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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Recognition of Need for Spiritual Development among Church of Christ Undergraduate Women at Harding University

Anessa Westbrook

Abstract: *This work explores how female students perceive their need for personal spiritual development. In a male-dominant structure, women may question their need to develop spiritually. I investigated three areas of college life to see how they influenced female students' perception of their own need for spiritual development: pre-college experiences, classroom experiences, and co-curricular religious activities. The research questions focused on these three areas in an effort to identify what was most effective in achieving spiritual growth among female students from a Church of Christ background. A survey was conducted among a sample of 610 sophomore female and male students.*

Results show the importance of having spiritual examples, mentors, and people to provide encouragement to grow spiritually. This work also explores the effectiveness of classroom discussions, co-curricular activities, church, and chapel. Pedagogical suggestions are included that pertain to female students. This study presents implications for curriculum development, teaching, mentoring, internships, co-curricular activities, youth group activities, leadership opportunities, and it shows the importance of both family and non-familial females on female spiritual development.

Like many faith families, mainstream Churches of Christ have historically taken varied positions toward female participation in the church. A male-dominant structure, though, may cause women to question whether their faith development is considered important. In such contexts, the place of female spiritual development appears unclear. Both anecdotal experiences and current literature support the need for exploring further necessary resources and positive examples that help women grow spiritually while they are in college.

The purpose of this study is to explore how female Church of Christ students at a Christian university perceive their need for personal spiritual

development. Three research questions guided the research: “In what ways have pre-college experiences influenced the way female Church of Christ students perceive their need for personal spiritual development?”; “How have experiences in the classroom affected female Church of Christ students’ attitudes towards personal spiritual development?”; and “In what ways have co-curricular religious activities during college influenced female Church of Christ students’ perceptions of personal spiritual growth?” This article summarizes the dissertation exploring these questions by discussing the context of Harding University, the historical context of Churches of Christ, and the findings of the study as they relate to the recognition of need for spiritual development among college-aged women.¹

The location of the study was Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. According to the catalog, Harding was “founded on the belief that the best education is built on faith in God.”² The university seeks to provide a space for faith development, making it an ideal setting for the study. The university faculty strive to live out the motto “faith, learning, and living.”³ Because of the strong incorporation of this mission into the classroom and co-curricular activities, Harding was an ideal location.

Context

The total enrollment of Harding University during the semester prior to the study, fall 2014, was 6,075 students. Of these, the undergraduate enrollment was 4,492 students.⁴ During the fall of 2013, the university reported that the undergraduate student body was comprised of 53.5 percent women and 46.5 percent men.⁵ Within the undergraduate population, 74.8 percent indicated that they were Church of Christ.⁶

The strong heritage of male leadership at the congregational level has led to concerns about women’s role, which are often reflected in the Christian universities. This conversation goes beyond theory and theology,

¹ Anessa Westbrook, “Recognition of Need for Spiritual Development among Church of Christ Undergraduate Women at Harding University,” DMin dissertation, (Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016). Dr. Richard Peace supervised this research.

² Harding University, “Our Heritage,” 2014-2015 Undergraduate Catalog, <http://harding.catalog.acalog.com/content.php?catoid=31&navoid=2086> (Accessed October 2, 2014).

³ Harding University Board of Trustees, *The Mission of Harding University* (Searcy, AR: Harding University, 2008).

⁴ Harding University, “Quick Facts,” (accessed September 4, 2014).

⁵ Harding University, *Harding University Fact Book 2013-2014*, 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

and influences practical matters, such as what types of training women may be encouraged to seek and the intentionality of training women for ministry. Furthermore, women themselves may question whether or not they should focus on spiritual development.

