

'That Joke Isn't Funny Any More'

By Adam Eakins

The joke goes, 'where do you stand on women in the church? Don't stand on them – sit on them – on their laps'. It's not especially funny and probably offensive, most likely to have been told by a man. A man writing about issues relating to women in ministry is probably not a helpful thing and I hope this issue of Talk Magazine is not dominated by men but allows the voices of women to be heard on this issue of gender and leadership.

However, as I sit down to put pen to paper (actually, fingers to the keyboard) I am really struggling to know what to write and feel that if I seek to write on this issue I would not be writing from a position of experience but maybe ignorance. Therefore I am just going to recount my own experience when relating to the issue of gender, ministry and leadership. My aim is just for them to raise questions and thoughts.

I grew up in a church which took a very strong viewpoint on women in leadership. They biblically defended their position especially using the writings of Paul. However, this didn't rest easy with me. There appeared to be some inconsistencies, the Church sent people abroad to lead churches and all of them were women. It seemed that women were unable to lead the men in the church in England but we, as a church, were quite willing to send women abroad to lead whole churches as long as the men in the UK church didn't have to experience it.

On arriving in Northampton as a student in 1990 I did the usual tour of churches in the town arriving at a Baptist Church because they were offering a student tea. The service that evening was the beginning of a new series on women and leadership. Here for me was completely different teaching and a church leader willing to wrestle with the issue head on. I decided to hang around and have been here ever since. Here a new idea to me was laid out. Since the Fall of man the world had seen inequalities in relation to gender. However, when Jesus came we entered a new time when according to Paul (again) there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

So the proposal is that Jesus came to reverse the effects of the Fall and one of those areas was gender inequalities. Therefore as we see equality occurring in different areas of life we are seeing the outcome of Kingdom of God at work. Again, maybe you agree or disagree?

I have served in a number of leadership teams and most of these have had women within them. All the teams have had very talented individuals, whether male or female, who have added a great deal to the team, given direction for the vision and each team was the richer for it. I have been lead well by both women and men and have come to the conclusion that issues relating to gifting, character and calling are far more important than gender. However it's important not to see people as gender neutral as that is part of who God

created us to be and it is important that men are men and women are women, whatever that means!

There is one thing that most of the women who I have worked with have in common. Their pathway into leadership positions was much harder than their male counter-parts. They had received far less encouragement, have faced more obstacles and prejudice. However, they had made it but what about those who didn't because of attitudes still found in some of our churches today.

I had the privilege of meeting many emerging leaders during my five years with Joshua Generation. The one question that I could guarantee to be asked by women was, 'where they could go to find women in leadership who would be willing to mentor and guide them?' They were struggling to find role models who would be willing to invest in and encourage them. This was mainly to do with the lack of women leaders who were visible to younger leaders. It was very difficult here to advise people about the best way to find a female mentor and maybe there is a role for Mainstream in enabling this to happen so that in the future women who sense the calling of God on them as leaders would find other women who are already in leadership who would journey with them.

These are some of my reflections on the issue of gender. We still probably have a long way to go but I guess it starts with us valuing each other as God does and allowing people to lead according to gifting, calling and character, seeking first the Kingdom of God.

Adam is Student Pastor at Broadmead Baptist Church where he mainly leads a fresh expression of church called Quench. He plans to start training in September to be a Baptist Minister which his two children are not sure is a good idea!!! He is married to Karen who is a Social Worker with the NSPCC and also has a dog who does very little in the way of housework. He is a happy man when given a glass of red wine, a good book and listening to anything by The Smiths or Billy Bragg. He also loves cricket but who doesn't?