

Gender & Church Office Committee Report

Approved by the Elders of the Williamsburg Community Chapel
August 30, 2018

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Gender and Church Office Committee Charter: approved by the elders of the Williamsburg Community Chapel on May 4th, 2016; Timeline amended December 7, 2016.

1. **Objective:** to examine, biblically and historically the role gender has played, and is permitted to play in the offices of the church, namely, elder, deacon and pastor
2. **References:** the Bible is the primary resource. Tradition, history and current practices in the church will be considered and compared with scripture. Recommendations will reflect the committee's united understanding of the voice of scripture.
3. **Deliverable(s):** A document that outlines the committee's findings and provides a series of recommendations on how we might incorporate those findings in our context at the Chapel to the elders.
4. **Composition of the committee:** two elders, two pastors, the lead pastor, one deacon and two lay leaders
5. **Scope of Authority:** The gender and church office committee has authority to make a statement to the elders concerning the role gender has played, and is permitted to play in the offices of the church and recommendations for how we might incorporate those findings at the Chapel
 - Lead Pastor, Travis Simone, will lead the committee
 - The elders, pastors and leadership teams will all have an opportunity for initial input and will receive one update before the final statement and recommendations are delivered to the elders
6. **Timeline for Completion:** the path to unity on these issues will be paved with slowness and therefore no hard deadline will be set. However, recognizing questions about these issues often come up and that the elder selection process moving forward could be impacted by the deliverables, the committee will ideally be ready to present to the elders at the April 2017 Business Meeting (April 19th, 2017). At the latest, the committee will present at the May 3rd Elder Work Session. The elders will adopt, amend, or reject the committee's recommendation by the June Business Meeting (June 21, 2017).

Process Narrative

1. Formation of the Committee

In accordance with its Charter, the Committee on Gender and Church Office consists of the lead pastor (Travis Simone), two additional pastors (Doug Bunn and Hawley Smith), two elders (Clif Brigham and Gary Bruce), one deacon (Bina Fenn), and two lay leaders (Laurel Henshaw and Ashley Heacock). When selecting members of the committee, Travis believed it was important to choose people with whose opinion he was unfamiliar. Prior to the formation of the committee he only knew his own opinion and Clif's opinion (and Clif's was a balance to his own). Committee members were chosen in accordance with the parameters of the charter with their spiritual maturity and commitment to the health of the Chapel family as the primary criteria. The intent was for every member of the committee to come together with open minds and hearts, ready to learn from the Scripture and be led by the Spirit, without a strong rooting in a particular perspective on this issue.

2. A primer for the study of Scripture

The Committee began its journey reading the first four chapters from Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart's How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth. This helped orient us to the discipline of Biblical Studies and helped us understand that discipline's two core topics: exegesis and hermeneutics. Exegesis is the process by which one goes about discerning the original intended meaning of Scripture (what it meant). Hermeneutics is the process by which one goes about discerning the application of the original meaning in your present context (what it means). Given that the committee members came from varying educational backgrounds, this reading provided a common language for understanding the secondary sources we read. It also deepened our level of thought and interaction with the primary sources, the relevant Scripture passages, we examined.

3. Reviewing the commentary

Much ink has been spilled discussing the topic of gender and church office, and so we began our study by reviewing a variety of commentaries from all sides of the issue. To begin, we read the entire book Women in Ministry: Four Views, which proved to be an excellent resource because instead of treating the topic as binary (complementarian vs. egalitarian), it provided four perspectives along a continuum and allowed the authors to respond to each other's argument. To ensure a balanced discussion, we addressed one complementarian author alongside one egalitarian author.

The four perspectives were as follows:

- I. The traditional view ("Let your women keep silence")
- II. The male leadership view ("The head of the woman is the man")
- III. The plural ministry view ("Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy")
- IV. The egalitarian view ("There is neither male nor female in Christ")

After finishing that book, we moved on to other prominent thinkers who have addressed this topic. We read a chapter from NT Wright's Surprised by Scripture and Kathy Keller's Jesus,

Justice, and Gender Roles, and we listened to sermons on the topic given by John Piper and John Ortberg. After each pair, we met as a group and discussed the material at length, noting points of agreement and areas of discord.