Problem

Several common factors challenge the training of women in formal and informal ministry within Churches of Christ. First, female students interested in ministry report experiencing pressure to choose secular professions rather than pursuing training for full-time ministry. Although the author is unaware of any formal study, through her role as a Bible professor and academic advisor she has had the opportunity to engage this common point of concern as future plans are discussed with students and sometimes parents. Second, because of a lack of opportunity for women to gain ministry experience, women often discover their spiritual gifts later than their male peers. One example of this comes from Barton in her book *A Woman Called*, where she recounted frustrations at being unable to create a long-term plan for her life and her struggles at having others' attempt to change or negate the course she was taking.⁷

Because the college years are ripe for spiritual growth, it is important to consider how to encourage women to grow spiritually and develop their gifts. Eddleman reported through interviews of female students at Harding that they valued finding a place to share their faith story. The act of sharing their stories validated their stories. Furthermore, the transition from a home congregation to a larger university setting was difficult for some. The students struggled to find places where their faith could be affirmed, which affected not only their self-worth but also their faith.⁸

Johnson and Penya polled several hundred university students regarding the gender of God. They found that 98 percent of students believed that God was male based on their observations of male leadership.⁹ In a paper presented at the Christian Scholar's Conference, Penya reported, "In religious contexts, women report that they are deeply affected by their roles. Specifically, women feel excluded by religious

⁷ Sara Gaston Barton, *A Woman Called: Piecing Together the Ministry Puzzle* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publications, 2012), 50-51.

⁸ Stephanie Eddleman, "Female Voices of Faith: The Untold Stories," (paper presented at Christian Scholars Conference, Nashville, June 5, 2014), 4-8.

⁹ Stephen C. Johnson and Lynette Sharp Penya, "What the Other Half is Doing: An Analysis of Gender Inclusivity in Church of Christ Congregations," *Restoration Quarterly* 53 (January 2011), 221-224.

practices and institutions that limit their roles.”¹⁰ Penya’s view underlined the importance of religious institutions’ consideration of the type of available examples and the effect that a lack of them could have on the faith development of students.

This was corroborated by Slee who recorded the faith stories of thirty Christian women.¹¹ One difference she noted between women’s and men’s spirituality was that women’s spirituality was relational in character based on a connectedness with others, which was seen by showing care and responsibility to others.¹² Girls’ self-concept and moral development was tied to an ethic of relationally.¹³ Because of this, Slee pointed to the importance of an “exemplar of lived faith.” The type of people that typically fill this role were “teachers, ministers, spiritual guides, counselors or therapists.”¹⁴

When considering attrition of female Bible majors at Harding University, the numbers indicate that female students drop their Bible majors as they advance in their education.¹⁵ Students have privately reported to the author pressure from peers, home congregations, and families who urged them to consider alternative paths to ministry rather than professional ones. While the university affirms the role of male spiritual leadership, it seeks to help all students develop. However, in an institutional setting where a lack of intentionality marginalizes a certain group, discouragement for this group can set in. This study looked at how women were progressing in a Church of Christ educational environment. It also identified what influences were encouraging and discouraging spiritual growth among the female students.

Historical Context

While the discussion of women’s roles and spiritual development is wide spread among evangelical denominations, this section focuses on the range of thought emerging from non-instrumental Churches of Christ, a

¹⁰ Lynette Sharp Penya, “How We Got There: Scriptural Literalism, Fundamentalism, Religious Proscription, Experience, and Gender as Predictors of Gender-Role Attitudes in Religious Contexts,” (paper presented at Christian Scholar’s Conference, Nashville, June 3-5, 2010), 3.

