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THE SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF FEMALE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP ON MEMBERS
OF NEW HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP

A PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE HAZELIP SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
CHERYL RUSSELL

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

APRIL 2023

This Doctor of Ministry Project, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Hazelip School of Theology of Lipscomb University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Ministry.

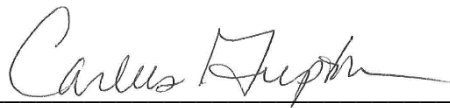
THE SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF FEMALE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP ON THE MEMBERS
OF NEW HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP

By:

Cheryl Russell

for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry




Director of Graduate Program

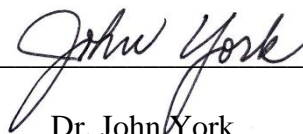
April 23, 2023

Date


Doctor of Ministry Project Committee



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ABSTRACT

Today, many females are waiting for opportunities to serve in pastoral leadership, hoping to partner with local churches to help carry the story of God forward in a moment of great vulnerability for the church, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, very few churches are opening their doors to females for key leadership roles, upholding a long tradition of male-only leadership. This project explores the spiritual impact of egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership on the members of New Heritage Fellowship. My hope is that this project will (1) give insights into the potential impact and possibilities of female pastoral leadership, (2) illuminate an egalitarian model of flourishing, and (3) provide hope to gifted and called spiritual siblings who are yet waiting and praying: “Here am I, send me.”¹

¹ Isaiah 6:8

DEDICATION

*To Tim, Rylee, Skylee, and Kendall,
who have been teaching me how to be a spiritual companion
for twenty-four years.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project is dedicated to those who have walked with me as spiritual companions throughout my life. I have been blessed by a great cloud of pastoral witnesses over the years, and through them, God has instilled in me the desire to learn to walk with others as a spiritual companion. Thank you for giving me glimpses into God's preferred and promised future, and for encouraging me not to give up on the possibility of being a pastor with a local church.

To John York who visited me at a coffee shop in Portland, OR for many years encouraging me to be part of this program. I remember asking you *why* I would need to be part of this program. Well, now I know.

To Mallory Wyckoff, Beth Bowers, and Falon Opsahl Barton, thank you for all of your wisdom, encouragement, and patience.

To my MREML and Lipscomb cohort members, who pastored me when I thought there was no way I would be able to find a church to pastor with, and who encouraged me and walked alongside me when I finally found one. I have learned more from you than I can ever express.

To PUMP Church in Portland, OR, God used you to breathe new life into our family at just the right time. If it were not for you, we would not have known what to hope for in a church.

To Maynooth Community Church in Maynooth, Ireland, God used you to show us what healthy leadership, healthy pastoral care, and healthy shepherding looks like.

I am deeply grateful to my learning community and church, New Heritage Fellowship. For so long I thought that a church like ours existed only in my dreams, and yet, here we are. To our shepherds who encourage so often, share power so generously, and love so well. To my siblings at NHF who took a leap of faith and welcomed me as a trusted spiritual companion *and* pastor. I am thankful for the freedom in Christ and the open table that you cultivate and hold so

dear. Thank you for letting me be myself and for loving my family so well. You have shown me that indeed, with God, all things are possible. By God's mercy, this project is *our* project.

To the community of female ministers who have made sure I never felt alone on this journey, you all have shown me when to keep plowing, and when to find better soil.

To my family, especially my parents, who have always had faith in me, and to my mom, my first pastor, who gave me both roots and wings.

To Tim, my favorite spiritual companion and partner in ministry and life, thank you for always pushing me and for always wanting to see my dreams come to fruition. To Rylee, Skyler, and Kendall, all three of you have made me want to be a pastor who listens well and gives people room to explore their faith.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Preparing for a Role That May Never Be

Why are you getting a degree in ministry? You're a woman; you won't be able to use that degree for anything other than maybe children's ministry. I have not heard of a church hiring a woman to be a preacher, not in the Churches of Christ.²

I knew early on in my faith journey that I wanted to work as a minister, but I also knew early on that there were many man-made boundaries that would make that difficult for me as a female. All the lead ministers or clergy in my youth were male, so I didn't see myself reflected in the positions of authority in the churches I attended. Still, I knew at a young age that I wanted to talk with others about Jesus and walk with others in their faith journey to whatever extent they would allow. I grew up Catholic, and my years of catechism were filled with curiosity and questions. My first spiritual companions and the people that had a prominent pastoral role in my life were women, particularly my mom, my aunts, and my female high school catechism teacher.³ The priest in the Catholic parish we attended held the place of highest authority and power, and he presided *over* the Eucharist, but it was the women in my life whom God called to walk *alongside* me, teach me about the Body and Blood of Christ, answer my endless questions, and fill me with a sense of awe and wonder about God. Their dedication and love for their faith overflowed onto me; the seeds that they planted and watered in my heart, soul, and mind grew. They continue to grow to this day.

² One of many such quotes I have heard through the years. This one was from a member of a church I attended in New Mexico, around 2004, after he learned that I was working to obtain a master's degree in ministry and theology from Pepperdine University.

³ In the Catholic parish that I grew up in, females read Scripture, recited prayers, led singing, and served the Eucharist during Mass.

I also knew early on that I would not remain in the Catholic Church, at least not in the official sense. My mom was a Catholic, and my dad grew up Methodist. Growing up in a home with parents of two different faith traditions, there always seemed to be a desire within me to venture out and see what other denominations would reveal to me about the Jesus I spent so much time staring at during Mass. One night in college, at eighteen-years-old, I broke the news to my mom that I was going to “check out some other religions and churches.” I was so worried about hurting her, the woman who taught me how to pray and shared the Good News with me; who insisted that I get up and go to church and invited me to faith commitment; who gifted me with an identity as a child of God. I will never forget that evening. Through tears, she gave me her blessing and told me that she hoped whatever I was looking for helped me grow closer to Christ. I don’t know if either of us slept that night. I think both of us were sad that even though my childhood faith had been a blessing for me, Catholicism was a launching pad for me, and not the place to rest my head. A few days later, my mom gave me a gold ring with a cross on it and Max Lucado’s *Inspirational Study Bible*.⁴ This was the first time I had a Bible of my own. It even had my name on the leather cover in gold. This was my mother’s way of blessing me and giving my faith room to breathe and grow, but it was also her way of encouraging me to keep learning about Jesus. I am a grown woman now, with young adult kids of my own, one of whom is eighteen, and I now marvel at the healthy attachment that my mother had to my faith. She gave me roots and wings. This is the kind of spiritual companion that I want to be.

⁴ Max Lucado, *The Inspirational Study Bible* (Dallas, TX: W Publishing Group, 1995). To this day, the New Century Version of the Bible is my favorite.

A few days later, I read the entire Gospel of Matthew on my own.⁵ The seeds that had been planted and watered within me for so many years grew that evening. I was overwhelmed by the story of Jesus; more than that, I was overwhelmed by Jesus. What captivated me most of all was the way that Jesus used his tremendous power, authority, and privilege. In Jesus, I saw a man with power and privilege who refused to acquire more power and privilege in the wilderness. In Jesus, I saw a man with power and privilege who invited people with less power and privilege to become his disciples and ministry partners. In Jesus, I saw a man with great power and privilege who shared his power with others. In Jesus, I saw a man with great power and privilege who use it to heal, feed, and bless others. In Jesus, I saw a man with great power and privilege give pointed warnings to people, especially religious people, who used *their* power and privilege to oppress and exclude others. In Jesus, I saw a man with great power and privilege who told his followers to “count the cost” and then showed them what that really meant. I liked this Jesus. I liked him a lot. It was very clear to me that I wanted to spend more time learning about him.

I visited several churches in our small town, but nothing sparked. I was asked to play church league softball and ended up on a team that was part of a house church affiliated with the Churches of Christ, a tradition I later learned started in the early 19th century by two men. Alexander Campbell and Barton W. Stone led two separate movements that sought to restore the principles of the early Christian church as they believed it was described in the New Testament.⁶

⁵ I love and prefer reading and interpreting biblical texts in community. However, growing up in a liturgical tradition, I started reading Scripture on my own later in life. I am thankful that the first time I sat and read through an entire book of the Bible, that it was just me, my open heart, my open mind, and the Holy Spirit. These early adventures reading Scripture were blessedly unencumbered by traditions and “experts.”

⁶ Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1993), 15.

This was my first experience with a house church. I really enjoyed the intimacy, laid-back atmosphere, and absence of hierarchy. More than anything, I loved the Bible study. I was able to sit with a loving group and the open-minded minister and ask question after question. I knew this was the kind of community that I was seeking. I transferred to a university in New Mexico the next semester, and the minister from that small house church introduced me to the campus minister at a Church of Christ. Being part of that campus ministry was one of the most meaningful, growth-oriented, and fun times in my life. It is also where I met my husband and ministry partner, Tim. In that community, I discovered my deep love for congregational ministry and my gift for leadership and teaching. I participated in every possible activity and event, especially if it involved Bible study, teaching, and community. Despite running into the hierarchical structure a few times and being told by many people that, as a female, I would not be permitted to teach or have authority over males of a certain age, I was hired as the summer youth intern. That summer internship was amazing, and it turned into three full years of ministry work with families and teens. I loved it.

It was a life-giving job where I could be creative and walk alongside young people that were just as curious as I was. I knew that I wanted to be a minister, but I also began to seriously question whether that was possible in this new denominational tradition that barred women from speaking in the assembly and even from passing Communion trays. I was concerned about the power dynamics I witnessed, and I was learning quickly that the Churches of Christ were known for limiting the roles of women and in some cases silencing women.⁷ I began to experience this

⁷ There are some mainline Churches of Christ that allow limited participation of females, and a small number allow for the full participation of females. The majority of Churches of Christ prohibit females from preaching or teaching in the assembly, leading songs, reciting prayers, reading Scripture, teaching males preteen and older, or serving as elders or deacons. Many do not permit females to serve Communion during worship services. For the most part, Churches of Christ, even those that are more inclusive of females, uphold a hierarchy that insists on male headship.

subjugation and silencing more frequently as a youth ministry intern.⁸ I was one of very few female interns in the Southwest in 1995. It was common to be the only female intern at youth events and to field tons of questions from other interns, youth ministers, and parents about my role. They all seemed to want to know exactly how much authority I had and if I was the intern “for the girls.” Some also wanted to know what sort of boundaries our ministry staff had in place to “protect ourselves from the appearance of impropriety.”⁹ It was made clear to me through several interactions and conversations with church leaders and church members that in their view, there was only so far that I could go before I overstepped a “divine boundary” and upset God. It was also clear to me that many of my spiritual siblings did not trust women—women like me—and that this would be one of the obstacles I would have to maneuver in my participation in ministry. I tried to navigate my call to congregational ministry without upsetting the status quo too much. It was a fine line to walk, and there were painfully few female examples for me to learn from or speak with about my ministry calling.

Marriage and children blessedly preoccupied me for a while, but ministry was never far from my mind, and I got involved in other ways. Tim and I taught teen classes together after we

The two prominent biblical texts that these prohibitions come from are I Corinthians 14:34-35 and I Timothy 2:8-12. For more history on the Churches of Christ hermeneutic regarding women, see John Mark Hicks, *Women Serving God* (John Mark Hicks, 2020), 23-44.

⁸ Once at a youth conference in Texas, I was told that to teach a class with my male counterparts, I would have to sit on the floor and could only respond to their questions. Sitting on the floor and answering questions ensured I did not have authority over the males in the room. This was one of the most painful and embarrassing experiences of my life. I tried it for one class, and then told my male co-teachers that I could not do it again. It was too demeaning.

⁹ This is when I first learned about the “Billy Graham Rule,” which basically stated that no man should be alone with a woman that was not his wife. The negative impact of this rule on church culture in general and female pastors specifically cannot be overstated. Healthy boundaries and knowing your own vulnerabilities is important and should be discussed and acted on in partnership, but a blanket rule like this contributes to a culture of distrust of women (and men) and undermines the example of male and female partnership we see in the Gospels and The Early Church (Matthew 27:55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 2:36-38, 8:1-3, 23:27-49, 24:1-11; John 4, 19:25-27; Acts 2; Romans 16). See, Jonathan Totter, “The Problem with the ‘Billy Graham Rule.’” RELEVANT, January 26, 2018. <https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/problem-billy-graham-rule/>.

moved to Albuquerque, NM and started attending another, more traditional Church of Christ. I also became a leader in a local interdenominational group for moms. I knew I was not supposed to admit it, but I felt spiritually suffocated by the teachings and practices of the church we attended and the Churches of Christ in general. For instance, I was allowed to teach if I taught *alongside* Tim. I loved teaching with Tim, but it was strange to me that it was his male presence that made it permissible for me to teach, even though I wrote most of the lessons. He was a gifted teacher, too, but it was his *gender*, not his gifts, that trumped my gifts for study and legitimized my voice as a teacher. I felt most spiritually alive and invigorated in open, diverse settings in which people of all genders could learn about Jesus and the Kingdom together. I really loved teaching and talking about the Kingdom of God. However, the constant reminder that I was a subordinate, and therefore relegated to team-teaching with a male, only in classrooms, only to children, teens, and women felt suffocating. More importantly, the homogeneity and enforced hierarchy of these settings seemed a far cry from the communal discipleship modeled by Jesus that had captured my imagination when reading the Gospel of Matthew just a few years before.¹⁰ I felt the excitement that I had always had about faith begin to languish. When an opportunity arose in Albuquerque to obtain a master's in ministry and theology from Pepperdine University, I jumped at the chance. Tim did, too, and we completed this satellite program together in two years. It was amazing to be in that program with males and

¹⁰ Tim and I once attended an adult class on the role of women in the church. I was hopeful; several attendees asked questions about specific women in the Bible. The next Sunday, the class teachers, also a husband-and-wife team, brought in an elder to speak with us, and it was made clear that we were not allowed to bring up any of the women in the Bible. We would only be talking about the verses that the teachers had selected for the class, and the matter was closed. It was fascinating to me that we could not even include the actual women in the Bible in a conversation about women in the church.

females, talking, learning, and growing together. That learning cohort was the fresh air that I needed for my faith to grow and flourish again.

In our *History of the Churches of Christ* class, I learned more about the history of the subjugation of women, but I also learned about women from the Restoration Family like Nancy Towle, Nancy Cram, Abigail Roberts, and Clarissa Danforth, female ministers and preachers who despite much objection and even threats of violence, pushed for the greater inclusion of women in the church and the Kingdom.¹¹ I also learned about female leaders in the Bible that God used to carry the story of God forward, sometimes in very vulnerable moments, such as Miriam, Huldah, Abigail, Deborah, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla, Phoebe, and many more. There were other females in my cohort who felt a call to ministry, so I began to see myself in women from both the past and the present and to feel less alone in my calling. My faith grew within this learning community and so did my love for congregational ministry, urban ministry, and missional living.

Right after graduation, we began praying that God would send us somewhere to serve, where both Tim and I, and all three of our kids, could serve based on our gifts and not on our gender. Tim took a job with a tech company in Portland, OR, and the Spirit seemed to join us very specifically with the PUMP Church of Christ in Northeast Portland. It was a marvelous joining. PUMP was egalitarian; all five of us were able to serve and lead in various capacities, and our family grew in a myriad of ways. I was able to lead children's ministry and congregational ministry with others, though not in an "official" or paid capacity. We were part of that church community that sought to be deeply engaged in its surrounding neighborhood for

¹¹ Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices*, 22.

eight years. It was here that we experienced a call to missional living, a call to justice, mercy, and faith, and what some call “the priesthood of all believers.”¹²

In 2010, I enrolled in the Master of Religious Education (MRE) Program at Rochester College to obtain a degree in Missional Leadership. It was another cohort learning program, and it was the best program I could have participated in as someone who felt called to be a congregational minister and a missional leader. My cohort was amazing, vulnerable, and wise, and the program itself was incredibly practical. I loved the missional focus, and the curriculum and discussions caused me to think about power and the way that churches and church leaders hold and exercise power. I completed that program with the desire to move away from paternalistic and triumphalistic ministry and move towards ministry founded in mutuality.

I also did some church consultation work with a group called The Partnership for a Missional Church (PMC), and I loved it. All my gifts, passions, and training seemed to collide during this time. Yet, I had this feeling in the back of my mind that I was going to have two ministry degrees in a denomination that would not grant me the opportunity to use them in an official capacity. I joined a group for women in ministry that included many women from the Churches of Christ. I knew I was not alone; many of my sisters were struggling to find churches to use their gifts and training. In 2013, Tim’s tech job asked us to move to Ireland temporarily, and though it was difficult to depart from our beloved church and neighborhood community, which had begun to overlap significantly, we agreed to go.

¹² As I understood this phrase at the time, every Christian was a “priest” and part of the priesthood of all believers, regardless of gender. There was no hierarchy. I also understood the phrase to have come from 1 Peter 2:9. What that meant within this egalitarian church (and other egalitarian churches that I have been part of) is a culture of equality, mutuality, and partnership within the Body of Christ. Martin Luther purported this doctrine to critique the Roman papacy, which he believed was dividing the church into the “spiritual estate” and the “temporal estate” that he felt had resulted in abuses of power. See Kristen Padilla, “Mothers of the Reformation,” *Christianity Today*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/november/mothers-of-reformation-women-ministry-luther-preaching.html>.

Moving to Straffan, Ireland preoccupied me for a time. We loved getting to travel, be in a new community, and put our developing missional identities to the test. The people in the village we lived in embraced us and we learned to rely on their gracious hospitality.¹³ We were part of the local Catholic parish attached to the school our kids attended, which was lovely for me because of my childhood faith, and we also participated in a Protestant community church another town over. Both communities were wonderful and embraced our family wholeheartedly. It was good for us to hear narratives about the world, the U.S., and Christianity that were not American. We were very blessed to experience the kind of mutuality in relationship that only the Holy Spirit can create. It was a breath of fresh air to be with people simply as good neighbors and good humans, with no strings attached, and no hidden agendas. We, the products of rugged individualism, “self-sufficiency,” and paternalistic American evangelicalism, were now the ones being hosted, cared for, and led by our new friends, neighbors, and spiritual siblings.

The Protestant community church where we spent a great deal of time was egalitarian. All the members of the church seemed to function as equals and had access to all aspects of the community. At this church, we enjoyed our first taste of a healthy flourishing eldership that consisted of both females and males. It was incredibly healing, especially for me.¹⁴ Our time in Ireland was blissful, and God used it to reveal to us a deep and meaningful theology of hospitality and mutual collaboration. After living so far away from family for two years, we

¹³ Ireland is called The Land of Thousand Welcomes.

¹⁴ I had been to several painful all-male elders’ meetings during our years going to Churches of Christ in New Mexico. I often requested the meetings already knowing the outcome, but I would ask if women could do things like pray or read scripture or inquire about why certain boundaries were imposed on females. After we had our kids, and could see that one of our daughter’s had a gift for speaking, I once asked for a meeting to request that the elders please stop opening the service by praying for our, “Sons to grow up to be the leaders of the church and our daughters to grow up to be good supportive wives.” The prayer continued.

knew when we moved back to Portland in 2015 that we wanted to be closer to family, who all lived in New Mexico and Texas.

In 2016, Tim found a job in a suburb of Dallas, TX, where we ended up. I struggled to find a job, and we had a very tough time finding an egalitarian church near our home. We looked for over a year; we called that our “wilderness period.” Tim and I wondered if moving to “The Bible Belt” would mean the end of the road for us in terms of institutional church. Even the more “progressive” churches we visited were a far cry from being egalitarian. We saw and heard from very few women during our myriad of visits to churches all over the Dallas Metroplex. I already felt guilty about moving our kids again, especially to “The Bible-Belt,” after living in more progressive environments. My guilt and fear were exacerbated by the overabundance of hierarchical church visits. I was concerned about our kids, because they had articulated to us that they were not interested in being part of non-egalitarian churches. I gave up on the idea of ever working in congregational ministry during this time. It was a bleak period for our family spiritually.

I took a job at a Christian non-profit as a social services director, which allowed me to dust off some of my ministry and theology skills and passions. The work scratched some of my ministry itches, like seeking justice, teaching, and partnering with other churches and organizations to support marginalized members of the community. It was hard work, too. There were some good days, when I saw God working in difficult situations, but there was also a lot of crisis management, trauma, and broken systems to navigate. Many days I went home certain that despite how hard I’d worked all day, I had not helped a single person in any tangible way. I was at this job for almost two years when a friend told me about a small church, not far from our home, that was looking to hire a new community minister and that the position was open to

women. I wasn't too interested at the time because I did not believe it was true. Even if they were to accept female applicants, I doubted that the church would truly be ready to have a female pastor. However, the job description appealed to me and reflected my experience as a missional leader. After staring at the job description for several days, I found myself sending an email to the hiring team with a resume, cover letter, and sermon attached. Late that evening, I got an email back saying that I would be entered into the pool of candidates at New Heritage Fellowship (NHF).

A few moments early in my journey with NHF indicated that it might be the right place for me after all. Early in the interview process, the leader of the hiring committee sent me an email inviting me to meet with the group. I replied to the email and realized the next day that I had accidentally greeted him with: "*Hell* Eric, I would love to meet with you all..." I was so embarrassed and certain that would be the end of my interview process. Apparently, the hiring team thought it was humorous and human, and it didn't prevent them from continuing to get to know me.¹⁵ I was completely honest with the hiring committee about who I was and where I was on my spiritual journey, and they were honest with me about New Heritage and where they had been and currently were on their spiritual journey. Tim and I met the shepherds one night for Tex-Mex and we all traded tough questions. It was warm, transparent, and healthy. Tim and I both felt an instant connection that neither of us was expecting. I had told Tim before we went into the restaurant that I was going to take my name out of the pool of candidates. Fear and doubt

¹⁵ Interestingly, this incident opened the door to some great dialogue about being real and human and has led to even more great congregational conversations about the hospitality of imperfection. I have appreciated being in a community where I can make mistakes. Women who are the first to step into a role, like lead pastor, often feel a great deal of pressure to execute everything perfectly, as if the weight of egalitarianism and female inclusion is on our shoulders. This is of course unrealistic and unhealthy, and it is good for me to be in a community where that is not the expectation.

were controlling my frontal lobe. After that dinner, I decided to stick with it, and we decided to visit the church on a Sunday morning.

The church was only eight minutes from our house. We wanted to be part of a church that felt like part of our neighborhood. I was excited about the proximity to our home but concerned that once we met the members of the church, we would discover that there might be some folks that were not excited about the prospect of having a female minister. My fears were assuaged. Although there were people who expressed anxiety about having a female pastor, most of the people we met were much more interested in our kids than my gender. The members were incredibly warm and welcoming and excited to meet us. During the worship service, we observed females and males, adults and children, all up front guiding the service. We witnessed partnership and mutuality, and we were reminded instantly of our longing for both. Most importantly, our three teenagers witnessed transparency and truth-telling about life and faith. It felt very people-centric and not role-centric. I had a lump in my throat and a feeling in my gut that made talking difficult. When we got in the car to go home, it was apparent that everyone felt the same way; all three of our kids said they loved it and wanted to go back. Our subsequent visits were similar, and we all thought something significant was happening. I had the feeling that all my life experiences up to that point might have been preparing me for this position. Perhaps, I would be a pastor with a congregation after all.

I share this personal story not because it is special; on the contrary, I share it because, in many respects, it is ordinary. It is the story of many women. Lots of females are called into ministry, have leadership-oriented gifts, and despite a myriad of obstacles and discouraging voices over many years, they obtain ministerial and theological training, work to get ministry experience in any way they can, and then wait in hopeful expectation that a door will open.

The Ever-Present Glass Ceiling

The Purpose of this Study

It was to my great surprise, and by God’s mercy, that I was anointed as the full-time lead pastor with New Heritage Fellowship on November 18, 2018. The original pastor (a shepherd) of NHF anointed my head with oil (along with every member of our family).¹⁶ The most influential spiritual leaders in my life were women, and I knew from years in ministry that God had used me to encourage others in their faith. Nevertheless, it was a day I never thought would come. I have now been the lead pastor at New Heritage Fellowship for four years, and I am thankful for the ways the Spirit prepared me and our family for this role, and then joined us and New Heritage together. I enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry Program at Lipscomb University during my first year as pastor.

I knew early on that I wanted this project to illuminate the egalitarian culture of New Heritage Fellowship, and specifically, to have a record of NHF’s intentional decision to employ and anoint a female as their *lead* pastor. I wanted to do this particular project because so few churches are hiring females for lead pastoral roles.¹⁷ The 2015 National Congregations Survey

¹⁶ This anointing was very moving. I have always loved the story of the woman who anointed Jesus’ head with oil in Mark 14:3-5. Some in attendance thought it was a waste, but she felt compelled to give a public witness to the identity of Jesus. I felt the oil on my head, and I watched in both fear and awe as every member of our family was anointed, and it gripped me. Just like the woman in Mark 14, some would say that anointing a female pastor was a waste, but this community was making a public declaration about our identity as partners, shepherds, as well as my identity as their pastor. The shepherd who anointed me was the first pastor of NHF and he was very intentional about this ritual. It was meaningful on multiple levels. I understood something about anointing on that day that I had never really grasped before. I also understood something about the kind of leader I wanted to be, thanks to NHF’s first pastor. He had very purposefully shifted a dynamic of leadership, trust, and agency towards me in a public and communal way. I have seen leaders at NHF do this repeatedly: disseminate the power and privilege they have to others.

¹⁷ Using information from the Community of Women Ministers, which is group of female ministers affiliated with the Churches of Christ, I estimate that approximately 0.1% of mainline Churches of Christ have a full-time female preacher or lead minister. It is difficult to accurately determine the percentage of female preachers within the Churches of Christ, as the term “preacher” is not necessarily synonymous with “pastor” or “clergy” and may refer to a wider range of roles and responsibilities within the church. A “preacher” is typically the principal leader of a

showed that even though three out of every five Protestant congregations in the United States had policies that allowed women to serve in lead pastoral roles, women only actually served as the “senior or solo pastoral leader” in 11% of congregations. Males retained solo leadership in approximately nine out of ten congregations in the United States.¹⁸ I knew these data points from my years in ministry, and I was aware that by hiring a female as their lead pastor, NHF (and I) had traversed into somewhat new territory, particularly for a church in North Texas with a mainline Churches of Christ affiliation. I started to think that sharing NHF’s journey with female pastoral leadership could be beneficial to the conversation about female pastoral leadership. It was also clear early in the process of writing the project that the egalitarian culture of NHF would be a significant factor in the project because it was this culture that made it possible for NHF to hire me, trust me as their senior leader, and bless me with agency from the beginning. Ethically, I did not want to send a message that any church could just hire a female pastor, and everything would be fine. In truth, the culture of a church is critical to any new pastor or preacher, but for a church embracing female pastoral leadership for the first time, it is essential to survey and tend to the soil of the culture; otherwise, damage can be done to both the female pastor and the church.

Church of Christ with elders (usually all male) acting as overseers. Additionally, the Church of Christ is a decentralized denomination with no central governing body that keeps records of churches, preachers, or the gender of preachers, or data from Hispanic Churches of Christ, Black Churches of Christ, or other groups affiliated with the Churches of Christ. More information about the current conversation in the Churches of Christ regarding the role of women can be found here: Bobby Ross, Jr., “Women in the Church,” *The Christian Chronicle*, February 24, 2020, <https://christianchronicle.org/women/>.

¹⁸ Mark Chaves and Alison Eagle, “Congregations and Social Services: An Update from the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study,” *Religions* 7.5 (2016): 55. The 2018-2019 study indicated that women serve as the principal leaders in 13.5% of congregations. For more information on the multi-year data set from The National Congregations Study see, “National Congregations Survey,” *The Association of Religion Data Archives*, n.d., accessed February 2, 2023, <http://www.theARDA.com> www.theARDA.com.

When I started working with NHF in 2018, I knew many gifted, trained, and qualified females that were prayerfully waiting for a church to open their doors to female pastoral leadership. (I still do.) Despite the number of females obtaining seminary degrees, many people are unaware (either intentionally or unintentionally) of the number of gifted females who have been trained for congregational ministry and congregational leadership. Female representation has been great in all three of the post-graduate ministry programs in which I have been a student. I have met some stellar female pastors in those programs. Although males still outnumber females in terms of seminary and ministry training, females are obtaining seminary degrees. In a *Christianity Today* article titled “The Seminary Gender Gap,” in the 2012-2013 school year, females accounted for 1 in 3 M.Div. students and at evangelical seminaries, females made up 1 in 5 M.Div. students.¹⁹ Despite the glass ceilings that women encounter, both in terms of seminary training and pastoral leadership opportunities, women who feel called into ministry continue to prepare for ministry and pastoral leadership roles. These women of faith are certain they have been called into congregational ministry and leadership, but they run into obstacle after obstacle and a wave of voices insisting that for theological, sociological, psychological,

¹⁹ Sharon Miller Hodde, “The Seminary Gender Gap,” *Christianity Today*, May 23, 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/may-web-only/seminary-gender-gap.html>.

familial, and even political reasons, women cannot and should not serve in leadership roles in churches.²⁰ In many circles, a lead female pastor has always been anathema.²¹

As I mentioned, even among churches that have policies *allowing* females to serve in lead pastoral roles, very few are hiring females for these positions.²² As a result, male and female congregants are deficient in female spiritual role models and a cycle of male-only leadership continues. In their book, *She Preached the Word*, Benjamin Knoll and Cammie Bolin cite the *Pew Religious Landscape Survey* from 2014, which found that 91.3% of respondents reported that the most influential priest, rabbi, pastor, or spiritual leader when they were growing up and attending religious services was a male, while only 8.7% said that this person was a female.

²⁰ Theological positions are some of the most difficult barriers for females to overcome in terms of access to leadership roles. See, for example, this article that asserts the validity of a “soft complementarian” position and further asserts that an egalitarian view misreads the Bible in favor of culture: Bobby Harrington, “Complementarian vs Egalitarian: 10 Questions for Egalitarian Church Leaders,” *Renew*, January 24, 2022, https://renew.org/complementarian-vs-egalitarian/?fbclid=IwAR1e2sv5U0P_f4RCRUr3AqrPwzpbhfjQUMQLUz1NXwn-bTuGW19hOpHEIQw.

²¹ Women’s ordination remains largely off limits in many denominations, such as the two largest Christian groups in the U.S., the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), as well as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See The Conversation, “Women Lead Religious Groups in Many Ways — Besides the Growing Number Who Have Been Ordained,” *Religion News Service*, December 8, 2021, <https://religionnews.com/2021/12/08/women-lead-religious-groups-in-many-ways-besides-the-growing-number-who-have-been-ordained/>.

²² A 2021 Pew Research survey showed that women also make up a small percentage of religious leaders within Black Protestant churches, and like White Protestant churches, it is uncommon for women to be placed in the position to lead large Black congregations. Findings also show that in many Black congregations, male experiences and roles as leaders are emphasized over women’s, and that, “Black Americans are much less likely to have heard sermons, lectures or group discussions about discrimination against women or sexism than about racial discrimination.” However, this same survey also shows that the majority of Black American women (87%) and men (84%) believe that women should be allowed to serve as senior religious leaders of congregations. Large majorities of Black Protestants (86%) and Black Catholics (89%) support this view as well as expressing more egalitarian beliefs. See Mohamed Besheer, Kiana Cox, Jeff Diamant, and Claire Gecewicz, “Faith among Black Americans,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/02/16/faith-among-black-americans/>. For more information about the issues that Black females encounter in terms of pastoral leadership, see Brittini L. Palmer, “The Truth about Black Women in Ministry,” *Sojourners*, November 23, 2021, <https://sojo.net/articles/truth-about-black-women-ministry>.

Evangelicals reported the lowest level of female influence.²³ Given these stats, it is not surprising that most American congregants today have had very little exposure to female leadership and representation in positions of religious and spiritual authority.²⁴ This disparity in female pastoral leadership has intrigued me as a new pastor, because in all of the churches I have attended, female membership and attendance has been higher than male membership and attendance. Indeed, according to Pew Research Data from 2014, women outnumber men in the majority of Protestant traditions in terms of regular church attendance: 40% to 31%.²⁵ More recently, The Hartford Institute for Religion Research found in its 2020 report that surveyed 15,278 U.S. congregations from 80 denominations and religious groups, that most congregations are more female (56%) than male in terms of regularly participating membership.²⁶ Females outnumber males in the majority of congregations, yet females are drastically underrepresented

²³ Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 127-128.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 197-199. This data is interesting and seems somewhat contradictory, because in their research, Knoll and Bolin found that 72% of American respondents said they supported women being permitted to serve as the chief leader in their congregation. However, when it came to their own personal preference, about half of American churchgoers said that gender did not matter, but of those who did have a preference, the vast majority preferred a male. Nearly half, 40%, said they preferred a male to lead their congregation, in comparison to fewer than 10% who stated they preferred a female. Knoll and Bolin believe that support for female clergy is closer to 55%. Interestingly, they also found that: “Those who would specifically prefer a woman to be their personal congregational leader tend to come from congregations that currently have a female leader, while those who would prefer a man tend to be men who are religiously active and orthodox and who are in congregations with male-only policies.” See, Knoll and Bolin, *She Preached the Word*, 197-199.

²⁵ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

²⁶ “Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today Overview,” *Faith Communities Today* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2020), <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2020-survey/>, 8.

in church leadership. This same study shows that of the 15,278 congregations surveyed, only 10% of them were led by a female; 90% of them were led by a male.²⁷

It is interesting to bring this data about the paucity of female pastoral leadership into conversation with the myriad of studies that show the importance of both girls and women having positive female role models in their lives.²⁸ Female representation matters in terms of empowerment, confidence, and self-esteem for both girls and women, and female role models have an amplified benefit for women due to the gender biases, institutional barriers, and negative stereotypes women have long had to contend with across a wide swath of professional domains.²⁹ Yet, despite females outnumbering males in terms of church membership, despite the known benefits of female role models for girls and women, and despite the policies of many churches that allow for female principal leadership, churches overall in the U.S. are holding on to male-only pastoral leadership and male-centric or patriarchal culture.

Leadership matters, and for good or ill, congregants are often shaped by the principal figure or leader of their church. In churches that uphold male headship, males alone occupy the spaces of authority, and even in churches with higher numbers of female lay-leaders, males maintain the decision-making power and the strongest capacity to influence the culture of the church. This imbalance of power seems misaligned with the Kingdom as demonstrated by Jesus.

²⁷ Ibid., 8.

²⁸ In their research, Benjamin Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin found that women who said they *never* had a female religious leader growing up are 10% less likely to agree that they “have high self-esteem” as adults, and they are 30% less likely to “strongly” agree, compared to women who had female clergy at least “some of the time.” In contrast, men who frequently had female congregational leaders growing up have levels of self-esteem that are just as high as those who never had a female congregational leader. See Knoll and Bolin, *She Preached the Word*, 129-133.

²⁹ Penelope Lockwood, Pamela Sadler, Keren Fyman, and Sarah Tuck, “To Do or Not to Do: Using Positive and Negative Role Models to Harness Motivation,” *Social Cognition* 22.4 (2004): 422-450.

Many churches and Christians are pausing to reflect on what kind of environment is needed to help all members flourish. Still, patriarchy has a grip on churches in America, and this is a large reason why the road to equality, female inclusion, and female pastoral leadership has remained the road less travelled. What impact does this imbalance of power have on churches? What impact does male-centric culture have on congregations and on the culture of a church? In this next section, I touch on some of the broader issues that often accompany patriarchalism and male-centric church culture and illuminate the need for more redemptive models.

The Need for Models of Flourishing

*We who follow Jesus are working in wounds,
working with wounds, and working through wounds.*³⁰
– Willie James Jennings

Some of the questions addressed in this project are: Why is church culture important? What kinds of church cultures enable their members to flourish? Do the systems that we have in place in our churches reflect God’s intent for the church and the world? Do these systems reflect the wholeness and completeness that we will witness in the eschaton when God fully establishes God’s reign?

