

**12 000 word research paper:**

***“The seedling poorly tended: vocational discernment and women’s experiences of ministry call”***

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*Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go and do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive” (Eldredge, 2001:200)*

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Abstract:**

Christian writers from a variety of traditions recognise God creates unique individuals with distinctive vocational callings. Individual discernment of our God-given vocations occurs in a social context. Some factors enhance the capacity of humans to recognise their God-given gifts and callings, other factors work against this. For women socialised in patriarchal church cultures, discernment of a ministry call may be misheard, disregarded, or delayed. This paper recommends specific interventions by church judicatories aiming to increase the participation of women in church ministry, particularly in judicatory systems overseeing independent churches. These interventions include processes that should enhance the capacity of individual Christian participants to discern their vocational callings (for both paid and unpaid work and ministry), and to live out such callings. Such interventions should not only lead to higher participation rates of women in ministry, but lead to increased fruitfulness in mission and ministry within participating churches and the Kingdom of God more broadly.

### **Finding a path into ministry**

*‘This is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to someone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling” Parker J Palmer*

At the age of 20, having just finished a science degree, I experienced a profound sense of call to ministry. At three different (non-lexical) churches in one weekend, I heard a sermon preached on the call of Jonah. Doubting this could be a coincidence, by the third sermon, I was overwhelmed with a sense of the Holy Spirit, and I tearfully accepted that God was calling me to ministry. I said my “yes” to God, without having any clear idea what this might involve.

It was somehow not on my radar that women might be able to be local church ministers in Australia, because it was completely outside my experience. In my own Baptist local church setting, there were

really only three roles that women could take on in ministry: that of the volunteer leader, the pastor's wife, and the missionary. I had no sense of God calling me anywhere specifically overseas, and becoming a pastor's wife wasn't entirely in my control, so I threw myself enthusiastically into volunteer work for my church, while looking for part-time work to survive.

After a year I began studies to prepare for medicine (perhaps God would want me to be a missionary doctor?), when I was invited to work as a school laboratory technician. Perhaps this should be my ministry setting for a while? Many of the girls in my small group at church were at this school, and I began a senior Christian group while working at the school. I continued to volunteer with my church, then two years later I took six months out to travel overseas, including a mission exposure experience in the Philippines, and a period of learning at L'Abri in Switzerland. I still had no particular sense that I was called to work overseas, although studies at L'Abri opened my mind to the possibility of women being involved in preaching ministries in theory.

When I returned to Australia I completed a teaching diploma, and taught in a Catholic then a Christian school for the next 8 years. My teaching career had an overt Christian ministry component in leading devotions and teaching Christian studies, as well as teaching Maths and Science. I got married, and my husband and I got involved in youth ministry in our local church, and in supporting accommodation for young people at risk.

After the birth of my first son, I took on a part-time role with Churches of Christ in Victoria and Tasmania in women's ministry. By this point I mostly saw my identity as that of a Christian teacher using my particular skills in ministry work. A number of years later, at a Churches of Christ convention/AGM held at Glen Waverley Secondary College, I felt called by God to leave teaching and devote myself to ministry. The text that spoke to my heart this time was Jesus' words to Peter after his resurrection on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: "Do you love me more than these?" I was in a science laboratory, with everything I loved about teaching very much in my face, but again my answer to God was "yes". I would leave teaching behind and follow God's call into ministry.

At the time of this "re-call" I had a very different understanding of women in ministry: I had been in a church with female pastors, and had worked for a female Conference Executive Officer and alongside another female minister. This time I interpreted the call in terms of needing to complete theological studies to equip myself for ordained ministry.

It seems fitting to me that Jonah (the prophet who ran away from his call) and Peter (told in his "re-call" someone would lead him where he did not want to go) were the characters involved in my personal "call" narratives. I was not looking for a call to ministry in either case. In my first call, it was not in my imagination that I could do local church ministry, in my second (or "re-call") it felt like a painful loss to leave my teaching career behind. The call was uninvited and inconvenient. Paradoxically however, when I am involved in pastoral care, preaching, and coaching leaders, it feels like the very thing I have been put on earth to do, and my greatest joy.

For the last eight years I have been working to promote women's leadership. I have heard the story repeated many times over of women who have experienced a call to ministry, but have struggled to find a pathway to express that because of the social and theological expectations around women's roles in the church and society. Those who have found their way into positions of ministry have often entered "sideways", after many twists and turns. Their stories have in many ways echoed my

own. However, for some younger women, the pathway into ministry has been more direct, particularly if their churches of origin have been egalitarian. The twists and turns for many women, and the “straight paths” for others, have made me curious about the barriers that might make it difficult for women to find their way into vocational ministry, and the ingredients that help others to navigate their way into ministry more directly.

My own slow discernment of a ministry vocation has aroused my interest in the following questions: What is the nature of vocation, and vocational discernment? What factors are required to enhance vocational discernment? Working in a specific ministry role in women’s leadership has fostered my interest in other questions. Are there specific challenges for women in discerning a call to vocational ministry? And if so, what are these challenges? How might such challenges and barriers be addressed or overcome? Is there such a thing as “best practice” for Christian churches, organisations and denominations that would like to increase the numbers of women in ministry?

## **Literature Review**

### **Vocation: Chosen by God**

Christian writers from a variety of traditions affirm that even before we were born, God creates unique potentialities in each human being. The Psalmist notes:

*For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well. (Psalm 139:13 – 14)*

The words of the LORD are recorded in the call of Jeremiah: *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.” (Jeremiah 1:5)*

Paul notes: *“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)*

Catholic theologians Coombs and Neebit note:

*“In creating us, God implants within the depth of our personhood the trust of a vocation. From inception, we are becoming who the Lord calls us to be. From the womb already, we start inching toward how God wills us to become our true selves” (2001:115)*

Whitehead and Whitehead describes vocational calling in the following terms:

*“The invitation to do something special with my life does not descend upon me from external authorities, appearing predominantly as a “should” or duty. It is inscribed within me, in my fragile gifts and best insights. And it is more than my own invention. It has taken root through the influence of loved ones, the witness of communities, the force of cherished ideals.” (2003: 14)*

Parker J Palmer, a Quaker, notes:

“Today I understand vocation... as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach, but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfil the original selfhood given me at birth by God” (2000:10)

A mature sense of vocation in this sense is viewed as *recognition* of a unique endowment from God.

The evangelical writer Terry Walling describes the mature Christian as involving “the coming together of ‘who’ God has shaped an individual to be, and a sense of ‘for this I was born’”. (2008: XV)

M Scott Peck notes the call that comes may be unwanted (1993:79). When Moses is called, he gives Yahweh a long list of objections, then asks him to send someone else (Exodus 4:13). Jonah boarded a ship to Tarshish, in the opposite direction of his call to preach at Ninevah. (Jonah 1:3) The experience of Jeremiah was that speaking the word of the Lord brought him reproach, but when he resolved not to speak out this word, it became impossible to hold it in. (Jeremiah 20:8 – 9)

Peck also notes that following a calling may be uncomfortable (1993:66). This is a theme in a number of the New Testament accounts. Jesus was in great anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying that if possible he would be spared from the ordeal of suffering before him. Nonetheless, he submitted his will to the Father. (Luke 22:42 – 44) When Ananias is sent to pray for Saul, both his call to ministry and his call to suffer for Christ is referred to explicitly. (Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”)

A call may also involve conflicted thoughts and feelings. Ben Campbell Johnson writes: “Fears of inadequacy don’t sweep away the call.... Generally a tug-of-war develops. On the one side, the gentle, seductive spirit of Christ lures us toward God’s intention. On the other side, our fears, inspired by who knows what, hold us back.”(2002: 23)

A call may involve the unexpected. Elisha was ploughing a field when Elijah summoned him for ministry (I Kings 19:19). David was tending sheep when Samuel visited the family of Jesse to anoint a new king (I Samuel 16:11 – 12). Matthew was collecting taxes when Jesus called him to follow (Matthew 9:9), while Simon and Andrew were fishing (Mark 1:16 – 18). Saul was on the way to Damascus to persecute the church when Christ called him (Acts 9:5 – 6) “Divine calling in scripture is frequently related to unexpected mission. An individual may be called to do something out of the ordinary, to accomplish a task previously unimagined” (Coombs and Nemeck, 2001: 49)

A vocational call may also release a sense of profound joy. “The delight of a vocation is rooted in a sense of its goodness and ‘fit’. I delight in the shape that my own life takes as I experience the way it fits my particular gifts and limits. It is not just the right thing for me to do with my life, it is good for me as well”. (Whitehead and Whitehead, 2003:27)

For many women, the call to vocational ministry can be unexpected, and lead to inner conflict and discomfort. “The witness of communities” may form an indistinct or conflicted witness in patriarchal settings. Nonetheless, the testimony of many women in ministry is that, despite twists, turns and

side tracks on the path, they ultimately come to experience the “inability to do other” that characterises a mature sense of vocation.