¹¹ Nicola Slee, *Women’s Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 1-6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71-72

¹⁵ For further discussion of these statistics, see Westbrook, “Recognition of Need for Spiritual Development,” 51-53.

branch of the Stone-Campbell movement.¹⁶ It is important to understand the historical and theological influences on the participants of the study and how these influences affect the dynamics of female spiritual development within the movement. During the eighteenth century, the Stone-Campbell movement had several positions on women's involvement. During the early years, congregations that associated with Barton W. Stone allowed women to preach, exhort, and give testimonies. After Stone joined with Alexander Campbell in 1832, many of these congregations left the movement. Hughes noted during the first half of the nineteenth century that there was some evidence of both deacons and deaconesses in the Churches of Christ. However, by the end of the century, women's involvement in worship and governance had disappeared. This might have been a result of Alexander Campbell's emphasis on rationality and rejection of emotionality, with which women were typically associated. When considering what was occurring in the broader American culture, the movement might have reacted to post Civil War issues with freed slaves and women's suffrage. During the late nineteenth century, David Lipscomb opposed the idea of women in church leadership roles, launching a sustained attack on the Christian Woman's Board of Missions which may have led to Lipscomb's separation from the Disciples of Christ.¹⁷ According to Hughes, this "virtually canonized as a formal orthodoxy for Churches of Christ the subjection of women in church affairs."¹⁸ Although Lipscomb was initially opposed to co-education, he later allowed women to attend the Nashville Bible School. He even made concessions for women to teach people who knew less than them about the Bible as long as they did it in a modest way.¹⁹

¹⁶ The discussion of theology in this section is deliberately limited to theology emerging from Churches of Christ because this limitation was part of the original design parameters of the dissertation this paper summarizes. Because of the brevity required for papers in this journal, an expansion of theological resources is impractical here. The author is aware, and would have her readers aware, that a much larger discussion is happening in the larger Christian context.

¹⁷ Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1996), 377-381. David Lipscomb was the editor of *Gospel Advocate* and according to Richard Hughes was "the most influential person among the Churches of Christ from the close of the Civil War until his death in 1917." Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 119, 382.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹⁹ David Lipscomb, "Should Women Teach?" *Gospel Advocate* 52 (August 25, 1910), 968-969.

While theology in Churches of Christ originally stemmed from the early influences of Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell, it has experienced changes over the years. Due to independent governance of the congregations, a plurality of voices exists when it comes to discussions of women's roles. There are presently three basic positions on women's roles that can be found within Churches of Christ: patriarchy, complementarian, and evangelical feminism (egalitarianism). Advocates of patriarchy appeal to a hierarchy and male leadership in both the church and the home, placing strict limitations on the role of women. Complementarians also teach male headship and female submission. However, they believe women can participate more fully in church life typically with the exceptions of church administration and teaching. Egalitarians believe that limitations on women derive from misunderstood biblical texts which are not universally applicable.²⁰

Churches of Christ look to the early New Testament Church to identify patterns to follow. This patternistic approach led to a basic hermeneutic to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent.²¹ This process has roots with Thomas Campbell.²² By using Campbell's approach and applying it to Scriptures such as 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, it was concluded that women should remain silent in the church.²³

One difficulty with the discussion of the role of women has been that there is a strong focus on public assembly. What happened in the assembly was often emphasized, as well as the role of public worship leader. The unintentional message could be that the public worship roles were the most valuable ones. The Corinthian church showed preference for particular roles. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul painted a picture of the body of Christ being made up of many parts, all parts being dependent upon one another and one not being more important than the other. However, Paul ended chapter 12 with an admonition in verse 31 to desire "greater gifts." Then he began a discussion of the importance of love which was not limited to a certain position. For Paul there was not a place for a hierarchy of positions. Rather,

²⁰ H. Wayne House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 19.

²¹ Thomas B. Warren, *Lectures on Church Cooperation and Orphan Homes* (Henderson, TN: Freed-Hardeman College, 1958), 11-13.

²² J. Gordon Melton, "Churches of Christ (Non-Instrumental)" in *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8th Edition, ed. J. Gordon Melton (San Francisco: Gale, 2009), 511.

²³ Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith*, 382.

all roles were to be seen as equally important. First Corinthians 12 applies well to the discussion of women's roles today, however many times it has not been given as much voice as other sections of scripture.

