but once you become more whole I think it's easier. Sometimes I wish I could have some of my leadership experiences over again because I think I would bring a different person to bear and I'd have more inner strength.

For Sarah, leadership is not about power, but about relationships, support, and guidance. Leadership is not a position, but a way of being.

## **Madeline's Story**

Madeline is a reflective woman with a deep sense of calling to pastoral ministry. Through her warm personality she quickly draws people into conversation. She is presently serving as pastor in a small MB church in the west. She has been part of the MB denomination for her adult life and she served as a volunteer in various churches and positions before entering pastoral ministry.

### *Early Adult Years*

Madeline's life followed a pattern that is familiar to many women. She took a two-year teacher training program and launched into her career. She was fluent in Ukrainian and was able to secure a teaching job immediately since there was a high need for immersion language teachers. Her husband was a student when they were married so she taught while he finished his program of studies. When they started their family she interrupted her career to stay home with the children.

She returned to teaching and found her work rewarding. Her contact with students, parents, and colleagues was joyful and life-giving. She felt comfortable with her work and had a place of respect in her school. Parents wanted their children to be in her classroom and she blossomed. She went back to university to finish her education degree and to work on a music degree. She felt settled and imagined herself teaching until she retired.

Madeline spoke with a sense of gratitude and fulfillment about these years. She displayed a sense of confidence when she talked about teaching. She appreciated being

able to stay home with her babies and look after the household as her husband took over the role of provider, which had been her role until this time.

### *Call to Pastoral Ministry*

Madeline's life was going well. Teaching brought her a sense of fulfillment and after a number of years of experience she needed to spend less time preparing lessons. She could do what she loved during the day and still have time to pursue other interests. Her daughter completed her teacher training and was working at the same school. Mother and daughter were proud to work side by side, doing what was right for them.

At this settled and fulfilling point in her life Madeline received a call from her church. A part-time pastoral position was available and she was asked to consider this position. Her duties would include some of the areas of ministry in which she was already volunteering in the church.

She had a decision to make. Was she willing to leave a place of great comfort—a place where she had respect, a nice salary, and good hours—for a position that was new to her? After some thought, she decided to apply for the job. She was offered the position, resigned from her teaching job, and started on a new path. The part-time work grew into a full-time position and so became a permanent move for Madeline.

The transition from teaching to pastoral ministry had its challenges. The position was not well-paid and the job description was vague. Some church members started asking whether the church should use the money they were paying for a woman pastor to do some renovations to the church building instead. Was there enough work for a woman in the church? As these discussions took place Madeline's self-esteem took a battering. In

her teaching career she had never experienced this kind of ambivalence. She had transitioned from being heartily affirmed and respected to being seen as somewhat suspect. In spite of reassurances that the discussions were about the position and not about her, she could not help feeling disoriented.

### *Growing Into Pastoral Ministry*

The uncertainty around her position was overshadowed by another factor. Madeline loved her new job. She could hardly wait to get to work each morning and soon had a trail of people coming to her door. Women who had never had a female pastoral presence on staff brought their issues to her. They found a safe place to talk about health concerns as well expressing the emotional hurts and injuries they had often experienced at the hands of men in their lives. New women's groups began to emerge in the church and soon men were also making appointments to talk to her.

### *Old Worries Surface Again*

In her teaching career Madeline had felt insecure when she initially did not have a teaching degree. Now she had to face her lack of a seminary degree. When the lead pastor took a sabbatical she was asked to take charge of the congregation. She had experience in teaching and parenting but lacked the academic qualifications to be a pastor. As she tried to avoid answering questions about where she had gone to seminary she discovered an important truth. People who were hurting did not care about her academic record. They needed someone to walk with them in their pain. The skill to do so was not something that came with any number of degrees. She already had the ability to love people,

listening and caring to bring healing. Since that time Madeline has completed a Masters degree in pastoral ministry.

### *A Turning Point*

The pastoral staff at Madeline's church had a practice of sending birthday cards to members of the congregation. On Monday mornings they would get together and sign the cards for the week, adding personal comments. One week she was asked to sign a card for a person she did not know. Her colleagues urged her to write a generic comment and just sign the card. But she felt uneasy. Instead of simply signing her name, she called the woman, leaving a message for an invitation to have coffee. In the card she wrote a brief message expressing her desire to have coffee together. That week the woman appeared at her door. She said, "It is no wonder that you never met me. I just pop in and out. I am really shy and do not have much of a connection but I would love to take you up on your offer for coffee." Madeline began a connection with the woman. When the woman's sister died suddenly, Madeline was asked to do the funeral and provide the family care.

Madeline reflected on this experience as she talked about her misgivings regarding her lack of training and, at the same time, her joy in working.

It was a high moment, recognizing that there was trust and that there was the expectation that I could do things. My life has been a series of finding people who believed that I could do things when I wasn't at all sure that I could. I was making the assumption that they must know and then finding ways of doing it. I think that the cost of this tension is a kind of weariness that comes with the depth and seriousness of the challenges. Maybe men feel completely qualified to do this work.

As Madeline found people who believed in her, she used her ability to connect with people and to accept their confidence in her.

### *Blossoming In Ministry*

The incident with signing the birthday card opened a window into Madeline's passion for ministry. She was not satisfied to continue with structures and programs that were in place if they did not meet the needs of people. When she observed the small groups in the church she noticed that people were not always matched with their gifts. People who had wonderful gifts in one area were asked to lead in another area simply because everyone was supposed to take a turn. She saw people languishing because they wanted more but did not know how to break out of the established structure.

Madeline began to find ways to help people grow while experiencing community in smaller groups. As she introduced programs to connect people, she began to see lives changing and leaders developing. People became enthused about learning and forming positive relationships. Madeline's vision for helping people grow rather than maintaining a structure paid off.

### *A Setback*

As excitement grew, so did tensions. Madeline was invited to a church board meeting. Board members told her that she was spending too much time on the initiatives she had instigated and asked her to drop them. The things that were most life-giving to her and to the congregation did not fit into the board members' view of the traditional church program. Other members of the church leadership could not accept what she was doing. Madeline reflected, "I think there is a niggling part of my experience that areas that I know are valuable and good and solid for the church have been regarded with suspicion until they come from the hierarchy, from the structure."

## *New Beginnings*

After she had spent a number of years in an associate pastor position Madeline and her family moved to another city. She was hired as a pastor in an MB church that had, as part of its history, made the decision to have a pastoral team made up of a female pastor and a male pastor with equal but not duplicating responsibilities. Madeline welcomed the opportunity to get away from the traditional lead pastor and associate pastor model for ministry.

Madeline entered into the working arrangement with enthusiasm, feeling the freedom to provide leadership in her areas of giftedness. But she noticed that the male pastor was being asked to do some things related to the total functioning of the church, while she was not included. Since she was new, she assumed this was because he had been there longer.

As they got to know each other she and the male pastor formed a good working relationship. Madeline felt comfortable and accepted. But when the two of them were present at various functions, she noticed that people introduced the male pastor as “the pastor” and Madeline as his “helper.” It was not until much later that Madeline discovered that the male pastor was being paid as a lead pastor and she was receiving the salary of an associate. Although the congregation gave verbal assent to the model, in reality they did not recognize that this was a pastoral team, an equal partnership without a hierarchy.

### *A Crisis in Ministry*

In spite of this discrimination Madeline continued to work in ministry, doing the things she enjoyed. People were drawn to the church and all were welcomed. Her working environment was positive and her male colleague included her even when others did not.

Then her life was shattered once more. Her colleague became involved in an extra-marital affair and left the ministry and his family. As the sole pastor in the church, Madeline had to deal with her colleague's grieving and broken family as well as her own sense of betrayal and disbelief. In the middle of this crisis, she longed for someone in pastoral ministry to walk through this time with her. She had been drawn to the collaborative leadership model in the church as a comfortable way of working with another pastor and now she felt alone. Although her male colleague had been part of a ministerial group in the area, Madeline had not yet had the opportunity to connect with a group. It was a devastating time but her love for the people of the church kept her going. At the insistence of her church she became the lead pastor.

### *Understanding Leadership*

Madeline has a clear understanding of what her call to pastoral leadership means. Leadership is, in her own words, about loving people, loving them when they are obnoxious, loving them when they are hesitant and scooting around the edges, bringing the hangers-on to life. She sees leadership not as a position that she takes on but rather as authority bestowed on her by people in the church. True leadership comes when the community acknowledges that you rightfully hold that position.

But leadership itself is communal. Madeline recognizes the need to have people around her to help her. When she, in her words, starts to feel “feeble” she needs people who help straighten out her vision, friends who will take her to task when frustration or bitterness start to creep into her life. She sees herself not as a leader set apart from the congregation but as a shepherd tenderly caring for people.

Madeline understands leadership as an attitude. In Hebrews 13.17 leaders are exhorted to work with joy and not with sighing. This has become a key verse for Madeline. Sometimes she has to ask herself, “Am I doing this out of joy or out of sighing?” When she recognizes the sighing in her life she goes back and asks, “What’s wrong?” Focusing on her joy of loving the people in her congregation helps her to leave the sighing behind.

