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Three Approaches to the Greater Inclusion of Women in Public Worship

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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

A Panel Discussion:

Three Approaches to the Greater Inclusion of Women in Public Worship

Jennifer M. Dabbs, Shannon Clarkson Rains, Kaley D. Ihfe

Abstract: In the spring of 2022, elders and ministers from three West Texas Churches of Christ convened at Lubbock Christian University's annual Scholar's Colloquium for a discussion of how their congregations expanded the roles of women in public worship. Tradition within the Churches of Christ dictates that men fill all visible roles during worship services. Since these practices are based in commonly accepted interpretations of Scripture, women's active participation in worship represents a momentous change in both practice and belief. The ninety-minute discussion with leaders from the three congregations covered the initial decision-making process, the implementation of new roles, problems encountered, and advice for others wanting to make a similar change. The conversation builds on a formal research project involving one of the congregations and provides valuable insights for those interested in the greater inclusion of women in worship. The transcript has been edited for clarity, but otherwise is an exact account of the discussion as the church leaders reflected on their experiences.

Introduction

In the spring of 2022, "A Oneness Study Story: The Experiences of Elders and Staff in Leading Change for the Inclusion of Women in Public Worship Roles" was presented at the Lubbock Christian University Scholar's Colloquium by Dr. Shannon Rains, Dr. Jennifer Dabbs, and Kaley Ihfe.¹ Responses of elders and staff to qualitative survey questions regarding Broadway Church of Christ's 2019 decision to expand the roles of women in public worship were discussed. Broadway had made a historic departure from Churches of Christ tradition which prescribed that all visible roles in worship be performed by men. The research paper delivered

¹ The paper has since been published in this journal: Shannon Clarkson Rains, Jennifer M. Dabbs, and Kaley D. Ihfe, "A Oneness Study Story: The Experiences of Elders and Staff in Leading Change for the Inclusion of Women in Public Worship Roles," *Discernment: Theology and Practice of Ministry* 8, 1 (2022), <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol8/iss1/3/>.

that day analyzed the decision-making and implementation processes of the congregation from a Systems Theory framework. To supplement the scholarly presentation, the researchers invited an elder and the preaching minister at Broadway Church of Christ to join in a panel discussion with representatives from two other West Texas congregations that had recently made a similar change. These participants were selected because the congregations were known to have expanded women's roles in worship, but how in which they approached this adaptive change varied significantly. The following conversation outlines the unique approach of each congregation to the question of women's roles in the Church, the things they did well as they transitioned to women's active participation in worship and the problems they encountered.² This information is shared in the hope that other congregations contemplating similar changes may find the stories of these three faith communities helpful in charting their own path to greater inclusion of women in public worship.

Panelists:

Minister at Monterey Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas

Elder at Monterey Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas

Minister at Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas

Elder at Broadway Church of Christ in Lubbock, Texas

Minister at Southern Hills Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas

Moderator: (To the Monterey Minister) Tell us how your congregation approached including women in more roles during worship services?

Monterey Minister: In terms of formal congregational study, and we called our study "Men and Women in the Body of Christ", that began in about 2017. But I've got to paint a bigger picture.

Monterey, like many churches, has gone through its share of ups and downs when it comes to conflict. Monterey went through some pretty tumultuous times. I think growing out of that a culture was created with a lot of trust. A group of elders led the church to a better place. Prior to my coming in 2000, Monterey went through a season where they were losing

² The following transcript of the panel discussion has been edited for clarity. We have connected the comments with the role of the speaker at that congregation to help the reader more clearly understand the context from which the comment emerged.

folks on both the right and left, as we talked about things like worship etc. So, I stepped into a context where incredible trust existed. Where the church was open to study, to conversation, to change, to transition on a number of fronts.

In the twenty years I've been at Monterey, we have gone through some very, very significant changes. Probably the two most significant ones being a transition to an instrumental worship service and then some transitions regarding women's roles. Back in 2002, 2003, we made transitions regarding how our ministries were led and structured. Prior to that, males were affirmed as deacons and there were a few women who were affirmed as ministry leaders, primarily over women's ministries. We did a congregational study and walked through a transition again at that point where men, women and couples were affirmed. We very intentionally told the congregation we're choosing to use the term "ministry leader" rather than "deacon" or "deaconesses." That set the stage for where we have traveled with women's roles since.