### **Early Yearnings and Dreams Distracted**

Dreams about what I am to do with my life may emerge at a young age. “A vocation is what I want to do ‘when I grow up.’ The five-year-old who wants to be a truck driver or a nurse or an astronaut gives an early hint of the dream.” (Whitehead and Whitehead, 2003:34)

Buckingham and Clifton note that our dreams may indicate our intrinsic birth right strengths. “Yearnings reveal the presence of a talent, particularly when they are felt early in life.... Your strongest connections are irresistible. They exert a magnetic influence, drawing you back time and time again. You feel their pull, and so you yearn” (2005:61 – 61)

Catherine Booth had read the bible through eight times by the age of twelve.

(<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Wbooth.htm> accessed 10/5/13) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart began composing music at age 5. (<http://www.biography.com/people/wolfgang-mozart-9417115> accessed 10/5/13). Parker J Palmer describes books he painstakingly composed on aviation as a young child, recognising in retrospect his vocation as a writer (2000: 14 – 15). In many biographical and autobiographical accounts, we note precocious interest in areas that provide subtle (or dramatic) clues to later vocation.

However, the imaginative dream we might have for our life at a young age can be deformed or destroyed by social expectations from our families, church communities, schools, and other social networks. The Whiteheads note that “Personal vocations are imbedded in social contexts. Our dreams begin within our families. They are nurtured or frustrated in neighbourhoods, parishes and schools – those settings where we learn what to expect from life.” (2003:38) They also warn: “My dream, my vocation, abides in my imagination. Without nurturance it can wither and disappear. Either from lack of support or because we ourselves cannot believe in them, our dreams may be set aside. Confused or frightened, I may abandon the dream.” (2003:35)

Parker J Palmer notes the expectation of others frequently distracts from our vocational call, lamenting:

“From our first days at school, we are taught to listen to everything and everyone but ourselves, to take all our clues about living from the people and powers around us.” (2000:5)

“ We arrive in this world with birthright gifts – then we spend the first half of our lives abandoning them or letting others disabuse us of them. As young people, we are surrounded by expectations that may have little to do with who we really are, expectations held by people who are not trying to discern our selfhood but to fit us into slots. In families, schools, workplaces and religious communities, we are trained away from true self toward images of acceptability; under social pressures like racism and sexism our original shape is deformed beyond recognition; and we ourselves, driven by fear, too often betray true self to gain the approval of others.” (2000: 12)

Just as sub-optimal parenting can leave a person emotionally and mentally unwell, unhealthy social expectations can create difficulties in determining a deep sense of authentic vocation. The expectations of parents and other relatives, of peers, teachers, careers advisers and other social

influencers might be overly conscious of remuneration (e.g. the child who announces they wish to be a writer or an artist may be pushed toward getting “a real job”, while the child who announces they wish to be a doctor or a lawyer in order to “make a lot of money” may be applauded, regardless of whether such fields suit the shape of their soul). Alternatively, vocational expectations may be focused around status or identity (examples include the child of a religious family who is encouraged to be a priest, or the child of a business-minded family who is expected to take over the family business, the sports-mad family who desperately hope their child will be a sports star, and so on). Many schools trumpet their success in terms of year 12 scores and numbers of university entrants, rather than whether they have helped nurture well-rounded, healthy and discerning individuals.

An important factor in social expectations is gender. Common expectations around appropriate roles and behaviour for women (and for men) seem to have translated into a “gendered” workforce in Australia. Women dominate the workforce in healthcare, social services, education, retail and in clerical positions, while men dominate in trades, technical fields, management, machinery operators, drivers, and as labourers.

(<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by+Subject/4125.0~Jan+2012~Main+Features~Labour+force~1110> accessed 10/5/13) While some fields (such as manual labour) may be influenced by the (on average) greater physical strength of younger men, much of this labour differentiation would be expected to be a result of stereotypical gender expectations. These expectations are “soft” rather than rigid, but they appear to be a powerful force in shaping individual’s vocational choices and opportunities.

In the context of women in vocational ministry, women who might experience early “yearnings” to be involved in Christian work, might learn from subtle modelling (and possibly overt teaching) that women can only be involved in a limited capacity or sphere.

A research project by Zikmund, Lummis and Chang notes that “God may call an individual, but if family, church, and society withhold support, it is hard for them to believe that this is what God really intends them to do with their lives. In many of the denominations in our study, women professing a call from God to enter the ordained ministry were not well received. They were scorned, told that they were overstepping the female role, and considered guilty of lying or pathetic self-delusion when they shared such an idea. This made it very difficult for many women to tell anyone what they thought God was calling them to do, especially denominational officials serving as gatekeepers to the ordination process.” (1998:98) They identify this as the key reason women on average enter seminary at a later age than men, and apply for ordination later than men (1998:98)

Rosie Ward, referring to a Canadian study, notes that “women experience less encouragement than men to consider church leadership and often have fewer role models. They are more likely than men to choose ordained ministry as a second career, after a lengthy decision-making process. Women who start in assistant or associate positions are less likely to ‘move up’ to more senior church roles than men (the so-called ‘stained glass ceiling’)” (2008:13). The movement into ministry as a second career also suggests delayed vocational discernment for women more frequently than for male ministers.

### **Developing vocational clarity: developmental and social factors**

A newborn baby cannot be expected to have a clear sense of vocation. An interplay of genetics and environment will cause a child to develop (in healthy or possibly pathological ways) in a developmental process toward physical, psychological, and spiritual maturity. Interactions with

parents, carers, siblings, and other people will help to shape a child's developing sense of identity. Various forms of feedback (including experiences of success or failure) in school, social interactions, sport, and other community activities will give the developing child a sense of their talents, personal strengths, weaknesses, and interests. Role models may shape a child's aspirations, and negative experiences will repel them from certain vocational directions.

Coombs and Nemeck describe phases of vocational consciousness as:

- Initial vocational awareness, characterised by conformity to the established Christian order (finding our niche in church or society and functioning well within it)
- Advancing vocational awareness, constituted by a focus on personal relationships with God and with significant others (Who am I really?)
- Mature vocational awareness, consisting in an existential inability to be, become or do otherwise. (vocation integral to our personhood) (2001: 100 – 108)

There is some resonance with Coombs and Nemeck's "inability to do other" definition of mature vocation in the work of Erikson. He calls a healthy resolution of a mature life stage as "integrity". Whitehead and Whitehead summarise Erikson thus: "Understood as a resource of the mature personality, integrity is seen in 'the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted no substitutions'. I am able to look at life in terms of my own life, its particularities and peculiarities, the patterns it shares with the lives of others, and its idiosyncrasies, with the judgment that it could not have been otherwise. (1982: 184 – 185).

