

# men and women working together

## Introduction

We live at a time when the Church is increasingly recognising the value of teamwork. And virtually all Christians agree that ministry or leadership teams should be made up of men and women; it's God's plan to serve him corporately.

But at the same time there seems never to have been so much confusion around how men and women can work together well. We think that men and women are gifted differently, and should be given clearly different roles and responsibilities. Or that men and women are so different that we can't understand each other and work well together. Or that our sexuality will cloud our relating, and lead to sin.

This article, edited from an 'Arrow paper', seeks to acknowledge and examine these perceptions and explore how men and women *can* work well together in teams.

## In the beginning...

In the beginning, God did not send a committee, but created a team! He created a mixed gender team, one man and one woman. Sadly, there was soon disharmony within the team, but as God created it, the team was good.

This team was a model of marriage, but it was also a model of teamwork. Before the Fall two people were jointly tasked with stewarding all they had been given, fish and birds and living creatures (Genesis 1:26-28). After the Fall there was disharmony (Genesis 3:12), hierarchy (domination by the man – Genesis 3:16) and segregated responsibilities (Adam was the chief provider of food – Genesis 3:17-19).

The rest of the Bible presents a mixed picture. In a context of post-Fall relationships and amid patriarchal cultures, there are still women leaders to be found, working in partnership with men: Miriam with Moses and Aaron, Deborah with Barak. Jesus affirmed women, was accompanied by a faithful group of women followers (Luke 8:1-3), encouraged women to learn as disciples (in order then to be teachers), and commissioned Mary Magdalene to announce the news of his resurrection. The words of the prophet Joel, quoted by Peter at Pentecost, sets out the restoration of what was lost at the Fall, the partnership of men and women as the Spirit is poured out:

“In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
Your sons and your daughters will prophesy...  
Even on my servants, both men and women,  
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,  
and they will prophesy.” (Acts 2:17-18)

As we read the Acts and Paul's letters, we see this prophecy fulfilled, despite some cultural barriers which were still to be overcome. New Testament leadership is nearly always plural, there are several named partnerships of leaders (Aquila and Priscilla, Andronicus and Junia), and other women are named as Paul's co-workers, for example, Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2-3).

Through most of Christian history, male leadership has continued to prevail. In addition, we have inherited ways of thinking which endowed men with rationality, logic and leadership, while women were all too often seen either as Eve the temptress or Mary the virgin mother, hardly the

most helpful models. Within the Church for most of its history, men have been the leaders and women the led.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and leadership is being redefined. For a whole variety of reasons, solo leadership is out. The notion that a single omniscient individual is uniquely called to exercise leadership has been replaced by the conviction that it is more biblical and more effective to see leadership as something best exercised in teams, where the gifts of a number of people are used. We are back to the picture we're given in Ephesians 4:7-12.

But at the same time, we are becoming more and more anxious about how we work together in mixed teams or as teams of two people, especially it seems, male leader and female curate or lay leader.

## **Rules and barriers**

We are all too aware of what can happen. A male church leader has an affair with a female member of the church. A female leader has an inappropriate relationship with a male colleague.

In response, many leaders have resorted to rules. No one-to-one meetings with a person of the opposite sex in a private place: their house, in a car, and so on. Ensure there is someone else around whenever you need to have a pastoral meeting, keep the door open, meet in a public place or not at all.

Keeping safe is clearly a good thing. But is this rule-based approach enough? Is it practical? And in the long run, is it what God intends?

The negative results are all around; a woman who feels hurt that her pastor won't pray with her. A woman who is excluded from meetings for reasons of 'safety'. A man who is sad that such rules reinforce the idea that he is a sexual predator, and that all women are out to seduce men.

If people want to sin, are rules enough to stop them?

## **New Testament models**

Jesus was remarkable in his friendships, being friends with both men and women. Among his close friends were Mary and Martha, and he shared meals and conversation with them without any hint of impropriety or sexualisation of the friendship. Was it a case that Jesus only spoke to Martha when Mary was around? We have no idea. But it is worth at least considering that in this, as in so many other areas, Jesus sets us an example.

