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A Oneness Study Story: The Experiences of Elders and Staff in Leading Change for the Inclusion of Women in Public Worship Roles

Shannon Clarkson Rains

Lubbock Christian University, shannon.rains@lcu.edu

Jennifer M. Dabbs

Lubbock Christian University, Jennifer.dabbs@lcu.edu

Kaley D. Ihfe

Broadway Church of Christ, kaleydenise@gmail.com

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

A Oneness Study Story:

The Experiences of Elders and Staff in Leading Change for the Inclusion of Women in Public Worship Roles

Shannon Rains, Jennifer Dabbs, Kaley Ihfe

Abstract: In 2019, the elders at the historic Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas, announced to the congregation that women would have the opportunity to take public roles in worship services. The decision marked a major shift from traditional scriptural interpretations held by many independent Churches of Christ which required active roles in worship to be performed by men. This study seeks to document the experiences of the leadership at Broadway Church of Christ during this significant transition. The elders who made the decision and staff members who enacted the new policy were asked to complete a qualitative survey in which they reflected on the evolution of their beliefs about women's roles in worship and the process of implementing this major congregational change. A systems theory approach is used to assist in understanding the challenges faced by the leadership as the congregation adapted to the new policy.

Introduction

Broadway Church of Christ (hereinafter, Broadway) in Lubbock, Texas, had a reputation as a progressive congregation in the mid-20th century.¹ In 1999, church elders invited Ken Cukrowski to teach a Bible class on women's roles that challenged traditional interpretations held by many in the Churches of Christ. It was a step on the part of the eldership toward a greater understanding of the role of women. However, knowing there was resistance in the congregation to the ideas presented, the eldership stepped back, continuing in the familiar gender roles of years past. It would be almost twenty years before the eldership—finding themselves faced

¹ The historical information in this section is documented in our previous article: Shannon Rains, Jennifer Dabbs, and Kaley Ihfe, "Oneness in Christ: A Qualitative Study of Women's Initial Experiences Leading in Public Worship at Broadway Church of Christ," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*, 7, 1 (2021), 25-44.

with a shortage of young leaders—would ask Cukrowski to return for a second installment of the gender roles class. This time the elders concluded it was time for a change. The inclusion of women in worship brought many positive changes to the congregation, but there were those who could not accept the change. Looking at the loss of lifetime members of the church family, the elders:

have felt responsible for people leaving Broadway. It's not their fault, people have left for a lot of different reasons, but it's hard not to feel responsible when you know someone is leaving "because of you". As a [-----],² this is familiar ground for me. It's hard to walk it, I hate it when others have to walk it.

This paper uses the case of the 2018 Oneness initiative at Broadway to include women in new roles in worship, as a means to understand how dramatic changes in congregational policy necessitate an understanding of the systemic nature of religious organizations.³

Purpose of this Research

The purpose of this research was to document the stories of the elders and ministers throughout the “Oneness” process at Broadway. In 2018-2019, the eldership led the congregation in a study of the role of women. Initially, they invited guest speakers to conduct workshops on the role of women with the congregation. These workshops were followed by an elder-led study in each of the adult Bible classes. At the conclusion of this process, women were permitted to lead publicly in worship and take on all other roles except that of preacher or elder.

In 2020 we conducted a qualitative research study that documented the women’s experiences and the meanings they made from those experiences as they led in worship for the first time at Broadway.⁴ Upon

² The title of this role has been redacted to protect the respondent’s anonymity.

³ Our goal is to provide insight for leaders that are considering a major policy shift and not to critique the process that the leaders at Broadway chose to implement.

⁴ In the first study, we used John Mark Hick’s recent book to describe the policy shift from no participation in worship service to “limited participation” in worship service. Broadway stopped short of full-participation of women, which would have included women serving in the role of preacher and/or elder. John Mark Hicks, *Women Serving God: My Journey in Understanding Their Story in the Bible* (Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, 2020), 17-21.

completion, the study and the de-identified interviews were presented to the elders and staff at Broadway. Additionally, the study was published in 2021 in *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry* and presented at the Lubbock Christian University Scholar's Colloquium and the Christian Scholars' Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. Through these presentations, the need to tell the story of the elders' and staff experiences with leading the Oneness processes at Broadway arose.⁵

Methodology

To document the experiences of elders and staff at Broadway regarding the Oneness process, we undertook a qualitative research project. All members of the Broadway eldership and staff were invited to participate in an anonymous electronic survey addressing their experience.