4. Collecting initial findings and recommendations

After completing our review of the commentary, we prepared an initial round of findings and recommendations. The findings represented our personal convictions, shaped by Scripture and honed by the commentary; the recommendations reflected our desire to see unity in the committee and the church body around a challenging and complex topic.

As we reviewed these findings and recommendations, and as Travis prepared to go on Sabbatical, the committee decided we were not yet ready to present to the Elders, and instead wanted to take additional time to review the relevant Scripture, passage by passage. We agreed to take the summer off to reflect and reconvene upon Travis' return.

5. Reviewing the primary source material

Throughout all of the commentary we read, several passages emerged that warranted inclusion in our detailed review, including passages from 1 Corinthians 14, Acts 2, 1 Corinthians 11, Galatians 3, 1 Timothy 2, 1 Timothy 3, and Genesis 1-3. Over the course of several months and meetings, we reviewed and discussed these passages as a group. It sometimes took multiple meetings to cover one passage and often these seven key passages pushed us to examine other important cross references connected to our main list. Travis served as our facilitator, presenting both the complementarian and egalitarian perspectives on the passages, and then opened up the discussion. It was an arduous but ultimately very worthwhile process, as we sharpened our understanding of the commentary, challenged each other to think deeply, and asked questions that we had been harboring. Throughout each meeting, we sought points of unity in our understanding of the Scripture and recorded those for future use.

6. Discussing with outside sources

One of the more difficult aspects of reading and reviewing written commentary is it cannot respond to our questions, and so we sought perspective from outside pastors as well. We invited pastors from two different Presbyterian denominations, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of America (presbyterian means, "we have elders"). The EPC denomination has placed the topic of gender and church office in their "agree to disagree" bucket and has some churches with female pastors or elders and some churches without female pastors or elders. The PCA has placed the topic of gender and church office in their "essential doctrine" bucket and does not allow for any church within their fellowship to have a female deacon, pastor, or elder. Also, they will not ordain anyone who openly holds the the egalitarian theological position. Our EPC pastor was an egalitarian and our PCA pastor was a complementarian. These pastors provided insight on how their respective churches address the issue of gender and church office and tackled tough questions about their positions and views of the Scripture. After many months of meeting together, adding other voices to our conversations was refreshing and constructive.

7. Collecting findings and recommendations

As the final step before presenting to the Elders, we once again came together to discuss our findings and recommendations. Each committee member was asked to record and present their

findings and their recommendations to the full committee. To honor the extensive amount of time and energy along with a good bit of raw spiritual soul searching, each committee member was given the option of recording their own personal journey in relation to this topic and the impact participating on the committee had on them. These testimonies are included in an appendix to our report.

After each committee member submitted their findings and recommendations, Travis combed through each document, color coded each finding or recommendation, and compiled an initial draft of unified findings and recommendations based on everyone's submissions.

Travis then shared the compilation of everyone's findings and recommendations along with a "Chairman's proposal for unified findings and recommendations." The committee was encouraged to see that from the diversity of everyone's findings and recommendations a productive set of unified findings and recommendations was clearly present. The committee reviewed the Chairman's proposal for unified findings and recommendations. They provided feedback, made changes, adjusted verbiage, and debated the merits of including additional items from individual committee member's findings or recommendations.

Travis incorporated all feedback as given and produced an initial draft of the Committee's proposal for unified findings and recommendations. The committee reviewed this proposal and provided a second round of feedback. Travis incorporated that feedback and sent the committee the updated draft for their approval.

The committee approved this draft and committed to moving forward in unity with the Findings and Recommendations that follow in this report.