Wilson, former professor of religion at Pepperdine University, noted the emphasis on particular roles within Churches of Christ. He linked the identity crisis of the 1900s with a leadership crisis in our movement, noting a high view of preachers who were viewed as "the real leaders in the church."²⁴ Penya noted that although women were pursuing higher education at increasing rates, their opportunities within the Church were not increasing at the same rate.²⁵ Where there was an emphasis on public roles and little room to accommodate women who were gaining ground in broader society, frustration was bound to follow.

In the Old Testament, there was a formal system of religious duties. In the New Testament, however, there were apostles, prophets, and teachers (1 Corinthians 12:28). The church itself was mainly organized upon a priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9). The act of ministry was not limited to just a few; but believers were taught to go out and to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16), prioritize their neighbor even over religious duty (Luke 10:30-37), and to minister to the concerns of those around them such as those Christ sent to minister among those harvesting (Luke 10:1-24). In the New Testament, ministry was understood to take place through individual members, making all believers priests (1 Peter 2:5-9).

Paul Pollard, retired professor at Harding University, pointed to the Philippian church as an example. In the early Philippian church women "had equal status with the males in spreading the gospel. No barrier prevented them from teaching and evangelizing the pagan population of Philippi, both male and female."²⁶ He added that modern scholarship, which tended to ask the question if these women were preaching, was missing the point. Instead, Pollard believed that they should focus on the participation of women in valuable public and private ministry tasks.²⁷

²⁴ John F. Wilson, "Saints, Shepherds, Preachers, and Scholars: Leadership Crisis in the Churches of Christ," *Restoration Quarterly* 34 (January 1992), 131.

²⁵ Lynette Sharp Penya, "How We Got There: Scriptural Literalism, Fundamentalism, Religious Proscription, Experience, and Gender as Predictors of Gender-Role Attitudes in Religious Contexts" (Paper presented at the 30th annual Christian Scholars' Conference. Nashville, TN: June 2010), 3.

²⁶ J. Paul Pollard, "Women in the Earlier Philippian Church (Acts 16:13-15; Phil. 4:2-3) in Recent Scholarship," in *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, Volume 1, ed. By Carroll D. Osburn (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993), 280.

²⁷ Pollard, 280.

However, the emphasis on formal leadership positions can cause those serving in informal leadership positions to undervalue their contributions. There is a need to recognize and encourage all members to find a place of service. If the focus on formal leadership was tempered with a wider kingdom focus, perhaps this would reframe the importance of women's involvement in Great Commission activities and underscore the value of their service to the church. Churches of Christ need a renewed emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, mobilizing their members to make a greater impact in the community rather than overreliance on paid ministry staff to perform the duties of the church.

Discussions on women's roles have often begun with a negative question: What are women not allowed to do? This begins the discussion in the wrong place. First, beginning with a negative tone has led to a discussion based on opinions and stereotypes, increasing levels of frustration and anger. Second, this has shifted the focus onto a few of the most public leadership roles within the church, which has tended to elevate public roles. This approach ignores the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12 that the body is made up of many parts, none being more important than the other. Third, beginning with a negative has caused convergent thinking to set in, limiting the range of possible areas of involvement for women. The challenges in our modern society call for creative solutions and active participation of all members to meet those challenges, which calls for generative thinking. Fourth, even in congregations which have been more conservative on women's roles, the number of roles women cannot participate in is relatively few compared to what they could do. However, by centering the discussion on what women cannot do, conversation about women's roles becomes deceptively limiting.

Efforts need to be made to reframe the discussion by focusing on ways women can be involved. If churches would take a closer look at how women already contribute in their contexts, and place a greater value on those areas, perhaps this would temper some of the strife surrounding the agency of women and both genders could find a harmonious partnership. This partnership is important not only to the well-being of the church, but it also contributes to the spiritual growth of women, which the findings in this study support.²⁸

²⁸ For further discussion of the theological context for this study, see Westbrook, "Recognition of Need for Spiritual Development," 81-114.