Permission to conduct a survey with elders and staff was sought and obtained from the preaching minister and the elders. Once permission from the congregational leadership was granted and an exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2) was received from the Lubbock Christian University Institutional Review Board, surveys were distributed.

Since the decision to begin the Oneness Study originated among the elders, the experience of the Oneness process was different for the eldership than it was for the staff at Broadway. Two surveys were created to address the similarities and differences of those experiences. Broadway had eleven men serving as elders at the time the research began. Surveys were sent to the entire eldership (see Appendix 1). There were eighteen staff members listed on a group email list administered by the Broadway administrative assistant. All staff members on the group email list were sent a separate survey designed to elicit the story of their experience (see Appendix 2).

The anonymous surveys were administered via Survey Monkey. Elders and staff received an email with an invitation to participate in the research. Those who chose to learn more about the study could click a link that would take them to a consent form with more information about the research being conducted. Participation was completely voluntary. Instructions stated that if the individual wished to participate, they should click a second link that would direct them to the survey. Doing so would indicate consent to participate in the survey. Those who did not wish to participate could exit the system at any time. The survey was open for a month and a half for participants to complete the survey.

⁵ Rains, Dabbs, and Ihfe, 42.

All survey questions were open-ended. Questions were designed to invite reflective, qualitative responses. Questions for both elders and staff asked them to provide their Oneness Story by reflecting on the roles of women in the churches in which they grew up, the point in their life when they came to believe women should take on more roles in worship, what their expectations were regarding the Oneness study, and the implementation of women's participation in worship services at Broadway. The elders received an additional question regarding the eldership's decision to expand women's participation in worship (see Appendices 1 and 2). No identifying information was requested. On average participants took 30 minutes to complete the surveys.

Ten of the eleven elders submitted a survey, yielding a 91% response rate. Nine of the eighteen staff members submitted a survey, yielding a 50% response rate. A lower response rate among staff is to be expected since it was a more diverse grouping including ministers, administrative assistants, and persons in charge of the maintenance of facilities.

The open-ended questions yielded detailed responses from participants regarding their experience of the Oneness process. The researchers conducted a line-by-line thematic analysis of the interviews, as well as a holistic analysis of each participant's responses to determine the overall meaning. Since many of the questions on the surveys were similar, the analysis allowed for a comparison of the staff responses with that of the elders. Those themes will be discussed in detail below.

An Emerging Story: The Elders and Staff Reflect on the Oneness Study

The following section will explain the experiences of elders and staff with the Oneness study and subsequent changes to the policies of women leading in public worship. All the elders and staff had a long-standing relationship with the Churches of Christ, but even so, they had many different experiences before they became leaders at Broadway. While the Churches of Christ are autonomous, without a hierarchical governing body, most are very similar in practice. During the elders' and ministers' childhood and early adult years, nearly all Churches of Christ took the traditional position of allowing no titled positions (minister, elder, deacon) for women nor public leadership in the assembly.

Early Experiences in the Churches of Christ

When asked to "describe a memory of what women did in your church growing up", it was not surprising that elders and staff had very similar responses. Elders recalled that women held a variety of traditional

roles. These were typically tied to “fellowship and the community aspect of church, such as visitation, meals for the church, and community events” as they took care of the church families and people in need. Others mentioned that women taught children’s ministry classes; but, in some circumstances, once a male child was baptized, the woman was removed from the teaching role. Sometimes, women actively contributed to class discussions but never led an adult class. One elder mentioned that women “unofficially ministered” to their social networks while two others stated that women were not regarded as “subservient or submissive” and that church members “were happy with their roles as far as gender is concerned.” The staff echoed the responses of the elders. One staff member recalled that the wife of the preaching minister ran the church office: “I remember thinking to myself how important what she did was to everything. I also remember thinking that her role was not even known or ever acknowledged.” Clearly, the contributions of women were important in the churches they attended and had a significant impact on elders and staff during their formative years. However, other than a staff member who grew up attending a congregation outside of the Churches of Christ that permitted women to act as ushers, elders and staff came from congregations in which women’s service was only permitted outside of the worship setting.

Should Women Lead?