You will hear us use the word organic, because a lot of the changes that have taken place at Monterey through the years have been more organic in nature. Long before we had congregational studies, women were a part of worship teams, standing on the stage, obviously helping lead the church in worship. Women at times read scriptures. Many times, it was men and women who were part of that worship team that read the scriptures. I did a lot of interviewing of women, men, and couples in sermons. So, in a variety of ways women's voices were being heard even before we did formal studies.

In 2017 we did studies with leadership, elders, and ministry staff. It's always been a collaborative process in terms of the studies that took place. That transitioned to study sessions involving elders, ministry staff, and spouses, which led to me doing some specialty classes on the roles of men and women Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. This led ultimately to doing a sermon series in early 2019 on men and women in the body of Christ. Five sermons as I recall. We also did a recording of different class sessions at that point that were made available to the church. I did the teaching. We did not bring anybody in from the outside as we walked through that process. This led to elder solicited feedback through focus groups, Bible classes, etc. Ultimately this led to the determination that we would begin incorporating women in worship in limited roles in our assemblies.

Moderator: Thank you. (To Monterey Elder) Do you have something to add?

Monterey Elder: Monterey's been through lots of challenges through the years. Before (the Monterey Minister) came, our elders made a statement saying we are going to make it okay to talk about things, whatever it is, and have an open mind about it. Some people were frustrated. Even so, nothing is off the table. We are willing to talk about anything. Which created a culture that made it okay to have tough conversations, which really has been fabulous for us. That doesn't mean we haven't had challenges since, but it created a culture that made it okay to have conversations that ordinarily would not take place. I think that was good.

Another thing we did was a congregational survey about, "What do you want to talk about?" What are things that are challenges for you that you see as challenges for this church? this body? And that uncovered what they wanted to talk about instead of us coming up with something we thought they wanted to talk about. I thought that was really a good thing.

Moderator: Thank you. (To Southern Hills Minister) Would you like to share with us how your congregation approached including women in roles in worship?

Southern Hills Minister: Our church followed some similar paths. I'll mention some things I think are a little bit different. Our study took nineteen months within the leadership. I was asked to lead the elders through a study, so I did that. The staff at our church obviously, like a lot of Churches of Christ, were never going to vote on the final decision. But we were in all those meetings, and the staff were given space to talk and share. Everything was equal except for that, the final vote.

We also talked to other churches that had gone through this change. One of the key things we discovered that ended up effecting how we handled talking to the church, was that churches that had announced a congregational study, immediately created a situation where there were sides in the congregation. Members started attacking other members in addition to trying to recruit leaders to their side of the issue. After talking to several churches about that, we came to a place where the elders made the decision. Then we announced to the church this is how we got to where we are. I taught a five-week series with one of our most trusted long-standing elders. We gave them all the same reading materials that the elders

had had. But we announced this is the change we're going to make. And like the other churches here, for the sake of unity, and for the sake of making some progress, we took the role of preaching minister and elder off the table, but everything else we wanted to open up to both men and women.

Moderator: Thank you. Broadway?

Broadway Elder: Back when I wasn't an elder (yet) in the late nineties, Ken Cukrowski came, and we had quite a study on women's roles.³ I was told at the time those leaders felt like this is something we should do, but it would have been too divisive for our congregation at that time. So, that was in the background.

A part of the reason why we started looking at this was our younger members are not coming into leadership roles like they used to. They're not serving like they used to. I feel like sometimes as elders we went to the ministry leader plan so we didn't have to say, "Okay, women. No, you can't be deacons, but you can be ministry leaders." I think that caused some problems.

Finally, we became convicted by the Spirit that now's the time for us to talk about that. That was the impetus.

The elders and the staff together studied this for several months. Then once we decided to make the change, (our executive minister) was very helpful in coming up with a curriculum. The elders each taught six weeks in our Bible classes, and we went through this study.