Amy L. Sherman discusses God’s intent in *Agents of Flourishing*, where she describes flourishing as embracing (and working towards) *shalom*, peace, harmony, and wholeness, as God’s ultimate intention for all of creation.³¹ We are made for God and others she says, and we

³⁰ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 139.

³¹ Amy L. Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 14-17, 25. Sherman uses flourishing as a verb. She goes on to describe “genuine flourishing,” which arises out of communion with God as seen in Creation and throughout the biblical narrative. She asserts that followers of Jesus are a royal priesthood that flourishes when our lives are centered on the love of God and neighbor, when we (men and women) seek out the peace and prosperity of our communities as our priestly vocation (Genesis 12:2; Jeremiah 29:7; John 10:10; Revelation 1:5-6, 5:9-10).

are created to flourish and to partner with God in the work of flourishing our communities.³² Even today, “To be a Christian is to be obliged to engage the world, pursuing God’s restorative purpose over all of life, individual and incorporate, public and private.”³³ The work of flourishing is an identity marker and divine vocation for the church in which Jesus is leader. N.T. Wright holds a similar view of this messianic mission, continued by Jesus and the church. In his book, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, Wright says, “The early Christians believed, on the authority of Jesus himself, that the original vision for creation, and for humans within it, had been recaptured and restored through Jesus’s inauguration of God’s sovereign rule. What Jesus did and said was designed to give a decisive answer, in deeds as well as words, to the question, ‘What would it look like if God was running things?’”³⁴ Wright’s question is pointed and powerful. Do our churches reflect what Jesus said and did? Do our churches look and feel to our members and our neighbors like God, who desires the flourishing of all creation, is running things? In the following section, I touch on these questions. I explore who benefits from a male-centric patriarchal culture, and, more importantly, who might suffer or languish within a male-centric patriarchal culture.

The challenges that females face in terms of ordination and finding pastoral leadership roles vary widely and can depend on things like the denomination, the preferences and beliefs of the church community, cultural influences, and a woman’s individual background, skills, and experiences. In many Protestant traditions, females traditionally have been excluded from

³² Ibid., 7. Michael Goheen says of Jesus and *shalom*, “Most of Jesus’s words and actions pertain to the healing of human life; in him, God is restoring human life to its intended shalom.” See, Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 78.

³³ Amy, L. Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing*, 7.

³⁴ N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 77.

leadership roles, especially roles like elder, pastor, or preacher, because those are viewed as authoritative roles. They are also influential roles. This exclusion of females from authoritative roles is often based on a host of factors that are a mix of cultural, social, and theological beliefs and constructs that have been deeply ingrained over time, producing a cyclical phenomenon and a culture that is further fortified by comfort and familiarity. This cyclical effect may explain why females are not being hired for lead pastoral roles, even in traditions that allow female ordination. All church members are impacted by this, but often women, people of a minority status, and children are most detrimentally impacted by these belief systems and cycles. It can be very difficult to change these beliefs, attitudes, and practices, even in more progressive denominations, because male leadership is normative and is operationalized within these congregations. Male headship is the culture of the church, and culture is very difficult to change. Even when congregations make strides to expand the roles and agency of females, even when they recognize that there are issues associated with their hierarchical structure, it can take years for them to make changes to the embedded culture. One major roadblock is theological in nature.

Our theological beliefs reveal the God we believe in, and they determine the practices we engage that shape the culture of our churches. Church culture does not stop at the doors of the church; it also touches the members of a church, their families, even the local community. Culture shapes us, and patriarchal and male-centric cultures shape us as well. Patriarchy is an issue in many places, but according to campus minister Brandi Miller, it has a weightier component when it is asserted by a church, because it alleges that God is also patriarchal. Miller asserts, “The danger of patriarchy in the church is distinct from patriarchy in general. In Christian spaces, patriarchy is not seen as a social phenomenon, but as a God-given directive and order for the flourishing of society. As a result, unquestioned commitments to patriarchy create

the context for the objectification, devaluing and ultimate abuse and traumatization of women.”³⁵

Miller argues that patriarchy cultivates a context or culture that can set the stage for issues, particularly for females, because it sends the message that God has an affinity or preference for males and that males are more like God than females.

Molly T. Marshall, president and professor of theology and spiritual formation at Central Baptist Theological Seminary, holds a similar view. In her article, “Women as Pastoral Leaders Render a Different Vision of God,” she contends: “We know that when men are the normative interpreters of Scripture, heroes of Christian tradition and models for ministry practice, it is understandable that we begin to think that somehow men are more like God than women are. We must reconstruct our theological vision in this regard.”³⁶ There is a long history of genderizing God and then subjugating females. Even in the history of the church, it is Greco-Roman patriarchal norms that are operationalized within the church, not the counter-cultural ministry of Christ. Karen Jo Torjesen, in *When Women Were Priests*, discusses the historical effacement of the feminine nature of God. She says, “Christianity has for the most part been mired in the limited symbol system it inherited from patriarchal societies. But hierarchic patriarchy is not intrinsic to Christianity, to its message, to its eschatological vision of the social order, or to its countercultural origins.”³⁷ In truth, there are feminine metaphors for God in Scripture.

Embracing those metaphors can help give us a fuller and more complete vision of God and help us in our vocation to flourish and help bring new life into our communities. “The Hebrew word

³⁵ Brandi Miller, “Opinion | Patriarchy Has Found a Home in the Pulpit,” *HuffPost*, March 25, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-miller-patriarchy-church_n_5ab797a0e4b008c9e5f83c77.

³⁶ Molly T. Marshall, “Women as Pastoral Leaders Render a Different Vision of God,” *Baptist News Global*, May 9, 2019, <https://baptistnews.com/article/women-as-pastoral-leaders-render-a-different-vision-of-god/>.

³⁷ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 268.

for one of the most important attributes of God is *rahum*, generally translated ‘compassion.’”³⁸ However, the literal meaning is “womb love.”³⁹ *Rahum* carries with it the idea of a yearning for the new life that is present in the womb.⁴⁰ This vision of God yearning for and loving new life is powerful in the context of this project. What new and flourishing life is God yearning for in the church today?

As many churches contemplate the multitude of Christians deconstructing and reconstructing their faith today, perhaps it would be wise to also consider, “What it would look like to extricate the essential teachings of The Gospel from the patriarchal gender system in which it is embedded.”⁴¹ Often, females do not have to look hard to see the connection between the language that churches use for God and their access to areas of the life of the church, especially when it comes to spaces of authority. Power, when it is not shared and dispersed throughout the Body of Christ, leads to power imbalances that can cause suffering for some parts of the body. What impact does a patriarchal power differential have on relationships? Who truly flourishes in a patriarchal church culture? Who suffers in this kind of church culture? The next section addresses the detrimental impact that an absence of gender parity has had in many churches and Christian institutions. Note: Stories of sexual misconduct and abuse are included.

³⁸ Ibid., 259.

³⁹ Ibid., 259.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 259. The same Hebrew term is the basis for the word *rahamim*, generally translated as “mercies.” Yahweh says to her people, “Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even those may forget, yet I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:15). Other texts that describe the feminine nature of God: Jeremiah 49:15; Deuteronomy 32:11; Hosea 13:8; Psalms 17:8, 22:9, 36:7, 91:4; Isaiah 42:14, 66:13; Proverbs 8:14-17, 8:22-35; Luke 13:20-21, 13:34-35, 15:8; Matthew 23:37. Ibid., 259-264. Also see, Deborah M. Gill and Barbara L. Cavaness, *God’s Women: Then and Now* (Colorado Springs, CO: Authentic Books, 2004), 46.

⁴¹ Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests*, 268.

The commitment to patriarchy and complementarianism, and the disparity in female representation in places of authority allow for a cycle of underrepresentation for females, making it more difficult for all church members to be exposed to and to rely on female role models, leaders, and advocates in the places of decision-making and culture-making within a church. What's more, those who uphold patriarchy often systematically efface Jesus and the church in the process. In the hands of some prominent male complementarians, such as John Piper, Mark Driscoll, and James Dobson, Jesus is a powerful masculine warrior who bows to no one.⁴² There is no shortage of material to uphold this system and no shortage of well-known Christian men (and some women) who have fortified it with books, articles, sermons, podcasts, and videos. They forcefully assert that anything less than militant male headship is capitulation to the culture and wayward feminists.

Historian, Kristin Kobes Du Mez, talks about this in her book, *Jesus and John Wayne*, in which she analyzes the vision espoused by some complementarians:

In the end, Doug Wilson, John Piper, Mark Driscoll, James Dobson, Doug Phillips, and John Eldredge all preached a mutually reinforcing vision of Christian masculinity—of patriarchy and submission, sex, and power. It was a vision that promised protection for women but left women without defense, one that worshiped power and turned a blind eye to justice, and one that transformed the Jesus of the Gospels into an image of their own making. Though rooted in different traditions and couched in different styles, their messages blended together to become the dominant chord in the cacophony of evangelical popular culture. And they had been right all along. The militant Christian masculinity they practiced and preached did indelibly shape both family and nation.⁴³

⁴² Sex, gender, and power are often topics of discussion among more assertive complementarians. Fear of effeminate faith abounds in their messages and in their churches. There are plenty of more moderate complementarians, yet the more radical complementarians, such as Mark Driscoll, seem to get the most attention. This form of complementarianism still has a tight grip on evangelicalism. Even after this podcast about Driscoll's abuse of power came out, he found a job as a lead pastor at a church and still has a large following today. See Mike Cosper, "The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill: The Things We Do to Women on Apple Podcasts," *Christianity Today*.

⁴³ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 293.

Kobes Du Mez is correct, and the form that Christianity took has created an imbalance in the places that have the most authority to create culture change. An absence of representation in these areas makes it more difficult for females to gain access to certain areas of the life of the church, more difficult to be taken seriously, and in many cases, this has led to the overprotection of males and the under protection of females and children.

In their book, *A Church Called Tov*, Laura Barringer and Scot McKnight discuss the power abuse issues plaguing many churches and the importance of cultivating a “goodness culture” within a church.⁴⁴ A goodness culture, or a *tov* culture, is a Christlike culture in which every person is valued equally as an image-bearer and empowered to use their Spirit-given gifts and abilities so that they may flourish within the body of Christ and in the world as agents of God’s love.⁴⁵ Their research into church abuse and trauma and creating healthy church culture has a lot to say about the need for a more balanced male-and-female-based culture. Male-centric church cultures negatively impact many members of a “minority” status, but Barringer and McKnight put an impetus on females because of what many females have experienced in churches and because females usually make up more than half of a church congregation.⁴⁶ They

⁴⁴ Laura Barringer and Scot McKnight, *A Church Called Tov: Forming a Goodness Culture That Resists Abuses of Power and Promotes Healing* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Elevate, 2020), 106-107.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 106-107. *Tov*, meaning “good” or “goodness” in Hebrew, occurs more than 700 times in Scripture, and Barringer and McKnight believe that from the first page of the Bible, *tov* is our “executive virtue” for how God wants us to live. Ibid., 86-87. This book also contains information about some of the recent revelations of church abuse and sexual misconduct within some of the most well-known churches in the U.S., by some of the most revered male pastors. One of the major themes that Barringer and McKnight address is power and the misuse of power by those with authority.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 104.

assert that, “How the church treats women is often a barometer of its culture and how it will treat people in general.”⁴⁷

Even in churches that profess to uphold a “softer complementarianism,” an absence of gender parity has been shown to lead to unconscious bias and discrimination against women. When these biases develop and persist, they can manifest in various ways among congregants, such as lower expectations for women’s abilities, unequal access to opportunities, and the systematic undermining of female voices and distrust of female experiences. Moreover, this paucity in female representation contributes to negative reactions to things that should not be foreign to Jesus-followers, like female voices, and even a female presence in certain spaces. In many cases, churches that have developed a male-centric culture—in which a small group of males (or even one male) holds all the power—discover, often too late, that this system has metastasized into a toxic environment that can be difficult to change. This toxicity can be rife with paternalism, intimidation, and an absence of accountability, creating an environment ripe for misconduct, trauma, and abuse.⁴⁸

A lack of gender parity, especially in leadership, often contributes to atrocities that devastate people, churches, and communities. In the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), one of the more patriarchal traditions, a tsunami of such atrocities recently came to light. A 2019 article in *Christianity Today* revealed an abuse crisis within the evangelical community, and many

⁴⁷ Ibid., 104. Barringer and McKnight do link *toiv* and flourishing to the empowerment of women and other marginalized groups. “A church called *toiv* will empower women (and others) within the body of Christ and in the world. In a culture of empathy and compassion, people will not be made to feel invisible. They will be *seen* and *heard*.” (106)

⁴⁸ Ibid., 32. McKnight asserts that, “More needs to be said about abuses of power because power-and-fear-based church cultures are on the rise. I (Scot) have seen on the faces of many (mainly women) a witness to the harsh reality and intense pain caused by such pastors. We need to dig a little deeper, therefore, into the power dynamics of a power-and-fear-based culture, because once it becomes established, it’s very difficult to uproot.”

women provided insight into the suffering of more than 700 victims who had been ignored and silenced. After the revelations were made public, former SBC president J. D. Greear said, “The body of churches needs to repent of a culture that has made abuse, cover-ups, and evading accountability far too easy.”⁴⁹ The women quoted in the article further elaborated on this culture that Greear referenced. One of the women reported being sexually abused by her youth pastor when she was a teenager. She was threatened and bullied for reporting the abuse, and the youth pastor received a standing ovation from the church after confessing to the abuse, calling it a “sexual incident.”⁵⁰

Not all traditional cultures are toxic, however, incidents like these, and attempts to cover them up, loom over those who insist that patriarchy is God’s path to flourishing.⁵¹ In these patriarchal systems, males hold the majority of the power, and are protected, and all too often, women and children are not protected. What’s more, these abuses by powerful Christian figures often do not stay within the confines of the church, detrimentally impacting the witness of the church.⁵² Beth Moore, one of the SBC’s most well-known female authors and teachers, has spoken out on behalf of women and victims. Moore has urged leaders to recognize the intimidating power dynamics in these churches for years, asserting that they need to treat women

⁴⁹ Kate Shellnutt, “10 Women Who Are Changing the Southern Baptist Response to Abuse,” *Christianity Today*, May 17, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/june/sbc-abuse-survivors-advocates-profiles.html>.

⁵⁰ Jules Woodson, “I Was Assaulted. He Was Applauded,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/opinion/jules-woodson-andy-savage-assault.html>.

⁵¹ Kate Shellnutt, “Southern Baptists Refused to Act on Abuse, Despite Secret List of Pastors,” *Christianity Today*, May 22, 2022. Another article about the abuse crisis in the SBC.

⁵² Daniel Silliman and Kate Shellnutt “Ravi Zacharias Hid Hundreds of Pictures of Women, Abuse during Messages, and a Rape Allegation,” *Christianity Today*, February 11, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/ravi-zacharias-rzim-investigation-sexual-abuse-sexting-rape.html>.

with more Christlike care and esteem. Moore speaks to the culture of the SBC by echoing what others have said: “By no means are all victims female, but we will make virtually no progress in dealing with sexual abuse in a Christlike manner until we boldly face the reality that women are not, and have not been, treated in many of our environments with the same value as men. Neither gender has flourished in the Lord over this disparity.”⁵³

Moore’s statement about the flourishing of both men and women resonates with me, because complementarians insist that theirs is the road to flourishing in the home and in the church. However, the scores of reports of abuse and misconduct in churches, Christian institutions, and even at *Christianity Today*, point to a different story.⁵⁴ They say, “‘peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14-15).

Beth Moore’s reference to the absence of flourishing for both men and women points to God’s intent for the ecosystem of the church. Sadly, even in the wake of such destructive revelations, the Southern Baptist Convention is not backing down from their stance that God’s intent is male headship. In February of 2023, the SBC disfellowshipped five churches with female senior or lead pastors, including the well-known mega church, Saddleback Church, founded by Rick Warren.⁵⁵ In the wake of much scandal and harm, of people languishing due to abuse, the SBC chose to double down on their stance to uphold patriarchy. Yet, I find hope in Warren’s recent response to the SBC: “It’s not an accident that the same voices that said we

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Daniel Silliman, “Sexual Harassment Went Unchecked at Christianity Today,” *Christianity Today*, March 15, 2022,

⁵⁵ Kate Shellnutt, “Southern Baptist Convention Disfellowships Saddleback Church,” *Christianity Today*, February 21, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/february/saddleback-church-southern-baptist-sbc-disfellowship-female.html>.

cannot protect women from abuse because of the autonomy of the local church are the same voices that are saying, but we can prevent them from being called pastors....the autonomy only matters if it's convenient for you. For the SBC to say it can't address sexual abuse but can monitor the titles given church staff members is nonsense."⁵⁶ Warren goes on to say that both men and women are needed to fulfill The Great Commission, signaling a shift in his own belief and giving reason for the changes made at his former congregation.

I agree with Warren in this regard—and my hope is that this project illuminates healthier and more Christlike models of flourishing—but first we must interrogate the church ecosystems that we uphold, asking better questions of ourselves moving forward. How can our churches work toward the genuine flourishing of our neighbors and communities if the systems that we uphold do not lead to the flourishing of the people in our churches?⁵⁷ How do we work toward the flourishing of our neighbors if there are people in our churches languishing under our own roofs?

In *A Church Called Tov*, Laura Barringer and Scot McKnight point out that the attitudes of those who insist on male-centrism are driving many gifted females out of the church and into the marketplace, where their gifts are welcomed and where they can flourish.⁵⁸ This is important,

⁵⁶ Mark Wingfield, "Scripture Changed His Mind on Women in Ministry, Rick Warren Tells Russell Moore," *Baptist News Global*, March 14, 2023, https://baptistnews.com/article/scripture-changed-his-mind-on-women-in-ministry-rick-warren-tells-russell-moore/?fbclid=IwAR3qIHWW_4pGVMNQDDq1zKCj68Jgpg6I3wnngDQU3qzr-10uRdxJD8wknMs.

⁵⁷ Rachel Held Evans was one of the first well-known female authors and public theologians to talk openly about patriarchal systems and the connection between patriarchy and abuse. She wrote a series of posts about abuse scandals uncovered in churches all over the U.S. Her work purported that both Scripture and various studies showed that churches and communities that share leadership are happier, safer, and more productive. Her vision was for a Kingdom alternative to patriarchy, matriarchy, and hierarchy that was grounded in partnership, mutuality, and harmony, leading to flourishing for the whole community. See Rachel Held Evans, "Patriarchy and Abusive Churches," *Rachel Held Evans*, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/patriarchy-abuse>.

⁵⁸ Barringer and McKnight, *A Church Called Tov*, 105.

because while it is true that on average women are more religious than men and have historically attended religious services at higher rates than men, more recently, women have been leaving church at higher rates.⁵⁹ Single women are leaving church at even higher rates, with some research suggesting that single women are the most likely group to walk out the door.⁶⁰ The reasons for this exodus of women vary. Women cite things like busy schedules, politics, relational hurt, and not having leaders to talk with about sensitive issues.⁶¹ However, women also cite deeper and more systemic issues like sex abuse scandals, feeling unseen, unequal, and not valued.⁶² As I have thought about my experiences and the stories of others, I have reflected on what kind of church environment is needed so that all members may truly flourish. I am eager to discover if being part of an egalitarian church (with gender parity in leadership) and having a female lead pastor has helped the members of NHF to flourish. I hypothesize that being part of an egalitarian church and having a female pastor has had a positive spiritual impact on members of NHF, and that female pastoral leadership has contributed to their spiritual flourishing (even during a worldwide pandemic).

⁵⁹ Tobin Grant, “Most Women Belong to a Religious Community That Prohibits Them from Being Leaders,” *Religion News Service*, July 9, 2015, <https://religionnews.com/2015/07/09/most-women-belong-to-a-religious-community-that-prohibits-them-from-being-leaders/>.

⁶⁰ Katie Gaddini, “A Large Number of Single Women Are Leaving the Church. Why?” *Relevant Magazine*, January 10, 2023, <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/church/why-are-so-many-single-women-are-leaving-the-church/>. Also see Aaron Earls, “Church Attendance Gender Gap Shrinks, but It’s Not All Good News,” *Lifeway Research*, September 25, 2017, <https://research.lifeway.com/2017/09/25/church-attendance-gender-gap-shrinks-but-its-not-all-good-news/>.

⁶¹ Brianna Griff Chron, “Why Evangelical Women Are Questioning the Church—and Their Faith,” *Chron*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.chron.com/culture/article/evangelical-women-deconstruction-religion-17012629.php>.

⁶² Thom S. Rainer, “Six Reasons Why Women May Be Leaving Your Church,” *Church Answers*, July 20, 2015, <https://churchanswers.com/blog/six-reasons-why-women-may-be-leaving-your-church/>.

Re-Imagining Kingdom, Freedom, and Flourishing

It seems important to reiterate that some of the most significant barriers that women (and congregations) face stem from deeply engrained theological positions, but, even more importantly, from worldly and un-Christlike views on power, privilege, and leadership. I write more about this in chapter four. For now, let us consider that a church's views and use of power are crucial to the process of creating a healthy church culture and ecosystem. Many traditions and churches interpret and elevate certain biblical passages as consecrating male headship and therefore consecrating the prohibition of women from speaking in church and/or holding positions of authority. 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 are often cited in support of this system of belief.⁶³ In her book, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry*, Karoline M. Lewis discusses the challenge of changing theological beliefs that can be crisis moments for some, because it is unsettling when things we have always believed about God are disrupted. Lewis encourages the need for a healthy, transparent, and patient process that helps one move from embedded theology to deliberative theology. She says, "This is crucial when it comes to negotiating the idea of women in ministry in places where this has not been an accepted practice. Part of what you are dealing with is a moment of change, when the embedded theology is now forced to move to deliberate theology."⁶⁴ If the embedded theology and imagination is that God has an affinity for males, a shift in thinking might mean that God has changed, which is

⁶³ I am not addressing these "prohibitive" texts at length in this project because they have not been part of our conversations at NHF, nor have they been discussed in tandem with this project at NHF. There are many resources available that address them. For churches and leaders seeking resources to help shift their church culture towards egalitarianism, and more gender parity, see, for example, Nijay K. Gupta, *Tell Her Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2023).

⁶⁴ Karoline M. Lewis, *She: Five Keys to Unlock the Power of Women in Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2016), 20-34. Caroline's treatment of theological hurdles specific to the "prohibitive texts" is excellent. She offers a great conversation for cultivating a culture shift and moving the culture forward.

disorienting, and requires patience, reoriented imagination (using the Bible), and compassionate pastoring.

The biblical texts—often called “prohibitive texts”—mentioned above have been interpreted in various ways over time, but in many church communities, they are the bedrock for a patriarchy that upholds male domination and female subordination. Patriarchy casts a long shadow, systematically effacing females in the Bible, in church history, and in the pews. Many complementarians insist that there are “softer” and more “biblical” forms of patriarchy. In *Equal to Serve*, Gretchen Gaebelein Hull addresses this claim about soft complementarianism, asserting that any espousal of patriarchy is an espousal of male domination. She asserts, “The very definition of patriarchy presents a male-dominated and male-controlled society and therefore means a philosophy of male supremacy.”⁶⁵ She further asserts, “Today justice issues like discrimination and human rights very much concern us, and we shrink from baldly pronouncing the words *male supremacy*. Yet, if one group is forever subordinate, then the group to which it is forever subordinate must be forever dominant.”⁶⁶

Those who purport to uphold a “softer” form of complementarianism contend that it is possible to uphold patriarchy without it being detrimental to the flourishing of females and the culture of the church. Many resist the language of discrimination and institutionalized discrimination to describe their beliefs and practices because, they contend, they are ordained by God. These arguments are difficult to argue with, especially for women who have been conditioned not to be “difficult” or to question God or those God is believed to have placed in

⁶⁵ Gretchen Gaebelein Hull, *Equal to Serve* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 1998), 82-84.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

authority. In his book, *Finally Feminist*, John G. Stackhouse, acknowledges that many of his complementarian friends insist that they do not deny women's equality, but that they only adhere to prescribed roles for men and women.⁶⁷ However, he also contends that this view is incoherent and should cause us to ask some pertinent questions: "Why would God call entirely equal sexes to deeply different roles? Why would one role be that of leadership and the other of submission if women and men are equal not only in status and dignity before God but in every other way as well?"⁶⁸ Another question worth asking our complementarian siblings is if these roles will continue when Christ returns? Stackhouse puts it more sharply: "To the complementarians who do believe that women are equal, and yet see the Bible as restricting leadership to men, let me respectfully and fraternally ask, Why would God mandate that pattern forever?"⁶⁹

It seems reasonable that each person who confesses to follow Christ as an agent of redemptive work in the world should grapple with what it means to forever subordinate another to anyone other than Jesus, and whether that subordination reflects the life, teachings, and ministry of Christ. Does subordination reflect God's intention for those into whom God breathed life? Is God's ultimate plan for creation that some will be forever subordinate, and others will forever subordinate others? Those with deeply held patriarchal beliefs and practices that keep fellow siblings in Christ in a subordinate role, or that in some cases even prohibit them from being seen or heard, make an illusory claim that this can be done in "gentle" and "dignified" ways, especially in the wake of story after story of abuse. Still, many complementarians assert

⁶⁷ John G. Stackhouse, *Finally Feminist: A Pragmatic Christian Understanding of Gender* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 70-71.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 72.

that they are being obedient to God in upholding gender hierarchy, and they have a lot of historical precedence to lean on.

In *The Making of Biblical Womanhood*, Beth Allison Barr propounds, “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing Christians that oppression is godly. That God ordained some people, simply because of their sex or skin color (or both), as belonging under the power of other people. That women’s subordination is central to the gospel of Christ.”⁷⁰ Patriarchy is subordination because it upholds male headship, and it does so under the belief that that this is God’s plan. So, for centuries many Christians have understood this hierarchal structure to be a key tenant of Christian faith. Barr suggests, “Patriarchy looks right because it is the historical practice of the world.”⁷¹

Thus, in this project, I do not claim that the world (past or present), the church, or the Bible were not patriarchal. They were and, in some places, still are. I agree with Barr that “a gender hierarchy in which women rank under men can be found in almost every era and among every people group. When the church denies women the ability to preach, lead, teach, and sometimes even work outside the home, the church is continuing a long historical tradition of subordinating women.”⁷² Yet, the Bible and Christian history is also full of counter-cultural and flourishing examples of male and female partnership that do not include subordination and that—I contend—better reflect God’s intention for us all. This begs questions such as: Is subordination the extent of the imagination of followers of Jesus? Is subordination the extent of

⁷⁰ Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021), 173.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 19.

our Christian imagination when it comes to power and privilege? Is subordination the extent of our imagination for the systems and structures that we build in the name of Jesus?

Are churches in the U.S. truly flourishing under patriarchalism and gender hierarchy? What we have seen far too often is that a lack of gender parity and gender partnership contributes to a host of issues, especially when male headship leads to an androcentric environment that protects its male leaders as a priority.⁷³ The witness of the church suffers when church leadership does not reflect the leadership of Jesus, especially when people are oppressed, hurt, or wounded under the weight of that system. Even before attending healthy egalitarian churches and experiencing the benefits of a more open structure that emphasizes mutuality, partnership, and gender parity, I questioned the male-only leadership hierarchy, and the accumulation of power and privilege that leaders (and even some members) support in such a system. I questioned this system because the accumulation and protection of power does not mirror the life and ministry of Jesus or the work of the Spirit. Yet, it is because of Jesus, and what Jesus did and said, that I still have hope that renewal, transformation, and flourishing are possible.

⁷³ A more recent example of this protectionism can be found in the story of former gymnast Rachael Denhollander who helped put her former coach in prison for abusing more than 150 women. Her advocacy on behalf of survivors cost Rachael her church. In a *Christianity Today* article she said, “The reason I lost my church was not specifically because I spoke up. It was because we were advocating for other victims of sexual assault within the evangelical community, crimes which had been perpetrated by people in the church and whose abuse had been enabled, very clearly, by prominent leaders in the evangelical community. That is not a message that evangelical leaders want to hear, because it would cost to speak out about the community. It would cost to take a stand against these very prominent leaders, despite the fact that the situation we were dealing with is widely recognized as one of the worst, if not the worst, instances of evangelical cover-up of sexual abuse. Because I had taken that position, and because we were not in agreement with our church’s support of this organization and these leaders, it cost us dearly.” Morgan Lee, “My Larry Nassar Testimony Went Viral. But There’s More to the Gospel than Forgiveness,” *Christianity Today*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-web-only/rachael-denhollander-larry-nassar-forgiveness-gospel.html>.

The Church and Vulnerability

Christianity in the U.S. is experiencing a steep decline: More churches are closing than opening, increasing numbers of young people are leaving, and many churches report experiencing candidate shortages when it comes to hiring pastors and preachers.⁷⁴ Increasing numbers of churches are languishing and closing, and many people in all age groups are identifying as “nones” (people with no religious affiliation) and “dones” (people who have given up on institutional religion). In his book, *unChristian*, David Kinnaman speaks to this crisis and asserts that American Christianity has an image problem not only among those who identify as nonbelievers, but also among 40% of believers ages 16 to 29.⁷⁵ Today, religious leaders and scores of people of faith are saying the American church needs revival. Many people are considering the viewpoints of emerging generations and asking what keeps them from coming to their churches and what might cause them to return.

Right now, Christians all over the United States are talking about revival and hoping to experience a new move of God. Perhaps this is the time for us to reexamine our leadership

⁷⁴ Many recent studies have shown that more churches are now closing than opening, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lifeway Research reported that in 2019, approximately 4,500 Protestant churches closed with about 3,000 new churches opening. See Adam Gabbatt, “Losing Their Religion: Why US Churches Are on the Decline,” *The Guardian*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/22/us-churches-closing-religion-covid-christianity>. Younger generations are exiting churches and leaving Christianity at increasing rates, often citing a lack of acceptance and disagreement on social and political issues as the reason why. Pew Research Center has reported that the number of Americans identifying as Christian was 64% in 2020, with 30% of the US population being classed as “religiously unaffiliated.” See “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, September 13, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>. There are many reports about pastor and preacher shortages and smaller numbers of students entering seminary. As an aside, I have yet to find an article in a mainstream Christian magazine that suggests that hiring the scores of female candidates waiting for ministry and teaching opportunities would be a great option to address these issues. See Emily Brown, “The Great American Clergy Shortage Is Coming,” *Relevant Magazine*, February 22, 2022, <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/church/the-great-american-clergy-shortage-is-coming/>.

⁷⁵ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity—and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2012), 11.

structures and the way we use and exercise power. Perhaps this is the time for us to interrogate our church systems and cultures to discern if we are bearing witness to our incarnational calling, to be agents of flourishing in our communities. Perhaps this is the time to renew our commitment as a “priesthood of *all* believers,” called to seek *shalom* in the world that God loves.

God invited females into participation and leadership at key points in the biblical narrative to bring about renewal and carry the story forward. Could we be experiencing a moment like this now? God used the voices of females to comfort communities of faith during times of upheaval and trauma (e.g., Miriam in Exodus 15). God invited the voices of females in vulnerable moments to call people to repentance and remind communities of their identity and purpose as God’s people, saving generations (e.g., Huldah in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34). God invited the voices of females to intervene in times of conflict and bring peace (e.g., Abigail in 1 Samuel 25 and Deborah in Judges 4 and 5). God invited the voices of females to pronounce the near and coming Kingdom (e.g., Anna in Luke 2 and the daughters of Philip in Acts 21). God invited the voices of females to witness to the birth, life, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus (e.g., Mary in Luke 1; Mary Magdalene in Matthew 27-28, Mark 15-16, Luke 8, 24, John 19-20; Priscilla in Acts 18; and Phoebe in Romans 16). What’s more, in these stories, God invited these gifted and dedicated women to work alongside their gifted and dedicated brothers, demonstrating the beauty of mutuality and kingdom partnership.

All of these women lived in a patriarchal society, but God invited them to participate in nonpatriarchal ways. Despite human captivity to patriarchal narratives and cultures, God has always invited and harmonized with the voices of females to help communities flourish. God has always consecrated the voices of females, even when it has been counter-cultural to do so. God has always brought males and females (not just as married couples) together as Kingdom

partners. Perhaps it is time to stop looking upon the incarnational work of females and their gifts as a fluke, or worse, a desecration. Perhaps we need to free the voices of our sisters in our own time of upheaval and uncertainty in the hopes that God will, once again, use them to help our communities heal, flourish, and reflect God's intent for creation.

Liberation as a Means of Flourishing

In his commentary on Acts, Willie James Jennings recounts the story of the nameless enslaved girl in Acts 16 who is encumbered by an unwelcome spirit.⁷⁶ She is caught up in a system that benefits her enslavers. They take advantage of her ailment, and their subjugation of her allows them to flourish, even while she languishes. Paul and Silas take in her cries for many days as she shouts, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Acts 16:17). Powerfully, even *this* female, robbed of her bodily autonomy, knew God and could imagine flourishing apart from this unjust system. She calls Paul and Silas servants, or slaves, *but* their enslavement is not the same as hers.⁷⁷ This is the danger of the unholy and self-serving consecration of subjugation. Jennings's elaboration on this point is poignant, and it intersects with the subjugation of women and other marginalized people today:

This woman seems to see herself in the disciples. They are slaves as she is a slave, her religious proclamation somehow matching their word. This, however, is a sick optic. The slaveries are not the same, yet they exist in the same world and can be and have been historically easily confused. One great danger for the disciples here is precisely such confusion. Repeatedly, the church has confused its obedience with the obedience of those enslaved, imagining the ordered and organized life of a Christian or a community to be a similitude to a slave body or a slave plantation. There is great pleasure in imagining someone or some people doing exactly what we want, especially if we fantasize that what

⁷⁶ Jennings, *Acts*, 159.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

we want of them is also what God wants of them.⁷⁸

Pointing out our confusion about obedience and subservience, Jennings cuts to the heart of the matter and leaves the disciple to grapple with the cries of our siblings in Christ, those yet waiting for liberation from the systems that keep us all entangled in a cycle of unhealthy dependency based on the subjugation of others, who also bear the image of God. While it is true that not all females feel oppressed in patriarchal systems (systems that use Paul's own words as calling for the silence of females), Jennings calls us to interrogate ourselves with questions about these beliefs and systems. The questions are piercing: Have we confused our obedience to God with the obedience of those whom we have subjugated? Is this subservience my fantasy for the church, or is it God's?

What response should the disciple of Christ have to a story like this? Paul answers the question for us; agitated by the cries of the enslaved female, he frees her from her captivity. Jennings unpacks her emancipation with an assertion about the longings that should undergird and compel the messianic community, the church, in Jesus' name:

Paul was annoyed, and this suggests a level of frustration through repetition. Enough of the religious noise! Enough of the mindless praise of God and God's servants that mask demonic activity! The point was not to silence her voice but to release it from its networked captivity. Ministry in the name of Jesus releases people to speak, especially poor women, by challenging the voices of their own oppression that constantly wish to speak through them. The text does not give us the freed voice of the slave girl. Luke has, however, set us up to hear it freshly, newly, and without its chains. Churches should long to hear freed voices and follow the Spirit in increasing their number.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 161.

Jennings asserts that releasing people should be the norm for those who follow Jesus, because ministry in the name of Jesus *always releases people to speak*.⁸⁰ This is a powerful commission considering the history of silencing females in society and in the church.

