

Male and Female Leadership and Teaching Roles

A Discussion Paper

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Introduction

This is both an important and a sensitive subject. It raises big questions about:

- a. Our understanding of what Scripture teaches and how to interpret Scripture
- b. The expectations of contemporary culture about roles. The church is often seen as out of date, intolerant etc.

I believe that part of the problem is that

- The church has often historically answered the question about male and female leadership in ways that in effect took legitimate, Biblical options off of the table leading to a distorted view of Biblical leadership
- Partly as a result of this, we see a contemporary tendency towards finding other answers. This leads to two problems. First of all, we still end up with the wrong answer and a distorted view of leadership. Secondly, in order to get the answers we want, we have to change how we handle Scripture and that leads to a distorted view of God's Word and opens the door to lots of other problems.

Those may be provocative statements but hopefully by the time we get to the end of this paper we'll be able to see why I've made them. I also want to suggest some possibilities for a way forward in our context.

1. The Wider context

Different churches, denominations and theological groupings have responded in different ways to these questions. We can split them into two main groupings.

Egalitarians argue that men and women should be regarded as being both equal in nature and in role. All that matters is gifting to perform a role.

Complementarians argue that men and women are equal in nature however, God's design for us to complement one another. That does mean that there will from time to time be different roles in the home and the workplace which in no way should impact on our understanding of equal nature and value.

Both views impact on our understanding of marriage but they also have implications for church life as well, particularly with regards to teaching and preaching roles. Egalitarians would argue that there should be no distinction in church life. All roles are available to all. The Methodist Church is probably the demonization that has most consistently taken this position. The C of E has moved in this direction whilst acknowledging that many churches and individual Anglicans remain complementarian. Baptist Union churches reflect a mixture of approaches. Some progressive Brethren churches have moved in this direction as well.

Complementarians argue that there will be some differences and restrictions in terms of roles. How different Complementarians have worked things out in practice varies from group to group

For example:

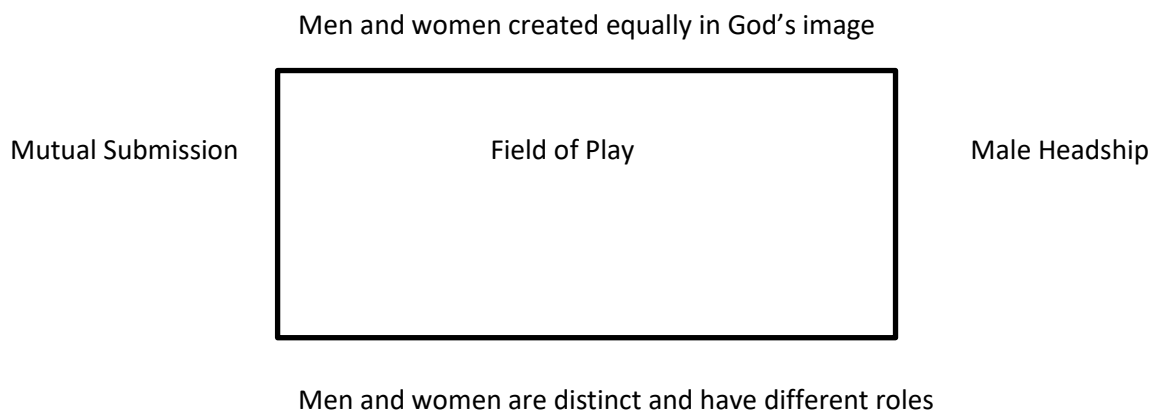
Traditional Brethren: Women are expected to remain silent in church –not to participate in public prayer, leading worship, speaking etc.

Most conservative Evangelical Churches and many charismatic groupings (e.g. Grace Baptist, FIEC also New Frontiers, some Anglican): Elders (or their equivalent) should be male, reflecting Bible teaching on headship. Women may hold other leadership roles in the church including deacons. Women may also teach in a range of capacities, though not normally preaching. Various views exist on leading worship. Women participate in public prayer, reading Scripture etc.

Some conservative Anglican Churches: The lead pastor/vicar should be male but other leaders and staff may be female. Most teaching is by men but women involved occasionally in preaching and teaching.

