An ethical exploration of gender inequality in church leadership

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An Ethical Exploration of
Gender Inequality in Church Leadership

A Senior Project
Submitted by
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Abstract

An Ethical Exploration of Gender Inequality in Church Leadership provides a moral analysis of the current status of women leaders in the church. Drawing on socio-analytical, ethical-theological, and leadership studies perspectives, this thesis sheds light on the disparity between the theological principles of equality and the ecclesiastical practices of inequality that create an unhealthy moral environment in churches.

Gender inequality in church leadership exists today in both the congregations permitting the ordination of women as well as in those that do not. This widespread discrepancy between rules and practices concerning women leaders in the church points to the socially symbolic significance of policies regarding women that has outweighed the importance of theological principles.

In examining the ethical-theological principles concerning equality, a theocentric model emerges in which humans derive their positive value and purpose from their Creator, endowing them with a fundamental equality in the eyes of God. This equality rejects arguments for women's inferiority, the differentiation of their roles in society, or their exclusion from God-human or human-human relationships.

The evidence of an ethical failing calls for immediate action on behalf of equality throughout the church. Transforming the culture within the church in order to make the church more ethical and consistent, and incidentally more efficient, is the only manner in which such a broad-sweeping change can truly eradicate the current unhealthy moral environment. By acting for equality within the organization, the church demonstrates its conviction to pursue equality in the world, in order to fulfill its mission to redeem people everywhere and liberate them from oppression.
“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail*
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Preface

A conversation near the end of my Jepson internship sparked the enthusiasm for this thesis that has not yet been exhausted. The discussion with a friend over a lunch break from work in Dallas turned toward followership and what it meant to be an exemplary follower. My friend reminded me that we are all human, and equals both in our capacity to mess things up and to be used to further God’s purposes on earth. She said to me that, when she prayed, she used to think of herself as unworthy of God’s attention. She used to think, “God chose people like Moses and David and Paul to lead his people. Who am I to talk to God?” But she quickly reminded me, “Then again, who were they to talk to God?” Thus, I set about my quest to discover what it meant to be part of the community of equals that is God’s church, and to learn more about what it means to be a leader or a follower in that community.

Followers have responsibilities of their own, I decided, and good followers know a great deal about accountability. What has blossomed from the process of my journey has been the realization that the term ‘followers,’ in the church, applies with special meaning to women. The term is special in that men seem usually to choose to be followers as opposed to leaders while women seem to be expected to follow. In fact, it is markedly unusual for a women to lead a congregation in an official position. With these observations in mind, I set about uncovering why this seems to be the case.

The point that I reach in a later chapter struck me as so important that I nearly fell off my chair when it occurred to me. The concept of follower cannot even be discussed in prescriptive terms until one deals first with that of leadership. Applied to the situation
of women, one cannot tell a woman how to be a better follower until one can show her and train her to lead. As Rost points out, "followers do not do followership, they do leadership. Both leaders and followers form one relationship that is leadership."\(^1\)

Recognizing this symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers is the first step toward understanding why inequality detracts from the quality of leadership in an organization. The implications for the church boil down to the fact that good leadership cannot occur until women are treated as equals, with full and genuine opportunities to serve at all levels of the church community, including that of the highest senior clergy positions.

Admittedly, this topic is of great concern to me as I am a woman greatly devoted to the mission of the church in the world and who intends to seek full ordination and ultimately a clergy position within a church community. I have worked in a church or church-related organization for the past three summers and have learned a great deal about the importance and influence of community and culture within the church and its related organizations. Although I have a great deal more to learn, I feel that my hopeful realism is helpful in this thesis in allowing me to see all of the possibilities, even those that might seem unrealistic to veteran church leaders. My intention is to provide a fresh perspective on an aged conflict that is very much at the heart of leadership concerns in the church today and to challenge those who are committed to the church’s growth and renewal to reexamine their beliefs in another light. In creating this perspective, I have drawn on my somewhat unique educational background in leadership studies and in Christian theology and ethics.

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I would like to thank the two organizations that provided me with the opportunity to grow in my own leadership skills, Dunwoody Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, and Leadership Network in Dallas, Texas. I am indebted to both of these groups of people for their nurturing and encouragement of my dreams and aspirations.

As a part of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, I have also been blessed to work with amazing individuals committed to ethical leadership in our institution, the University of Richmond, and in the world. The administration including our Dean, Dr. John Rosenblum, and especially our Assistant and now Interim Dean, Dr. Anne Perkins, has encouraged me from my first day on campus to stretch my limits and reach for my goals. Dr. Tiffany Keller, Dr. Terry Price, Dr. Richard Couto and all of my other Leadership professors have shared their insights and encouragement throughout this process.

My friends and family have both provided immeasurable support for my work and have given me invaluable opportunities to discuss my thoughts on this thesis with the added benefit of their input and opinions. I am especially grateful to Karen, Courtney and Carolyn, Terri, Grandma, Dad, Linde, and my Mom, who never ceases in encouraging me and teaching me about leadership by her example.

Finally, although only one name appears on the cover of this thesis, the substance of the paper is truly a collaborative work thanks to the insightful input of my dedicated advisor, Dr. Douglas Hicks, to whom I owe an enormous debt of gratitude. His tireless and careful guidance shaped the process of this paper into what is on these pages. As iron sharpens iron...
Support for women’s ordination in Christian churches has grown significantly over recent decades to include proponents from many different fields of religious studies and of religious practice. Recent decades have seen an increasing number of women preparing for ordination from seminaries in this country. Together, these two groups have promoted a growing movement toward “modernization” in the church—an effort that has both helped and, paradoxically, hurt the cause of gender equality in the church.

A recent New York Times article documented the rise in women’s study and preparation for ministry:

The percentage of women in the clergy almost tripled from 1983 to 1999. Their enrollment in Master of Divinity programs has risen even more sharply. In 1972, according to the Association of Theological Schools, about 1,000 women, representing less than 5 percent of the students, were enrolled in such programs. By 1998, there were almost 9,000 women, or about 30 percent of the total.¹

However, only approximately half of U.S. denominations give full clergy access to women, and those ordained within these denominations accounted for a mere ten percent of all clergy in 1990 (with that number only rising slightly over the past decade).² The notable difference between the heightened interest among women to assume full clergy positions, implied by more women serving as clergy and enrolling in seminaries, and the Church’s reluctance to universally encourage female ordination has highlighted the need for denominations and congregations to grapple with their current ordination policies.

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² Mark Chaves, Ordaining Women; Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), I.
Many congregations still prohibiting female clergy have resolved this leadership challenge by allowing women to assume non-ordained positions virtually identical to those held by ordained men. This inconsistency between rule and practice concerning gender in church leadership has serious implications both for the quality of church leadership and for the moral environment sustained by the church.

Many current church leaders are concerned about the effects that this ethical discrepancy is having on the church. Eileen T. McMahon, President of the Long Island Women’s Ordination Conference, recently wrote a response to the New York Times saying,

Roughly 25 years ago, Pope Paul VI commissioned biblical scholars to look into the question, and they concluded that there is nothing in Scripture to settle the question one way or the other. Theologians since then have pointed out much in Jesus’s own example to indicate that he included women as disciples and as apostles although the Twelve held a unique position. The People of God support changes in the requirements for ordination in greater numbers every year. Rather than focus on bracing for a church devoid of priests and sacraments, we know that there are ways out of this man-made problem.

The opinions expressed in this letter are shared by a number of church leaders including those serving denominations that prohibit female ordination. In a recent congressional report on the status of the papacy, David Masci writes, “In spite of opposition from many Catholics in Europe and the United States, [the Pope] says that since Christ had chosen only men as apostles, only men could serve as their priestly successors.” As this statement suggests, popular opinion is often not the source for current policies on gender inequality in churches.

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Why does gender inequality matter?

Church leaders have good reason to be concerned about the struggle over gender inequality within their organization as its repercussions could be felt in many areas of the church's organizational life. Avoiding resolution of this ethical issue jeopardizes both the moral environment within the church as well as the mission of the church in the world.

An unhealthy moral environment, as Ciulla describes it, is one in which an organization states that it values one kind of action but allows and even rewards another. In allowing women to assume leadership roles without promoting full equality within the church, the church as an organization is sending out mixed messages about its stance on gender equality. By not firmly committing itself to the equality of men and women, the church is, by default, promoting inequality. As later chapters will develop, this is inconsistent with ethical-theological principles and thus creates an unhealthy moral environment in which members are confused about what is morally appropriate and what is not.

In addition, contradictory messages about gender in the church find their way to those outside the church and conflict with the church's mission to redeem all people and liberate them from oppression in the world. While appearance is certainly not sufficient reason to warrant an organizational change, realizing that the perception of how people act within the church presents a model for persons outside it to act is an important factor in determining the merit of such a change. There is evidence that the church's reluctance to allow women equal access to leadership positions stems, in part, from their response to
external pressures to modernize. Vehement opposition to modernity has translated into prohibiting women’s ordination in a number of denominations.\(^7\)

Finally, the decision to promote gender inequality, directly or indirectly, affects the overall quality of teamwork, relationships, and even effectiveness attainable by the organization. These consequences reach far and wide in the manner in which they limit the organization’s potential, limiting not only the women relegated to subordinate positions but also the men who are adversely affected by their domination. In treating the subjection of women, J.S. Mills writes about men, their oppressors:

Their vain fears only substitute other and worse evils for those which they are idly apprehensive of: while every restraint on the freedom of conduct of any of their human fellow creatures, (otherwise than by making them responsible for any evil actually caused by it), dries up pro tanto the principal fountain of human happiness, and leaves the species less rich, to an inappreciable degree, in all that makes life valuable to the individual human being.\(^8\)

Thus the entire organization, consisting of both men and women, is severely limited from achieving its full potential by the continued existence of an unethical hierarchy of gender inequality amongst its constituents.

**How can the matter be resolved?**

In order to produce an ethically acceptable resolution to this matter of inconsistency concerning gender inequality, this thesis seeks first to provide an account of the current state of women in church leadership. This sociological analysis of both rules and practices across the denominations that make up the church in the U.S. is intended to place the reality of the situation

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\(^7\) Chaves, 101.

in plain light so that an appropriate plan can later be devised. In applying a socio-analytical framework to the matter of gender inequality in the church, some underlying sociological reasons for the current discrepancies can also be uncovered.

Taking the findings of the first part as the impetus to uncovering the ethical rules and practices that would alleviate the current inconsistency, the thesis then employs an ethical-theological approach to establish the principles for ethically appropriate rules and practices. In presenting a renovated ethical-theological framework, it is important to consider counter-arguments to the new principles. Three groups of arguments against equality in church leadership will be considered in an effort to strengthen the findings of this part. These efforts of ethical-theological analysis comprise Part II of the thesis.

Finally, these ethical premises must be translated into organizational behavior. This step will require a significant change for the entire church and determining an appropriate plan of action will be essential to preparing for and implementing that change. Part III of the thesis will consider the possible consequences of such a change, both positive and negative in nature. Leadership theory will be applied to the findings of the previous two parts in order to achieve these ends.

The overarching goal of this thesis is to provide the contours of a workable approach to overcome gender inequality in the church, and specifically in church leadership, in order to eliminate or avoid the issues raised above. A solution derived by means described here should help make the church a healthier moral environment for its constituents, addressing some of the concerns of appearance, and overall making the church both more ethically reflective and consistent, and more effective as a community in achieving its mission.
This thesis is concerned with the extension of full church leadership access to women and is about deconstructing the unethical gender inequality that pervades many denominational cultures. It is about the notion of Christ transforming not only the culture of the world but starting with a renovation of the culture of the church.