In *When Women Were Priests*, Karen Jo Torjesen, a leading authority on women in ancient Christianity, speaks about how females have been systematically effaced throughout history and in the institutional church. Silence has been upheld as a virtue for females by those opposed to their liberation and their participation in both public and private spheres. Torjesen quotes Aristotle and an epitaph about a freed enslaved woman:

Aristotle, appealing to the wisdom of the poets, insisted that silence was *the* distinctively, female virtue. “All classes must be deemed to have special attributes; as the poet says of women, ‘Silence is a woman’s glory, but this is not equally the glory of men. ‘An epitaph for a freedwoman, Allia Potestas, praises her with the words, “She spoke little, and was never rebuked (for speaking at the wrong time).”⁸¹

Speech is a powerful tool that has historically brought males power and authority, while female speech has often been relegated to the private sphere and trivialized and disparaged. Origen, she says, “discredited a woman’s public speech even if it conveyed a spiritual truth.”⁸²

In her book, *Finding Phoebe*, Susan E. Hulen devotes several chapters to this phenomenon of silence and its promulgation as a feminine virtue. She says, “The idea that women should be silent doesn’t occur only in the New Testament. It was common advice at the time.”⁸³ In Plutarch’s work, *Advice to the Bride and Groom*, he advised that women should let

⁸⁰ Ibid., 160.

⁸¹ Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 119.

⁸² Ibid., 120.

⁸³ Susan E. Hulen, *Finding Phoebe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2023), 151. Hulen makes the case that although silence emerged as primarily a virtue for women, silence was actually a virtue for any person in the

their husbands speak for their family: “A wife should speak only to her husband or through her husband, and should not feel aggrieved if, like a piper, she makes nobler music through another’s tongue.”⁸⁴ There is a long history of this sort of ventriloquy in the church, in which males must speak for or on behalf of females, but a thorough reading of the chorus of voices in Scripture points to God’s intent for harmony and cooperation among all believers, not silence from half the church.⁸⁵

Intentional or not, calling submission to subjugation and silence a virtue is one of the ways that Christians and churches have prevented people—especially historically marginalized people, including countless females—from flourishing both inside and outside the church. Jennings asserts that our Christian imagination should release us all from such ecclesial and eschatological atrophy and propel us into God’s preferred and promised future. The church, every part of the Body of Christ, should long for the liberation and flourishing of others, not just those who have been subjugated, but also those who subjugate. Subjugation and discipleship are not easily aligned, no matter how “gentle” the subjugator may be. Neither the subjugator nor the subjugated can truly flourish in such a system. This project on the spiritual impact of egalitarianism and female pastoral leadership at New Heritage Fellowship aims to address these questions of power, privilege, and flourishing in another vulnerable time in Christian history. Hopefully, the questions at the beginning of this chapter will ring in our ears just as the cries of

New Testament period who was in the presence of someone of higher social status. This was true of women when they were among men of higher status, but it was also true of men when they were in the presence of people of higher standing, and sometimes women were socially superior to some men. *Ibid.*, 152-153.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 163-165. Although silence emerged as a virtue for females, particularly in patriarchal cultures who elevate two verses (1 Corinthians 14:33-35, I Timothy 2:11-12), the Bible is full of female voices. Females sing, prophesy, teach, pray, invite others, report on the works of God, and appeal to Jesus on behalf of themselves and others. Not only that, but there are also times in the Bible when males are also called upon to be silent. *Ibid.*, 163-165.

the enslaved girl rang in the ears of Paul and Silas. Do our church ecosystems reflect what Jesus said and did? Does the culture of our church look like God is running things?

Jennings rightly surfaces the danger of confusing the obedience of the subjugated with obedience to God. The distinction here is worthy of consideration. N.T. Wright asserts that our example in obedience is Christ, and that obedience is not absent of justice, and it always looks forward to God's breathtaking, radical vision of the ultimate flourishing of all things. Wright expounds:

And, as in Genesis, part of the answer to that [vocation] question was, it would look like obedient humans, following the Obedient Human, acting as stewards over creation, bringing new creation to birth, and gathering up the praises of that creation to present them to its maker. Jesus himself, as the whole New Testament makes clear, acted as the Obedient Human, summing up creation's praises and inaugurating God saving sovereignty. What is not so often noticed is that this role is immediately shared with his followers. The early Christians held out a breathtaking, radical vision of the ultimate goal of all things: the new heavens, and new earth, the renewal of all things, the new Jerusalem, "coming down from heaven to earth" (Revelation 21.2), a world flooded with the joy and justice of the creator God.⁸⁶

Our churches should reflect this saving sovereignty. Our church cultures should reflect a glimpse of this future breathtaking and radical vision of God's ultimate goal for the flourishing of all of Creation.

⁸⁶ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: Harpercollins, 2012),77.

Ministry Context: New Heritage Fellowship and The Road to Flourishing

*It is hard for us to recognize it now, but Peter and Paul were introducing the first Christian family to an entirely new community, a community that transcends the rigid hierarchy of human institutions, a community in which submission is mutual and all are free.*⁸⁷

– Rachel Held Evans

New Heritage Fellowship (NHF) is a small community church with approximately 68 regularly attending members located in Fairview, Texas. A little more than half, 55%, of the regularly attending members are female and the rest are male; 27% of those regularly attending members are children under the age of 18. NHF also partners with two different groups of people that are not regularly attending but are no less important to the community: occasional members that consider NHF a “home away from home;” and people that come for a temporary amount of time to heal (usually from church-related trauma or other types of trauma). New Heritage is 20 years old. Most of the members of NHF have a Church of Christ (mainline) background, with a few members from Baptist and Catholic traditions. Almost all of our members, 96%, come from traditional backgrounds that uphold male-only leadership. Only one member of NHF stated that he had a lead female pastor prior to when I started working at NHF as the lead pastor in January of 2019. Our membership is made up of 40% of people who are 67 or older and 24% who are 57 to 66 years old. Most of the members are white and middle class.

NHF is a church that loves service and community and was specifically looking for a missional leader and pastor that would help them cultivate a missional church culture that would be more deeply engaged in the community. When I started working at NHF, they already had a few volunteer opportunities and some long-term local, national, and overseas partnerships, but they wanted to seek out more local partnerships, and they desired to see those opportunities grow

⁸⁷ Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband “Master”* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

into stronger *mutual* partnerships and long-lasting relationships. Most importantly, NHF wanted to shift from seeing mission as programmatic to participating in mission as a way of life for followers of Christ. NHF now regularly partners with some new local non-profits and organizations, and we also have members who have continued to serve as missional partnership coordinators for work in Croatia and Ukraine. Ministry partner relationships have grown in the last four years. We have also made significant strides towards becoming a church in which members see themselves as partners with God in the flourishing of our church community as well as our household and neighboring communities.

NHF does not own a building. We rent and gather for worship and other events at a local event venue in a shopping center. We have been at this location for one year. Our process of discipleship includes joining God and our neighbors in the community and learning to be good community partners and people of peace as a means of participating in the redemptive work that God is doing in our communities.

Since its inception, NHF has steadily moved into egalitarianism in function and practice. When the church first opened twenty years ago, their gatherings and dreaming sessions consisted of males, females, adults, and children, and this is where the church's egalitarian roots were planted. A belief in "the priesthood of all believers" was part of the genesis of the church. A female member led the first Communion reflection during their first Sunday worship gathering. At the time, that seemed like a major step away from their heritage of origin. NHF leaders did not spend a great deal of time talking about those passages in the Bible that many believe prohibit females from leading and participating in the assembly, because they were ready to build a "new heritage" and desired a more open and welcoming church culture than they had

experienced in more traditional churches—mostly Churches of Christ.⁸⁸ During NHF’s early years, they were more intentional about discerning the role and responsibility that comes with having authority and power, and steadily, they moved to believing that authority, submission, and power were intended to be shared and dispersed throughout the Body of Christ.

All NHF members were invited to try things as they felt moved or called for the purpose of building up the church and providing a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Over the years, female voices gradually became more familiar in all areas of the assembly as women led prayers, songs, and Communion, shared testimonials, and eventually preached sermons. Many members have shared with me that the gradual process of hearing female voices and seeing females guide and lead the congregation during the assembly (and the life of the church) played a big part in the process of becoming egalitarian. This process occurred because they were all able to witness the Spirit working in more and more members of the church.⁸⁹ This Spirit-led experience was life-giving and faith-building for the congregation. The same is true for children, who are also fully welcome to participate, guide, and lead during the assembly. NHF practices “shared preaching,” meaning all members are invited and welcome to preach. NHF is intentional about inviting guest preachers and speakers into our shared space. In the last four years, we have invited several females to come and preach for us, sometimes for the first time in their lives. This aspect of

⁸⁸ My understanding from the leaders I know that started NHF is that most of them believed that the passages often used to prohibit the participation of females (1 Corinthians 11:3, 14:34-35; Ephesians 5:24; and 1 Timothy 2:8-15) were contextual and written to specific communities for specific reasons, and they were not intended to prohibit females from leadership roles for all time in all places. Desiring to move into what they believed was God’s preferred and promised future, NHF began by abandoning the view that said women were not permitted to speak or lead in the assembly and gradually moved to the full participation of females. For more on the differences between no participation, limited participation, and full participation, see Hicks, *Women Serving God*, 105-161.

⁸⁹ Naturally, this was a process, and it took time for some members to feel comfortable with females leading. It also took, and continues to take, time for some females to feel comfortable leading at NHF. It is not easy to change the tapes that our churches give us in our youth.

NHF's egalitarian composition has been a tremendous blessing, allowing us the opportunity to witness the Spirit working in the lives of others.

A few years after NHF opened, the all-male group of shepherds made the decision to include their wives in the group of shepherds and call them all "shepherding couples." This was not a decision absent of dissent and difficult conversation, but in the end, the inclusion of the wives of shepherds served as another catalyst towards NHF becoming egalitarian, and ultimately, being ready for a lead female pastor. Members were able to experience the combined gifts, wisdom, and dedication that both female and male shepherds provided for the overall spiritual health and well-being of the church. The church witnessed new levels of female and male Kingdom partnership, and this spurred an awakening about the work of the Spirit and God's intention for all of God's children to be co-laborers in every aspect of life. At this time, NHF chooses shepherds not based on gender or marital status, but on who is gifted to shepherd and who is doing the actual work of a good shepherd in the community (John 10:11-18).

NHF is a healthy church.⁹⁰ I believe this is because NHF is first and foremost completely captured and compelled by Jesus as the ultimate leader and head of the church. Jesus, as *the* leader, is the example of self-giving love, and the example of a merciful and radically gracious host. Members have an abiding desire to emulate these aspects of Jesus. My own experience at NHF has been that the people of NHF desire to move towards Jesus and his vision for the Kingdom in everything they do. "Christlike love" is a verb and a noun within NHF, and this

⁹⁰ I do not say this lightly or to pat ourselves on the back. I am a church critic by nature (and nurturing), have been part of church consultation programs, and have a degree in leadership that trained me to see systems in churches. NHF is not perfect by any means, but it is a healthy church with a robust ability to hold complexity, be flexible, uphold transparency, and put others above personal levels of comfort. There is a great deal of trust among the members of NHF and an assumption that all of us have the Spirit as well as wisdom to bring to the table. All of this is rooted in a deep love of Jesus. I will discuss *kenosis* (self-emptying) and Christofornity in Chapter Four, as both are foundational at NHF.

ethos manifests in a wide welcome. Members desire not only to move towards Jesus, but also to move towards others, and especially those who are hurting or suffering. Loving God and loving others are the primary focus and mission of New Heritage. “Love God. Go, Love Others:” this is our benediction (Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27).

One of the extensions of this primary focus is that NHF upholds a belief in the “priesthood of all believers.” I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Four. At NHF this means that *everyone* is invited to participate in the radically loving, reconciling, and boundary-breaking work that God is doing all around us, including in the church and in the worship gathering. All gifts are needed and welcomed in every place where the Spirit is doing the work of joining people together to participate in the redemptive activity of God. Members used the phrase priesthood of all believers several times in the surveys and the communal discussion for this project. As I understand it, the theology of the priesthood of all believers, and the practices of inclusion and participation that accompany it, have *always* been a priority at the heart of New Heritage. This is especially significant because, after doing the work of ethnography over the last four years, I believe that the root of this inclusive ethos overflows from the healthy way that NHF leaders (and by extension members) view and exercise power and privilege.

NHF leaders believe in the importance of all Christians, and especially leaders, sharing and dispersing power throughout the Body of Christ, because that is the model that we have in Jesus via his birth, life, death, and resurrection.⁹¹ I would not say this theology of power has

⁹¹ I have experienced many examples of this in my four years at NHF, particularly from the leaders. Since I hope for this project to be as helpful and practical as possible, I will share a powerful example of this. NHF rented space at another church during my first year as pastor. At one point, the leaders from both churches needed to meet to discuss aspects of our partnership. Two of our male shepherds and I met with four leaders from their church, including their pastor, all of whom were male. I was nervous about this meeting and curious to see how it would go. It was the first time any of them had a female pastor in a meeting like this. It was my first time showing up as a lead pastor. Our shepherds introduced me as such. The brothers from the host church initially directed all questions to our two male shepherds. It could have easily been a situation in which I felt completely sidelined, and in some ways, I

been explicitly articulated, but the desire to emulate Jesus has been, and this sharing of power is the ethos and practice at NHF. New Heritage loves images of Jesus as a humble infant, a humble rabbi and friend, a humble table host who washes *all* feet, and a humble Savior on the cross.⁹²

This view of Jesus and this theology of power is why NHF seeks to practice shared authority and shared submission, and it is why NHF values an open invitation to participate in all areas of the life of the church. Alongside this, NHF also practices communal discernment as a means of decision-making, which requires active listening, communal reflection, and reflecting on what God may be doing in our midst.

There is no way to talk about my ministry context without talking about the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it had on New Heritage. I was only the lead pastor at New Heritage for one year when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and changed the world forever. On the second Sunday of the national lockdown, NHF switched to meeting on Zoom, and we continued meeting on Zoom full-time for well over a year. That same week we sent out a survey to the entire church to gather information, and we made the communal decision to be a Zoom church until it was safe to gather in person. We did this for many reasons, but the two most important were that (1) the majority of NHF members fell into “high-risk” categories, and we prioritized trying to keep them

may have preferred that, since I was so new to the role. However, what our two shepherds did was powerful. Both shepherds redirected every single question that was directed at them, to me. “Pastor Cheryl, what do you think?” Our shepherds were kind about it, and they were consistent, and by the end of the meeting, the brothers from the host church were also addressing me and looking me in the eye. The whole scene was unexpected, and I was incredibly moved by their humble, simple, and powerful example of sharing and dispersing power. In the process, they also built me up as a leader. It struck me as incredibly Christlike then, and it still does when I remember it today.

⁹² Philippians 2:5-11 comes to mind because of the way that this passage is operationalized in the lives of our members and especially our leaders. They seem to focus on the way that Jesus used power to help others flourish and refused to grasp for privilege, and they seek to emulate his example. This verse was mentioned often during the most challenging parts of the Covid-19 lockdown when NHF was discerning the best way to move forward and trying to balance a plethora of information and differing views on the best course of action to take from one week to the next. We did not experience any major issues or “blow-ups,” and I believe this is largely because of the way this view of Jesus, power, and privilege functions among leaders and members.

healthy and safe, and (2) we wanted to try to help keep people in our communities safe as well. We chose to follow CDC guidelines, and that helped us be consistent in our navigation of the myriad of unprecedented experiences we encountered along the way. It seems impossible considering all that we now know about how COVID changed society and Christianity in the U.S., but by God's mercy, NHF experienced spiritual and numerical growth during our time as a Zoom church. We worked together to stay in touch and check on one another. Shepherds checked in on members regularly and Zoom allowed us to be in one another's homes several times a week.

During our time on Zoom, members shared many creative ideas for continuing our mission to be a church that is called, gathered, centered, and sent. We played Zoom bingo and encouraged our members to get gift cards from local small businesses to help them through the lockdown. We had a Zoom talent show, Zoom trivia nights, and even a Zoom Christmas pageant. We had vehicle graduation parades, house warmings, and goodbye parties. Our small groups and support ministries continued over Zoom. Our children's minister made yard or porch visits with the kids. Our worship gatherings were meaningful, participatory, and creative. We studied Acts, Exodus, and Nehemiah, all of which spoke to our experience as a church scattered, in the wilderness, and in the process of rebuilding. We enjoyed many guest speakers from all over the world. On Pentecost Sunday, we had a combined Zoom worship gathering with another church. We had fun together, we lamented together, and intimacy within our community increased, despite meeting through electronic devices. One of our communal reflections of this time is that the growth we experienced—in several areas—was the work of the Holy Spirit, utilizing *all* our gifts for building up the body and joining us together, even though we were not in the same space physically.

In 2021, we gradually started meeting in-person again. Our Zoom members asked us to continue to offer Zoom. We are now a hybrid church; our gatherings are a fusion of in-person and Zoom. We have had a consistent Zoom presence since we started this hybrid model. We practice dwelling in the word together, and this is one of the communal practices that makes it possible for our “Roomers” and our “Zoomers” to be gathered in “one place” and listen to one another every Sunday morning. Zoom has been a tremendous blessing post-pandemic, because we have members who can’t make it in-person for various reasons, like having a compromised immune system due to cancer. Zoom allows us to stay connected with those members who cannot physically be in the gathering space. We chose Zoom instead of online streaming because Zoom reflects the egalitarian values of NHF and allows for more participation, interaction, and mutuality than a one-directional streaming platform.

I wholeheartedly believe that NHF’s egalitarian composition as a priesthood of all believers, grounded in equal partnership, open participation, and mutuality is a *major* reason why NHF was able to navigate the stressful, unprecedented, and continuous changes that we faced over the last four years and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our posture of openness and sharing allowed us to make this transition and maintain unity and increase intimacy during a time when many churches struggled. We did not have a hierarchical structure to contend with, so we did not have decisions about how to navigate the challenges coming from the top down. Instead, our membership was poised to practice communal discernment and make informed decisions filtered through our primary value to be people who “Love God and Go, Love Others.” Shared submission and shared authority served us well and ensured that all members were invited to voice concerns, visions, and goals. We did not all agree on every point, but everyone had the opportunity to be heard, and that allowed us to submit to one another

(especially to one another's health needs). Understandably, COVID-19 served as a wrecking ball for many churches, but NHF's egalitarian priesthood of all believers fostered inclusion, cooperation, compassion, and a sense of community. This egalitarian approach also served us well in our recent relocation; once again, our posture of openness and sharing allowed us to successfully make another big transition together.

These are the major characteristics and stories that I have experienced with my ministry context, New Heritage Fellowship, over the last four years. I cannot overstate the role that I believe NHF leaders, especially those who have been with NHF since the beginning, have played in cultivating and growing this egalitarian culture that does not seek to accumulate power, but to share it. Even during difficult times, and even when it wasn't executed perfectly, it seems to me that their aim was always to realign with Jesus and be the kind of leaders that they believed Jesus to be, a leader who did nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, valued others above himself. The characteristics I have described are characteristics that I believe reveal the fruit of NHF's egalitarian culture and have made it possible for New Heritage to follow the Spirit into new territory. This fruit made it possible for NHF to hire and anoint a female as their lead pastor, and to experience new life and ecclesial flourishing, even during the most difficult parts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Definition of Terms

Egalitarian(ism). In this project, I use this term as we understand it at NHF: It is the belief that all people are of equal value to God. We implement this belief in all areas of the church, including areas of leadership, so that they are shared, open, and accessible to all members, regardless of gender. Spiritual giftedness, passion, and curiosity are the keys to participation in any part of church life, not gender, nor any other descriptor.

Complementarian(ism). In this project, I use this term as we understand it at NHF: It is the belief that though all people are equally valuable to God, males and females have different roles that complement each other. In practice, the access to certain areas or roles in the church—primarily leadership roles—differ between males and females, due to the belief that God delegates certain kinds of participation and leadership based on gender.

Patriarchy. I like the definition from Nijay K. Gupta, in *Tell Her Story*: “Patriarchy refers to a system of male power and dominance. The fact that it is called *patri*-archy (rule of the father) and not *andri*-archy (rule of the man) attests to a history of male power in the household, which extends outward to the male ruler as the ‘father’” of the state.”⁹³ In a patriarchal culture, males have greater access to resources, decision-making, and opportunities.

Patriarchalism. Patriarchalism is the beliefs, attitudes, and values that support and justify patriarchal systems. It includes the idea that men are inherently superior to women, and that women are naturally suited to subservient roles. This is often where theological views come into play, providing a foundation for creating patriarchal systems.

⁹³ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 31.

Hierarchy. I refer to a “gender hierarchy” in which power and authority in a relationship between males and females is granted to one, while the other is blocked from having authority or serving in leadership roles where authority is held. I concur with Philip B. Payne’s definition from his book, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God’s Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality*: “In short, “hierarchy” means uneven distribution of power, while “equality” means equal access to power. Now, some proponents of gender hierarchy claim that they believe men and women are equal: they are both made in the image of God, have equal worth in God’s sight, and so on. But when it comes to the everyday practice of leadership and use of power, they do not treat women as equal to men. When certain leadership roles are only and always limited to men, that is by definition gender hierarchy—in fact, it is a particular kind of gender hierarchy: patriarchy (rule by men).”⁹⁴

Genuine Flourishing or Flourishing. I am using this term which comes from Amy L. Sherman’s book called *Agents of Flourishing*.⁹⁵ Genuine flourishing is a missional term which means to participate in bringing about God’s intention of *shalom*, peace, and wholeness. Sherman asserts that followers of Jesus flourish when “our lives are centered on the love of God and neighbor, and when we seek out the peace and prosperity or flourishing of our communities, as our priestly vocation.”⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Philip B. Payne, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God’s Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), xxii.

⁹⁵ Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing*, 14-17, 25.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Hypothesis and Potential Bias and Risks

I intended this research project to bring the small percentage of female lead pastors in American churches into conversation with the egalitarian church culture and recent hiring of a female lead pastor at New Heritage Fellowship. I completed this research to discover both the spiritual impact of egalitarianism and the spiritual impact of female pastoral leadership on the members of New Heritage Fellowship, where I have been the lead pastor for four years. My hypothesis was that being part of an egalitarian church *and* having a female pastoral leader have had a positive impact on the spiritual lives of NHF members. Based on the various elements of this research project, and the personal nature of this project, I would categorize it as part autoethnography—because it includes personal narrative—as well as a cultural analysis of several members of one church. I employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data to explore my research question. I used the data that I collected and analyzed for this study to test my hypotheses and answer my research questions about the spiritual impact of egalitarianism and female pastoral leadership on NHF.

It is essential that I acknowledge the potential conflict of interest involved with this research project, because I am both the researcher and the pastor of the church I analyzed. I worked with my church, church leaders, and project advisors to make every effort to ensure that this project was transparent and credible. Yet, my proximity to the congregation could have impacted the research process. I relied on NHF's egalitarian and transparent culture, the involvement of NHF leaders, and NHF's emphasis on communal discernment to help ensure that this project accurately portrayed the community. To help mitigate my own bias in my interpretation of the data collected, *all* members of NHF that were over 18 years old and that had

been members of NHF for at least ten consecutive months (with me as the lead pastor) were invited to participate. Invitations were sent out via email, and announcements were made during worship gatherings by both me and members of our shepherding team over several months.

There were 29 NHF members that chose to participate in this study. This is a surprisingly large sample size for a project like this, especially for a relatively small church, but an open invitation to participate seemed the best way to try to avoid bias and self-selection of participants on my part as both the researcher and pastor. NHF leaders and I wanted to make sure that every adult who had experienced having me as lead pastor for at least ten consecutive months was invited to participate. This open invitation was also intended to help ensure, to the extent possible, that a variety of perspectives were represented. It was also a risky project for me as both the researcher and pastor because, in the worst-case scenario, I could be released from my job as the lead pastor if reactions were negative or if they highlighted major issues or concerns with my leadership. These risks were discussed among our church leadership and with the entire community via email and during communal gatherings.

Another potential bias revolves around the difficulty of separating me, my personality, my gifts, and my personal leadership style (and training) from my gender, a challenge I talked about openly with the congregation and the leadership from the outset. In this research, I asked participants to focus specifically on gender (my gender as their female pastor) in light of previously only ever having male pastors, and to reflect on the experience of having a female pastor. Participants were encouraged to do their best to focus on my gender, keeping in mind previous experiences with male-only leadership. Additionally, it feels counterintuitive for some people to focus on gender, particularly for those who wish to see the church focus on the gifts the Spirit gives instead of gender or those who want to be more mindful and inclusive of gender

fluidity. Again, I acknowledged the complexity of this discussion and asked participants to do their best to focus on the parameters of the study while acknowledging the complexity.

Additional potential issues exist around demographic limitations. Most of the members of NHF are white and middle class. Therefore, my analysis is representative of a particular demographic of respondents. In addition, the majority of NHF members are 57 years old or above, so younger age groups are less represented in the data collected. As previously stated, additional limitations around diversity are that most of the members of NHF would be classified as middle class; moreover, most of the members of NHF are college educated, and grew up attending Churches of Christ.

Procedures and Instrumentation

I sent out informed consent forms and media release forms to every adult member of NHF, except for my family members. Everyone was instructed that those forms had to be completed before participating in the project. I used two anonymous Google Forms to collect data from participants. The first Google Form went out at the beginning of the data collection process after all the data was collected and analyzed. NHF hosted a communal discussion on a Sunday morning in January to discuss the results. All NHF members were invited to see the results of the data collected and to provide feedback about the experience. This project became a communal project, and it was essential for the community to see the results and be able to respond. The communal presentation of the results and the communal discussion provided a greater measure of accountability and helped mitigate any bias in interpretation on my part as the researcher and pastor. The final Google Form went out after the communal discussion. The initial anonymous Google Form contained the following questions:

1. What is your gender?
 - a. Male

- b. Female
 - c. Other
2. How long have you been a member of NHF?
 3. What is your age range?
 - a. 18-25
 - b. 26-36
 - c. 37-46
 - d. 57-66
 - e. 67+
 4. What is your church/denominational background? (Ex: Church of Christ, Baptist, Catholic, etc.)
 5. Before NHF please describe the leadership structure of churches you were a member of before and specify the leadership roles of male and female members. What access did male and female members have to leadership positions and areas such as shepherding, preaching, etc.? Specifically, did females have access to leadership positions?
 6. NHF is an egalitarian church. That means that NHF is a church that opens ALL areas of the church, including areas of leadership, to both males and females. What impact has this had on you and your spiritual life?
 7. Please explain your answer above, being as specific as possible. In what ways has being part of an egalitarian church impacted you and your spiritual life? Please share any specific stories from your experience.
 8. Have you ever had a female pastor or female lead minister (in an official/paid capacity) before NHF?
 - a. Yes, I have had a female pastor or female lead minister before NHF.
 - b. No, I have not had a female pastor or female lead minister before NHF.
 - c. Other
 9. Has having a female pastor had an impact on you and your spiritual life?
 - a. Having a female pastor has had no impact on me or my spiritual life.
 - b. Having a female pastor has had a negative impact on me and my spiritual life.
 - c. Having a female pastor has had a positive impact on me and my spiritual life.
 - d. Other
 10. Please explain your answer above being as specific as possible. In what ways has having a female pastor impacted you and your spiritual life? Please share any specific stories from your experience.
 11. Do you have children (17 and under) that attend NHF? If yes, what impact do you believe that having a female lead pastor has had on him/her/them? Please be specific.
 12. Have you participated in aspects of worship and leadership more, less, or the same at NHF than you did at previous churches where you have been a member? (Examples: preaching, Communion, dwelling, reading scripture, praying, shepherding etc.)
 - a. I have participated in worship and leadership more at NHF.
 - b. I have participated in worship and leadership less at NHF.
 - c. My participation has been the same.
 - d. Other

13. Please explain your answer above. Why have you participated more, less, or the same at NHF in terms of worship and leadership? If your participation has remained the same, please share why.
14. Since having a female lead pastor, have you participated in things at church that you had not participated in before? (Ex: preaching, Communion, dwelling, reading scripture, praying, shepherding etc.)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other
15. What things have you tried, or done, or considered doing at NHF since having a female pastor that you had not before? How did having a female pastor impact your decision to try or do these new thing(s)?
16. Have you noticed gifts emerge among NHF members that may have been dormant before having a female pastor? If so, what is it about having a female pastor that may have helped to uncover those gifts?
17. Has having a female pastor changed your beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other
18. In what ways has having a female pastor changed your beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God? Please describe what changes you have experienced or any new insights you have gained.
19. Describe the beliefs or attitudes about having a female pastor that were part of your church background before attending NHF.
20. In what ways has having a female pastor changed your thoughts, feelings, or beliefs about church?
21. Has having a female pastor impacted your spiritual life and spiritual well-being? Please explain how having a female pastor has impacted your spiritual life and well-being.
22. In what ways has having a female pastor changed your perspective on leadership and leadership in the church?
23. What other gifts and strengths do you believe that having a female pastor has helped to nurture and/or enliven in NHF?
24. Please share any final thoughts about your experience of having a female pastor.

The second part of the research was the Community Presentation that I gave for all NHF members on a Sunday morning during worship. I used a PowerPoint presentation to share the results of the anonymous survey. New Heritage regularly practices communal discernment and values transparency in these gatherings, so this part of the research was done to ensure that the results accurately reflected the responses of the participants and the culture of NHF. I went through the results of each question in the presentation. The presentation and discussion were

recorded, and all in attendance completed the appropriate permission forms. I did not receive any negative feedback about the presentation or results, and to my knowledge, none of the shepherds received any negative feedback about the presentation or the results. There was a consensus that the results reflected the participants' responses and the journey and culture of NHF. Having this consensus from the community made me feel more comfortable sharing this project with people outside of NHF.

Analyzing the Data

NHF is a small church, and I wanted the Google Form surveys to be as anonymous as possible, so I included minimal identifying demographic information from the participants. The general demographics of survey respondents were representative of the larger New Heritage Fellowship community. The 29 respondents included 15 females and 14 males. The age ranges of the participants were as follows: 3 participants were 26-36; 4 participants were 37-46; 3 participants were 47-56; 7 participants were 57-66; and 12 participants were 67+. In terms of religious backgrounds, the majority were Church of Christ (23 participants), and there were 3 participants each that identified as Baptist and Catholic. I also asked how long each participant has been a member of NHF. Most participants have been at NHF for more than 15 years (16 participants). Four participants had been at NHF for 6-15 years, and 9 participants for 5 years or less.

There were 29 participants in this study, and with such a big group—as well as a lengthy anonymous survey—I needed a way to categorize the large amount of data collected accurately and more easily. The multiple-choice responses and some free-form answers from individual sections of the first anonymous Google Form survey were loaded into TIBCO Spotfire, a data

analysis program by TIBCO Software Inc.⁹⁷ Demographic data was analyzed and put into categorical areas corresponding to the frequency of grouped responses. I used pie charts to display the data when it easily showed groupings based on key words. I did not create pie charts for every question because the number of responses and the length of the individual responses did not allow for discreet categories. For those free-form answers that were ungrouped, I categorized them myself using themes.

The Spotfire program allows for a more detailed analysis of the demographic data within each category. For example, answers to multiple choice questions can be differentiated and broken out by gender, age, church background, or combinations of any of those pieces of demographic data. So, I could use the program to see what percentage of respondents 67+ years old also had a Church of Christ background. I could use the program to break that data out even further using gender. So, for instance, I was able to break out the percentage of males and females, 67+ years old, with a Church of Christ background. The Spotfire program made it very simple to categorize the data and break it out in helpful ways that enriched the analysis and interpretation.

In the cases of some lengthy free-form answers, my analysis was thematic. I discerned themes by extracting key words according to frequency of answers. When possible, the summary results of those tabulations were then put into pie charts, using the Spotfire program, where they could be further analyzed by looking for major themes. I went through each of the answers via the Google Forms to check for any discrepancies in answers, such as those who listed “Church of Christ” versus “CoC” in their responses about church background, and I made changes accordingly. Once those themes were identified, I selected quotes from the free-form answers

⁹⁷ “TIBCO Spotfire Analyst,” computer software (Palo Alto: TIBCO Software, 2022).

that were representative of the themes due to the frequency of key words and sentiments.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Results and Thematic Analysis

The aim of this project was to discover the impact of egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership on the members of New Heritage Fellowship. After looking at the graphical results from the data analysis, I also combed through the written free-form answers to discern common themes from the responses. I tried to scrub the responses of personal identifiers without disturbing the integrity of the responses.

One thing that stuck out immediately from the data was that egalitarianism and female pastoral leadership was *not* the norm for the overwhelming majority of the survey respondents prior to coming to New Heritage. Nearly all of the respondents, 96%, reported that before attending NHF, the churches they were part of upheld hierarchical leadership models, with all-male leaders and male headship. When asked what roles females could access, participants reported that females could do things like teach children (42.6%), teach women (14.8%), prepare food (11%), sing in worship (9.3%), help behind the scenes (3.7%), work in the nursery (3.7%), and read Scripture during worship services (3.7%). 3.4% reported that females had access to leadership or authoritative roles. 100% said that males had access to all leadership and authoritative roles.

One participant out of 29 went to a church that had a female in a lead pastoral role prior to NHF. Significantly, patriarchalism and male-centric leadership was the norm for most of the respondents prior to coming to NHF, and this is representative of the membership of NHF at large since most members and participants had a background in the Churches of Christ. (See Appendix D for corresponding pie chart).

Below are the questions and selected thematic responses from the initial anonymous Google Form Survey.⁹⁸

Leadership Experiences Prior to NHF

As shown in the data above, I wanted to start with a baseline of what respondents' experiences with church leadership were prior to being part of NHF. I asked participants:

Question: Please describe the leadership structure of churches you were a member of before NHF and specify the leadership roles of male and female members. What access did male and female members have to leadership positions and areas such as shepherding, preaching, etc.? Specifically, did females have access to leadership positions?

Respondents reported previous church leadership experiences as being male centric. 5 used the term male-dominated. Female respondents included feelings of being unseen, unheard, unvalued, and even intimidated by the male-centric and hierarchical structure in their prior church experiences. This is a sampling of responses about their experiences of church leadership before NHF:

The denominational tribe I grew up in was very male centric. Men were expected to be in leadership roles exclusively. That included pastoral roles, deacon roles, committee chairmen, participation in worship and study environments. Women were allowed to teach Sunday school, participate in children's and youth classes and activities and women to women activities.

"Vintage" Church of Christ. All leadership roles were limited to male members. Females were limited to teaching young children, preparing communion, cleaning the building, making meals, etc.

I grew up attending churches in which I (as a woman) felt completely invisible to the leadership. All leadership roles were male led. There was a hierarchy within the elders' wives that the women had to 'go through' to do things (at least that's how it seemed to me) and I never ever felt at ease reaching out to these women. Women were not allowed any leadership roles in the churches I've been a member, nursery duty, teaching classes, and preparing food for potluck dinners or showers. I never felt like I could go to the elders with an issue because they met in a conference room at night, away from the

⁹⁸ I removed personal identifiers from the responses and eliminated personal or sensitive responses when asked by the respondent, other than that, the responses are copied and pasted without edits to grammar or punctuation.

congregation. Deacons might have been a little more approachable but again it just wasn't something that was encouraged.

All my life it's been men in charge unless food was involved. That's when we were important.

Males in primary leadership roles (i.e. preacher, elders, deacons and most ministry leaders). Females were largely positioned to be in supportive or secondary roles. Females had no real access to "key" leadership roles. Females might have some leadership type responsibilities for children but even then they reported to a male leader (i.e. elder). I recall some said (jokingly or otherwise) that the wives of elders had influence over their husbands and thus contributed to leadership.

Males had most of the leadership roles in my upbringing. Male priests, deacons, cantor, eucharistic ministers. Females could read scripture, be eucharistic ministers and could play an instrument and/or sing. Females could also serve the church by being a nun. I would say that females had very limited access to leadership positions.

