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THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN — A PROPOSAL FOR MENNONITE BRETHREN

Timothy J. Geddert

Which church ministries may appropriately ... Biblically ... be carried out by women? It is clear that diverse answers are being given to this and related questions. The Scriptures are being read in diverse ways; practices within churches vary; we are not united on where we should go from here. My goal is to introduce and clarify the issues and propose a way forward.

Introductions

I want to role play three different introductions to this paper. In these introductions, I hope to capture some of the perspectives that are represented within our denomination, and perhaps even capture some of the passion with which people share their perspectives. The various views, often strongly held, must be taken seriously as we ask prayerfully for God's guidance in forging a consensus for the future.

The first two spokespersons are pastors, each providing leadership in a strong and growing Mennonite Brethren congregation. But how different they sound.

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The present conference position is both "too open" and "too closed."

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Down with Sexual Barriers

The Mennonite Brethren Church is at a cross-roads. At stake is nothing less than faithfulness to Christ's vision for the Kingdom of God ... "where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."

The early church was in step with Christ's kingdom vision. Like Jesus, the church worked to break down racial barriers, socio-economic barriers, and especially sexual barriers. Women were accepted and included, trained and drawn into leadership ministries. They were liberated from the repression they had suffered as long as age old rules were used to bind and repress.

But most of church history has worked in the opposite direction. Institutions replaced community. Racial and socio-economic barriers were reconstructed. Women were excluded from leadership roles. Jesus had liberated them; the church chose to repress them. The freeing power of the Kingdom and of the Spirit of God were replaced by the binding institutionalism of a repressive church.

Yet throughout church history there have been pockets of authentic Christian community ... where barriers were broken down, where the oppressed found freedom, and where disciples of Jesus could become sisters and brothers in a true spiritual family. In our day, the vision is growing. Christians of many denominations are beginning to recognize that equality in the family of God was always God's ideal, that giftedness and call, not privilege and power and gender, determine ministry opportunities.

A Biblical church is always on the cutting edge of renewal and change, even when renewal upsets long-entrenched patterns of thought and behavior. A Biblical church will not be led back into bondage by reactionary voices that speak loudly to defend the status quo, that maintain a conservative institutionalism.

We are obliged to keep in step with God's call, Christ's vision and the Spirit's gifting. God is calling women into ministry, but we do not let them serve. In Christ there is neither male nor female, but we will not let women lead. The Spirit gifts women as surely as he gifts men, but we restrict the use of those gifts in the church.

We must not let the reactionary voices win! Too much is at stake...

And so begins a passionate defense of Christian freedom, of the Kingdom vision, of the nature of true Christian community, and the need to affirm the ministry of women alongside men.

But what do the so-called "reactionary voices" really sound like? Are they the voices of repressive defenders of the status quo, of leaders opposed to renewal and change? Or do they rather sound like this:

Observe God-ordained Roles

The Mennonite Brethren Church is at a cross-roads. At stake today is our obedience to the Word of God, and therefore the legitimacy of our claim to be a Biblical people. Will our decisions and priorities be determined by God's Word or by a culture that is crowding in on us?

The Bible clearly teaches that men and women find fulfillment and joy in their God-ordained roles when men lovingly lead and women willingly submit, when together they seek to establish Godly families with appropriate role-differentiation in the home, the church and society.

Jesus did not come to redefine the roles of men and women. He came to renew individuals so that husbands and fathers could truly be spiritual leaders in their homes, and Godly women could find joy and liberty in the exercise of their God-ordained roles. The early church understood God's ideals and found harmonious ways of affirming the giftedness and call of all believers.

Today, liberationist movements and power struggles between the sexes are invading the church. Many Christians are allowing these secular forces to distort their reading of the Scripture. Some are even calling for a complete obliteration of any God-given distinctions between men and women in the leadership of the church. We are at a crossroads. Will we allow the world to squeeze us into its mold? Will we allow liberal theology and a weakened commitment to the Scriptures to seduce us into giving up God's ideals? Nothing is more necessary today than for the church to gain back its credibility. How shall we do that if we blatantly reject the clear teaching of the Bible? How shall we do it if we contribute to the chaos of

our society and our families by rejecting God's creation mandate? How shall we do it if we allow the secular forces around us to tell us who should be accepted as leaders in our churches?