Madeline says that to recognize leadership as a calling is the key to serving others. People in the church will recognize when their leaders are working from a sense of calling because people know when they are loved. Madeline explained how in their church everyone is “broken, messed up, and hopeless apart from the grace and the mercy of God lived out in community.” As leaders love their congregations they help create a community where people in the church will fill in the blanks in each other’s lives. The people become the incarnational presence of God for each other. They meet the needs in each other as Jesus would.

### *Challenges in Ministry*

For Madeline one of the frustrations of pastoring is that people have expectations of her in areas that are clearly outside of the normal pastoral role. People complain to her

about crumbs on the carpet while they do not bother the male pastoral team members with such details. She wonders whether people do not bother men with things like this or whether it is that they see her as someone who will know how to deal with such matters. Is it her skill set or is it because she is a woman and expected to look after housekeeping?

Madeline had spent six years as an associate pastor before moving to an equal partnership with a male colleague. While Madeline collaborated with and was supported by her colleague in this church, the Conference leadership generally did not support her in her ministry. There was no customary exit interview when she left her first church. The Conference did not recognize her induction as a pastor. In the time of crisis the support she longed for was not offered.

Madeline's male pastoral partner was invited to join a ministerial group in the area but Madeline was not. Eventually another group formed. When group met, they realized that they had not included Madeline even though she had asked to be part of the group.

Madeline and her husband were invited to a pastors' and spouses' retreat. When they arrived they were dismayed to find that the sessions were designated for pastors and for pastors' wives. Bravely Madeline appeared as the only woman in the pastors' sessions, listening to instructions on how to buy proper insurance so that their wives would be looked after in case something happened to them. Meanwhile her husband, the only male in the wives' session, listened to advice on how to support husbands in ministry.

Madeline had difficulty finding her place in such settings. Sometimes she felt more than invisible. She felt ignored. The men seemed uncomfortable talking to her as a

colleague and the women were uncomfortable talking to her as their husbands' colleague. At times she felt hostility in the air.

Not only did Madeline's colleagues' spouses not know how to relate to her, but other women also displayed a negative attitude. At one point a woman introduced Madeline as part of the pastoral staff with the words, "This is our lead pastor, this is our youth pastor, and this is Madeline and she does all the stuff that the rest of them don't want to do." When her first church did not hire someone to carry on the work she had done as associate pastor, she felt that the church did not recognize the significance of her work.

Madeline struggled with the way she was perceived. She once received a call from a leader saying that one of the Conference boards had discerned that God was calling her to be their secretary. Madeline had a difficult time taking this call seriously. She had never learned to type and in meetings she usually found herself so engaged in the conversation that she would forget to take her own notes. She was certain that God had not called her to a position for which she was so ill-suited.

At another time she was asked to serve the denomination on a particular committee. She introduced herself to the chair of this committee, expecting to talk to him about the work she would be asked to do. She was rendered speechless when his only comment was, "My, I like the way you wear your hair." She allowed her name to stand for a board on another occasion but withdrew when she was not recognized as a pastor who could be a pastoral representative on the board. It appeared that her work as a pastor was not taken seriously.

### *Joys of Living out Her Calling*

Even as Madeline talked about the challenges of ministry, it was evident that she found joy in living out her calling. In her ministry she lived out her understanding of leadership. She expressed her pastoral heart in multiple ways. “I love the moments where I am doing the work of Christ in the lives of people in our congregation and around me,” she said. “The formal occasions such as an ordination service are wonderful times to mark the life of the community in ways that invite everyone to revisit where the community has come from and where it is going.”

Helping people to grow is a joy for Madeline. Introducing them to a good book and taking time for a retreat to discuss the book opens new ways of understanding. Reading the Bible together and interpreting it within their context helps people to see the Bible as the living Word of God. Madeline is anxious to open ways of reading the Bible for people who have been burdened down by a single approach to reading that has left them with pathetic spiritual lives. To find their gifts and use them rather than forcing people into uncomfortable positions changes people’s lives and how they see themselves.

When leadership is a calling rather than a position, the everyday struggles of people are as important as the formal duties of pastoring. Madeline explains. “I love the opportunities where people trust me in their lives in tough times; to do hospital visits in the middle of the night or when there’s been a death.”

### *Reflections on Pastoral Ministry*

Madeline was grateful for the people of her first church who discerned her gifts for pastoral ministry and encouraged her to apply for that first pastoral position. Looking

back, she realizes that they had no sense of the rocky road upon which they were launching her. They catapulted her out of her comfortable teaching position into a path that was both rewarding and challenging.

Madeline now has greater confidence in the work that she is doing. This confidence has come with experience and the ability to discern what she can and cannot do. She is able to prioritize her time and invest her energy in the things that are important. This maturity has helped her realize that she does not need to be affirmed by everyone. She chooses not to take on all the personal jabs and comments that come along. That decision has freed her to concentrate on her gifts.

Madeline has developed an exercise to help her discern what she should pay attention to when comments or actions are directed to her. She seeks to differentiate between the things she *assumes* and the things she *knows*. She related a story of how someone had snubbed her one day at church. She was tormented over this for days before she had the courage to confront the person. As it turned out, the person had simply been in a hurry and had brushed by her, oblivious to Madeline's reaction.

Madeline has had the courage to revisit situations that have caused her pain. While her first experience at a pastors' retreat was negative, she went to another retreat years later and had a positive experience. Although her first experience of being nominated to a denominational committee was so painful, she recently accepted another position with an openness to see what would happen. As it turns out, it seems to be an empty exercise of endlessly shuffling things but she is willing to persevere in order to learn and find a place where she can contribute.

As she looks to the future, Madeline is hopeful. She sees the resolution passed by the Conference as the very beginning of something huge. She reflects:

To encourage women to get involved in pastoral ministry may take a growing awareness in the way we live together, the vocabulary we use and the expectations we have of one another. Even a greater understanding of what we bring to the table, the unique contribution that women make in leadership. What are we asking them to do when we say we want them as full partners in leadership? Do we want them to be the way our male pastors have always been? Because if that is it, we are setting them up for huge failure. That's the definition. If we are going to have meetings and talks and discussion groups, that's what needs to be redefined.

Madeline sees present church governance structures as a hindrance to including women in leadership. The notion that there must be a lead pastor is deeply ingrained in churches that they may not be able to see a different way of organizing to include women. Madeline thinks that women feel more comfortable in structures based on partnerships rather than hierarchy. In order to make this kind of structure comfortable for churches she asks: "How do men receive women as partners without feeling that they have the edge or women accept it without feeling that they should step down?" Women who have not questioned the interpretation or the application of Scriptures on the role of women find it is difficult to suggest another way to organize.

Madeline predicts that the next generation will not have patience with the church structures of the past. Changes will need to be made if they are going to remain active in the church. She hopes that these changes will include a greater role for women.

### **Reflecting On My Own Story**

As I listened to Sarah's and Madeline's stories I realized how closely my own story intersected with their experiences. We were all energized by our ministries. We

each had a strong sense of calling to leadership ministry in the church and we approached our work from a sense of vocation rather than as a job with specific parameters. We longed to connect with people as fellow travelers on life's journey. As leaders we wanted to create an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusion by helping people find their own sense of calling in building the household of God.

In our leadership experiences in the church each of us identified challenges. The common themes include:

- the value of our leadership
- gender role expectations and inner knowing
- the need for wholeness
- the need to hear women's voices and
- the desire for interdependence.

### *The Value of Our Leadership*

As a school principal I provided leadership to staff, students, parents, and the community. I was responsible for a budget of well over one million dollars, strategic planning for three-year cycles, and curriculum implementation as well as engaging the staff, students, and community in the affairs of the school. With this background I accepted my responsibilities as a board member for the denominational seminary with a sense of confidence that I could make a positive contribution. But my enthusiasm was quickly quashed when a photo was taken of the board. One of the board members suggested that the photographer place me in the centre of the front row because I was the token woman on the board. The church had called me to a leadership position but others

saw me only as a fulfillment of the mandate to include a woman, with no expectation that I could contribute any further.

Madeline also came to a leadership position in the church with a strong sense of self and of her abilities as a teacher. She had created a positive learning environment for students and had earned the respect of the parents. She came to her pastoral position with a sense of confidence. But when questions were raised about her position her self-esteem suffered. The value of her work was diminished when she was asked to discontinue programs she had initiated. These were programs that connected and excited people. She sensed that she was not free to carry through on what she saw as helping the people of the congregation because it did not come from the hierarchy. When she left her first position no one was hired to continue the work she had done.

I had a similar experience. At one congregational meeting someone commented that I was doing a great deal of work as a pastor. The speaker intended this as a compliment and I took it as such. However, at the next staff meeting the lead pastor placed a copy of my job description in front of me and asked me to cross off the things I would no longer do. When I explained that I saw all the parts of my work as being interconnected and that it was difficult to cut out any particular area, he simply stated that from now on I was to do less. When I left my position no one was hired to replace me.

Sarah expressed frustration when she reflected on her leadership style. While some men were affirmed as church moderators for their bold aggressive approach, she did not see herself in a position of power but rather as an enabler to other leaders in the church. She worked with them to provide vision for the ministries in the church. To her

this approach modeled the servant leadership expressed by Jesus.<sup>309</sup> But she sensed that her church did not validate this approach, seeing it as weakness rather than strength. Her leadership approach clashed with the expectations of the system in place.