The next question was “tell about the moment in your life when it became clear to you that women should take on more roles in worship services.” All the elders reported attending Churches of Christ in which women did not take on visible roles during worship. At some point, a significant transition in their thinking about women’s roles occurred. Five of the ten elders stated that doing or teaching the Oneness study contributed to their clarity on the issue. As one elder reported:

I was persuaded that the big passages on women's roles are either 1) traditionally misinterpreted or 2) at least not as clear as many believe. It's not wise to base such an important decision on disputed and vague passages, especially when others point in the other direction.

For one of these five elders, the epiphany came as he was actually teaching the class on Oneness to the congregation. The other half of the men serving as elders had arrived at the same conclusion before the Oneness study. Two elders had decided women’s roles needed to be expanded in the three years

leading up to the Oneness study. As one of them said, "I had become convinced leadership was being held back in making several key decisions due to the obvious need to address women's roles in worship (and) church." Four elders had experiences previous to the Oneness study that influenced them. These experiences included women's active and public leadership in their college ministries and a slow drumbeat of discussions over the years with other leaders. The need to make other important decisions for Broadway that included the role of women had led to years of continued discussions.

Unlike the elders, all the staff members had earlier studies and experiences that led them to conclude that women could have public leadership roles. Three people described a "gradual process" in which their views of women in leadership changed. One staff member raised in the Church of Christ recalled wondering about the wisdom of allowing a newly baptized male to teach and lead while mature women with long commitments to the church sat in silence. And, a staff member that served in the mission field described studying Scripture with first-generation Christians in the mission field as a significant experience.

Watching and listening to first-generation Christians who had no denominational baggage interpret Scripture about women and worship was very powerful ... [they concluded] that women could lead the church in prayer, song leading, and the public reading of scripture was meaningful and helpful to opening my eyes. This was done in a very male-dominated society and the men allowed their obedience to scripture to make this decision. The reading of scripture in other languages really helped in stripping away some of my preconceived beliefs.

Another staff member noted the number of men that were required to fill all the leadership roles each Sunday. That person wondered if this constant burden would be lifted if women joined men in serving in those roles. As the staff reached clarity about the role of women, one staff member bluntly stated, "I was ashamed of the way I had acted in the past and vowed to do better for as long as I live."

Reasons Behind the Oneness Study

The elders answered, "What was the defining moment for the elders in deciding to initiate the Oneness Study at Broadway?" with the need to

appoint deacons; a position traditionally held by men. Five of the nine elders mentioned this as the primary reason for the discussion of women's roles among their group. Two mentioned the 1999 study with Ken Cukrowski. Even then elders were discussing whether women could fill that role. At that time, the elders decided that it was important to continue to limit the participation of women but also acknowledge the leadership of women in non-titled positions. Instead of changing their policy to allow women to be deacons, they chose to leave the deacon system behind and call all leaders, female and male, "ministry leaders." This avoided the issues of spiritual authority typically associated with the word "deacon" in the Churches of Christ. By doing so they "allowed for more engagement of women without having to face all of the questions involved." Thus, they avoided a potentially divisive issue. However, in 2018 after a "long history of letting the deacon ministry languish because of the uncertainty regarding the role women ought to play," the elders decided they must address the deacon system and knew that a study of women's roles would become necessary, leading to the Oneness study. In addition, the elders were concerned about the lack of involvement by young people, male and female, in leadership, and determined that they needed to focus on equipping them for leadership. These discussions prompted the elders to wrestle with the role that women hold in leadership of the public assembly.

Since the elders initiated the Oneness study, the staff was asked "What was your first reaction when you heard the elders had decided to do the Oneness Study at Broadway?" By and large, staff were excited about the prospect of the study and the expansion of the role of women. When one staff member was hired, they had been told the elders were not against the public leadership of women but that the elders found it too divisive to make the change, reflecting the 1999 study and decision. So, this person, like others, was "shocked", "surprised", and "excited" at the elder's decision to lead the Oneness process. However, four staff members tempered the positive emotions with feelings of "trepidation" and "concern" at possible conflict that might arise from this process expecting division among the church members.