Most importantly, this thesis invites and challenges scholars, leaders, and potential leaders of the church to reexamine their beliefs about the biblical stance on ordaining women with a new eye to the ethics of justice and equality. It aims to engage in a moral debate on the theological and leadership issues of inequality in order to provide a moral framework for understanding and responding to them.

This interdisciplinary discourse demonstrates both the interest and relevance of this debate to the practice of leadership not only inside the church but also outside the church. That is, lessons can also be garnered from this multi-faceted approach by other secular organizations also facing the need to overcome inequality in their own cultures.

Structure of the Thesis

According to these three significant areas of study—sociology, ethics/theology and leadership studies—this thesis is divided into three corresponding parts. These parts contain in-depth discussions of the main points in the discourse of that field of study and the implications that each holds for gender inequality in church leadership. The first part, “Surveying the Context of Gender Inequality,” critically examines the status of inequality in American denominations. This investigation is followed by the second part, “Renovating with an Ethical-Theological Approach,” which grapples with the ethical and theological implications of clarifying a normative argument for gender equality and of resolving the gap between rule and practice in women’s ordination. Finally, the thesis concludes with a critical and constructive discussion of
the leadership steps that could be taken toward this new ethical paradigm, "Institutionalizing Change as a Method of Transforming Culture." This part provides a wider view of the implications of the previous part on the culture for re-shaping the church and consequently for impacting society at large. After first focusing on the sociological realities, and then analyzing and constructing the ethical-theological normative arguments, the third and final part seeks to bring the first two into a closer and more beneficial alignment utilizing the lessons of leadership studies to implement the prescribed change.

Similar to the structure of Hicks' book, *Inequality and Christian Ethics*, this thesis tends to follow the three 'moments' of liberation theology as described by Clodovis Boff: *socioanalytic mediation, hermeneutic mediation, and practical mediation.* The use of these terms will help facilitate a more in-depth discussion of the chapters of this thesis.

In the context of this thesis, *socioanalytic mediation* entails utilizing the studies of sociologists of religion to survey the current status of gender inequality in churches and to understand the sociological pressures, both external and internal, that helped shape this territory. Hicks likens this portion of liberation theology to "reading the signs of the times," a concept introduced in the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, as a means of Catholic social teaching. Its intention is to call Christians to critically survey and assess the value of social trends and changes and to adopt or discourage those developments in the light of the teachings of the gospels. The call is not a passive one. Strengthened by theological reflection, it demands an

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active response to cultural changes, first of critical assessment, and then of appropriate transformation in order to remedy previous injustices.

Chapter 2 attempts to ‘read the signs of the times’ through a critical exploration of the sociological literature on gender inequality in church leadership. It draws centrally on Mark Chaves, a professor of the sociology of religion, particularly his book, *Ordaining Women; Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations.* This comprehensive work is itself a recent critical overview of the sociological factors that have shaped women’s ordination over time. This chapter will also utilize other sociological works and denominational documents to establish the context of gender inequality in church leadership. The aim of the part is two-fold; to answer the question, ‘Why did gender inequality come about?’ as well as the question, ‘Inequality, specifically, of what?’

*Hermeneutic mediation*, the second moment of liberation theology, constitutes “the specific moment by virtue of which a discourse is formally a theological discourse.”\(^{11}\) A formal discourse over gender inequality, as specified in the second moment, has been made possible by the development of the theocentric theory of equality to counter theological arguments for gender inequality. Although the Christian theological and sociological arguments for gender inequality have been in existence since the early years of the church, and a sociological justification of gender equality emerged with the suffrage movement, this sociological debate was not enough to precipitate the second moment that Boff describes. It would take the emergence and acceptance of a theocentric theory of equality, which was only narrowly accepted up to recent decades, to initiate the necessary theological discourse. This part seeks to expose that public discourse, from a number of critical theological angles.

\(^{11}\) Boff, 74.
Accordingly, the second part of the thesis commences in Chapter 3 with an evaluation of the theological argument for equality in the eyes of God, focusing primarily on the writings of Niebuhr and Hicks. This chapter lays a foundation for Chapter 4 in which the three main arguments against gender equality in church leadership are considered and refuted, guided by the work of Jewett and Schüssler Fiorenza. Considering the counter-arguments to equality, in light of a discussion of theocentric equality, allows for a more balanced view of the theological issues concerning women’s ordination.

*Practical mediation,* the third and final moment of liberation theology, corresponds to the last part of the thesis. The primary purpose of this moment is to call those responsible to action to remedy the injustice exposed in the first two moments. This action is the fulfillment of the task outlined in the ‘reading of the signs’ of the first moment in that it requires steps to be taken toward a more ethical paradigm. This part of the thesis will focus upon the contributions that leadership studies has made toward an enhanced understanding of the responsibilities of leadership. It will discuss the leadership imperative to bring practice into line with rule for ethics’ sake as well as for the sake of the effectiveness of the organization internally and externally.

With this in mind, this part concludes at a point that is closer to a feasible prescription for change that will benefit the organization, the church, on all its leadership planes inside and outside its community. As such, Chapter 5 deals with the work of Ciulla and other leadership theorists as it related to the decision over whether or not to implement this change at all levels of the organizational culture. It is important to note here that the leadership implications for this thesis are embedded throughout the chapters. However, the choice to save a deliberate discussion of these implications for the end of the piece is made in order to emphasize the call to
action inherent in this work, and the role of leadership as the medium for that action. Chapter 6 contains a discussion of those implications for leadership within the church, and it pulls together the concepts of the thesis to suggest a change that will realign the church with ethical principles while making it more effective at achieving its fundamental mission of communicating God’s good news to all women and men.
Part I – Surveying the Context of Gender Inequality
Chapter 2 - The Symbolic Significance of Organizational Rules

This chapter makes up the socio-analytical portion of this study corresponding to the first moment of Boff's liberation theology. Its intent is to ‘read the signs of the times’ by reviewing current sociological studies on the status of women in church leadership. Systematically analyzing the information on gender inequality in church leadership will prescribe further action on the issue, for without ‘reading the signs of the times,’ it would be difficult to know how to address current problems.

As the research will show, there is a serious disconnect between the rules and actual practices of women’s ordination; that is, there is an inconsistency between churches’ message of equality or inequality advocated by the rule, on the one hand, and by the practices, on the other. Studies show that in churches of denominations officially prohibiting the ordination of women, women are encouraged to assume leadership positions similar in task to their male counterparts, especially in times of clergy shortages. Conversely, other findings reveal that churches in denominations granting full access to ministry to women often treat women as inferior to their male counterparts in wages and in the desirability of their congregational assignments.

Uncovering these inconsistencies and exploring their root causes are the aims of this chapter. Only in uncovering the organizational reasoning and practices behind current rhetoric concerning women’s ordination can proponents of gender equality in church leadership clearly view the obstacles before them.

Methods

Three comprehensive sociological studies on women in ministry are the primary sources for data about gender inequality in this chapter. The first was conducted in 1980-82, the second
in 1993, and the third combines various sources of organizational information up to 1997.

Together, they create an extremely detailed picture of the status of women in church leadership from many angles, only a few of which are used in this text. Two concern themselves with the attitudes and obstacles of being a woman clergy member and so are mostly limited in their breadth of study to those denominations allowing female clergy. These two studies use a variety of means to gather statistical information including surveys, interviews and accumulating denominational sources.¹ The third focuses more on the denominational organizations than on the women themselves in looking at the actual policies that concern women in ministry in about half of American denominations, comprising 80% of churchgoers, in 1997.²

Given that the aim of this chapter is to look at the extent of the connection between rule and practice in gender inequality in the church, this last study, by Mark Chaves, is most helpful at surveying the rules, while the other two studies serve to provide evidence of the practices. Admittedly, this thesis relies heavily on these three sources for reliable data and especially on the work by Chaves, which is a groundbreaking study on the subject of church policy towards women's ordination. While individual denominations typically maintain their own statistics on their female clergy, these sources of information are often collected very differently and very few attempts have been made to survey female clergy statistics across denominations. The limited availability of statistical data across denominations highlights the need for further investigation into this topic.

Incongruence Between Rule and Practice

Examining the rules and practices of denominations, both those that allow and those that prohibit women from assuming church leadership roles, uncovers an undeniable incongruence between their rules and practices for most denominations and hence for most churches. Mark Chaves, in his book, *Ordaining Women; Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations*, studies the one hundred largest denominations in America and observes, “denominational policy regarding female clergy often fails to correspond to the actual practice of women in ministry.”³ Often women hold influential leadership positions in denominations where the ordination of women is prohibited while female ministers in denominations that do ordain women are often treated inequitably to their male counterparts. “Rules and practices in this arena,” Chaves writes, “are only loosely coupled.”⁴

There appear to be two significant bodies of evidence that confirm this inconsistency. The first includes the historical and contemporary evidence that, in denominations with rules restricting female clergy, women nevertheless perform many of the same functions as men. Those denominations prohibiting full clergy access to women often create parallel positions for women nearly identical to those held by their male counterparts. This interesting and common occurrence caused R. Stephen Warner to remark, “religious organizations with restrictive gender rules may be the only organizations on our society that are more sexist in theory than in practice.”⁵

The denominations continuing to exclude women from realizing positions of ordained ministry include the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention. And yet, female members continue to assume a variety of leadership roles in each denomination, both

³ Chaves, 8, 1.
⁴ Chaves, 2.
⁵ Chaves, 26.
with and without the approval of the governing denominational body. As a result of severe clergy shortages in the Roman Catholic Church, the vast majority of the approximately three hundred priestless parishes in the United States are “pastored” by women.

These women function as priest in almost every sense, including presiding at worship and distributing communion. They are often called “pastor” by their parishioners, by male priests, by diocesan administrators, and even by their bishops, despite the fact that this title is formally prohibited them. These women work mainly in small rural parishes, exactly the same low-status congregations most likely to have a female minister in denominations that formally grant women full clergy status.

The Roman Catholic Church has not been consistent in making rules against women priests while recognizing women “pastors” as equally capable of filling the role of priest under another name. Similarly, women in the Southern Baptist denomination have been seeking seminary degrees in other denominations and returning to various ministry roles in their home churches without ordination since the middle of the last century. These facts result in the question, what exactly is the importance of the rule in the first place if it is not to be followed in all situations?

Loose coupling between rule and practice in denominations granting women full clergy status is virtually the mirror image of that described above. This body of evidence shows that even women who are allowed to assume the same titles as their male counterparts are often prevented from attaining real equality with male clergy in a number of ways including salary and placement. Almost without exception, women earn much less than their male counterparts in ministry. One study showed that, of the clergy surveyed from 15 different denominations allowing women full clergy access, every single denomination paid a significantly lower average salary to its full-time female clergy than it did to its full-time male clergy. The study also noted that a significantly higher proportion of female clergy worked part-time jobs than male clergy,

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6 Chaves, 24.
7 Chaves, 22.
8 Zikmund, 156.
17 percent to five percent. Many women chose part-time work because of the freedom that it allows them to spend time with their family but some women accept part-time work because they cannot find full-time ministry positions.\(^9\) Similar to the salary issue, gender also seems to affect the job security of clergy even in denominations espousing equality in access. In another survey most men questioned felt that it would be relatively easy to get a parish position slightly better than the one now held, but most women thought that such a reassignment would be difficult.\(^10\) Job security in general is an issue for many clergywomen who feel that their gender exposes them to more mistrust and skepticism than their male counterparts.