Methodology

This study presumed that although the perceived need for spiritual development affects the classroom, multiple experiences influence student spiritual growth both before college and during college. The purpose of this study was to explore how female Church of Christ students at a Christian university perceived their need for spiritual development by investigating three areas: pre-college experiences, classroom experiences, and co-curricular religious activities. The site for the study was Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. The spring semester of sophomore Bible classes was selected as the sample, since this ensured the students would have enough college experiences at Harding to complete the survey. A survey was developed for this study to test specific programs, activities, and organizations in order to see what was most effective in leading people towards spiritual growth. The working definition for spirituality in this study was borrowed from Wink and Dillon: "spiritual development demands not only an increase in the depth of a person's awareness of, and search for, spiritual meaning over time, but it also requires an expanded and deeper commitment to engagement in actual spiritual practices."²⁹ This definition influenced both the research questions and development of the instrument. Items were built into the survey to help compare and describe relationships between variables. Information gleaned from the review of related literature was used to develop the instrument along with consultation from a Harding University research professor, Kenneth L. Hobby.³⁰

In the fall of 2013, there were 4,428 undergraduates. Of those, 2,057 were men (46.5 percent) and 2,371 (53.5 percent) were women.³¹ Although the study was specifically focused on female spiritual development, data was collected from both men and women in order to mask the true intentions of the study and to provide a point of comparison when necessary. Two limitations of the study were that the information may not be generalizable to other educational contexts given the specific nature of

²⁹ Paul Wink and Michele Dillon, *Journal of Adult Development*, 9:1 (January 2002): 80.

³⁰ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), 71-72, 74, 79; Elizabeth Loutrel Glanville, "Leadership Development for Women in Christian Ministry" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2000), 138-140.

³¹ Harding University, "Harding Posts Another Record Undergraduate Enrollment," http://www.harding.edu/news_2014/news_2014enrollment.html (accessed September 2, 2014).

the questions. Second, because of the close ties of Harding University with Churches of Christ, the survey may not translate to a different denominational setting.

Results

A total of 867 surveys were filled out. Of those, 610 students indicated "Church of Christ", which constituted 70.4 percent of the sample. Of these, 352 were female, 257 male, and one chose not to answer. To remain true to the research questions only Church of Christ surveys were used to calculate the findings. The survey was divided into five sections, three related directly to one of the research questions and two with demographic and other information relevant to the analysis. In this article, only statistically significant or surprising findings have been shared.

Research question 1 asked, "In what ways have pre-college experiences influenced the way female Church of Christ students perceive their need for personal spiritual development?" One question associated with research question 1 asked, "Before college, who was the greatest example to you to grow spiritually?" While "parents" and "minister or church leader" were the top two choices for both genders, statistical significance was found between them. Ministers and church leaders had a strong influence of male students, while females were influenced more by friends and family. One disturbing discovery was that while seven female students had no one to serve as an example to them, no male student reported a lack of examples.³²

Another question asked, "Before college, who was the greatest encouragement to you to grow spiritually?" Based on Glanville's research, this item was expected to show that same gender models provide the primary source of spiritual encouragement. The majority of male students, 83.3 percent, were most encouraged by a male to grow spiritually. However, this trend did not continue among the female students with 51.1 percent indicating they were most encouraged by a female, but 42.9 percent said they were most influenced by a male.³³ If women from Church of Christ tradition are more strongly influenced by men, it raises questions regarding why this trend is occurring. Two possibilities could be a lack of spiritual female examples or an emphasis within the church structure of male spiritual leadership. Furthermore, the missing exemplar trend continued;

³² The differences between genders was statistically significant [Chi-square (df=7)=18.088, p=.017]. For statistical significance through this research, $\alpha \leq 0.05$.

³³ The results were statistically significant [Chi-square (df=3)=105.387, p=.000].

nine female students indicated no one had influenced them spiritually, but only one male had this response. One important implication was the importance of both male and female spiritual examples. A church that does not provide female examples denies women a necessary feature for spiritual development. These findings reinforce the importance of both genders working together for ministry within the church.