I will say we live in a society where people see the President taking polls to decide what should we do. I think some people thought we were going to put this out there and then we were going to poll the congregation. Depending on what they came up with is what we're going to do. That really wasn't the case. We were inviting them to come into this study with (us). It wasn't. "Let's look at this, and then we'll see." We'd already decided what we wanted to do. It's a little bit tricky when you're dealing with a congregation because sometimes people say, "You didn't listen to us at all." Well, we'd been listening and praying and thinking about this for decades. It wasn't like this is a brand-new thing we just thought of. But that was part of the process. So, we went through a six-week study period, and we also

³ A brief history of Broadway Church of Christ and an explanation of the Oneness process was published in: Shannon Clarkson Rains, Jennifer M. Dabbs, and Kaley D. 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), <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol7/iss1/2>.

brought Ken Cukrowski back and Mike Cope and gave the congregation a chance to hear some other voices as well.

Broadway Minister: A couple of things for context. I think for us, we really had been trying to cultivate the leadership. Like Monterey, we said we can talk about anything. Any question. We're not going to be afraid of having hard conversations with folks. That was something that was of high value, and we wanted to model that. We also really wanted to see the next generation of leaders grow and develop. So, this conversation about roles in our worship services was born not out of one issue. It was this idea that we want to try and engage the next generation. And to do that, we're going to have to acknowledge some of the ways we have stiff armed half of our congregation and said you can't do these certain things, understand why that is and hold onto that value of hard conversations to keep moving forward.

This was not a conversation we felt was something we wanted to lay out and take a political poll on, vote yay or nay. Really the process we followed was trying to help the congregation come along and understand how we got to where we were. Like Southern Hills, we tried to provide as much of the information that we had studied and learned from, including Dr. Cukrowski coming back and leading the entire church (in 2018). We had a number of new members who didn't get a chance to go through (the earlier study) to bring along so they could understand how we got here. Then the final piece of that was to say our goal here is not to try to convince you why we're right and you're wrong for not agreeing with us. Only to help you understand this is how we got where we are, and this is why we are convinced this is where God is leading us.

Moderator: Thank you. (To Southern Hills Minister) What roles did women move into in your church?

Southern Hills Minister: Like everyone else, we had informal changes through the years with ministry leaders and deacons, so that didn't change. For us, this was primarily worship roles. And we intentionally avoided backing ourselves into a corner with saying who could get up and speak in a form that might be described by some as preaching. We just tried to focus more on if you feel called and gifted. We wanted our theology of worship to be that as a community, we are going to give those opportunities to people, no matter whether they are male or female, everything except for the role of preacher and elder.

Moderator: Thank you.

Broadway Minister: Yes, similarly at Broadway, we said no to the preaching minister and elder. We were opening up. Giftedness was the basic requirement, and giftedness was all that was necessary for service.

Broadway Elder: So specifically in our worship service, we have a welcome we usually do. The women (now) do that. We have a communion time women do. Reading of Scripture, prayers. All of those things (are) done (by women).

Moderator: Thank you.

Monterey Elder: Informally, we had women teaching Bible classes and couples teaching Bible classes before we had this study. We studied women's roles through the years several times. The eldership and leadership just thought the congregation wasn't quite ready because of homeostasis, keeping that balance, and not wanting to conquer the big divide and try to bring everybody along. Because you're responsible for all. That is part of the challenge. The leader himself has to not take on the fear of the congregation because they have to lead. But the challenge is I'm responsible for all those souls as well. You have to balance all that. The tension you have to navigate well. But there are lots of things that were happening behind the scenes, women who would teach Bible class. At Monterey, Bible classes initiate the invitation for different people to teach their own Bible class. In some classes, it has happened before. That was fine for them. It navigated behind the scenes, (an) organic deal for several years before.

Monterey Minister: I feel like overall, we are a church that is incredibly united, and yet there is incredible diversity. Overall, I think we are theologically a fairly progressive church, and yet, we have two assemblies. One of which is instrumental, one of which is acapella. Probably the folks who are part of the acapella assembly would represent a different posture than those who are part of the instrumental assembly, even though there is a back-and-forth. So even when we made more significant transitions with the role of women in our assemblies, our two assemblies look different. Outside of preaching, women can do anything in our instrumental assembly. In our acapella assembly, they have done welcome,

they have done Scripture reading, etc. but have not led communion thoughts in that assembly, as I recall.