Committee's Unified Findings

1. The committee finds that the current Chapel constitution, as well as all other Chapel governing and policy documents, provide no specific prohibition to women serving as deacons, elders, or pastors.
2. The committee finds there is insufficient evidence to warrant a prohibition against women serving as deacons, elders, or pastors being added to any Chapel governing documents.
3. The committee finds that people who submit to the full authority of the Bible have different understandings of what the Bible teaches regarding gender and church office. We found that reasonable people can disagree in unity and avoid disrespecting each others' convictions or abandoning the discussion.
4. The committee finds that the Bible teaches that men and woman are created equally in God's image and that gender distinctions are a Divinely ordained part of the created order. In the sense that we are all created equally in God's image, we are all "Big E" egalitarians. In the sense that gender distinctions are a Divinely ordained part of the created order, we are all "Big C" complementarians.
5. The committee finds that spiritual gifts listed in Scripture were not given on the basis of gender.
6. The committee finds that God's original and intended purpose is for men and women to work together for His redemptive purposes in this world.
7. The committee finds that Paul's New Testament letters often contained a mixture of "principle" and "application" of that principle for that local context.
8. The committee finds that the topic of gender and church office, due to the interdenominational character of our church and the current cultural climate, has the potential to be divisive within our community, but we do believe our recommendations outline a path for disagreement and unity to live side by side in the Chapel family.

Committee's Unified Recommendations

1. The committee recommends that no change be made to any Chapel governing documents regarding women serving as deacons, elders, or pastors.
2. The committee recommends the position of the Chapel on gender and church office be stated as follows: "We celebrate unity in the midst of diversity."
3. The committee recommends that we teach our church how to "celebrate unity in the midst of diversity." For the committee's recommendations of what this could look like, see appendix 1.
4. The committee recommends that all nominated members be considered as candidates for our elder apprenticeship program.
5. The committee recommends that an elder advisory council be created to ensure the elders have ready access to a fuller range of congregational perspectives than the current makeup of our elder team provides for. We recommend that the elders establish this council with a clear three year sunset clause to evaluate its effectiveness and future necessity.
6. The committee recommends that men and women serve alongside one another on the elder committees.

Appendix I

The following are examples of what teaching our church how to “celebrate unity in the midst of diversity” could look like:

- I. The committee, deacons, elders, pastors, and staff leadership team should set an example for how to love each other and treat each other with respect as we celebrate unity in the midst of diversity on the topic of gender and church office.
- II. We create a forum where we have members of our pastoral team holding egalitarian and complementarian views teach through this topic, helping our congregation gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for both complementarian and egalitarian views. Pastors would also help clarify how this topic connects, or does not connect, to other biblical topics.
 - a. This forum would be a great opportunity to help our church understand how to engage in what Tim Keller calls, in his book *Center Church, Gospel Polemics*. We would model the level of candor, respect, and civility this topic and others require if Christians are to have unified witness for Jesus in the world.
- III. The committee holds listening sessions, where anyone at the Chapel has the opportunity to sit down with the committee and bring their perspective to the table. The committee could also receive feedback via the Chapel’s dedicated feedback webpage.
- IV. We begin teaching side by side that the Bible teaches that men and women are created equally in God’s image and that gender distinctions are part of the created order. We introduce the language of “big E egalitarians” and “big C complementarians” to provide short-hand common language for the more complex ideas of “ontological equality” and “gender distinctions matter.”
- V. We allow our teaching pastors to teach according to their conscience when the topic of gender and church office is a part of the Biblical text from which they are preaching. However, we ask that, in addition to teaching the Bible according to their conscience, they also give appropriate weight to other points of view and state that we are a church that seeks to “celebrate unity in the midst of diversity” on this topic.

Appendix II

Clif Brigham:

Where I began: At the beginning of this journey I had thought about this topic for most of my adult life. I had prayed about and studied this subject extensively. I have studied and observed how churches and ministries around the world, in all phases, from one end of the spectrum to the other, operated. Their history, successes and failures. From these studies and observations, I came into this project as a strong Complementarian.

Where I ended: After going through this process, I find my convictions strengthened, though with a better understanding of both the theology and heart of those who do not hold my views and interpretations. I feel I am better at articulating my views. At the same time, I am more aware that this is not as clear cut an issue as I had once thought and have a better understanding and appreciation for the views and convictions of the Egalitarian. This process has been enlightening on many levels. I have developed a much deeper concern, compassion and love for those who do not hold to my views. I have a greater concern to find a way to live together in unity in spite of our differences, without compromising my beliefs. Unity in the body has become a greater concern and burden for me. This is one issue that can threaten that unity. It is my hope and desire that a way is found to preserve this unity and be a light to the community and other churches, showing this unity.