The struggle Sarah experienced was evident when she recalled how women who provided strong leadership in the home, church, or community were referred to in derogatory terms. Dee Dee Meyers, press secretary for former U.S. President Bill Clinton, offers a similar view when she says “women are also penalized for being too aggressive. When a man drives a hard bargain, he knows what he is worth and by God, he’s going to get it. But when a woman does the same? She’s a pushy broad, and no one wants to work with her.”<sup>310</sup>

Joan Borysenko, a medical researcher, makes a similar observation from her experience when she says “single-minded strength of purpose was apparently an acceptable characteristic for men, but for women it was called aggressiveness.”<sup>311</sup> The standards have been different for men and women. Patterns and expectations for each have been established. Each woman’s story shows that her leadership was not highly valued.

### *Gender Role Expectations and Inner Knowing*

Madeline, Sarah, and I all experienced instances where we were not accepted as leaders but instead were seen as helpers to the men who were considered leaders. One striking example is that of being a secretary.

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<sup>309</sup> Matthew 20.26-28 (NRSV) It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

<sup>310</sup> Dee Dee Myers, *Why Women Should Rule the World* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 29.

<sup>311</sup> Joan Borysenko, *A Woman’s Journey To God* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 171.

A male leader in the Conference came to Edmonton to meet with the pastors of the MB churches in the area. When I showed up at the meeting in my role as a local pastor, he was clearly flustered. He said that he had not expected any women. When he regained his composure he indicated that it would be all right for me to stay and take the minutes. Madeline received a call from a Conference leader saying that his board had discerned that God was calling her to be their secretary even though she did not have the skills or the desire to do such work. Sarah related how as an assistant to the director of missions she asked questions to learn about the job but was rebuffed because people viewed her as a secretary who should not bother with such important matters. Both Madeline and Sarah were paid unequally to the male pastors when they were regarded as assistants rather than as colleagues.

All three of us have described times when we felt ignored or isolated. Sometimes this attitude was blatant but many times it was subtle. The people who discriminated against us seemed unaware that they were treating us differently from how they treated men in similar positions. Madeline was introduced as a pastor who did what the male pastors did not want to do. Sarah was not asked to preach or to lead the choir even though she was more qualified than the men who were asked. I was told I could cry anytime when I asked for my job description to be clarified.

Sarah expressed that it was difficult to trust her inner knowing in light of past teaching and how she was treated. Walter Wink speaks of powers that exert pressure on people because whatever “the system tells our brains is real is what we are allowed to notice: everything else must be ignored. *We give the system the power to make the known*

*unknown*. Thus we are taught to mistrust our own experience.”<sup>312</sup> Sarah knew herself to be a natural leader but attitudes toward women in the church powerfully affected how she thought of herself. She sensed that she did not live up to the accepted male way of leading.

I went through a struggle when my inner knowing told me that I had gifts for ministry to offer the church but this knowing clashed with gender role expectations. At first I was confused and then I became frustrated. I moved to a stage of anger and then doubt. I came to believe the message that I was second-rate. Although I had approached to the task with a sense of confidence, the put-downs and isolation led me to believe not only that I was not capable of the work but that I was not a good person.

I tried to understand why I allowed this to happen to me. I believe it was because the attitude against women in leadership was so deeply ingrained as part of the faith tradition. It was extremely difficult to stand up against something that people saw as an integral part of faith through a literal reading of the Bible. Sarah’s story reveals the same struggle.

As the result of my experience I have come to understand why abused women behave as they do. When they are constantly bombarded by a message of inadequacy and shame they begin to believe what they are told. Just as it is a hard journey for them to believe in themselves I too had to find a way to again trust my inner knowing and to regain my sense of confidence and self-worth.

Madeline expressed doubt about her abilities when she mused about whether men just did pastoral ministry naturally and did not struggle with how to do things. But, like

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<sup>312</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 54.

Sarah, she had an inner knowing that gave her the confidence to do what was right. She realized that when people were hurting they did not care about academic degrees or gender. What they needed was someone who cared and loved them in spite of everything else that was happening in their lives.

We have all three come to understand and listen to this inner knowing. Bill Plotkin identifies this voice as a core power that comes from within us.

Our *core abilities* are the natural talents or gifts indispensable for performing our soul work: these abilities are developed effortlessly or are capable of being honed to exceptional levels. Our *core knowledge* consists of those mysterious, soul-level things we know without knowing how we know them and that we acquire without effort: they are facts essential to performing our soul work.<sup>313</sup>

By listening to our souls we have moved on. Although she is a wonderfully gifted leader, Sarah has stepped away from leadership positions in the church for a time. Madeline is focusing her attention on people in her congregation rather than putting energy into Conference work. I understand that many women have an inner knowing that connects with people in the way that Jesus did to bring healing. By following my own knowing I hope to help other women to find their voices. Through our collective presence we can bring changes that will celebrate women in the church in a new way.

### *The Need for Wholeness*

Sarah spoke of the importance of finding wholeness for herself in order to be an effective leader. She said that women need to value themselves so that they can use their gifts for ministry regardless of expectations. Until women achieve personal wholeness

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<sup>313</sup> Bill Plotkin, *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* (Novato, California: New World Library, 2003), 25.

they may be perceived to be fighting the system rather than finding ways to be authentic and offering alternatives to the present system.

Our inner knowing and the practical expression of that knowing must be in harmony. As long as Sarah experienced a dissonance between her knowing of what was right for her and the outward expectations of the church, she could not fully realize joy in ministry. She struggled to find wholeness and, when she came to understand and accept herself, she realized that not only was her approach right for her but that she would lead with more confidence when given the opportunity in the future.

My journey to wholeness followed a similar path. Like Sarah, I too had to let go of the expectations for leadership based on a model that was not comfortable for me. As I came to understand that the leadership of Jesus was reflected in the feminist worldview of shared power designed to bring healing and empowerment to everyone in the community, I was again able to value myself and my gifts of leadership.

Madeline spoke of a way of finding wholeness for herself within her ministry. As she matured in her ministry she came to accept the fact that she could not be everything to everyone in the church. She is aware of what she can do and which areas are not comfortable for her.

Madeline uses two questions to guide her as she seeks wholeness in her life. She asks, “Am I working from a position of joy or of sighing?” and “Is what I am feeling or thinking based on what I know or on what I assume?”

As we find wholeness, we also find a voice that is authentic. It is a voice that speaks from an inner knowing of being known and loved.

*The Need for Women to Find their Voices*

Sarah indicated that women's voices will need to be heard in speech and writing to facilitate change in the church. These voices should not be disgruntled but should be confident expressions of how women understand themselves and the gospel. This is not an easy task when male voices have been dominant in the church. It requires insight and courage.

Madeline gave an example of how a woman had introduced her as the pastor who did what the male pastors did not want to do. It appeared that this woman had not found her own voice as a woman and therefore could not accept Madeline's voice as authentic.

Sue Monk Kidd describes her struggles to find her voice in the church: "Steeped in a faith tradition that men had named, shaped, and directed, I had no alliance with what might be called the Sacred Feminine. I had lost my connection to feminine soul."<sup>314</sup> Sarah said that women will need to stand together, supporting each other as they find their voices. They will need to explore their knowing and find validation within the community of women. Once women are able to do this they will have a greater impact on the church and on their ability to lead within it.

Sarah suggests that women have some work to do as they move into leadership positions. First, women "have to find [their] own wholeness and then just move confidently in the areas where [they] are allowed to serve as leaders." Then she confides, "That's a start. I know for myself I've shrunk away." As women feel comfortable with themselves and their abilities they will develop the confidence to move on.

Second, women need to do more writing and speaking. They should not take for granted that people know the challenges they face and understand their approach to

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<sup>314</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, 20.

leadership. They need to do this in a loving and empowering way and not from a defensive stance.

Third, Sarah suggests that women need to come alongside each other and encourage each other, affirming each other's gifts. They need to value each other and recognize leadership gifts in each other rather than withdrawing because they do not want people to see them as domineering.

Women's voices need to raise these issues so that changes in attitudes and practice can happen. This study is designed to allow women's voices to be heard in the denomination.

#### *The Desire for Interdependence*

Sarah expressed a desire for interdependence when she spoke of her approach to leadership. She valued opportunities to process ideas and feelings with others. Sarah was animated and energized when she talked about her leadership role on a team that helped the church formulate a vision statement. She explained how team members each brought their strengths to the group and rotated leadership during the various stages of the process.

Madeline was animated in much the same way when she talked about moving to a position of shared leadership. She wanted to work in a team situation. The language she used conveyed this desire for interdependence when she talked about all of the people in her congregations journeying with her through the challenges of life. She spoke of the members of the church as being family to each other. Madeline surrounds herself with

people who support and challenge her in her personal life and ministry. She does not see her ministry as a solo venture. Rather, it is a shared experience.

In my career as a principal I developed a wide network of people within the school system. The principals of schools in specific areas of the city met regularly to share everything from homework policies to snow removal contracts and curriculum resources. Within the school staff members shared resources, helping one another daily. This interdependence created a sense of support and community for everyone.

In my ministry in the church I missed the sense of collegiality that I had been used to in schools. I felt isolated. Staff members each looked after their areas and few projects were a joint effort. I was expected to work on my own.