Two other areas of research question 1 did not produce a statistically significant difference between genders but did provide interesting insights. When asked which activity caused the greatest spiritual growth before college, both genders chose worship service, Bible class, and school Bible class at a low rate. This indicates that traditional methods of providing avenues for spiritual growth may not be as effective with the younger generation. Ranking higher than these avenues were personal Bible study, youth devotionals, and church involvement. Although not statistically significant, women showed slightly more preference for experiential activities than men.

Another question that yielded interesting, but not statistically significant, results asked which items best helped the students recognize the need to grow spiritually. Male students chose mentors and leadership opportunities at a higher rate than women, while women chose local church and outreach opportunities, which conforms to typical gender role expectations within Churches of Christ.

Research question 2 asked, "How have experiences in the classroom affected female Church of Christ students' attitudes towards personal spiritual development?" The researcher designed questions for this section with the typical Harding University Bible classroom experience in mind. Item nine asked, "When discussing faith, what type of discussion is most effective for you personally?" While both genders preferred "concrete, experiential, visual, or narrative" types of discussions best, women showed a stronger preference towards them.³⁴ Furthermore, these results varied from what was suggested by Slee's research, that men would prefer "abstract, conceptual, or analytical" discussions. Item eleven asked, "When studying the Bible in a classroom, what most discourages you spiritually?" This item showed high statistical significance.³⁵ The top discourager for both genders was "influence of other students," with men choosing it at a rate of 42.2 percent and women 33.6 percent. Women reported finding

³⁴ The difference in response between the genders was significant [Chi-square (df=1)=4.986, p=.026].

³⁵ [Chi-square (df=7)=26.922, p=.000].

theological discussions significantly more discouraging than men at a rate of 27.2 percent to 11.6 percent. Women were split on whether theological discussions were the most encouraging (27.8 percent) or discouraging (27.2 percent) thing that happened in a classroom. This indicates that over half of the women in a classroom are having a strong positive or negative reaction to a theological discussion, a helpful piece of information for teachers as they are trying to connect with everyone in their classroom.

Research question 3 asked, "In what ways have co-curricular religious activities during college influenced female Church of Christ students' perceptions of personal spiritual growth?" These questions were based upon typical Harding University college experiences, with an open-ended option to allow for qualitative data. Item twelve asked, "During college, who/what was the greatest encouragement to you to grow spiritually?"³⁶ The four sources of greatest encouragement for women were (1) friends, (2) club, (3) devotionals, and (4) small group studies. While the top two were the same for both genders, men chose small group Bible studies and professors for the third and fourth spots respectively. The choices were interesting because women tended to choose groups that allowed them a more active role, which also correlated with their interest in experiential activities.

Item thirteen asked about what helped students recognize their need to grow spiritually during college. While there was not a significant difference between genders, male students chose mentors, leadership opportunities, and encouragement by family as higher than female students. When considering this along with trends in other questions, this could indicate that they have greater access to these sources than women. Women ranked community outreach as higher than men, which is consistent with women's preference for experiential activities as well as those within which they can play a more active role.

Item fourteen asked where students learned the most valuable spiritual lessons during college. While both mentors and role models made the top four list for male students, only role models were in the top four for women. Considering the more active role mentors take in the life of a mentee, this may indicate a lack of access to spiritual mentoring for female students. During the fall of 2014, of the 332 instructional faculty members 99 were women, or 29.8 percent. Mission and community outreach made the list of the top four for women, which is also an example of an

³⁶ The differences between the genders was statistically significant [Chi-square (df=11)=27.698, p=.004].

experiential activity in which women are allowed to have greater participation in Churches of Christ.