These trends demonstrate the duality of the clergy world in which most male clergy are full-time and full-benefits employees with the assurance that they will be able to find work in their denominational field while most women must either work part-time sometimes despite their wishes or full-time for less pay without any security that they could line up another job in their field. These differences arguably affect the ways that these two groups of leaders interact with each other and their parishioners on a daily basis by affecting the way that each group feels in and about their jobs.

This part of the thesis has uncovered literature linking both forms of institutional rules to inequities in practice. This indicates that a disparity between genders exists in most, if not all, churches no matter the official stance of the denomination on women’s ordination. This evidence causes Chaves to conclude, “The noticeable differences in formal rules and rhetoric overlay essentially similar actual practices.”\(^11\)

One might begin to wonder exactly how such an incongruence came into existence and why it has remained so firmly engrained in American denominationalism to date. Chaves gives a

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\(^9\) Zikmund, 156.
\(^10\) Carroll, 117.
\(^11\) Chaves, 21.
uniquely sociological perspective in his answers to these questions, based on organizational behavioral theory. The main points of Chaves’ argument are outlined in the next part. Each area explored sheds light onto the answer to the question, why the inconsistency? And each point helps proponents of gender equality in church leadership further comprehend the obstacles that stand in the way of full equality.

The Changing Meaning of Women’s Ordination

The issue of women’s ordination was not always linked to the issue of gender equality. Before the latter half of the nineteenth century, making a decision to have a woman pastor was usually viewed as an isolated incident concerning an extraordinary women and not worthy of changing denominational policy. “Although it may be difficult for late twentieth-century observers to think of conflict over women’s ordination as an issue of anything other than basic gender equality,” Chaves writes, “that fusion of practice and idea is a cultural achievement, and it is an achievement of the liberal wing of the nineteenth-century women’s movement.”

Early supporters of female clergy favored the inclusion of women because of some women’s particular ability to preach. The argument was far from one of gender equality and focused on the exception and not the rule. However, “although advocates of female clergy found biblical support for their position from early on, it became more and more common in the closing decades of the nineteenth century to express that support in terms of a principle of gender equality.”

The fusion of practice and idea may be a recent invention but later parts of this thesis will show that it is a principle that is indispensable for an ethical assessment of current practices.

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12 Chaves, 66.
13 Chaves, 73.
The cause of this shift in the meaning of ordaining women, in the words of Chaves, “was that these conflicts were now [during the women’s movement of the late nineteenth century] occurring in the context of a social movement advocating gender equality as a goal.”\(^{14}\) Thus opposing the ordination of women became for some denominations a way of opposing the values of the social movement sweeping America and threatening religious organizations based on tradition. Chaves puts it this way, “Denominations not yet ordaining women after the policy comes to mean ‘gender equality’ resist something more than actual females in pulpits and at altars. They resist modernity. More accurately, they resist a part of modernity in which the liberal agenda of elevating individual rights is of paramount importance.”\(^{15}\) Resisting modernity has become the credo of many fundamentalist groups including those denominations basing their beliefs on the inerrancy of the biblical texts or on the sacramental nature of their religion.\(^{16}\)

### External Factors

It would appear that there is a common set of forces acting upon denominations causing them to have similar practices. That set of forces, according to Chaves, probably comes from outside the church. Chaves writes, “‘Liberal’ and ‘conservative’ denominations are not as far apart when it comes to actual practice as their very different formal rules would lead us to expect. Such similarities in practice—in the real opportunities and barriers faced by women across the denominational spectrum—suggest that there is a common set of market forces operating among congregations.”\(^{17}\) This part lays out these market forces, evaluating how each has affected the church and the issue of women’s ordination.

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\(^{14}\) Chaves, 75.

\(^{15}\) Chaves, 83.

\(^{16}\) Chapter 4 contains a more in-depth discussion of both inerrancy and sacramentalism from a theological perspective.

\(^{17}\) Chaves, 32.
Outside the denominational field

The external pressures facing denominations include those from outside the denominational field—from organizations and movements not affiliated with a denomination but affecting the society in which denominations operate—as well as those from within it. Amongst those outside the denominational field are the pressures of the state (or the lack thereof), the influence of the women’s movement, and the increasing legitimacy of gender equality.

In considering the role of the state, the most significant factor affecting churches is the lack of significant pressure either for or against women’s ordination. Most professions are protected from gender inequity by the laws of our national government but the sharp distinction made between religious institution and other employers has kept churches from having to meet equal standards in hiring and in salary distribution. Looking at the influence that the government has over other professions versus the lack of control over the church’s affairs explains why women have been able to move into other predominantly male fields in greater numbers over the past half a century.\(^{18}\) The lack of direct control of religious institutions by the state has allowed, and even silently encouraged, religious denominations to remain behind the times in comparison to the widespread acceptance of gender equality by other organizations under tighter government jurisdiction. This is largely tied up in the lack of funding authority of the state over these religious organizations. The notion that church and state are separate and that the ethics of one do not similarly apply to the other encourages this theory. Many churches have reacted to this external force by declaring their support of full gender equality but with the understanding that there are male and female roles, equal but separate, in religious organizations. This argument

\(^{18}\) Chaves, 41. Also see Carroll, 4.
that women are different from men and that the difference is expressed in their roles will be explored further in Chapter 4.

Another external factor acting equally upon all denominations was the women's movement in both its early wave last century and in its most current wave in the 1960's and 1970's. In his study, Chaves analyzes the information about the dates when the largest denominations allowing women's ordination began those policies and about how those policy decisions came about. He finds that both waves of women's movements had a considerable impact on the acceptance or rejection of clergy access to women by religious denominations. The ideas espoused by these movements inspired many women to seek the gender equality in the church that had been granted to them in other arenas thanks to the women's movements. One statement by a women's rights activist read, "We will not be able to create a new church and a new society until and unless women are full participants." Interestingly, the women's movements, though felt similarly in most churches, only led half of the denominations to formally allow women clergy. This fact leaves the possibility that something more than pragmatism was at stake in these conversions, and that something more was the denominations' public reactions to the changes occurring around them.

It appears that the movements often only deepened the resolve against women's ordination for the other denominations. The women's movement had more than just passing influence on churches in that it placed both direct and indirect pressure on denominations to include women in their leadership. It established indirect pressure on denominations by bringing an increased social legitimacy to gender equality in the society surrounding religious organizations. The movement encouraged women to assume roles in many previously

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19 Chaves, 47.
exclusively male arenas including the labor force and higher education. This concept expanded to include even more arenas as the movement progressed, leaving the church further and further behind society’s move toward equality. Even those churches allowing women clergy do not meet the same standards established by the work of the women’s movement in other professions. And so, as the church has found itself more and more out of synch with the quickly changing culture that encompasses it and in which it strives to accomplish its own organizational mission, it has come increasingly into direct conflict with women granted fuller equality and leadership positions in the home, the office, the financial world, the voting booth, but not to nearly the same degree in their places of worship.

Within the denominational field

The external forces acting upon denominations that influenced their reaction to society’s movement toward gender equality in leadership also includes a significant amount of influence that occurred amongst denominations. Alliances were made and broken on this point. Fundamentalist denominations put pressure on those seeking a working alliance with them to conform to their social ideas about women’s roles in their organizations.

In sum, denominations engage in a kind of structured watching and influencing of one another. The direction of this influence, however, varies substantially depending on a denomination’s position in the interdenominational network—depending on whom it turns to for purposes of comparison. The social structure of the denominational population—the patterned connections indicating which denominations are more closely tied to which other denominations—will therefore affect denominations’ formal policies on women. If rules about women clergy are largely symbolic display to relevant environments, and denominations are embedded in denominational environments that send different signals on this issue, then identifying a denomination’s position in the overall denominational world should help to explain its relative openness or resistance to ordaining women.

20 Chaves, 50 and Carroll, 4.
21 Chaves, 59-60.
Chaves cites several letters of correspondence between denominational leaders and proclamational documents as evidence in support of the argument that women’s ordination was seen as a tool of acceptance amongst like-groups of denominations. Each of these letters demonstrates just how important this denominational influence was and continues to be by showing the significance of “fraternal relationships” between denominations in determining policy toward women.  

This evidence clearly indicates that the issue of women’s ordination is a symbol of membership in a larger group of similarly minded denominations to the neglect of the real implications of the rule itself.

Interestingly, what proves to be decisive in the women’s ordination issue amongst churches is as much rooted in how external pressures have affected the church as in how the church has reacted to those pressures. After all, an organization’s reactions to the external forces acting upon it are an integral part of that organization’s identity. Along these lines, Chaves writes, “rules about women’s ordination have become one of the primary markers of a denomination’s cultural location.”

Thus, if a denomination wants to be seen as “conservative,” it would publicly resist the ordination of women as well as the outside forces trying to coerce them to follow secular society’s norms. Therefore, it is both the influence that the culture has had on the denomination and the influence that the denomination seeks to have on its culture that determines its policy on the ordination of women. “For most denominations,” Chaves continues, “the original impetus to ordain women came via political and normative pressure rather than via pragmatic concerns stemming from the organization’s internal affairs.”

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22 Chaves, 58. The full quote from a 1970 report from the interdenominational Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. reads, “Since arguments neither for nor against ordination are conclusive, a variety of practices is permissible within a common confession... A decision by one church to ordain them, while another chooses not to do so, should not endanger their fraternal relationship.”

23 Chaves, 40.

24 Chaves, 40.
between the denominations taking a stance on those external pressures and their addressing
pragmatic needs for church leadership resulted in internal inconsistencies that grew inside their
organizations.

Internal Factors

Several internal factors have contributed to the gap between rule and practice concerning
women's ordination in religious denominations, although not nearly with the same weight as the
external factors discussed above. Among these internal factors are clergy shortages, members'preferences, and the internal organizational structure of most churches. Given the widespread
problem of clergy shortages that have occurred repeatedly over the past century, one would think
that such an impetus would spark a necessary acceptance of female clergy in denominations
feeling the pinch. However Chaves finds that, although women have been drafted in such
shortages to do the work, there is a strong "likelihood that such market forces will not directly
translate into formal rules that enshrine gender equality."25 Once again, female church leaders in
these situations are widely viewed as exceptions to the rule.

Concerning members' preferences, evidence shows that certain groups are more likely to
oppose women's ordination than others and that responses to women clergy are improving over
time. Overall, people living in rural areas, people living in the Southeastern states, and African-American congregations are the groups most likely to oppose female clergy.26 The study
conducted in the early 1980's showed an overall less enthusiastic response to female ministers
than the one conducted in the late 1980's.27 Chaves finds, however, that such inclinations, even
though they might be the most characteristic of a particular denomination, rarely if ever

25 Chaves, 132.
26 Chaves, 135.
27 Carroll, 154 and Zikmund, 149-152.
influence that denomination’s policy toward women’s ordination. “The likelihood that a
denomination will begin to ordain women in a given year is neither higher nor lower for rural
than for nonrural denominations, and it is neither higher nor lower for predominantly black than
for predominantly white denominations.”28 This fact coupled with the finding about clergy
shortages reinforces Chaves’ main argument that “formal rules about women’s ordination are
driven much more strongly by the ways in which denominations interact with their environments
than by the ways in which denominations respond to internal pragmatic organizational needs.”29

The degree to which a denomination is centralized and the nature of their women’s
mission organizations does appear to give some indication as to the likelihood of that particular
denomination permitting female clergy. The more centralized the control of the denomination
over the affairs of its constituent churches, the less likely it is to allow women’s ordination. This
appears to be the case because those churches in less centralized denominations feel less need to
conform to external organizational pressures, especially in personnel shortages they encourage
women to assume leadership roles and their denominations are not close or present enough to
feel the need to discourage it.30

Women’s missions are organizations within religious organizations that have arisen in
most denominations over the past century. In each denomination, there are different policies
determining the autonomy of such organizations and those policies seem to be predictive of a
denomination’s likelihood of permitting women’s ordination. Those women’s missions groups
that are more autonomous and active in the politics of their denominations have been
instrumental in the adoption of full clergy access for women in those denominations. In focusing
on these internal pressures, Chaves corrects the impression that organizational change is the

28 Chaves, 138.
29 Chaves, 139.
30 Chaves, 141.
inevitable result of homogenizing pressure and amends it to say that organizational change is the result of the choice and influence of that group’s change agents in response to external pressures.31

Conclusions

When a discrepancy as significant as that which exists between the rules and practices of women’s ordination across American denominations is uncovered, a myriad of possible affecting factors immediately appears. This chapter has considered these factors with special attention to those that appear to be the most influential. This ‘reading the signs of the times’ is crucial to a deeper understanding of the obstacles that block the realization of gender equality in the church.