Expectations of the Oneness Study

When asked "What were your expectations for the Oneness Study at Broadway?" the responses from elders and staff were mixed. All nine of the elders expected the Oneness study to be informative and influence the congregation to accept the change, a sentiment that most of the staff echoed. Additionally, both groups looked forward to the expanded role of women,

to “hearing the ideas and voices of the half (or more) of our population that had been silenced.” Some of the staff expected “members to at least listen and be civil” while others looked forward to “open dialogue” as the elders “decided what was best for the church.” Staff members were more likely to anticipate significant conflict, while the elders were much more hopeful about moving forward with limited fallout. The elders felt people would eventually embrace the new roles for women. When some church members did not, the elders had “deep disappointment,” several mentioning they were “surprised” when people chose to leave. Some of those that left “grew up” at Broadway. One elder said they were “expecting life-long friendships to be more important than the gender of the person leading communion thoughts.” Optimistically, another elder stated that he expected Broadway to lose families because of the new policy but also expected Broadway to gain families that sought out the church due to the inclusion of women in public leadership. On the other hand, five staff members expected dialogue about the possible changes to women’s roles but four of the staff expected resistance or conflict. Overall, the staff had a higher expectation of conflict than the elders did.

The Day of the Announcement

When asked “their thoughts/emotions on the day the elders made the announcement” all the staff and 60% of the elders used expressions such as “happy”, “thrilled”, “excited”, “proud”, “optimistic”, and “curious.” One elder said:

It's one of my happiest memories at Broadway. The question of broadening women's roles in the church is something that I have supported for decades and, quite frankly, I didn't ever imagine that Broadway would make the move until quite a few others had done so ahead of it.

But the elders and staff tempered their excitement with the anxiety they felt because they knew this would be a difficult transition. Continuing the quote above, the elder said,

I was, and continue to be, a little bit surprised that as a group the elders were willing to make this decision, as it came with a fair bit of personal cost as well.

Other staff and elders mentioned they were “nervous”, “anxious” and had “apprehension.” A staff member said they felt

Predominantly dread because I knew the line had been drawn, so to speak, and several of my friends would be leaving. The pain would intensify, and my close circle would never be the same. But also, some relief that the decision had been made and it was time to move on.

Even though it was difficult on the leadership to make the change, they had highly positive emotional responses when a woman led publicly in worship. Several people mentioned they cried, and others described being proud. One elder said it was not when women served in worship that “impacted” him, but he “teared up” as his “daughter served communion...knowing that the future for my girls would be very different than the world in which I grew up.” Several others were worried and anxious for the women that led in worship knowing they carried a heavy burden since they were the first women in that role.

Challenges of Women Leading in Worship

“What has been the biggest problem you experienced when women took on new roles in worship?” One of the “biggest problems” the elders and staff faced was the loss of members. Four of nine staff members and seven of ten elders mentioned the loss of church members, often their own friends. They felt some members were “reactionary” and shared “criticism and angry words” that hurt the leaders deeply. Four elders struggled with “false rumors and outright lies” that were shared by members of the congregation. A staff member blamed the reactions on the “consumeristic nature of US Christianity ... an unwillingness to try something outside of previous experience or perceived understanding.” The “push-back” often came from unlikely people, and one mentioned that it “seemed to come from mostly women.” One elder assessed that most exiting members did not think that it (women leading) was wrong “they just didn’t feel comfortable with it.” Interestingly, two staff members recalled that some church members refused to take the communion trays from women.

I immediately felt sadness for women who would serve communion in the future. My heart hurt for them having to feel the rejection that I was currently feeling. I believed this sort of horrible feeling should never have to be felt by

someone who is just trying to hand the body and blood of Christ to our family, especially by so-called Christian men.

An elder heard that some church members refused to accept communion from women and said, “They were treated rudely by some while passing out communion, in that some ignored them, refused to take and pass the tray, or even acknowledge her.” Perhaps this is the reason that one staff member said it was difficult to “find women who were willing to participate. Understandably, some were reticent.” And, while some were reticent, over fifty individual women participated in roles previously reserved for men within one year of the policy change.⁶

Benefits of Women Leading in Worship

“What are the biggest benefits of women taking on new roles in worship at Broadway?” Seven elders said that women using their “talents” and their “spiritual gifts” was important to Broadway and the Kingdom of God, a sentiment echoed by six of the staff members. Through the use of their spiritual gifts, women brought a new, “fresh” perspective to worship as they spoke with “beauty, power, and eloquence.” Two elders mentioned the importance of women feeling they belonged as “full citizens” as they participated in leading worship. Two elders explained they were hopeful families that had considered leaving to find a place that valued their daughters' gifts would now stay. Two ministers and one elder said they were happy to be more “in line with God’s will.” The policy change “communicates that we're trying to be a place that values every person's gifts and makes room for them to use those gifts for the building up of the body.” Valuing the giftedness of men and women increased the roster of those who could and did serve, which brought fresh insight, energy, and hope into the worship services. Despite the problems described above, staff and elders felt that a greater unity had been created within Broadway and the benefits of women leading in worship outweighed any difficulties.