When comparing items thirteen and fourteen, the difference in the retention rate of items by gender was statistically significant.³⁷ For example, although leadership opportunities might have helped women recognize their need for spiritual development, their opportunities only translated into concrete spiritual lessons for 10 percent of women, as compared to 26.3 percent of men. Among the women that mentoring helped recognize their need for personal spiritual development, only 40 percent of women learned valuable spiritual lessons from it as compared to 52.6 percent of men. This may follow the trend of lack of access to mentors and consistent leadership opportunities in which women can become actively involved and gain concrete experiences.

Despite sometimes discouraging numbers, women seem to be making the most of their Christian college experiences. Female students indicate a stronger spiritual walk and slightly more growth than males. When comparing their rankings of their spiritual walk during college, gender differences were significant.³⁸ For female students, their spiritual walk seemed to have had greater change during college. When asked the extent to which the students learned valuable spiritual lessons during college, all students reported having learned spiritual lessons. Women reported in statically higher numbers, however, that they had learned “many lessons”, which was the highest category.³⁹

Discussion

This research yielded results which could have significant implications in two general areas: Christian education and the church. The results should advise and inform the classroom, co-curricular activities, internships, and mentoring. Within the church there are implications for youth groups, families, and the influence significant adults can have on teens.

Implications for Christian Education

Women showed a strong preference for “concrete, experiential, visual, or narrative” discussions at a rate of 71.2 percent. They chose this

³⁷ Overall, the results were statistically significant [McNemar-Bowker (df=27)=72.599, p=.000]. The female results alone showed strong significance [McNemar-Bowker (df=27)=61.078, p=.000].

³⁸ [McNemar-Bowker (df=13)=218.661, p=.000].

³⁹ [Chi-square (df=3)=18.409, p=.000]

over “abstract, conceptual, or analytical” which was chosen at a rate of only 28.8 percent. When asked to select what was the most encouraging thing that happened in a classroom, 27.8 percent of women chose theological discussions. When asked what was most discouraging, 27.2 chose theological discussions, meaning that 55 percent of women have a strong positive or negative reaction to them. They are also strongly encouraged and discouraged by others. Their relationships with others, particularly friends in college, have a strong spiritual influence on them. When asked who was the source of greatest encouragement during college, women overwhelmingly chose friends at a rate of 38.3 percent. These results suggest several ways that can help a curriculum become more conducive to female spiritual growth. First, be aware that over half of the women in a classroom are having a strong reaction to theological discussions, both positive and negative. Acknowledging how theology could be discouraging to some may soften the blow for those who normally do not like theological discussions.

Second, efforts should be taken to make the curriculum more experiential. Based on responses, reading the text aloud in the classroom and highlighting Bible figures on a personal level are effective ways that draw women into the discussion. Consideration should be given to presenting theological teachings in more concrete ways, much like Jesus did when he used parables. Third, women grow through their connections and relationships with others, so whenever possible it would be beneficial to help them engage with others to encourage spiritual growth. Fourth, the data also pointed to the influence of a teacher on their spiritual growth, which should highlight the importance of their examples, comments, and interactions with students. Fifth, when women were asked which activities were the greatest encouragement for spiritual growth during college, small group Bible studies ranked highly, chosen at a rate nearly equal to chapel and local church combined. Since women in certain theological environments are able to participate more fully in small group Bible study this may be preferred due to their experiential nature. Sixth, mentoring relationships are valuable to women, and fit into the relational aspect of female spiritual growth. Mentors should help women find ways to live out their faith in concrete and experiential ways. They can also share life experiences and real life situations. In an academic setting, there is a great need for more female mentors for students, especially for female Bible majors who need qualified women with ministry experience to work with them.

Implications for Ministry Internships

This research indicated the importance of ministry internships for women. First, internships provide the concrete and experiential experiences women need to grow spiritually. Second, when asked to identify the greatest source of encouragement to grow spiritually, women ranked mission and community outreach at higher rates than men. Third, because of the value of internships on spiritual development, women need to be encouraged to seek out and to apply for them, which could lead to employment.