Chaves argues that conflicts about women’s ordination are not about women or even strictly between men and women, they are about gender and the organizational identity that certain groups want for their denominations as they conflict with the organizational identity that other certain groups want for their denominations.32 Given this nature of the conflict over this issue, women’s ordination has come to have symbolic significance for the identity of religious organizations, helping to define its place in the religious spectrum of this and other countries. Women’s ordination is not the only significant symbol of religious organizational identity but any exploration of this issue must take this nature into account.

Obviously the socio-political obstacles revealed in this chapter have their root in ideas outside of the theological doctrines of the church as well as in them. A denomination’s stance on women clergy is, in effect, its way of taking a stance on issues that they fear are changing around them. Ultimately, this means that the church will either be left behind as a relic of the past or that it will continue to be more and more marginal and irrelevant to the experience of

31 Chaves, 156-7.
32 Chaves, 189-90.
people living in today's society. Either outcome is detrimental to the ability of a denomination to achieve its mission or work toward its vision, both of which require an intimate relationship with those who make up the society around the Church.

Of course, the ethical force of reflecting on the "signs of the times" is not to follow social trends without critical thought, but rather to subject them to careful ethical and theological reflection. Thus, the imperative at this point appears to be to reexamine the denominations' formal policies in light of the theological basis that they represent and decide which are in line with its organizational missions. These are controversial issues but ones that require critical exploration. Denominations have an ethical obligation to adopt policies based not on 'peer pressure' or political agenda but based on theological values critically examined and determined to be sound. This critical examination of theological values is the aim of the next part.
Part II – Renovating with an Ethical-Theological Approach
Chapter 3 – Theocentric Equality

The aim of this chapter is to evaluate critically both the often-contradictory rules and practices in light of some foundational standard. While the rules represent what institutions decide should be, practices reflect what institutions are. When these two are out of synch, the challenge becomes to determine what the guiding principles say that practices should be and to go about implementing that change.

This thesis has chosen a framework of equality, including both ethical-theological and leadership studies arguments concerning equality, to examine the current gender inequality in church leadership and to determine the most ethical principles on which to model institutional practices. Ethical-theological arguments about equality will be presented in this part while leadership studies arguments will be offered in the following part.

Accordingly, this part, including chapters 3 and 4, corresponds to the second moment of liberation theology, hermeneutic mediation, “the specific moment by virtue of which a discourse is formally theological discourse.”¹ In developing this theological discourse, this portion of the thesis draws upon sources of theological authority that place emphasis on understanding equality in ethical-theological terms.

Toward this end, this chapter proceeds primarily from the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, a well known Reformed, U.S. theologian (1894-1962), who devotes much of his writing to working through the ethical issues facing the church from the point of view of a theologian and ethicist. Important sections of his work treat the subject of equality

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from a theological perspective. This chapter also draws upon the work of Douglas Hicks who applies Niebuhr’s concepts to socio-economic inequalities in the global community. Hicks’ work builds from Niebuhr’s perspective, developing it for use in a broader context. When applied to gender inequality in church leadership, both provide significant insight and clarity.

Theocentric Equality

The first step in critically evaluating the current status of gender inequality in church leadership through an ethical-theological frame is to specify what is meant by the term ‘equality,’ in order to assure that it is clear and consistent throughout the theological discourse. Equality implies the existence of a relationship between two entities. In this particular situation, the ‘equality’ in question is that between men and women, or more broadly, between two distinct groups of human beings.

The nature of the relationship depends on the two entities, men and women. Niebuhr asserts that each and every subject is related to its corresponding object by its very definition. He establishes that the object for the subject ‘church’ is ‘God.’ This basic premise shapes our understanding of the word ‘church’ because it immediately gives the organization a direction and a purpose for its associated activities. Similarly, the object of the subject, ‘human,’ including both men and women, is also ‘God,’ for all human action can be seen theologically as a response to the creator of all humanity, God.

Here again, God as the object gives humans, as subjects, a direction and a purpose for

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2 The most disheartening thing about Niebuhr’s account is his unceasing use of the masculine to refer to humanity. I applaud Hicks for widening this narrow vocabulary usage to its obvious intention – that of all humans, male and female. In this inclusive spirit, I will continue to modify Niebuhr’s vocabulary to refer to all humans.

their activities. In his discussion of Niebuhr, Hicks writes, "all living creatures\(^4\) derive both their \textit{being} and their \textit{value} from God, because God is the very principle of being and the principle of value."\(^5\)

In this respect, Niebuhr’s definition of ‘human’ is ‘theocentric’ in that it explains the nature of a human being according to the nature of God and the relationship that God has with each and every human being. Boiled down to its simplest form, Niebuhr says, "worth is only worth in relation to God."\(^6\) Since no one can claim credit for or special status in that relationship, all are equal as created by God. This theocentric notion of equality will be a common thread running through this text.

\section*{Theocentric Equality Applied}

Drawing upon the triad that Hicks develops to specify Niebuhr’s notion of theocentric equality, three reasons can be applied to gender equality.\(^7\) Using this triad becomes a means for understanding the implications of a theocentric view for women in the church.

First, Hicks argues that God gives all people, including both women and men, the gift of life, thus making equality before God \textit{universal}. Hicks summarizes this portion of Niebuhr’s argument, “all beings possess positive value in relation to God, who is their

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\textsuperscript{4} This passage interestingly includes the animal kingdom as fellow creatures of God, (though Hicks does not go so far as to suggest moral equality among humans and animals). Niebuhr, however excludes them from his application of equality given the fact that only humans can properly respond to God as their creator. The issue of the inclusion of animals into the moral community, although a provocative topic, will not be discussed in this thesis.

\textsuperscript{5} Douglas A. Hicks, \textit{Inequality and Christian Ethics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117, about Niebuhr’s “radical monotheism.”


\textsuperscript{7} Hicks’ triad of theocentric equality consists of equality as \textit{universal}, resulting in a \textit{grateful response} promoting equality in human-to-human relationships, all based upon a \textit{relational} approach to defining equality. See Hicks, 117-121.
source and creator.” This positive value, extended equally to men, women, children, rich, poor, sick, and accused, determines full membership in the moral community. In turn, membership in the moral community determines that each and every one has the opportunity to develop a personal relationship with God and to be used through that relationship to affect others in a positive sense. This point becomes important when a woman’s fitness to lead as a representative of God is called into question. Nothing at this stage of the theocentric equality argument would suggest that her relationship to God would be any different than a man’s.

Secondly, Hicks summarizes Niebuhr’s argument that humans are called to “live all of life as a grateful response” to God for the gift of their value and being. It is that grateful response which “leads to the ethic of responsibility: Each person is responsible to God but for one’s neighbors.” It is this ethic of responsibility that leads to the spirit of community that Niebuhr argues is essential to the purpose of the church. Phrased in leadership terms, this aspect of theocentric equality says that each and every person, as leaders in the context of community, has a responsibility to everyone else to share their wealth of knowledge and resources, leaving no one behind. Leaders, both formal and informal, must actively work to raise the status and awareness of their followers out of the recognition that both parties are equal in the eyes of God. This component of Hicks’ triad is applied less directly to the issue of gender inequality in church leadership but rather effectively demonstrates the need for church leaders to view all of humanity equally as their charges and partners in ministry. Women and men should have equal capability and access to exercise their gifts as a grateful response to God.

8 Hicks, 120, italics added.
9 Hicks, 119.
Thirdly, Hicks writes, “Niebuhr’s theological anthropology is grounded in relati

relationality.”¹⁰ In defining humans according to their relationship with God, Niebuhr subtly points out that this definition has implications for human-to-human relationships as well. For if all are equal in the sense that they have positive value in the eyes of God, then no human should be fundamentally disadvantaged in relationship to another. All are fundamentally equal in worth to God. Therefore no permanent inequality in human relationships, including that which currently exists between genders in contexts like church leadership, should ignore this relational aspect of theocentric equality. The quality of relationships depends on seeing each other as genuine equals, that is, it depends upon the absence of a hierarchy of relationships. The issue of permanent inequality will also be developed further in Chapter 5.

Niebuhr’s theocentric definition of equality does not challenge the fierce individualism that pervades American thought in calling for believers to treat all humans with equal respect, but it does require “that they deal with each person as uniquely sacred and ignore all claims to special sanctity.”¹¹ “Ignoring claims to special sanctity” implies an imperative to cease policies of exclusion, while ‘unique sacredness’ shines a beacon on the possibility of women assuming church leadership roles. These claims will be further explored as this chapter continues.

Theocentric Equality in Sin; No Exceptions

Just as humans are all equal in relation to God, Niebuhr believes that humans are all equal in sin. Equality in sin both decreases the distance between clergy and

¹⁰ Hicks, 119.
congregation and shows the fallibility of current policies and practices of church leaders.

Human equality in sin can be seen as simply another aspect of theocentric equality, for the ultimate object of a sin is God. Sin serves to separate what is blameworthy from what is blameless in God’s eyes. Sin not only affects all people; it affects all parts of a person. Hicks explains this classic Christian notion of “total depravity” thus: “all persons remain mired in sin” and “all aspects of life are affected (or infected) by sin. It affects the ‘total person’ or the ‘whole person.’”12 This maxim further justifies Niebuhr’s concern that any claim to special sanctity be ignored given the fallibility of all humans in relation to God. No one is an exception to equality in sin just as no one is an exception to the more positive aspects of theocentric equality.

There is particular danger of falling into believing that one is an exception to these universal principles when one is in a leadership role, especially when that leadership role is part of God’s church. Terry Price writes of the ethical failures of leadership, “Leaders may well come to believe, for example, that they are not bound by the requirements of morality.”13 Price even uses King David as an example of a leader who experiences moral failure. But equality in sin clearly implies that even church leaders are not above reproach for their actions because they are as much susceptible to sin as anyone else. The risk run when church leaders see themselves as exceptions to the principles of theocentric equality are somewhat more significant, however, given their power and position as ambassadors for the church. Niebuhr writes, “The Protestant philosopher sees that... dangers arise from the tendencies of individuals to abuse their powers as well as from such tendencies in the corporations. Hence he restricts and

12 Hicks, 121, 122.
balances all powers, for sin is universal, particular, total, not confined to one part of
life.”  

Cronin, in writing on democracy, puts it this way, “Leaders, in a sense, have to be
mistrusted. None of them is ever infallible, and unquestioning subservience to those who
wield public power corrupts the human spirit.” Therefore, groups can be mistaken
about ordination policies and other organizational attitudes toward women. The hope for
remedying this situation and renovating church leaders’ attitudes toward equality comes,
again, from God’s gracious ability to transform groups as well as individuals.

