

Divine Love: The Power of Christian Hope

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Response

by

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Holiness is the message of hope for our denomination, and should be for all Christians. The problem is not the message; it may be the messenger. The Church of the Nazarene is what its local churches are. General leaders may exercise influence to change a culture over time. But for change to take place regarding women in ministry, a high degree of change-energy must originate at the local church and district levels and in the classrooms of our theological institutions.¹ Though the *Manual* paragraph is hidden in the appendix, at the General Assembly level (which guides the church at all levels) our denomination has a position on women in ministry.²

Every local church promotes the call to ministry. Men and women get excited about and respond to God's call mostly in local church settings. Support and encouragement from pastors, relatives, and the entire congregation is given to both, men and women. But as local congregations seek to fill vacant senior pastor positions, women candidates seldom make the top of the search list. A survey of laywomen in local congregations indicates a marked preference for male over female pastor figures. So, a "machist" attitude toward women by Nazarene males is not the problem. A similar reaction surfaces among patients of both genders indicating a greater preference, when the option is given, for male as opposed to female physicians in general practice.

On the other hand, we need to recognize that the visibility of some women called to ministry in many instances is a problem. Some local churches find it difficult to conceive of women as potential senior pastors, because congregations have no or little opportunity to know who they are.

On many occasions, ministerial couples (wife and husband) are well mixed for a local congregation to technically call on her husband — but she really weighed heavily enough³ in the decision for that church to invite him (and her) to be its pastor. When single pastors are available, the odds for male or female candidates to be called to minister in a local congregation diminished proportionally compared to ministerial couples. Local congregations are slightly more likely to call a competent single male than female minister.

On a curious note: Single women missionaries are rarely invited to pastor Nazarene congregations in the United States, even if they successfully served overseas as pastors, professors, and / or district superintendents. But male missionaries receive invitations, even when their missionary careers were not very successful.

¹ I believe that theological institutions — especially professors — may contribute in many ways for female, women ministerial students to be provided with principles, guidance, and involvement in local churches so that they may gain higher visibility roles as they are trained.

² Manual 1997, paragraph 904.6.

³ And sometimes, her skills and compassionate heart were the main reason for his election!

Strong ministerial women married to men without ministerial calls present another problem area. Surveys indicate that both individuals need to be well known by a local congregation for her to be elected as the senior pastor. Otherwise, in many cases such men are perceived as weak (an obviously prejudicial view!). Male pastors who happen to be "famous" may be invited by a congregation, even if their wives are unknown or even a "little difficult to be dealt with." Famous women, normally in strong denominational or district leadership positions, were invited to pastor by local congregations. In most cases, the candidates declined the invitations after prayerful consideration.

The chances that another denomination or independent church will welcome women to become their senior pastors — mainly in the American context — are proportionally similar. However, the proportion of women ministers called to pastor rises as the married ministerial couples' presence and availability decrease.

Obviously, there is a work of love to be done at all levels in our denomination, if God's will is to be carried out effectively in the life of every man and woman worldwide. Local congregations need to open their minds to the possibilities of the Gospel, instead of the focusing on the gender, color, or nationality of their pastors. Invitations should be given to any qualified and competent individual whose profile matches the universal principles of ministry — call, compassion for the lost, passion for holiness, competence, and communication skills. Teaching and loving inclusiveness, inclusiveness and loving teaching should be core tasks of every congregation. Where a controlling pattern of power is shown — locally and at any level of the denomination, failure is the destiny station.

Although I believe we need to address the issue of women in ministry, I am more inclined to include them with minorities and other underrepresented groups in the US and other countries. What are God's gifts in the Church of the Nazarene that are hidden? What are the policies that, by being protective or wishy-washy, make the message of holiness less available to a wider world constituency? I believe that influence⁴ at the general leadership level (in writing and by example) should be exercised on local congregations⁵ for women and for persons of any race or color to be included in the search list, if our denomination wants to hopefully be a great holiness movement in this century and for centuries to come.

I disagree with many of Ernest R. Camfield's statements (and have told him so). However, one of his statements should serve as reminder to all Nazarenes, especially to those privileged with the opportunity to lead⁶ our denomination theologically. "The strength of the International Church of the Nazarene lies in the dedicated work of millions of members of the church (sic), and through the dedication of thousands of bi-vocational pastors, evangelists, and missionaries (and their spouses)⁷ in bringing about the union of like-minded people."⁸ And, in my own perception, I want to think that a "like-minded people" is a holiness people.

All Christians, all Nazarenes, are called to make disciples (women preachers included). None should be excluded! We count with God; He counts on each of us!

⁴ Or, "holy pressure", if you want to admit it.

⁵ Through District Superintendents (we need more brave DSes!)

⁶ And by way of love and influence.

⁷ I would add: "NMI presidents, educators, writers, male and females, as well."

⁸ Bulletin "A Short History of the International Church of the Nazarene", Aug. 1, 2001; page 6.