

# “Can anyone here play the piano better than my wife?”

by Stephen Rand

What an interesting question to start a Tearfund weekend conference! The weekend's host thought he was just asking for some help with worship accompaniment. Another colleague, sitting next to me, audibly winced – and was still throbbing with anger when the session finished an hour later. *He* thought his question was a light-hearted way of solving a problem; *she* marked it down as yet another example of the crass insensitivity of male Christian leadership.

A few years later I remember the moment I discovered – after being an elder for some time, mark you – that

- a) not only did the trust deeds forbid women members to vote on matters of finance and property
- b) not only had the church not been informed of this significant fact
- c) not only did the elder who did know make a private count of men only votes when relevant to ensure that the trust deed rules were not violated
- d) not only for years had it been considered too complicated to change the trust deed, and therefore right to continue with this remarkable subterfuge
- e) but it was not thought that many, if any, of the women would have any problem with this arrangement.

Then there was the woman I got to know because of Clive Calver's insistence that Spring Harvest's main seminars should always include a woman in the speaking team. She was an excellent, gifted communicator – and recently we invited her to speak at Kairos. At some point that morning I discovered that the leaders of the Baptist Church where she was on the staff had asked for her visit to us not to be included on their Sunday notice-sheet – they did not want the church to know she was preaching.

Years ago I attended a mission agency conference where the issue of women in leadership was the main topic. That was where I discovered that there were those (men) who could argue, apparently seriously, that the Bible taught that women could be allowed to speak to a mixed audience on a Wednesday but not on a Sunday.

Now in some ways it is quite impertinent of me to tell these stories, because while they made me angry I did not feel the pain; empathy is not easy for English white middle-class men. Women, especially those who have been anywhere near thinking of getting involved in Baptist ministry, will almost certainly be able to multiply these stories ad infinitum and ad nauseam.

I have only dared to recount them myself because I realised a long time ago that if men just let these things pass, things do not change, and we would continue – by silence and default if not by intention – to hamstring the church by seriously hampering the ministry opportunities of over half its membership, and maintaining a significant barrier to effective evangelism among women.

So just to be provocative, here's a short list of some aspects of this issue that frustrate me most about the difficulties Baptist churches have in allowing women to take God-given responsibility in leadership:

1. For people that believe in the 'priesthood of all believers' we seem often to have a curiously high view of ordination – and in practice we therefore believe in the 'ministership' of men. We partly get into difficulty because the denominational default is the minister who is the preacher who is the leader. So endless hours are spent discussing whether a woman can be the sole leader, rather than addressing the more significant issue: how are we going to develop shared leadership – of men and women – so that it is practiced by leaders, understood by members, releases gifts, transforms the church and impacts the community?

2. Mainstream has a particular opportunity to actively counteract the all-too-readily accepted assumption that truly Biblical churches believe that leadership is male, and those with women in leadership have compromised with the spirit of the age. The opposite is true. But it needs to be said. Mainstream regional groups can help to get the theology straight; men who are preaching need to preach it and men in leadership need to make every effort to practice it.

3. Inclusive language in Scripture is not about political correctness for its own sake; it is about making sure we have an accurate contemporary translation. Inclusive language in church is not about political correctness, it is about a right and proper and holy sensitivity. If political correctness means trying to avoid unnecessary offence and speaking to and about people with words that demonstrate to congregation and community your respect for them – men and women, white and black, young and old - as human beings made in the image of God, then not only am I all for political correctness, I think God is too: we are talking about basic kingdom values.

And let's not argue that because not every woman has a problem with this issue there is not a problem: not every slave wanted to be free.