My prior experience was that leadership roles were exclusively reserved for men. This is definitely true of preaching, leadership and church mission/direction efforts. From my background, women were restricted to roles as teachers, counselors, administrators, music ministry and Eucharistic Servers. In congregational churches women appeared to have a little more access to leadership opportunities. Women also served as teachers, counselors and administrators.

Male-centric leadership and complementarian culture was the norm for 96% of the respondents.

Those from Catholic and Anglican backgrounds indicated seeing females more in the assembly (Mass) than those from the Churches of Christ, but those churches also upheld male headship. In the free-form responses, 96% of respondent's prior experiences included "no participation" of females in terms of leadership and leadership roles, but some respondents indicated being part of churches where there was "limited participation" for females. I was careful not to use the word "allowed" in the survey question, yet I observed that 8 of the respondents used the word "allowed" in their responses. In each instance it was attached to what females could do or were "allowed" to do. The responses were in alignment with the culture and hierarchy of traditional complementarian churches.

Impact of NHF's Egalitarian Culture

After establishing a baseline of the church leadership experiences respondents had prior to being part of NHF, in the next question, I asked respondents to share the personal impact of NHF's egalitarian culture:

Question: NHF is an egalitarian church. That means that NHF is a church that opens ALL areas of the church, including areas of leadership, to both males and females. What impact has this had on you and your spiritual life?

- Being part of an egalitarian church has had no impact on my spiritual life.
- Being part of an egalitarian church has had a negative impact on my spiritual life.
- Being part of an egalitarian church has had a positive impact on my spiritual life.
- Other

Nearly all of the respondents, 96%, said that being part of an egalitarian church has had a positive impact on their spiritual life. None of the respondents indicated that being part of an egalitarian church has had a negative impact on their spiritual life. There was 1 respondent who added a different answer that reflected the challenge of this project which asks respondents to focus on gender:

I find it hard to give the answer to this a black and white answer. I have always been in a quandary about role differentiation based on gender. My questions were always left unanswered or just told that it was God's way. As a budding young minister in the church any pursuit I made to remove barriers was met with opposition. So to answer this question I must say that I am pleased that I have lived long enough to see it happen. I must admit that my roots, although buried deep, were tested when becoming a part of a faith community where barriers have been taken down. The test was more visceral than philosophical or theological. It was good for me to feel that so I may work through it and set it aside.

I then asked a follow-up question to discover if respondents could articulate specific ways that being part of an egalitarian church has impacted them and their spiritual lives:

Please explain your answer above, being as specific as possible. In what ways has being part of an egalitarian church impacted you and your spiritual life? Please share any specific stories from your experience.

I was not surprised to see that such a large percentage of respondents said that being part of an egalitarian church has had a positive impact on their spiritual lives. This follow-up question gave insight into why and how it has had a positive impact. The respondents' answers were surprising and full of depth and personal insight. There were 15 respondents who reported that they appreciate the different perspectives and diversity of thought that NHF's egalitarian culture provides. 12 indicated the positive impacts of increased female involvement in areas like leadership and speaking. Respondents indicated that an egalitarian church culture has renewed and invigorated various aspects of their being part of a church and a disciple of Christ. A theme that emerged from 10 respondents was deeper engagement in the life of the church. Females reported experiencing increased levels of self-efficacy, increased participation, and renewed excitement about their faith such as this female respondent who described herself as moving from attendee to active participant.

When I first joined NHF, I viewed the Shepherd Couples that were spiritual leaders as a positive. I saw some of these women and others participate in the Sunday worship. The women's comments before Communion were lovely. I eventually agreed to become a shepherd with my husband. I also began to lead elements of worship. The egalitarian church helped me to step away from being a church attendee to active participation.

Here are some of the responses that reflected these major themes:

Being part of an egalitarian church has not only been a positive influence on my spiritual life, it has informed my service and given me a greater understanding of scripture and worship and God's intentions. I am a better listener because of this egalitarian approach. I am a more discerning speaker. Both make me a better leader and hopefully a useful model for others.

I feel valued more, that my voice and knowledge matter. I feel respected and that has given me confidence to fully step into my roles in the church, where before I was just going through the motions. Now, I feel like I can explore any spiritual topic with respect and validation.

Being a part of an egalitarian church has opened my spiritual life to the influence of the female members of the body of Christ. Some of the most profound communion devotional

comments were made by the female members of NH. Those women who preached shared a new, rich perspective on the Word, often based on a perspective outside my male experience. And female shepherds bring a different, more grace-filled view of spiritual development to leadership.

For more years than I can remember I have spoken out concerning the priesthood of all believers but with the exception of NHF, there was token agreement but no real action. NHF gives voice to everyone and helps me to honor the priesthood of all believers. It provides me an opportunity to hear voices in the church that have been silenced or have been made afraid to speak out.

It has broadened my spiritual viewpoints and life because I never think, “only a certain person can do certain things.” I now get to hear more women speak from the female perspective. I would not have believed how much I am learning from them.

I spent 45 years hearing a male perspective in leadership and in public gatherings. Many times if there was a female perspective expressed it was expressed through the filters of men. As a teacher of adult classes and women's classes I was always impressed with the wisdom and insight women brought to the understanding of scripture and issues facing the church ... this created a tension in me because I knew the female perspective was filled with insight that was filled with spiritual insight. I have personally reaped so much from women in my life and am thrilled that we now have female shepherds and a female pastor!

This made me rethink some of my long-held beliefs. It has also made me see that females are important to the congregation. Specifically, I feel like an integral part of God's church—not a bystander.

I have always believed that women are equally blessed with the ability to lead and preach! If the Kingdom of God is our model, then everyone equally shares the blessings of the love of God, the teachings of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, what we have today is a situation where culture and societal norms have reversed what I feel God truly intended. Being a part of NHF, where our pastor is female, and women have equal access to leadership roles, has brought me inspiration and hope for our church and the role of future generations of women and men as well. This feels more like a direction God blesses than what I have experienced in the past.

The responses to this question demonstrated a great deal of positivity and deeper engagement within the church community. The respondents expressed feelings of “hope” which were not represented in the answers about their former complementarian experiences.

Impact of Female Pastoral Leadership

After discovering the impact of NHF's egalitarian culture on respondents, the next question was intended to see the impact of female pastoral leadership on respondents:

- Has having a female pastor had an impact on you and your spiritual life?
- Having a female pastor has had no impact on me or my spiritual life.
 - Having a female pastor has had a negative impact on me and my spiritual life.
 - Having a female pastor has had a positive impact on me and my spiritual life.
 - Other

More than four-fifths of respondents, 86.2%, said having a female pastor has had a positive impact on them and their spiritual life. I used the Spotfire program to break this out and found that 14 of these respondents were female and 11 were male, so slightly more females than males proportionately reported a positive impact. None of the respondents indicated that having a female pastor has had a negative impact on them and their spiritual life. 4 respondents said that having a female pastor has had no impact on them and their spiritual life. 3 of these respondents were male and one was female, so slightly more males than females proportionately reported no impact.⁹⁹ (See Appendix E for pie chart with corresponding data).

The next questions were aimed at determining why the respondents selected their answers and to draw out specifics related to the impact of having a female pastor:

Question: Please explain your answer above being as specific as possible. In what ways has having a female pastor impacted you and your spiritual life? Please share any specific stories from your experience.

A few major themes emerged from the participants' responses: a female pastor offers a safe and open space, encourages spiritual growth, emphasizes personal responsibility and an open mind, and reinforces the belief that females can be in leadership roles in the church. This respondent

⁹⁹ These results lined up with research from Bolin and Knoll that indicated that females were more likely to be positively impacted by a female congregational leader than males in terms of levels of self-efficacy and spirituality. In addition, they found *no* indication that males are disempowered by female clergy, but women are disempowered by an absence of female clergy in their youth. See Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word, Women's Ordination in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 178-180, 214.

reported feeling more spiritually responsible and their response was indicative of the major themes:

It's someone in a pastoral leadership role that gets it. She understands the frustrations of being overlooked and undervalued. It challenges me to fully expect myself to pursue spiritual matters beyond what society's expectation may be. I feel more spiritually responsible.

Here are some of the other responses that reflect these themes:

Our female pastor has had a greater impact on my spiritual life than any other minister I can recall. She is open to hearing what I have to say, unlike so many ministers in the past. They had all the answers; she doesn't pretend to. Our female pastor encourages me to think, feel, and respond to stresses/challenges/events with an open mind and open heart. I have NEVER enjoyed such open and honest communication with a pastor. I have NEVER felt like my ideas for service were as appreciated and sought after as I do now. I have NEVER felt more alive in my faith walk as I do now because of the true pastoring done by our female pastor.

First having a female pastor affirmed my growing belief that we had misunderstood Paul's writing about women keeping silent for two thousand years. Second, we engaged our first female pastor at about the same time I committed to being more contemplative and more liturgical in my practice. These three changes reinforced each other and convinced me I was on a better track. Third, I think having a female pastor has encouraged other women members to step out of the limitations of their past church experiences. Seeing that the church was serious about our female pastor, I suspect that they believed that they were indeed welcome to equally participate. I don't think anyone felt this was a "ghost" patriarchal system with just a female puppet pastor. This freedom seemed to engage our female members, who in turn, opened the church, and me, to a flood of pent-up spiritual growth, experience, wisdom and strength.

I have found that it is much easier to talk to a female pastor. I am not one that normally shares my feelings or thoughts but found myself out of the blue seeking my pastor to confide in her. She listened and prayed with me. She also followed up with me to see how I was doing. That meant a great deal to me.

I have been in a situation where a male elder used his position in an abusive way. Having a female pastor not only makes me feel like I have a safe place as a woman to seek and share my spiritual feelings with someone that can see things from my prospective as a woman. It has also shown me that as women we have a message and a voice. From working in a corporate environment, I always knew a woman could handle the same administrative tasks as a man. So, I supported NHF's plan to include women in our search for the new pastor position. The icing on the cake is the caring, shepherding, loving presence of a woman in that role. Having a female pastor that encourages my relationship with God, educates me on female leaders in the Bible, and emphasizes service to the needs of others has been a benefit to my spiritual growth.

Though my experience in spaces with female pastors is limited, I do find that female pastors have created spaces where more people are welcome and more perspectives are heard, whether that's from others in the congregation, different guest speakers, or diverse authors. Female pastors have widened the kingdom of God for me and are consistently working to make more room at the table or build a whole new table. Because I learned from female pastors I now also learn from people of color, LGBTQ+ folks, differently abled people, people from different religious traditions, and so much more. My spiritual life is more vibrant and more embodied because of the ways female pastors have broken down barriers for themselves and continue to do so for others.

Another notable theme that emerged from this question is that 2 respondents indicated that a female pastor increased their awareness of the more feminine characteristics of God:

I like the freedom, the sense of openness, of embracing the feminine nature of God, the example for our female members and children both boys and girls.

I also think having a female pastor feeds the feminine, softer side of God that I really need due to the harsh, judgmental side of God that I grew up with. I thought God was one dimensional. I don't remember the words "God is love" even though it was biblical.

The 4 respondents that indicated that having a female pastor had no impact on them and their spiritual lives also explained why. Their reasons had to do with their perspective on gender *not* being the determining factor or the only determining factor in terms of impact. These responses generally surfaced the complexity of separating the personality of the pastor from their gender and discerning which of those had an impact and which did not. These respondents felt that it was the personality and leadership of the pastor and not the gender of the pastor that had an impact. Here are 2 of those responses:

No impact but that's a good thing. I see her role as pastor as genderless. If there has been any positive impact, it is a result of my better understanding of the role of members, male and female, in God's church.

She has brought a positive impact on me and my spiritual life, though I don't know if that is because she is a woman. Her perspective is impactful, and it's safe to assume that her perspective has been cultivated by her life. I cannot possibly know how much of that cultivation is influenced by her gender, therefore, I can only say that she is impactful as an individual.

Overall, responses indicated that female pastoral leadership has had a positive impact on spiritual growth, feelings of safety, and inclusivity in the community. Additionally, while no questions asked about participants' images for God, several responses also indicated that having a female pastor has helped them embrace the feminine side of God. This seems significant in light of the discussion in chapter one about the need to embrace the more feminine metaphors for God.

Impact of Female Pastoral Leadership on Children

I did not include children in this project, but I did include this question for parents/guardians:

Question: Do you have children (17 and under) that attend NHF? If yes, what impact do you believe that having a female lead pastor has had on him/her/them? Please be specific.

Most of the participants (6 out of 7) said that having a female pastor has had a positive impact on their children. None of the respondents said that having a female pastor has had a negative impact on their child/children. Respondents indicated that as parents, they feel hopeful that female pastoral leadership will help move the next generation out of patriarchy and instill the belief in children that they can participate and lead regardless of gender. Another theme was that female pastoral leadership helps nurture deeper connections with their children. Here are some of those responses:

He will grow up seeing women in leadership positions and that is one step out of the patriarchal values into a direction we hope he will embrace when he is older.

Yes. Sends a message to my child that they can have a role in church no matter their gender.

Yes. I think both males and females have the ability to see how important our children are and that we should help nurture their spiritual health. I do believe having a female allows for stronger relationship building.

Yes. Our daughters see our female pastor as both a leader and member of our family in Christ. They recognize that she is in charge but are also comfortable approaching and interacting with her.

One respondent indicated that gender was not a determining factor one way or the other on their children:

Yes, but I honestly couldn't tell you if having a female pastor made a difference one way or the other. I would say that my kids were much more impacted by the church's collective outreach during and after the worst of the pandemic than by any one individual.

Parents reported that they are hopeful that female pastoral leadership will help their children and future generations to see that they can participate regardless of gender, and parents indicated hopefulness about their kids continuing to embrace a culture that invites everyone to participate.

Impact of NHF Egalitarian Culture on Levels of Participation

The next question was designed to discover if being part of a church with an egalitarian culture has had an impact on respondents in terms of their levels of participation in worship and leadership, compared to their levels of participation *prior* to being part of NHF:

Question: Have you participated in aspects of worship and leadership more, less, or the same at NHF than you did at previous churches where you have been a member? (Examples: preaching, Communion, dwelling, reading scripture, praying, shepherding, etc.)

- I have participated in worship and leadership more at NHF.
- I have participated in worship and leadership less at NHF.
- My participation has been the same.
- Other

More than three-quarters, 79.3%, of respondents indicated increased levels of participation at NHF in worship and leadership in comparison with their prior experiences. Of the 23 respondents who indicated increased participation, 15 of those were female and 9 were male. None of the respondents indicated that they have participated less at NHF at the worship and leadership level than in previous experiences. Of the 6 respondents who indicated that their level of participation was the same at NHF as it was before NHF, 5 of those were male, and 1 was female (see Appendix F for pie graph of corresponding data).

This was a significant data story in terms of the hypothesis of this project. Not only did zero percent of members indicate *less* participation since being part of the egalitarian church culture at NHF, but most participants reported experiencing *increased* levels of participation, including a significant number of males—despite being in churches prior to NHF in which males had access to all leadership roles. Almost every female participant in the survey indicated that they have participated in leadership roles more at NHF. More females than males indicated that their participation has increased at NHF. This increase as well as the corresponding free-form answers indicates that female representation has positively impacted male and female participants, with a higher increase amongst the female participants.

The next question was designed to draw out the reasons for any variation or consistency in terms of participation for respondents:

Question: Please explain your answer above. Why have you participated more, less, or the same at NHF in terms of worship and leadership? If your participation has remained the same, please share why.

Participants' answers indicated that church culture was a major factor in participation prior to NHF and at NHF. Once again, I was careful not to use the word "allowed" in the question, but the word "allowed" appeared multiple times in respondents' answers; many respondents indicated that they were "not allowed" to participate in their previous church contexts. A major theme that emerged was that those respondents who indicated increased participation at NHF were invited, asked, and encouraged to participate more at NHF in terms of both worship and leadership than in prior church experiences. Respondents indicated an open, non-judgmental, and communal environment at NHF that empowered them to try new things.

While I had served as a song leader at a church before NHF, I was never allowed to truly lead the worship service as I do now. I was never allowed to preach as I am now. I was never consulted as to what study we should pursue for our Sunday worship services. My ideas were never considered, much less sought after. Now I am routinely asked by the

pastor for what I think the church wants and needs. I am allowed the freedom to follow the Spirit as it directs my service.

I was not allowed to participate in any forms of leadership at most of the churches I was formerly a part of. The exception to that would be time spent abroad in a church community that allowed women to participate in worship, but only foreign women were ever permitted to share a message (local women were rarely given this platform). Since being a part of NHF I have been invited to preach, guide Communion and dwelling, pray over the congregation, and read scripture. Even though public speaking is not something I particularly enjoy, I do feel compelled to represent women in leadership when I am invited to do so, because I want all of the girls like me to have the experience I didn't have of seeing regular women hear from God and inspire the community.

I was never allowed to participate in worship at other churches. Once, I was 1 of 4 fellowship leaders at another church. One male leader of the committee made all the decisions without ever consulting me. I was a committee leader in name only.

I previously lead classes and worked in youth ministries in paid internships at churches. I organized and ran a singles program voluntarily. But here, I feel more connected by providing services like helping setup, takedown and making coffee. I am asked to participate more by helping with leading communion and dwelling. Getting asked to help makes it more open to me. I enjoy being asked.

I HAVE PARTICIPATED IN MORE WORSHIP AND LEADERSHIP AT NHF THAN EVER BECAUSE I WAS ASKED TO!

From the beginning of NHF, we embraced the idea that all who shared the spirit were welcomed to lead, share, and have a voice in our fellowship. Because we are committed to priesthood of all believers.

Because we are committed to the priesthood of all believers. I feel that I can serve with integrity and honesty. My beliefs about how we historically have treated females and their opportunities for leadership would sometimes get me into trouble. In previous churches, I shied away from leadership positions because of traditions/beliefs on the "roles" of women and especially the "rightfulness" of them serving in positions of leadership. New Heritage allow me to be open and honest about this matter in ways that I could not do in the past.

Interestingly, those respondents that indicated that their levels of participation have remained the same also indicated in written form that they have benefitted from those who have experienced increased levels of participation. Here are two of those responses:

While the levels of my participation are about the same, my participation experiences have been richer. Just knowing that we are an open group to which all are free to participate brings a different kind of joy to me.

I've always been pretty active in my church life because that's what my parents did. I feel more respected and heard at NHF. In previous experiences, I felt more used and then tossed aside, whereas here I feel like part of the team.

Impact of Female Pastoral Leadership on Levels of Participation

This next question was designed to see if female pastoral leadership had any impact on levels of participation above and beyond the impact of egalitarian culture:

Question: Since having a female lead pastor, have you participated in things at church that you had not participated in before? (Ex: preaching, Communion, dwelling, reading scripture, praying, shepherding, etc.)

- Yes
- No
- Other

Nearly three-quarters of respondents, 72.4 %, indicated that since having a female pastor, they have participated in things at church that they had not participated in before (e.g., preaching, Communion, dwelling, reading scripture, praying, shepherding, etc.). Of those 21 respondents, 11 were male and 10 were female. About a quarter, 27.6%, of respondents indicated that since having a female pastor they have not participated in things at church that they had not participated in before. Four of those were female and four of those were male (see Appendix G for a pie graph of corresponding data). This was an illuminating data story. Even though most NHF respondents had already reported that they experienced higher levels of participation due to NHF's egalitarian culture, a majority of respondents also indicated that they were participating even more with a female pastor. This increase in participation was represented in both males and females. Interestingly, even though male respondents have experienced increased levels of accessibility in all areas of church, including leadership roles, before having a female pastor, the

majority of male respondents also indicated increased levels of participation since having a female pastor.

I then asked respondents to identify what things exactly they have tried, done, or considered doing at NHF since having a female pastor that they had not before. I also asked respondents how having a female pastor impacted their decision to try doing those new things:

Question: What things have you tried, or done, or considered doing at NHF since having a female pastor that you had not before? How did having a female pastor impact your decision to try or do these new thing(s)?

Since having a female pastor, respondents said they have enthusiastically participated in community service partnerships more; six respondents mentioned participating in our practice of dwelling in the word during the worship gathering; and there was a general sense from most of the respondents of experiencing increased motivation to participate in leadership or speaking opportunities, with the majority stating that the reason for increased participation was that they were encouraged to or invited by their female pastor:

I have created numerous special services at NHF, thanks to the idea sharing and collaboration (and fearlessness) of our female pastor. She has sought out and secured ample service opportunities that have really changed my views of things a church can do for the community. I gladly sign up for service projects because she is right there alongside us. I have a better understanding of the value of church and personal hospitality because of her. Before her, I thought that the leadership at churches was a good-ol-boy network (at least NHF had some good-ol-girls in the mix); but now, that's a thing of the past. Full transparency and accountability has made shepherding a possibility for me; til now, I saw no path into that kind of leadership for me ... just not my style, that elitist, sexist, top-down nonsense. I think the current arrangement is open to anyone who truly wants to serve in a more official capacity. That's a reflection upon the pastor.

Dwelling in the word was a new practice instituted by our female pastor. I was excited to try something that was not “vintage” Church of Christ and I have been pleased that this positive experience opened the door for NH to try additional new practices: Tenebrae service, prayer walk, etc.

Dwelling has been an enlightenment for me. I think it has for many others, too. It just so happens that our female pastor brought this practice to our church. I love how it allows us to connect with different members in a ‘real way’ that is deeper than the surface chit-chat.

In previous congregations, I have done preaching, teaching, etc. While I have been asked to allow my name to be considered for a shepherd/elder. I have turned those down until New Heritage. Having a female pastor was finally a dam breaker for me to step into that role because I saw and understood that we practice the priesthood of all believers.

What has changed is not so much what I do, but the fact that I feel like I do MORE than previously. Basically, I'm more motivated to be involved and enjoy the opportunity to work with our pastor and others as well. One good example is all the work we do with ACO. Before I was somewhat involved, now I'm EXCITED to be a part of that compassion ministry. It's a much more "encouraging and positive" experience for me! I feel that women are natural leaders when it comes to benevolence ministries!

I have been much more involved in volunteer activities (Harbor Chase and ACO) since having a female pastor. This is a result of her passion for the family's involvement with the community.

A major theme also emerged among female respondents specifically. Female respondents reported increased involvement in speaking and leadership opportunities due to increased confidence, safety, and encouragement directly related to observing a female pastor and the support shown to the female pastor by the congregation. This data suggests that female representation has had a strong impact on most of the female respondents in terms of participation. It also shows that the degree to which others have supported the female pastor has also impacted the female respondents who have participated more. Here are some of those responses from female participants:

Being a shepherd and standing in front of the church to lead dwelling and communion have been significant break throughs for me. I believe that I wouldn't have done those things without the encouragement of my female pastor. I witnessed her capability, learned from her delivery, and felt I could try this.

I have participated in more worship and leadership than EVER before at NHF, wholeheartedly because I WAS ASKED TO. Our female input is valued and needed at NHF. I have led communion and even a lesson/sermon if you will. With a female pastor I felt more comfortable than ever trying these new things and what I loved is there has always been guidance in doing those things.

I do not know if I would have attempted to lead dwelling, communion, etc if a male pastor had asked me to. I certainly think it would have been more difficult to be open and vulnerable about my anxiety to do so.

My female pastor encouraged me without pressure to start [a] group and I grow more confident as we continue each month. I don't think I've ever led a group of people before, and it's not as scary as it seemed at other churches where there was so much more expectation instead of appreciation.

I have done communion. Just speaking from the pulpit or front of the room is a big deal. As I said before, certainly not something I had ever experienced. And I know I could do more, but it's hard to break years of feeling that you can't possibly be spiritual or intelligent enough to speak.

Most of my participation in worship as a guide of some kind has happened because the pastors have invited me to do it, which is something that never occurred at other churches. The invitation is low pressure in some ways because they have created a safe space for everyone to be heard (regardless of their experience or skill level), and they have created different opportunities to participate. Even though some people may never have the time or courage to deliver a homily, they may be able to read a Scripture, guide dwelling, share an insight, or give announcements. In this way it becomes high pressure, because she really wants you to be heard. It is difficult to say no because she has created an environment that is conducive to everyone participating—which means everyone tends to be involved.

For the eight respondents (four male, four female) who said they have *not* participated more since having a female pastor, their responses fell into two categories: They either indicated that they have always been involved, or that their involvement was *not* tied to the gender of the pastor:

See above answer on apprentice shepherds. My participation changed a little bit with the apprentice shepherd role, but I don't know if that is directly attributable to having a female pastor.

I have not personally expanded my areas of participation, but I have benefitted by others who have.

I can't say my participation in such things has changed. The only thing that is different, at least in name, is dwelling. Having a female pastor did not affect my decisions but has impacted my joy and feelings because we are committed to the priesthood of all believers.

Overall, respondents expressed appreciation for the female pastor and her leadership style, which is perceived as more inclusive, collaborative, and inspiring than what they had experienced before. Many respondents mention the introduction of new practices and services, such as dwelling in the word, which they found enlightening and meaningful. Several respondents also mentioned feeling more motivated and involved in missional partnership activities and leadership roles, as a result of the female pastor's encouragement. Lastly, some respondents mentioned overcoming personal barriers and fears to participate in new activities and leadership roles, which they attribute to the female pastor's leadership and the more inclusive and empowering environment she has created.

Impact of Female Pastoral Leadership on Communal Gifts

The next question was designed to get respondents to reflect on gifts that may have emerged among community members, and to consider what impact a female pastor might have had on helping those gifts to emerge.

Question: Have you noticed gifts emerge among NHF members that may have been dormant before having a female pastor? If so, what is it about having a female pastor that may have helped to uncover those gifts?

Respondents enthusiastically indicated that they have seen an increase in leadership and speaking opportunities for everyone, which have allowed gifts in those areas to emerge, especially for females. Respondents indicated that females feel more confident and empowered to take risks and participate in leadership areas, due to being able to observe a female pastor and being invited by the pastor to participate. Additionally, respondents indicated that males have also participated more and have not been negatively impacted by the increased participation of females. All the respondents who mentioned it viewed the increased participation of females as positive. Here are some responses that reflected these major themes:

The gift of teaching/preaching has definitely been enhanced. The pastor always provides source material and a sounding board for those of us who try to bring messages to the church. She has drawn out others to visibly lead through the dwelling practice we've adopted because of her. The Spirit is breaking out in all kinds of ways, and I think the female pastor has had a hand in that happening with more and more members and especially the leaders. She has nurtured our children's minister and helps make her a more polished deliverer of information, a more discerning teacher, and a more selfless servant. Really, that "gift" of self has been the most dynamic change since our female pastor arrived. Everyone has that gift inside, I think; she draws it out in the greatest way.

Absolutely. Having a female pastor not only opened the worship leadership experience to more female members, but also encouraged some male members to step out and try things they had not tried before. For example, we've had some female/male team sermons, mother and daughter communion talks, father and daughter discussion leaders, etc.

Yes, I have. I have noticed more women leading communion, preaching, praying and more. Women can do anything that they are empowered to do. NHF has many talented women who have so much to offer. I think I've noticed more activity from our women members in responses to questions in service. I know I felt led to start [a] study (I've never done anything like this before).

Yes! I believe our ladies have become an equal spiritual force in our NHF family. But the amazing thing is the men of our NHF family are every bit the leaders and spiritual guides they were. You don't have to choose one to be stronger, as we say, "We are better together."

My main observation is that our women are much more involved — a very good thing to me! I also feel their involvement much more relaxed and natural due to our female pastor's leadership! I love the roles our female leaders provide. A key reason behind this is the support and encouragement they receive from our female pastor.

Women at NHF seem to be sharing their gifts more since we have had a female pastor. I believe that our pastor's openness and encouragement of women to fulfill roles (such as technology support, book clubs, shepherding, leading elements of worship) has uncovered these gifts.

I didn't know most of the NHF members prior to them having a female pastor, but I have certainly noticed things in members that I have not witnessed anywhere else. I particularly love hearing older women speak from the pulpit, and I tend to think that it's something they started doing later in life. I have seen NHF's female pastor put in extra work to create experiences where everyone is heard and everyone has an opportunity to share, which has become more natural for even the more timid members to do. She has put forth incredible work to create and promote different types of activities that engage everyone outside of worship — from book clubs, to theological discussions, to bingo. No

one is left behind here, and I know what most people's giftings are because regularly get to see them in action.

One of the most prominent themes is that 14 respondents have seen gifts emerge since having a female pastor. These respondents reported that they have seen more women participate in leadership and worship. There is also a sense that the female pastor has helped to uncover the spiritual gifts of members who might have stayed in the background otherwise, particularly those who might not have felt empowered to participate due to a history of male-dominated leadership. Additionally, many respondents feel that the female pastor has been instrumental in creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for all members, which has allowed them to feel more comfortable sharing their gifts and participating in church activities. Finally, several respondents have noted that the female pastor's leadership has helped to develop and nurture other leaders in the church, both male and female, and that this has led to greater collaboration and a sense of unity within the community.

Impact on Views of God and the Kingdom of God

The next question was aimed at discovering what impact female pastoral leadership has had on respondents' beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God. I hoped to learn from this question what areas of respondents' spiritual lives may have been impacted by female pastoral leadership. The question was:

Question: Has having a female pastor changed your beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God?

- Yes
- No
- Other

A little more than half, 58.6%, of the respondents indicated that having a female pastor has changed their beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God. 10 of those were female and 7 were male. The remaining 41.4% indicated that having a female pastor has

not changed their beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God. (See Appendix H for a pie graph of the corresponding data.) I followed up this multiple-choice question with a free-form question aimed at discovering *how* having a female pastor has changed respondents' views on God and/or the Kingdom of God and what specific views have changed:

Question: In what ways has having a female pastor changed your beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God? Please describe what changes you have experienced or any new insights you have gained.

The 17 affirmative responses to this question were quite profound. Those participants who reported a change in their views said that having a female pastor has helped them see the feminine aspects of God; they have learned that in God's Kingdom both male and female are created in God's image and are equal co-laborers in the Kingdom. Respondents also indicated that their views about the love of God and the inclusivity of the Kingdom have changed and expanded. Following are some sample responses:

So much to say, here. I long suspected but never had this idea reinforced at church: God is not binary. The "male" and "female" are united in God, and we are made in God's image. The scripture says that in Christ there is no male or female, etc. Our pastor has shown us that the patriarchal bias throughout church history is truly bias. The thirst for power and control has corrupted many churches. Women were strong leaders in early church days, and there is no "scriptural" basis for excluding them today. Centering our faith on Jesus changes pretty much everything I have been trained by churches to believe. All are welcome, at the "bigger table." All. Period. Everyone is a child of God. Everyone. Period. We are not judges; we are fellow seekers. We need not be afraid to question, to doubt, to be open to whatever the Spirit is telling us.

As I worked on the continuum of my faith journey, my mind has continued to open to new possibilities and spiritual discoveries. God does not discount or diminish half of his children.

I see God's wisdom in teaching us that in Christ, there is no male or female. I gave that truth lip service before, but practiced traditional CofC patriarchal limits. Now I regret the years I limited my own spiritual growth by supporting that system. My heart breaks for the women who were silenced by tradition. I have a sense of urgency about egalitarianism in the church, especially as I see other denominations and congregations "harden" in their traditional stance.

Having a female pastor has shown me that God's kingdom is inclusive and that there are opportunities for both males and females to work to achieve their spiritual potential.

Everything is possible with God! Why should I feel as if I am not worthy of leading others in a worship service or church activity because I am not a man? We cannot allow the possibilities of women led opportunities to go untapped. We are all created in His image.

Yes, our female pastor has impacted my beliefs. I might have eventually seen it at NHF with a male pastor, but our female leader has reinforced my belief of a loving God rather than a punishing one. She has widened our opportunities to serve others as Jesus did such as supporting ACO and those in Assisted Living.

I do believe that she has a much greater pulse on the issues facing the church. Many of those issues are not gender based. At the same time, the perspective she has brought is first-hand experience in dealing with the "traditionally" excluded I believe born out of her experience as a woman. She has used this experience to give a voice to those who have been excluded ... Powerfully.

I feel like having a female pastor has made me less judgmental of others because of the warmth I feel and the trust and compassion I feel from her. I hear in her sermons the facts of what God wants us to do and her take on those facts has opened my heart and mind to think differently on a lot of topics. She has really made me aware of what a loving God we have and how that will never change.

For the 12 respondents who indicated that having a female pastor has *not* had an impact on their views about God and/or the Kingdom of God, the most significant theme that emerged was that the gender of the pastor was not a factor in their views before or now:

My attitudes haven't changed. I just think people are listening to women more than previously.

I can't think of any ways that having a female pastor has changed my beliefs. I have always been fairly open minded about many things and this is one of them.

I don't feel the changes are as a result of a female pastor necessarily but the message and culture that has been created by our female pastor.

Just over 40% of respondents mentioned that their beliefs have not necessarily changed since having a female pastor, but most of them indicated that their perceptions and imaginations have been impacted positively by the increased participation of others. Many respondents express that

they have always believed in the mutual nature of God's Kingdom, and having a female pastor has reinforced this belief. Some also stated that their previous beliefs were limited by patriarchal biases.

Previous Church Beliefs about Female Pastoral Leadership

The next question was aimed at discovering attitudes specifically around female pastoral leadership that were part of respondents' backgrounds *prior* to being part of NHF:

Question: Describe the beliefs or attitudes about having a female pastor that were part of your church background before attending NHF.

A couple of major themes emerged from the participants' free-form answers. In short, female pastoral leadership was not possible in all but one of the respondents' backgrounds. Respondents reported that before NHF, their previous experiences and beliefs were that females could not lead for scriptural reasons, namely they were not permitted or gifted to lead. The church allowed males to lead, and females were to be in the background, quiet, and led by males both at home and at church. Here are some examples of those responses about attitudes about female leadership:

They were background employees and specialty leaders (kids and other women). They couldn't preach, lead, or even speak in front of the congregation because that was the domain of men. A female lead pastor/minister was anathema.

My tribal background was that men were leaders of the church. Women were supportive of men except when social events needed to be planned and executed, teaching Sunday school, leading missions efforts, and any other non-public display of ministry.

I was a traditional Church of Christ trained male leader. So I "understood" Paul had commanded women to be silent in the church.

Most of my prior attitudes/beliefs focused on frustration that we did not understand (or perhaps did not want to understand) what it means to be a "priesthood of all believers" or "there is neither ... male or female of those in Christ Jesus. As such, I found myself challenging others on this in many of the classes I taught.

Women & children were to be seen and not heard.

Women were supposed to follow behind the man of the house. And while they may have had spiritual insight or had very different ideas they kept quiet.

Having been a part of the founding of NHF giving voice to others ... especially women was at the heart of why we began. But it still took 20 years to get there. Most (not all) of the members were desirous of having women at least take a role in worship (leading worship, communion devotion, scripture reading, testimony, art, and drama, even occasional preaching and presentations.) There was also a desire to allow women to lead ministries based on their passions, not just for women or children. At the same time it took a long time for us to get to the place where a) the family felt comfortable and b) where many of the women felt comfortable to take on those roles. I believe that having a female take on the responsibility has been empowering to many men who were less enthusiastic and many women who were reluctant.

My Catholic background did not allow female pastors. All pastors were male priests. From my career, I knew women could perform well in the same role as a man. But my 50-year experience of no female pastors, blinded me to the benefits of a female pastor.

I grew up believing that God had gifted women differently from men, and public speaking in front of men was not one of the gifts that women had. Even though I wasn't sure about the reality of this, I did think it was a "salvation issue" and could risk damnation if I were to challenge it or even propose alternative viewpoints. In college I moved further away from that as I discovered that I was really gifted in and really enjoyed studying theology and realized that I may be more equipped to deliver good news than some of my male counterparts.

Regrettably, it felt like we gave lip service that women were equal but could only participate in ministry as long as it was in a secondary role. It seems we simply could not imagine or perhaps did not want to imagine that God called women into roles we traditionally reserved for men—despite numerous references throughout Scripture to women who were called by God.