In Acts and Paul's letters we have tantalisingly brief references to many of Paul's fellow-workers, both men and women. Again, we can't be sure how Paul handled his relationships with Phoebe, Priscilla, Lydia or Junia, but nowhere does he explicitly suggest avoiding being alone with anyone of the opposite sex. Do our assumptions and rules say more about us and our sex-obsessed society than they do about genuine Christian community?

## **Men, women and style**

The other issue which comes to mind when we think about men and women working together is how to work with people who are 'different'. Some of those who give advice on how women can lead men at work or how to avoid misunderstandings of style assume that there are fundamental differences between the way women and men think and behave. Men compete, women converse; men think sequentially, women think in a more random way.

But are women and men so different? Sometimes we're told that women need to respect men by not interrupting them as women do with each other, while others perceive that women need to

learn to interrupt men to get their point across – as men do all the time – otherwise they will not be heard. So who are the 'natural' interruptors, men or women? And is this all more to do with personality and experience than with gender?

The danger of being too aware of possible gender differences is that we can overlook the things we have in common, the task we have to do, and also the differences between us as *people*. So perhaps a better way of thinking in our relationships, whether we are supervising, working with or reporting to someone of the opposite sex, is to see them as an individual and treat them as an individual, with respect and care.

## **Keeping safe**

For Anglican clergy, the guidelines for the professional conduct of the clergy are designed to help clergy to provide safe boundaries for ministry, and include the following:

- There is risk in all pastoral work...The appropriateness of visiting and being visited alone, especially at night, needs to be assessed with care. The clergy should recognise the importance of knowing themselves and their own emotional needs.
- It is essential in pastoral care to acknowledge appropriate physical, sexual, emotional and psychological boundaries...(paragraph 2.8, 2.9).

These guidelines do not of themselves keep people safe; they require interpretation. As I have already suggested, one way to do this is for leaders to ensure that they are never alone in any private place with any person of the opposite sex other than their spouse. But is this the best solution, even if it were practicable? It might work for some clergy who have a spouse elsewhere in the home when colleagues or church members are visiting, but this not often viable. And what of those who are single? It was once suggested that I should summon a female church member every time I wanted to talk to a male colleague or church member. But life is just not like that.

It is worth remembering that male clergy have worked with female assistant clergy, deaconesses or Readers for years, long before women were ordained priests (1994 onwards). Yet there seems to be a new sensibility around, as if this were a new problem, or as if women being leaders had somehow changed the situation. Perhaps there are other factors involved. Deeper-seated solutions are needed. And sometimes, plain self-control, not blaming the 'other'.

## **Working well in mixed gender teams**

My thinking on this issue has been helped immeasurably by the research of Carol Becker, begun in 1994, on mixed-gender teams in the faith-based workplace, written up in *Becoming Colleagues* (Jossey-Bass, 2000). I would commend the following principles for all teams, and especially for men and women working together. Taken seriously, I believe that these principles can lead to powerful and effective teams.

### **Reflecting**

One important activity for men and women who work together is to reflect on their experience. This may mean meetings which are about better relating, not just 'staff meetings' to exchange information and tasks. But it will be time well spent.

If women and men listen to each other, women may come to see men as individuals, not those who create barriers. And men may come to see women as individuals, not (in some cases) as those who should not be there. And of course listening and understanding can overcome a whole variety of barriers. In my own experience, careful listening to see what was below the surface in one male colleague led to an excellent working relationship and genuine friendship.

Another area for reflection is the subject of difference. I've discussed this already, and by having a discussion about this rather than relying on inherited assumptions and stereotypes there is scope

for better understanding. Difference is much more likely to be about personality than about gender per se.

### **Believing**

Becker makes the crucial point that mixed-gender teams will not work unless we believe in them. Some problems stem from the fact that some men (and less frequently, some women) don't believe that women as well as men can be leaders and equal partners in a team. Thus women may receive mixed messages, and their role and participation may be restricted. Some churches have adopted a statement of belief about women, so as to put these issues into the open— see for example the statement produced by Willow Creek, reprinted in *Gifted to Lead* p 201-3.