Another danger in placing one group of people above another in a moral hierarchy
is the creation of a group of marginalized individuals. Hicks explains this concept in
terms of the ‘nonperson.’ Non-persons are those who have been excluded from the moral
community by those within the community. In relation to the section above that dealt
with the moral community as being universally inclusive of all humans deriving their
being and value from God, any exclusion runs contrary to the spirit of theocentric
equality. However, in the present reality such a label might indeed be given to women
(among others) to varying degrees in the church, especially in reference to the formal or
informal rules surrounding their attempts to perform leadership roles in the church.

The inextricable link between being, saying and doing, between values and
actions, is the force behind Christian ethics. The call is for any believer to align his or
her motives with God’s, in all things, at all times. Thus, as Hicks explains, power in and
of itself is not evil; it is power used against God’s purposes that is evil. On the other side
of the same coin, it is not inaction that is sinful, but rather inaction linked to the lack of
hope that God retains the ultimate power that is wrong. In this way, Niebuhr attributes

most responsibility for human suffering to “the hands of human powers” once again emphasizing the far-reaching consequences of human corruption. Extending this notion to the situation of women in the church clearly shows that not including women in church leadership is a sin of power that is contrary to the purposes of God.

**The Leader in Theocentric Equality**

Given that equality is fundamental to a theocentric definition of humans in relation to God, equality is a central theological concern. Permanent inequality is a theological issue because it violates the fundamental and universal human relationship to God. As a sin that separates people from a deeper understanding of God in relation to humans, inequality is the source of much human suffering, according to Niebuhr. Hicks writes “The suffering inflicted by human agents on those who hold a disproportionately small share of social goods is a violation of their sacredness as created equal in God’s image.”

There are direct implications of this warning for church leadership against violations of equality. If God is the creator of all humanity, then to create an artificial form of hierarchy based on gender inequality in the church violates the first principle of theocentric equality that we are all *universally* given being and *value* by God. Valuing men more than women fails to ignore blatant claims to special sanctity, and church leaders are especially called to preserve the principles of theocentric equality. In this situation, ignoring claims to special sanctity involves acknowledging not that women have an equal “right” to church leadership positions but that God places equal being and value in women and thus can and does choose to use them to further his ministry in

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16 Hicks, 126.
17 Hicks, 127.
leadership roles—just as God uses men called to be leaders both inside and outside the church.

This account of equality also suggests that assuming a leadership position in any situation including the church is simply a role and not a state of being. This ties to Niebuhr’s view of the “priesthood of believers” in which he argues that all who follow God are God’s ambassadors in the world and can do God’s work. Ministers are simply those who have devoted a larger portion of their time to such matters but who are no more fundamentally capable or appropriate in their roles as any other believer.

Along these lines, Niebuhr suggests that a distinct type of church leader is called for to preserve these values of equality. He calls this new leader a pastoral director as opposed to a pastor, “his first function is that of building or ‘edifying’ the church; he is concerned in everything that he does to bring into being a people of God who as a Church will serve the purpose of the Church in the local community and the world.” Niebuhr goes on to say that the pastoral director should do all the things a pastor would do, “but the work that lays the greatest claim to his time and thought is the care of a church, the administration of a community that is directed toward the whole purpose of the Church, namely, the increase among [all] of the love of God and neighbor; for the Church is becoming the minister and its “minister” is its servant, directing it in its service.” There are many parallels between this concept and that of servant leadership, which is discussed in Chapter 5. The important point to glean at this stage is the emphasis placed upon the

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19 Niebuhr, The Purpose of Church and its Ministry, 82. I will make no attempt to change Niebuhr’s choice of the masculine in these quotes for the sake of accuracy of ideas but I would propose that Niebuhr was simply using the masculine pronoun to apply to all human beings and had no intention of excluding women.
20 Niebuhr, The Purpose of Church and its Ministry, 83.
inclusion of all in the community of God as valuable contributors to God’s purpose in the world. This idea is embodied in the “priesthood of believers.” Niebuhr recognized that the Church does not happen with leaders alone but through leaders who empower and serve their followers enabling them to in turn become leaders of others themselves. Both women and men should serve as leaders and as followers in church and in society.

One might despair that the current leadership paradigm in the church is still so very far from what Niebuhr envisioned in 1956, as is evidenced by reading the signs of the times like in the previous chapter. But Niebuhr himself describes liberation, or the process of working through inequality, “as an ongoing process, as a possibility,”\(^{21}\) rather than an impossibility. And so, there is hope that the process of working through inequality will take great strides in the near future and that it will possibly reach total liberation, for women and other ‘nonperson’ groups, in our lifetimes. For now, however, our task to work toward a universal theocentric paradigm of equality in both theory and practice is clear. Continuing that work is the subject of the final part of this thesis, but first the theological arguments against equality must be addressed.

Chapter 4 – Challenging Current Thinking

Women were an invaluable segment of the leadership of the early church. Despite the fact that those Jesus chose to be part of the group of twelve disciples were all men, there were a number of very influential women in Jesus’ life and who survive to today in the biblical text. Three out of four gospels place a woman as the first to discover Jesus’ resurrection, a fundamental event in the course of the Christian religion. Women were missionaries and teachers, starting and counseling new churches in the first years of Christianity, some with their husbands and some alone. Women were given the gift of prophecy and some became deacons in their congregations, often hosting churches in their own homes.1 Immediately the question arises, what happened to the church that caused it to change the way it treats women in its community so drastically? The answer manifests itself in arguments that have been used over the centuries to institutionalize gender inequality in the church and especially in church leadership.

With the theological arguments for gender equality in church leadership in the eyes of God firmly established, it is important to consider theological perspectives that oppose gender equality. The aim of this chapter is to represent those accounts and to compare and contrast their components with the theocentric theory of equality developed in the previous chapter. This chapter also provides a medium to take a general look at some of the reactions on the part of scholars to specific biblical writings on women and to the roles of those women in the early church suggestive for outlines of contemporary practices, rules and relationships.

1 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her; A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 162.
The arguments that are used to promote and sustain gender inequality in church leadership can be grouped into three broad categories. The first grouping asserts that, by their very definition, women are somehow incapable of filling the role of minister because their feminine nature renders them inferior to men and thus unsuitable for the specific tasks that the role requires. The second group of arguments, along a similar vein, states that the very leadership nature of the role of minister precludes women from holding this role because women were created to be not inferior, but simply subordinate, to men. So, women are less adept at leading and more apt at following not because they are inferior but because they are different. And the third argument, largely held by the more hierarchical churches (including the Catholic Church), states that the masculinity of God precludes women from performing the role of minister because such an authority figure is meant to represent God. The non-representation of women in the masculine figure of God, they argue, prohibit women from ministry. While this three-fold typology is by no means an exhaustive list of all of the arguments used to keep women out of ministry, the broad categories that these three ideas represent contain at least some part of most of the various counter-arguments to equality.

As was presented in the second chapter, each of these attempts to keep women out of church leadership positions can be seen as a reaction to modernity by the traditionalist church. Several noted biblical scholars have worked through these responses to gender equality and have created and developed a reconstructive feminist theology in reply. This theology is reconstructive in that it seeks not to eliminate or downgrade the relationship

2 This three-fold typology of arguments against gender equality in church leadership is adapted from Jewett’s set of arguments against women’s ordination in The Ordination of Women. See Paul K. Jewett, The Ordination of Women; An Essay on the Office of Christian Ministry, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980).
between God and men but rather to reintroduce women to the relationship between God and humankind. Men and women need to be in both a good relationship with God and with other humans to fulfill their grateful response to God for their life value—the two are inextricably linked. Once quite present and active in leadership at the time of Christ and the early church, women have since been neglected by the church. Reconstructive feminist theology seeks to reintroduce those women who shaped the church through the years to accepted biblical history and Christian theology in order to transform the way that the church thinks about its female members in the present.

This portion of the thesis turns directly to the controversial passages and ideas that have challenged the church for so many centuries and looks at the discourse that has developed in response to those controversies. The primary intention is not to resolve definitively these complicated historical issues, but rather to show that they are indeed complex and, like so many aspects of an organization built on faith, are subject to interpretation. The end goal is to show the importance of the wider picture of Jesus’ teachings in resolving the more particular questions of interpreting problematic biblical passages.

**Woman as Inferior**

The first group of arguments, that women are inferior to men and so are not capable of leading the church as ministers in the way that men are, is in direct contradiction with the spirit of theocentric equality. Viewing women as inferior to men stems to a great extent from how people perceive that they are portrayed in the biblical texts. Women have been viewed as both holy, as exemplified by Mary, and as sources of

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3 Schüssler Fiorenza, xv.
unrestrained temptation or the 'devil’s gateway,' as exemplified by Eve. This dichotomy, though similar to the distinction between Adam and Christ,⁴ has stuck with women and clouded issues concerning their rights and roles in society much more so than with men. Unlike the male distinction, many church leaders seem unable to move past the original characterization of woman through Eve as 'wily and weak' and appear not to even ponder the idea that weakness might not be the result of the nature of their being but might possibly be derived from the nature of the andocentric society—including those in which creation stories were written and interpreted—that surrounded them and that relegated them to a particular social status.⁵

The distinction between the nature of women in the Bible and the social status of women in the Bible is an extremely important one. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a prominent feminist biblical scholar, draws an even more fundamental distinction between the two by separating the form from the content of biblical texts. Her argument centers around the idea that, "patriarchal imagery and andocentric language are the form and not the content of the biblical message. Since the content of the tradition is Christ, feminist theology must make clear 'that Christ’s work was not first of all that of being male but that of being the new human.'"⁶ This basic understanding echoes the central claims of theocentric equality, which is based on the equality of humans as equally precious creations in the eyes of their creator, God. Given that humans have this universal status of equality in worth before God, no human has the ethical grounds on which to claim superiority to any degree over the rest of humanity. And so, any characteristic attributed

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⁴ According to accounts used to sustain this view, Eve was more easily tempted than Adam was, and Christ is more central in redemption than Mary is.  
⁵ Jewett, 4-5.  
⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, 15.
to all women that makes them inferior to men in the biblical text is not a matter of the
requirements of faith but is simply a result of the imposition of other—indeed sinful—
social forces. These characteristics represent what women in the biblical texts were
perceived to be and not what all women are or even should be.

Some modern theorists still cling to the notion of women as the 'devil’s gateway'
and cite their sexuality, among other aspects, as the reason for their inferiority. E. L.
Mascall, a prominent theological spokesman for high-church Anglicanism, refers to N.P.
Williams’ argument against women’s ordination and his claim that

...men as such are very less likely to be an involuntary cause of distraction
to women, under the circumstances of public worship, than women are to
men; and that this is a permanent fact of human nature which can no more
be abolished by modern progress than the law of gravitation can be
abolished by modern progress.” He goes on to add that “although this fact
may seem to result in a privilege for men, it does not imply any moral
superiority on their part over women, but, if anything, the opposite; it is
based, paradoxically enough, upon their greater weakness (in this regard)
and susceptibility.”

This admission of ‘greater weakness’ on the part of men leads one to wonder exactly why
they, and not women, should be allowed to lead God’s church. An argument based on a
hypothesis of ‘male weakness,’ in the words of Jewett, “is just about as bankrupt as an
argument can be. It is but a thinly veiled admission that the woman is still regarded as a
sex object rather than as a person.”