Many respondents reported that in their past experiences, gender roles were strictly defined in their churches. Women were not allowed to preach, lead, or even speak in front of the congregation because that was the domain of men. Respondents also reported that women were only allowed to occupy supportive roles in the church, such as teaching children or other women. Some female respondents indicated that they were brought up to believe that male leadership was the only way and that women were not fit to be pastors or hold leadership roles in the church.

Impact of Female Pastoral Leadership on Beliefs about Church

The next question was a free-form question aimed at gathering specific data about the impact of female pastoral leadership on spiritual beliefs, specifically respondents' beliefs about church. The question was:

Question: In what ways has having a female pastor changed your thoughts, feelings, or beliefs *about church*?

Respondents reported that a female pastor has helped them be more open, compassionate, and focused on participating in the mission of God outside of the church. Respondents also indicated that a female pastor has caused them to believe that church should be more transformative, relational, welcoming, safe, and inclusive.

Churches were clubs for the self-righteous. Churches were rigid, rules-based, exclusionary, male-dominated, shaming, finger-pointing. They were corporate. I now see, once again because all churches offer glimpses, what a church is meant to be: the opposite of those things. Our female pastor embodies openness, compassion, intellectual discernment, stewardship, and faith in God.

This female pastor has worked tirelessly to include people from the margins and encourage the growth of the people in the seats. 'Church' has a much more positive connotation now. I still like the terms family and community better. Seeing her in this role certainly opens one's eyes to being inclusive in a very tangible way.

Having a female pastor has cemented my belief that my prior hermeneutic was flawed, which opened my mind to contemplating other interpretations I had held for many years. Now I think it is so wrong to limit women to the traditional CofC roles, and I want to be a part of churches open to giftedness of all.

It redeems "church" for me. It says all our welcome and we are open to all voices. There is still much work for the modern church to overcome our traditionalism and clinginess to old ways but having a female pastor gives me new breathing room to address other issues. And, if we can navigate this, who knows (other than God) what we might be able to say and do for the kingdom. That makes me excited.

I don't know how much of what I have learned is because of a female pastor or just the one we have. She is really focused on how we can serve the community and brings her experience along with her passion for the church. She has opened up my heart to a lot of things I was too busy focusing on doctrine to see. I learned that for us to be "church" we can only do this by focusing on people - as Jesus modeled. I knew that, but she brought

an example in a different way. It wasn't about belonging to the "men's clubs" it was about being part of the community in which we live and serve and work.

My eyes have been opened even wider as to what “church” really should look and feel like. DOING is God and our female pastor DOES God very well in our community. She is not afraid to reach out to any one and serves our God and His people very well. That inspires me and makes me braver in my daily life to take care of people I don't know.

A paradigm shift has occurred. I no longer believe that the Bible directs men only to participate in public worship. Again, this was not solely because of a female pastor.

I am proud to mention to others that our church has a female pastor. I believe people are looking to be accepted by churches, and I think having a female pastor is less threatening to some who might be looking for a safe place to worship.

Four respondents indicated that having a female pastor had not changed their beliefs about church. The common theme that emerged from these respondents was that having a female pastor only confirmed what they already believed. Here are two of those responses:

My thoughts on church haven't changed as I was raised to understand that the church was more than a building. But having a female pastor has heightened awareness about a number of issues outside the church.

It has been freeing. I have believed — for 30 years or more that this is where the church needed to be — but I had no experience with it — In short my feelings and thoughts have not so much changed but have grown because my beliefs have moved from theory to reality.

Overall, the belief that churches are rigid, rules-based, exclusionary, male-dominated, shaming, finger-pointing entities has been challenged. Respondents reported that a female pastor has surfaced compassion, intellectual discernment, openness, and open stewardship as an expression of the church. Having a female pastor has also highlighted the need for the church to focus on serving the community, to be inclusive of all voices, and to be accepting of people. Additionally, respondents reported that a female pastor has challenged traditional interpretations of the role of women in the church.

Impact on Spiritual Life and Spiritual Well-Being

86.2% of respondents indicated that having a female pastor has had a positive impact on their spiritual lives. I included this question that was worded slightly differently than the previous one to further glean what specific impact female pastoral leadership has had on respondents' spiritual lives and spiritual well-being:

Question: Has having a female pastor impacted your spiritual life and spiritual well-being? Please explain how having a female pastor has impacted your spiritual life and well-being.

Respondents (especially female ones) indicated deeper levels of spirituality, confidence, and safety, and also increased feelings of spiritual freedom. Interestingly, 7 respondents indicated deeper understanding of God's Word. Others indicated their being more involved in the life of the church and, significantly, in the mission of God. Here are some of those responses:

I've been more confident and awake for lack of a better term. I feel like I was just going through the motions, but now I can be a vibrant child of God.

Yes. While my experience with a female pastor is limited, I've seen her bring a deeper spirituality to her role than any male preachers I've worked with. So far, our female pastor is much more inclusive and supportive of those on the fringe of the church. She truly cares for the 99 and the 1. Seeing this in action has modeled that behavior for me, and it has had a positive impact and I am more concerned and caring for those on the fringe, and those who think differently than me.

I have had a difficult time in my life trusting men, especially those in roles of leadership. In fact, all my physicians are female. I feel more at ease opening up with my feelings and issues to a female rather than a man. I've always, always had the feeling that men don't really hear or care about what I say. Because our pastor is female, I have opened up about things I've never shared with any other. I feel comfortable asking her spiritual questions that I would normally fear asking a man (except for one other) I think the female mindset is more open to possibilities than a male. Men seem to NEED to be right. So because of all of these reasons, I know my spiritual life has been enriched, broadened, and cracked open!

For me and my past experience. It's just a much safer less threatening situation. This has made me think more and seek out what I feel God is teaching me.

Seeing the men embrace the reality of a female pastor gives me hope for my own grandchildren that the church will be relevant in their eyes and a relationship with Jesus is something to seek.

I think the different perspectives help provide that guidance in scripture and understanding of scripture. Plus, there is more emotional leadership in a female pastor where emotion is able to be exhibited. I have seen our female pastor exhibit emotion during a beautiful song or passage reading. I have rarely seen a male pastor or leader do this as openly. It just opens me up to know this is a safe place to worship openly and exhibit emotion.

I know that I feel more spiritually free because of having a female pastor. She has given me permission to show up as my whole self before God, and also with others. She has taught me to let others be their whole selves, and together we can navigate our joys, our sorrows, our doubts, and our dreams. My spirituality and spiritual practice is no longer driven by fear or condensed by legalism. Having female pastors has meant that my spirituality can take up space and make space for others.

Not all respondents attributed the impacts to their spiritual life and well-being to the gender of the pastor. The common theme from this group of four respondents was that, for them, it was the personality of the pastor that had an impact, and not the gender of the pastor. Here are two of those responses:

Again, I struggle whether this is about her being female or just about her being who she is. She has brought a lot to the table that I didn't see before. She also brought an intentionality to women leading. We have wanted more women serving in worship. She modeled it. She gave a vision for people to see and want. This has really pushed me to focus on more viewpoints of scripture and spirituality than maybe I had before.

Yes, but I think it is because of our particular female pastor. I have been loved, encouraged, and challenged. I do believe that personality matters when it comes to leadership. She has been an incredible guide and understands the value of relationships.

These respondents demonstrated the difficulty of separating gender from personality, leadership style, and gifting. However, none of the respondents indicated a negative impact on their spiritual lives.

Overall, respondents reported increased ability to listen and love people. Several respondents shared that they have become better listeners and lovers of people—including those

who are different from them—because of having a female pastor. Seven respondents stated that they have gained a deeper understanding of God's word. Many respondents reported increased confidence and spiritual vibrancy, and a few respondents shared that they feel more confident and spiritually awake since having a female pastor. A number of respondents mentioned that having a female pastor has created a more inclusive space for worship, where they feel comfortable asking spiritual questions and exhibiting emotions.

Impact of Female Pastoral Leader on Perspectives on Leadership

The next question sought to discover if having a female pastor has impacted respondents' views on church leadership in general as well as leadership as it relates to gender in the church. I hoped that since I had already established respondents' experiences with leadership in the church prior to NHF, this question would indicate if any shifts had occurred in regard to their views of church leadership and leadership as it relates to gender in the church. The question was:

Question: In what ways has having a female pastor changed your perspective on leadership and leadership in the church?

Respondents indicated that they now see how effective a female pastor can be, and that God is the one who calls someone into ministry and gifts them for ministry (therefore, anyone can lead), and that having a female pastor brings much needed ideas and perspectives to the church. There were 17 respondents who indicated a positive change in perspective due to having a female pastor. These responses represent major themes that emerged:

People who lead with their hearts are the best leaders in a church. That's what Jesus did. He wasn't foolish, ever. He wasn't blind, ever. He loved first and always. He didn't judge. He sought out those society had left behind. He showed how to take care of everyone's physical needs first and worried about their souls after. That's what our female pastor has done for me.

I've had female supervisors and CEOs at work, so I knew that our churches were off-base in terms of church leadership. But that was not experience-based knowledge until we engaged a female pastor. Now that I've seen it modeled, it's a bit painful to visit a non-

egalitarian church. The “good-ole-boy” network of preachers in a local area/region seems so juvenile now. And I can’t help but wonder what riches are being missed by those churches who follow tradition.

It solidifies what I believed and hoped for all these years. It reminds me that if God calls and gifts someone for ministry, who are we to say you can't do that. I feel blessed that I can say we are genuinely trying to practice the priesthood of all believers.

Well honestly, upon learning we were considering a female pastor I thought it was weird and would never happen. It was weird to see how I had been brainwashed to think something was wrong with the thought of a female leader. Now I will never think about male or female but just what as a leader are they bringing to this family.

I am more open to women having major leadership roles. I must admit, however, that “old tapes” continue to play. I am still not comfortable with women elders. I would also be uncomfortable with a very strong willed, aggressive female as a pastor.

As an adult member of the “Church,” my vision and beliefs of who can and can’t lead and who is and can be equipped to lead has been constantly changing. The female pastor opens the door and shows how it can be done. The funny thing is this is the first time she has done it as a pastor. Therefore, we are doing it together. I think very few question her ability to lead or her desire to lead. She does not do it in a way that is super authoritative.

I have learned that the ability to pastor a church and provide spiritual leadership are not male only attributes.

I grew up seeing leadership as a man at the head of the boardroom table, but I have seen female pastors facilitating discussions at the roundtable or overthrowing the table completely in favor of a picnic blanket or a living room couch. The leadership I have seen from female pastors does not settle for congregants who listen and obey, but rather they lead people to share, participate, and grow.

Not all respondents felt that having a female pastor had changed their perspective on leadership and leadership in the church. Some respondents indicated that they had *always* believed that females could be leaders in the church, and others indicated that finally having a female pastor only confirmed what they already believed. Here are two of those responses:

It hasn't changed my viewpoint on leadership, just made it more relevant.

For leadership in general, I have believed for a long time that women, people of color, and those of different sexual orientation should not be discriminated against in leadership roles. My female pastor's accomplishments at NHF are proof that women can be church leaders.

Overall, respondents shared that having a female pastor can bring new perspectives, ideas, and skills to a church community, making it more complete and healthy. Additionally, a female pastor can help shift the church culture so that it is more hospitable, caring, and emotional. The majority of respondents reported that the presence of a female pastor confirms the idea that all individuals, regardless of gender, are called to use their gifts for personal and community edification to the glory of God, reflecting the priesthood of all believers.

Gifts or Strengths Enlivened or Nurtured by Female Pastoral Leadership

I included this question to discover if respondents could identify any additional gifts or strengths that having a female pastor has helped to nurture or enliven at NHF:

Question: What other gifts and strengths do you believe that having a female pastor has helped to nurture and/or enliven in NHF?

Respondents reported that having a female pastor has enlivened their passion and participation for service and missional partnerships in the community (31.0%). Other strengths and gifts nurtured or enlivened were hospitality (17.2%), compassion (10.3%), and inclusion (9.4%).

I want to study scripture and commentary now. Perhaps I always leaned that way, but our female pastor has made it collaborative. She has supported [a] group, where everyone is welcome and can have a safe place to think and say whatever is going on in our lives and minds. She has helped make church a moving experience, a fun experience, a sobering experience, an energizing experience that leads to action outside the church.

One issue not addressed in this survey is the maternal/paternal role of God. I grew up in a paternalistic understanding of God. Having a female pastor allows all of us to understand the maternalistic role of God and His gifts to us.

Openness, the ability to hear fresh voices and perspectives that I might not get to hear otherwise. Having been a male pastor and known quite a few over the years, she brings a softness and sweetness that I have not always experienced among male pastors I have known. Generally, we say a lot about the Fatherhood of God but completely miss or minimize the “motherhood” of God. Perhaps having a female pastor allows me and others to understand and see the motherhood of God.

Community building and service are definitely at the top of the list. I think having a female pastor also helps in constructive and productive communication both on spiritual matters and business matters.

I think it has helped the church look more at supporting the emotional needs of its community. It isn't just a checkbox - look what I did type of community outreach. We are all looking at ways to help the community more.

Definitely our cooperating with our compassion partners. The advantage of working with many other female leaders has given us all a new enthusiasm when it comes to compassion. This is also true for those special needs that occur within our faith family as well! As stated before, I feel women leaders have several natural advantages.

My female pastor has emphasized caring for our members and for others. She coordinates meals and solicits help. She has initiated and encouraged those services that were typically delegated to women non-leaders in churches. Her support of these little efforts emphasized their importance. As a result, more members have volunteered to help serve others.

Our pastor has continually reached out to our community to help. She seeks opportunities for NHF to demonstrate God's love.

I think that our practical missions have been strengthened - i.e., ACO, helping individuals in our church, etc. While global missions are very important, I think in our society women have the ability to see a need and meet that need without having to be told.

It is significant that missional participation (31.0%) was by far the most reported gift and strength to be enlivened with a female pastor, especially considering NHF's desire to become a missional community, and to hire a missional leader and pastor. Respondents also reported that hospitality and compassion were enlivened or nurtured, including related qualities such as openness, listening, and understanding. Respondents shared that having a female pastor has allowed for fresh perspectives and voices to be heard. It has also increased focus on emotional and community needs, which helped to build a more collaborative, inclusive, and compassionate community. Additionally, female members have been empowered to discover and use their spiritual gifts.

Final Reflections on Experience Having a Female Pastor

For the final question, I asked respondents to share any final thoughts on their experience having a female pastor.

Question: Please share any final thoughts about your experience of having a female pastor.

A few themes emerged from this final question. Most respondents were enthusiastically positive in their answers. Respondents indicated that having a female pastor made them more hopeful about the future, and they reported feeling excited to see more females and more people in general engaged at NHF. Another major theme was that respondents indicated feeling thankful and energized to be part of a church that includes everyone and reflects “the priesthood of all believers.”

She lives up to the concept of “pastor.” She nurtures. She cares. She listens. She shares. She makes me want to be more like Jesus.

Our experience together has been one of rich growth. I believe it has given the women, and especially our younger women a place where they are valued as individuals with deep spiritual insights. I look forward to what God has for us in the future.

My final thoughts about having a female pastor include the idea that engaging women in the entire life of the church, including pastoral leadership, will better equip NHF to weather whatever challenges NHF will face in the future. I also think NHF is better attuned to the Holy Spirit by including the voices of women. And I think that an egalitarian church will be more winsome to future generations.

I will conclude with these thoughts. It just feels good to say that I belong to a fellowship where the priesthood of all believers is our model. Our pastor has been amazing in modeling this and encouraging all our members to use their gifts and desires as Kingdom citizens.

Believing that having women in leadership has long been a passion of mine. But before I pat myself on the back too much. I was clueless in how to go about getting this done. And in honest self-examination, I can see how many times I was at the same time, unwilling to take the steps to press forward. Why? Honestly out of fear of the repercussions of how others might react. And, more condemning, because like most in positions of “authority” I was unwilling to yield “control” unless it was on MY terms. I thank God every day for our pastor’s (and the NHF’s) leadership for pushing forward to see this become a reality.

We have a long way to go to release the kingdom from 2000 years of patriarchy and misogynistic chains. I am beyond thrilled that I have lived long enough to see us come this far and pray that this journey continues to move people to the freedom of “all are one in Christ.”

I am grateful beyond words that we are congregation that doesn't just talk about the priesthood of all believers. We also practice it in visible ways. So thankful. So blessed.

Some respondents who identified as being happy with the pastor indicated that this was because of the personality of the pastor and not the gender of the pastor.

While I struggle to differentiate her qualities from her gender, I appreciate that she acts as a strong role model in our church. We have had strong female role models in our church before, but we have not had a woman serve as lead pastor. To that end, I appreciate that kids in our church will grow up where church leadership roles are not gender specific.

She is a perfect match for our church. It didn't matter that she was female. I'm not sure I could say that about all female pastors.

Common affirmative themes that emerged were appreciation and gratitude for having a female pastor, acknowledgement of the benefits of having women in leadership roles, and the importance of inclusive leadership for all.

Conclusion

The overwhelming response to the impact of NHF's egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership on the members who participated in this study was very positive. Having a lead female pastor was a new experience for 28 out of the 29 respondents. Most of the respondents' previous church leadership experiences were born out of the Churches of Christ, and therefore upheld a traditional culture based in hierarchy and characterized by male headship, complementarianism, and, for some, male-centrism. Yet, 25 respondents said that having a female pastor has had a positive impact on their spiritual life. The four respondents who said that having a female pastor has had no impact all reported that the impact was related to the personality and leadership style of the pastor and not their gender. Even those members who

spent the longest amount of time in churches that practiced male-only leadership have had a positive experience with the egalitarian culture of NHF and female pastoral leadership. For example, of the 9 respondents with a background in the Churches of Christ who were 67+ years old, 100% indicated that female pastoral leadership has had a positive impact on them.

Both female and male respondents had very positive responses to female pastoral leadership, with female respondents indicating slightly more positive responses. More males than females indicated that there has been no impact, and most of those respondents indicated that gender was not the factor that impacted them one way or the other. *None* of the respondents indicated that NHF's egalitarian culture has had a negative impact on them and their spiritual lives. Likewise, none of the respondents indicated that female pastoral leadership has had a negative impact on them and their spiritual lives.

The majority of parents (six out of seven) who participated in the survey indicated that having a female pastor has had a positive impact on both their male and female children. None of the respondents indicated that having a female pastor has had a negative impact on their children. This indicates a generational positive impact for egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership.

The majority of respondents (79.3%) indicated that they have participated more at NHF in the areas of worship and leadership than they had at previous churches in which they had been a member. Males and females indicated participating more in the areas of worship and leadership since attending NHF, with females indicating slightly more participation than males. Responses from female respondents indicate that this change in participation is related to policies at their former churches that barred them from participation in the areas of worship and leadership. Some of the respondents (20.7%) indicated that their participation in the areas of worship and

leadership has remained the same since becoming part of NHF. None of the respondents indicated that they have participated less in the areas of worship and/or leadership at NHF than in their previous church experiences. Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that NHF's egalitarian culture has had a positive impact on their participation particularly in areas of leadership and worship. Throughout the survey, dwelling in the word was mentioned by 33.3% of respondents as a new practice they have participated in, and for many of those respondents, dwelling in the word has been an entryway to increased participation.

The majority of respondents (72.4%) indicated that they have participated more since having a female pastor than they did before. Interestingly, despite already being part of an egalitarian church with open access to all areas of the life of the church, most respondents—both female and male—indicated an increase in participation at all levels since having a female pastor. Females indicated slightly more participation than males, especially in areas of leadership and worship, since having a female pastor. Respondents attributed the increase in female participation to female representation at the pastoral level, and being invited or asked to participate by the female pastor and encouraged by other church members. Males also indicated participating more, largely because they were asked. Also interesting is that this increase occurred alongside the COVID-19 pandemic when many churches and church members experienced a decline in participation.

Some respondents (27.6%) indicated that their participation level has remained the same since having a female pastor. None of the respondents indicated that they have participated less at NHF since having a female pastor. 6 respondents used the phrase “priesthood of all believers” in the survey with the connotation that this reflected NHF's egalitarian culture and an absence of hierarchy.

The majority of respondents (58.6%) indicated that having a female pastor has positively changed their beliefs about God and/or the Kingdom of God. 10 of those were female and 7 were male. All the respondents viewed these changes as positive, such as seeing more of the loving and inclusive nature of God, coming to recognize the more feminine nature of God, and seeing that all people—male and female—are made in God’s image, gifted by God, and are needed to participate as partners with God in the church and the community. 41.4% indicated that having a female pastor has not changed their beliefs about God and/or the Kingdom of God. 5 of those were female and 7 were male. Half of these respondents reported that gender was not the determining factor in their view, and the remaining reported their views have remained the same or were confirmed by having a female pastor. None of the respondents indicated that having a female pastor has had a negative impact on their beliefs about God and/or the Kingdom of God.

As revealed in the corresponding responses, NHF participants overwhelmingly indicated increased levels of satisfaction, energy, and connectedness to God/Jesus, the Bible, the church, and the community. An overarching theme that emerged in relation to female pastoral leadership is that respondents feel more energized to serve and partner with God in the community and connect with people outside of the church more (31.0%). This is exciting to me as a missional leader because NHF wanted to become a missional community. Females indicated being more energized, confident, safe, and connected since having a female pastor. Interestingly, males indicated similar impacts, though on a slightly smaller scale. However, males also indicated that the increased participation of females was positive and beneficial to the whole community. None of the males indicated any detrimental impacts related to NHF’s egalitarian culture or female pastoral leadership. As predicted, several respondents had a difficult time separating the pastor’s personality and leadership style from gender on certain questions in the survey. Still, none of the

respondents who—understandably—struggled to focus on gender being the deciding factor in terms of impact indicated a negative implication stemming from female pastoral leadership.

The positive impacts of NHF’s egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership abounded for the 29 respondents who participated in this lengthy survey. I was overwhelmed (with gratitude) by the number of participants and the breadth and depth of their answers. I hypothesized that both NHF’s egalitarian culture and the recent experience with female pastoral leadership have had a positive impact on the spiritual lives of NHF members. According to the respondents who participated in this survey, my hypothesis was correct. Respondents are flourishing within NHF’s egalitarian culture and with a female pastor. Additionally, more respondents also reported being more engaged in the work of “genuine flourishing” within the community. As a first-time female pastor, I am also flourishing with NHF. In the next chapter, I will discuss the theological foundations that I believe underpin the flourishing expressed by the project participants and myself.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

NHF's Theological Foundations for Flourishing

*When God does what God intends to do,
this will be an act of fresh grace, of radical newness.
At one level it will be quite unexpected, like a surprise party
with guests we never thought we would meet and delicious food
we never thought we would taste. But at the same time
there will be a rightness about it, a rich continuity
with what has gone before so that in the midst of our
surprise and delight we will say, "Of course!"
This is how it had to be, even though we'd never imagined it.*¹⁰⁰
– N.T. Wright

In this chapter I share a theological framework that illuminates the theological and biblical foundations that I believe New Heritage Fellowship prioritizes, that cultivate a culture in which all members (and a first-time female pastor) can flourish. This chapter focuses on (1) a theology of power and privilege, which I believe reflects NHF's desire to emulate Jesus in *kenotic* (self-emptying) love; and (2) a theology of egalitarianism and its connection to a belief in "the priesthood of all believers," as a means of missional participation and flourishing. There is a missional and eschatological impetus to these undergirding theological foundations that I believe are operationalized within NHF and among NHF's leaders.

Both theologies—of power and privilege, and of egalitarianism, and the priesthood of all believers—help nurture a type of discipleship defined by *Christoformity*, being conformed to Christ. As Scot McKnight states in *Pastor Paul*, "We are formed by his life, by his death, and by his resurrection and ascension. We are not only to believe the gospel but also to embody it."¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Easter* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009), 39.

¹⁰¹ Scot McKnight, *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christoformity in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 4-5.

Christoformity has a missional dimension in that it includes embracing our calling as coworkers with Christ in God’s ongoing ministry in the world.¹⁰² Flourishing is made possible for all when followers of Jesus dwell in and are formed by the person and mission of Christ, and when God’s intentional vision for all creation becomes our collective vision as well. This is a belief embraced by the priesthood of believers, also known as the members of NHF.

A New Imagination for Power and Privilege

*Why is power a gift?
Because power is for flourishing.
When power is used well, people and the whole cosmos
come more alive to what they were meant to be.
And flourishing is the test of power.¹⁰³
– Andy Crouch*

When I read the Gospel of Matthew for the first time as an eighteen-year-old, I was moved by how Jesus used his immense power and privilege. I have also been inspired by witnessing and benefitting from the intentional away that NHF shepherds, leaders, and members seek to emulate Jesus in their use of power and privilege. Power and privilege are a reality, and they are realities for most of the leaders and members of our majority white, middle-class, and educated church community. Yet, I have observed no efforts to deny that such power and privilege exist. I have witnessed a critical mass of NHF members seek to follow Jesus’s example

¹⁰² Ibid., 5.

¹⁰³ Crouch, Andy. *Playing God: Redeeming the Gift of Power*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 35. Crouch defines power as the “ability to make something of the world” (17). Crouch defines privilege as “the ongoing benefits of past successful exercises of power. Privilege is the name for all the good things we do not need to try to acquire, because they simply flow to us as a result of past exercises of power” (150). He also says that power and flourishing are connected from the first page of the Bible: “Power is for flourishing, teeming, fruitful, multiplying abundance. Power creates and shapes an environment where creatures can flourish, making room for variety, diversity and unpredictability of coral reefs and tropical rainforests, but also the surprising biological richness of high deserts and ocean depths. And image bearing is for power—for it is the Creator’s desire to fill the earth with representatives who will have the same kind of delighted dominion over the teeming creatures of their Maker. Which means image bearing is for flourishing. The image bearers do not exist for their own flourishing alone, but to bring the whole creation to its fulfillment” (35).

of using power and privilege. I have witnessed *kenosis*, or self-emptying, followed by intentional moves toward or on behalf of others. This kenotic intention echoes the hymn that is Philippians 2:5-8: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”¹⁰⁴

In *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love*, Alan Jacobs—also drawing from Philippians—defines *kenosis* this way:

I refer to the idea that genuine love of others is *kenotic* in a particular sense of that word: Genuine love of others requires an emptying out of one’s own self and a consequent refilling of the emptied consciousness with attention to the Other. This notion derives from St. Paul’s account of Christ’s *kenosis*, or “self-emptying,” “self-divestiture.”¹⁰⁵

Jacobs holds that the *kenosis* of Christ establishes a pattern for Christians that is “a corporate endeavor, as the ever-repeated and never-perfected task of the hopeful church.”¹⁰⁶ I agree with

¹⁰⁴ I have often heard this passage quoted at NHF and it was one of our Dwelling passages during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Dwelling in the Word is a spiritual practice that we do every Sunday. It is a listening practice in which listen to a passage of Scripture together (the same one over several weeks), get into pairs to share what we heard, and then share what we heard our listening partner say in the larger group.

¹⁰⁵ Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), 104.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 110-112. There is not a consensus among scholars regarding *kenosis*, and Jacobs shares multiple views from various scholars. For example, Jacobs notes that Karl Barth preferred to speak in terms of “self-giving” rather than “self-sacrifice,” being preoccupied not so much with the loss to the self as with the gain for the other (110). Notably, there is also critique among feminist theologians due to concerns related to abasement. In J. C. Polkinghorne, *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (International Society for Science and Religion, 2007), Sarah Coakley’s essay shares the feminist perspective and makes the case that *kenosis* is about “power-in-vulnerability,” meaning that the focus is less on what Christ gave up, and more on how Christ chose to live and use power. Coakley considers that it is not God in need of emptying, but rather, “a false form of hubristic human power.” The feminist critique is that self-emptying can be an unhelpful paradigm for women. Coakley elaborates, “For here there has been a long-standing critique by feminist theologians of ‘kenotic’ Christology on the grounds that it may make normative for women forms of ‘self-sacrifice’ and ‘self-abasement’ that keep them in subordinate roles and can even lead to the condoning of abuse. Whereas men may need to learn forms of moral *kenosis* that compensate for their tendency to abuse power (this argument runs), women can be endangered by an emphasis on ‘self-emptying’ that is already damaging to their sense of identity” (2607). This is an important consideration also fraught with gender

Jacobs, but I would add the caveat that giving up power in this way does not entail a loss of identity. Rather, in the act of Christlike *kenosis*, we can see ourselves fully, as powerful beings, who choose to share and disperse power to and on behalf of others. In becoming vulnerable and moving towards another in service, Christ demonstrates a restored view of power.

Paul begins the *kenosis* text by first addressing privilege: Jesus is equal to God. Yet he does not seek the power associated with that privilege. Instead, Christ voluntarily submitted to a life defined by self-emptying, humility, slavery, and sacrifice.¹⁰⁷ Jesus did not exploit his position of power and privilege; instead, he voluntarily chose to be humble and human. Jesus deliberately chose solidarity with us humans. Paul's encouragement is to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus, to *be in agreement with* Christ Jesus, or to model our way of being on Christ Jesus. The emphasis is on what Christ does and whether we will follow Christ. Furthermore, it is in Christ's self-emptying that he reveals to us what God is like.¹⁰⁸ Paul sings a song of a God who is both powerful and vulnerable. Sadly, but importantly, this exhortation from Paul has historically been used to admonish Christian women and slaves to submit to abusive husbands and masters.¹⁰⁹ This is a misuse of this text that avoids the first part about forgoing privilege, in favor of further subjugating those with less power and privilege. This interpretation signifies "a

generalizations, and Coakley asserts that it should not prevent us from considering *kenosis* as a legitimate spiritual goal for both men and women. See 2600-2636.

¹⁰⁷ Morna D. Hooker, *Philippians*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible Volume XI*, Ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 502, 506-507.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 508.

¹⁰⁹ Carol Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, 2012), 344. Slaves were often instructed to obey their masters and not to express any sense of ingratitude. Christians were more than complicit in using the Bible to manipulate, control, and shame those who were enslaved. See Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 120-130.

failure to struggle against injustice.”¹¹⁰ Flourishing is not possible where power is not filtered through *kenotic* love and where justice is ignored.

One of the things that I learned in this project was that many of the participants from NHF have experienced church pain and trauma. I was humbled as I read through their responses and was welcomed into some of their most painful experiences. Not surprisingly, most of them involved abuses of power and privilege from those in positions of authority. It is essential for leaders to become aware of the wounds and scars that are present within the community. Christians and churches that desire to join God in the flourishing of others also choose to grapple with the reality of power and privilege, and ultimately, they should choose to use power and privilege the way that Christ did. Christ chose to redefine power and privilege, choosing solidarity with those with less power and privilege, and using his abundance of power to give life in abundance (John 10:10). This is in stark contrast to much of the misuse of power and privilege that we see among far too many Christians and churches today, which center and elevate a few, accumulate more power at the center, and marginalize others, often leaving them more vulnerable.¹¹¹ Jesus chose power *with* others instead of power *over* others. This way of being was counter-cultural when Jesus did it, and it still is today. Scot McKnight puts Christ’s voluntary submission this way, using Paul as an example:

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 344. “They forget that the hymn starts not with the suffering Christ but with the Christ who is equal to God. The poor in Latin America who are told to suffer like Christ rather than struggle for freedom, or abused women who is ministers tell them to submit husbands, are not in a position to copy the Christ of this hymn. Its challenge is addressed to persons of some status and power, just as Christ had the status of God. In order to preach a gospel that centers on a crucified person and that brings persecution in its wake, such people must empty themselves” (344).

¹¹¹ This reminds me of the Parable of the Lost Sheep, in Matthew 18:10-14 and Luke 15:3-7. Jesus cares about those inside the community and those who are at the margins. In Jesus’ kingdom it makes sense to leave the center and go out to the margins to find the one that is most vulnerable.

Rather, he degraded himself in order to subvert their worldly system of patronage, eloquence, and honor. Why? Because, as the above lines from Paul reveal, God revealed his power in Christ, and that power was the power of the cross, the power of sacrifice for the sake of others, the power of a path toward a death that led to a resurrection. In the words of Mark Finney, “The cultural lust for upward mobility, greater influence, or higher status in the eyes of the world by changes in circumstances is now to be abandoned for it is ultimately irrelevant. Status for Paul was irrelevant.”¹¹²

In stark contrast to the culture of his day, Paul asserts that status is irrelevant, drawing into question the belief that maintaining a superior place in a hierarchy is a relevant pursuit for those who follow Jesus.¹¹³ Jesus prioritized the flourishing of all over the flourishing of himself. This is the intentional work that Christians and churches have to grapple with as co-laborers in the redemptive work of God. Paul’s admonition is for persons of privilege to be of the same mind as Christ, and our actions should follow.

Jesus chose a change of status, and this voluntary change of status is significant and has implications for Christ followers and churches today. In *Playing God*, Andy Crouch enjoins us to be wary of status and privilege:

Ultimately, the best reason to be wary of status and privilege is how little they mattered to Jesus. “It will not be so among you”—the priorities of Jesus are to spend his privilege, not to conserve it. As Paul would put it, quoting one of the first Christian hymns, the one who is in a very form of God, the one who could have claimed ultimate status, the one who deserved all privilege, did not consider it something to be grasped, and emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. Did that mean he was not the Son of Man and Son of God? No. It was precisely because he was the true Son of Man, the true Image Bearer, and the Icon of the true God, that he had not the slightest interest in gripping tightly to status and privilege. Because he did not grasp them, they had no grip on him, and because

¹¹² McKnight, *Pastor Paul*, 159.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 152. McKnight describes the culture of Rome this way: “Everywhere Rome went, its culture went, and a singular mark of Roman culture was the insatiable quest by upper-class males (especially) to climb the social ladder to be honored, often with a monument or statue, for their accomplishments. Historians of the ancient world as well as scholars of contemporary cultures often describe such societies as honor-shame cultures. Honor is both one’s perception of one’s own status and simultaneously (and more importantly) affirmation by one’s peers or important others. Honor thus becomes public verdict. It also becomes intoxicating” (152).

he became last and servant of all, he is now highly exalted, Lord of all—the only one in heaven, on earth or under the earth who deserves his place in line.¹¹⁴

Status and privilege mattered little to Jesus: He did not conserve it; he spent it. Likewise, privilege should matter little to those who follow Jesus. Jesus used his power in unexpected ways, specifically, he emptied himself for the flourishing of others (*kenosis*). Throughout his ministry, Jesus engaged in surprising and transformative acts of culture-making, demonstrating the proper use of power and privilege. I will discuss some of them in the next section of this chapter. Confident in his identity, Jesus never sought to accumulate more privilege and, in contrast to the social fabric of his time, he was indifferent to status. This indifference to status, rank, and place made many people—especially many religious leaders—angry, because it freed Jesus from the bondage of perception and associating with the “right sort” of people.¹¹⁵ Instead, in his ministry, Jesus met and befriended procurators and prostitutes, tax collectors and zealots, and synagogue leaders, with precisely the same care and truthful attention, and he invited them into Kingdom partnership.¹¹⁶ Jesus never fails to honor the image of God in each of these daughters and sons; he never pays the slightest compliment to the exaggerated images and roles they play.¹¹⁷ Jesus never tries to exalt himself. His only purpose is to restore, redeem, or create, and he invited males and females, Jewish and Gentile people, and enslaved and free people to partner with him in that work (Galatians 3:28).