And so begins a passionate defense of Biblical authority, literal hermeneutics, a re-capturing of God's creation ideal, and the need to preserve God's will that men and not women are called to be the primary preacher/teacher/leaders in our churches.

There are variations on these two positions, many variations. But they are typical of people who address the issue from the extreme ends of a spectrum. And the tug-of-war tears at our unity, builds up our defenses, and sometimes multiplies our confusion.

I have yet another introduction to share with you. It is my own. It represents the passion of my heart.

Communication Must Not Break Down

The Mennonite Brethren Church is at a cross-roads. At stake today is our commitment to be a discerning, consensus-building community ... a people who can study the Word together humbly, openly and expectantly. At stake is our calling to be a community of people who can disagree without judging, who can listen to each other without misinterpreting and misrepresenting, who can set aside our prejudices and preconceived ideas and hear the Word of God together. At stake is our ideal that we can be a community of learners who will not give up loving each other and learning together, even though we believe passionately and believe differently.

In the early church when there was disagreement, they worked towards agreement, as in Acts 15. They sometimes agreed to work separately, as Paul and Barnabas did. They sometimes openly rebuked each other, as Paul did Peter. They sometimes warned the church of opposite dangers, as Paul and James did. But they were one church, seeking together to find God's way. When they saw things differently, they practiced their faith differently. But they did it side by side, as one church.

We are called to do the same if we disagree ... when we disagree. We have weathered many storms ... storms over eschatology, inerrancy, the confession of faith, the charis-

matic movement. For some, these issues are still storm centers. But few issues, it seems, have been as volatile as the issue of women in ministry. The issues are multiple — the ministry of women; how we read the Bible; how we reach consensus; what we do with our diversity. Accusations come easily. Misunderstandings abound.

We must not let communication break down. We must find ways to facilitate dialogue, promote unity, and practice our convictions ... even while we are working towards a consensus. So much is at stake.

Some leaders in our conference would wish for me to argue as clearly and forcibly as possible that we must open doors more fully to the ministry of women. Some would wish for me to argue as clearly and forcibly as possible that this is precisely what we should not allow to happen. I will oblige neither of them. My concern is to help this conference to find a way to move forward on the issue of women in ministry, at a time when there are already many leaders pulling from both ends of the spectrum.

My goal is *not* to convert people from one side of the debate to the other. It is certainly not to help us silence or ignore one set of views. My goal is to help us understand our diversity, to accept one another in love, to move forward constructively in continuing dialogue, and to find an appropriate model for action while we still see things so differently.

My goal and my prayer is that this issue, despite the confusion and uncertainty that it sometimes generates, will ultimately lead us together to God's throne, as we seek His face and His will. I honestly believe that this issue can lead us together into God's Word as we study its teaching and submit to its authority. It can push us to articulate more clearly and more consistently what principles we use when we interpret and apply Biblical instructions. It can lead us to become a more authentic hermeneutical community. It can challenge us to greater faithfulness to God's call as we understand it, even while our understandings may vary.

I suggest that the way forward will be facilitated primarily by three things:

1. By understanding how our present diversity has come about.
2. By clarifying the underlying issue: Biblical hermeneutics.

3. By agreeing to accept considerable diversity in practice while we work towards consensus of conviction.

1. How Did We Arrive At Our Present Diversity?

A Consensus

Two or three decades ago, evangelical Christians, including church leaders and scholars, were very close to consensus on what the Bible teaches concerning the appropriate roles of women in the church. They agreed on how to read the relevant texts in their original contexts (“Biblical exegesis”) and they agreed on how to translate the message into God’s Word to their contemporary context (“Biblical hermeneutics”). Key elements in the “exegetical consensus” included the following: 1. The first three chapters of Genesis (creation, fall and curse narratives) were understood as a clear statement on 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 on “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” (like I Cor 11:2-16 and I 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.