Moderator: Thank you. Broadway, what things worked well for you and what problems did you encounter?

Broadway Elder: As far as what went well, I wasn't part of the group that was asking the women to participate, but it seemed like that was not a problem. Women were actively filling those roles and eagerly. You could see the joy on some of their faces as they were able to be there for the first time and minister in that way they never had been able to before. That part I thought was really good.

I would say that the negative was the fact that even though we'd gone through this six-week study and we'd been talking about this for so long, we had very, very few people during the actual study were questioning or saying this is wrong. I'm the eternal optimist, I thought, "I think this is going to go really, really well." I was really shocked how many people did leave. I think this (is an) American consumeristic attitude of "Well, no, this is not wrong, but I'm just not comfortable with it." I never talked to a single person that said they thought what we were doing was wrong. They just didn't feel comfortable with it.

Moderator: Thank you.

Broadway Minister: I think things that worked well was it really engaged a whole new group of people. The kinds of encouragement and feedback we were getting from the women who talked about their experience and being able to (participate in worship). My own daughter and other young women were talking about how neat it was to see another woman up there. To envision, "Hey, that might be me at some point." So, trying to do our best to cultivate the kind of community where if somebody visits, they might encounter someone who looks like them and thinks like them and might believe like them. There was a sense of joy in the services and a lot of love. That was the exciting part.

One of the problems we look back on—and I don't know that there's a perfect way to do this—we said, "Hey, we're going to introduce a new role open to women about once a month." So, over the course of about five months, we introduced five different roles, levels of participation in a public worship. What it felt like was every month, more people who were upset would leave. So, "I'm okay with them welcoming me, but I'm not okay with

them handing me communion.” Or “I’m okay with them handing me communion but don’t try to lead a meditation about communion.” Or “I’m okay with them singing on the stage, but if they lead us. . . .” So as each month progressed, you could tell who was offended by what because they didn’t show up after that started. Which, we went into it with the best of intentions. Like when you go to the ocean, you start at your ankles, then you get to your knees, and then your waist, then you just make the plunge. Versus you just go in and say, “Here’s the decision we made. We’re going to help you understand how we got there, and starting this day, you’re going to see. . . .” That’s how we tried to communicate (with the congregation). “You may not see a woman up every time, but you might because we are going to see who can do it, and who is willing to do it, and who has the gifts and desires to do that.” So, we found a couple of unique challenges in our processes. Part worked well for us, and part of it really didn’t.

Moderator: Thank you. Then Monterey if you would go next.

Monterey Elder: No, I don’t know that there’s one way to do it right for every congregation. I think that’s the challenge because they’re all different. I was shown an analogy when I was younger before I was an elder. You stretch a rubber band, and then you let it relax. Then you stretch it a little further, and then you let it relax. And take it further. If you just stretch it all at once, it will break. I’ve always kept it in mind when we talk about change as we began our study and we began to incorporate women. We have an early service that is a bit more traditional than the later service. We knew we could introduce it, not aggressively, but right off the bat in that second service. We knew we would have to be a little bit more organic and ease into that first service because we knew that was the folks we were dealing with. And as (Broadway) mentioned, we didn’t have a single person come to us and say, I absolutely do not agree with the conclusion you have come to, but it was the comfort level they were all dealing with. I think part of the challenge for us as leaders is to help expose them to things that aren’t wrong, so they get a comfort level to ease into it. That’s not right or wrong. Your version is not wrong, but we could do that because we had two services. It allowed us the opportunity to ease some people into it and expose some people right off the bat.

Monterey Minister: Every church system looks different, and while there are both advantages and disadvantages to our context with two

assemblies, I think that gives us some flexibility many churches do not have. When I step back and look at our early assembly, I am of the opinion that assembly looks more progressive than most assemblies in Churches of Christ because of the variety of things that are even a part of that assembly at Monterey. But we felt like we were in a position to introduce changes even more quickly in the instrumental assembly than we did in the acapella.