Like Madeline, I lacked a feeling of interdependence with the provincial Conference leadership. Madeline indicated that no one from the Conference came to her induction as a pastor. When a crisis arose in her church she felt isolated when provincial leadership did not connect with her. The lead pastor in my congregation told me that there would not be an installation service for me as there was for the men who came to be pastors. When men were installed their wives were seen as the supportive spouse but the pastor thought it would be embarrassing for a husband to be seen as the supportive spouse. He was supposed to be the head of the house.

Sarah, Madeline, and I have longed for interdependence as reflected in the words of feminist theologian Letty Russell, who uses the symbol of a round table for the church. “The round table in itself emphasizes connection, for when we gather around we are connected, in an association or relationship with one another.”<sup>315</sup> The hierarchical

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<sup>315</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round*, 18.

leadership model of the church did not allow for the interdependence that we longed for in our work.

### **Conclusion**

Stephen Covey says that a “compass represents our vision, values, principles, mission, conscience, direction – what we feel is important and how we *lead* our lives.”<sup>316</sup>

As Sarah and Madeline found their inner knowing it became a compass for them to find their way in a church system that was not always attuned to their understanding of leadership or their need for support and interdependence. As the church hears the lived experiences of women in leadership, it will have another perspective from which to continue to attract women to leadership in an informed way.

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<sup>316</sup> Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 19.

## CHAPTER 6

### USING WOMEN'S STORIES TO MOVE FORWARD

#### Introduction

Hearing the stories of women is part of the process to include them in leadership in the church. Celia Allison Hahn says that change “always begins at the moment when those who find themselves out of joint with things-as-they-are begin to notice and name the disjuncture between what is and what they yearn for. Until women raise their voices to claim their perceptions and proclaim their hopes, no change can take place.”<sup>317</sup> Sarah, Madeline and I have begun this process by telling our stories, stories that provide insight into some of the challenges we have faced in leadership ministry in the Mennonite Brethren (MB) Church.

#### Why Stay in the MB Church?

Hearing the struggle of women in leadership ministry in the church leads to the question: “Why stay in the MB Church? Why not leave?” Although I can only answer this question for myself, Sarah and Madeline both reflected similar thinking.

For me the answer lies in the congruence of Anabaptist and feminist theology. Anabaptists understand discipleship as the essence of Christianity. The center of Anabaptism is to practice the ethics of Jesus concretely in daily life.<sup>318</sup> Menno Simons, after whom the Mennonites are named, expressed the life of faith in a practical way. True

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<sup>317</sup> Celia Allison Hahn, *Sexual Paradox: Creative Tensions In Our Lives and In Congregations* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), 215.

<sup>318</sup> Tim Geddert, “What’s in a name?” *In Touch: Bringing Faith to Life* (Fresno, CA: MB Biblical Seminary, Fall/Winter 2008), 7.

faith, as he saw it, “cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it. It binds up that which is wounded.”<sup>319</sup>

Early Anabaptists saw the church is a covenant community that practiced such faith and discipleship, not a support group for individual piety.<sup>320</sup>

In a similar vein Letty Russell describes feminist theology as “a search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization on the part of those who advocate full human personhood for all of every race, class, sex, sexual orientation, ability and age.”<sup>321</sup> Jesus’ concern for those on the margins of society was clear in his teaching and his actions. He came to free the oppressed and to heal through love and justice.

Anabaptist Mennonites, like feminists, have a concern for those who are oppressed. It follows that to marginalize women is not congruent with the MB Church’s foundational understanding of the purpose of the church. If discipleship understood as following Jesus in practical ways is the essence of Christianity for the MB Church, it is worth the struggle to bring changes to include the leadership gifts of all people and not only those of certain men.

### **Seeking Change**

Sarah identified two changes that need to occur in the church to make it inclusive of women in leadership: 1) the church needs to listen to women’s voices in order to understand women’s experiences, and 2) women need to find wholeness from the past teachings about them in order to be effective leaders. These processes require men and

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<sup>319</sup> Menno Simons, “Menno Simons: True Evangelical Faith” (available on the Internet at <http://www.streetlevelconsulting.ca/biographies/menno.htm> , accessed November 23, 2009).

<sup>320</sup> Tim Geddert, “What’s in a name?” *In Touch: Bringing Faith to Life*, 7.

<sup>321</sup> Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, 22.

women to work together to examine leadership in the church to determine how present attitudes and structures affect women's ability to provide leadership.

### *Listening To Women*

The Board of Faith and Life of the MB Church held study conferences to discuss the question of women in ministry but women were absent as presenters at these public debates and their voices were not heard. Kathleen Billman explains how the church can begin to hear women's voices.

The first step in helping people to voice their experience, "to hear into speech" that which has never been articulated, begins with the gracious commitment to listen past the borders of our categories, to communicate our valuing of what is waiting to be voiced, to learn a language that might be quite "other" from our own, and to be deeply aware of the language spoken through bodily expression as well as words. Listening in such a way has always been an art and a mystery, the profoundest gesture of respect. To communicate, by eyes, face, voice, and posture, that one has something infinitely precious to learn from someone else is to offer back what often seems to be ebbing away—the capacity to touch or enrich another human being.<sup>322</sup>

Giving women a voice means stepping into those sacred spaces in their lives that have been locked in by patriarchal thinking. It is recognizing that women do not want to be fixed, but that they simply want to be seen, heard, and acknowledged as equal partners. Parker J. Palmer describes how this can happen: "[If] we want to see and hear a person's soul, there is another truth to remember: the soul is like a wild animal—tough, resilient, and yet shy. When we go crashing through the woods shouting for it to come out so we can help it, the soul will stay in hiding. But if we are willing to sit quietly and

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<sup>322</sup> Kathleen D. Billman, "Pastoral Care as an Art of Community" in *The Arts of Ministry: Feminist-Womanist Approaches*, Christie Cozad Neuger, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 31.

wait for a while, the soul may show itself.”<sup>323</sup> And so it is with women in the church. The Church must find ways of “hearing [women] into speech.”

This genuine listening means that preconceived notions about women and what they want must be put aside. Patriarchal headsets must be turned off to allow both women and men to discover another reality. While women have always been welcomed as leaders in children’s and women’s ministry, these areas of leadership are not necessarily comfortable for all women. At the same time there are men who are gifted in ministry positions that have traditionally been held by women.

True listening means having openness to explore other ways of seeing situations. Women need a safe place to talk about their needs and views without being dismissed when they do not fit into a patriarchal way of thinking. In this research three women’s stories identify challenges they faced in church leadership. Their voices provide insight into how accepted structures and attitudes impact those who have not been part of the traditional hierarchy of the church. To hear their stories is a first step in moving toward wholeness for both men and women. To truly listen is to examine present assumptions with openness to another perspective.

### *Finding Wholeness*

Finding wholeness requires the courage to listen to our souls and then to live out that reality. When people hear the call of their souls they must have the freedom to pursue ministry that is an expression of this inner knowing. This process can include redefining one’s own perceptions as well as those of the church community.

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<sup>323</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey Boss Press, 1998), 151.

Sarah's story revealed her pain as she struggled with the limitations placed on her because she was a woman. She saw that she did not fit into a system that taught women to be subordinate to men. That teaching stifled her soul. While she had no desire to dominate she did have the ability to observe what needed to be done and the organizational skills needed to involve others in carrying out a plan. It was difficult for Sarah to follow the truth that she was a leader when she felt constrained by the expectations of the church that leadership positions were reserved for men.

Madeline talked about her struggle with self-esteem when she entered pastoral ministry. She came to this ministry with confidence from a successful teaching career but found herself marginalized through language and expectations. Her job description was ill-defined and she was frequently excluded as an equal partner with her male colleagues. As a woman she was sometimes seen in a position of servitude rather than as a leader who was serving.

My sense of self-worth took a battering as well when I entered pastoral ministry. Like Madeline I came from a successful career but found the culture of church leadership difficult to understand. While the teaching profession had moved beyond patriarchal thinking to accepting women as equal partners, the church culture was still steeped in an understanding of male entitlement to leadership. I too frequently felt relegated to the status of servitude.

Beverly Harrison says that a caring community and the small decencies of human kindness need to be in place in order for the soul to be felt.<sup>324</sup> A caring community must listen to women's stories about their experiences and dreams. As women are freed to

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<sup>324</sup> Beverly Harrison, "Christianity's Indecent Decency" in *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love* Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith, eds. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 129.

express themselves they will find the courage to follow their souls' desires. For women to find wholeness means feeling safe enough to value who they are and being able to follow that calling.

At the same time the Church needs to understand that women's search for wholeness and full partnership in ministry is not an anti-male struggle. Feminism seeks to bring wholeness to all people, women *and men*. It is a struggle to break free from a worldview that has given power over others to some men. It seeks rather to create a caring community where all people are valued.

Sarah, Madeline and I found ways to accept our gifts as valid in spite of our painful experiences. Sarah has, hopefully only temporarily, stepped out of ministry leadership in the church. Madeline has found a way to continue in ministry that gives her freedom to follow her understanding of leadership. I have chosen to help women find a voice in the debate in the church. Wholeness has come in different ways for each of us but courage is needed to pursue the path for change so that a greater number of women will choose to provide leadership in the church.

### **Moving Forward**

The MB Church needs to make a paradigm shift from a patriarchal worldview in order to achieve its desire to attract women into leadership. Patterns of ministry and gender roles have been set for many years. The process of creating a new paradigm can have profound effects on how people perceive not only their way of life but also their identities. Women's and men's realities have long been shaped by patriarchal thinking. Finding different ways of being is a challenging process for both. The process is

particularly difficult because there are a significant number of people who still support a patriarchal worldview through the literal reading of the Bible. Others may reject such a worldview in theory but they do not recognize how it is still operative in the structures and language of the MB Church.