This “exegetical consensus” was matched by a “hermeneutical consensus.” That is to say, most evangelicals agreed not only on the meaning of the Biblical texts, but also on the appropriate response of the church in our day. Many evangelicals three decades ago would have claimed that their “hermeneutical principle” was “literal obedience.” If the Bible teaches

a hierarchical pattern, it must be practiced. If the Bible forbids women to preach, they must not preach. If leadership in churches was restricted to men in the New Testament church, it must be restricted to men today. When the Bible speaks, Christians simply obey. There is no room to negotiate, and we must certainly not let modern trends in society influence what we do in the church.

Because there was widespread consensus on “exegesis” and “hermeneutics,” there was also widespread agreement on which ministries were appropriate for women. They were free to teach women and children and to organize themselves into women’s groups. But their public ministries in the church as a whole were rather limited. They were normally not involved much in leadership or decision-making. They were called “equal” with men, but they were to be subordinate to them.

Challenges to a Consensus

Already three decades ago, some Christians were troubled by what was happening. They were uncomfortable with a so-called “literal obedience” which was in reality a rather inconsistent and selective “literal obedience.” Sometimes Biblical prohibitions were carried over directly, sometimes they were ignored, and sometimes the principles behind them were applied in new ways. Thus, while women were forbidden to teach men, they were not called to be silent (cf. I Tim. 2:12; nor were men called to lift up holy hands in prayer, cf. I Tim. 2:8). While women were forbidden to take leadership roles, they were not called to wear veils (cf. I Cor. 11:5). The biblical teaching was “translated” into a set of guidelines that made sense in our world.

Outside the evangelical camp, other winds were blowing. There were radical feminist critiques of the church’s teaching and practice. There were “theologically liberal” reinterpretations of the Bible, and often rejections of its authority. The apostle Paul was sometimes called a “male chauvinist.” Conservative views as a whole were considered “backward” “repressive” and “out of touch with the modern world.”

The challenges came from outside the evangelical camp. And since the inside consensus was strong it had little impact. This was especially true because many evangelicals quietly imagined that history and tradition were on their side. The consensus they shared was mistakenly thought to be an unbro-

ken tradition since the New Testament was written. Why should a totally new view be taken seriously?

But what many evangelicals did not realise was that the consensus they shared was actually rather recent. Many did not realise that at the beginning of the nineteenth century a significantly different consensus ruled the evangelical world. At that time Christians were virtually agreed that women should not speak in church at all (though they were permitted to sing). It was inappropriate for them to gather together for prayer, although gathering for social conversation was considered acceptable. Teaching Sunday School, even to other women or children was not considered appropriate.

Nor did many evangelicals thirty years ago remember how different things were in the evangelical church at the end of the nineteenth century. Preaching and teaching by women was affirmed by such great evangelical leaders as Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday and others. Numerous Christian institutions prepared women for ministry and several evangelical denominations ordained them.

The issue of “women in ministry” had been debated often before the middle of this century, but somehow by about 1950 a consensus had been gained, and it was easy to imagine that this consensus represented “what the Bible clearly teaches.”

Since the middle of this century, a great deal has changed. No longer is it “the radicals” and “the liberals” who challenge the evangelical consensus. There is considerable uncertainty within the evangelical camp itself concerning which exegetical conclusions are correct, and which hermeneutical models are appropriate. In recent years two very influential groups of evangelical scholars have organized themselves into advocacy groups for two main alternative views. The two groups, called Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood and Christians for Biblical Equality are working equally diligently, but are poles apart on what they believe the Bible teaches.

Alternative Evangelical Views

Because many of us are already familiar with the older consensus, a brief examination of some alternative views is in order. It is important to realize that these views are being advocated by Biblical scholars who are also leaders within the evangelical church. These are Christians who confess the infallibility of the Scriptures and who stand under the author-

ity of its teaching. Views like these are represented within virtually all evangelical denominations and on virtually all evangelical Seminary campuses.

Many evangelicals now interpret the creation account(s) in ways which give equal authority to women and men. Both together and each individually is invested with authority by God as his image-bearer. The “helper” role of the woman does not imply subordination. In fact it is the word often used for God as our “helper.”