Monterey Elder: When we say we have two services, those people in both those services love each other, and they go to Bible class with each other. They just have different comfort levels and different desires. So, when we say that, we honestly don't have two churches. We have two different worship services and one church. They just worship in different ways.

Monterey Minister: And a lot of those folks flow back and forth between the two assemblies. We borrowed the language from Rick Atchley at The Hills when they went through the instrumental transition. We're a "both/and" church, and I think even in a variety of other topics we've explored through the years, we are at that same place, we are "both/and." What's been fascinating for us through our study of women's roles, and again we're in a context where folks can choose which assembly, but we may have lost five or six families in our study of women's roles. The tension level, the stress level, the anxiety level, in my judgment was so much less than when we walked through the music study.

Moderator: Did you feel like you encountered these issues more when you went through the instrumental change? With more problems then?

Monterey Minister: Yes, I still think the process we walked through was a healthy process, and we included some steps in that process that were not a part of this process, but for whatever reason, it was. It was interesting. Our elder mentioned the congregational survey we did in 2009 and the rolling out of (expanded women's roles). (There was) an elder staff retreat where the determination was that we need to do some very significant study beyond what we've already done on both music and women's roles. The determination of the elders ultimately was the music question will create less tension than the women's role question would. I'm not sure that's the case. Maybe simply because we tackled that one first.

Moderator: (To the Southern Hills Minister) What are some of the problems you encountered, or what are some of the things that went well?

Southern Hills Minister: We tried to prepare our eldership to understand that in our tradition, people are more comfortable pretending something is a theological issue than admitting all the feelings they have. Feelings aren't legitimate in Church of Christ arguments even though they're running the argument. Like everyone else on this panel, I can't remember a single person who actually tried to deal with the theological content of our decision, but they would talk like that. They would say, "Well, I don't think you're taking Scripture seriously." So, one of our problems was we wasted a lot of time trying to win theological arguments with a handful of people when that wasn't their problem. Their problem was that the church was changing in a way they were not ready for. One of the common phrases we got from the people who left is, "I didn't leave Southern Hills, Southern Hills left me." That kind of pushback. We are an a cappella church with one worship service, and we had people asking, "Why didn't you tackle that first?" I don't view the question of what women are doing in our assemblies or in our life together in the same category as whether or not we do instrumental worship. I feel like one is more of a question of preference and what that experience is like, and one goes to the heart of someone's dignity and worth. To me, it was really important that we didn't create levels of what other people are comfortable with, and that cost us because we had people who were definitely uncomfortable and didn't view it that way. They felt like it was on the same level as "Are we going to have a guitar or not?"; "Are women going to lead prayers or not?" I and our leadership felt like those were two different types of conversations. Even though they both happen in worship.

We dealt with feeling like we kind of went off a cliff all of a sudden for people who were wanting it to be a more gradual change. We did not do a once-a-month thing. We just told people this is all open, all these roles. We don't know which women are going to want to step into those experiences and do that as that comes available to us. We didn't want to pin ourselves in a corner of promising a pace we couldn't actually maintain. In other words, we wanted it to feel organic after we'd made the decision and statement about it.

The main thing I would add, we had a ton of people who left. If I had to say who actually left over the issue itself, that's a relatively small number of people. But, over time, their friends left, their extended families left. I kind of expected everyone to leave right away and it took the course of two

and a half to three years for all of that to stop happening. And that's the one thing I would say to people who are considering this level of congregational changes. You tend to think about how many people would leave over the theological disagreement itself. We weren't prepared for all of the extended relationships that would cause people to leave who had no strong feeling about the decision itself at all. They just looked around. A lot of their friends had left, and it didn't feel like their home church anymore, so they all ended up drifting away to other congregations in Abilene.

Moderator: Thank you. (To the Southern Hills Minister) What advice do you have for other congregations wanting to include women in more roles in the service?