Discussion

The following section discusses the leader’s stories and applies the concepts of systems theory and adaptive change to their experiences. An understanding of systems theory and adaptive change applies to any policy change in the church, not just the role of women in leadership. It is the hope of the Broadway leaders, and the authors’ hope as well, that the stories

⁶ Rains, Dabbs, and Ihfe, 30.

described in the section above may help other leaders prepare for and walk through a difficult change process.

The elders initiated the Oneness study after discussing the need to appoint deacons, a leadership role held only by men. This raised a second question; can women lead publicly in worship? This represented a drastic change from the current doctrinal policy of the congregation. After study, the leadership decided women could be named as deacons and could lead publicly in worship. At this point, it was time to invite the congregation into the process to initiate the policy change.

The leadership had a choice to treat the new direction as technical change or to take an adaptive approach. Technical change begins with expert-level information already present in the organization and often leads to quick implementation of change.⁷ Technical change is at the surface level of the organization and it does not require members of the organization to change their belief system. However, technical change would have created chaos if applied to a complex, theological issue.

When technical change is not appropriate, an adaptive challenge to long-held values and theological understanding is needed. Heifetz and Linsky describe adaptive challenges as those that

require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization and community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment. The sustainability of change depends on having the people with the problem internalize the change itself.⁸

Changing a long-held practice of the church, such as the role of women in public leadership, is a challenge that requires adaptive change. Adaptive change stretches deep into the identity of the organization and is often marked by heightened emotion. Heifetz describes adaptive change as “dangerous” because “people cannot see at the beginning of the adaptive process that the new situation will be any better than the current condition.”⁹ Further, he warns that people will anticipate the “potential

⁷ Ronald Heifetz, and Martin Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*

loss” they will experience because of the change that is being made.¹⁰ Even so, leadership expert Tod Bolsinger says that adaptive change is absolutely necessary.¹¹ Explaining his position, he states “leadership requires shared, corporate learning expressed in new shared, corporate functioning. In order to act or function differently in a changing world, all true leadership will require transformation.”¹² Unlike the quick-fix mentality of technical change, adaptive change is often a longer, slower task that reaches into the depths of the congregation and transforms it, requiring congregational leaders to remain resilient in the face of emotion-filled resistance.

Adaptive Change and Emotional Reactivity

Adaptive, transformative leadership is difficult because it acknowledges that sometimes the answers cannot be known on the front end of a change process. Empowered by the spiritual imagination of leadership, this kind of change must grow out of the mission of the church. In most Churches of Christ, elders are charged with being “creators and guardians” of the mission of their church, often in partnership with some or all the staff members.¹³ Congregational leaders discern the specific tasks a congregation embraces to partner with God in the reconciliatory work of the kingdom. These leaders must continually evaluate, assess, and implement new opportunities that move the congregation towards greater fulfillment of the mission. For this reason, it is important that most of Broadway’s elders and staff believed that empowering the leadership and spiritual giftedness of women had kingdom purposes. In fact, two elders said that women would finally be treated as “full citizens.” For Broadway’s leadership, the decision to appoint women as deacons and to empower their public leadership in worship was a mission decision that required adaptive change.

Adaptive change requires leaders to think systemically about the change process. Ed Friedman, Peter Steinke, and others have used family systems theory to contribute many insights to the role of relationships and anxiety in a system. Steinke describes systems theory as “a way of conceptualizing reality. It organizes our thinking from a specific vantage point. System thinking considers the interrelatedness of the parts. Instead

¹⁰ Heifetz and Linsky.

