

Leading *change* in the church

Reflections on women in leadership

ONE EVENING THIS SPRING OUR WOMEN'S GROUP SHARED REFLECTIONS on women's leadership in the church, in response to a request from *Making Waves*. Each of us has been a leader in the church congregationally, nationally, ecumenically or globally. Our experience spans five decades and two denominations. All of us felt we had been encouraged into leadership in the church; supported, mentored and challenged to take on roles we may not have felt ready for, but found we could fill well. We also had some deeply satisfying experiences in developing new leadership approaches such as consensus decision-making.

Different styles

As we reflected on the styles and models of leadership we attempted to emulate and develop as women leaders in the church, we wondered if they could be identified with one gender. We all had stories of leadership exercised by women in controlling and patriarchal modes, and many of us had experiences where men called out the best in us and others. As we shared our experiences, we identified some phenomena that seemed to reflect gender-related differences in men and women's leadership.

The first difference had to do with sharing of information and the power which comes from withholding it. We have often found ourselves at odds with male colleagues about when and what information to share with others. For most of us sharing as much information as possible with as many people as possible is our preferred mode of operation. Often our male colleagues operate from a "need to know" approach to managing or leadership.

Another diverging leadership style is the degree to which leaders or managers choose to involve others in the process of planning and decision-making. One of our members reflected that she noticed some of her colleagues (men and women) expected the worst of those who worked for them or assumed people wanted to do as little as possible rather than be engaged in a participatory workplace. In contrast, she wished to share as much as possible with colleagues in order to benefit from their good ideas and insights in coming to the best possible course of action. She found that expecting the most of people was productive as it built capacity and skills in people through encouragement and recognition of their gifts.

Strategies and structures

Accountability and building trust are key aspects of effective and appreciated leadership for many. A number of us shared a positive experience during a period of change in our workplace, when a colleague was asked to manage the relocation of all of us to new offices. Marilyn impressed us at staff meetings with the clarity of her information and her willingness to both offer to be and be accountable. She committed to telling us what she knew, what she didn't know, when she expected to know and welcomed questions to answer at the time or at a definite future point. All of us found this a refreshing, energizing and trust-building style of leadership. It was a high point in what was often a disappointing experience of leading change.

Our women's group had read and discussed Margaret Wheatley's book: *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future* at an earlier gathering and all of us agreed that she described a leadership style to which we all aspired. Leadership as starting and sustaining conversation is a helpful image. Conversations that respect different perspectives and

Juliet Huntly, Deborah McKellar, Patty Evans, Donna Hunter, Moira Hutchinson and Betsy Anderson are celebrating their 10th year of regular table gatherings where food and conversation are shared.



Sustaining conversation: (from left) Patti Evans, Deborah McKellar, Betsy Anderson, Moira Hutchinson, and Juliet Huntly bring their experiences and voices to the table.

are open to the power of God's Holy Spirit being expressed in those conversations have the potential to illuminate God's vision for leaders and followers.

Creating support groups and accountability groups of women outside the workplace was and is an important strategy for many women who find themselves breaking new ground. This can be a place to seek advice, gain perspective, test criticism and connect to the roots and culture that nurtures us. This is equally important for women leaders who find themselves under attack by other women, whether their own staff or others in the church. Trusted places of reflection, discernment and strengthening are key to healthy and sustained leadership.

The role of prophetic or charismatic leadership was another theme in our conversation. What is the balance between inspiration and consultation? When do we need leaders who can call and challenge us into new directions, and when do we need leaders who can articulate the direction to which we have committed ourselves. We reflected that feminists have tended to be wary of charisma in leaders and preferred collective processes which do not always maximize the varieties of gifts women bring to leadership.

We struggle with lots of questions as women leaders. How can we allow group processes to work and yet not hold back in exercising leadership? How is it that women leaders become isolated from other women when they are in positions of power and authority? What is an appropriate exercise of accountability for women who are leaders, with their colleagues, with other women? How can their sisters and allies support and challenge them and how are all of us changed by their experiences in top leadership or management positions? Why does it appear that women have been unable to positively affect institutions and their culture even though they often bring a commitment to participatory

and transparent processes?

One of our group had studied organizational structure in the '80s, looking to see if flat structures were better than hierarchies in terms of the ways power was shared and transparent. She found that in fact cooperative or flat structures were sometimes more coercive and manipulative environments within which to work, because power was exercised often through personal power

or was not acknowledged to exist. In a hierarchical structure it is clearer where the power is located and therefore easier to address and challenge it when necessary.

Learning from our history

Over the few decades, there have been big changes. There are many women in positions of leadership and power in the church. It is now unusual to find oneself as a woman leader alone at a table with men. How does that reality change the practice of women's leadership? There are many books written about adaptive and participatory leadership, building consensus, problem-solving, interest-based negotiating and creative, non-linear processes. Emotional intelligence and intuition are recognized as desirable qualities in leaders. To what degree can these developments be attributed to Christian feminist leadership?

It is time to review the assumptions and analysis some of us developed as feminists in the '70s and '80s. It is now time for reflection and evaluation. Have our leadership styles been different? Have they changed the church in good directions? When have women leaders disappointed us? How can we support and mentor women as leaders?

Women are more prevalent in leadership now than 30 years ago, but their experience of marginalization and otherness, of a dominant culture to which they do not belong, is not far below the surface. For this reason women often recognize the marginalization which continues to be the experience of many people of colour in leadership roles.

In the last 30 years, women have begun to recognize the diversity of our experience as women and the varied voices we bring to the table. Women leaders continue to call us to be attentive to the voices which are not being heard and the people who are not at the table. Holy conversations have changed us and will continue to do so.

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