Gary Bruce:

I have learned a tremendous amount and discovered that this is not an easy answer. If you were to ask me if this made me lean more toward complementarian or egalitarian, I would say that based on what I have learned from the data presented, I'm now more of an advocate for the complementarian viewpoint. But I would say that, if I was able to express my thoughts in this area as well as Ben did, that would be where my heart is on the issue. I thought he really expressed what I have been "feeling" throughout this process. That said, I am very concerned for how all this will play out for WCC and will remain in deep prayer that the Lord will carry us through this in His perfect will.

Doug Bunn:

I began this process "undecided." I was aware that there were conservative Christians making biblical arguments on both sides. I figured that I would not dive into the debate unless it became necessary. In fact, I did not even discuss the issue with my daughter, since I was unsure. I knew that I had to give it a much longer look before speaking on it. I have given it a much longer look now. And while I am sure there is always more to learn, I have become strongly egalitarian.

Bina Fenn:

Starting Point: I joined our discussions as a Complementarian regarding gender and Church roles. I was raised in a traditional church with a close knit family. My parents exemplified traditional Christian roles of Daddy leading and Mommy following, though they had many discussions with my mother comfortable expressing her opinion vocally. I had mixed feeling about how in the end she would subdue her misgivings and always demur to my Father's decisions. Though she tried, it was an example I could not adopt. Yet I did not feel a Complementarian model prevented women from stating and sticking to our opinion and I was blessed with men in my life (Father, brother, husband and sons) who respected

my opinion as I respected theirs. My parents were both active and supportive in our Marthoma Syrian Christian church, but Daddy preferred to play a supportive role with membership, monetary support and teaching Sunday School (which, through the studying of scripture, drew him to become a committed Christian after being a nominal one for half his life). My mother enjoyed more active participation at church and was the Women's league leader for our Philadelphia Marthoma Church.

I know the benefit to family that occurs in a complementarian model with clear gender distinctions and had not deeply thought about whether it should be different in the Church. My default position was that, since the church is the family of God, continuing gender specific roles probably allowed for greater efficiency and less divisiveness. There is also great reverence given to "achens" or priests and bishops that my Mom tried to foster but my Dad and my own temperament had a healthy suspicion of. I have always looked to Christ and the Holy Spirit as the author and finisher of my faith and never been more respectful of those who preach or teach than those who clean and serve in other ways. I believe men and women are inherently distinct with individual variations and all are uniquely gifted by God for the role he has created us to play.

I wasn't sure why I was chosen as part of the committee as I personally did not have strong feelings about women being present or not in Church leadership. I did feel out of my comfort zone when attending services with female priests yet I felt that some of the lack of clarity and lack of church leadership perception of the "feelings and concerns" of the body of the church was understandable because they were "male" and did not place importance on feelings and opinions.

Where I Landed: Though I am comfortable living out the rest of my life as a complementarian, my eyes were opened to a different perspective through the study and discussions we had on this committee. The plural and egalitarian view spoke to me as where I and our church should be. We are content in the way we have been but Christ is always been calling us out of the boat and into the water, focused on Him. Leaving our comfort zone knowing that God has equipped every believer to be a vital part of His body, how can we leave 50% of it without a vote or voice? Christ calls us to work together in love, honor, and respect.

Ashley Heacock:

I began my study of gender and church office without knowing very much about the topic. My parents would consider themselves complementarians, and although I have always fully subscribed to the notion that men and women complement each other, as the name suggests, I hadn't considered if that principle limited women's ability to fully participate in the leadership of Christ's church as pastors or elders. My study of Scripture has strongly affirmed the notion that men and women are created as compliments with important gender-based distinctions. However, I have become convinced that with respect to church leadership, the limitations Paul placed on women are contextual applications of larger principles, rather than principles themselves; instead, the entirety of Scripture speaks to the critical inclusion of women in leadership and teaching of the Gospel.

Laurel Henshaw:

When I walked into our first committee meeting, I was neither solidly in the egalitarian nor complementation camp. I "felt" like women should not be restricted from any role in the church mostly because it didn't seem right or fair or consistent with the way Jesus engaged women, and I wished they were not because I believed many of the men I knew could benefit as much as I had from some of the gifted, female Bible teachers I had heard; however, all the Biblical teaching and mentorship I had received about the role of women, specifically, had been in support of a complementarian position that

felt very strongly about male headship of the Church and family. I approached the committee's task with great enthusiasm, an open mind and a genuine interest in understanding more of what God says about the roles of women and men in His Word.