Implications for the Church

Some of the areas which Churches of Christ see as the main avenues for spiritual growth are not feeding the current, collegiate age group. When asked what activity caused the greatest spiritual growth before college, only 6.2 percent of men selected worship service and only 3.7 percent of women. Only 5.1 percent of women chose church Bible class, and only 2.9 percent of men. Even among those who attended a private Christian high school, school Bible classes were selected by only 1.2 percent of men and 1.1 percent of women. While worship service and Bible classes are deeply rooted in the practice of Churches of Christ, if their impact is limited, careful consideration needs to be given as to why. Some of the activities which were preferred over worship and Bible class were more experiential in nature.

When asked who was their greatest example for spiritual growth before college, a minister or church leader was chosen by 27 percent of men and 19.4 percent of women. This was a significant gap, however, when compared in another question to an important figure in the students' lives (grandparents), minister/church leader still ranked higher. The implications for church leaders is to recognize the important impact they have on both genders. Often young men are targeted for mentoring and encouragement, but women can also benefit from intentional interactions. Women valued their local church involvement at higher rates than men, which also points to how both genders value the church. As reported earlier, research suggests that men and women benefit spiritually from same-gender models. However, 51.1 percent of women reported receiving their greatest encouragement to grow spiritually from other women and 42.9 percent from men. This signals the importance of providing examples from both genders. If only one gender serves as exemplars, then the needs of both genders would not be provided. A good solution to this would be to use team ministry when possible.

Implications for Youth Groups

Women prefer experiential activities that have a greater sense of connection and involvement, such as devotionals, mission trips, and outreach. When students were asked which activity facilitated the greatest spiritual growth before college, church camp overwhelmingly ranked first with 35 percent of women and 36.2 percent of men. To put this into perspective, camp was selected at a rate over three times that of worship service, church Bible class, and school Bible class combined. This should catch the attention of youth group and churches, with consideration given to investing into this resource by helping more of their youth attend camp.

There were several other implications for youth groups. First, mission trips also ranked highly, second only to camp. Mission work has traditionally been an area which has allowed women greater ministry opportunities, allowing them to develop leadership skills and an opportunity to live out their faith. The benefits of mission trips should be considered carefully, especially since they could provide a means for developing female leadership. Second, because of the strong influence of friends, youth groups should not disregard time with friends merely as social time, but youth leaders should explore how relationships could be utilized for female spiritual growth. Third, women preferred youth devotionals at a rate significantly higher than worship service, church Bible class, and school Bible class combined. Youth ministers should consider this as they develop programs. Fourth, families were a huge influence on students before college. Just under 60 percent chose a family member as being the greatest example for spiritual growth before college. Youth groups should be cognizant of this powerful influence, perhaps planning activities which incorporate family units. For children from highly dysfunctional or broken families, special thought needs to be given to how they should be ministered to since they may not be able to take advantage of this resource. Fifth, church leaders need to help women find areas in which they can have spiritual leadership opportunities.

Conclusion

While women are finding domains where they can grow spiritually, especially in areas such as mission and outreach, consideration needs to be given to help them find more. Women need access to leadership opportunities, female role models, and female mentors; and they need to receive more validation of ministry abilities and stronger incorporation into the local church. While many Churches of Christ place some theological restriction on where and how women can serve, there are many

underutilized opportunities for women especially in the areas of community involvement and outreach.

Women are a significant part of the church, making up at least half of the body of Christ. Simply because they are not always in visible leadership positions within Churches of Christ, their spiritual development is not any less important. Not only do they have a spiritual influence on those with whom they come into contact within and outside of the church, they have significant influence on future generations. Despite this, little focus has been given to creating an intentional program of spiritual development for women. It is the researcher's hope that this study will provide insight and give tools to help schools and churches mature females spiritually. With the goal of engaging all Christians in the work of the Kingdom of God, this can be done more effectively when the spiritual development of all men and women is given proper attention.

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