The curses of Genesis three are not viewed as prescriptions, but as predictions. They do not express God’s intentions for this world, but the unfortunate consequences of human sinfulness. (The implication would be that it is just as legitimate to try to end male dominance as it is to minimize the pain of childbirth.)

The Gospels are seen to be loaded with evidence that both Jesus and the Gospel writers were consciously working towards the liberation of women in an age of blatant sexual discrimination. That Jesus chose twelve Jewish men as his apostles should not prevent women from leading churches any more than it should prevent Gentiles from doing so.

Galatians 3:28, stating that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, is understood to be Paul’s “eschatological ideal,” the vision Christians aim to realize. It took decades before Jew/Gentile discrimination disappeared in the church. It has taken even longer for male/female discrimination to be erased. But it is still God’s ideal.

Restrictive passages are often reinterpreted and “mistranslations” are corrected. Whatever the texts really mean, the restrictions must be applicable only to specific local and temporary problems. How else can they be harmonized with the widespread inclusion of women in teaching, leading, prophetic ministries within the early church? First century restrictions should not be applied to our modern world.

Virtually all Biblical texts are addressed equally to men and women. Since the over-all direction of movement within Scripture is toward partnership, not hierarchy, so it is argued, we should not allow a few debatable restrictive passages to be the focus of our attention.

Evangelical interpreters in this camp believe that God is calling Christians to work as aggressively to eliminate sexual discrimination as Jesus himself did. At the very least Chris-

tians must be careful not to practice sexual discrimination within the Christian church.

A Lost Consensus

At the present time, evangelicals are deeply divided both in their exegesis (“what the texts say”) and in their hermeneutics (“how the Bible guides our decisions.”) While some call for a return to the former consensus, more and more evangelical Christians are finding alternative exegetical conclusions persuasive. And more and more evangelical Christians are trying to find a Biblical hermeneutic which is more self-consistent than the one which prevented women from preaching but allowed them to pray without head-coverings, that takes certain very debatable texts with utter seriousness and apparently sets aside other texts that seem perfectly plain (e.g. I Tim. 2:8; I Thess. 5:26).

Many would insist that it is essential for evangelicals to take with much greater seriousness the fact that the New Testament was written in circumstances far different from our own. While the Gospel remains intact, and the basic principles which motivated first century behavior are permanently binding, the specific behavior patterns are not always to be duplicated in our world.

Thus, we no longer practice wearing veils because the absence of them does not mean what it did in first century Corinth. We no longer keep women silent in the church because they no longer disrupt services the way they apparently did in some early church contexts. And, some would argue, there is no longer any need to keep women from public teaching ministries, now that they have the same educational opportunities as men. Some would argue that the time is coming, and perhaps is already here, when the ordination of women to eldership and pastoral positions will be seen to be just as “Biblical” in our day as their exclusion from these ministries was in an earlier day.

While some would argue that this whole approach is too arbitrary, and deprives the Scriptures of their normative function for faith and life, others would claim that it is the hermeneutic of “(selective) literal obedience” which is arbitrary and unfair to the Scriptures.

The New Testament itself, it seems, allowed for considerable variation in the way abiding principles were applied to

local needs and customs. How else do we account for the fact that the New Testament which appears to forbid women from leading and teaching, tells us that Paul knew women who lead and taught (Acts 18:26)? How do we account for the fact that Paul calls quite a number of women his “co-workers” and (probably) even calls one of them an apostle (Rom. 16:7 [in Greek])? In the midst of the current uncertainties and disagreements, it is not surprising that some want to reinforce the older consensus, *just because* it represented a consensus. They lament the fact that the consensus was ever lost. If only we could agree again now, the problems would disappear. But those on the other side can just as legitimately call for consensus in the direction of their new understandings.

And in the midst of all the “exegesis” and the “hermeneutics,” women are being called into leadership roles. Many doubt that they have a right to be there. But many others rejoice that finally the church has recognized their giftedness and calling. Hardly anyone doubts that where they minister, they frequently do so with great effectiveness. But the consensus is gone.

Where Are The Mennonite Brethren?

In an evangelical world that has lost its exegetical and hermeneutical consensus on the issue of women’s ministry roles, where are the Mennonite Brethren?