Coombs and Nemeck overlay their stages of vocational development with 3 other developmental models (those of Brian Hall, James Fowler, and Erik Erikson) and explore how developing a sense of vocational maturity is related to and dependent on psychological and faith maturity. The sense of inevitability, and "rightness of fit" associated with a mature sense of vocation, would be hard to achieve in the absence of psychological and spiritual maturity more broadly. (2001:100 - 108)

Sofield and Juliano also refer to Erikson's model of development (Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. shame or doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, identify vs. identity diffusion, intimacy vs. isolation). Although no one is perfectly mature, the ways in which we have matured (or not) will impact our capacity to work collaboratively with others (1987: 49) It should be noted that a level of maturity in these areas might not be particularly important in some areas of work (e.g. technical fields), but is very important for those involved in pastoral ministry.

A spiritually mature person would be expected to have a greater awareness of God's vocational call than a spiritually immature person. This is related to, but also distinct from, psychological maturity (e.g. an atheist might be psychologically mature, but spiritually immature). Coombs and Nemeck use Elijah's encounter with God on Mount Horeb as a metaphor of what occurs in the development of fully mature vocational awareness. The hurricane represents letting go many things previously esteemed (an experience of aridity), the earthquake represents the shaking of our security (hitting rock bottom), and the fire represent purification (the dark night of the soul) (pp 146 - 147). Finally, we hear the "sound of gentle silence", a more contemplative spiritual encounter not characterised by words, symbols or images but by direct communion with the loving presence of God. The

spiritually mature Christian experiences the life of the Spirit of God working in and through their life, including in their vocational awareness and contribution.

Discernment of a call to vocational ministry has a very important distinctive. All members of the Christian community (hopefully) would be encouraged to seek God's will around their vocational choices. However, a ministry vocation requires not only recognition of "call" by the potential minister, but recognition of this call by others in the body of Christ. Without such discernment by others, opportunities for ministry will be restricted, and may indicate "mishearing" by the individual.

From the earliest days of the church, members of the body of Christ have discerned God's call to set aside people for particular ministries. The whole church was involved in the process of selecting seven men to "full of the Spirit and wisdom" in order that they would administer the daily distribution of food, and the apostles lay hands on them to commission them. (Acts 6:1 – 6). In Antioch, a group of teachers and prophets heard the call of the Holy Spirit to set aside Barnabas and Saul, and hands were laid upon these two as they were sent out into mission. (Acts 13: 1- 3)

People in ministry have generally been at the receiving end of a positive feedback loop: a person's gifts are recognised by others in a local expression of the body of Christ; they are invited to serve in a ministry; they receive positive feedback about their service; they are given an expanded ministry opportunity; they are given more positive feedback; new ministry opportunities arise; training for ministry may then be recommended. This is a process that is "human", but it can provide the context in which a person senses the Spirit speaking through God's people, stirring them toward recognition of a call to vocational ministry.

But what if a woman is in a church context that does not accept the ministry of women? Their opportunities for ministry will be limited. This places an interruption in the positive feedback loop common for individuals who experience a growing sense of call to Christian ministry.

To steal a pithy analogy from the Whiteheads, "just as the acoustics in an auditorium may be poor, making it difficult to understand the speaker, the spiritual acoustics in a community may be muddled as well, making it difficult for us to listen to one another." (1995:68)

### **Doors opening, doors closing: movements, institutions, and women in ministry**

Clarification of vocational fit must involve actual experience. It is therefore difficult for women to discern a call to vocational ministry unless they have the opportunity to become involved in ministry in some capacity.

Many commentators have noted that historically, women have participated most fully in ministry in movements, and been squeezed out of ministry through a process of institutionalisation.

Stanley Grenz sketches the involvement of women in ministry across church history, noting the greatest participation of women in leadership seemed to occur during times of renewal movements (e.g.'s the early church, the Wesleyan revivals, early Pentecostalism), who are then squeezed out of leadership as movements develop organisational structures. (1995:37) Cheryl Catford-McCallum's thesis on CRC women's pastors notes that " 'Decentralised organisation is highly predictive of women's ordination, and it is especially highly predictive of very early female ordination.' Greater autonomy of congregations means they are distanced from denominational regulations, which are

likely to be fewer than in centralised denominations, and there is greater opportunity to disregard such rules without penalty. This flexibility enables congregations that wish to ordain women, or simply recognise their ministry, to move ahead as soon as such women become prominent” (Catford, also quoting Mark Chaves: 2007:317 – 318)

A US-based “Pulpit and Pew Research Report” of 2002 notes the same trend:

“During the first part of the twentieth century, some women in (Holiness and Pentecostal groups) felt called into ministry and served as preachers, evangelists, and pastors. Some of them were very popular witnesses as they engaged in peripatetic revival meetings. However, as the membership in these churches experienced upward social mobility, apparently wanting to enjoy images of respectability and propriety which they associated with the more mainline groups, they began to back away from such “deviant” practices. (Lehman, 2002:2)

Within Churches of Christ in Australia, Kerrie Handasyde also notes decentralisation allowed a relatively early entry of a woman into paid ministry:

“Our movement’s lack of centralised control provided no structural barriers to women’s ministry.... In 1931, a belief in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, combined with a congregation’s right to call their own minister, enabled history to be made. Miss Violet Maud Callanan – equipped with intelligence, confidence and a Foreign Mission Certificate - was inducted into pastoral ministry in Hawthorne, Queensland. That brief appointment made Vi Callanan the very first Australian Churches of Christ woman minister. It also made Churches of Christ the second denomination in Australia, after the Congregational Church, to employ women in ministry.” (A Historical Overview of Women’s Ministry in Australian Churches of Christ)

Stanley Grenz describes John Wesley’s growing support for women preachers throughout his life, and notes: “Wesley’s public affirmation demonstrates the crucial role of male support for women in ministry at denominational, institutional and congregational levels.” “Opportunities for women to publicly minister quickly declined after his (Wesley’s) death” (1995:44, quoting Tucker and Liefeld).

This is an important factor to note. For women to develop a sense of ministry vocation, opportunities for ministry need to exist. In non-institutional revival movements, gifted women exercise ministry outside of institutional control. Within denominations and established church structures, leaders at all level of church organisations need to open up such opportunities, and men are frequently the gatekeepers to such opportunities. Theological and organisational support and for the participation of women in ministry is clearly an important factor for established church organisations.

Cheryl Catford-McCallum’s thesis examining the factors that led to an increase in the numbers of ordained women in the CRC denomination in Australia found (amongst other things) that the role of a male “sponsor” was critical in women finding pathways into ordained ministry. She notes: “(an) impact of the CRC decentralised structure was the necessity for the first potential women pastors to obtain male patronage, a practice that continues today. In 1988, the women who were foremost in the minds of those debating the issue had had their names put forward by their male senior pastor. These men played a prominent role at denominational level in arguing for the recognition of women’s ministries, the ultimate success coming in no small part because of their own prominence

and stature within the CRC. It is very unlikely that these women would have gained ordination without the patronage of these male pastors. These men acted as 'gatekeepers' for the denomination – entry into the ministry 'club' for women and subsequent assistance in enculturation came via these men. Likewise today the same structure exists and aids in the continuing entrance of women into ordained ministry" (2007 :322 - 323)

It is possible that women who speak about women's leadership in the church will be negatively perceived as personally ambitious or whiny, whereas men in authority who advocate for women in leadership are viewed positively. In some denominations and church movements men in leadership have opened doors for women in ministry, while in other contexts they have closed them. Advocacy for women in leadership from men in authority would have to be a positive factor toward increasing women's participation in ministry. To quote Edward C Lehman Jr, "The work of competent women alone may not be sufficient. They will need some prophetic criticism by male clergy and church officials – advocates." (2002:34)

Despite the historic trend that decentralisation opens up opportunities for women in ministry, there currently appears to be a higher participation rate for women in ministry in Australia in some centralised denominations that permit women in ministry, than in some denominations or movements with local church autonomy. There is a higher proportion of women in ministry in the Salvation Army, Uniting, and Anglican Churches, than in the Baptist denomination and in Churches of Christ. (see Appendix 1)

In the 2005 census data, of the theologically orthodox Christian denominations the Salvation Army had the highest proportion of female ministers (54.1%). Of the other centralised denominations, the Uniting Church had the next highest proportion of female ministers (32.6%), followed by the Anglican Church (25.7%). A denomination with local church autonomy (Baptist) had 22.1% of female ministers, while another autonomous movement (Pentecostal) had 34.3% female ministers. Clearly theological and cultural factors that are distinctive within different denominations are at play. It is common within Pentecostal denominations for both the husband and wife to be both called "pastors" of a local church, even if one partner has lesser (or no) ministry qualifications, while this is unusual in other denominations.