¹¹⁴ Crouch, *Playing God*, 159.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

What are the implications for Christians, churches, and religious leaders today? If we are intentional about recognizing the power that we hold, what then should we do with it, and how should we use it? Crouch's answer is succinct: "Jesus simply never had a thought except to restore, redeem and create a new community among whom power would be used always and only for flourishing."¹¹⁸ The implication is that the church should strive for Christlike *kenosis*, to have the mind of Christ, to likewise restore, redeem, and create a new, welcoming community that utilizes power always and only for the flourishing of all. This is the story that I have seen NHF leaders and members strive to live out, and this is the attitude that I have witnessed at NHF that I believe has enabled the church to thrive during the COVID-19 pandemic, to fully lean into egalitarian culture, and to flourish with a female pastor. This posture also made it possible for their first female pastor to flourish as a leader as well.

Jesus and Kingdom Collaboration: Sharing Power

Jesus resisted the accumulation of status, power, and privilege, and this resistance casts a new imagination for power, authority, and leadership. In many ways, Jesus resisted the Greco-Roman culture of his day, including systems like patriarchy and slavery that allowed some to flourish while others languished. Jesus was not like the standard teacher of his day. Although the culture of the time required that the twelve disciples were all male and Jewish, Jesus also welcomed female Jews and male and female Gentiles into his larger group of disciples. Jesus didn't select what his society would consider "the best of the best" to be his disciples. He chose marginalized people, such as tax collectors, fishermen, prostitutes, and zealots. Jesus gathered and cultivated a diverse and surprising community that he empowered to follow him in his ministry of redemption and restoration, the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 166.

Jesus had authority that was given to him by God, and Jesus also blessed others with authority for the flourishing of others, such as providing spiritual and physical food, healing all manner of illnesses, and casting out evil forces. The teachings of Jesus emphasized self-emptying love, mercy, and forgiveness, and he modeled these qualities for his followers and in his interactions with people, especially with those who were marginalized and oppressed. Followers of Jesus saw a leader whose use of power and authority was unconventional and counter-cultural. Likewise, Jesus posed a challenge to the religious and political authorities of his time, as well as ours, by speaking out against abuses of power, injustices, and the hypocrisy that he saw all around him. His teachings and actions often went against prevailing societal norms, which like today, tended to be exclusive and detrimental to those with little-to-no social standing. In stark contrast to many religious authorities from his day and ours, Jesus' use of power was marked not by self-aggrandizement or upward mobility, but by his willingness to share power, to suffer, and to sacrifice himself for the sake of others.

Jesus Disperses Power Throughout the Community

Astonishingly, and often to the frustration of those around him, Jesus did not use his power and authority to avoid suffering or to seek personal comfort or security; he used his power to bring healing and liberation to those in need. Jesus was also courageous in his use of power and authority: He often got in between those with the most power and those with the least.¹¹⁹ The ultimate authority in the Bible is the Triune God. As the ultimate source of authority, God dispenses the abilities, skills, strengths, and gifts that result in the capacity to lead or influence others (1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 18, 24, 28; Romans 12:6-8; Ephesians 4:7-13; 1 Peter 4:10). Jesus

¹¹⁹ John 8:1-11 The story of the woman caught in adultery is a great example of Jesus using his power as a shield to protect and recognize the dignity of others.

also makes it known that his authority and power come from God (Matthew 11:27, 26:64, 28:18-20; John 3:5). God gave authority and power to both males and females in the Bible. God called on females and males to lead in the Bible. Jesus called on males and females to partner with him in redemptive work. In fact, the story of Jesus can't be told without both men and women.¹²⁰ In their book *God's Women Then and Now*, Deborah M. Gill and Barbara Cavaness describe the counter-cultural leadership found in the Bible:

Scripture records, that God placed women in power. God chose to equip women with the capacity to influence people. God entrusted them with responsibility and held them accountable for how they used their authority. God empowered women with supernatural gifts that qualified them to minister in the church. And God chose women to speak to his people on his behalf. Women bring certain strengths to leadership, just as do men. Both are needed in interdependent ministry for leadership to be the most effective overall.¹²¹

Jesus invited males and females to partner with him, taught females alongside males, told stories about female and male characters, and interacted with males and females on a personal level, showing tenderness to them and solidarity with them.¹²² Jesus demonstrated to males and females how to lead lovingly, use authority prudently, and never abuse one's power.¹²³ Jesus showed a healthy attachment to power, unlike the Israelite kings before him, who allowed the lust for power and privilege to go to their heads, just as God warned (1 Samuel 8:9-22).

Leadership comes with responsibility, and the greater the advantages granted to a leader, the

¹²⁰ Gupta, *Tell Her Story*, 51. Gupta shares a series of in-depth pieces on women that God called to lead, such as Deborah, Mary the mother of Jesus, Phoebe, Prisca, Lydia, and Junia. All of these women were called by God and all of them partnered with men. Gupta emphasizes that the women that Paul commended in the New Testament were full ministry partners that Paul greatly esteemed as leaders. Their partnership reflected the Kingdom goal, not of submission or supremacy, but of mutual care, respect, and harmony (155-160).

¹²¹ Cavaness and Gill, *God's Women Then and Now*, 176.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 177.

greater the level of accountability is required of the leader to resist.¹²⁴ God promised to replace those wicked kings that preceded Jesus with good shepherds who would be servant leaders and would gather the flock together instead of driving them apart (Jeremiah 3:15, 23:1-8, 25:32-38; Ezekiel 34).¹²⁵ Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who would lay down his life for the flock (John 10:1-16).¹²⁶ Although the metaphor of a shepherd can be seen as problematic today, because it can be used to perpetuate paternalism and even abuse, Jesus uses it to describe one who welcomes the flock, knows and sees the flock, protects the flock, and cares deeply for the flock. Jesus used his power and privilege to cultivate relationship and community. Additionally, it is interesting to note that Jesus is also referred to as both a lamb and a sheep.¹²⁷

Jesus' use of power in relationship and community is astonishing, and it seems critical for churches to spend significant time reflecting on his use of power as they assess their own systems and disbursement of power within the church and among the neighboring community. The assessment and disbursement of power is important in the process of cultivating a flourishing, Christlike culture. McKnight and Barringer contend that a Christlike culture:

Nurtures truth, offers healing for the wounded, seeks opportunities to show redemptive grace and love, focuses on serving others (rather than on being served), and looks for ways to establish justice in the daily paths of life. A Christlike church culture always has its eyes on people because the mission of the church is all about God's redemptive love for people.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Ibid., 178.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 179.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 179.

¹²⁷ There is a dynamic of solidarity with us humans in Jesus also being referred to as a lamb or sheep. This language reiterates kenotic love and shows that Jesus is both vulnerable and powerful. See John 1:29, 36; Isaiah 53:7; Acts 6:32; 1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:12, 7:17, 13:8, 22:3; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:18-19.

¹²⁸ Barringer and McKnight, *A Church Called Tov*, 23.

In their book, McKnight and Barringer share some of the impacts of an unhealthy attachment to power by those in leadership. When under the influence of power, people have shown to be more impulsive, less risk-aware, and—crucially—less adept at seeing things from other people’s points of view.¹²⁹ Sadly, the authors note, many leaders lose the ability to empathize with others: “When leaders acquire power, power itself becomes an agent that may reduce the leader’s capacity for empathy and compassion, especially toward those who are powerless (like women, in many churches). Such a self-centered hubris may cause the personal character of the power-shaped pastor to lose contact with the very essence of Christianity.”¹³⁰ Losing contact with the essence of Christianity—with Jesus—has a profoundly detrimental impact on a church and its culture. A healthy church culture is one in which leaders and a critical mass of members have a healthy attachment to Jesus and to power and privilege. Likewise, a Christlike culture means that congregants are free to hold their leaders accountable for abuses of power. These are two of the values that I have witnessed at New Heritage: a culture of seeking *kenosis*, Christofornity, and a culture of accountability that is maintained through transparent communal gatherings in which all members are invited. In the next section I discuss three stories in which Jesus demonstrates the importance of Christlike *kenotic* love and restores our understanding of power and privilege.

Jesus and a Foundational Theology of Humility and Service

James and John provide a relatable example to us of the importance of a healthy theology of power, privilege, and authority in Mark 10:35-45. Focused on status, they boldly ask to be

¹²⁹ Ibid., 32-33.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 33.

given seats of honor in Jesus' coming kingdom: "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory" (Mark 10:35-37).¹³¹ Jesus corrects their confusion and reorients them to his mission and the nature of his kingdom. His kingdom is not about power and prestige, but about service and sacrifice. The other disciples become frustrated with James and John, and Jesus calls them all together to share a message with them about power and authority: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45).¹³²

James and John are very relatable in this narrative. Mark must have known that generations of ministers would be too concerned with power and status. James and John want to be as close to Jesus (and his power) as possible, and they don't mind saying so in front of others. The closer we are to status and power, the more status and power we feel we have. An unhealthy attachment to either of them develops easily, especially when it is accumulated and conserved within groups. Andy Crouch asserts that some of the most egregious acts of "god playing" come from concerns about status.¹³³ Status is privilege, and it is about our place in line and the human

¹³¹ In Matthew's account (Matthew 20:20-28) it is the mother of James and John who makes the request of Jesus.

¹³² In Barringer and McKnight, *A Church Called Tov*, 183-192, the authors discuss this story in terms of celebrity culture, which is a growing problem among churches today. Like Jesus (Matthew 25:5-7), Barringer and McKnight say, we must resist celebrity culture. Pastors especially must resist ambitions for fame, remembering their task is to be faithful to Christ. All of us must resist narcissism and glory, remembering: "1. There is no such thing as the *most important pastor* in a denomination, in an area, or in America. 2. There is no such thing as the *most important church* in a denomination, in an area, or in America. 3. The terms "celebrity pastor" and "celebrity church" contradict the way of Jesus (and break his heart, by the way)" (189).

¹³³ Crouch, *Playing God*, 156.

drive to be ranked above another or counted more worthy than another.¹³⁴ Status is about counting, numbering, ranking, and ultimately about excluding.¹³⁵ Crouch says, “The quest for status rarely stays within the bounds of limited domain. Instead, we start to chase status itself. And because there will never be enough status, because every move up the line requires that someone else move back in the line, the quest for status pitches us against our fellow image bearers.”¹³⁶ Jesus knows this and speaks to this when he references those who lord their status over others. Crouch says the following about Matthew’s version of this story:

James and John ask for status—but Jesus responds with a question about power. Are they able to actually risk everything in the way he will shortly risk everything, drinking the cup of wrath to its dregs?...But as for status, Jesus turned them away. It is not something he is even concerned with; it is the business of his father. Who will be first in the kingdom of heaven? Who knows? Not Jesus. It will be someone no one expected, someone for whom it was prepared without them asking.¹³⁷

Jesus does not instruct them to give up power; instead, he reorients them regarding their use of power and privilege, and tells them that his kingdom is different. His kingdom is not one of grasping for earthly power, where some dominate and lord their power and authority over others. In his kingdom, greatness is found in using power and privilege to serve others, putting their needs before one’s own. Jesus also tells them that he is not exempt from this. He too, came

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 156-157. Crouch purports that privilege is never based on what we are currently aspiring to or achieving, but on what has been done before, often long before. We are born into families with greater or lesser economic means. We inherit features that are strikingly attractive or painfully plain. We live in districts with “good schools” or “bad schools.” And every one of these inherited qualities is ranked, sometimes vividly and directly, sometimes implicitly and obliquely. We rarely have any control over where we land in these rankings; they are assigned based on realities that long preceded us. But our status follows us, or maybe more accurately hovers over us, opening certain doors and closing others. Wherever there are limited resources that are distributed on the basis of privilege, status is at work.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

to serve and give his life for others. This is an important teaching from Jesus. David Lose encourages us to let it take over our Christian imaginations:

Can you imagine, for just a moment, what the world would be like if our leaders behaved like this—vying with each other to see who could best serve the needs of the vulnerable, holding debates about the best way of coming in last so that others could come in first? It seems absurd. Well, let’s make it a little easier...and harder. What if we lived like this—measuring our achievements not in terms of dollars or possessions but in terms of lives touched or assessing our “net worth” not in terms of bank accounts but in terms of acts of compassion?¹³⁸

In *The Living Gospel*, Luke Timothy Johnson puts a finer point on Jesus’ requirement for leadership in this teaching: “Jesus emphatically rejects the attitudes of ambition and self-serving that he sees among those whom he chose to lead his community. As he moves toward his own death, he summons them to a higher vision of leadership that corresponds to the pattern of his own life: they must be small and they must be servants.”¹³⁹ Power in the kingdom is exercised in ways that are strange to our modern sensibilities; a higher vision of leadership translates to being small and serving others. Churches grasping for control and power in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic might find relief in recalling this teaching and then shifting focus.

The kind of power that Jesus distributes to his followers is the kind that doesn’t grasp for more or have its grip on them. It is a power unencumbered by fear. Jesus releases his followers from that which would prevent them from being agents of flourishing in the world. Everything Jesus does with power and privilege is done in the name of liberating us from it. This should also be true for the hierarchical structures that bind us to the unhealthy and worldly systems that come with them. I do not believe we have formally articulated this yet at New Heritage, but I believe that this is the reorientation of power and privilege that is at work among us, especially among

¹³⁸ David Lose, “Mark 10:35-45,” *The Meantime* (blog). December 14, 2012. <https://www.davidlose.net/2012/09/mark-10-35-45/>.

¹³⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Living Gospel* (London: A&C Black, 2005), 58.

our leaders. It is a shift away from hierarchy and the supposed prescribed roles within it, to a culture of service and mutuality—and, dare I even say, *smallness*—that move us towards others, and ultimately, towards Christ. As churches take in the current crises facing the church and even Christianity in America, it would be a tragedy to say that it is “secular” culture that needs conversion, especially if we have yet to be converted to Jesus’ way of being small and being servants. This could very well be the moment for us to learn to embrace the freedom of using our power for the flourishing of others. Surely, it is not just the world that needs conversion from the “powers and principalities,” but us, including our churches that still follow the patterns of this world when it comes to power and privilege.

Jesus Restores Power Using a Towel

Let’s turn our attention to one of Jesus’ most radical demonstrations of *kenotic* and creative love and of putting power and privilege in their proper place, the Last Supper in John 13:1-17. In this story, Jesus demonstrates the humility that comes with servant-leadership. On the night before his arrest, he gathers with his disciples around a table, takes a water basin and a towel, and washes their feet. This is not the desperate act of one who knows his days are numbered, but an intentional one. Crouch speaks to this intent:

Jesus knows that, far from being powerless, he holds “all things” in his hands. He knows where (and Whom) he has come from. He knows where (and to Whom) he is going. In short, the action and passion that is about to follow is not the sign of someone who has lost power, but someone who has been given all power.¹⁴⁰

Jesus leaves his place of honor at the table and picks up the last thing that anyone in the room would expect: a towel for washing guests’ feet.¹⁴¹ To touch the feet of another was an act of

¹⁴⁰ Crouch, *Playing God*, 162.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 162-163.

profound subjugation, fit only for a slave or a supplicant.¹⁴² Usually only an enslaved member of the household would have washed the feet of those in attendance, or it would fall to the person with the least status.¹⁴³ This leaves the disciples, especially Peter, in shock, but Jesus is steadfast; this is the requirement for a place at Jesus' table in this perplexing new kingdom.¹⁴⁴ This the ultimate sign of Jesus' power, an act of power that continues to "bear witness to truth from generation to generation."¹⁴⁵ In this moment, Jesus creates culture, forever transforming the meaning of towel, loaf, and cup, forever altering the way teachers and masters will see their roles and the way their students will see them.¹⁴⁶ Notably, there is no point in the story where Jesus, the most powerful person in the room, gives up power. Instead, this ritual is the culmination and demonstration of his power. What Jesus gives up in the story is not power, but privilege and status.¹⁴⁷ Crouch calls this the *restoration of power*:

The Messiah wrapped in a servant's grimy towel is not giving up power. He is restoring it to its original purpose, cleansed of its distortions—the power to love a lovely and loveless world to the uttermost. None of his power is reserved for carefully guarding privilege or meticulously accounting for status; every bit of it is poured into this one end.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴² Ibid., 164

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 165.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 164.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 166.

It would be too easy to hold this intimate and communal story up as a private affair, but Jesus makes it much more than that. This act has missional and eschatological implications; this is the way that Jesus sends his followers out to continue his mission. This act is how the mission of God manifests among those who follow Jesus from that day forward. It is a moment of *kenosis* that points to the cross and the continued mission of Jesus for us today. Jesus explains to his disciples that this humble act of service is to be an example for his followers as they participate in the continuing mission of God. Crouch expounds: “Whether in the Church or in society, today’s followers—both God’s women and God’s men—must live like Jesus, who defined leadership in terms of humility and service.”¹⁴⁹ Jesus gives us a salient and rightly-oriented view of power and demonstrates that flourishing flows out of servanthood and humility.

The Lies We Believe about Leadership, Power, and Privilege

Another story worthy of consideration for Christians and church leaders is that of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness from Matthew 4:1-11. Anna Case-Winter’s commentary, *Matthew*, titled this section of the narrative, “‘If you are the Son of God...’: The Temptation.”¹⁵⁰ Uncertainty about who we are seems to be exactly where many of our issues around power, status, and privilege begin. It is significant that Jesus faces the tempter, reminiscent of Adam and Eve; it is the same voice in the wilderness, and the voice is still spinning the same false story about power for us today. The tempter takes Jesus through three temptations and each time starts with the same line: “If you are the Son of God.” Case-Winters relays that the word translated “if”

¹⁴⁹ Cavaness and Gill, *God’s Women Then and Now*, 180.

¹⁵⁰ Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 52-55.

(*ei* in Greek) could easily well be translated “since.”¹⁵¹ So, the question may not be *if* Jesus is the Son of God, but what he will do *since he is* the Son of God. This is interesting for us to consider, because it shifts the question from whether Jesus is who he says he is, to *what he will do* with his great power as the Son of God. Case-Winters elaborates:

The temptations he faces will each in turn urge him to take his relationship to God as a position of privilege, using it to meet his own needs, receive protection from the vulnerability of his humanity, and gain power over all the kingdoms of the world. Is this what it means to be “the Son of God”? Or will Jesus understand his calling in terms of God’s redemptive work and take up a role of serving God and God’s people toward that end—even if the end was suffering and death for him?¹⁵²

In this story, both identity and mission are on the line. Jesus faces the same temptation that we all face as children of God. Will we understand our calling and partner with God in redemptive work for the sake of others, or will we pursue more power and privilege at the expense of others and our identity as image bearers invited to participate in the mission of God?

Case-Winters goes on to say that in this text Jesus is showing himself to be the one who will “fulfill all righteousness.”¹⁵³ Jesus will stay on mission and respond to every temptation with the word of God, repeating the word from Deuteronomy and saying, “It is written...”¹⁵⁴ This desert scene should remind us of the Israelites wandering in the desert. First, the tempter tries to get Jesus to turn stones to bread to satisfy his hunger (Matthew 4:3), reminiscent of the miracle of the manna.¹⁵⁵ Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:2-3 and does not use the power he has to

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 53.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

his own advantage, for one does not live by bread alone, “but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”¹⁵⁶ The tempter then tries to tempt Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and count on God’s special protection.¹⁵⁷ This would show both his power and demonstrate God’s protection, also revealing that he is the Son of God. Jesus once again refuses, quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” For the third temptation, the tempter takes Jesus high on a mountain where he can look down on “all of the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (Matthew 4:8). In exchange for worshiping the tempter, Jesus may possess kingdoms and power and glory.¹⁵⁸ This is the climactic moment in the story. What will Jesus do with this superior view and the power that will come with it? Jesus shows that he will not misuse his power. Case-Winters expounds, “It is the view from above, looking down. It is a vantage point and life orientation that Jesus will resolutely refuse.”¹⁵⁹ Once again Deuteronomy shapes Jesus’ final answer; he quotes Deuteronomy 6:4-5, “Hear (*shema*), O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and will all your soul, and with all your might.”¹⁶⁰ Jesus says, “It is written, ‘Worship the LORD your God, and serve only him.’”¹⁶¹ With this, the tempter flees. Right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is tempted to misuse his power to acquire more power for himself. He is tempted to take a position of authority, looking down on the world. Instead, Jesus remains faithful to God and his

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 54.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

mission. One of the first things that Jesus does in Matthew’s gospel is empower us by freeing us from the temptation of acquiring more power and privilege for ourselves.

All three of these stories address lies and misunderstandings about power and privilege. Throughout Jesus’s ministry he dispels lies about both. Healthy church culture depends on us addressing these lies and forming a healthy attachment to power. Gill and Cavaness contend that the root lie about power is called a “fixed quantity error,” which says that the total amount of power in a social system is a fixed quantity.¹⁶² This error asserts that power can never increase or decrease, but always remains constant.¹⁶³ However, this view of power is not accurate, because the amount of power in a social system, an institution, or a church can increase or decrease.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, they attest, “Christian leaders should grow every possible means of accomplishing things for Christ with people. No Christian leaders should be threatened by any other leader—not by men, not by women. Followers of Christ should be free to empower others.”¹⁶⁵

Power: An Expanding Entity for Doing Good

According to Cavaness and Gill, there are three lies attached to the “fixed quantity error” that lead to further lies about leadership:

(1) That leadership is the struggle for power. This lie asserts that leadership is the context of conflict in which the relative power of the leaders and followers is constantly at stake. This lie is lived out in the lives of leaders who are selfish or insecure and thus feel themselves threatened by others... (2) That leadership is one sided or unilateral. It is an all or nothing view which says: A person either leads or is led; he is either powerful or

¹⁶² Cavaness and Gill, *God’s Women Then and Now*, 181-182.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 182.

powerless; she either controls or is controlled... (3) Leadership is a matter of coercion. Based on the kind of “conflict theory” behind lie number 1, this lie asserts that leaders are only obeyed out of fear of punishment or hope of reward. Those whose leadership style includes manipulation, coercion, or intimidation are living out this lie.¹⁶⁶

Those who lead by these lies may find success, but it is limited, because it is not God’s way.¹⁶⁷ The problem is that leadership in the kingdom of God should not be viewed as a one-sided struggle for power, coercion, and control, but as an opportunity to use power to empower others. This requires leaders to take risks and embrace an expansive (Christlike and not fixed) view of power, which entails surrender and emulating Jesus in turning our lives over to God.

In his book based on the 12-step recovery program, *Breathing Under Water*, Richard Rohr says of the Third Step in recovery (made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood God*):

Any foundational handing over of our will to power is previous and prior to any belief system whatsoever. In fact, I would say that what makes so much religion innocuous, ineffective, and even unexciting is that there has seldom been a concrete decision to turn our lives over to the care of God, even in many people who go to church, temple, or mosque.¹⁶⁸

This view of power emulates Jesus, moving away from fear and control and toward trust. Rohr says of our aversion to surrender, “Religious surrender, I am afraid, is often to status itself and the status quo instead of the full truth of the situation.”¹⁶⁹ The 12-step program has

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 182.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2011), 20. Rohr adds another dimension to the discourse on power, quoting Paul who boasted of power in weakness: “I do not know why ‘power is at its best in weakness’ as Paul says, or ‘it is when I am weak, that I am strong’ (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). It sure seems like God is some kind of trickster. Perhaps the Divine is playing games with us. God seems to have hidden holiness and wholeness in a secret place where only the humble will find it. Some topsy-turvy God has decided that those on the bottom will be revealed as the true top, and those who try for the top will find nothing of substance there” (2).

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 20-21.

Surrender as Step 3, but according to Rohr, “Jesus made it step one, you might say: ‘If anyone wants to follow me, let him *renounce himself* [or herself!]’” (Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; Matthew 16:4).¹⁷⁰

Jesus pushes his followers away from any kind of power grab or sense of celebrity culture. This evokes the story above about James and John and their desire for seats of honor. They had yet to surrender themselves over to the care of God and were still intoxicated by worldly notions of self and status. Jesus reorients them to service to others. Barringer and McKnight emphasize that in a *tov* culture, there is a healthy balance between self-concern and an “others-orientation.”¹⁷¹ When we surrender to the way of Jesus and a life of service and humility, we can stop competing for power and can embrace cooperation and the gift of partnering with others. The truth is that healthy leadership is not unilateral but mutual.¹⁷² Leaders who follow Christ involve as many people as possible, and there should be a give and take in every leadership relationship.¹⁷³ Instead of seeing power, authority, and leadership vertically, perhaps we can start to see it spatially.¹⁷⁴ That is, instead of viewing leadership as a hierarchy of power, or rungs on a ladder, perhaps we can see it as spheres of authority, or circles of influence—some concentric, some overlapping, and all in Christ.¹⁷⁵ This spatial and

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷¹ Barringer and McKnight, *A Church Called Tov*, 178.

¹⁷² Cavaness and Gill, *God’s Women Then and Now*, 182.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 186.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

expansive view of power frees us to partner with one another and enjoy mutuality, cooperation, and harmony, all of which make for a much healthier community and ecclesial ecology.

Conclusion: Power Is for Flourishing

We see in the ministry of Jesus that all are empowered through *kenosis* to empower others. There are several important and common themes in the stories above (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 10:35-45; John 13:1-17). All of them present a paradigm shift regarding authority, power, privilege, status, and leadership. In all of them, Jesus liberates us from an unhealthy attachment to power and privilege, freeing us to serve and partner as a priesthood of all believers. Co-laboring in the continuing mission of Christ is not defined by the pursuit of power and privilege, but by the willingness to reorient power and to serve, putting the needs of others first. Christofornity looks like being guided by the same values and principles as Jesus, and Jesus remained committed to those values even when faced with temptation and pressure to conform to societal expectations.

Jesus is clear in his message to James and John, to Peter, and to the rest of his disciples, that they should serve one another. This takes us right back to where we started this chapter, in Philippians 2:5-8. *Kenosis* seems otherworldly to us, as it no doubt did to the recipients of Paul's letter in Philippi. Barringer and McKnight proclaim, "In a Christlike culture of *tov*, something completely different from the culture of the world pervades, something so upside down and so backwards it is nothing less than stunning. Jesus calls people to follow him to the cross, and the apostle Paul uses that cross-bearing life to redefine true success."¹⁷⁶ The way of Jesus is the

¹⁷⁶ Barringer and McKnight, *A Church Called Tov*, 218.

cross-bearing life, and *kenosis* is a life entrusted to God for the sake of others.¹⁷⁷ This is the foundation of the *tov* culture we are called to establish, stimulate, and nurture, so that all may flourish both inside and outside the walls of the church.¹⁷⁸ Indeed, power is for flourishing, and only through Christlike *kenotic* love do we see it as it was meant to be.

An Egalitarian Priesthood of All Believers

*The royal and priestly vocation of all human beings, it seems, consists in this: to stand at the interface between God and his creation, bringing God's wise and generous order to the world and giving articulate voice to creation's glad and grateful praise to its maker.*¹⁷⁹

– N.T. Wright

In this section, I bring egalitarianism and the doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers” into a conversation as a means of mission or “genuine flourishing.” I previously shared that Amy L. Sherman describes “genuine flourishing” as occurring when Jesus-followers seek *shalom* and function as a royal priesthood that centers on the love of God and neighbor, and when we (men and women) seek out the peace and prosperity of our communities as our priestly vocation (e.g., Genesis 12:2; Jeremiah 29:7; John 10:10; Revelation 1:5-6, 5:9-10).¹⁸⁰ The phrase “priesthood of all believers” has been used often at NHF and it came up several times while completing this

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 219.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. Luke Timothy Johnson likens this relational cross-bearing to salvation or liberation: “How does Jesus save us, according to the New Testament? Not by freeing our souls from our bodies, or by adjusting the arrangements of society, but by transforming human freedom, so that we can be in right relationship with God, and with each other. Since salvation in this tradition is relational, it cannot remain private; to be in right relationship with God, demands also to be in right relationship with the world, beginning in communities that live by ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5), which means that ‘each one looks not only to his own interest but also to the interest of others.’” See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Living Gospel*, 198.

¹⁷⁹ Wright, *After You Believe*, 80.

¹⁸⁰ Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing*, 14-17, 25.

project on the spiritual impact of egalitarianism and female pastoral leadership on this community. Additionally, both female and male members reported increased levels of participation in both the ecclesial practices and the missional vocation of the church.

In the discussion surrounding this project, a connection emerged between the egalitarian culture of NHF, a belief in the priesthood of all believers, and communal participation in the incarnational work of helping our communities to flourish. I am just beginning to discover the connections between egalitarianism, the priesthood of all believers, and mission (“genuine flourishing”). I have a sense that we may be experiencing a harmony of them at New Heritage, where *all* members are invited to fully participate in the redemptive activity of God as “royal priests,” in service to one another and our neighbors.¹⁸¹

A Missional Royal Priesthood

I have typically talked about mission in terms of the *missio Dei* in my work as a pastor, but I like Sherman’s term “genuine flourishing” because it aligns with one of the goals of this project, which is to bring at least two different kinds of church cultures (complementarian and egalitarian) into a conversation around flourishing.¹⁸² Sherman asserts that we were made to flourish in two senses: (1) God’s desire is for us to live as a whole people in a world of

¹⁸¹ Robert Muthiah has a concise overview of *the priesthood of all believers*: “Several terms are used interchangeably to refer to the idea that all Christians share in the ministry of the church. The ‘priesthood of all believers,’ a phrase used by Martin Luther, is one of these. The ‘royal priesthood,’ a phrase found in 1 Peter 2:9, is another. At points I use ‘the common priesthood,’ a phrase often used in Catholic circles where the phrase ‘the priesthood of all believers’ is avoided because of its association with Luther and the Reformation. Other phrases used as synonyms include ‘the universal priesthood’ and ‘the whole people of God.’ See Robert A. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 4.

¹⁸² I am aware that not all egalitarian churches are healthy and that not all complementarian churches are toxic. Every church and every church leader have the potential to misuse power and privilege. I am most interested in discussions about which church cultures and ecologies have the most potential to help members to flourish in this new missional era.

shalom.¹⁸³ She says that although we will not fully experience this genuine, holistic flourishing on our still-broken planet, God desires that through an intimate relationship with God, we will discover even now some foretastes of the full, future thriving we'll enjoy in the new Jerusalem.¹⁸⁴ (2) We are made for a purpose, for a vocation, to *flourish* others.¹⁸⁵ Sherman expounds, "Jesus called this loving our neighbors. True biblical flourishing involves the good of others as well as our own good. Flourishing is meant to be a shared experience. We are blessed to be a blessing (e.g., Genesis 12:2)."¹⁸⁶ Throughout the Bible, this vocation of flourishing others is described as the work of the royal priesthood; Sherman contends that our first task is to understand pursuing *shalom* in our communities, and our second is understanding who we are as royal priests.¹⁸⁷ N.T. Wright holds a similar view, saying, "The royal and priestly vocation of all human beings, it seems, consists in this: to stand at the interface between God and his creation, bringing God's wise and generous order to the world and giving articulate voice to creation's glad and grateful praise to its maker."¹⁸⁸ Sherman and Wright both believe that this vocation is to be a priestly one with a missional orientation.

The Priesthood of All Believers: How It Started and How It's Going

¹⁸³ Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing*, 18.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-21. Sherman contends that it was always God's intention that we be royal priests. Adam and Eve were created as royal priests with the divine vocation to fill the earth, tend the garden (which was a kind of temple), and to image God in the world (e.g., Genesis 1:28, 2:15). This identity and vocation is also found in Revelation (e.g., 1:5-6; 5:9-10).

¹⁸⁸ Wright, *After You Believe*, 80.

The concept of the “priesthood of all believers” is most often linked to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. The concept is often debated, but in essence, it originally emphasized the spiritual priesthood of all believers in Christ, a “royal priesthood” and “holy nation,” all having direct access to God, and not in need of a priest or intermediary to act on their behalf. In *Theology of the Reformers*, Timothy George says:

Luther’s greatest contribution to Protestant ecclesiology was his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Yet no element in his teaching is more misunderstood. For some it means simply that there are no priests in the church, the secularization at the clergy. From this premise some groups, notably the Quakers, have argued that abolition of the ministry as a distinct order within the church. More commonly people believe that the priesthood of all believers implies that every Christian is his or her own priest and hence possesses the “right of private judgment” in matters of faith and doctrine. Both of these are modern perversions of Luther’s original intention. The essence of his doctrine can be put in one sentence: Every Christian, is someone else's priest, and we are all priests to one another.¹⁸⁹

Luther believed that all members have an equal share in the priesthood and that priestly offices were the common property of all Christians and not the special prerogative of a select cast of holy men.¹⁹⁰ However, George says, “Luther also excluded women, children, and ‘incompetent’ persons from the official ministry of the church, although in times of emergency he would have allowed these to fill this office by virtue of their share in the priesthood of all believers.”¹⁹¹ Egalitarian churches, such as New Heritage, extract this exclusive aspect of Luther’s doctrine in favor of his claim that all Christians are priests in equal degree and that our unity and equality in

¹⁸⁹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1988), 95-96.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

Christ is demonstrated by our mutual love and care for one another.¹⁹² NHF would likely also adhere to Luther's definition of the church as the *communio sanctorum*, a community of saints:

But who are the saints? They are not super-Christians who have been elevated to heavenly glory, on whose "merits" we can draw for help along life's way. All who believe in Christ are saints. As Paul Althaus said, "Luther brought down the community of saints out of heaven and down to earth." Luther wrote, "Whatever it is that you want to do for the saints, turn your attention away from the dead toward the living. The living saints are your neighbors, the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the poor people who have wives and children and suffer shame. Direct your help toward them, begin your work here." A community of intercessors, a priesthood of fellow helpers, a family of mutual sharers and burden-bearers, this is the *communio sanctorum*.¹⁹³

A community of saints has a ring of egalitarianism to it and many modern theologians and practitioners refer to Martin Luther as a "proto-egalitarian," because while he did not fully embrace egalitarianism, his teachings laid the foundation for later developments and challenges to traditional hierarchies. In fact, some women from the Reformation Movement used Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to advocate for the further inclusion of women in certain spheres of the ministry and public discourse. In a *Christianity Today* article titled "Mothers of The Reformation," Kristen Padilla introduces us to three such women of the Reformation, one of them being Argula von Grumbach, a female who converted from Catholicism because of Luther's work.¹⁹⁴ Argula and Luther were lifelong friends, and she had an extensive resumé as a Reformation writer and lobbyist.¹⁹⁵ Argula was the first woman to apply Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers for herself and thereby for other

¹⁹² Ibid., 96.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 96-97.

¹⁹⁴ Kristen Padilla, "Mothers of the Reformation," *Christianity Today*, November 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/november/mothers-of-reformation-women-ministry-luther-preaching.html>.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

women.¹⁹⁶ This doctrine became her apologia for reproving those in the “spiritual estate.” Here is an excerpt:

I find there is a text in Matthew 10 which runs: “Whoever confesses me before another I too will confess before my heavenly Father.” And Luke 9: “Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, I too will be ashamed of when I come in my majesty,” etc. Words like these, coming from the very mouth of God, are always before my eyes. For they exclude neither woman nor man. And this is why I am compelled as a Christian to write to you. For Ezekiel 33 says: “If you see your brother sin, reprove him, or I will require his blood at your hands.”¹⁹⁷

Argula faced death threats for her public writing. It is fascinating that Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, though exclusive of women, would be used by a woman as an argument for the inclusion of women in male-dominated spheres. Luther believed that men and women were equal in the eyes of God and that both sexes could receive salvation. He also advocated for the education of women, and believed that women should be allowed to participate in the work of the church. However, Luther did not embrace women’s ordination to the priesthood, and he believed that women were not suited for certain roles in the church, such as preaching and administering the sacraments.¹⁹⁸

Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers also upheld social and religious hierarchies and roles within the church. In light of this, it is ironic that many egalitarians today view the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as a foundation for egalitarian theology and practices. Egalitarians believe that all Christians have equal access to God, all areas of ministry, and are called to serve one another in the name of Christ. This poses a challenge to complementarian hierarchical structures, just as Luther’s doctrine was a challenge to the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 97.

hierarchy of the Roman papacy. At some level, both egalitarians and Luther challenge traditional power structures by abstracting hierarchy in favor of mutuality and shared access to God and the church. However, Luther attempted to make God and the priesthood accessible to all, while also maintaining the hierarchal system that blocked women, children, and those he deemed incompetent from the places of authority and power. Luther's theology and the theology of many modern complementarian churches prevent some believers, even though they are considered priests, from fully engaging in the life of the church, particularly in the places of authority and power. Therefore, many modern theologians, churches, and Christians are looking for fresh expressions of the priesthood of all believers. I posit that NHF is a fresh expression of the priesthood of all believers.