Southern Hills Minister: Heifetz has a quote that says, "adaptive change is your disappointing people at a rate they can stand." It is rough to be in a season of disappointing people or making them unsettled. I don't know that there is a way to fast forward through that season where your church is wrestling with "we think we've done the right thing here, and we think we've tried to do it in the right way, and we still feel like there's people who are leaving and are hurt." What tends to happen is if they can't really argue with the position itself, they are going to over and over criticize the process and say, "It's not that you did it. It's *how* you did it." The reality is that people of goodwill can disagree strongly about process. That's a really difficult conversation to get caught up in, and we found even that wasn't really what they were talking about. I think what they were primarily worried about was that the feeling they got in church was at risk and they were afraid of what was coming next.

And that's another thing, we had to head-on address the fact that a lot of our people are more disciplined by cable news than they are by Scripture and by church. You are disciplined in whatever you spend the most time-consuming. Our folks, unfortunately, know those scripts better than what we're trying to say in terms of God's preferred future for the church. So, we had to tackle that straight on, because we had people assuming, "Okay, well, what's next?" "If you let women do this? What's next?" It all felt like it was more culturally attuned to the outside world than what we were actually trying to say to the church, which is if people are called by God and gifted to do something, why would we rob our church by not letting them do that, of not letting them serve in those ways? That gets uncomfortable. I think we all know that even though we are trying to resist

the world, we are more shaped by the world than we realize, so some confession has to happen across the table.

One of the things that helped is I'm on the record publicly saying I feel like women should be able to fulfill any role in the life of the church. So, my church knew that our leadership position, where we said no to preaching and, or being the preacher and no to the elder, that I was compromising. That I was giving up something in terms of what I would like to have seen, and that ended up helping in the long run. I think modeling as a leadership: Look, no one is getting exactly what they want here, but we believe as a community, God is calling us to do this. And yeah, it's not always comfortable, and it's challenging, but you know, we can do this together.

But I think what was hardest to us is that we had a functioning vision of not offending people. That was our church growth model prior to this decision. So, it definitely has radically changed who comes and who stays at our church. And again, that's why I think it took two to three years for a lot of people to leave because they kept looking around, and our church really has radically changed. It's really exciting in neat ways. But we went through a definite season where all I would say is church felt sad. There was just this sense of who wasn't there, and it caused some of the elders to question, was this worth it? All of us believed it was right. But then you started having questions about, okay, should we have waited? I think the reality is, and Monterey, the leaders there mentioned that whatever big, big change you make first is going to be the hardest one. I don't know that it matters exactly what the content of the change is. It's are we going to take risks for the sake of the kingdom? Or, are we going try not to offend people?"

Moderator: Thank you. Monterey, what advice would you give?

Monterey Elder: Any organization I've ever been in says we don't communicate enough. So, you've got to feel like you're over-communicating with everyone. We were trying to relay that the elders and staff studied this for years behind the scenes. Then (we) brought our spouses into it more recently, about five years ago. And then spent a great deal of time in adult Bible classes, not just in the auditorium, but in smaller groups, so that conversations could take place about how people were feeling that heard the scriptural references about why it's okay. Then they were able to voice how they were feeling in those smaller groups. It gave people a chance to voice things, and (then) we ended up making the change.

Leadership can't be held hostage. They have to be Spirit-led and feel like God is leading them, and they have to act on that. But you've got to communicate all along the way so that the church understands the heart from which you're leading. I think that's really important. And relationships are really important with that too. If you don't have relationships across the board with your leadership, good relationships with all the folks in the church, you're at risk.

Moderator: Thank you. (To the Monterey Minister) Do you have something to add?

Monterey Minister: We referenced this earlier but recognizing the value of building a culture of trust. That doesn't happen overnight. Recognizing that any time you step into transition or change, you run the risk of conflict, of people leaving. So, from a leadership perspective, acknowledging that, affirming one another over and over again through that process, and to not be afraid to solicit feedback from the church. I think perhaps one of the differences between us is even though leadership was moving in a particular direction at Monterey, and it wasn't a democratic process, before ultimate decisions were made with the transition, we tried to involve the congregation in that process, in that study, in that feedback with us and for us. Again, it looks different in every church. For us, I think that was the right course to take.

Moderator: Thank you. Broadway, what advice would you give?