Another complicating factor in these statistics is the growth in chaplaincy, particularly in school chaplaincy, following the introduction of federal government funding for chaplains in Australian schools. As some church denominations do not distinguish between ordained chaplains and ordained local church ministers in their statistics, the proportion of women and men in local church ministry is unclear. However, it would appear that the historical tendency for women to enter ministry in larger numbers in decentralised movements and denominations, and to be "squeezed out" of centralised denominations, does not hold true in the contemporary Australian context. Indeed, the dramatic rise in women in ministry between 1991 and 2005 in the Anglican (8.4% to 25.7%) and Uniting Churches (13.3% to 32.6%), compared to the significant but more modest rises in the Pentecostal (18.8% to 34.3%) and Baptist Churches (10.6% to 22.1%) suggests centralised denominations significantly enhance the capacity for women to work in local church ministry, once a denomination makes the decision to affirm women in ministry. It does seem reasonable to assume a local church resistant to women in ministry would be more likely to have the issue forced upon them if a diocese / bishop / general appointed a woman to the parish (probably generating considerable

stress for the individual woman appointed in such circumstances). A local church would have to be very intentional about resisting a female minister in these cases. An independent church has less “external” pressure to consider appointing a woman minister, and is more likely to avoid calling one because of social expectations that have never been articulated, or voiced discontent from a noisy minority.

### **Obstacles to ministry discernment for women:**

#### **1 A shortage of positive role models**

Pamela Holliman undertook a study of women and mentoring, and made the following observations about role models:

“Persons became models as women identified with certain characteristics of teachers, supervisors, or pastors. *Models provided ways for women to imagine themselves* in particular roles, to claim authority, to negotiate demands, to manage responsibilities, and to be in ministry. They were proof that women could reach their goals, could contribute, and could survive. These models were also inspiring. They were mentors in their behaviour, choices and status. They shared their wisdom through the ways they lived their professional lives”. (from Neuger, 1996:167) (Emphasis mine)

Other women in ministry provide a way for younger women to “imagine themselves” in ministry. Vocational desire does not emerge in a vacuum; it is an exercise of the imagination and the heart. Humans are social creatures, constantly learning from one another. I have a suspicion that as more women enter ministry, this will create a positive feedback loop, as women from the next generation exposed to their influence might “imagine themselves” in Christians service. It may speed up the time frame in which younger women discern a ministry call, and lead to women entering ministry at the same age as men do. This will extend their potential working lifespan.

In my own story of discernment, encountering positive female role models in ministry enabled me to imagine myself not simply volunteering or doing missionary work, but of exercising church leadership. I believe the lack of such female role models when I first experienced a sense of call delayed my entry into formal ministry studies.

Patriarchal churches, I suspect, create a “negative feedback loop”, as younger women cannot “imagine themselves” in ministry. It appears to them to be men’s work. Therefore they are less likely to pursue any inner yearnings that may indicate a vocational ministry calling.

The Pew and Pulpit report on “WOMEN’S PATH INTO MINISTRY: SIX MAJOR STUDIES” summarises available research from the United States, and gives a “bleak assessment of clergywomen’s continuing struggle to find positions. Research shows that it takes women longer to find a job and that men still command higher salaries than women. In addition, women are rarely offered “high steeple” churches, serve as assistants longer, receive fewer benefits, and rarely rise to executive levels. Consistently more men than women are placed in jobs that offer more prestige, autonomy, and remuneration.” (2002:2)

If positive *female* role models are a significant factor in helping younger women discern a call to vocational ministry, restricted openings for women in church ministry would be expected to form a

negative feedback loop. Fewer role models may mean fewer young women become conscious of vocational ministry being a possibility for them.

## 2 Patriarchal cultures

Edward C Lehman notes that “Latent and subtle sexism still persists in the church and society. Institutional sexism, the hardest to crack, goes deep to our unexamined assumptions – our ‘of course’ world – ideas, customs, and rules derived from the past that have acquired the aura of ‘nature.’ They are often embodied in the very fabric of our language, the symbols with which we make sense of our world, including the world of other people’ (2002:34) In the words of Philip Culbertson, “distinct gender roles and gender assumptions continue to survive in the subconscious layers of our identity”. (2000:304)

Such presumptions about the roles of men and women, mediated by language, symbol, and practices in our society and churches, pose difficulty in ministry discernment for women in patriarchal churches. When the role of women is “of course” to operate in traditionally feminine support roles, but to avoid the exercise of power, leadership, or upfront roles, it is difficult to imagine God might call a woman to a ministry role.

Carol Becker completed an extensive study of women in ministry. She argues that in the patriarchal environment of the denominations, theology and language work against women, claiming:

“The nature of the patriarchal paradigm “represents a socio-cultural system in which a few men have power over other men, women, children, slaves, and colonized people”. (1996:68) “In the environment of our denominations, as in our culture, many forces work together to ensure that language reflects the masculine” (1996:86) “The church actually casts off the feminine principles that are at the heart of the faith, devalues experience as a grounding for theology or practice, and hotly debates the value of diversity in its ranks.” (1996:62). She notes that women “call for language that images them and reflects their participation in the work of the church.... We need a diversity; a wealth of images for God.... In the language we use for ourselves.... we desperately need to be inclusive.” (1996: 86)

Jan Berry notes: “feminist theology (claims) that women's experience is often invisible or marginalised – for many of the events of our lives there are no existing rituals. Where rituals do exist, they are often out of touch with women’s lived experience” (2006: 9)

Sexist language and practice communicates the message at an unconscious level that women are not central to the life and leadership of the church: indeed that God is male and women are alien. Language is a powerful mediator and shaper of culture. Words convey meaning; they help us to make sense of our world and our place in it. If a church community uses patriarchal liturgical materials, sermons, bible translations, bible study notes and so on, this would be expected to work against discernment of a call to vocational ministry for women.

For a woman in a patriarchal church community, there is less potential for her to be “tapped on the shoulder” and offered ministry opportunities and training by her ministry leader, if this leader does not believe in the leadership of women. It is also possible that a ministry leader might believe in women ministers *theoretically*, but in practice has difficulty recognising leadership in a feminine form.

Lacking affirmation in ministry, or only experiencing affirmation in stereotypical areas (“You are great at children’s ministry: keep it up!”), can short-circuit the positive feedback loop and stifle development of vocational ministry awareness.