As background...I grew up in a United Methodist Church in Williamsburg and had both male and female ministers throughout elementary and middle school. As a child, I learned a great deal from and highly respected each of those ministers, as they were all kind, engaging, and committed to Kingdom work.

I committed my life to Christ personally as a freshman in high school, became very involved in Young Life and began attending the Chapel.

I then attended college at James Madison University, led Young Life there, regularly attended IntersVarsity Christian Fellowship and worshiped at Grace Covenant – a congregation of the Presbyterian Church of America denomination. While my campus ministry leaders/teachers were both male and female, and Young Life called on both males and females to teach high school students, the church I attended adhered to a Complementarian viewpoint, as did most of my faith mentors during those years. After graduation, I began graduate school at American University and attended the Falls Church Episcopal (which soon became Anglican). In the Anglican Church, there were both male and female deacons and priests.

After getting married, I moved to Chicago and became a staff member and attendee of Park Community Church, a non-denominational church that had an all-male elder board and pastoral staff, and revered the teachings of Jon Piper. I had never given significant thought to the question of female leadership in the church, but like many other viewpoints, it seemed assumed that if you were truly Christian, you allowed men to lead in both the church and the home.

Four years later, I found myself back in DC and part of an Anglican church plant with both a male and female priest. Because female teachers in church were not new to me, this did not seem problematic, however quite a departure from my recent experience. Additionally, I was working for a global Christian non-profit that had many women in executive leadership positions. It was here that I first began to question the scriptural basis for gender-based roles within the church. Until this point, without giving it much thought or study, I think I attributed the decision to have or not have female leadership as more of a preference from denomination to denomination.

Moving to Williamsburg and attending the Chapel again as an adult was the first place I felt like I really noticed the absence of women in leadership. I sought out female mentors and began reading bits and pieces from authors with both egalitarian and complementarian perspectives but I never fully landed on a position as I could see validity in both viewpoints. I have wanted my position to be rooted in God's Word and not simply a personal preference or notion of justice.

After more than a year of study, prayer, and discussion I find myself convinced that scripture allows for the full participation of women in the leadership of the Church.

Overall, given God's creation of male and female as equal and complementary partners, His use of women as teachers and prophets throughout the Old Testament, Jesus' inclusion of women among his witnesses and apostles, and his reminder that we are all one in Christ – 'no longer male and female', as well as the promise from Joel, repeated at Pentecost that "sons and daughters will prophesy," I find a solid scriptural basis for women's full participation in ministry, including teaching and serving as elders. In 1 Corinthians 12, there is no distinction among the recipients of the gifts of the Spirit, but "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." If the gifts of the Spirit are given without regard for gender, women who are gifted and called should have the opportunity to participate fully in the work of the Church.

Travis Simone:

Where I began—Before beginning this journey, I had given significant thought to the topic of gender and church office, as demanded by the nature of my vocation and the preparation required for ordination. I began the work of the committee as an egalitarian (as I had made clear to the elders during my hiring process), but with significant respect for the complementarian position. While I concluded during seminary that the egalitarian position most faithfully applied the Bible’s teaching on the topic of gender and church office, I also concluded that the Body of Christ would be best served if complementarians and egalitarians found ways to work together, worship together, and even lead together.

Where I ended—I ended this significantly enriching journey as an egalitarian who still believes the egalitarian position most faithfully applies the Bible’s teaching on the topic of gender and church office. Despite starting and concluding with the same perspective, the work of the committee did move me, in a paradoxical way, to be more firmly rooted in the egalitarian position and more deeply committed to finding creative ways to work, worship and lead alongside complementarians. In my view, the complementarian position still does not adequately address the breadth of the Bible’s teaching on gender and church office; the egalitarian position offers a better explanation for the variety contained in the Biblical witness on the topic, but I also found that the complementarian position is an important and historically popular interpretation of God’s Word that should not be pushed aside, especially as our culture is having its own crisis about the meaning of gender and sexual identity.