Broadway Elder: I look at what we did, and I don't know if there are things I definitely would change. I think some things we did really, really well. Obviously, some things didn't turn out the way we wanted. One of the most encouraging things I thought happened was this was one of the first times I remember as a whole body in our individual Bible classes looking at a really tough issue for Churches of Christ. We did it very in-depth, very carefully, very thoughtfully, for a six-week time period. I had numerous people tell me, "I'd like to be able to do this on other things too because I think this is how we should discern Scripture, and I really appreciate that." I think that was one of the reasons I was so confused when people did leave because it just seemed like it was good. (But) people left because they said they just didn't feel comfortable.

The other thing was, "If you all are going to make this change, what else is going to happen?" The fear is you made this big change. While we're

in the middle of this, they are already bombarding us with what's the next change? They're scared of what we're going to do next. We don't have a list of ten things that we're going to do, and we're rolling them out a year at a time."

Broadway Minister: You know. I was thinking about how the first four or five months of making these changes felt like you went to a funeral each Sunday because you were reminded of all the people who weren't with you. If I could go back and make some changes or do something different, I would want to try to intervene at that level more intentionally with our members and with our leaders. I think (Broadway elder) is right; the way our elders handled it, I was extremely proud.

Some of the staff were shocked that this decision was made. I was one of those because when I was hired, we came from a church where women were actively involved in worship already. The elders said, "Hey, if you come here, we may never make that move. Are you okay with that?" (My wife) and I prayed about this a lot, talked about it, and we were okay. We said we still believe God is calling us here to this place. So, when this came, you could have knocked me over with a feather because my impression was this is not going to happen. But we saw the progression of just the desire to engage our church in meaningful ways and opportunities to live into God's preferred future at Broadway.

Part of our legacy was we were a church known for risks. We were a church who started this. We were a church who did that and went there. We kind of left that legacy behind in our lane to come (to) that vision of "non-offense." Our growth point is not to offend too many people. This actually pushed us back to re-engaging this idea: What if we were really trying to take seriously that legacy of embracing all that God has for us and engaging our entire church and participating in that? So, I think on the back side of that, the support piece (I) would change (would be) providing consistent counseling and spiritual direction for the leadership. Certainly, I would go back and redo some of that. Our elders took a lot in the neck. I was proud of how they handled that but thinking back. Man! We should have some support in place.

Then some more, maybe institutional-wide opportunities to stay connected with our church in bigger ways. Perhaps engaging our next level of leaders down from our elders in the process of helping us do that type of work with our small group leaders and Bible class leaders.

And doing some work down the line to help with the people who show up and say, like one of our elders where literally five of his closest friends at church left. He went one Sunday, all his friends were there, to the

next Sunday, none of them were there. It very much was like a funeral. Very much was like a tragic accident. Trying to sort that out at an emotional level. If I could go back, or if I was speaking to a church thinking of this kind of change, I would say be intentional about thinking what's going to be your wrap-around support and encouragement for your leaders. Also having some opportunities to engage your congregation in follow-up conversation that's more personal. It's not just the Bible class, but some listening sessions, some opportunities to gather in small groups and say, "Folks, how do you feel about it? Can we pray for you? How can I encourage you? We're hurting. We're all hurting." Doing some of the things that we might do if there had been a tragic accident in the church. Where we would step in at some levels and say, "Hey, this is a big change. We know it's not going to be the same from this day going forward." I would advise each church if we could change one thing, we would approach in some similar ways that type of support to come alongside them.

Monterey Minister: I never felt like either through our instrumental transition or what changes we had made to women's roles - we are not where I want it to be yet there—I never personally felt like I'm walking into a funeral. When churches walk through that experience, I hurt for you, but I think in that context, there is value also in leaders modeling excitement. From a systems perspective, we would talk about a non-anxious presence, but even modeling excitement as we walk through those kinds of transitions. I think even though we lost a number of folks to the instrumental transition, because of the nature of that transition, there was some excitement that was a part of our context that might not have been otherwise.