John Dominic Crossan identifies the process involved in changing the understandings by which we live. He says “when a master paradigm breaks down and another takes its place, the latter is not derived by logical deduction from the ruins of the preceding paradigm or model.”<sup>325</sup> He continues to say that intuition and imagination play a role even in science when, rather than following a series of logical deductions, a researcher may make an intuitive leap that can be confirmed through intellectual analysis and experimentation.<sup>326</sup> In the MB Church people have assumed that biblical interpretation is the key challenge to opening ministry to women. From this assumption, it seemed logical that reinterpreting the Scriptures would free women to serve. But this has not happened.

The 2006 resolution to allow local churches to call women into any leadership position was the culmination of years of study and discussion in the MB Conference. The long-held understanding that women should not have authority over men was changed to allow women to provide leadership not only for women and children but also for men. But the journey to include women in leadership in the MB Church has just begun. Three factors hinder a paradigm shift in the church:

- To accept women in leadership is a decision made by each local church. The Conference does not *require* that women be accepted as equal partners with

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<sup>325</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1988), 16.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

men in leadership ministry. Thus the door is still open for discrimination against women in churches that continue to hold a patriarchal worldview.

These churches can exert a strong influence on the Conference.

- For people who use a literal reading of the Bible long-established gender roles are still used as a lens through which to view both women and men. They see feminism as a threat rather than as a way to recognize the value of all people. An understanding of feminist theology is needed.
- The MB Church has not considered some major challenges women face in leadership. The persistent use of male language and the hierarchical approaches to leadership need to be addressed.

Karen Armstrong talks about the difficulty of changing a paradigm when she reflects about changes expected of the religious orders following the Second Vatican Council.

The council urged the religious orders to go back to the original spirit of their founders, who had been men and women of insight and imagination, innovators and pioneers, not guardians of the status quo. Nuns and monks should also let the bracing spirit of change invade their cloisters; they should throw out the rubble that had accumulated over the years and craft a new lifestyle that was in tune with the times.

But this proved to be a monumentally complex task. Nuns had to decide what was essential in their rule, and then translate this into present-day idiom. But they themselves had been shaped by the old regime at a profound level and many found that they could not think in any other way. They could modernize their clothes but they could not change the habits of their minds and hearts, which had been formed by training that had been carefully designed in a different world and was meant to last a lifetime.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004), xii.

The MB Church reflects the same struggles in its desire to open all leadership ministries to women. It is difficult to decide which beliefs and practices to retain and which to discard.

Chaos can result when changes are made to long-held beliefs. The review of the process for dealing with the question of women in ministry leadership indicated a strong desire for unity. Many people expressed a desire to maintain unity rather than risk a rift in the Conference by allowing women to hold senior leadership positions. Unity provides a sense of order, security, and stability. Unity also allows the status quo to remain in place. It allows those with power to continue holding power over others and denies others a voice. When justice is denied for the sake of unity oppression continues.

The desire for unity will stifle necessary change. Susan Erwin and John Erwin suggest that “forcing a system to avoid chaos by repeatedly following a defined path leads to stagnation.”<sup>328</sup> Although chaos theorists see periodic turbulence as normal and necessary to our survival, the church strongly resists allowing the chaos that is needed to bring about change.<sup>329</sup> Allowing women full ministry opportunities may disrupt the status quo. The MB Church is currently struggling with how to best bring about change while preserving unity. To allow women full access to all aspects of ministry not only takes women out of their traditionally-defined gender roles but necessitates changes that permit women to lead in ways that may be different from the current approach. Sarah and Madeline spoke of this tension between their own leadership styles and those of the churches in which they worked.

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<sup>328</sup> Susan L. Erwin and John R. Erwin, “Heuristic Methodology And New Science Studies,” a presentation to the American Education Research Association Annual Meeting of the Chaos and Complexity Sciences Special Interest Group, April 21-25, 2003, Chicago, IL (available at <http://ccaerasig.com/papers/03/ErwinHeuristics.htm>, accessed 6 February 2006). 9.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 12.

As the Church continues to place a high value on unity leaders like Sarah may give up the struggle to find their place in leadership and move on to other ministry opportunities. If gifted women choose to leave ministry in the church because they can not find meaningful ways to use their gifts for leadership the church will become irrelevant to more and more women. Katie Funk Wiebe already predicted this result in the early 1970s.<sup>330</sup> In addition the church can become irrelevant to a society that has accepted women as equals in many professions.

Madeline, on the other hand, has decided to stay in leadership in the Church. She has found a way of staying true to who she is within the present system. If more women tell their stories and stand in solidarity, their voices will be heard and they can have the impact to bring about changes.

### **Starting Points for the MB Church**

As the MB Church continues its quest to attract women to leadership positions it can make some changes to help women feel accepted and supported. As women feel accepted they will have a greater voice in the church. Two changes that can start this process are the use of inclusive language and the recognition that women often approach leadership differently than men do.

#### *Language*

Using male language for humans and for God can make women feel excluded. The argument that the term *man* refers to humankind and includes women may have been true in the past but today's society does not presume this. In our secular world words

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<sup>330</sup> Katie Funk Wiebe, "Women's Freedom – The Church's Necessity," 84.

such as chairman, fireman, and policeman have been replaced with the inclusive terms chairperson, or simply chair, firefighter, and police officer. The fact that some churches still assume *man* to be an inclusive term is an affront to women in today's culture.

Anne Carr has adapted a list by Anne Wilson Schaef that identifies the stereotypical characteristics of God, humankind, males, and females. These words can have a profound effect on how women see themselves. The words are divided into four categories:

<i>God</i>	<i>Humankind</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Male	childlike	intelligent	emotional
Omnipotent	sinful	powerful	weak
Omniscient	weak	brave	fearful
Omnipresent	stupid, dumb	good	sinful
Immortal, Eternal	mortal	strong	like

children<sup>331</sup>

This analysis shows how the characteristics ascribed to God and to humankind are opposites. The words used to describe God are positive while the words used to describe humankind are understood as negative. The lists to describe males and females are also opposites, with the positive characteristics assigned to males and less desirable characteristics used for females. The characteristics of God match those of males more closely than those of females.

Joan Chittister makes a similar observation:

Women obviously were created to give birth—a very animal, earthy, natural thing—while men, since they were clearly not created to give birth but only to capacitate it, were obviously made to think and to create—a very divine thing. The implications were clear: Women were earthy and natural; men were reasonable and spiritual. The correlation was beyond doubt: God, pure reason and omniscient creator, had to be male. As one wag wrote, “First God created man, and then man

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<sup>331</sup> Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace; Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) quoted in Maxine Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, *Women in Travail & Transition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 216.

created God.” The wag was right. The implications for society of the insistence on the maleness of a God who is more defined as Lord of Hosts, King of Heaven, and Father than as pure spirit, as Sophia wisdom, as the one who claims “I am who I am” can hardly be overestimated.<sup>332</sup>

This underlying current of language and images has an impact on the way women view themselves within the church.

Rosemary Ruether has argued that this dualistic thinking—spirit or freedom versus nature, reason versus emotion (which is called irrational), soul versus body—has oppressed women. Men have organized dualisms hierarchically and have associated themselves with the positive side—spirit, freedom, reason and soul—while relegating women to the negative side—nature, emotion, irrationality, and the body.<sup>333</sup> Children often offer a perspective that adults may be afraid to voice. One child prayed, “Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one but try to be fair.”<sup>334</sup>

Jann Aldredge-Clanton asks whether a “He” can believe that girls are as good as boys.

Such an understanding of God raises a fundamental barrier to the self-esteem of women. If the supreme power of the universe is called “He,” how can women believe they have as much worth as men? The church teaches women that they are created in the image of God, but then uses masculine language to refer to God. This double message creates a conscious or unconscious struggle within women. Women are left wondering if they come closer to the image of God by minimizing their femininity.<sup>335</sup>

In telling her story Sarah referred to the problem of being less valued because she was female. These feelings of inferiority have in part been instilled in women through

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<sup>332</sup> Joan D. Chittister, *Heart of Flesh: A Spirituality for Women and Men* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 22-23.

<sup>333</sup> Rosemary Ruether as quoted in *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* by Carol P. Christ (Beacon Press, Boston, 1980), 25

<sup>334</sup> Eric Marshall and Stuart Hample, *Children's Letters to God* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), n.p.

<sup>335</sup> Jann Aldredge-Clanton, *In Whose Image? God and Gender* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2001), 76-77.

language and images that place greater value on male characteristics. Aldredge-Clanton confirms Sarah's feelings when she says that from "the time they are small, females suffer from exclusively masculine references to God. They internalize feelings of inferiority to men. By the time they reach adulthood, many women are not even conscious of the damage masculine references have done to their self-esteem."<sup>336</sup>

It is important to move past masculine descriptors and focus on some of the feminine images of God. This is one way to value women. Ronald Rolheiser has described what it means to bear the image of God:

We all have this place, a place in the heart, where we hold all that is most precious and sacred to us. From that place our own kisses issue forth, as do our tears. It is the place we most guard from others, but the place where we would most want others to come into; the place where we are most deeply alone and the place of intimacy; the place of innocence and the place where we are violated; the place of our compassion and the place of our rage. In that place we are holy. There we are temples of God, sacred churches of truth and love. It is there, too, that we bear God's image.<sup>337</sup>

If women do not see themselves as fully bearing the image of God, this sacred part of their lives is lost to them and to the church. The place where they most want to be known is not authentic because in language and images they are not perceived to be as valued as men.

