

The Service of Women in the Church – the necessary wider context

I'm writing to suggest that our narrow focus for the past decade on the "two key passages" has not served us well in the LCA *1 Corinthians 14:33b-38 & 1 Timothy 2:11-14*. It has led us to view ordination to the pastoral ministry in unhealthy isolation from the rest of our teaching and practice. At the same time, our view of lay ministry and the service of women has developed significantly, and this has been tested over many years in faithful response to the witness of Scripture and the opportunities God has placed before us.

In the past these and related passages were frequently used to prohibit women from serving in almost every area of church life and not just the ordained ministry. Indeed, for many centuries the texts regarding the submission of women to men were used to preclude women from positions of authority at every level of society, and not just in the church. We cannot ignore that (mis)use of Scripture when evaluating the relevance of these same texts for our theology of the church today. Always we need to ask ourselves: is our practice consistent with our theology?

We also need to remind ourselves of how far we have come in the past 40 years in our understanding of the role of women, and what is now happening in our congregations, schools, and church agencies. Just imagine how much poorer we would be, if we had not permitted and encouraged women to serve as:

- Layworkers in LCA congregations and in overseas mission;
- Theologians, theological students and Bible translators;
- Lay readers and pastoral assistants, communion assistants, and lectors;
- Organists, musicians, soloists, and directors / members of singing groups and choirs;
- Planners and leaders in the worship life of the congregation and school;
- Voting members of congregations and parishes;
- Chairpersons and members of the boards and committees of our parishes, agencies, and schools;
- Delegates to the conferences and conventions of the church;
- Chairpersons and members of synodical boards and commissions;
- Leaders and participants in the study of Scripture in Bible Classes and home / community groups;
- Teachers and Principals in Lutheran Schools and Colleges;
- Chaplains, counsellors, and visitors in Schools, Colleges, Hospitals and Prisons and other institutions of the church and state;
- Executives, managers, and staff in the agencies of the Church.

Further, in our preaching and teaching, the challenge to contextualise our faith for 21st century Australians cannot be ignored. We no longer view healthy relationships between men and women as being based on the old models of authority and submission. Rather:

In the home and family, Christian couples can be encouraged and affirmed in building relationships of mutual trust and dependency, as equal partners in the plan of God for the restoration of the original dynamic of creation, male and female together "in the image of God" *Genesis 1:26-28 and Galatians 3:26-29*. In this way, women and men together fulfil their Christian vocation as partners and parents, for the blessing of all and to the glory of God in the home and the church.

Also in society-at-large, suitably gifted and qualified Christian women (and men!) need to be encouraged and affirmed in the pursuit and acceptance of leadership roles at all levels of business, industry, primary production, finance, law, politics, medicine, science, the arts, education, welfare, and sport. In this way, the call to service is at work through us for the blessing of all and to the glory of God in our world today. *Mark 10:42-45*.

In conclusion, the attempt to uphold a theology of the ordained ministry in isolation from our broader understandings of the roles of women and men in church and society is no longer credible nor sustainable.

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