We are right in the middle of the evangelical camp. We have also lost our former consensus. “New” interpretations of the crucial texts are being advocated. “New” applications of Biblical principles are being tested. But this is not happening without strong reactions. Sometimes we are tempted to label each other as “naive, old-fashioned” or “liberal, unbiblical.” And we find it very difficult to agree on what to *do* while we are disagreeing on what the Bible said when written, and says today.

Present conference policies (that women minister, including preaching, but not be ordained or hold senior pastoral leadership positions) encourage a far greater openness to the ministry of women than would seem to be allowed by “the older consensus” or by the view that a hierarchical “creation order” is mandated for all time and in every context. But we still have restrictions, a constant source of pain and frustration to women who believe they are called to pastoral ministry and

to men and women who understand the Bible in ways which affirm that call.

I have attempted to trace some of the historical movements that have resulted in our present diversity. Hopefully our dialogue about that history can help us move forward, so that the present pain and misunderstanding can give way to dialogue, strengthened relationships and greater understanding. Before we can suggest a way forward, more needs to be said about what I am calling Biblical Hermeneutics.

II. The Underlying Issue: Biblical Hermeneutics

Interpreting texts is called “exegesis.” It is a matter of carefully reading and understanding what the texts actually say. Bible teachers who have the training and skill to read the original texts in the light of their original contexts must give us guidance in exegeting Scripture. They must earn our trust, and their conclusions must be tested in our churches and schools.

But “hermeneutics” is another step. The term “hermeneutics” traditionally meant “the science of Biblical interpretation.” It included what we now usually call “exegesis.” In recent years, the term “hermeneutics” has taken on a narrower connotation. No longer is it the whole task of “interpreting and applying” the Bible. It now is usually used to refer to the second part of that process, the part that takes the findings of Biblical “exegesis” and determines how those findings become applicable in today’s situations. The distinction between “exegesis” and “hermeneutics” is roughly the same as between what we now often call “interpretation” and what could be called “application.”

We can debate the most appropriate terms, but what is essential is to observe that we are moving beyond exegesis when we move from “what the text said when written” to “what God is calling us to do today.” Many Christians overlook the importance of this as a second step. The result is a great deal of confusion, especially when we confuse hermeneutics with issues like inerrancy, Biblical authority, or personal obedience.

For example, most Biblical scholars agree that in I Cor. 11, Paul instructs women to wear some kind of cloth head-covering. In reaching this conclusion, they have “exegeted” the text. But the next step after exegesis is to ask, “and what should we

do?” If women are not required to wear it today it is *not* because the text does not instruct women to wear it. It is *not* because we no longer believe in Biblical inerrancy or authority. And it is *not* because we are unwilling to obey. If women are not required to wear a head-covering today, it is because our “Biblical hermeneutic” leads to an act of obedient response which is *different* from the one that Paul expected in first century Corinth. In other words, “what the text required then” and “what God requires today” are not identical.

Facilitating Discussion

“Biblical hermeneutics” is an issue which is crying out for attention in our denomination. The issue of women in ministry will probably force us to give it that attention; I hope it does. The few brief comments that I am including here are intended to provoke and facilitate that discussion.

First, hermeneutics is something that needs to be addressed in community. While “exegesis” (interpreting the meaning of the original texts) is best done by those with special training and skill, “hermeneutics” must not be left to “the experts.” The church, as a discerning community, under the guidance of God’s Spirit and local leaders, must work towards consensus on “what God wants us to do in response to what the Bible says.”

This consensus-building should take place also at a denominational level. However, our local circumstances can and should affect the way we practice Biblical obedience. For this reason, it is often unwise and unrealistic to expect an entire denomination to adopt uniform implementation of principles, even if we do agree on “exegesis.” It is quite clear that the early church did not demand such uniformity.

Second, hermeneutics requires more than one model. While some speak affirmingly of a “literal hermeneutic,” the fact is that it is not adequate for all situations. No Christian can or should expect that every Biblical command is intended to be literally obeyed in all contexts. We are not required in our culture to greet each other in church with a kiss, despite the fact that the Bible commands it. Lifting up holy hands when we pray is not required, even though Paul commands this of men “in every place.” Whether we realize and admit it or not, none of us apply a literal hermeneutic to all Biblical texts.