In her autobiographical memoir “Soul Friend” Jo-Anne Berthelsen writes that she “found myself in awe of the men, with a somewhat unrealistic view of them. They thought and acted differently from me in so many ways. They were more logical and strategic. And they knew so much more about ministry and theology and church leadership than I did. Somewhere along the line I had made a key judgment – and that was that my way of doing ministry must be inferior and less acceptable than the men’s. It was engraved in my spirit.” (29:2012)

Jo-Anne initially refused the offer of a ministry position in her local church. Self-doubt about the validity of her feminine style of leadership led her to count herself out of ministry. She changed her mind, entered the ministry, but experienced considerable difficulties in working in a team with men. After she left this ministry she reflected that: “I have harboured a lot of self-doubt that has affected not only my own ministry but that of my colleagues; (I) have had a deep belief that the opinions of others, particularly men, must be right and my own must be inferior or wrong.” (2012:89)

Carol E Bekker would regard Jo-Anne’s assessment of the inferiority of her leadership style as a natural consequence of women functioning as “immigrants” in a foreign patriarchal culture. She writes that “women are the ‘resident other’ in Western culture. We are the opposite of all that is normal. We are aliens, strangers, the permanent ex-magistrates’. Because women are immigrants, we do not fit, cannot fit, and will be ‘trapped’ unwittingly by the rules of a culture we do not know” (1996: 95) She claims that “there are tasks for women and tasks for men. Men’s tasks come first” (1996:32) She also claims that men are “very much in control in the workplace. They have the power and the influence. They make – and therefore know – the rules of the culture.” (1996:144) Elizabeth Ridgley describes “gender dialogue as a form of cross-cultural communication”, where assumptions must be dropped and curiosity developed, for men and women to successfully work together. (from Culbertson 2000:304)

The Whiteheads explore *developmental* factors as one origin of the difficulties of men and women working together in collaborative ministry. They write:

“The ability to be aware of women as persons (rather than just as sexual entities) and to experience them as individuals (rather than just as representatives of the category “women”) is basic for an adult relationship between men and women. It should not come as news that not all men have achieved this adult stance.... Some men.... Will be frightened of her... because she falls into that dangerous category of ‘sexually other’”.... In some men the negative emotional response they feel – their fear of women as somehow dangerous – is expressed (and sometimes even experienced) as hostility.” (Whitehead and Whitehead, 2003:183)

Carol Bekker confirms that being “sexually other” can generate considerable hostility. She quotes one woman involved in ecumenical circles: “To gain respect you have to stick around long enough, and of course, a lot of women are rejected out of hand in church circles, especially global circles, where there are very few of us. But if you stick around long enough, and if you are tough enough, and if you are nice enough, and most of all if when they look at you they don’t think about sex, it will be all right” (1996:74) She claims “the very presence of women in the church is unsettling to the

psychic imagination of men... women stand out as the unknown Other, a source of fear and temptation.”

As the majority of men were raised primarily by mothers, another source of hostility may unresolved discomfort with the *authority* of women. Lurking within the sixty-year-old man might lurk a repressed but petulant two-year-old who does not like a woman telling him what to do. Family of origin transference is an ever-present reality in church ministry. (Culbertson, 2000:297)

Experiences of hostility are another potential disruption to the “positive feedback loop” involved in developing a sense of call to ministry. Even in contexts that allow women’s ministry in principle, hostility may sabotage it in practice.

The Whiteheads also point out women can become very hostile toward men for a different reason: changes in social awareness can lead to the perception men are the “enemy” who oppress women. They write: “There is a pattern that emerges in the process of personal transformation that accompanies social change. The moments or stages in this process are marked by a differing sense of self.... At a stage of conventional thinking... what her culture says women are, she senses that she is.” (2003:186) “In dichotomous thinking, the world is perceived in terms of opposites: good and bad, friend and enemy, female and male. At this point some women experience men – all men- as the enemy. Newly aware of the many ways in which women are oppressed, they are alert to oppression everywhere. Now conscious of the hidden faces of discrimination, they have become suspicious of motives and gestures and behaviour that were once of little concern.” This anger, legitimate as it may be, can work against women’s acceptance into ministry. They may be perceived as bitter, divisive, disruptive, and immature, and therefore unfit to exercise ministry.

The Whiteheads describe the third stage as integrated thinking: women who are aware of injustice, in touch with their anger, but who are capable of seeing nuance, and of evaluating their anger, and choosing when to (and when not to) express it. She also has become conscious “the line between good and evil “cuts through the heart of each person, including herself”. (2003:191) A woman with this level of maturity is sensitive when it is appropriate to express anger and when it is inappropriate to do so: she is better able to navigate her way through the politics of local or denominational church life without creating unnecessary enemies. Nonetheless, anger is a difficult emotion for women to express publicly: they are socialised toward nurturing rather than confrontation (Culbertson 2000:304 – 305).

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, quoting Nancy Nicholls in the 1993 Harvard Business Review, notes that: “The double yardstick of gender appropriateness and managerial effectiveness often leaves women in an unbreakable, untenable double bind. Women who attempt to fit themselves into a managerial role by acting like men... are forced to behave in a sexually dissonant way. They risk being characterised as ‘too aggressive’, or worse, just plain ‘bitchy’. Yet women who act like ladies, speaking indirectly and showing concern for others, risk being seen as ‘ineffective’” (1995:5) She also quotes Robin Lakoff’s claim that: “A girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does (talk as a lady), she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion; in some sense, she is less than fully human. These two choices which a woman has – to be less than a woman or less than a person – are highly painful”. (1995:121)

I suggest that *positive* female role models are a significant factor in vocational discernment. If women's experience of ministry is difficult, stressful, or conflicted, they will convey a message to younger women. The message is simple: ministry for women is so difficult it is best avoided!

### **Stress, remuneration, and drop and for women in ministry**

Peter Pereira conducted a research project into the experience of stress among female clergy in the Uniting Church in Australia. He notes that "the stress arising from the juggling of home and work life emerges as problematic for women in many studies." (2007:24) (for working women in general, rather than clergy in particular). He notes Lim and Teo's study (1996) that "female occupational stress was related to either overt or subtle discrimination at an organisational or personal level." (2007:24) He picks up these two themes in his interviews of a number of women in ministry:

"Sophie believes that her ministry experience is responsible for major impacts on her health. She also reports that the discriminating attitude of many towards female clergy has added to her stress." (2007:49)

"Sue's stress is compounded by ways in which some people have treated her. Sue is aware of subtle hints that suggest to her that being a female is an issue for some members of the congregation. Sue relates a conversation with a lady who said: 'If you were a male they wouldn't even have the courage to ask you about that decision.' 'It sort of hit me in the face. She's been in the church like 40 years... and she believed that there were definitely issues about women.' With awareness heightened Sue has begun to notice subtle messages that give further verification of this unspoken issue." (2007:54)

"Jill finds the juggling of the demands of ministry with family life a major area of stress in her life. Jill feels pushed to the edge all the time and ministry impacts her family in a way that she does not like. She sees this concern of hers as gender specific. She believes that the juggling of work and family time is much more of an issue for her than it is for her husband who is also in full-time work." (2007:56)

"Janine finds that there are times when life becomes a difficult balancing of roles. Full-time ministry and chaplaincy combined with the role of mother and wife make for a particularly full work load. Janine says: So it is a kind of juggling act and there are always people in the congregation who you could be visiting. I don't regard the chaplaincy and the congregation as the main things I'm juggling. The main things I'm juggling is all the other more domestic issues in life as well as the ministry things. And that's where I find the pressure comes"" (2007:57)

Professional ministry is a challenging calling and career. As the quotes above suggest, there appears to be some distinct factors that make these challenges even more intense for women, increasing rates of drop-out, and making women in ministry less likely to be *positive* role models to younger women.

Women are more likely than men to be in part-time ministry employment. I believe it important to critique the idea that the yardstick of "success" is full-time paid employment. Judgment using the scales of economic rationalism, rather than the less tangible measures of well-being, satisfaction with family life, and so on, may be measuring women's progress with ungodly criteria. It would be

interesting to engage in primary research about how many women in ministry with young families would like to work more paid hours: my suspicion is a significant number are quite happy to create space in their lives for mothering and family responsibilities. My own perspective is that equality would be better served, and men and women might become more well-rounded individuals, if both mothers and fathers took on part-time work and part-time parenting responsibilities when their children are young. While there is a need to offer grace and space for individuals arrange their lives and to parent as they see fit, loving, training and discipling the next generation should be maintained as an important value of the Christian community.

While acknowledging that part-time ministry employment may be chosen by many women, Zikmund, Lummis and Chang's research in the United States indicated "women experience discrimination... by being systematically tracked into lower-paying and less-powerful positions and career patterns.... Our findings show... that even when male and female clergy hold the same kind of position within comparable churches, *the woman will still be paid less for doing the same job*". (1998:73) I suspect the same pattern would hold true in Australia: that women receive less pay for similar work. Awareness of pay discrepancies may lead to resentment and contribute to stress. Financial pressure is just one more stress to deal with: ministers are not well-paid compared to comparable professionals.