Sarah's story reveals this to be the very place from which she wanted to minister in the church. She longed to give expression to what she knew in her innermost being. Madeline spoke of her calling as centered on loving people. She was comfortable to live out her calling among the people she worked with in the church and community rather than being involved in denominational work that did not seem relevant to the people in the pews.

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 86

<sup>337</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Restless Heart* (New York: Doubleday, 2004). 54-55.

The use of inclusive language is one avenue to help women accept that their way of knowing is valid. They can explore rituals and symbols that speak to their spirituality because they are validated in a new way. Developing these new forms of expression may be difficult because one perspective has dominated the church for so long.

### *Approach to Leadership*

The MB Church has invited women to accept leadership positions but it has not attempted to redefine leadership roles. The recent restructuring of the Conference focused on streamlining the conference structure. The decision-makers continue to assume that women will feel comfortable in the present structure. However, Susan Pinker in her research shows that “equal opportunity doesn’t necessarily lead to equal results.”<sup>338</sup>

Pinker cites studies that confirm that men and women are not just socialized to behave differently but that there are biological differences between the sexes that affect behaviour. She found that “gifted, talented women with the most choices and freedoms don’t seem to be choosing the same paths, in the same numbers, as men around them. Even with the barriers stripped away, they don’t behave like male clones.”<sup>339</sup> As the Church recognizes these differences it can become more open to validating different approaches to leadership that are comfortable for women.

In theory, the MB Church affirms that women have the same opportunities for leadership as men. But Gerda Lerner says, “women need to understand that getting ‘equal’ parts will not make them equal, as long as the script, the props, the stage setting,

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<sup>338</sup> Susan Pinker, *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the real Gender Gap* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2008), 10.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

and the direction are firmly held by men.”<sup>340</sup> Robert S. McElvaine confirms the frustration women feel in traditionally male-held roles: “If women gain ‘equality’ but only on the basis of accepting the male script, they will not really have succeeded. They have left intact the fundamental error that has been at the base of so many of our troubles for thousands of years: the assumption that the male is the ‘normal human.’”<sup>341</sup>

Kim Dales in a poem expresses the frustrations of early native Canadians that must be similar to the feelings of women in the church when they are expected to conform to male norms.

Fort Saskatchewan, 1884.

My dearest –  
We have a new problem:  
the Indian agent speaks English and Cree;  
the Indians speak Blackfoot and French.  
Our MP refuses to comment.

Yesterday  
our petitions to the appropriate ministers  
were answered by a shipment of dictionaries.  
Tomorrow the Indians  
begin to learn Cree.<sup>342</sup>

The patriarchal view of leadership is based on the notion that certain men possess the specific knowledge to lead. With this knowledge comes power over others. By contrast, a feminist view of leadership recognizes that all members of a group have knowledge that can benefit the group as it is shared. Shared knowledge leads to shared power. From this standpoint a servant leader is not someone who is subservient to others.

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<sup>340</sup> Gerda Lerner. *The Creation of Patriarchy*, 13.

<sup>341</sup> Robert S. McElvaine. *Eve’s Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 327-8.

<sup>342</sup> Kim Dales, “Fort Saskatchewan, 1884,” in *100% Cracked Wheat*. Bob Currie, Gary Hyland and Jim McLean, eds. (Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan: Coteau Books, 1983). 322.

Rather, the servant leader is one who works to release the knowledge and the gifts of all members in the community.

Women find it difficult to function in leadership ministry because of the ambiguity of being encouraged to lead according to a paradigm that sees service as subservience rather than as leadership. True servant leadership occurs when a group gives an individual authority to lead in order to meet the vision and needs of the community. This leadership approach does not happen when someone is presumed to be in control of knowledge or anointing that gives that person power over others. A servant leader shares knowledge and power freely. The strength of this approach is embracing power *with* the rest of the community rather than exercising power *over* others.

In addition to combating a patriarchal understanding of leading, the relationship building that women value is often seen as secondary to men's more task-oriented values. When women become frustrated with trying to straddle two worlds—the world of their own knowing and the established leadership approach—the toll can be too great, causing them to step out of leadership positions and finding other ways to use their gifts.

Research reviewed in this study confirms Sarah's perception that her leadership style based on building relationships and supporting other leaders is a more comfortable approach for women. Madeline also preferred to build relationships with the people in her local congregation rather than supporting conference structures through committee work that seemed irrelevant to her and the people in her congregation.

Both Sarah and Madeline demonstrated the kind of leadership Jesus taught. As they came to understand themselves and to feel comfortable with being women they were able to truly serve as leaders. They each spoke in their own way of bringing wholeness to

others by loving them and encouraging them to use their gifts rather than focusing on perpetuating a particular structure. Like Jesus, they have a clear understanding of their calling. They seek to bring dignity and healing to those they lead.

Structures in the church will need to be examined to see whether they favor the tendency toward assertive, task-oriented leadership rather than the servant leadership approach that Jesus taught. Sarah's servanthood approach to leadership was based on her desire to nurture other leaders. While she saw this as a strength, she perceived that the people in the congregation saw it as a weakness when they compared her to the assertive style of male leaders. Her leadership was not weak just because it was different from the norm. If church structures continue to favor a patriarchal hierarchical approach rather than a servant leadership model as taught by Jesus and embraced by feminists, women will continue to be viewed as subservient rather than as leaders who serve.

### **Personal Reflections on Changes Needed**

Changes in the use of language and leadership approaches are helpful steps that the church can take but will not necessarily result in a paradigm shift as Crossan describes it. Paradigm shifts require imagination and sometimes a shift in thinking needs to occur before other changes happen. A personal story may best illustrate the point.

It was a Monday morning of the second week of a new school year when I heard a knock on my grade three classroom door. When I opened the door I was greeted by the school principal and a mother. Between them stood a dejected looking boy who was obviously feeling uncomfortable with the situation. The principal and the mother took turns explaining the situation.

Matthew was a grade four student who was having a great deal of difficulty with his school work. On the previous Friday he had left his classroom in frustration, hopped on a city bus and ended up downtown, lost and feeling desperately rejected by the school system. Discussions in the school office had resulted in a plan to place Matthew in my grade three class in hopes that he would experience success in his school work.

Matthew was a tall boy for his age but I did find a desk in the classroom that was suitable for him. I asked him about his favorite subject and he informed me that he was good in math. When the bell rang and the students were settled in their desks I announced that we were going to have a change in our regular time table. We would be starting the day with math. Furthermore we had a new student who would be my assistant and students were free to go to either Matthew or me for help with their math problems.

A few minutes into the class time, Matthew was surrounded by students who wanted his help. He patiently explained the problems and assisted the individuals who came to him. By the time the recess bell rang, we had not only had an extended math period but Matthew had gained the friendship and respect of students in the class.

Matthew went out for recess with the rest of the class but when recess ended we were faced with another problem. Former classmates still saw Matthew as a bully who could not control his aggressive behavior and so had taunted and teased him during the break. I spoke to the rest of the staff and an agreement was reached that my class could have a particular spot on the playing field for themselves. I provided the students with a soccer ball and we went out to step up for a game in our special spot. Since Matthew was taller than the rest of the students he was recognized as an asset to his team and soon became a popular player. Instead of hearing tales of woe when students came in from

recess I had excited announcements about the soccer games. Matthew was a hero rather than a bully.

Matthew continued to help others with math but at the same time he was willing to then accept help from his fellow students in language arts. There was no shame in having problems with spelling because other students had problems with math. It was an accepted practice that students simply helped each other and in this way everyone benefited.

Matthew continued to blossom throughout the year. By track meeting time in the spring he had established himself as the fastest runner in the class and the other students showed their pride in his accomplishments. One day the class came up with a plan. They asked whether I would be willing to run a race with Matthew. Matthew beamed as the class challenged me.

I faced a dilemma. Should I run all out and give the race my best effort or should I let Matthew win? How would the race affect him? I decided that I would make it a real race and we lined up at the starting line. Although the race was close I did win. As we sat down on the grass to catch our breath, the rest of the class gathered around excitedly commenting on the race. I glanced over to see Matthew's reaction. His face was beaming. Rather than criticizing him for losing or giving him advice on what he could have done better his classmates simply cheered both of us for having run well. Matthew's only comment was, "Wait until next time."

Matthew began the school year as a frustrated boy with a learning disability trying to fit into a system that had long been established as supposedly benefiting most students. During the year a shift took place. This shift did not come about because the Department

of Education implemented a new curriculum. It did not happen because of new School Board regulations or local school policies. No, somewhere in a system of thousands of students, somewhere in a school of hundreds of students, there was a classroom of students who saw the potential of one child and embraced that gift. A true desire to include *the other* regardless of learning style, age or past experiences resulted in a richer world for all. A paradigm shift occurred through the imaginative thinking of how to include Matthew in a way that helped everyone succeed.