A Truly Whole Priesthood of All Believers

In *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context*, Robert Muthiah shares a fresh understanding and embodiment of the priesthood of all believers, saying:

The priesthood of all believers is part of the ecclesiology of the church, and yet current theologies, church, structures, and practices often work *against* the development of congregations that involve the whole people of God in ministry. While Luther lifted up the priesthood of all believers as a key aspect of the church, in the centuries since then the importance assigned to this theology has ebbed and flowed. There is never a time, however, when the priesthood of all believers is *not* crucial in the life of the church—it belongs to the *esse*, not the *bene esse*, of the church.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ Robert A. Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers in the Twenty-First Century: Living Faithfully as the Whole People of God in a Postmodern Context* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), 1. *Esse* refers to that which is of the essence of the existence of the life of the church. *Bene esse* refers to that which is of benefit for the life of the church. *Plene esse* refers to that which is of the fullness of the church's life. See Don S., Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, eds., "Esse, Bene Esse, Plene Esse," *The Episcopal Church*, Accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/esse-bene-esse-plene-esse/#:~:text=Terms%20for%20characterizing%20the%20significance%20of%20a%20doctrine.>

The priesthood of all believers comes from the Bible: 1 Peter 2:4-10 (especially 5-9) is the primary passage, but priesthood language is also found in other texts (e.g., Revelation 1:6, 5:10, and 20:6). 1 Peter was most likely written to convince a Gentile audience to embrace the stories, scriptures, and Messiah of Judaism.²⁰⁰ Peter uses many Old Testament citations, but intentionally, Muthiah claims, Peter only chooses those that refer to the *whole* people in priestly terms.²⁰¹ For instance, the background to the “holy priesthood” of v. 5 and the “holy nation” of v. 9 is Exodus 19:6 where God gives the following words to Moses to pass on to the people: “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (the “royal priesthood” in v. 9 is a quotation from the Septuagint rendering of Exodus 19:6).²⁰² Alluding to Isaiah 43:20-21, which refers to the whole people of Israel, not to a chosen class within that nation, v. 9 goes on to speak of a “chosen people,” who is to proclaim God’s mighty acts.²⁰³ Muthiah concludes from Peter’s intentional selection of texts that, “Peter’s grounding of his conception of the royal priesthood in these carefully selected OT texts shows his theology of a royal priesthood to consciously include the whole people of God.”²⁰⁴ Some have argued that the priesthood of all believers carries an individualistic “right of private judgment;” however, some New Testament theologians, like

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 6.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid., 6-7. Amy Sherman refers to Exodus 19:4-6 as a recommissioning for the royal priesthood. “God instructs Moses to restate the human vocation given at creation and apply it specifically to his chosen people Israel, whom he has rescued from oppression. God here gracefully chooses (or elects) Israel for a purpose. This recommissioning is—again—given in a temple setting, that is, in a place where God is present with his people, where heaven and earth meet. The recommission is given in the wilderness, where God himself has traveled with the rescued Israelites by day as a pillar of cloud and by night as a pillar of fire.” See Amy L. Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing*, 18.

²⁰³ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 7.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

Muthiah, argue against the notion that these verses mean each person can interpret Scripture for themselves, on the grounds that 1 Peter 2: 5-9, Exodus 19:6, and Isaiah 43:20-21 all refer to a *corporate* entity.²⁰⁵

Therefore, Muthiah asserts, “None of these references describe individuals as priests. It is the entire nation, the chosen people, who constitute the priesthood in these passages. Thus, an individualistic understanding does not find textual support.”²⁰⁶ There is a great deal of diversity of thought here and plenty of dissent, specifically regarding whether or not these verses in 1 Peter 2 refer to status and function. If they refer to function, what is the function of priests?

Muthiah elaborates on some of these arguments; here is a portion of them:

Some scholars argue that these verses do indeed include a functional dimension that goes beyond just a declaration of status, beyond a declaration that these people are elect. So, the argument goes that v. 9b sets forth the priestly function of proclamation. This function is given even more specificity: the proclamation is not intra-church, but is focused on the Gentiles. While some do not see in these verses a reference to how the church should be structured, others, such as J. Ramsey Michaels do. Michaels argues that 1 Peter sets forth a mutuality (4:8-10) that should characterize the whole community. Michaels claims that 1 Pet 2:5, 9 should be understood in terms of this mutuality. He goes on to say that this mutuality excludes a hierarchy. All are called to the function of making spiritual sacrifices (2:5). Michaels points to two specific functions of the priesthood: offering spiritual sacrifices (2:5) and proclaiming the mighty acts of God (2:9). The latter is probably to be taken as the way in which the former is carried out. Similarly, G. W. Hansen connects 1 Pet 2:9 to the gifts talked about in 1 Pet 4:7-11. The function of the “royal priesthood” (2:9) is to use these gifts.²⁰⁷

The argument about status and function is cumbersome and important, because it is here that the road either widens to make room for a larger community (egalitarianism), or remains narrow,

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 9.

keeping hierarchy in place.²⁰⁸ For those seeking a fresh perspective on the priesthood of all believers, 1 Peter 2:4-10 is important, and always has been, because it is these verses that demonstrate a conception of priesthood that involves the *whole* people of God.²⁰⁹

Philip B. Payne also proposes a similar more expansive view of the priesthood in *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God's Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality*.²¹⁰ Additionally, Payne also proposes the possibility that the reason that women were not priests in Israel was to avoid the appearance of temple prostitution. He says, "God did assign the priesthood to Aaron and his sons (Num. 18:1-7). The Bible does not give a reason for this, but Deut. 23:17 may imply one: "None of the daughters of Israel shall be a temple prostitute." (NRSV). Priestesses were closely associated with prostitutes and cultic sexual rites in the surrounding heathen cults. God repeatedly prohibited his people from giving the appearance of following the immoral practices of the surrounding nations. To have women priests would have given that appearance. First Samuel 2:22 confirms the importance of this in practice."²¹¹ Payne also concurs with Muthiah that the limitation of the priesthood to Aaron's sons was temporary

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 9. There is a great deal of debate regarding whether the move to a new covenant also extends to females. Stanley J. Grenz advocates for the inclusion of male and female priests in the new covenant, but he also acknowledges the voices of folks like C.S. Lewis who did/do not on the grounds of representation. "In his defense of an all-male pastorate, C. S. Lewis asserted that the central issue that divides him from proponents of women in ministry is the meaning of the word priest. Lewis claimed that opponents forget that the basic role of a priest is representational, that a priest 'represents us to God and God to us.' According to Lewis, the second aspect is the crucial consideration, for in his estimation a woman cannot fully represent God." See Stanley J. Grenz, "Biblical Priesthood and Women in Ministry," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Biblical, Theological, Cultural, and Practical Perspectives*, eds. Ronald W. Pierce, Cynthia Long Westfall, and Christa L. McKirland (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2021), 316.

²¹⁰ Philip B. Payne, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood: How God's Word Consistently Affirms Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 18.

²¹¹ Ibid., 18.

and was not God’s long-term plan because God was specific that the entirety of the people of Israel was to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Payne elaborates:

Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” (Ex. 19:3–6) Isaiah 61:6 predicts a future when all God’s people “will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God.” And ultimately, God brought about the priesthood of all his people in the New Testament church: But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Pet. 2:9)²¹²

Payne and Muthiah contend that though God did establish male priests with the sons of Aaron, Jesus is now our high priest and that male and female believers are all priests with a direct connection to God.²¹³

A New Imagination for the Priesthood

Several texts about the priesthood from the Hebrew Bible play an important role in this conversation, because they show that the central function of priests was to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. As stated previously, they also show that only a very specific kind of priest could perform these functions. As Marg Mowczko points out, “Under the Old Covenant, only the High Priest (a specially appointed, male Levite and a direct descendant of Aaron) could enter the Most Holy Place in the Temple” (e.g., Exodus 28:1; Numbers 18:7; 1 Chronicles 23:13).²¹⁴

²¹² Ibid., 18.

²¹³ Ibid., 18-19.

²¹⁴ Marg Mowczko, “Old Testament Priests & New Covenant Ministers,” *Marg Mowczko*, April 30, 2011, <https://margmowczko.com/old-testament-priests-new-testament-ministers/?fbclid=IwAR1Uy3vgQ8lcNc8wkC3ITRVUVctJWWAI93yQ0nPvPpTpuI-WsA-Y7woPBOA>.

Egalitarians like Muthiah and Payne, propose that in the New Testament, the sacrificial role is not given to a priestly class but it is given exclusively to Christ; for example, “Christ ... offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:12).²¹⁵ Animal sacrifices were not carried forward into Christianity, but Christians did offer spiritual sacrifices (e.g., Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5).²¹⁶ So the priestly function of offering sacrifices looks different in the early church, because unlike the strict requirements of the Old Testament, all believers are involved and not just a priestly class.²¹⁷ Muthiah further illuminates the expansion of the priestly duties in the New Testament regarding teaching:

The proclamation and interpretation of Torah was another priestly function in the Jewish context. Like the function of sacrificing, this one is not reserved for a priestly class in the New Testament. Paul sees the functions of proclamation and interpretation as communal functions. He states that when the community gathers, each one has a lesson or an interpretation that should be offered for the building up of the community (1 Corinthians 14:26). Some may be more gifted than others in these areas (1 Corinthians 12:28-30), but primary gifting is not equated with exclusive domain.²¹⁸

In Jesus, the hereditary nature of the priesthood is fulfilled and comes to an end as Jesus is portrayed as the high priest and ultimate sacrifice. In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is described as a high priest who is above the priests of the Old Testament, because he offers himself as the sacrifice once and for all (e.g., Hebrews 7:23-28). Furthermore, Hebrews makes the claim that

²¹⁵ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 10.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

Jesus replaced the Levitical priesthood, according to the order of Melchizedek (e.g., Hebrews 5:6-10).²¹⁹

Therefore, God is doing a new thing through Jesus: The former conception of priesthood, sacrifice, proclamation, and interpretation were no longer reserved for a special class, and hereditary duties passed from within Judaism were not carried forward into the early church.²²⁰ Muthiah highlights specific words that he believes further demonstrate that these former ways were not part of the early church: (1) *hiereus* (priest) is applied to Christ and to the whole people of God, but it is never used to designate an individual believer who has been set aside for ministry; (2) *laos* (laity) is sometimes believed to signify the existence of differing classes.²²¹ Though our English word “laity” is related to the Greek word *laos*, the meaning of the two words must not be equated, as they have significantly different meanings.²²² *Laos* is a common word in the New Testament, and it has a range of meanings including “nation,” “crowd,” “population,” and “people,” and it never refers to a group of non-ordained people that is in contrast to a priestly group.²²³ (3) *Kleros* (clergy) is the “portion allotted to someone,” who is chosen (e.g., Ephesians

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., 11.

²²³ Ibid.

1:11).²²⁴ In the New Testament, *kleros* refers to all the people of God and never refers to a special priestly class.²²⁵

Muthiah then examines the patterns in the Pauline churches and letters to determine if Paul is establishing a charismatic (Spirit-gifted) rather than a hierarchical structure in the body.²²⁶ He asserts that there is not a uniform or normative pattern in the Pauline churches (Rome, Ephesus, Corinth), but a mix of churches—some that are more charismatic, and some (likely influenced by society and culture) that are more hierarchical.²²⁷ Muthiah believes that Paul’s vision is charismatic in nature.²²⁸ The churches in Acts provide a good example of this argument over a charismatic or hierarchical pattern. Muthiah relays a few ideas regarding how the church in Acts was organized:

There are two main views of how the church in Acts was organized. One view is that here we have a definite organizational structure. The twelve apostles were the primary leaders in the Jerusalem community (e.g., Acts 1:15-26; 2:42; 4:32-37). A second office was created to assist the apostles with administrative chores (Acts 6:1–6). Elders are said to constitute a third office, one that shares authority with the apostles (e.g., Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22–35). Some have correlated the apostles with bishops, the elders with priests, and the administrative assistants with deacons.... A second main view is that leadership and authority in the early church as seen in Acts was spontaneous and diverse. Often ministry was undertaken without the authorization of other leaders. Rather, case after case, it was

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

²²⁷ Ibid., 11-12. Muthiah shares much of the major arguments regarding New Testament patterns: “What patterns do we see in the Pauline churches? Many hold that Paul argues for a charismatic rather than a hierarchical structure of the body. As part of his argument, Paul claims that every member of the body is necessary and every member has a gift (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12). In addressing the abuses that were occurring, Paul does not call on any particular leader to enforce his dictums. His primary instruction is for the people in the congregation to wait for one another” (1 Cor 11:33).

²²⁸ Ibid., 14-15. Muthiah shares many of the arguments for a pattern of structure and hierarchy: “Some congregations were indeed becoming more hierarchical, but others persistently resisted this institutional thrust. It has been proposed that the more structured tenor of the Pastorals is due to these particular congregations importing Jewish authority structures, whereas other NT congregations had not.”

carried out under the guidance and authority of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:2; Stephen in Acts 6:8,10; the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:28). Rather than pointing to a developing ecclesial structure, this view sees Acts as pointing to a leadership that was spontaneous and charismatic.²²⁹

The conversation about organizational patterns is important and still has major implications for local churches today. Churches continue to wrestle with how they will organize and what kind of church structures and cultures they will create. The case against a mandated hierarchy or pattern is strong, especially if we accept Muthiah's view about the intentional language that Peter and Paul used that seems to indicate a shift away from a more narrow hierarchical structure and towards a more open and egalitarian one. I would argue that the case for an expanded view of the priesthood of all believers is made stronger as we look at the house churches in places like Rome, especially the priesthood of all believers that Paul mentions in Romans 16. As we survey the landscape of Christianity in the U.S., and if we consider the steep decline in church attendance and the increasing numbers of young people leaving Christianity altogether, perhaps this expanded view should be examined anew in the present. A more charismatic pattern demonstrates the significance of a fresh perspective on the royal priesthood in our time.

The priesthood of all believers is still an important doctrine. Hierarchy continues to follow the pattern of Luther and keep some women, children, and those we deem "incompetent" from full participation in the life of the church. Luther may have been one of the first "soft" complementarians as he advocated that all are equal and have equal access, but he also maintained structures and offices—which he believed were patterned—that barred access for

²²⁹ Ibid., 15.

some. Muthiah summarizes the argument about a New Testament pattern, and the need for fresh expressions well:

A hierarchy is nowhere mandated or made normative. At no point in the NT are the responsibilities of the universal priesthood caste in individualistic terms. We are given no indication that each person is his or her own priest, the significance of which will be highlighted in the theological discussion below. Nowhere in the NT is a cultic priesthood seen to be part of the early church and nowhere in the NT is the word “priest” applied to any individual in any church. And in contrast with some claims, even as the church developed, a variety of leadership patterns existed. No normative pattern can be construed even from the later NT writings. What this all means is that hierarchical ecclesiology is not mandated, and in fact, seems to stand against the participatory and pneumatological patterns seen in many of these texts. The functions of sacrifice, proclamation, and interpretation that were associated with the Levitical priesthood are now given to the universal priesthood of believers. We do not have in the NT the establishment of a separated ministerial priesthood; rather, we have a single priesthood composed of all Christians.²³⁰

I concur with Muthiah’s argument that there is not an established pattern, and I also align with Philip Payne’s argument that both Peter and Paul demonstrate that the priesthood of all believers is universal. Payne says, “1 Peter 2:5 and 9 affirm the priesthood of all believers. In 2 Cor. 3:12–18, Paul implies the universal priesthood of believers. Colossians 3:16 expresses his desire that all Christians, women as well as men, will have a teaching ministry: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.” Similarly, 1 Cor 14:26 affirms, “When you assemble, each one has . . . a word of instruction [literally, ‘a teaching’].” The priesthood of all believers is incompatible with excluding women from the priesthood.”²³¹

Payne asserts that priestly duties are intimately connected with the gifts of the Spirit. He states, “To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7;

²³⁰ Ibid., 16.

²³¹ Payne, *The Bible vs. Biblical Womanhood*, 179.

cf. Rom. 12:6–8), and in 1 Cor. 12:11, “the same Spirit . . . distributes them to each one, just as he determines.” Thus, all women, just as all men, have spiritual gifts and are responsible to use them not in seclusion but “for the common good.” Indeed, in 1 Cor. 12:31 and 14:1, Paul urges all believers, women as well as men, “Eagerly desire the greater gifts [i.e., to be apostles, prophets, teachers] . . . especially prophecy.” Excluding women from such forms of ministry doesn’t simply deprive the church; it disobeys God’s command.”²³² Historically, there have been many viewpoints. Therefore, not surprisingly, various renewal movements about the priesthood of all believers have emerged in every century since the Reformation.

A Brief History of Renewal Movements

The priesthood of all believers has been through many renewal movements over many centuries. I am only going to share a few of the more significant Protestant leaders and movements here. Those who advocated for fresh expressions often pushed for more involvement from non-clergy members. Theologians such as John Wesley (Methodism), Hendrik Kraemer (Dutch Reformed Church), Elton Trueblood (Quaker), among many others, worked towards renewal efforts, trying to expand the view and function of laity and to broaden the category of “minister.”²³³ In the 1960s and 1970s some of the key Protestant figures who brought about a renewal of the priesthood of all believers were Gordon Cosby, Richard Mouw, William Diehl, Robert Coleman, Ray Stedman, and Howard Snyder.²³⁴

²³² Ibid., 179.

²³³ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 21.

²³⁴ Ibid.

In 1988 the Southern Baptist Convention passed the Resolution on the Priesthood of the Believer, which shifted the phrase to the singular.²³⁵ This drastically departed from Baptist tradition by shifting the ecclesial distribution of responsibility from the whole people toward the elders or pastors.²³⁶ The resolution emphasized the authority of leaders and cautioned that “the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer can be used to justify the undermining of pastoral authority in the local church.”²³⁷ In contrast with the traditional Baptist emphasis, the resolution sought to centralize power.²³⁸

Nancy Ammerman argued that the doctrine set forth by Luther and the other Reformers had a corporate tone that starkly contrasted the individualistic tone of the Resolution on the Priesthood of the Believer.²³⁹ She stated that the Reformers “never envisioned solo believers standing figuratively alone before God in prayer and Bible reading. They talked about the priesthood of *all* believers, emphasizing the equality, not the aloneness.”²⁴⁰ Gail Carlton Felton (United Methodist) argued that priesthood of all believers needs to be understood broadly.²⁴¹ She said that the priesthood does indeed include the idea that each person can access God directly without a mediator, but she also said that it must be taken to mean that we have responsibilities

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., 30.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid., 32.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

for each other, so we are priests to each other, not just our own priests.²⁴² She held that baptism is a sacrament of equality and the ordination into the priesthood, and she believed that all Christians should be assisted in finding their calling.²⁴³

Greg Ogden comes very close to erasing the lines between clergy and laity. Muthiah shares the focus of Ogden's work; he points to a growing awareness of the role of the Holy Spirit and gives this as a reason that the priesthood of all believers is at a point of recovery.²⁴⁴ He sets forth a model of the pastor as an equipper and argues that this model works toward, rather than against, the priesthood of all believers.²⁴⁵ He calls for baptism to be recognized as ordination, but he also allows for the rite ordination to a "special ministry."²⁴⁶ Ogden's main concern is to replace a "dual-level status system" in the church with a framework that includes only one status.²⁴⁷ Unfortunately, Ogden does not completely erase the line between clergy and laity, weakening his own push for a single status within the church.

Howard Snyder's work on the priesthood of all believers is applicable here because it brings egalitarianism and mission into conversation. The charismatic nature of the church is part of the basis for his push for renewing the church, in his book, *Liberating the Church*.²⁴⁸ Snyder

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 175.

asserts that the contemporary church does not believe in the gifts of the Spirit. He chastises the church, saying “The contemporary church does not believe profoundly in the biblical doctrine of the gifts of the Spirit.”²⁴⁹ In line with this conversation around egalitarianism and the inclusion of the whole church, Snyder makes a direct connection between the gifts of the Spirit and the priesthood of all believers. Using the primary text on the priesthood of all believers, 1 Peter 2:4–9, Snyder draws three important implications for the church: “1) We all have direct access to God 2) we are priests to each other, and 3) this universal priesthood is for carrying out God’s mission in the world, not just in the church.”²⁵⁰ Snyder observes that the priesthood of all believers has most often been understood soteriologically rather than ecclesiological. The soteriological framework emphasizes the direct access that each individual has to God, but if the doctrine is framed in a way that includes an ecclesiological dimension, Snyder believes that the whole people of God are given the ministry of the church.²⁵¹ I will conclude this section on some of the royal priesthood renewal movements by including some important thoughts from Miroslav Volf regarding the nature of the church.

Nature and Structure in Ecclesial Community

Muthiah concurs with Miroslav Volf that any discussion on the *structure* of the church must be preceded by a discussion of the *nature* of the church.²⁵² Volf believes that the nature of

²⁴⁹ Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church and Kingdom*, 175.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 170-172. Snyder further holds that ministry modeled after Jesus is based on service and not hierarchy. He says, “When we follow Jesus, priesthood does not become professionalism and gifts do not become self-gratification. In our ministry we are to have the mind of Christ, following his self-emptying, serving example” (178).

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁵² Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 42.

the church must shape the structure of the church. He examines the nature of the church by examining the relationship of the church to the mediation of salvation, and the correspondence between the Trinity and the church.²⁵³ Volf argues for a polycentric model that views the church as constituted by the participation of the *whole* people of God. In *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Volf states:

The polycentric character of the church has a twofold theological grounding, namely, in the Christian call to faith and in the charismata. Christians are called to enter into communion with Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9) and to confess and witness him with words and deeds (1 Pet. 2:9). At their initiation, they receive from God's Spirit the authority and capacity for this ministry. The call to faith and ministry is general, one-time, and permanent, whereas the particular forms of ministry change, just as do both the bearers of ministry and the situations in which they function. For that reason, this calling can ground only a general priesthood that is the same for all members of the church; it cannot ground the various and changing ministries of each member. The specific way in which each Christian realizes his or her general priesthood must be established through the individual, specific charismata, even if it is true that each Christian already receives a specific charisma (or specific charismata) in the general call as such. For the charismata are empowerments for pluriform service in the church and in the world, empowerments which come from God's grace and which can change and overlap. The relationship between calling and charismata can be defined as follows. The call to new life and to practices commensurate with this life comes to everyone without distinction through the words of the gospel.²⁵⁴

Muthiah correctly summarizes Volf this way: "He rejects ecclesiologies that propose an episcopocentric (hierarchical office) model of the church, because he believes that the church is not a single subject, but rather a communion of interdependent subjects; that the mediation of salvation occurs not only through office-holders, but also through all other members of the church; and that the church is constituted by the Holy Spirit not so much by way of the institution of office as through the communal confession in which Christians speak the word of

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 374-375.

God to one another.”²⁵⁵ This is the view that is at the heart of egalitarian churches such as New Heritage. The whole church is invited to participate and use their Spirit-given gifts for the sake of the community and the world. In short, Muthiah, Volf, and New Heritage believe that it is the Holy Spirit that composes the church and not office.

This view is important because what Volf is saying is that *every* Christian is given empowerments or gifts from God for the purpose of carrying out God’s redemptive mission in the world. These gifts—and the corresponding belief that all members are needed for the building up of the Body and for the flourishing of their communities— seems to be something that churches often neglect to nurture among the Body of Christ. Volf ascribes to this participative model of community because he believes it describes what has actually been going on all along, “The mediation of faith by a whole range of people, not just office holders.”²⁵⁶ Volf says, “The mediation of faith for all practical purposes proceeds less by way of officeholders (in whom allegedly the entire church acts) than by way of the various Christian "significant others" (such as family members or friends). And the mediation of faith is supported by the life of all the members of the church (the "remaining others"), who among other things also create the plausibility structures for the mediation of faith.”²⁵⁷

Furthermore, Volf believes that episcopcentric models lead to passivity among the non-office-holding members of the church, and he sees the polycentric model as a way for a church to

²⁵⁵ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 42.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, 278. Volf also states that, “Commensurate with their calling and endowment by God’s Spirit, all the members of a church are stewards of God’s manifold grace through their deeds and words (see 1 Pet. 4:10-11), and all have something to contribute in worship and in the entire life of the church. The church arises and lives insofar as salvation is mediated through mutual service with the pluriform gifts of the Spirit” (375).

work against passivity by elevating the significance of the laity, which is essential to the life of a church. He says of the polycentric model, “The model according to which the Spirit constitutes the church through officeholders (ordained in the apostolic succession) obscures the ecclesiological highly significant fact that in all churches, faith is mediated and kept alive above all by the so-called laity, that is, in families, in one’s neighborhood, or in the workplace; without this lay activity of faith mediation, there would be no living church. Ecclesiologically, the model that assigns priority to officeholders also suppresses the contribution of the laity in worship. In all churches, the laity participates in the worship service through singing, praying, the reading of scripture, the confession of faith, or simply through their mere presence. All these activities must be acknowledged ecclesiologically as constitutive for the church, for it is through these activities that people confess Christ before one another as Savior and Lord, and it is in this way that the Spirit of God constitutes them into a church.”²⁵⁸

The laity is intrinsic to the life of the church and the cultivation of faith, but this is not to say that leadership is not important. It is. However, the views of both Muthiah and Volf allow for participation to be done on the basis of *charisma* or gifts from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1).²⁵⁹ So, a church can be a church without office holders, but at the same time, Volf believes that a church does need to have informal or formal, spirit-gifted, and communally

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 377-378.

²⁵⁹ This reminds me of the large number of NHF respondents who reported increased levels of participation with both the communal and missional life of the church. Respondents indicated increased participation because they were invited to participate. Everyone is invited to participate based on passion and gifts, i.e., “the mediation of faith by a whole range of people.”

anointed leaders who are *enjoined with* the community for the ongoing life of the church.²⁶⁰ The Trinity is also essential for Volf when talking about the priesthood of all believers.

The Trinity, the Priesthood, the Mission

Muthiah and Volf both hold that the nature of the Trinity is important for a discussion on the priesthood of all believers, because the church should reflect the nature of the Trinity. Volf does not believe that the Trinity is monocentric, nor does he believe that the Trinity is hierarchical.²⁶¹ This is an important aspect of the complementarian and egalitarian conversation, because people from both camps base some of their views on their beliefs about the Trinity. Volf contends that the relations within the Trinity are symmetrical: “The more a church is characterized by symmetrical and decentralized distribution of power and freely affirmed interaction, the more will it correspond to the trinitarian communion. Relations between charismata, modeled after the Trinity, are reciprocal and symmetrical; all members of the church have charismata, and all are to engage their charismata for the good of all others.”²⁶² Muthiah concurs, and this symmetrical and decentralized view is a key component of the priesthood of all believers. Muthiah purports that this view of the Trinity may very well produce an egalitarian impulse that has the potential for positively informing the church’s identity and shape, but he wisely also cautions that we must be careful not to construct a Trinity in order to justify what we

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 370. Volf also makes the case that this is what Paul was envisioning for the church in Corinth, “Paul seems to envision such a model of ecclesial life with a polycentric participative structure when he tries to reestablish peace within the enthusiastic and chaotic congregation in Corinth (see 1 Cor. 14:33). As a kind of summary of his own ecclesiological extremely significant instructions in 1 Corinthians 12-14, he writes: “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up the congregation” (1 Cor. 14:26; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5-10; 4:10)” (373).

²⁶¹ Ibid., 393.

²⁶² Ibid.

already embrace.²⁶³ Volf and Muthiah propose a theology of the royal priesthood that emerges from an ecclesiology tied to a relational view of the Trinity.²⁶⁴ They are not alone in this proposal.

Muthiah emphasizes that theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg also hold a relational view of the Trinity. Muthiah states that although Moltmann’s “social trinitarianism” is relational, it has also been criticized as tritheistic, “emphasizing three discrete subjects or centers of activity which makes it difficult to conceive of a principle of unity that is comparable to that of the plurality.”²⁶⁵ Pannenberg grounds his relational doctrine of the Trinity in history saying, “It is on the basis of the historical revelation of the three—Father, Son, and Spirit—that we are then moved to ask about their oneness or unity.”²⁶⁶ Pannenberg focuses on how the three members of the Trinity receive their divinity. The divinity of the three members is not something that each member has independently of the others, but rather, each member is divine because this divinity is given by the others.²⁶⁷ Moltmann emphasizes the plurality of the Trinity, and Pannenberg emphasizes their dependent nature; communion and relationship are key to their understanding of the Trinity.

²⁶³ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 50.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 51. See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), viii.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 52. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 308-319.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

The word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible, but the Bible does provide insights into the relational nature of the Father, Son, and Spirit.²⁶⁸ The biblical God is Triune, relational, and mutual. *Perichoresis* refers to the mutual indwelling of the three Persons of the Trinity. Volf calls this the “reciprocal interiority” of the three Persons.²⁶⁹ Volf says, “This reciprocal interiority of the divine persons determines the character of their unity. The notion of perichoresis offers the possibility of overcoming the alternatives *unio personae* — *unitas substantias*. The unity of the triune God is grounded neither in the numerically identical substance nor in the accidental intentions of the persons, but rather in their mutually interior being. By the power of their eternal love, the divine persons exist so intimately with, for, and in one another that they themselves constitute themselves in their unique, incomparable and complete union.”²⁷⁰ Therefore, the trinitarian Persons relate to each other, but also actually indwell each other and possess the most intimate type of relationships possible. This indwelling is reciprocal, each Person indwells and is indwelt by the other two Persons. This is what Jesus pointed to when he said, “the Father is in me, and I am in the Father” (John 10:38; cf. 14:10-11; 17:21).²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 54. “God is revealed in the OT to be the God of the Covenant with his people. Covenant requires relationship. This God wants to assimilate all people to himself (cf. Genesis 9), and such assimilation is a relational move. The communion that God desires with Israel (cf. Exodus 19, 24; Leviticus 26:11) is symbolic of the communion God desires with all peoples. In the NT we see clearly that the natures of the Father, Son, and Spirit are relational. An intimate relationship exists between the Father and the Son—no one knows the Son like the Father and vice versa (Matthew 11:27). In fact, Jesus and the Father are one (John 10:30). John repeatedly uses the “being-in” language to express the relations between the Father and the Son and the communion of the Father and the Son with the people of God (cf. John 10:38; 14:11; 17:21–23). This relationship has existed from the beginning (John 1:1-2; Colossians 1:15-17). At many points a relationship between Jesus and the Spirit is indicated, even if the exact nature of this relationship is not detailed (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 4:1; John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 14).”

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, 347.

²⁷¹ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 54.

What does this have to do with church structures and the ecology of a local church? Is Trinitarian theology really that important for a local church? At least for Volf, he views the Trinity as a “determining reality” in terms of correspondence and participation.²⁷² Volf believes that the church is called to correspond to or mirror the Trinity, and to participate in the Trinity because the triune God has opened God’s self up to such participation.²⁷³ This is a matter of both intimacy and reciprocal hospitality that lead to a healthy church ecology. In *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, Moltmann’s relational view concurs and expands our relationships and participation in the life of God into the past, present, future:

Through the sending of the creative Spirit, the trinitarian history of God becomes a history that is open to the world, open to men and women, and open to the future. Through the experience of the life-giving Spirit in faith, in baptism, and in the fellowship of believers, people are integrated into the history of the Trinity. Through the Spirit of Christ they not only become participants in the eschatological history of the new creation, but through the Spirit of the Son they also become at the same time participants in the trinitarian history of God himself. The church does not determine the nature of God, but the church does participate in the life of God. The church is to model itself after the Trinity even as the church participates in the Trinity.²⁷⁴

The relational nature of the Trinity has implications for the way that local churches relate to each other. An insular existence does not reflect the nature of God or participation in the life of God. Churches should work to be open to one another because this openness and intimacy is a foretaste of the complete communion and unity that will mark the body of Christ in the end. Furthermore, the church that mirrors the relationality and mutuality of the Trinity will be a

²⁷² Ibid., 56.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 90.

church that works to relate to one another. Muthiah encourages that this work is not just for those in the pews, but for pastors as well:

Pastors should be the leading examples of relational presence and openness. All Christians are called to be present with others—both others in the church and others outside the church. A presence marked by self-donation and openness should characterize those who lead the church as well as those who assume other roles in the church. We do not find certain Christians called to be present while other Christians are exempt from it. All Christians are to mirror the trinitarian presence. The fact that all the people of God are to be present with others through self-donation and openness calls for an understanding of the royal priesthood as self-giving.²⁷⁵

Muthiah's admonishment here is well-placed, and it reminds me of Margaret Whipp. In her book *Pastoral Theology*, she says, "Pastoral care requires availability. Being there, for and with the other, in the steadfast immanence of covenant love is itself a 'presencing' of the gospel, a tangible expression of the immediacy of God's love, and the nearness of his grace, through extended ministry of incarnation which Christ has entrusted to his Church."²⁷⁶ Muthiah uses the examples of Jesus (Matthew 23:8-11) and Paul (1 Corinthians 11:17-22) to demonstrate that it is possible for leaders to lead without domination, and to assert that stratified relations are not acceptable within the Body of Christ.²⁷⁷ Muthiah pointedly elaborates:

The church is supposed to reflect the equality present in the trinitarian relations. Pyramidal or hierarchical models of the church must therefore be put aside. The nature of the Trinity calls for an egalitarian church structure, a church structure marked by equalness. If the church is to be marked by equality, no cultic stratification is acceptable. Such stratification must be set aside as our understanding of the priesthood of all believers is pressed into the egalitarian image of the Trinity.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 61.

²⁷⁶ Margaret Whipp, *Pastoral Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 12.

²⁷⁷ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 62.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

This is important for local churches because it provides a foretaste of eschatological social arrangements.²⁷⁹ Our churches should be a glimpse of God's preferred and promised future.

The Trinity and Power and Privilege

This Trinitarian posture of equality and non-domination also relates to the reorientation of power and privilege discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet once again comes to mind (John 13:1-21). Abuse of power, privilege, and a posture of domination is not the way of the kingdom and is not reflected in the Trinity. Muthiah posits that all of Jesus' relationships were marked by freedom. He says: "Jesus did not coerce anyone to follow him and he did not force anyone to remain in his company. He had a clear picture of a preferred future for all of humanity, but he didn't foist this upon anyone. His disciples were to follow his pattern of non-domination."²⁸⁰ This theology of non-domination reinforces previous discussions with regard to Christofornity and how *kenosis* relates to power and privilege. Scot McKnight postulates, "A Christoforn culture is nurtured not by those seeking power *over* but by those seeking power *for* God and others. Power itself is good or at least neutral, so our concern is power *over* versus power *for*."²⁸¹ I posit that Jesus also demonstrates power *with* others, exemplifying mutuality in ministry.

Margaret Whip concurs and emphasizes the importance of being aware of power. She says, "Since naivety about power is hazardous for Christian ministry, it is important for those who pastor others to develop the self-awareness and role-awareness which can embrace the

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 64.

²⁸¹ McKnight, *Pastor Paul*, 29.

realities of spiritual and institutional power with humility and transparent integrity. Underpinning this stance is a critical theological understanding that power, which finds its source and goal in God, is entrusted to human beings for the sake of loving service. We could sum this up by reflecting that pastoral power is given to be used *with* others and *for* others and never *over against* them.”²⁸² Authoritative and dictatorial approaches to leadership have no place in the ecclesial community.²⁸³ Crucially, the mutuality of the Trinity, also reorients power and privilege.