Broadway Elder: Obviously, the elders talked and prayed about this before. We knew some people would leave. I was a little bit surprised at how many left, but one of the things we talked about ahead of time was how many people have left because they didn't feel like their young girls were going to be able to (serve). It's one of those things when something big happens, you notice. When it's attrition throughout the years, you'll notice it (less). We also thought, how many people are going to be drawn to this at some point and want to come here. Even though that was in our head, it's still emotionally...when it happens, it's hard to reconcile.

Moderator: If we could give our panel a hand. I really appreciate the honesty with which you shared.

Conclusion

The panelists' discussion provides a candid picture of how three Churches of Christ broke with tradition to provide women the opportunity to serve in visible roles during worship.

Discernment processes

Elders, in partnership with the ministry staff, began with an earnest desire to better understand God's will for women in the Church. In all three congregations, elders and ministers delved into Scripture before the elders concluded that they should open all roles but that of preaching and eldership to women. The elders charged the ministers with implementing a plan that included study with the congregation and integration of women into worship. Despite their shared belief that "the right thing to do" would be to base worship roles on "spiritual giftedness," each congregation took a different path toward implementation. These conversations reveal the different levels of conflict involved in their unique journeys but also the successes and rewards of women's expanded participation in worship.

All three churches had opportunities for elder-led small groups or Bible classes to study biblical teaching on women's roles. Ministers in each congregation also led studies from the pulpit. However, Broadway Church of Christ utilized outside experts to further assist in the education of church members and leaders.

Although all the congregations had studied women's roles in the past, two undertook their most recent study for the purpose of educating church members on how the leaders arrived at their decision. At Monterey, a decision regarding women's roles was not finalized until classes had been completed and feedback from the membership obtained.

Implementation and consequences

Implementation processes also differed. Broadway created a detailed roll-out plan to ease into greater inclusion of women. Southern Hills opted to open all new roles at the same time. Monterey also opened roles to women concurrently but followed an "organic model" that naturally resulted in more females volunteering in the more welcoming atmosphere of the contemporary worship service. Those attending Monterey's traditional service implemented changes at a slower pace, relieving some of the pressures congregations with single services could not avoid.

This level of adaptive change did not come without resistance. Broadway and Southern Hills, in particular, experienced a significant loss

of membership during the transition. However, the leaders exhibited a high degree of resilience because of their confidence that they were following God's will for women in their congregations.

Monterey mentioned choosing to address instrumental worship before women's roles. They credited the difficulties related to this earlier transition with providing their leadership with strategies that avoided some of the stressful emotions and larger membership loss experienced by Broadway and Southern Hills when expanding women's roles. This included the use of a second service that allowed members of the congregation to have options in how worship was conducted.

The "non-anxious" presence

All the panelists discussed the importance of understanding the role of emotion in the change process. Leaders had to manage their own emotions, choosing to be a "non-anxious presence" in the system and model excitement to the congregation.⁴ In addition, panelists recognized the need to help congregants identify the difference between theological disagreement and the feeling of discomfort that comes with a change as challenging as that of women's roles. The need to normalize hard conversations in the congregation was paired with the recognition that leadership needs to be surrounded with the support necessary to carry the emotional burdens of others adapting to significant change.

Concluding thoughts

The transcript invites the reader into a conversation between church leaders concerning the change of policy regarding the role of women. These leaders reflected critically on the practices of the Church and the Church's "faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to, and for the world."⁵ While the leaders shared similar goals, their contexts were different and complex and cannot be simplified into a prescription for leading this

⁴ In his book *Generation to Generation*, Edwin Friedman describes a non-anxious presence as the ability of a leader to maintain their sense of self, acknowledge and regulate their own anxiety, and not take on the anxiety of others or the system. Many other authors have explored the concept, including Steve Cuss, who wrote *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs*, providing a guide for leaders to explore anxiety in themselves and their congregations. Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1985). Steve Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019).

⁵ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), 6.

change in other churches. Practical theologians Swinton and Mowat rightly say that “theologians who do not take cognisance of the importance of contextual questions often fail in significant ways to address the needs and problematics of particular situations ...”⁶

We hope that the publication of this transcript and the brief reflection above will help other church leaders as they consider the role of women in public leadership in their churches. We sincerely thank each of these church leaders for participating in this panel and giving permission for their comments to be published in full.

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⁶ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 14.