In many situations we seek to discern the principle that

motivated a particular command or guideline. We then maintain that the principle is permanently binding, while the particular application demanded in the first century context is not. Thus John 13 teaches us to adopt a servant attitude in the church, even though we do not literally practice the foot-washing that Jesus commanded his disciples to practice. We agree that generosity is required of us, even though most of us do not literally give away our second shirt to someone who has none.

There is much room for misunderstanding here. Christians are often divided as to whether a given text calls for a direct and literal application, or whether “it is the principle that counts.” When we differ in our practice of hermeneutics, we are sometimes tempted to call each other unbiblical or disobedient, but it is always wrong to do so. This has important implications for the issue of women in ministry.

If we conclude that the so-called restrictive texts on the issue of women in ministry are intended to be applied directly and literally, we will defend something like the older consensus. If we conclude that what really mattered to the original writers, and behind them the Holy Spirit, was the observance of a principle ... and that the specific way in which that principle is upheld might be very different in our day ... then including women in many more ministry settings will likely seem appropriate and Biblical. But until we are willing and able to dialogue openly about our hermeneutics, without criticizing or judging each other, it is unlikely that we will move towards a consensus on what God’s will is for us on this question in our day.

We want things to be simple ... just listen to the Bible and obey. Our present confusion and misunderstanding comes in large measure because for too long we pretended we were doing just that. Really we were not. And now we know neither what we really were doing, nor what we should do to get out of the present impasse. And so I suggest the following way forward.

III. Working Towards Consensus

Where do we go from here? The burden of this paper is to urge that we commit ourselves to four things. While the first three are foundational, they are also not very controversial. It

is the fourth which needs careful testing and refining if it is to represent a way forward for our denomination. We must commit ourselves (I suggest) to the following:

1) To continued *Bible study*. Unless we are persuaded by the Bible itself, we have no valid reason for adopting one position over another. The goal of “exegetical consensus” is worth pursuing. Though it seems a distant goal in times of controversy, we must reaffirm the presence of the Spirit among us as we discern together “what the Bible says.”

I am encouraged to see how many individual churches and groups of churches are taking seriously the call to study the Bible on this issue. It is stimulating all of us to look at the Scriptures more carefully. It will surely help all of us to understand why there is so much diversity on this issue. Hopefully it will help us move closer towards consensus.

2) To careful reflection on *hermeneutics*. Many of us have never reflected carefully on how we get from “what the Bible said then” to “what God wants us to do today.” To equate the two is the simplest answer, but it is often the wrong answer. We need to work hard to become people who “rightly handle the Word of truth.” (II Tim. 2:15). Good books are available to help us understand hermeneutics, but even more important is a commitment to seek God’s guidance together as we aim to be faithful to His Word. God will guide us as we dialogue openly in the community of God’s people.

Detailed exegesis requires specialized training. But the task of moving from what the Bible says to what God is instructing us to do about it, is not to be left to specialists. It is the task of the whole church as it gathers in the name of Jesus to discern what obedience to God’s will means.

3) To mutual *trust*. While it is appropriate for us to call each other again and again to “Biblical faithfulness,” we must do so in an attitude of love and trust. It is not appropriate for us to charge each other with “departing from the authority of the Bible” just because we do not reach all the same exegetical conclusions, or practice precisely the same form of hermeneutics.

We may have some disagreements but we are still one. “There is one body and one spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4-5). In the spirit of that oneness, we

work to build up the body “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

4) To *grant freedom* to practice our convictions, even when others do not share them. This is the primary recommendation of this paper which needs careful testing.

We must commit ourselves to working towards consensus. But, in the meantime, local churches should be freed to practice their convictions on whether women may or may not be affirmed for particular leadership ministries. We simply cannot call on each other as churches, districts or conferences to live in ways which are inconsistent with our understandings of what the Bible teaches.