¹¹ Tod E. Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, Expanded edition, 2018), 40.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 78.

of seeing the isolated, unrelated parts, we look at the whole."¹⁴ Relationships and issues are impossible to disconnect from each other because they "loop" together and become "co-causal."¹⁵ Volunteer leaders, as well as paid staff, should have some training in systems theory, especially before a major change such as women's leadership roles.

When the church has well-trained professional staff, they might have some experience with leadership and change theories, such as systems theory. When these staff members manage themselves well they make positive contributions to a system as they bring their expertise to bear. For instance, one leader at Broadway clearly defined their role in light of systems theory. When asked, "What has been the biggest problem you experienced when women took on new roles in worship?" this person responded,

By far it has been helping people manage anxiety -- (1) help members trying to figure out if they can "accept" a change that is so new, (2) help leadership not lose heart when members/friends/family simply walk away, many without saying a word, they just disappear, almost like a death, (3) encouraging women who were excited and willing to serve in this new way, but in doing so saw people (some literally as they were serving) leave, not only the worship service but the church. They have felt responsible for people leaving Broadway. It's not their fault, people have left for a lot of different reasons, but it's hard not to feel responsible when you know someone is leaving "because of you". As a [-----],¹⁶ this is familiar ground for me. It's hard to walk it, I hate it when others have to walk it.

Managing complex, anxious emotions in a season of change is difficult for any leader. Coaching others to manage their emotions becomes even more complicated. On the front end, leaders were already anxious to solve some pressing needs in the church. These needs could have been solved with a technical change by just appointing new deacons or initiating a change in policy by simply appointing women. Wisely, the elders did not

¹⁴ Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herdon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006).

¹⁵ Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 1996), 11.

¹⁶ The title of this role has been redacted to protect the respondent's anonymity.

pursue a technical change. They realized the deeper, emotional concerns of “joy”, “fear”, “trepidation”, “concern”, and “hope” would need to be addressed, among themselves and within the congregation, even though adaptive change is a time intensive and emotional process.

Friedman describes the three families of a minister (or leader): the families within the congregation, the congregation as a whole, and the leader’s own family.¹⁷ Anxious reactions in all three families were documented in the stories submitted by the elders and staff. For example, in some cases, multi-generational families left the church as a unit. At times, a family remained at the church and expressed disagreement with the decision by refusing to accept communion from women. Leaders experienced joy when they saw women, sometimes their own family members, leading in service. Other leaders felt pain when their life-long friends left. The congregation reacted as an anxious system, and the leaders’ own family dynamics influenced the process. When emotion is handled well, it is normalized and given appropriate boundaries. However, in this process, the leaders were triangled with a theological issue, perhaps the most reactive of all kinds of triangles, and their stories include the pain of bearing the responsibility for an adaptive change process.¹⁸

Unfolding Anxiety in the Congregation

The leadership developed a plan for a congregation-wide study and, eventually, a plan to initiate the new roles of women. What is evident in this study is that elders and staff had different expectations of the change process. Even as the leaders took steps to design an adaptive process, some felt a study of women’s roles would be enough to carry the implementation forward. Some ministers and elders were surprised when their technical expertise in the form of Bible studies was not enough to convince the congregation of the necessity of the change. For example, some elders believed the congregation would “come around” after the congregational study, and one staff member thought the congregation might submit to the authority of the elders.

On the other hand, half of the staff anticipated negative emotional reactions to the new direction. Likely, at least some of the staff understood this as an adaptive change process and had been prepared for it through previous experiences and/or professional training. They understood the

¹⁷ Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985), 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

kind of change needed would reach deep into the history and emotional memory of Broadway. This emotional memory included the 1999 study led by Ken Cukrowski that did not produce significant change to the roles of women. Most of the elders serving during the Oneness process were not elders during the original study and were not directly responsible for previous decisions. Yet, members would focus frustration from the historical memory of previous eldership decisions on the current elders. The staff anticipated the possible conflict and had more realistic expectations of the situation that would unfold than the elders.