### **Communicating**

Keeping good lines of communication is vital. When men and women talk to each other and listen well, they will learn how they interact, who speaks too much, who speaks little, who interrupts too often, and so on. Members of good teams keep talking to each other, both formally and informally. This enables them to resolve disagreements and misunderstandings.

And under this heading can be included the traps and dangers of mixed-gender working. If team members can acknowledge that there is sexual energy in mixed teams, and that sparks are present, they can discuss what is going on. Then they can set their own boundaries and keep accountable – to spouses and others outside the team if necessary.

One example is where a male church leader is working with a female curate – or vice versa. When I was a curate I was single and well aware that I could be spending more time with my married clergy colleagues than they might be spending with their wives. I worked hard to ensure I had a good relationship with those spouses.

Another important dynamic in communication is power, and whatever the shape of a team there is power at work. Team leaders need to be aware of the power they hold over others and how this influences the dynamics of relationships. Men usually have more access to power anyway, and women have often been oppressed by power. Talking about power, sharing it, and using it humbly can help teams to use power well.

### **So in summary:**

- Listen to each other.
- Talk about life as well as work.
- Pray and study the Bible together.
- Recognise that there are as many differences between one man and another or one woman and another as there are between a man and a woman, and treat each person as an individual.
- Examine your prejudices about working in a mixed-gender team.
- Acknowledge how past experiences in family or ministry life may have affected your thoughts and feelings.
- Respect each member of the team, and work to develop trust.
- Consider producing an agreed statement for your church on gender issues; see for example the statement produced by Willow Creek church, reprinted in *Gifted to Lead* pages 201-3.
- Resolve disagreements by talking honestly and openly together.
- Discuss the gender traps you're aware of so they are in the open.
- Establish clear boundaries, honour them, and keep accountable to each other and to spouses or friends.
- Acknowledge sources of power and how power is used in the relationship or team.

## **I believe...**

I believe in teams! I believe that God wants us to work together, and groups or teams of mixed age and gender best enable us to make maximum use of all the gifts God gives us. As those who believe in a God who is Trinity – one in three, and we have scriptures which give us pictures of collaborative, gift-based ministries, how can we do otherwise? We also have an opportunity to show the world that men and women can overcome the perceived differences and barriers between us, and work together in ways which others have failed.

My dream for the church is very much one of men and women working as team:

I dream of a church  
where women and men work together  
in leadership and evangelism;

Where women use their gifts,  
discover new ones,  
and empower other men and women;

Where men and women  
are seen as fellow-workers together  
and fellow-servants of each other.

I dream of a church  
which is seen by outsiders  
as one where women are affirmed,  
encouraged and fulfilled  
in their God-given callings;

Where men and women working together  
reflect the image of God,  
and, in Christ,  
overcome the 'battle of the sexes'.

I dream of a church  
which proclaims to women and men  
the good news of true liberation in Christ.

## **For reflection/discussion:**

- What assumptions do I/we make about men and women in terms of different roles, different styles and different ways of behaving? How valid are these assumptions?
- What can we learn from Scripture about the ways Jesus and Paul worked and spent time with teams or groups, and individual women? (Not only did Jesus have a conversation with the woman at the well, he then sent the male disciples away while he continued it.)
- How do members of our team spend time together outside 'meetings'? What other opportunities could we find to learn to listen better to each other?
- How have we ensured that our team has a shared understanding about women and men as leaders? Would it help to draw up an agreed statement of beliefs and values regarding men and women in leadership? If so, how are we going to do this?
- What power dynamics are at work in our team? How can power be shared in appropriate ways?
- What 'gender traps' are we aware of, and how can we overcome them?
- What 'rules', written or unwritten, do we currently operate by? What guidelines would best serve us and what boundaries do we want to make? How will we keep accountable to others so as to work well together safely?

## Resources

Rosie Ward, *Growing Women Leaders*, BRF/CPAS.

Nancy Beach, *Gifted to Lead*, Zondervan/Willow.

Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next*, IVP.

Carol Becker, *Becoming Colleagues*, Jossey-Bass.

Leonard Sweet and MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership*, IVP.

Sue Edwards, Kelley Matthews and Henry J Rogers, *Mixed Ministry: working together as brothers and sisters in an over-sexed society* (Kregal).

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