2. A framework for discussion

David Peterson, former principal at Oak Hill and NT scholar, suggested that it is helpful to set out a framework that provides the boundary for discussion. This provides for charitable disagreement and variation in practices within those parameters. So for example, we could draw the lines as follows



What we have here are four positional statements. To expand upon them a little, we can say:

1. *Equality:* Men and women were made equally in God's image. This means we have equal value from and access to God and all have gifts to use in church life. This is reflected in the Creation account in Genesis 1:27-28. It is both male and female that are created in God's image, blessed and commission to fill and subdue the earth. The Creation mandate is not given to one gender alone. That is why, when we see the description of human creation fleshed out that God says "It is not good for man to be alone." It is not that man is lonely, it is that he is alone and needs a helper, to complement and partner him in the task God has given.
2. *Mutual Submission:* We should submit to one another. It is often forgotten that in Ephesians 5:21ff that before wives are told to submit to husbands, we are told to submit to one another. This is so surprising to many that if they do spot it, they try to avoid the force of it and argue that this cannot mean mutual submission, there must always be a hierarchy and so Paul must mean "submit to those you are meant to submit to." Fascinatingly it was John Calvin who challenged this and said that no, husbands are genuinely required to submit to

their wives, fathers to children and masters to slaves by putting their needs first. The Bible is radical!

3. *Difference*: Men and women are different resulting in distinctive roles in life. We are not interchangeable. This is important not just when we think about church leadership but for other matters too. For example, it relates to how we approach questions about gender, you cannot just change your gender, our bodies are not mere exchangeable commodities. In the home, it means that equality between husband and wife does not mean that their roles are interchangeable. As one mum once put it to me “I realised that I was both compelled and was choosing to try and be the dad as well as the mum because the dad had abdicated his responsibilities. It just did not work.”
4. *Headship*: The man is the head in the home/marriage. This is not about power but about the responsibility he is to take. This also means that whilst mutual submission means we submit to one another, there is a difference between how a wife submits to a husband and how a husband submits to his wife (by sacrificially loving her). This headship has implications for church life too. So in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul says that when women speak, they are to wear a symbol of authority on their head and when writing to Timothy he says that he does not permit a woman to teach and have authority over a man.

Now, as you looked at those statements. It is highly likely that you will have found yourself leaning into one of them. That’s not surprising because each statement reflects explicit Biblical teaching. However, we are also more likely to lean towards one or the other (or a pairing of either 1 and 2 or 3 and 4) because of our background, character, experience and previous teaching.

However, if we found ourselves reacting with suspicion or hostility to one or more of those statements, that is also both natural because of character, experience etc but also problematic because each statement summarises Biblical teaching.

The point is that these Bible verses do not contradict each other but rather complement one another. They set out the extreme boundaries across which we should not stray. We should be careful of not sticking so close to one boundary that we lose sight of what the other verses are teaching and we need to be aware that we will come with our own biases and comfort zones that will need to be challenged.

I think that this is a helpful way forward and shortly intend to go through some of those key texts to see what they teach. Before that a word about hermeneutics and the question of culture

Culture and trajectories

One of the problems we have is that there has been significant disagreement in recent years not only about how to apply Scripture but how to read it in the first place.

The key question is this: “When these texts were written, to what extent were the authors constrained by their cultural context?” How much was what they said limited/bounded by the circumstances into which they wrote and to what extent can we apply what they said into a modern cultural context?

In particular, one approach has become popular – it’s known as the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic and is associated with an author called William Webb, who wrote a book called “Women, Slaves and Homosexuals.”

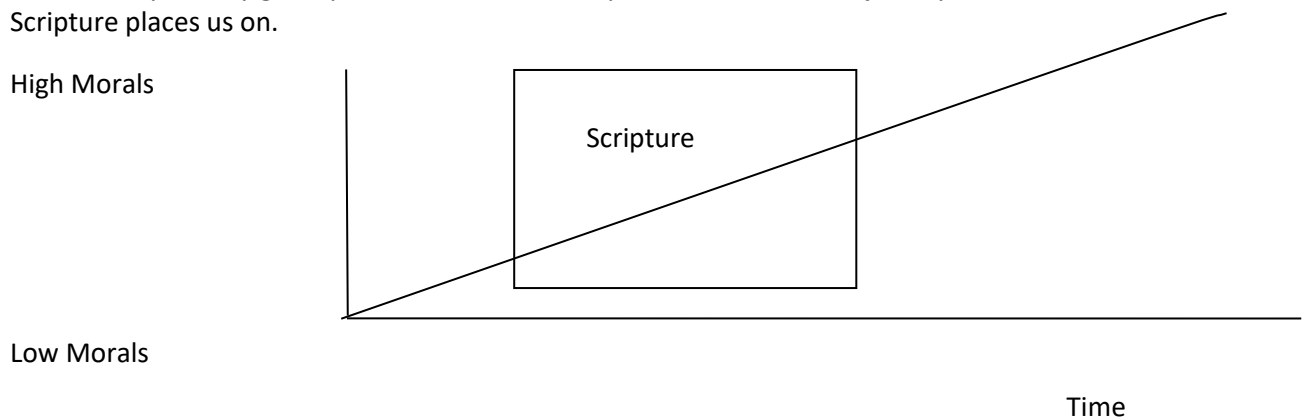
Webb’s central thesis is that not every scriptural injunction is to be applied universally. Whilst some injunctions invite trans-cultural application, others are limited in their scope to the particular context.¹ The purpose of the hermeneutical model is to enable the reader to choose between the