The church can change its use of language and organizational structures. Women can find wholeness and make their voices heard. All are important steps but a true paradigm shift can only occur when there is a desire to embrace *the other* with the inclusiveness that Jesus demonstrated in his interaction with the people he met. Believing in *the other* is something that comes from the heart and not from resolutions.

### **Conclusion**

When Sarah spoke of her desire to serve God with her gifts she did not want to add more rules and regulations for women. Instead, she wanted the MB Church to move from an exclusive to an inclusive way of thinking about leadership. Men and women need to continue to find ways to give everyone the freedom to serve. Like Matthew, they need a safe and supportive environment to learn, grow and lead.

Men and women have both been affected by traditional views of gender roles. These roles provide a framework within which they find security. It is frightening to imagine other possibilities. In many ways, this change has already happened within larger society where women have entered professions that in the past were considered

appropriate only for men. To rethink issues as part of a faith system is perhaps more challenging. When the Bible has been used to define leadership as *power over* rather than as *power with*, changes threaten those who hold positions of authority. The MB Church needs first to examine how it understands leadership. Then it must create support systems for both men and women to allow new ways of seeing ministry in the church.

To harmoniously blend the worlds of men and women within the MB Church may not be an easy task. In the Broadway hit *Big River* Huck Finn and Jim the slave blend their voices in a song that speaks about bringing two ways of seeing together.

I see the same stars through my window  
That you see through yours  
But we're worlds apart  
Worlds apart  
And I see the same skies through brown eyes  
That you see through blue  
But we're worlds apart, worlds apart  
Just like the earth, just like the sun  
Two worlds together are better than one  
I see the same sun rise in your eyes  
That you see in mine  
But we're worlds apart, worlds apart<sup>343</sup>

Jim had to find a way to explain to Huck how different life was for him as a slave. Each experienced the same events in ways that the other person did not understand. Women need to articulate how they experience life inside and outside the MB Church. As the Church hears their voices, it can begin to imagine other ways of seeing leadership.

Letty Russell paints a picture of a new paradigm. She envisions the church community as sitting at a round table with Christ as the head. Authority becomes the kind of servant-leadership that Sarah spoke about. Russell explains:

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<sup>343</sup> "Worlds Apart" from the soundtrack *Big River*, (available at <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/bigriver/worldsapart.htm>, accessed 4 December 2009).

Power understood as the ability to accomplish desired ends is present in human relationships no matter how particular communities or societies are organized. Nevertheless, Christian communities recognize that the source of power in their life is the love of Christ which inspires and directs them. This is a style of power not of coercion but of empowerment of others. Those who exercise legitimated power or authority are those who assist members of the congregation in making use of their gifts in the service of Christ's love in the world. This authority is one of leadership in the round...It also connects to those at the margins of society who search for word of God's love and justice.<sup>344</sup>

Taking the intuitive leap to move toward such a form of leadership in the MB Church may result in some chaos. The Church needs to be willing to take that risk.

In telling Sarah's, Madeline's and my stories against the backdrop of the MB Church's journey to include women in leadership ministry, I have put human faces to the discussion. Dan Gardener from the *Ottawa Citizen* employs research to show that people who can brush aside thousands of deaths from earthquakes, cyclones, or famine are moved to respond when they see just one picture of a child affected by these disasters.<sup>345</sup> Our stories give the MB Church faces to add to the discussion about women. They are faces filled with joy and pain, faces that lend voices for the church to hear. Their stories now belong to the Church. Thomas King hands over his stories in the same way:

It's yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard the story. You've heard it now.<sup>346</sup>

The stories of women who have the courage to speak their truth can help the church to include all people regardless of gender, race, education, sexual orientation, and income. As the MB Church hears women's stories, the door may be opened for others who feel marginalized to tell their stories. Then we can change together to allow all of

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<sup>344</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 66.

<sup>345</sup> Dan Gardener, "The story of one person's suffering can unite humanity to act" *Edmonton Journal*, May 22, 2008 A18.

<sup>346</sup> Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*, 119.

God's people to use their gifts for ministry in a way that is fulfilling for them and honoring to God.

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## APPENDIX A

### MENNONITE BRETHREN GENERAL CONFERENCE RESOLUTION MINISTRY OF THE WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

General Conference Yearbook, 1981, 46–47

Many churches are asking whether we as Mennonite Brethren have been faithful to the Scriptures by restricting certain ministries in the church to men only. The Canadian Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns brought a resolution on this matter to the Canadian Conference some five years ago. Since then the question has come up repeatedly at both local and conference levels and BORAC put it on the agenda for the study conference last May in Clearbrook, B.C. In view of the continuing debate on this matter we would like to present the following concerns and proposals to our General Conference.

1. We should be careful not to take our models for the husband/wife relationship and for the place of the woman in the church from the current feminist movement, which is largely secular in orientation. We recognize, of course, that movements in society at times force students of the Bible to ask whether they have understood the Scriptures correctly, but the church must always hold a critical stance toward such movements, including also Christian interpretations which have denied Christian women their rightful place in family, church and society.
2. We would caution against those modern currents of thought which tend to minimize the significance of a woman's high calling to be a wife and a mother to her children, and we should do all that we can to strengthen the family and to establish it on biblical principles.
3. We, as men, confess that we have not always loved our wives and honored them as we should. However, we believe that the Scriptures teach that "the husband is the head of the wife." and that a wife's submission to a loving husband is in no way demeaning. True fulfillment comes to both husband and wife when they seek to serve one another, and to be submissive one to another (Ephesians 5:21, "and be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord."), rather than in the desire for equality or even superiority. This, however, does not mean that we condone any form of oppression (either of men or women) in our society.

We recognize that the language of Scripture reflects the patriarchal societies in which the Bible emerged. We should not, however, sit in judgment over Scripture, for God's Word was given for all times and all cultures. It should be understood that when words such as "brother," "brotherhood" and the like are used for the believers that these terms include also the sisters. Therefore, we should not accuse those who use this biblical patriarchal language in teaching and preaching, of being anti-feminist. On the other hand we should avoid using sexist language that offends.

4. We acknowledge the great contribution of our sisters to the work of the Lord in local church, in mission fields, and other areas of kingdom work, and we encourage our churches to continue to discover and to draw upon the spiritual resources found in our sisters for various ministries in the church and in the world. This may also include participation in local church and conference ministries, if the local church so chooses.
5. We do not hold that the reciprocal relationship between male and female, as established in creation, has been annulled by redemption. We do believe that the Bible's teaching on the headship of the husband has a bearing on the place of the woman in the church. We do not hold that the passages in the New Testament (such as 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2), which put restrictions on the Christian woman, have become irrelevant, even though they were given in a different cultural context and, therefore, do need to be re-applied. And while we recognize that women played a significant role in the early church – something we would encourage them to do in our day as well – we do not believe that the Mennonite Brethren Church should ordain women to pastoral leadership.

## APPENDIX B

### PATRIARCHAL THINKING REFLECTED THE MENNONITE BRETHERN HERALD

The gender and the province of the writer are included in the brackets whenever they were indicated in the letters to the MB Herald.

1980 “One shudders to think of the consequences when biblically defined roles are tampered with.”<sup>347</sup> (woman, ON)

1982 “It is dishonoring to the Creator if men wear their hair as long as that of women.”<sup>348</sup> (man,?)

1983 “The Church in its assertion of patriarchal language and values drives countless people from its doors. It portrays God as an unfair, unloving “Father” bent on suppression and subjugation of half his human creation, a half he seemingly created to this very purpose.”<sup>349</sup> (woman, BC)

1984 “Men and women alike need to imitate Christ, and to be transformed in his image – not that of the opposite sex.”<sup>350</sup> (woman, SK)

1985 Bible study on Deborah: “Although the idea of women in leadership is not offensive to the author of this text, the fact that the fate of Israel rests in the hands of these women represents one more symptom of a deep spiritual problem within the people of God. But the Lord’s work must and will be done. In an ailing, patriarchal community, where men are weak and lacking in faith, the Lord uses women.”<sup>351</sup> (man,?)

1986 “Women played an important role in the early church but not a leading role: the incarnation was a man.”<sup>352</sup> (man, BC)

1987 “It certainly is in sharp contrast to the atmosphere that prevails whenever “the brethren” are mainly concerned with deciding among themselves what “the sisters” should or should not be allowed to do.”<sup>353</sup> (woman, ON)

1987 “Letters defending women have a low view of scripture.”<sup>354</sup> (man, ON)

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<sup>347</sup> Viola Eckert, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 15, 1980): 9.

<sup>348</sup> David Ewert, “Head covering for women” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 26, 1982): 9.

<sup>349</sup> Nancy Olfert, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (December 2, 1983): 10.

<sup>350</sup> Debra Esau, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 9, 1984): 8.

<sup>351</sup> Daniel I. Block, “In the looking glass: Studies in the book of Judges (Part IV)” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (November 1, 1985): 9.

<sup>352</sup> Kirk Durston, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (December 12, 1986): 11.

<sup>353</sup> Judith H. Doerksen. “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 25, 1986): 18.

<sup>354</sup> Leonard Reiss, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 20, 1987): 10.