Relationships and Triangulation

Emotional triangles are formed “by any three persons or issues.”¹⁹ Friedman says, “The basic law of emotional triangles is that when two parts of a system become uncomfortable with one another, they will “triangle in” or focus upon a third person, or issue, as a way of stabilizing their own relationship with one another.”²⁰ Because systems are co-causal, multiple triangles exist at any point in time, and leaders are often unaware of the effect those triangles have on their capacity for leadership.²¹

Emotional triangles bind anxiety to a system.²² Triangles are reactive, oppose change, and, when rigid, typically focus anxiety on a person, group, or issue, often a leader within the system.²³ Of the kinds of triangles that a church leader might face, the triangle between a person, their theological beliefs, and leadership is among the most anxious and potentially destructive.²⁴ Since most church members and leaders view the role of women in leadership as a theological issue that grows out of an understanding of Scripture, a change to this policy has the potential of being highly emotional and divisive.

Broadway’s leaders were triangulated with families that were emotionally invested in the change, regardless of their position on women’s roles, and they experienced intense relational pressure. Relational pressure is a way to sabotage leaders during a time of change.²⁵ The real work of the leadership was to stay self-defined and cultivate a non-anxious presence in

¹⁹ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 35.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, 51.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 55.

²⁴ Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, 36.

²⁵ Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2007), 11.

these triangled relationships. Leadership was aware of the toll that it took on them to study the role of women and implement the change of policy. As members made decisions to leave or stay, their reactions were sometimes hurtful and extremely critical, even to the point that the elders dealt with “lies” and “falsehoods” that had been spread around about them. The pain the leaders carried was heightened by a sense of responsibility for the pain of others, including those that left and those that were treated poorly.

The pain of lost relationships is difficult to carry and will often cause a “failure of nerve” of the leaders in which the system reverts to the way things have always been done.²⁶ For adaptive change to occur, which Friedman refers to as imaginative change, “... the system, in turn, must produce leaders who can both take the first step and maintain the stamina to follow through in the face of predictable resistance and sabotage.”²⁷

When predictable conflict arises, leaders can prepare themselves for disagreements, relational pressure, and potential sabotage of their leadership. Some of the Broadway leaders did not expect conflict to arise over topics that were not about the role of women. These leaders felt surprised that other anxieties surfaced and members left for reasons other than the new roles women carried. Anxious systems unearth unresolved issues from the past, even if the people responsible for those issues have moved on. The organizational memory recalls the hurt and pain of those decisions that were made by the staff, the elders, or both. While the leaders prepared themselves to defend the decision to allow women in leadership roles, they were not prepared for the other issues that surfaced. Slowly, this drained the energy of individual leaders, threatening their resilience in their leadership positions.

Leadership and Responsibility

The leadership of Broadway persevered with their change process until the implementation of the new policy on women’s leadership in public settings was fully established. Shortly after, the global pandemic caused Broadway, like almost all other churches, to meet virtually, instead of in person. The leadership continued the implementation of women’s leadership in this setting. This is notable since a crisis often creates additional anxiety that can cause a change process from being fully implemented. Leaders must be aware of the tendency to pull back from

²⁶ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

adaptive change during anxious times, sabotaging the work they have already done. In this case, the leadership stayed focused on the inclusion of women during the pandemic, and a new normal with women serving in public was established.

Non-anxious leaders take responsibility for their actions without taking responsibility for the actions of others. Some of the leaders at Broadway clearly communicated in their stories that they took responsibility for their decisions and understood the reactions of the congregation. However, there were also hints, if not complete embracing, of taking responsibility for the pain of others. This is dangerous in leadership because it causes emotional damage to the leaders as they carry baggage that is not theirs to carry. Often, this feeling of personal responsibility for other people's actions is a private struggle, one the leader is working out between themselves and God. Perhaps a congregational practice in times like this is to embrace the Biblical practice of lament. Lament provides the opportunity for leaders and members of the congregation to give voice to the loss while reminding themselves that the mission of God within their church is of the utmost importance. Ultimately, the congregation can trust that God has provided and sustained them into a new balance, faithful to the call God put on their church.

Conclusion

Leadership is hard. It comes with unanticipated pain, sometimes from others that are loved and respected by the leader. It is easy to focus on the negatives, but the Oneness story also revealed that there is great joy and peace in faithfully pursuing God's kingdom mission. Courageous leaders embrace the mission God has given their church, knowing the cost, but having faith in the Spirit's leading. Therefore, they do not avoid change, they embrace it, diligently, giving it time and space to transform their congregation.