The Gift of Diversity

The priesthood of all believers should reflect the diversity found in the Trinity. This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges that the modern church faces. The Bible provides a vision of diversity and marvelous examples of the Spirit joining and quilting diverse people groups together.²⁸⁴ There are many examples, but Acts, where we see the Spirit joining Jewish and Gentile Christians together, is the source of many of these stories. Muthiah references Pentecost and the diversity of people and languages that flowed forth from the Christian community in Jerusalem that day (Acts 2:4).²⁸⁵ It is imperative to notice that though the people of God are

²⁸² Whipp, *Pastoral Theology*, 145.

²⁸³ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 63. Muthiah also states that, “The Holy Spirit does not bestow authority in a way that bypasses community. The whole community shares responsibility for this authority. In Matthew 18:18–19, Jesus gives his followers the responsibility to bind and loose (cf. Matt 16:19), that is, the responsibility to exercise authority. This responsibility is given to all members of the church. A leader in a church may exercise authority in a way that others in the church might not exercise authority, but this authority is granted by the Holy Spirit through the community. Ecclesial authority ultimately is grounded in Christ, but it is conveyed through the community” (85).

²⁸⁴ This marvelous joining and quilting language is borrowed from Jennings, *Acts*, 221.

²⁸⁵ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 66.

united in Christ through the Spirit, they simultaneously maintain great diversity.²⁸⁶ There is unity, not uniformity. Willie James Jennings says of this marvelous joining work of the Spirit:

Paul represented an alternative vision of joining in which Jew and Gentile found each other at the resurrected body of Jesus. This is not assimilation but joining, and the church has always struggled to know this difference. The former means loss, but the latter means gain. The former destroys the voices and histories of people and imposes an alternative story that imparts to peoples a derogatory gaze of their own people and culture in light of the glory of the new conquering culture. The latter invites peoples to share in each other's ways of life and come to know each other through the Spirit, who imparts the desire to love and the desire to be together in the love of God made known in Jesus. The former is Rome and the latter is Pentecost, and the church has too often chosen Roman-like assimilation instead of Pentecost-formed joining.²⁸⁷

The priesthood of all believers is comprised of joining and sharing, not erasing, those things that make us unique image-bearers. The church should take great care not to engage in oppressive mission, universalizing her story at the expense of others.²⁸⁸ Likewise, no Person of the Trinity can be said to be more important than the others, and no member of the Body is more important than any other (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).²⁸⁹ This attitude should emerge in an egalitarian priesthood of all believers; no priest within this royal priesthood is more important than any of the other priests.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Jennings, *Acts*, 221.

²⁸⁸ Richard Bauckham has sobering and important considerations for Christians with regard to the temptation to totalize narratives and repress diversity. See Richard Bauckham, "Mission as Hermeneutic for Scriptural Interpretation," in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael W. Goheen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 28-44.

²⁸⁹ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 72.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

The Spiritual Practices of the Priesthood of All Believers

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....”
–Acts 15:28

The ecclesial community is shaped by its practices. Although there are many practices that help to form a community (prayer, listening, dwelling in the word, Communion, and confession), Muthiah places special focus on *communal discernment* as a key practice, because, he says, “How a congregation makes decisions reveals the contours of the congregation’s theology of the priesthood of all believers.”²⁹¹ Moreover, I emphasize that how a congregation makes decisions also reveals how power and authority function within the community. Domination is not part of communal discernment. I agree with Muthiah about the importance of discernment, and I also concur with him that the decision-making process reveals a great deal about theologies operationalized in a local church. Furthermore, this is important because, as stated throughout this project, one of the biggest differences between egalitarian and complementarian communities has to do with access to the places of authority and decision-making.

In Chapter One of this project, I shared some of NHF’s formational practices. NHF’s theology of the priesthood of all believers necessitates communal practices that are open and mutual, and in which authority and submission are shared. Naturally, when it comes to discernment, there are always practical concerns at play and efficiency and effectiveness are always part of the equation. Muthiah, importantly, expands the scope of discernment into a broader effort to develop a communal sensitivity to the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. He says this of communal discernment:

²⁹¹ Ibid., 153.

The practice of discernment does indeed include the operational and strategic decisions that a community makes, but it also includes an intentional, explicit openness to the Spirit that relates to the whole range of communal and personal choices as well as to an evaluation of authoritative claims set forth by individuals and institutions. Discernment is the practice that identifies false prophets as well as the practice used to decide whether or not to build a new church building. When a small group or a congregation gathers to prayerfully talk through a situation, they are practicing discernment. It is a practice that encourages us to focus on the Spirit, not just on the decision.²⁹²

This is an important shift because it is very easy for churches to go about decision making with little mindfulness to what God may be doing in their midst. However, in communal discernment, as the priesthood of all believers seeks wisdom or clarity regarding a choice to be made, the community does so in a way that makes room for the Holy Spirit to lead and move within the process.²⁹³ Alan Roxburgh shares a similar view in *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time*, in which he says, “Discernment is a big word that can be either scary or cliché for congregations. It’s truly about bringing God back into the center of our conversations and actions.”²⁹⁴

Muthiah posits that community formation is another major and practical benefit to the practice of communal discernment. The formation of community happens as a community gathers, listens, reflects, and articulates together what God may be up to and what they are learning. Muthiah also shifts the goals and definitions of success within the practice of

²⁹² Ibid., 155.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World: The New Shape of the Church in Our Time* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 1540. Roxburgh acknowledges the shift of this kind of communal and missional discernment: “The people of a congregation have been socialized to be more at home with business meetings with agendas and Robert’s Rules of Order, small group gatherings with study guides, or canons and bylaws that determine what can and cannot be done in a congregation and by whom. These practices have their place, but they have squeezed out other practices of listening to God together and asking discernment questions such as, “What does the Spirit seem to be saying to us?” Such questions no longer feel concrete or practical, but out of step with our established ways of being God’s people” (1554).

discernment. He proposes that a healthier standard of evaluation is that of unity. He says, “Discernment done well contributes to the trinitarian-shaped unity of the body. Unity does not mean that differences are ignored, and unity does not mean unanimity of perspective. The type of unity that marks the priesthood of all believers and that marks good discernment allows for differences and distinctions—in fact, this type of unity assumes that differences will exist.”²⁹⁵ In short, fear of dissenting viewpoints should not prevent us from pursuing communal discernment. Furthermore, all voices from the priesthood are invited into the process. Muthiah suggests that even outside voices are brought in, and that conversations with texts and context are included, and that attention is given to biblical and personal narratives.²⁹⁶ When done well, the practice of discernment is a concrete expression of a theology of the priesthood of all believers that corresponds to the trinitarian nature, because it involves mutuality and participation.²⁹⁷ Such a theology of the priesthood of all believers elicits the practice of discernment in which all members seek to speak and act in light of the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.²⁹⁸

Roxburgh expands the missional element in the practice of communal discernment:

This is the practice by which a congregation develops the capacity to name concrete ways they might join with God in their neighborhoods. Discernment is different from analyzing a neighborhood and then deciding how to meet some related need. Such research and response is not wrong, nor is helping others an improper form of Christian action. Discernment is simply a different way of seeing and being with your neighborhood. First, discernment assumes God is already active in the neighborhood. Second, it assumes that listening with our own ears and seeing with our own eyes gives us clues to where God is at work. Third, discernment depends on a willingness to be surprised about the places and among the people where the Spirit might be at work. Fourth, it involves being present

²⁹⁵ Muthiah, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, 156.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

without a predetermined strategy for assessment. Discernment is the way we practice the conviction that the Spirit is already out ahead of us. If this is true, then our common work includes discovering how to listen for what the Spirit is saying to us. Discernment asks the question, “Where might we be seeing God in our neighborhood, and how might we join with God there?”²⁹⁹

There are many benefits to the practice of communal discernment. Congregants and leaders will begin to see that ministry, the mission of God, and the work of flourishing with their communities is shared among all the people—the priesthood of *all* believers.

The Trinity points to the priesthood of all believers as a metaphor that illuminates the communal and mutual nature of the church. The Trinity marks the local church as an entity of presence, equality, non-domination, unity, and diversity. This nature challenges many current ecclesial structures, particularly those that practice domination of any kind.

²⁹⁹ Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, 1554.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Results and Conclusions of This Study

Indeed too many pastors and church leaders have made themselves the high priest of segregationist practices. They have settled for the love of their own people instead of a love that creates a people. They have, out of the sheer need to be accepted, embraced, and celebrated, refused the holy work of the people of God to accept, embrace, and celebrate others different from themselves.³⁰⁰
– Willie James Jennings

In this project, I aimed to discover the spiritual impact of egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership on the members of New Heritage Fellowship. The overwhelming response to NHF's egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership on the members who participated in this study was very positive. There were 29 participants, 15 female and 14 male. None of them reported that NHF's egalitarian culture or female pastoral leadership has had a *negative* impact on them. This is significant because 28 of these respondents had not had a female pastor before, and because all 28 were part of churches with a complementarian and hierarchical culture before being part of NHF. Therefore, 28 of the respondents have experienced a paradigm shift, moving from a complementarian and hierarchical culture to an egalitarian culture. Only 4 respondents reported that NHF's egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership had *no impact* on them, because—as they indicated—gender was not a factor in their answer. A striking 25 respondents said that NHF's egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership has had a positive impact on their spiritual life.

Conclusions on Female Survey Results

For the missional aspect of this project, I used Amy L. Sherman's definition of *flourishing*, which she describes as embracing and working towards *shalom*, peace, harmony,

³⁰⁰ Jennings, *Acts*, 147.

and wholeness, as God's ultimate plan for all of creation.³⁰¹ This occurs when Jesus followers participate in the mission of God, and live out the precepts of their priestly vocation: to love God, neighbor, and self. The data showed that 14 out of 15 females reported increased spiritual enthusiasm, participation in the life of the church, and deeper missional engagement. Additionally, 14 females indicated increased feelings of self-efficacy and safety. Eleven females reported trying new things in church since having a female pastor, such as dwelling in the word, Communion, and even leadership roles, such as shepherding and preaching. All of these female respondents reported that the female representation and encouragement from the community both served as catalysts to try new things and get more involved. The participatory nature of NHF and female representation in leadership appear to be giving females more confidence and the motivation to take risks.

One of the changes that 10 female respondents reported was that having a female pastor has positively changed their beliefs and ideas about God and/or the Kingdom of God. These respondents said that a female pastor has helped them to see that God loves them, that God is inclusive, and that they are also capable of contributing to the life and mission of the church. It is encouraging to discover that female respondents are flourishing within the priesthood of all believers at NHF.

Conclusions on Male Survey Results

All 14 of the male respondents were previously part of churches in which they had access to all areas of the life of the church, including leadership, so I was not sure if male respondents would report any changes to their spiritual lives. However, 11 males reported increased spiritual

³⁰¹ Sherman, *Agents of Flourishing*, 14-17, 25.

enthusiasm, increased participation in the life of the church, and deeper missional engagement with female pastoral leadership. In terms of levels of participation, 9 males reported participating in leadership at NHF more than they had in previous churches. Interestingly, 10 males also reported trying new things since having a female pastor, such as dwelling in the Word, preaching, and engaging in missional partnerships in the community.

One of the changes that 7 male respondents reported was that having a female pastor has positively changed their beliefs and ideas about God and/or the Kingdom of God. These respondents said that a female pastor has helped them to see that God is compassionate, generous, and that everyone is valuable to God and to the Kingdom. It is encouraging to discover that male respondents are also flourishing within the priesthood of all believers at NHF.

Conclusion

The Missional Royal NHF Priesthood

Respondents were asked: *What gifts or strengths do you believe having a female pastor has enlivened or nurtured at NHF?* This is where some fascinating harmony seems to be emerging within NHF. Part of this project focused on the mission of the priesthood of all believers to participate in the redemptive work of God towards the flourishing of our communities (1 Peter 2:5-9). In terms of increased missional participation, 9 respondents reported feeling more energized to serve and partner with God and others in the community.

Another focus of this project was a theology of power and privilege that I connected with *kenosis*, a restored view of power that opens the Christ-follower up to serve others. For this same question, 8 respondents said that a female pastor has enlivened and nurtured hospitality and compassion at NHF. NHF is working towards a new expression of the priesthood of all believers. In this project I aimed to bring egalitarian culture and complementarian culture into

conversation. NHF's egalitarian culture is illuminated because of its expression of a priesthood of all believers that is grounded in mutuality, hospitality, and participation.

Limitations of This Study

The most obvious limitation to this study was the sample size. I only studied one egalitarian congregation with a female pastor. Studying more congregations like this would provide additional insights and depth. Part of the challenge of this limitation is that I know of very few churches from a mainline Churches of Christ tradition that have a lead female pastor.

Additionally, the congregation studied is fairly homogeneous. It would be helpful and enriching to have more age groups, racial diversity, persons with disabilities, LGBTQ+ persons, and more diversity in religious background.

There were no respondents who indicated that NHF's egalitarian culture and female pastoral leadership had a negative impact on them and their spiritual lives. A few dissenting viewpoints in that area would have enlivened the discussion and taken the study down more avenues. Even though I tried to make the project as anonymous as possible, it is possible that those with dissenting viewpoints chose not to participate.

Most of my respondents have a history with the Churches of Christ. It would be fascinating to hear how other denominations view the priesthood of all believers and see what that means within other traditions. It is important that people from complementarian and egalitarian church cultures stay in dialogue with one another. I realize that it is easy to sequester ourselves and form intimate relationships only with those who share our beliefs, but that is not the Trinitarian way and hearing from other traditions is important because "expanding the priesthood" is important.

Another limitation was trying to discover how multiple theologies (power and privilege, *kenosis*, egalitarian priesthood of all believers, Trinitarian) overlap while also illuminating a life-giving missional theology. Although I loved the research I found, my knowledge of the depth and history of the priesthood of all believers was a limitation for me in terms of research and creativity. Also, there are limited resources for missional theology written by women. I found the female theologians that I read to have a great deal of depth and insight, and I would like to discover more.

Implications for Ministry and Mission

Christianity is experiencing a period of transformation in the U.S, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many call it a crisis, and I think there is a diaspora effect at work as Christians adjust to their new identity not being at the center of the cultural landscape. Lots of young people are surveying current expressions of the church and not seeing a community where they can find belonging and purpose. If the data is correct about the “nones” and “dones,” the future will have a lot fewer royal priests to participate in the redemptive mission of God. I wholeheartedly believe that a church’s ability to cultivate intimacy and connection among diverse people groups determines whether or not that church flourishes or languishes. I believe that smaller egalitarian churches, like NHF, are the fresh expressions of church and Christian community that many people are seeking. Despite navigating many changes over the last four years, including COVID-19, participants in this study—male and female—reported increased self-efficacy, participation, connection, and enthusiasm within NHF’s egalitarian culture and with a female pastor. There is great potential for female pastoral leadership and missional leadership in this new missional era.

I also now believe that a fresh expression of the priesthood of all believers is needed, one that is open, welcoming, diverse, *kenotic*, Christoform, and missional (concerned with justice, mercy, and faith). Likewise, I suspect that churches that don't interrogate their theology of power and privilege will struggle, especially larger churches with centralized and top-down leadership models. Alongside this evaluation and reorientation of power and privilege, churches and church leaders will need to work toward dismantling any notions of supremacy (e.g., male supremacy, white supremacy, national supremacy, religious supremacy, hetero-normative supremacy), which I contend are not representative of the Triune God. Likewise, missional expressions will need to be reoriented and redeemed, in favor of a means of joining the Spirit in *joining* all people together—in other words, ministry *with* versus ministry *to* or *at*. Amy L. Sherman's book on mission as flourishing captured my imagination for this project.³⁰² Mission as *mutual* flourishing seems like an important trajectory to explore. Ultimately, our missional work will need to reflect the Trinity in terms of mutuality, relationality, and intimacy. Reflecting back on the research, NHF respondents reported that all of these were increased in NHF's egalitarian culture and with a female pastor.

Muthiah's work on the priesthood of all believers is excellent and would be helpful for missional leaders looking to make shifts in theology and praxis. I believe that he is right in his critique of the hierarchical model and the reticence—or failure—to believe in, cultivate, and utilize the gifts of the Spirit for the building up of the whole priesthood and for the flourishing of local communities. The COVID-19 pandemic brought so many latent spiritual gifts to the surface at NHF, and those spiritual gifts allowed us to thrive and to cultivate intimacy during a very disruptive and disorienting period. Renewed creativity and imagination allowed us to continue to

³⁰² Ibid., 13-29.

be a church that was called, gathered together, centered in the Triune God, and sent into the world to join our communities as loving neighbors and people of peace (even though we were on Zoom). Muthiah's use of Snyder's three implications for the local church are helpful in our modern context: "1) We all have direct access to God 2) we are priests to each other, and 3) this universal priesthood is for carrying out God's mission in the world, not just in the church."³⁰³ I concur with Snyder and Muthiah both that the *whole* priesthood is given the ministry of the church for the purpose of flourishing our interior and exterior communities.³⁰⁴ If we do this within a Trinitarian framework, I believe it will become difficult to tell who is "in" and who is "out." That blending of persons, all working out our salvation together in partnership with God, sounds incredibly Gospel-oriented and liberating.

Finally, I believe the research here demonstrates that local churches should move away from programs, and instead spend time and energy implementing communal practices that form and shape the members of the local church into a missional royal priesthood. Listening and making room for the other should be a primary focus for those practices. Admittedly, this is going to be a challenging shift for many communities that are accustomed to ministry that is more unidirectional. This shift towards mutuality will require more investment and vulnerability from members, but on the plus side, these practices mirror the Trinity and cultivate intimacy and connection. I contend that a discipleship community, a priesthood of all believers, is intentional about practices that gather us, center us at the Table and in the Triune, and send us out into the world that God loves to join with our communities as loving neighbors and people of peace.

³⁰³ Ibid., 32.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 33.

Future Research

Future research should examine how female pastors fair within churches that have not done the work of examining *kenosis*, power, and privilege. The timing for NHF and I to come together was “just right” as NHF had already been doing the work of *kenosis* and reorienting power and privilege. They already had a genesis in an egalitarian priesthood of all believers. It would be helpful to discover just how important the culture is for churches that make the intentional move to be more inclusive of female leaders (and more inclusive of any marginalized people groups). Putting a woman in a lead pastoral role in a church that hasn’t done some focused cultural work regarding power and authority will likely not be healthy for anyone involved. I would argue this is not healthy for most male pastors either. Future research should include questions about how power and privilege are viewed and utilized within a church.

I also think future research should take trauma into account. Any discussion on power and privilege surfaces trauma in a community. Additionally, passages like Philippians 2:5-8 have been used by some Christians throughout history to maintain toxic hierarchical structures. Future research should be more trauma-informed, aware of the histories and issues associated with misuse of power and privilege.

Conclusion

I did not expect to say this at the beginning of this project, but I now believe the priesthood of *all* believers should be part of the essence of a local church. I believe this theology underpins why NHF has flourished and why NHF has flourished their first female pastor. I hope that this project has illuminated the need for a refreshed understanding of the priesthood of all believers, one that includes female leaders, using their Spirit-given gifts for the church, the world that God loves, and the mission of God. Priestly language has always bothered me because of my

religious background and because of the exclusive nature of it, but I now have a different perspective, and I am eager to explore more about the *kenotic*, egalitarian, Trinitarian, flourishing priesthood of all believers. Likewise, I have come to think that all believers should see themselves as part of this priesthood, and this will require us to make some changes to our church systems and practices. Most importantly, I have been surprised to discover that the theologies of *kenosis* (as it relates to power and privilege), the priesthood of all believers, and genuine flourishing (mission) are all theologies that work in harmony to liberate us, welcoming us *all* to participate in the redemptive activity of God. We are all flourishing priests, together.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Study

Hello NHF,

As discussed at the last Congregational Meeting, I am about to officially start the NHF side of research for my Doctor of Ministry Project with Lipscomb.

The project will be about the spiritual impact of being part of an egalitarian church and having a female pastor for NHF members.

This invitation to participate is open to all adult members who have been at NHF with me as the pastor for at least ten consecutive months. The surveys used to gather information for the study will be anonymous so that members feel free to share their experiences.

What participation will entail for participants:

1. Complete a Consent Form saying that you are willing to participate in the research project.
2. Complete an anonymous Google Form survey with questions relating to the title of the project above.
3. Participate in a one hour recorded group presentation and discussion during Sunday morning worship gathering to see results of the surveys and make sure NHF is accurately represented.
4. Complete a very short final Google Form survey.

The shepherding team has been incredibly supportive of this project and has given me consent to move forward.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating in this project and please let me know if you have any questions at all about this project.

Thank you for all of the encouragement and support during my studies.

Peace to your homes,

Cheryl

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

THE SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF EGALITARIANISM AND FEMALE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP ON THE MEMBERS OF NEW HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating THE SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF FEMALE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP ON THE MEMBERS OF NEW HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP. This study is being conducted by Cheryl Russell, a graduate student in the Hazelip School of Theology at Lipscomb University under the supervision of Dr. Mallory Wyckoff. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the spiritual impact of the experience of female pastoral leadership over the last three+ years at New Heritage Fellowship. Approximately 15 to 20 people are expected to participate in this research.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an electronic survey, and participate in a recorded group discussion with an outside facilitator and complete a final electronic survey after the recorded group discussion. The recorded group discussion will be in-person if possible and over Zoom if in-person is not possible. This study will take approximately 120 minutes. The first survey should take no more than 30 minutes. The recorded group discussion will take 60 minutes. The final electronic survey will take no more than 30 minutes.

Risks and Benefits:

The study has a minimal level of risk. Participants may have some discomfort sharing their experience with female leadership past and present in the group setting. Talking about leadership and gender may bring up traumatizing or difficult experiences from one's past, if this is the case, participants should reach out to a counselor or spiritual director for support. In addition, there may be varying opinions about the experience of female pastoral leadership that could cause discomfort and feelings of tension. There are no monetary benefits for participating in this research. The lead researcher is also the lead pastor and is paid by the church.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission. In any written reports or publications, all personal identifiers will be scrubbed.

I will keep the research results in a locked safe in my home and only I have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by October 2022. I will then keep all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you in a locked safe in my home.

All participants agree to maintain the confidentiality of the other project participants. This is not something the researcher(s) can guarantee, but that is the expectation of all participants.. Upon completion of the project all data collected with personal identifiers will be destroyed and/or deleted.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. All adult members are invited to participate on a voluntary basis, regardless of your experience with female pastoral leadership. You are free to stop participating at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Lipscomb University or NHF in any way.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Cheryl Russell at riorussell@gmail.com You may ask questions now or later and my faculty advisor, Mallory Wyckoff, mallory.wyckoff@gmail.com, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. Justin Briggs, Chair of the Lipscomb University Institutional Review Board at jgbriggs@lipscomb.edu. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time. I consent to participate in the study and for the interview to be recorded.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix C: Multimedia Release Form



IRB RESEARCH STUDY MULTIMEDIA RELEASE

To be completed by the researcher	
Principal Investigator:	Cheryl Russell
Research Study:	THE SPIRITUAL IMPACT OF FEMALE PASTORAL LEADERSHIP ON THE MEMBERS OF NEW HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP
Type of Release (check all that apply):	<input type="checkbox"/> Audio <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Video <input type="checkbox"/> Photo

To be completed by the research participant

Name of Participant: _____

In consideration for participating in the research study referenced above, I hereby grant to Lipscomb University (“Lipscomb”), and those acting pursuant to its authority, a non-exclusive, perpetual, worldwide, irrevocable license to record, use, reproduce, exhibit and distribute my presentation, likeness, voice, name and/or identity on a video, audio, photographic, digital, electronic, Internet or other medium without restrictions or limitations (the “Recordings”) for the following purposes and uses (*please initial and check all of the following that apply*):

Initials	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Recording Purpose
1. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Recordings can be used for scientific publications.
2. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Recordings can be used for scientific conferences or meetings.
3. _____	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	The Recordings can be used for educational purposes.
4. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Recordings can be used for public presentations to non-scientific groups.
5. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Recordings can be used on television or the audio portion can be used on radio.
6. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Recordings can be posted on a Lipscomb website.
7. _____	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Recordings can be used for reports/presentations to any research funding agencies.

I hereby agree to defend, hold harmless, indemnify, release and forever discharge Lipscomb and its trustees, officers, agents, representatives and employees from and against any and all liability, claims, actions, causes of actions and damages (including reasonable attorneys’ fees) of any kind whatsoever in law and in equity, both past and present and whether known or unknown, arising out of or related to (a) the use of my name, likeness, identity, voice, photographic image, video graphic image and voice, and the Recordings, and (b) any personal, intellectual property (including copyright), proprietary or other rights that I may have in connection with any use of the Recordings. To the extent required, I hereby grant and assign to Lipscomb all copyright in the Recordings and any video, audio, photographic, digital, electronic or other medium utilized in connection therewith. I hereby acknowledge and agree that Lipscomb shall have exclusive ownership of the copyright and other proprietary and property rights in the Recordings. **I acknowledge and understand that my name will not be used in any publication.**

I have read and understood this Multimedia Release, am at least eighteen (18) years of age and fully competent, and execute the same as my own free will.

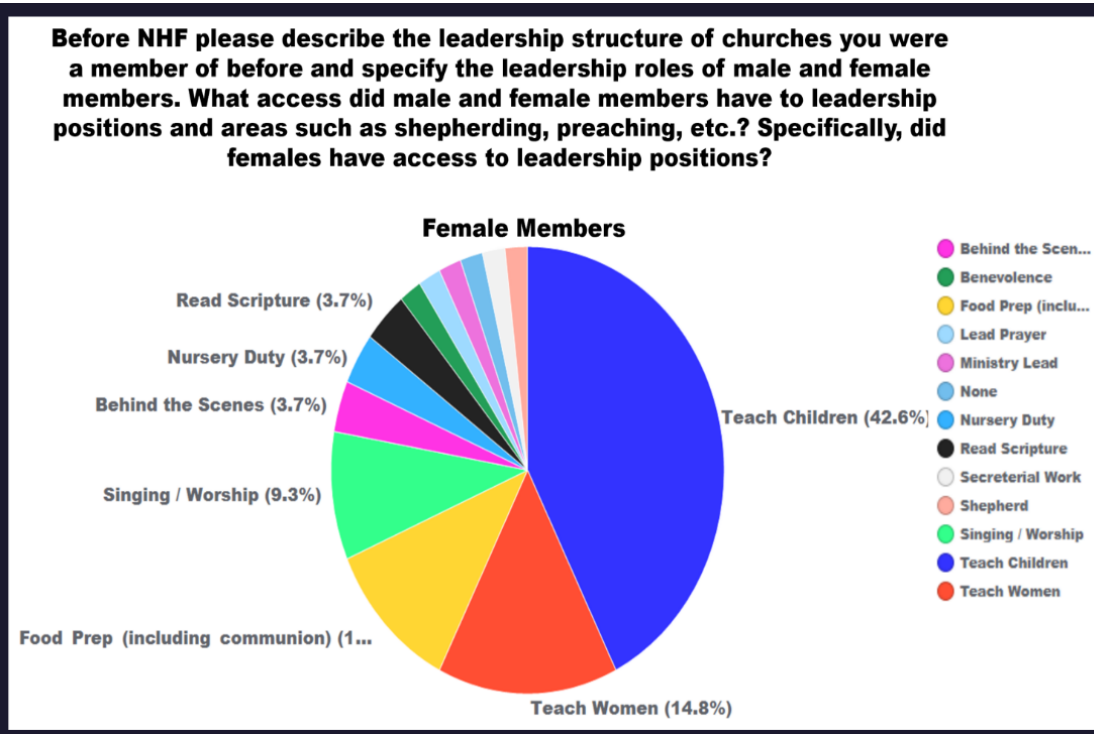
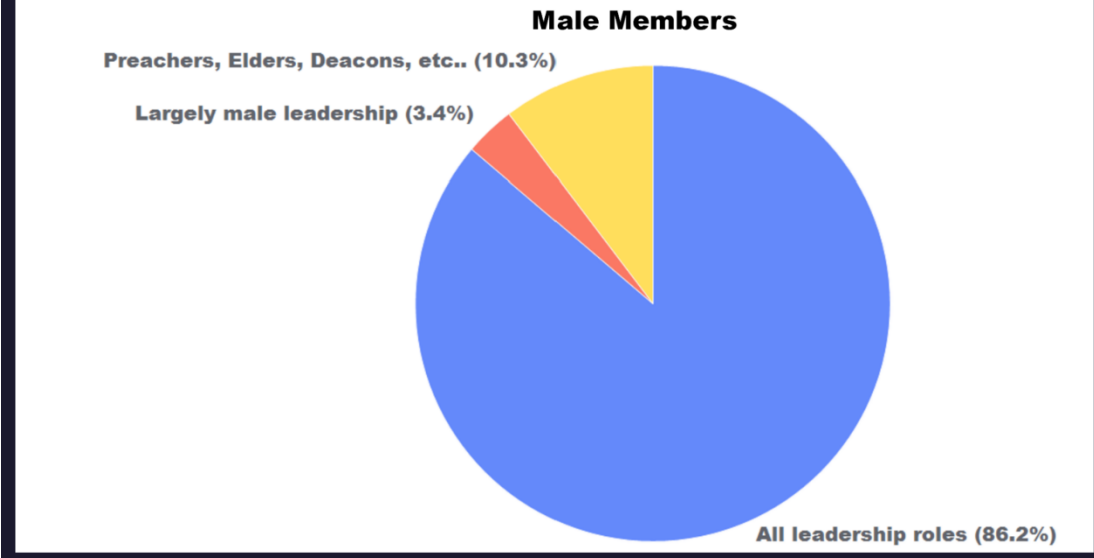
Signature: _____ Date: _____

If the participant is under the age of eighteen (18), the undersigned parent/guardian of the participant agrees to the terms of this Multimedia Release on behalf of the above-named participant:

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Leadership Experiences Prior to NHF

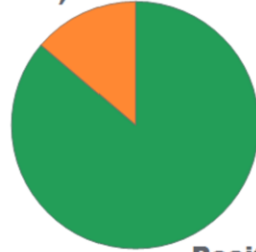
Before NHF please describe the leadership structure of churches you were a member of before and specify the leadership roles of male and female members. What access did male and female members have to leadership positions and areas such as shepherding, preaching, etc.? Specifically, did females have access to leadership positions?



Appendix E: Spiritual Impact of Having a Female Pastor

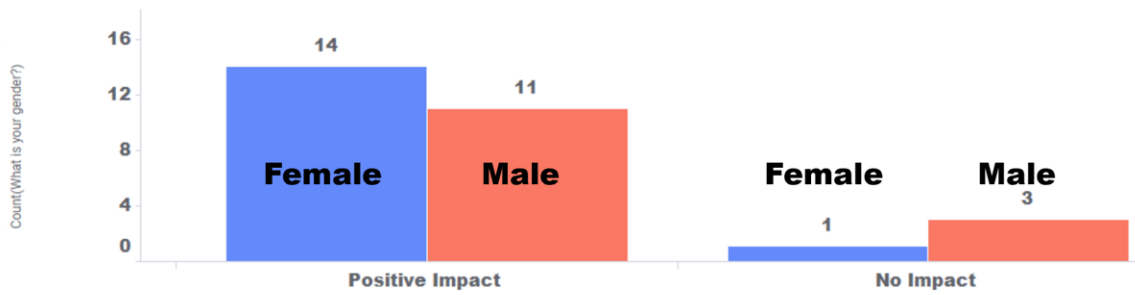
Has having a female pastor had an impact on you and your spiritual life?

No Impact (13.8%)



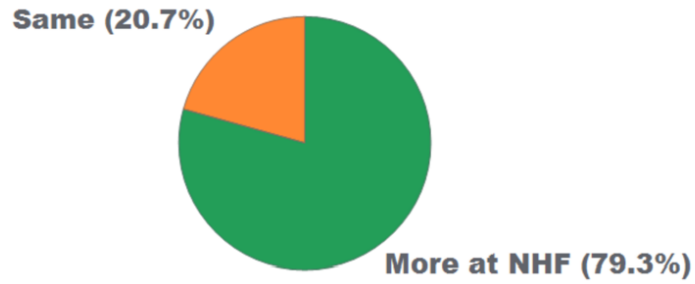
Positive Impact (86.2%)

Gender Breakdown of Responses

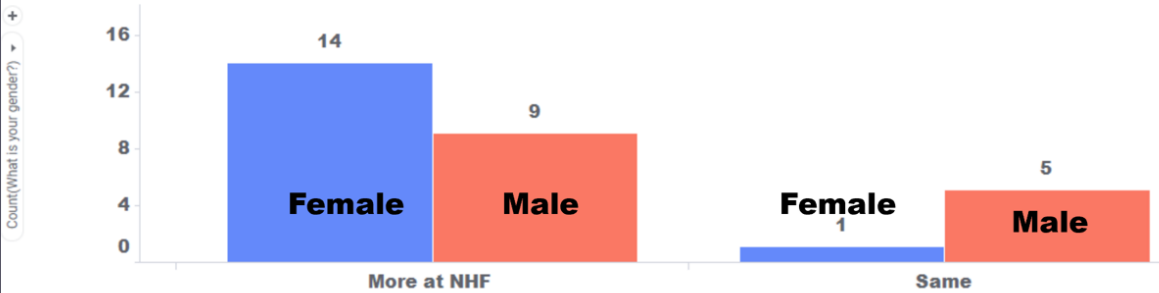


Appendix F

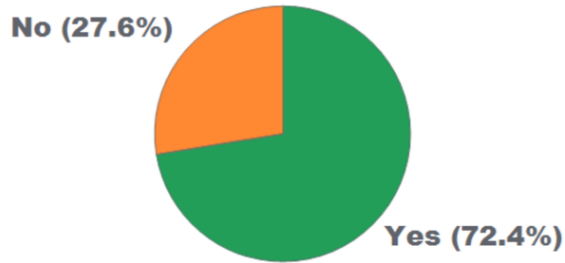
Have you participated in aspects of worship and leadership more at NHF than you did at previous churches where you have been a member? (Examples: preaching, Communion, dwelling, reading scripture, praying, shepherding etc.)



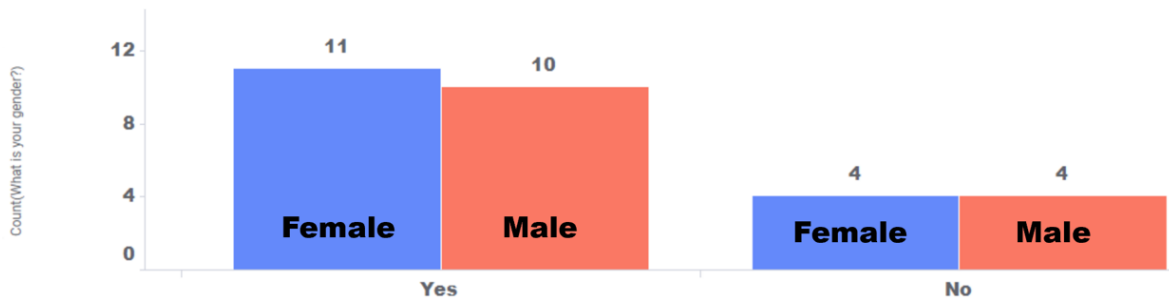
Gender Breakdown of Responses



Since having a female lead pastor, have you participated in things at church that you had not participated in before? (Ex: preaching, Communion, dwelling, reading scripture, praying, shepherding etc.)



Gender Breakdown of Responses



Appendix G

Appendix H

Has having a female pastor changed your beliefs, ideas, or imagination about God and/or the Kingdom of God?



Gender Breakdown of Responses