¹ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 24.

two. Webb argues that the overall narrative of Scripture shows a movement in favour of redemption. Included within the idea of redemption must be freedom from oppressive cultural environments.²

Therefore, the models start by looking at where the Bible text stands in relation to the culture of its time and the culture of the reader. It may be assumed that in certain cases the scriptural injunction will result in better treatment of people than the culture of the day; however, that treatment may still be inferior to what is suggested by contemporary culture.³ If this is the case, then the application of the injunction is likely to be culturally constrained. Webb then suggests a further set of clues from within Scripture that will confirm this to be the case.⁴ Additionally, the reader should consider extra-biblical clues such as science and social science.⁵

In other words, morality can be portrayed as in the diagram below progressing with time. Scripture contributes to that progression –indeed even escalating it. However, the progression continues after the completion of the canon of Scripture. This means that rather than simply looking at what the Bible says at any given point, we should attempt to trace out the trajectory of moral travel which Scripture places us on.



Webb argued that this was the approach taken by the Abolitionists when campaigning against the Slave Trade and therefore that the same approach should be taken when looking at women in church leadership.

There are two problems with this approach however.

1. It misrepresents or at least misunderstands history. Abolitionists such as Wilberforce saw no need to resort to such tactics because they saw clear teaching in Scripture against the slave trade of their day. Indeed their understanding of Scripture put them in conflict with the dominant culture/morality of their time.
2. More importantly, it places our culture as authoritative over Scripture which is completely the wrong way round. It is also a gross misrepresentation of history.

Now this isn't to deny the place of culture in our understanding of Scripture. Paul writes as a 1st Century Jew and he writes to people living in specific circumstances. Scripture is not written in a vacuum. We will see some examples of cultural context as we look at specific passages.

² See Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 35-38.

³ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 31.

⁴ See Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 69-70.

⁵ See especially chapter 7. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*, 209-235.

However, Paul is very careful to explain when he is dealing with a specific culture contextual situation. Also inspiration must mean that we can trust God's Word to be protected from human error and limitations so that it transcends culture challenging both the culture of Pauls' day and ours. The cultural argument suggests that Paul did not feel able to challenge some of the aspects of the culture of his time head on and so just left clues as to his true feelings. One must ask whether that sounds like the Paul we know and see in the Bible, or indeed anyone who exercised a prophetic role challenging the idolatry and sin of the times in which they lived.

There is a further problem with this. As I suggested at the start, in order to reach preferred conclusions, people have changed their methodology for how they handle the Bible. The result has been that how they answer other questions has been affected. For example, in his book, Webb went to great lengths to try and argue that the approach did not support same-sex marriage but that is exactly how it has been used more recently. Furthermore, because it moves us to a place where we sit in judgement over God's Word rather than allowing it to disagree with us, it becomes a human book. This has enabled people like Rob Bell, Steve Chalke and others to question the place of the Old Testament and to cast doubts on why Jesus died for us so that even the Gospel itself is changed. Fascinatingly and somewhat sadly, this was exactly what key evangelicals were warning would happen when the issue of women's ordination became political in the Church of England nearly 30 years ago.

5. Some of the key boundary texts in a bit more detail

In this section, I want to have a look at some of the key and at times controversial Bible texts and give a bit more exegetical detail on how we are to understand them.

1Timothy 2:12

"I do not let women teach men or have authority over them."

This forms part of Paul's instructions to Timothy about the care of the church he has planted in Ephesus. Similarly, Paul writes to another co-worker Titus with instructions for the care of churches in Crete. This comes in two letters to the younger co-worker. The letter comes in the context of a church that faces challenges and dangers. First of all, there's the threat of false teaching (1 Tim 3:3) and then of persecution. In fact, Paul warns that anyone who wishes to live a godly life will face persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).