Unfortunately, some avoid pursuing leadership roles in the church because they know they will face difficult times, deal with relational issues, or feel defeat when plans fall through. This begs the question, "What needs to change about the way the church raises and equips leaders?" A few suggestions include:

- 1) Train leaders in leadership theories, such as Family System Theory, so that they have a well of knowledge to draw from in hard times.
- 2) Stay connected to the history of your church, using this for discernment as new initiatives are created.

- 3) Empower the professionals that are trained in congregational leadership and change management to create plans that embrace adaptive change.
- 4) Provide spiritual care, counseling, and Sabbath to all leaders regularly so that they have the emotional energy to manage themselves well in anxious times.
- 5) Help leaders create realistic expectations of a change process and a plan for working through the difficult conversations as they arise.

While there is no magic formula for making change easy, we believe these suggestions will help church leaders. One elder at Broadway said of the decision to include women in worship “I have no regrets about our decision and am convinced we made the right choice.” Sometimes when we make changes, we believe that it should be easy if God has led us into that change. However, this is rarely the case. Our hope is that this study will encourage and equip other church leaders as they lead their congregations boldly and courageously in God’s kingdom mission for their churches.

Appendix One

Guidelines for Elders Oneness Story

How to write your Oneness Story. Use the prompts below to help you write your story. Take as much time as you need to respond to each question. There are no rules about how long each answer must be. What is important is that the reader can imagine what this experience has been like for you. Don't put your name anywhere on this document. We want it to be anonymous so that you feel comfortable answering the questions completely and truthfully. Instead of names you can use titles. For example, "One of the ministers said...", "One of the elders came....", "My wife thought..." When you are done hit the submit button and your story will be recorded in an electronic database.

1. Describe a memory of what women did in your church growing up.
2. Tell about the moment in your life when it became clear to you that women should take on more roles in worship services.
3. What was the defining moment for the elders in deciding to initiate the Oneness Study at Broadway?
4. What were your expectations for the Oneness Study at Broadway?
5. What were your thoughts/emotions on the day the elders made the announcement to the congregation that women would be taking on new roles in worship?
6. Tell about your personal reaction when you first saw a woman take on a new role during worship at Broadway.
7. What has been the biggest problem you experienced when women took on new roles in worship?
8. What are the biggest benefits of women taking on new roles in worship at Broadway?

Appendix Two

Guidelines for Staff Oneness Story

How to write your Oneness Story. Use the prompts below to help you write your story. Take as much time as you need to respond to each question. There are no rules about how long each answer must be. What is important is that the reader can imagine what this experience has been like for you. Don't put your name anywhere on this document. We want it to be anonymous so that you feel comfortable answering the questions completely and truthfully. Instead of names you can use titles. For example, "One of the ministers said...", "One of the elders came...", "My wife thought..." When you are done hit the submit button and your story will be recorded in an electronic database.

1. Describe a memory of what women did in your church growing up.
2. Tell about the moment in your life when it became clear to you that women should take on more roles in worship services.
3. What was your first reaction when you heard the elders had decided to do the Oneness Study at Broadway?
4. What were your expectations for the Oneness Study at Broadway?
5. What were your thoughts/emotions on the day the elders made the announcement to the congregation that women would be taking on new roles in worship?
6. Tell about your personal reaction when you first saw a woman take on a new role during worship at Broadway.
7. What has been the biggest problem you experienced when women took on new roles in worship?
8. What are the biggest benefits of women taking on new roles in worship at Broadway?

Shannon Clarkson Rains (DMin, Abilene Christian University) is the Associate Professor of Children's Ministry at Lubbock Christian University. Before her appointment, she served in children and family ministry for fifteen years. Her research topics include children's spiritual formation, worship with children, and women's leadership in churches.

Jennifer Dabbs received her BA in Sociology from Centenary College of Louisiana in 1986. She received her MA in sociology from the University of Pittsburgh in 1988 and her PhD in sociology from the University of North Texas in 1994. For the past twenty years, she has taught sociology courses in the Department of Social Work and Criminal Justice at Lubbock Christian University.

Kaley Ihfe received her BS in Human Communication in 1998 from Abilene Christian University. She received her MEd in School Counseling in 2002 and her MA in Christian Ministry in 2019, both from Abilene Christian University. She teaches Bible classes and has authored several curriculums for adult Bible classes; she speaks at retreats and is the Director of Lavish Hope Retreats. She currently works at the Volunteer Center of Lubbock as the Leadership Development Manager.