In all fairness, most men in the Church have moved beyond this limited view of
women but have continued to cling to the rules initiated by men who suffered from these
misguided impressions often without question. Jewett, referring to an observation made
by Simone de Beauvoir, comments that “men have always written the rules which—if we

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7 In Jewett, 7-8.
8 Jewett, 9.
are to believe the theologians—God has ordained. According to these rules, man holds the powerful weapons of ablution and ex-communication; thus, the church sees to it that God never authorizes the women to escape male guardianship.”

Beginning to critically reexamine the biblical texts with the understanding that they originate in a patriarchal society is the first step toward renovating the way the church regards women and women’s roles inside and outside the church. Schüssler Fiorenza’s suggestion of separating the timeless content of the biblical message from the message’s time-bound form is the key to taking that first step.

**Woman as Different**

The second argument used to keep women from assuming leadership roles in the church is based upon the commonly held notion that men hold the power of guardianship, with God’s supposed blessing, over women and all of church and society, and so they are more fit to assume the dominant ecclesiastical role of minister than women, who are to be subordinate to their guardians. This argument stems from the idea that men and women are equal in the eyes of God, but that they were created, biologically and spiritually, to fulfill different societal roles. It claims that one set of roles is not superior to the other as both are necessary, but that one is clearly dominant over the other. Generically, men are thought to play the leadership roles and women the follower roles. The argument logically concludes that since ministers are leaders of God’s church and men are naturally supposed to be leaders, the ministry should be reserved for men and denied to women.

Proponents of this argument are quick to note that this emphasis on the *difference* between woman and man does not imply her *inferiority* to him. A woman’s role is wife

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9 Jewett, 12.
and mother just as a husband’s role is husband and father, they would say. Jewett explains,

As such, the man is head and guardian of the home, a divinely given role in the natural family, which must be reflected in the church, the spiritual family of God. In other words, Roman Catholics and Anglicans who oppose the ordination of women are following the tradition of the centuries in saying that woman, *per definitionem*, is incapable of receiving priestly or episcopal ‘character.’ Yet they insist that such incapacity implies no inferiority, as was assumed in other ages.10

As manifestations of the opposing arguments over gender equality in church leadership, these two issues, women’s ordination and women’s subordination, are understandably and unavoidably linked. Promoting one implies a stance against the other. Schüssler Fiorenza grapples with the issue of female subordination as it is presented in the biblical text and comes to the provocative conclusion that the restraints placed upon women to keep them in subordinate roles run contrary to the freedom espoused by the biblical message. The whole concept of baptism, she points out, is centralized around the freedom provided by Christ in the act of accepting him. This freedom is worded throughout the gospels and the letters not only as a spiritual freedom from sin but also as a socio-economic liberation from oppression.11 Indeed, Christ was most concerned with the total spiritual liberation of the marginal members of society, the poor and outcast. Who better to represent the marginal, poor and outcast than women, who under patriarchal tradition often do not have the right to property, to voice themselves, or to even basic social status. This fundamental tenet of Christianity, liberation of the oppressed, tears at the very root of the argument based on role supporting the subordination of women and denying them the opportunity for ordination.

10 Jewett, 17.
11 Schüssler Fiorenza, 141.
Consequently, one might come to the question, exactly why was the language of subordination used in reference to women in the biblical text such as in the “Household Codes” of the pastoral Epistles? The answer, as one can imagine, is complex. The writers of the biblical texts, aware that their words would be read by many friends and foes, were somewhat influenced by the patriarchal culture in which they wrote but, more importantly, were sensitive to the influence that their words would have upon the culture surrounding them. The form of the text had to be crafted in such a way that it intruded into the ethos of the people only to the extent that they would be encouraged to adopt the ethos of the new group to which they were being introduced (the Christians). There is evidence that the early Christians were committed to the concept of gender equality but that they phased women out of leadership roles and out of the accepted texts as a result of their desire to be recognized as an acceptable religion by the Roman government and to avoid further persecution. Schüßler Fiorenza notes that “the history of early Christianity is written from the perspective of the historical winner,” who undoubtedly were all male. It is vital to remember these facts when attempting to apply the biblical message to our society today. Simply put, “Feminist sociological models for the reconstruction of history (...) show that the definitions of sexual role and gender dimorphism are the outcome of the social-economic interactions between men and women but that they are not ordained either by nature or by God.”

The concept that men and women are equal but have distinct and separate naturally determined roles unavoidably creates a permanent inequality based upon gender that runs contrary to the notion of freedom in Christ as well as to a theocentric view of

12 Schüßler Fiorenza, xx.
13 Schüßler Fiorenza, 83.
14 Schüßler Fiorenza, 91.
equality. Or as Jewett puts it, “To take the position that a woman should not be admitted to the ministry, while conceding that she has the God-given capacity for it, is obviously to put oneself on a cleft stick.” \(^{15}\) Proponents of these theories do not cling to the notion of women’s inferiority to justify their claims in any way but fail to recognize that acknowledging the equality of men and women in one respect often precludes arguing for their inequality in another. In this case, saying that both are of equal value to God and thus that men are not superior to women completely overlooks the fact that men are given the far superior roles in society. Schüssler Fiorenza expands on this problematic issue, “It supposes that equality and egalitarian organizational structures exclude authority and leadership.” \(^{16}\)

Equality within organizations is built upon the notion of role-interchangeability and without such interchangeability at all levels in those organizations, there can be no true equality. \(^{17}\) “Different members of the community may receive different gifts and exercise different leadership functions, but in principle all members of the community [have] access to spiritual power and communal leadership roles.” \(^{18}\) This concept mirrors the position that every Christian, ordained or not, male or female, makes up the ‘priesthood of believers’ in which each contributes valuable skills, including leadership skills, to their church. \(^{19}\) Therefore, if equality of believers exists between brothers and sisters in the Christian community, and all are bestowed with spiritual gifts, then, all

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\(^{15}\) Jewett, 18.
\(^{16}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, 285-6.
\(^{17}\) This is true for groups distinguished by morally relevant characteristics (e.g., gender) but not for individuals’ particular skills and capacities. Not all people should be ministers, but no group of persons should be excluded on account of their gender.
\(^{18}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, 286.
\(^{19}\) See Martin Luther, “The Pagan Servitude of the Church,” in Martin Luther; Selections from His Writings, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1961 [1520]), 345.
over this issue—the almost universal use of masculine language like He, his, him, and
even Lord, King, Master, and Father do not aid in encouraging readers to maintain a
sexless image of God. There appear to be two issues at work in this argument; firstly,
determining the sex of God, or for some, the sex that God is most certainly not; and
secondly, determining the degree to which the sex of God is connected to the
requirements for representing God’s presence in the church. The first issue would be less
directly relevant given a favorable resolution of the second, but it deserves attention
nonetheless.

Getting to the root of God’s sex or lack thereof is central to the argument based on
the nature of God for keeping women from the ordained ministry. Jewett writes, “an
affinity between maleness and divineness remains the basic assumption behind every
argument from the nature of God for the exclusion of women from the office of
ministry.” 23 There are two ways to refute this affinity. The first is to disassociate
maleness and divineness, an extremely difficult and abstract task, and the second is to
draw a similarly qualitative relationship between femaleness and divineness in order to
show that one is not preferred over the other. Indeed the biblical text is full of references
alluding to the masculinity and paternity of God but the text also contains a number of
analogies to the maternal, and thus feminine nature, of God.

Although the former [masculine reference] is much more frequent, the
frequency does not change the quality of the statements. All such
statements which liken God to a father or a mother are possible because
‘God created Man in his image.’ And this creature, who is in the image
and likeness of God, is male and female. In other words, when the Old
Testament likens God to a father or a mother, the language used is
analogical in both instances. 24

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23 Jewett, 35.
24 Jewett, 41.
In some biblical texts, God is portrayed in explicitly female terms. The act of creating life is at its very core a female behavior. The language of the Apostles’ Creed used to describe Mary’s experience calls Jesus “conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.” Conception is also a uniquely female behavior. In fact, the Spirit is often personified as the female Sophia meaning “wisdom of God.”

There is a fundamental problem with this group of arguments from the nature of God against ordaining women, such as the one promoted by the Vatican in their Declaration on women. As Jewett points out, “it is an argument which is constantly moving back and forth from the literal to the symbolical in an *ad hoc* manner. There is no critical control of the reasoning process at this point. The argument is predestined to come out to a certain end because those who use it tack both from left to right and right to left as they face the winds of counter-argument.” The only way to be consistent about analyzing the biblical text is to treat all analogies with equal interpretive weight as either exactly descriptive, in which case God is both male and female exactly as we know those distinctions to be, a fairly difficult state of being to conceptualize, or God is neither as we know them but only reminds us of some of the qualities we associate with each. God is like a father willing to discipline, forgive and bequeath (characteristics also possible of mothers!) and God is like a mother ready to nurture and comfort (again characteristics possible also of fathers).

The second point of this argument hinges on the degree to which God’s gendered distinction, or lack thereof, is connected with the ministerial requirements. Proponents of the argument against women’s ordination refer to Jesus at this juncture, asserting that

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25 Jewett, 51 and Schüssler Fiorenza, 133.
26 Jewett, 86.
since Jesus was a man, those who follow in his footsteps to guide his flock must be men. Since Jesus was the Son of God and a physical representation of God on earth, God’s other representatives on earth, namely church leaders, must also be men. In order to prove that this argument is valid, one would have to show why maleness above all other characteristics Jesus possessed in representing God is a determining factor for ordination. As Jewett explains, no one seems to want to argue that ministers must be Jewish, for indeed Jesus was Jewish as were all of his disciples. What makes maleness a characteristic of high importance in minister but not being Jewish? There is no real significance in Jesus’ disciples being Jewish, Jewett argues, other than their membership in the culture in which Jesus was performing his ministry. Why then could not their maleness also be seen as part of the form determined by the culture and separate from the function of the message itself and the application of that message for women?

The solution to these arguments based on a hopelessly flawed way of thinking, according to Schüssler Fiorenza, is beginning to understand the biblical texts “not as an archetype but as a prototype. Both archetype and prototype denote original models. However, an archetype is an ideal form that establishes an unchanging timeless pattern, whereas a prototype is not a binding timeless pattern or principle. A prototype, therefore, is critically open to the possibility of its own transformation.” To begin to place the issue of gender equality and women’s ordination as a part of that issue in the light of the overarching message of the gospels is to begin to breathe new life into the mission Jesus challenged his followers to undertake.

27 Jewett, 89.
28 Schüssler Fiorenza, 33.
Drawing on a prototype thus requires not literal application but a focus on the central message. Jesus challenged his followers to build a community of ever-increasing membership in which the values of spiritual freedom, equal status, and forgiveness were paramount. One term for this communal goal is ekklesia. "Ekklesia—the term for church in the New Testament—is not so much a religious as a civil-political concept. It means the actual assembly of free citizens gathering for deciding their own spiritual-political affairs. Since women in a patriarchal church cannot decide their own theological-religious affairs and that of their own people—women—the ekklesia of women is as much a future hope as it is a reality today." And so extending equal access and opportunity to women to determine their own affairs within their spiritual community is not simply a side issue but part of the core of fulfilling Jesus' commission. "Only when the ekklesia of women is joined by all those in biblical religion who share the vision of the people of God as the discipleship of equals, only then is the gospel proclaimed in the whole world."