All of the difficulties noted above would be expected to contribute to higher rates of burn out and drop out for women than men in ministry. Joy Charlton's longitudinal research (published in 1997) did find women left the ministry in higher numbers than men, and notes that many of these women were "pioneers" (the first woman to take up a ministry post). The pioneering role created particular stresses. (Pereira, 2007: 29)

Zikmund, Lummis and Chang's suggest found 32 % of clergywomen and 28 % of clergymen have "sometime in the past year... seriously considered leaving ministry as a paid vocation". (1998:121) However, the numbers of women seriously considering leaving the ministry were higher in some denominations than others: 40% of Southern Baptist clergywomen (probably because of overt resistance to women in ministry) and 40% of United Methodist clergywomen (probably because the expectation of moving every 3 – 4 years is inimical to family life). (1998:123)

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

### **1 Promoting vocational discernment**

An intentional focus on identifying and releasing others for pursue their distinctive contribution has enormous potential to release fruitful ministry for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

A person who is working exercising their unique strengths is far more productive, motivated, and effective. Commenting on extensive research conducted by the Gallup organisation, Marcus Buckingham notes: "Whichever way you care to slice the data, the organisation whose employees feel that their strengths are used every day is more powerful and more robust." (Buckingham and Clifton: 2004: 3 -4) "With a clear personal vision and intention, work flows organically. We feel in tune with the task, and alive with energy and enthusiasm. Nothing stops us from our purpose. It is this inherent strength of focus that gives work meaning" (Feldman and Feldman 2011:14)

That which is true of other workplaces would also be expected to be true in ministry roles. The person who is exercising their strongest spiritual gifts, who is obeying the deepest call upon their lives, would not only be expected to experience a deep sense personal of fulfilment, but also (to use the rich biblical metaphor) to experience fruitfulness in their ministry. Or to use another rich biblical metaphor, as God releases those with particular leadership callings into ministry, the whole body of Christ grows into maturity. (Ephesians 4:11 – 13).

In short, the business of helping believers to identify their vocations and step into them is a win-win: a win for the person who experiences the deep fulfilment of working in a field that aligns with their gifts and deep passions, and a win for the church and the Kingdom of God. My major recommendation would be that church leaders use whatever tools they have at their disposal to equip church members to take vocational calling seriously. If care is taken to involve both men and women in intentional discernment processes, a “happy accident” of such endeavour would, I suspect, be an increase in the numbers of female ministry candidates: it would help women hurdle over potential discernment blocks identified in this paper.

Beginning at the judicatory level, an initiative might be piloted around an intentional discernment process. As young and emerging leaders are a key leverage point for church judicatories looking to enhance the vitality of their churches for the long haul, I suggest this should begin with a nomination and selection process of such younger leaders. Components of this intentional process may include readings about vocational discernment, reflecting on life story, reflecting on important revelatory moments, engaging with vocationally-oriented questions (“what do you dream about? What do you love to do?”), strengths assessments (Strengths finder), spiritual gifts assessments, personality type assessments (e.g. MBTI), meeting with a spiritual director or life coach, and so on. This might potentially be run through (or partially engage) the theological college associated with the ministry office. The “Focusing Leaders” material developed by Church Resource Ministries is one existing resource that involves a number of these processes.

Another possible model for a vocational discernment process has been developed by Diann Feldman. The material is called “The Significant Woman”. It has been run with over 10 000 women internationally, (Feldman, 2011:18) Diann identifies five important elements to call and vocation beyond gift and personality:

- Life experiences - that have shaped how they see the world and their core beliefs
- Core values – those that they have relied upon and behaved in alignment with consistently over time
- Strengths – some are personality driven, others are learning and passion driven
- Passions – those things that drive us to take action, e.g. compelling us, and they come from either a positive drive that is to make something happen, or a fuelled drive that is a desire to not have something continue to happen (e.g. often a cause) (Feldman 2013)

Actual ministry experience is not only vital in pastoral formation, but also in the task of refining discernment. Perhaps a greater variety of ministry placements could be considered sooner than later in theological college education. Some exposure to chaplaincy, local church, welfare-based, cross-cultural and community-based ministries can help ministry candidates engage with their areas of passion and their areas of discomfort. Similar “exposure” experiences might be piloted by church

judicatories for younger leaders, as part of intentional leadership development strategies. Pastoral subjects with a discernment focus might become a core component for ministry students.

Resources could be developed for local churches that assist all interested members of local congregations to find their vocational fit. A simplified version of the intentional discernment process for emerging leaders could be developed for local congregations, utilizing spiritual gift and personality surveys, life-coaching styled questions for small group discussion, and bible studies on the nature of call and vocation, and so on. More simply, existing courses such as “The Significant Woman” or “Focusing Leaders” could be promoted for local church use by a judicatory.

As all church members are encouraged (as much as possible) to take vocational discernment seriously, one would expect an increase in the numbers of people (both men and women) identifying a call to vocational ministry. As the mean age of ministers in Australia is significantly older than the mean age of Australians, this would be very a positive outcome for the long-term health of the Australian church.

## **2 Mentoring and Coaching**

For the past eight years, one of the core components of my ministry role has involved connected female emerging leaders with mentors, who operate using a coaching model of mentoring. In a number of instances, this has been a key step in helping women make connections with other people, organisations or study opportunities that has enhanced their leadership growth and personal development.

Both secular and faith-based organisations already see mentoring as a key way of enhancing leadership growth, as the following quotes demonstrate:

“Mentoring provides a relationship in which a woman can experience support, affirmation, and challenge about her uniqueness and gifts. Mentoring is a relational space where a woman can critically examine her assumptions and those of the culture, and evaluate her choices, opportunities, and realistic limits” (Neuger, 1996:166)

“Mentoring... (is) seen as a strategy for women to position themselves in male-oriented organisational cultures.... The practice of mentoring ... is an ideal way for organisations to motivate and retain high achievers.” (Bekker, 2009:274) “quality mentoring relationships are probably the most significant and instrumental single relationships in enhancing careers” (Bekker, 2009:276)

“Whether you are a man or a woman, someone has got to show you the ropes... For women emerging as leaders in a patriarchy, mentors must include men who know the system” (Bekker: 1996, 157-158)

“A mentor is someone who helps a protégé in some very practical ways: by giving timely advice that encourages the protégé; by risking his or her reputation in backing the protégé; by bridging between the protégé and needed resources; by modelling and setting expectations that challenge the protégé; by giving tracts, letters, books, or other literary information that open perspectives for the protégé; by giving financially, sometimes sacrificially, to further the protégé’s ministry; by co-ministering in order to increase the

credibility, status and prestige of the protégé; and by having the freedom to allow and even promote the protégé beyond the mentor's level of leadership.... God's guidance through a mentor can be life-changing. It can speed up the development process and set patterns that will last for a lifetime." (Clinton: 131 – 132)

"Neither a parent nor a lover, the mentor presents an alternate model of adult intimacy. Having a mentor thus invites growth in the capacity for intimacy". (Whitehead and Whitehead, 1982: 126)

Another important aspect of mentoring in church contexts is increased awareness of important networks and political realities. "For the Christian community that aims to foster the growth and development of the next generation of leaders, there is a need to strategically connect with other Christians who have either reached senior positions or positions of influence within their contexts" (Clifton and Grey, 2009:275)

I believe the impact of intentional mentoring will provide a fruitful area for ongoing qualitative and quantitative research around ministry development and formation. I am convinced any church judicatory would benefit from developing intentional mentoring programs for identified emerging leaders, both men and women. Women who may otherwise be subtly (or overtly) excluded from leadership networks would expect to receive particular benefit from intentional mentoring initiatives. Promoting mentoring at the local church level, by offering accessible training to local church ministers and leaders, is another way to promote leadership development by a church judicatory.