This works *both ways*. There are churches in which there is widespread agreement with the older evangelical consensus. It would be wrong to demand that in churches of this persuasion, women be welcomed and promoted in ministry roles which appear (to those in that context) to be unbiblical. But by the same token, there are churches in which there is widespread agreement that the older consensus, however correct it may have seemed in its day, is not consistent with their present understanding of what God wants the church to practice today. It would be wrong to prevent such churches from working actively to live consistent with their convictions.

Given the present diversity of understanding on this issue, it is clear that some churches will restrict the roles of women in church leadership more than other churches will. While some churches have affirmed women for pastoral roles, other churches will want to affirm them for leadership ministries only if they are part of a team of ministers that also includes men. Others will want to include women in leadership positions only if they minister under the authority of a man or of a male eldership board.

Most churches have consensus-building processes (with or without voting.) My suggestion is that when churches are seeking to fill ministry positions, they should first seek to build consensus on whether women should or should not be considered for the particular positions. Then, depending on their conclusions, they should discern which men and/or women God is calling for those ministry positions. Full consensus (i.e. 100% agreement) should *not* be the guideline, unless it is the

guideline by which the church makes all other decisions.

Churches debate the appropriateness of including women in many different ministry positions ... church council members, church moderator, members of elder boards, associate pastor, senior pastor. I know churches that would achieve widespread agreement that women could be considered for all of these. I also know churches that would conclude they should not be included in any of these.

In all our churches, we make decisions about which Biblical instructions are permanently binding and how they should be implemented. Sometimes our conclusions differ, and that is O.K.

It is not inappropriate for churches in different contexts to reach different conclusions on which ministry positions can be filled by women.

What this means is no church should be “pressured” into inviting a woman to serve as a pastor. But neither should churches be “prevented” from doing so. We *all* continue to study and seek consensus, but during the process we live by the convictions that we hold. I am not advocating a “relativity of truth,” in the sense that whatever seems true for you, is true for you. I am rather advocating “integrity,” in the sense that we honestly seek the truth and then faithfully practice what we believe.

Implications

My proposal to facilitate the diversity that we know is present among our churches has some significant implications. The present conference position which urges churches to affirm women for all levels of leadership except Senior Pastor is both too “open” and too “closed.” It is too “open” for churches which feel pressured to do what the leaders and many members believe should not be done. It is too “closed” for churches which feel prevented from doing what they believe should be done. I believe that if we tried *not* to urge uniformity on our churches, a more conducive climate for dialogue and discernment could lead us closer to an over-all consensus. And even if it did not, I believe that faithfulness to God’s call as we understand it within local churches is a higher goal than enforcing a compromise uniformity on a denomination that is deeply divided on what it means to be Biblical on this issue.

Diversity between churches and districts would create some practical problems, notably regarding ordination, and we must be willing to test some creative solutions. The freedom to practice our convictions in the local church should be matched by freedom within districts and provincial conferences. If in a given district or province there is widespread consensus that the ordination of women is appropriate, then those districts should be encouraged to ordain women. If that consensus is not present in a given district or province, local churches could perhaps be freed to “affirm,” “commission,” or even “ordain” female leaders within the local church.

While some would object that this would call for a complete rethinking of the whole meaning and practice of ordination, others would rejoice if it had that effect. There is at present a great deal of unclarity concerning the meaning and function of ordination, and the present issue might well be an important catalyst in the process of re-thinking it.

If we can affirm our oneness in Christ and recommit ourselves to mutual trust and united study of the Scriptures, we can allow for diversity within our unity. Indeed our unity can flourish when we stop pressing for a uniformity which asks us to compromise convictions.

Our prayer must be that the issue of the “role of women,” though it is confusing and painful for many now, will be an issue that leads us to greater faithfulness to God. My own personal prayer is that this “issue” will lead towards a reconsideration and revitalization of our whole understanding of ordination and of ministry, to a much more reflective and consistent approach to the Bible as our infallible authority in faith and life, and to a renewed love for each other in the Church as we learn to “speak the truth in love” even while we are disagreeing.

God will ultimately be glorified most if our discernments and decisions lead to an increasingly effective ministry by all leaders (whether women or men). Effective ministry, in God’s plan, serves to build up the body for works of service ... “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13). And that is our ultimate calling.