In his letters, Paul gives instruction on godly living and worship. He insists that the vital thing is that Timothy and the church hold fast to Scripture as God's inspired word and that godly leaders are put in place to teach God's Word. Scripture is God breathed –it is trustworthy, useful and sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16).

It's in the context of these instructions that Paul says that women should be characterised by submission to teaching, modest in their appearance and godly in their behaviour. Then he says that he does not permit them to teach or to have authority over men. Note that Paul specifically does instruct older women to teach younger women.

Some commentators (though not all) that "teach or have authority" here are meant to be read very closely together so rather than conveying two independent thoughts they reinforce each other. The

technical term for this is known as “hendiadys.” If this is correct, then the primary issue here is to do with exercising authority. One means by which someone could exercise authority is by teaching and in any case, the Greek verb “to teach” would carry that sense of authority so that “Teacher” was a title of respect for Jesus. A teacher had an authority relationship to a disciple (c.f. Matthew 10:24).

This issue of authority can also be seen in the instruction to “submit” and there is strong suggestion from the overall context that one of the issues Paul had with the false teachers was that they wanted to encourage people to usurp authority.

Hold onto that issue of authority and submission for now. We need to come back to that later. At this point we need to note that some people have suggested that there is a cultural dimension to this passage which limits its application distinct from the Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic. The suggestion is that Paul gives this instruction specifically for the church at Ephesus because women at that time would not have been as well taught as men and therefore those women were more prone to the false teaching. This then would be a temporary piece of advice and might suggest an instruction more along the lines of “Don’t teach just yet until you have been instructed.” I think that there are two problems with this suggestion. The first is that Paul does not give the reason for his instruction as “because of your present circumstances” as he does with his instructions in singleness and marriage in 1 Corinthians 7, rather he takes the readers back to the issue of Creation and the Fall (again hold onto that thought because it is something we need to come back to later). Secondly, Paul’s issue is not with women teaching generally (prior to having learned) but with them teaching men specifically. If the issue was about women needing to learn first, then why didn’t Paul say “Learn first, then teach.” And at this point, what would there be to stop them from teaching men as well as women. Something else seems to be going on (again this is something we need to come back to).

So, our first boundary line tells us that there is a sense in which women are not to teach men and that this has something to do with authority.

1 Corinthians 11:5

Every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head

The whys and wherefores about “head covering” here have been much debated and this isn’t perhaps the place for a detailed discussion of all the ins and outs. However, we can note the following key points:

a. This does appear to be one of those examples of cultural context. When Paul talks about “the very nature of things” in verse 14 that phrase “very nature” can both refer to nature as in “creation norms” or as in “what is widely accepted within the cultural norms of our civilisation” and there is a strong argument here for it to be the latter (not least that Paul himself seems to have taken Nazirite vows at times leading to him growing his hair). b. The cultural practices of long hair and head coverings do seem to reflect a deeper ingrained morality which again is to do with how men and women relate to each other, autonomy, freedom, attention seeking behaviour and modesty. c. The key point is this. The woman is not to wear a head covering and not speak (as per the old Brethren

practice) rather she is to have some form of covering when and because she speaks. Note then that Paul again sets this need in the context of theology not culture. The issue at stake is headship and order and this is related again to what happened at Creation.

This is important because in a few chapters, Paul will instruct women to be silent in church (ch 14) and this has been understood by some as a complete ban on speaking and praying. However such an understanding of 1 Corinthians 14 would force Paul to contradict himself in the same letter. Chapter 14 is also to do with order in the church and the issue there seems to be to do with the women in the church turning to others and raising objections and questions in a disorderly and noisy fashion that disrupted the proclamation of God's Word. No doubt this would have been made worse by the factionalism prevalent in Corinth. So Paul says "wait until you get home to discuss those things." At the same time, the injunction to talk it through with your husband indicates that a key purpose here is so that right relationships in the home are not to be overturned in the church. Wives should not be publicly challenging their husbands and nor should husbands use a public platform to put down and shame their wives.

So we see that the purpose of the covering is to in some way symbolise authority and order. So just as our first boundary tells us that there is a sense in which women are not to teach and that is an authority issue, so too, Paul says that there are contexts in which women are to speak, they can pray to God for God's people and they can speak God's Word to God's people (prophesy) but when they do so it is in the context of authority. This is backed up descriptively in the New Testament as we see Priscilla and Aquilla teaching Apollos together and the daughters of Philip prophesying.