There are a number of different models used in Christian coaching circles such as COACH (Keith I personally recommend mentoring training that has a strong *coaching* component and a focus on action, in contrast to some more passive models of mentoring that focus more on awareness raising. Adults learn best by action and reflection in an ongoing learning loop. I view Christian coaching is a discipleship process with "teeth" that assists those coached to reflect, to develop action plans that emerge from these reflections, to be accountable for those action plans, and to engage in evaluation of their actions (what worked, what didn't work, what could be done better) in their next coaching session.

Webb), The 5 R's (Robert E Logan) and GROW (John Whitmore). In some literature, coaching is regarded as short-term relationship. However, some management literature now refers to a "coaching culture" in business, where coaching and feedback is the constant paradigm shaping leadership practice(Crane, 2007). In church planting, weekly coaching over a period of years appears to be best practice (Ogne and Roehl 2008:80), and this could hardly be called "short-term". Regardless of the model used and duration employed, there is compelling evidence that ongoing coaching value-adds to training in a spectacular fashion, as is illustrated by the evidence below:

- Business Training alone increased productivity for leaders by 22.4%. However, when leaders had a coach alongside them after the training, productivity increased by 88%.(Ogne 2008:72) (The impact of this is illustrated in Appendix 2).
- A 2001 study by Metrix Global found that executive coaching produced a tangible 529 percent return on investment, as well as increased financial benefits from improved

employee retention – boosting the overall ROI (return on investment) to 788 percent (Ogne and Rohel, 2005:117)

- Denominations who have put (assessing, coaching, and training) systems in place saw their church planting success rates go from 30 to 50 percent to 80 to 90 percent. (Ogne and Roehl: 2008, 79)
- Ed Stezer’s study of Southern Baptist church plants found that planters who had a coach that met with them weekly had churches that were twice as big as those without a coach after 4 years (Ogne and Roehl: 2008,80) .

The church should not be shy about seeking to adopt educational best practice in the serious business of developing and training its next generation of leaders. In an ideal world (perhaps facilitated by theological colleges) a rigorous dialogue between supervisors, mentors, coaches, counsellors, psychologists, spiritual directors, and educational practitioners might develop a synthetic discipline ideally suited to working with mission and ministry leaders, and tailored to the distinctive challenges of particular church judicatories in particular places. Or it may at least clarify which disciplines are most critical at various stages of development and for which issues. It is certainly true that all of these disciplines are continuing to be informed by further research.

At this point in time, the evidence of the effectiveness of coaching is so compelling I believe there is a strong case for running coaching training as a core component of professional development of ministers. Local church ministers would thus be equipped to coach emerging leaders in their own congregations (both male and female), as well as younger leaders outside their congregations referred by the judicatory. Another “happy accident” of such training should be improved leadership development, discipleship formation and fruitfulness in local congregations. Coaching leaders of mission and ministry initiatives in particular helps leaders to maintain focus and to maintain project momentum, as well as assisting to develop these leaders personally and professionally. (Ogne and Roehl, 2008:79 – 81)

A period of coaching to follow up those who have completed an intentional discernment process (as recommended above) would significantly value-add by deepening learning and assisting those coached to live out the callings they have identified.

### **3 Exposure to female role models**

As noted earlier in a research essay on mentoring by Pamela Holliman (Neuger,1996:173 – 184), female role models provide a way for women to “imagine themselves” in ministry. A woman beginning her ministry journey reported “I could begin to imagine doing ministry in the parish the way she was ministering.” Women already in church leadership felt that “women looked to them as models in ministry”, and that “they were part of a process of helping other women ‘get their voice’”, and they reported that “their word or action or decision was a defining moment for another woman.” (1996:177)

One of the strengths of the mentoring initiative I have been involved with is simply the exposure to healthy female leadership role models. As well as connecting emerging leaders with mentors, there are other ways to expose younger women to role models. Taking steps to ensure both men and women are keynote and elective speakers at church conferences is one way to expose younger

leaders to positive role models of both genders. Attempting to achieve gender and age balance on church committees and working parties will also expose younger women to older women in leadership. This will also enhance networking and ministry experience for younger leaders. One fringe benefit of this for congregations and church organisations is evidence that increasing the numbers of women on a team increases “team intelligence” significantly!

(<http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-study-by-carnegie-mellon-mit-and-union-college-shows-collective-intelligence-of-groups-exceeds-cognitive-abilities-of-individual-group-members-104152848.html>)

#### **4 Theological resources, theological training, and inclusive language and practices**

One of the barriers to discernment of a call to vocational ministry is the belief that women cannot be involved in Christian ministry. If the leader or leaders of a church do not accept the leadership of women, this will create a discernment “block” for any women in the congregation who may have an emerging ministry call.

In centralised denominations, the issue can be managed in a straightforward fashion: announce the theological position of the denomination, ordain women and appoint them to local churches and senior denominational roles. In independent church systems, theological conversations are decentralised. However, a church judicatory overseeing independent churches, if committed to increasing participation of women in leadership, might promote women’s ordination through its statements and practices, develop and provide theological resources (both web-based and paper) to church leadership teams, and participate in local church discussions over this issue.

The Pulpit and Pew Report indicates theological colleges/seminaries have a very important role to play in the call to ministry for women. “Lehman’s research... indicates that ‘most women entered seminary from motives other than ordination to pastoral ministry’, but that ‘once enrolled, many of them decided to pursue vocations in ministry’ (2002:7). Seminaries appear to provide a congenial environment either for experiencing one’s call to the ministry or for announcing one’s call previously kept silent due to external pressures.” (2002:7)

In my role I have been involved in promoting theological study for women. My intuition suggested that for some women, especially for women who have not studied for long periods because of parenting and work responsibilities, that entering study in a male-dominated environment can be intimidating. Women’s classes provided a supportive environment and a “safe entry” into the world of theological education, particularly women from local churches where they are largely or entirely excluded from church leadership. Over the period of my promoting theological study for women, the numbers of women enrolled (at Stirling) has increased significantly. I have also organised women’s-only preaching classes to provide a supportive environment to practice public speaking skills. I believe specific women’s leadership training initiatives are a worthy area of consideration for denominations/judicatories that would like to increase the proportion of women in leadership, particularly if women are currently significantly under-represented in ministry. This is less of an issue in church systems where egalitarian practices are widespread.

One way of helping to promote a gender-inclusive culture throughout a church system is to ensure *all* theological college students, both male and female, engage in an intentional study of issues around gender. Offering an optional subject in “women’s studies” will largely attract female students

(perhaps involving a small number of men because the slot in the timetable happens to suit them). I believe engagement with the issues around gender and theology should become *mandatory* for all ministry candidates. This is probably best achieved by ensuring reflection on gender issues occurs in the core theological, historical and pastoral subjects for a ministry degree. For example, church debates on women in ministry could become one component of an Introduction to Theology subject (this does form a fascinating case study on different approaches to hermeneutics, and the role of church culture in practices of interpretation.) The contribution and roles of women in the church in different eras could become the focus of at least one lecture in an introduction to church history, rather than women remaining a largely invisible element of a course focused on church fathers, emperors, male theologians and popes. Pastoral subjects could deliberately increase focus on gender issues in pastoral care, including reflection on masculine and feminine leadership styles, and some of the distinctive pastoral needs of women (and men) in the local church and in society. Such kinds of initiatives would require interdisciplinary faculty discussions, and a commitment to making some attempt to counter the masculine bias of Christian theological traditions.

There seems to be a minor backlash against the creeping tide of an egalitarian focus in mainstream theology, perhaps most notably vocalised by the Sydney Anglican diocese in the Australian context. The capacity to evaluate and critique Complementarian theology will give students tools to manage such discussions at the local church level. I believe local congregations have a key role in setting church culture, and the messages women receive about their place in the Kingdom of God. Engagement around gender issues at college is one way of sensitising future ministers to gender-inclusive language and practices in their local churches.