If this spiritual community of equals worshipping and serving God together is a central goal of the church, then challenging current thinking about gender inequality in church leadership will be a necessary component to fully realize that goal. Highlighting the flaws in three approaches to gender inequality in this chapter has served to strengthen the argument for gender equality in the church. The next part will begin to address the implementation of a change that follows from a commitment to equality in the church’s life and leadership.

29 Schüssler Fiorenza, 344.
30 Schüssler Fiorenza, 351.
Part III – Institutionalizing Change to Transform Culture
Chapter 5 – The Call for Equality

An organizational change renovating attitudes about women in the church and resulting in full clergy access to women is the ethical solution to the current controversy surrounding women’s ordination. It is ethically acceptable because it appropriately aligns theological principles and ecclesiological practices. These theological principles, as they were explored in previous chapters, are founded upon a theocentric view of equality in which all humans are fundamentally equals as a result of their relationships to God. This principle is morally attractive given its promotion of spiritual and social liberation within a nurturing religious community. By not pushing others down in order to lift some up, working toward gender equality throughout the church and especially in church leadership is both ethically pleasing and organizationally promising. For in order for ethics to be upheld, there must be consistency between rule and practice and most importantly, both rules and practices must be moral. These criteria hold true for gender equality in church leadership.

Returning to Boff’s framework for understanding liberation theology, this part corresponds with the third moment, practical mediation, in which various responsible parties are called to take action to remedy the injustice exposed in the first moment and shown to be unethical in the second. 1 Demonstrating the ethical impetus for change is the subject of this chapter, while building a model for action is the subject of the following chapter. A framework for going about organizational change—gathering information,

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analyzing the situation, weighing alternatives, selecting the most appropriate option, justifying that choice and planning its implementation—is echoed both in Boff's moments of liberation theology as well as in accepted leadership approaches to change. Having worked through the first four steps in the first two parts of this thesis, it is a fitting progression to use widely accepted leadership theories, consistent with Christian theological principles, to work through the last two steps of this change process, justifying the choice and planning its implementation. Accordingly, this chapter will set about doing the first of these two remaining steps by drawing upon the lessons of leadership studies.

In order to justify the choice that was made in the previous part to work for full gender equality in church leadership, this chapter draws on leadership literature with a variety of foci. It looks at the issue through the lenses of justice, ethical leadership, and organizational culture and change. Using this combination of leadership approaches allows for a multidimensional view of the issue and hopefully will present important arguments in favor of such a momentous change effort. The insights uncovered in this chapter will hopefully guide the change process described in the next.

**Justice Through Equality**

The theocentric notion of equality parallels the Rawlsian notion of justice in that both emphasize the importance of equality in sustaining a just society. Theocentric

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2 John P. Kotter presents a theory of organizational change process that it widely accepted in leadership circles. His process includes eight stages that indirectly correspond with those I set forward here. These eight stages are establishing a sense of urgency, creating the guiding coalition, developing a vision and strategy, communicating the change vision, empowering employees for broad-based action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains and producing more change, and anchoring new approaches in the culture. I have condensed several of these steps to correspond with the aims of each of the chapters in this thesis but would assert that all stages (except for creating a guiding coalition which seems more appropriate for smaller groups than the general church) have been represented in some form or another. See John P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, (Boston; Harvard Business School Press, 1996).
equality, as espoused by Niebuhr, explains how equality affects human-to-human relationships by reminding people that all have positive value endowed by their common Creator. The ethic of responsibility to one another that comes with that realization. Rawls similarly emphasizes that equality is necessary to foster justice in human relationships. Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* rests upon two basic principles, both centered on equality:

a. Each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all.

b. Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions. First, they must be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality; and second, they must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.

The first principle begins to make the argument for equal access to office but tied with the second, the need for equality in societal leadership positions is clear. In this context, Rawls is writing of society in general and later states that his principles do not extend to institutions of the “background culture” like the church. However, it could be argued that in order for the church to achieve its goal of a community extending to include all, it must adhere, at a minimum, to the principles of justice in practice in the wider society. In this respect, Schüssler Fiorenza’s idea, “in principle all members of the community [have] access to spiritual power and communal leadership roles,” distinctly echoes Rawls’ second premise.

Rawls’ stipulation that all offices and positions in a just society be “open to all under conditions of fair equality” reflects the distinction that Miller makes between

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temporary and permanent inequality. Miller distinguishes these two types of inequality by their ability to be overcome. Temporary inequality is that of student to teacher, or child to parent. The relationship has the potential, as Rawls would stipulate for a just society, of being reversed or equalized. Permanent inequality, on the other hand, is not easily overcome if even at all possible. Miller writes, "In these relationships, some people or groups are defined as unequal by means of what sociologists call ascription; that is, your birth defines you."  

Such is obviously the case for women in many churches today. Simply being born female restricts them from assuming a "fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all." And the permissible inequality defined by Rawls' second principle of justice is not consistent with the gender inequality in church leadership because these positions are not "open to all under conditions of fair equality," or "to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society," as has been shown. Only the total and complete abolition of this permanent state of inequality imposed upon women can remedy this injustice in the church community.

Ethical Leadership Through Equality

Ciulla, in her essay, "Leadership Ethics: Mapping the Territory," argues that the attainment of justice and equality is necessary for what she calls "good" leadership. She boldly states that the ethical component inherent in "good" leadership means that there cannot be such a thing as "good" leadership that violates the relevant ethical principles. Ciulla finds that "good" leadership must be both ethical and effective, making morality of

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great concern to organizations and societies. "This is why I think it's fair to say that ethics lies at the heart of leadership studies." 

Ciulla’s argument acknowledges that there is a trend over time amongst leadership theorists to include ethical components in their theories of leadership. Her research finds that there are two ethically attractive components that these theories share. “First, rather than induce, these leaders influence, which implies that the leaders recognize the autonomy of the followers. (...) The second morally attractive part of these definitions is that they imply recognition of the beliefs, values, and needs of the followers. Followers are the leader’s partner in shaping the goals and purposes of a group or organization.”

Inherent in these two leadership trends is the recognition that all group members have basic worth to the group, not just leaders. Both leaders and followers have a stake in the outcome of their collective efforts and both have important skills to contribute to those efforts. In including autonomy in leadership theories, theorists recognize the importance of choice in the role of all participants. Autonomy cannot be fully reflected in situations of permanent inequality. Looking at the theories themselves can enhance an understanding of these two leadership trends.

Rost’s theory of leadership, one included in Ciulla’s study, includes a chapter on ethics in which he writes, “The leadership process is ethical if the people in the relationship (the leaders and the followers) freely agree that the intended changes fairly

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8 The issue of effectiveness will be discussed in the next chapter.
10 Ciulla, “Mapping the Territory,” 12.
reflect their mutual purposes." The language that Rost uses is connotative of a relationship based on moral equality in which the leader does not exert his or her own will over the followers but rather is engaged with the followers in the process of real change for the entire group's mutual benefit. Thus the difference between the leader and follower is not based on one's ability to exert power over the other, as in a dominant-subordinate relationship typically resulting from permanent inequality, but is instead based on the degree of influence exercised for the benefit of both the leader and the followers. Such a situation could only occur in instances of equality as outlined above, requiring leadership positions to be open to all.

According to Burns and his definition of good leadership, "Transforming leaders raise their followers up through various stages of morality and need. They turn their followers into leaders, and the leader becomes a moral agent." When applied to the church setting in which women are not granted equal access to leadership, transforming leaders are not fully possible because they are unable to raise up their followers, in the fullest sense of the word, to themselves become leaders in similar positions. This limitation, for Burns, also limits such leaders from being true moral agents to all of their followers, a function indispensable to the role of a spiritual leader thus leaders and followers are impaired morally.

Similarly, servant leadership is impossible for church settings in which women are treated unequally. Ciulla, in her article, refers to Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership,

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12 Ciulla, "Mapping the Territory," 16.
Like the transforming leader, the servant leader elevates people. Greenleaf says a servant leader must pass this test: 'Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?' He goes on and adds a Rawlsian proviso, 'And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society?'

If one considers the term 'servant' in this excerpt to refer to a servant leader, Greenleaf is, in effect, making the same claim that Burns makes about transforming leaders. Both are saying that good leaders cultivate in their followers additional leaders. To limit those eligible for growth into a leadership capacity by their sex alone seems contrary to the essence of what these theorists say about good leaders. Taken a step further, these theories say that when leadership roles are open only to a certain kind of person, they are limited to only being good leaders to people of their own kind. This concept strikes at the heart of male-dominated leadership theories that exclude women for they imply that such leaders can never be truly ethical or effective. The predictable result would be the empowerment and liberation of those belonging to the group that can advance, but the further limitation and restriction the group that cannot, except that the advancement of both groups are morally linked.

The support for promoting gender equality in church leadership from the point of view of leadership theories is overwhelming. Each of the theories above reflects the trend Ciulla distinguishes that leadership is about influencing others to themselves become leaders in a participative process for mutual benefit. These trends are echoed in the words of Cheryl Mabey who writes that citizen leadership, similar to Greenleaf's

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servant leadership, "must include the recognition that every citizen will lead. Civic participation is not an elective but a given. Each person matters." \(^{14}\)

### Changing Organizational Culture for Equality

Equality will require change of both rule and practice throughout the entire church culture, however, for both of these to be significantly changed, attitudes about women leaders will need to be renovated. Change as an instrument of transforming culture is therefore necessarily broad sweeping and all-encompassing. The importance here is not simply to change the rules regarding women but to change the environment that creates and fosters the enforcement of those rules. Ciulla writes about the significance of such environments, "An unhealthy moral environment is one where it does not make sense for a person to be, for example, honest fair, loyal or trustworthy. In an unhealthy moral environment, doing what is morally right is more difficult than usual and sometimes requires great courage."\(^{15}\)

When an organization like the church sets a standard by adopting a rule but then failing to implement it or even ignoring it altogether, it is creating a moral environment in which integrity and honesty are not thought to be important. If the rule itself doesn’t allow women in church leadership, then the message is one of inequality. This being the case, equality does not end with but begins with the law, in this case, and continues into our agendas, our assumptions and even our language. There is both a biblical and a moral call to be consistent in word and deed for the sake of ethical integrity and

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completeness. Just as Jesus calls his disciples to the principles of honesty and consistency, the church's 'yes' must be a 'yes,' and its 'no,' a 'no.'

This magnitude of change can be daunting for any organization, but is especially menacing for one rooted in tradition, as the church is. Working toward such a change can be discouraging and even dangerous. But the moral call is clear, the course of action prescribed. Miller discusses some of the challenges to reversing permanent inequality, like gender inequality in church leadership, in her article,

> It becomes difficult for the dominants even to imagine that subordinates are capable of performing the preferred activities. More importantly, subordinates themselves can come to find it difficult to believe in their own ability. ...dominant groups generally do not like to be told about or even quietly reminded of the existence of inequality. ‘Normally’ they can avoid awareness because their explanation of the relationship becomes so well integrated in other terms; they can even believe that both they and the subordinate group share the same interests and, to some extent, a common experience. The extent that subordinates move toward freer expression and action, they will expose the inequality and throw into question the basis for its existence. And they will make the inherent conflict an open conflict. They will have to bear the burden and take the risks that go with being defined as ‘troublemakers.’ Since this role flies in the face of their conditioning, subordinates, especially women, do not come to it with ease.16

Permanent gender inequality exists in so many denominations largely due to the fact that women share the same patriarchal organizational heritage as the dominant men. This common tradition and the beliefs that have resulted are what convince the dominant and subordinate groups in the church that they share a common experience which is more important than their experiential differences.