1989 “Is it possible that perhaps my contribution to society is my child and the full-time love and care that I can give him? Have I perhaps been given life and redemption for the very purpose?”<sup>355</sup> (woman, AB)

1990 “If a woman is called of God to minister, then set her free. A married lady after having had her family and if her husband consents should, “Go for it.” We need women ministers that would offset our high salary pastoral system. We need women ministers to help with the counselling because there are more ladies coming for counselling than men.”<sup>356</sup> (man, BC)

1990 “I cannot understand why people want women to be equal in what God has called men to do. I don’t want to do what God created a woman for.” (man, SK)

1991 “You chose your husband every bit as much as he chose you, so why should it be the woman’s responsibility to assume the man’s surname?”<sup>357</sup> (woman, MB)

1992 The items on the “list of Mennonite apostasies are an increasing acceptance of homosexuality, allowing women to serve as pastors, teaching liberal theology at church colleges and seminaries and a peace witness that interferes in the affairs of the government.” (Message by George Brunk II at the Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites’ Eighth Annual Bible Conference)<sup>358</sup>

1992 “(God) also created women with a greater need for dependency and for a need of spirituality. Take away the leadership role of men and men will soon feel superfluous in the church. I conclude with praise for those women who have worked diligently behind the scenes to make their husbands real pastors to the flock.”<sup>359</sup> (man, ON)

1992 “The connection between the oppression of women and patriarchal understandings is obvious in La Hayes’s recent book on pastors who fall. He takes the classical position that women seduce men, therefore men are the victims and never applies ‘victims’ to women at all.”<sup>360</sup> (man, BC)

1993 “I write on behalf of many women who are very thankful for the leadership of many men in our homes and churches. He is divinely appointed “head of the family”. God uses order of authority in the human race to protect and provide.”<sup>361</sup> (woman, MB)

1993 “Women in Christian ministries (singing or preaching) should also cover their distinctive feminine traits: they should leave their low neck and back-lines for social

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<sup>355</sup> Charolotte Riegel, “Mothering” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (May 12, 1989): 13.

<sup>356</sup> Norman Fehr, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (August 24, 1990): 17.

<sup>357</sup> E.E. Penner, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (May 31, 1991): 12.

<sup>358</sup> T. Fast, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (January 10, 1992): 31.

<sup>359</sup> Isaak Eitzen, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (October 23, 1992): 22.

<sup>360</sup> Len Hjalmarson, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (December 4, 1992): 13-14.

<sup>361</sup> Elfrieda Lepp, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (April 16, 1993): 12.

events. They should also have a moderate hairstyle and makeup and no earrings. These things distract listeners from hearing the gospel message.”<sup>362</sup> (man, BC)

1995 “As a professional woman, the only place where I don’t feel like a fully participating adult is in the church. The church and this publication seem to be dominated by middle-aged white men.”<sup>363</sup> (woman, ?)

1999 “It grieves me to see Christian women buying into the world’s mindset.”<sup>364</sup> (woman, MB)

2004 “Our primary calling can and should be that of mothering.”<sup>365</sup> (woman, BC)

2004 “... the senior pastor, the shepherd of the flock should definitely be a man.”<sup>366</sup>

2005 A male reader expressed concern about the cascading effect of changing a traditionally held position of the Scriptures and how to read them. He feared that the present issue of women in senior pastor positions would lead to the blessing of same sex couples. He also stated that in

North America men need to show leadership in family and church. The tragedy is that too many of our leaders see their position as a position of power instead of ministry (service). Perhaps emphasizing the shepherding minister rather than the ruling leader would bring a better attitude to this discussion.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Norman Fehr, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 16, 1993): 9.

<sup>363</sup> Linda Poulson, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (April 21, 1995): 14.

<sup>364</sup> Jill Arndt, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 5, 1999):

<sup>365</sup> Hildegard Thiessen, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 2, 2004).

<sup>366</sup> Sally Epp, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (July 2, 2004).

<sup>367</sup> Isaak Eitzen, “Letter to the Editor” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (January 7, 2005).

## APPENDIX C

### THEMES FOR THE WOMEN'S CONFERENCES IN THE 1980s

1980 Saskatchewan: Let us not grow weary in well-doing. The emphasis was on the need to sacrifice for missions.<sup>368</sup>

1980 Saskatchewan: Service as a way of life with Christ as the supreme example of servanthood.<sup>369</sup>

1981 Ontario: Season and time for every purpose. The women were affirmed and challenged to use their leadership gifts.<sup>370</sup>

1982 Ontario: Women were meant to be responders while men are to be initiators. Just as Christians were meant to respond to God, wives were to respond to their husbands.<sup>371</sup>

1982 Manitoba: Sitting in Rubble. Women were challenged to love the Lord enough to make his Word a guide in every situation in their lives.<sup>372</sup>

1982 Women in Ministry Conference: Looking beyond Ourselves. Workshops addressed issues such as women and overseas ministries, inclusiveness of women in worship and fathers as caretakers of children.<sup>373</sup>

1984 Manitoba: Here I Am, Send Me. Women were challenged to be people helpers.<sup>374</sup>

1986 Ontario: Discipleship Today: The joy of servanthood and the importance of knowing one's self-worth were stressed.<sup>375</sup>

1986 Manitoba: Spiritual Motherhood: God's Intention for all Women. To be a spiritual mother women were to be obedient and not to take their cues from the world. The speaker identified the seven responsibilities of a spiritual mother: to be faithful in marriage, to care for her children, to be hospitable, to wash the feet of the saints, to assist those in distress, to preside over her home making order and peace, to be reverent in behaviour, not to be a gossip, not to be enslaved to wine or other substances, to uphold high standards and to teach younger women.<sup>376</sup>

1987 Manitoba: Let Go and Let God. Women were asked to let go of the need for approval, the need for a partner who would run their lives, the need to live life with very

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<sup>368</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Saskatchewan women take time out to tune in" (May 23, 1980): 16.

<sup>369</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Saskatchewan women encourage service" (December 19, 1980): 20.

<sup>370</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Take hold of your time, women told" (May 8, 1981): 16.

<sup>371</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Women meant to be responders, says Elliot" (May 7, 1982): 15.

<sup>372</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Clear challenge at Manitoba Women's Conference" (May 21, 1982): 22.

<sup>373</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Women in Ministry conference" (August 27, 1982): 18.

<sup>374</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Women's conference touched by God" (May 18, 1984): 19.

<sup>375</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Warm blessing amid driving rain" (May 16, 1986): 15.

<sup>376</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Elizabeth Elliot speaks to overflow crowd" (May 16, 1986): 15.

narrow limits, the need for power, the need for social recognition, the need for personal admiration, the need for personal achievement and ambition, the need for self-sufficiency and the need for perfection and unassailability. They were instructed to let go of disappointments, bitterness, resentments, comparisons to others, and the failures, hurts and tensions of the past.<sup>377</sup>

1989 Saskatchewan: O Give Thanks to the Lord: Women were reminded that their goal in life was to be content and to be thankful.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "A God-centred perspective needed, Manitoba women told" (May 15, 1987): 14.

<sup>378</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, "Ladies give thanks to the Lord" (November 24, 1989): 15.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

#### **THE SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES OF WOMEN IN MINISTRY LEADERSHIP IN THE MENNONITE BRETHREN (MB) CHURCH**

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully.

#### **Project Description**

The MB Church has opened the door for all levels of ministry leadership to women. All positions in the Conference and in the churches except for that of lead pastor have been open to women since 1981 and in July 2006 the Conference passed a resolution to give local churches the option to have women in the lead pastor position.

Although the door has been opened for women to serve in leadership a limited number of women have responded to the call to ministry. This research explores the challenges that women face in leadership positions that has been shaped and held by men. The research will consist of writing the stories of women who have served in leadership in the MB church to explore their experiences in ministry.

This research project is being undertaken by Kathleen Neufeld as part of the Doctor of Ministry program through St. Stephen's College, Edmonton.

#### **Participation in the Project**

Interviews will be held in the summer and fall of 2009. I will meet with you in a comfortable setting of your choice to listen to your story of ministry leadership. I will ask you to engage in story telling and theological reflection as we together explore your experience.

You will be given the opportunity to participate in consultation on the emerging themes as the analysis is taking shape. This will happen through written and oral conversation with me and by your comments on the final draft. Your participation in this will be at your discretion.

#### **Potential Harm to Research Participant**

This research process does not carry with it potential harm greater than that which you might experience in the normal conduct of your everyday life.

## **Recording Process**

I will record the conversation with an audio recorder. I will then transcribe these conversations verbatim into written form.

## **Rights**

Confidentiality or anonymity will be protected as much as possible. Your name and location of ministry will not be disclosed. Every effort will be made to avoid using identifying factors in the project. Since there are so few women involved in leadership ministry it is possible that someone reading the project may recognize some details which will lead to identification. You will have the opportunity to read the material before it is used so that the dangers of identification will be minimized.

You will have the opportunity to opt out without penalty or prejudice and the data will be destroyed or returned and not used in the study.

You will receive a final copy of the project.

## Consent

Please initial the following clauses if you consent to them.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree that Kathleen Neufeld may at her sole discretion use the materials resulting from this project.

\_\_\_\_\_ I assign Kathleen Neufeld any copyright interest I may have in any materials produced from this project.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights or release researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

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geoffwp@telus.net

You are free to contact Dr. Wilfong-Pritchard for further information.

This research has been approved by the Ethics Committee of St. Stephen's College. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons.

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Participant's Signature

Date

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Kathleen Neufeld, Researcher

Date