Both colleges and church judicatories should model best practice in terms of communication around gender-inclusive language, and raise this issue periodically in communication to member churches. Church judicatories need to periodically audit whether they are communicating in gender-inclusive language. Theological colleges also have a leadership role in promoting sensitivity to “masculinised” theology and use of language, and can offer a critique of church communication where necessary. Further feedback can be received through periodic gatherings of potentially marginalised groups (women, the young, ethnic groups) to reflect on and evaluate practices, policies, systems and use of language in church judicatories. This information may lead to changes in practice that will be more just and inclusive. My experience is that it is more often lack of awareness, rather than lack of good will, that can create barriers in church systems to under-represented groups.

## **5 Supporting recent college graduates and other women in ministry**

The Pulpit and Pew report also notes that: “Unfortunately, most women seeking initial placement are not yet a part of a denomination’s infrastructure and do not have access to geographic clergy groups, affinity groups, or a denominational official as their primary caregiver. This is where the system fails. Denominations need to offer pastoral care more aggressively to women seeking their first position of placement.”

This challenge is particularly difficult in independent church systems. Although such systems have processes in place of recommending candidates for a ministry placement, the decision ultimately rests with the leadership team of a local church. Pereira cites Chang’s study that “whereas most people seem to indicate an acceptance of having a woman pastor, these same people hold a belief that others in their church will have difficulty and therefore choose to oppose hiring a woman to

avoid conflict and tension.” (2007:30). The current degree of church member mobility between denominations and independent churches means many local churches will have some “malcontents” around women in ministry present in a congregation, even if the overseeing church denomination has had longstanding support for women in ministry.

Mary Jane Hitt notes that “It has been my own experience, and that of most women I now appoint, that once congregations experience women in the role of pastor, acceptance comes.” (2002:44) It seems a significant point of challenge is the “first appointment” of a woman in ministry, both for the woman concerned and for the congregation. It is interesting to note within Churches of Christ that one of our member churches (Williamstown) has had women as its past (and present) senior pastors for its past three ministries. This provides anecdotal evidence that the pioneer female pastor of a church opens the path for other women. There are many Churches of Christ in Australia that have not yet had one woman in ministry. Appointing a first woman minister is a relatively straightforward matter for centralised denominations, but is a more complicated art in independent churches with local governance. However, personal visits by judiciary staff, and theological resources offered by these staff, might assist forming new openings for women in ministry. Concrete guidelines could be developed that would encourage local congregations to interview at least one female ministry candidate. Well-resourced church judicatories (if there is such a thing) might be able to offer financial affirmative action steps such as bonus church payments or reduced interest rates on church debt. This might help more women achieve a local church “first” placement in a senior or solo role.

Active support personal from judicatory leaders, and connection with groups of other women in ministry as recommended above, will help guide these “first appointment” pioneers through difficult transitions, and reduce the risk of burn-out and drop-out.

There is no “magic wand” that can make many of the obstacles named in this paper for women in ministry disappear (self-doubt, hostility, double-binds, the “double shift” of work and home duties, lack of openings, salary differences, etc.). However, gathering together with other women in ministry can provide a safe forum to help women name and reflect on such issues. They can learn from one another about how to manage the distinctive challenges they may face. Perhaps most importantly, they can provide emotional support, a factor that is critical in reducing the risk of serious burnout.

In her contribution to the Pew and Pulpit research paper, Charlene P. Kammerer notes: “Clergywomen do not thrive as ‘lone rangers’ in the ministry. They need to see each other, to hear each other’s stories, to support each sister’s struggles, to be advocates, to speak up on justice issues. The need to hear women preaching, singing, and reflecting together is deeply valued. I know I could not have survived in ministry without this kind of web of support and validation by other women in ministry.” (2002:45)

The Pulpit and Pew report notes that in most instances, “pastoral care of clergy” already is a significant item in the job descriptions of middle judicatory staff. (2002:20) Such staff can facilitate some gatherings for women in ministry, and encourage the women involved to set up their own support groups. For women working in rural areas, phone and skype collegial “gatherings” might help reduce the sense of isolation they experience.

Either local churches or church judicatories (for both male and female ministers) should ideally pay for quality ministry supervision, not only to support the minister, but also to help ensure the wellbeing of the congregation that receives his or her pastoral care (Culbertson, 2000:303). Such support would seem especially critical in the early years of a minister's career as ministry patterns are established.

### **Conclusions:**

Vocational discernment is an important element of maturing personally and spiritually for individuals. In order to remain emotionally healthy, indeed, to thrive as a person, it is helpful if one's paid (or voluntary) working life aligns well with one's deepest callings and unique giftings. Not only do individuals thrive when vocational discernment is done well, but communities, organisations, and churches are more productive and fruitful also. It is worthwhile for church organisations to take a close look at how to enhance the capacity of their leaders to promote vocational discernment, and to coach leaders toward living out their callings.

Alongside egalitarian vocational discernment initiatives, active mentoring of women, promotion of theological study targeted to women, efforts to make gender studies a core component of ministry studies, efforts to model gender inclusive language and practices at the judicatory level, and support groups for women in ministry, would all be expected to lead to an increase in women's participation in ministry.

Church ministers in Australia are ageing (on average), and many are nearing retirement age. Women provide a potential under-utilized pool of talent for church ministry in future decades. If implemented, the initiatives described in this paper would be expected not only to increase the number of women ministry candidates, but to improve the vitality of the Christian church, as all members are equipped to seek and live out the unique call of God on their lives.

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### **APPENDIX ONE**

#### **Ministers of Religion in Australia: Census data**

|  | 2005   |      | 1991   |      |
|--|--------|------|--------|------|
|  | Female | Male | Female | Male |
|  |        |      |        |      |

|                           |       |        |       |       |
|---------------------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| Jehovah's Witnesses       | 62.5% | 37.5%  | 42.5% | 57.5% |
| Latter-day Saints         | 57.1% | 42.9%  |       |       |
| Salvation Army            | 54.1% | 45.9%  | 52.5% | 47.5% |
| Other Christian           | 36.5% | 63.5%  |       |       |
| Pentecostal               | 34.3% | 65.7%  | 18.8% | 81.2% |
| Uniting Church            | 32.6% | 67.4%  | 13.3% | 85.7% |
| Christian, nfd            | 31.2% | 68.8%  |       |       |
| Anglican                  | 25.7% | 74.3%  | 8.4%  | 91.6% |
| Churches of Christ        | 23.8% | 76.2%  |       |       |
| Baptist                   | 22.1% | 77.9%  | 10.6% | 89.4% |
| Brethren                  | 19.6% | 80.4%  |       |       |
| Catholic                  | 17.2% | 82.8%  | 8.7%  | 91.3% |
| Other Protestant          | 12.8% | 87.2%  |       |       |
| Presbyterian and Reformed | 10.3% | 89.7%  | 6.1%  | 93.9% |
| Seventh-day Adventist     | 9.9%  | 90.1%  | 2.4%  | 97.6% |
| Lutheran                  | 8.7%  | 91.3%  | 2.4%  | 97.6% |
| Oriental Orthodox         | 0.0%  | 100.0% |       |       |
| Assyrian Apostolic        | 0.0%  | 100.0% |       |       |
| Eastern Orthodox          | 0.0%  | 100.0% |       |       |

(Sourced from a yet-to-be published paper by Darren Cronshaw and Philip Hughes, and [www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/eb5dbf508e41611fca2570ec00787e70!OpenDocument](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/eb5dbf508e41611fca2570ec00787e70!OpenDocument) Sourced 10/5/2013)

## Appendix Two

Extract from *The Heart of Coaching*, Thomas G Crane, pages 22 and 23:

In 1979, Training and Development Journal published an article in which the the following two figures appeared.

Figure A illustrates what seems to be a reasonable expectation of training: it will produce new behaviours that, over time (and in spite of a small and temporary dip in performance immediately after training) will lead to improved results.

Figure B shows what actually happens after training if no coaching is performed: old behaviours quickly resurface, and sustained performance improvements never materialise. Without coaching, the opportunity training provides for permanently improving behaviour – and the improved results that could have followed – is lost.

By not providing coaching to people after providing them with behaviourally skilled-based training, we set them up to fail.

(insert diagram p 23)