

A Woman's Place is in the Boardroom

Peninah Thomson and Jacey Graham (Palgrave, 2005)

This book explores the so-called 'glass ceiling': the lack of women in senior executive positions and on the boards of major companies. It looks at this obstacle from both sides: those who cannot find the talent their companies need, and the women who feel stuck in their career development.

What makes this book so fascinating is that for 'executive posts' and 'major companies' we can substitute the words 'senior posts' and 'dioceses', and immediately find much which is very pertinent to the Church of England - and other churches too. Many bishops are now keen to appoint women to posts such as Archdeacon, recognizing the talents they are missing and the opportunity to have a more balanced senior staff. At the same time, some women who have been ordained for a number of years and who feel that God may be calling them to more senior posts are frustrated that they are not being considered. What is going on?

Not only is this a well-researched and well-written book, but read through such 'Church' eyes, it offers key insights into some of the issues which we are facing today.

It is increasingly recognized that many women bring a more transformational, collaborative style to leadership, and their contribution will be increasingly needed for good leadership in the future. So what are the barriers to them taking their place alongside men?

The book explores masculine hierarchy, lack of role models for women, the 'boy's club' culture, the difficulty in getting leadership training or experience when for many their 20s is the time for child-bearing. Women tend to under-sell themselves, and need to build self-esteem so that they have more confidence in what they can do.

Action is needed by organizations to make them more welcoming to women. Strategies for women include coaching, mentoring, career planning, understanding organizational politics and establishing women's networks.

One delight of the book is the number of cartoons, which, while supposedly illustrating corporate life, also shed much light on the situation in the church: 'Y'see, there're just no women around to choose from', say three men, oblivious of a whole number of women underneath them desperately trying to make their way upwards. Or: a

man welcoming a new woman director, and pointing to the hat rack of men's hats, says : 'And this is where we all hang our hats'.

In conclusion: 'We have argued in this book that men and women lead differently, that for historical reasons, business organizations still bear the imprints of masculine values, norms and patterns of behavior and that, as a result of this, cultures of companies frequently don't 'fit' women, particularly at senior level where women remain thin on the ground.

Two consequences arise from this. The few women who do manage to reach the top of large companies often feel abraded by the cultures they find there, and women just below the board, who look up at the tip of the management pyramid, often decide not to participate, because the price they will have to pay seems too great.'

In some ways it's encouraging that the church is not alone, or indeed so far behind, when it comes to a balance of women and men in leadership. This book provides many insights into the issues from both sides - that of women and the existing hierarchy - which could lead to real progress in the future.

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