As Miller points out, “this internalization of dominant beliefs is more likely to occur if there are few alternative concepts at hand.”17 It is for this reason that works like

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16 Miller, 225, 227, and 229, italics added.
17 Miller, 229.
Schüssler Fiorenza's critical feminist reconstruction of the biblical text are so important to the church, for they finally offer alternatives to the entirely patriarchal interpretations available up until recently. Fresh points of view like this one provide the means through which to begin to think critically about one's organization.

It is interesting to note here that this thesis, in its research phase, began as an inquiry into the status of followers in the church, and specifically of female followers. I quickly came to the realization that any analyses of the female follower in the church cannot be derived or communicated until the issue of female leaders in the church is addressed. The reason that one cannot first explore the followership imperatives of the church leadership process is simple: women are subordinate to men in most churches, even some in leadership positions, and a subordinate is unlikely and unable to focus on her/his own needs and aspirations until the structure of inequality is challenged. "A subordinate group has to concentrate on basic survival. Accordingly, direct, honest reaction to destructive treatment is avoided" at all costs. Women cannot become accountable as partners in the church leadership process until they are able to extricate the standards of permanent inequality from their society's guiding concepts.

However, the lack of the 'excellent' does not negate the presence of the 'good;' women who do church work in a subordinate role can still be good at the roles relegated to them. But rather the absence of excellence severely limits the good that is possible; women cannot excel at what they do because there is no ultimate position to which they might be promoted like there is for the men who are allowed to dominate church work. That is, until women are granted full equality in the highest levels of church leadership, the quality of their contributions on any level will continue to be compromised.

18 Miller, 228.
And so will the quality of the current church leadership. "Members of the dominant group are denied an essential part of life—the opportunity to acquire self-understanding through knowing their impact on others. They are thus deprived of 'consensual validation,' feedback, and a chance to correct their actions and expressions." The cost of this lack of open and honest dialogue is not only the psychological well being of the subordinates but the effectiveness of the organization.

"What is immediately apparent from studying the characteristics of the two groups is that mutually enhancing interaction is not probable between unequals. Indeed, conflict is inevitable." Mutually enhancing interaction is essential to good leadership according to the literature on leadership and ethics explored above. Church leadership will fail to embody ethical leadership until it ceases its institutionalization of permanent gender inequality. Thus, there is a clear call to action to transform church culture into one in which equality is championed and leadership flourishes.

19 Miller, 228.
20 Miller, 229-230, italics added.
Chapter 6 – The Call to Action

By all accounts, Jesus of Nazareth, as the leader of a radical religious movement that has survived for two thousand years after his death, is a prime example of a “good” leader. For many, Jesus epitomizes the notion of a servant leader. The image of him washing his disciples’ feet and reminding them of the need to serve the least among us fully represents the definition given by Greenleaf of a servant leader.¹

Similar to the definition of a servant leader is Burns’ definition of a transforming leader, which Jesus also exemplified. He became a moral agent who turned his followers into leaders and who was engaged with them in the process of real change for their mutual benefit, the goal of establishing the community of God on earth.² As such a leader, Jesus showed that equality was essential to the kind of community that God intended and that all would have to work toward equality in order for it to come to fruition in human culture. By this account, Jesus would be seen as a radical social egalitarian who worked for equality on earth as a central component of his mission. The kind of sweeping change that will be necessary to transform current church culture in accordance with the ethical imperative for gender equality is thus particularly reminiscent of the leadership example of Jesus.

Christ as Transformer of Culture

H. Richard Niebuhr summarizes this account of Jesus as a change agent when he refers to Christ as the transformer of culture in his book addressing the relationship

between Christ and culture. Niebuhr works through several models of this relationship between the human and divine Christ and the worldly culture, ultimately rejecting efforts to keep Christ separate from culture and rebutting theories that confuse Christ's role in culture. He settles in with those he calls conversionists on the theory that Christ came to completely transform culture using all things created as they were intended, for God's work.³

Conversionists, as opposed to dualists, believe that the kingdom of God does not have to be limited to an experience far from the here and now, but that God's kingdom is a constant force of redeeming and renewing power on earth at the present time. Their belief is grounded in a much more hopeful attitude toward culture stemming from the realization that all things are of God's creation and that "worldly" does not necessarily equal "evil." "Hence the conversionist is less concerned with conservation of what has been given in creation, less with preparation for what will be given in a final redemption, than with the driving possibility of a present renewal."⁴

Consequently, conversionists place much less emphasis on the kingdom of God to come in order to place focus on transforming actions here and now. They see elements of culture that are not currently aligned with God's will not as evil and in need of replacement but as worldly and in need of conversion. Niebuhr writes, "The problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation; though the conversion is so radical that it amounts to a kind of rebirth."⁵ They see Jesus as the instrument of that conversion working diligently toward renewing our present society, always with an eye to God's kingdom in the future.

⁴ Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, 195.
⁵ Niebuhr, Christ and Culture, 194.
Transforming Culture by Example

Admittedly, Niebuhr, in speaking of Christ as the transformer of culture, is referring to the culture of the world at large and not only to the culture of the church. However, there is an important relationship between these two cultures in that the church’s culture exists within and for the world’s. The church consists of members who must live every day in the greater context of their society as well as in the context of their community of worship. These people not only see the culture of the world that is around them, but also are seen as representatives of the other culture to which they belong in the church. Two concentric circles might be used to represent these two cultures for people who consider themselves members of God’s church, the smaller representing their church community and the larger representing the world. These people belong to both.

An international body of Catholic leaders, the Synod of Bishops, agrees with the notion of Christ as the transformer of worldly culture and adds that the church, as the body continuing the work of Christ on earth, works in the name of Christ in that transformation. Additionally, these leaders recognize the importance of justice in such a transformation. They write, “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appeals to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.” This statement takes the powerful position that talking about God’s message of equality is only effective when one is actually undertaking efforts toward that end. The church cannot ignore the action component of bringing God’s equality to everyone on earth.

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Furthermore, these bishops recognize the need for the church to seek equality within in order to work more honestly for equality through justice outside the church. Their statement reads, “While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself.”\(^7\) Just as leaders of the early church were warned to make sure that their own houses were straight before attempting to help others straighten theirs, the church must realize the imperative to straighten its own house on the issues of equality before attempting to help the world straighten out its problems. It is the intention of this thesis that gender inequality be considered one of the “modes of acting” referred to above, found to be unjust after examination, then pursued in order to be a more fitting instrument of equality in the world at large.

**Concrete Steps Toward Gender Equality**

Completely changing the moral environment contained within church culture will require a number of concrete steps intended both to increase access to senior leadership positions for women and to change areas of inequality throughout the entire church culture. Drawing from the findings of Chapter 2 of this thesis, these recommendations are intended to remedy documented inequalities that are representative but not exhaustive of all currently unequal situations.

In the first category, more women will have to be given access to full clergy positions officially sanctioned by the church. For some churches, this will first mean the extension of access to ordination for women. For all churches, this will entail actively

\(^7\) Second Synod of Bishops, para. 40, 522.
recruiting and hiring competent and dedicated staff without allowing gender to count either for or against potential candidates. Women in all full-time clergy positions in the church will need to be compensated equally for their work. This will require eliminating the salary and benefits disparity that exists in nearly every denomination. Most importantly, churches will need to focus on creating a culture in which women are nurtured, appreciated and listened to as much as their male counterparts. The accomplishments of the first two changes will mean nothing without the third because it is the environment in which one does one job that determines the culture that is created. An environment of equal attention, care and compensation will produce a culture of equality.

The second grouping of required changes follows along this path. It includes changes that will renovate the entire church culture, not just that of its leadership offices, in order to affect those with whom leaders interact as well as the pool of potential leaders. Changing church culture to champion equality will involve extending lay leadership positions to women, encouraging equality in personal relationships, and paying attention to language both in church services and in everyday conversations. These suggestions, although extreme, are barely representative of the concrete changes that will be needed to transform an organization as deeply rooted in tradition as is the church.

**Intersections of Ethics and Effectiveness**

As the Synod of Bishops proposed, actions on behalf of equality through justice in the world are appealing in the sense that they allow the church to meet its mission, which includes its goals of redeeming the human race and liberating it from every oppressive situation. Working for equality *within* the church should have a favorable outcome for
the mission of the church not only by becoming internally and externally consistent to observers but by improving the quality of the leadership found within the church. Certainly the church would stand to gain respect in the world and possibly the attention of those who had dismissed it in the past by eliminating its current inconsistency, but it would also benefit from an entire segment of untapped human resources sitting in its own pews. Neither of these reasons should be compelling enough to make the change for equality but their effects cannot be ignored.

By including women fully in leadership roles, churches would be in a new position to benefit from the realization of those leadership styles deemed impossible in the previous situation characterized by permanent inequality. Women would be able to realize the autonomy and participation that are essential to theories of ethical leadership, allowing them to become active agents in the leadership process. By eliminating the dominant/subordinate relationship, lines of communication can begin to become two-directional, allowing women more input in their church’s decision-making process. Leaders could begin to fully encourage each and every one of their followers, including women, to become leaders themselves, enabling them to be “moral agents” as Burns suggests, and “servant leaders” as Greenleaf proposes. The bottom line is that the entire organization would find itself free of a previously self-imposed restriction on its growth and effectiveness that affected both women as followers once dependent upon their leaders and men as leaders ironically dependent upon those followers.

While changing for the sake of improving equality will most likely enhance the effectiveness of the church as an organization, or how well it works toward its mission, this improvement must never be mistaken for the end-goal of this transformation. The

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8 Ciulla, 18, and Burns, 20. See also Greenleaf, Servant Leadership.
call to action detailed in this chapter is the direct result of the imperative to become ethically consistent with the foundational principles of equality outlined in Christian theology. This reason alone is sufficient to warrant dramatic change. Carried further, even if a change were proven to enhance the effectiveness of an organization one hundred-fold but might compromise that organization’s commitment to ethical principles in the slightest, such a change must be fought with all due strength and speed. By contrast, if a change under consideration were to cost an organization one hundred-fold in its effectiveness but was the only way in which the organization’s practices could be made just and ethical, it should be done no matter the magnitude of the cost involved. The fact that this particular change, for gender equality, is pleasing on more than just the ethical level must be seen as an added bonus but not as the impetus for that change.

**Institutionalizing Change to Maintain Principle**

Referring again to the declaration from the Synod of Bishops: “We must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and of the possessions and life style found within the Church herself,” in order to be ethical in both rule and practice. This imperative does not stop with the rectification of the injustice exposed in this thesis. Constant revision of the rules and practices of the church will be necessary to remaining true to the cause of justice in the world as new injustices are uncovered. The old adage says that the only thing one can depend upon is change. For a Christian this might be amended to say that while God’s love is constant and ever-present, human beings must continuously read the signs of the times in order to respond faithfully to God in their time and place.
The church carries the tenuous responsibility of being the agent of God, but in and for the world. This difficult relationship between yearning for an encounter with holiness while existing among sinful people, who are, even in their sin, creatures of the most holy, is one that requires further investigation and might indeed be the element of faith that baffles Christians for the remainder of earthly time. Certainly, it is an interesting and complex system of duties that has to be treated with care and respect. It is the hope of the author that inquiries into the complexities of this system and the situations that those complexities create continue as long as the church wishes to see its mission furthered in the world. In the present moment, one task that demands our attention is the opening of church leadership positions to all people of both genders who can express their gifts in ministry.
Bibliography