1 Timothy 3:1

If someone aspires to be an elder he desires an honourable position

The instructions about elders in the church describe the appointment of men. The language is masculine and relationships are described with reference to male roles in the home. Is this simply describing the situation at the time? The elders were male because of social norms just as Bearwood Chapel elders are all currently male but there's not any written policy on gender.

1 Timothy 3:2 says that he must be "faithful to his wife." (NLT) or "the husband of one wife" (other translations). Does this back up the suggestion that it is cultural? We are not ruling out unmarried elders are we? So can't we read verse 2 as "if he is married he must be monogamous" and thus imply "if he is male..."

I don't think this works. Let me explain why. The literal phrase in verse 2 is "a one woman man." The point is that whilst it would require monogamy in marriage, it has a much broader implication than that. It refers to whole hearted faithfulness. It means that married elders need to guard their minds and actions and be exclusively loyal to their wives. It means that unmarried elders should not be looking around, flirting, moving from relationship to relationship. These are tough standards and call each of us to daily seek to resist temptation, to repent of lust, to be respectful and appropriate in conversation etc. Indeed all of the qualities looked for in elders and deacons should challenge us.

Secondly, there is an interesting distinction made in the teaching on elders and deacons and it is sometimes missed because in NT Greek, we use the same word for "woman" as we do for "wife." So 1 Timothy 3:11 has often been translated "In the same way their wives...." However, this begs the

question as to why the qualities of a deacon's wife are articulated but not an elder's wife. For this reason, I think the word should be translated as "women" rather than wives and is a description of women deacons.

Romans 16:1

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe who is a deacon"

Paul closes his letter to the church in Rome with a long list of greetings from different people in different roles within the church. The list includes men and women. Phoebe is a deacon, Priscilla is a co-worker, Mary has "worked so hard for your benefit" Junia is highly respected among the apostles." Note that in the last case, the phrase could either refer to her reputation among the apostles or be describing her as an apostle with an outstanding reputation (if the latter then this would likely refer to a wider body of missionaries/church planters/leaders beyond the 12 (small 'a' rather than capital 'A' if you like).

The implication, with each of the descriptions, is that in some way, those women were taking a lead in the life of the local church or the wider work of God's kingdom. So whilst a specific office such as "elder" might be subject to restrictions, there were a much broader range of leadership roles than this.

6. What's going on –pulling things together theologically

We are now in a position to see how the boundaries function together in order to create theological principles which should shape church practice.

We've seen that there are both permissions and restrictions for women in Paul's letters in terms of leadership and teaching. We've also seen that these relate to Creation and The Fall and to authority, and order. What do I think is happening?

In 2005 before I came to Bearwood, I spent some time looking in detail at Paul's teaching on marriage relationships. Some of you will already have a copy of my dissertation on this and it can be made available to others on request. I believe that it is with a Biblical understanding of marriage that we need to start and by that I don't mean with the detailed workings and ordering of family decision making and roles and responsibilities. Rather, I mean the bigger picture of marriage.

Just as with his teaching on men and women in the church, Paul takes us back to the Creation account when talking about men and women in the home. "As the Scriptures say, 'A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife and the two are united into one.'" (Ephesians 5:31. Paul then goes on to link marriage into something much bigger theologically. He says "This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the Church are one."

What I see here is something incredible. God gave marriage as something special. He makes man and woman. They are like each other (flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone) but they are different (in Genesis 2, the Hebrew has the idea of "like but opposite to"). In other words, I take a complementarian view. They are to help each other in work and worship; they are to fulfil the creation mandate to multiply and to populate the planet etc. And....they are to provide a visible

picture of how God relates to his people. God is presented as the husband of Israel in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the focus is on Christ and the Church.

Paul tells us what the relationship of Christ to the Church is like. He is the head of the church. In other words, he has real authority. We are meant to submit to him. At the same time, there's a surprising twist. Christ who is the head, submits. He submits willingly to the Father and he comes sacrificially to serve, suffer and die. Paul says that our marriages should reflect that. Wives are to submit to their husbands as they take on a headship role but husbands are to sacrificially serve their wives. This means that there is an order and headship but there is also mutual submission. This mutual submission also applies to slaves and masters and parents and children. There is a new model in place, authority is no longer to be seen in terms of hierarchy and self-seeking power, rather those in positions of authority are servant leaders and the focus is on their responsibilities to others.

In 1 Timothy, we also saw that Paul links things into the Fall. In Genesis 3, we see two things, we see that Eve willingly acts first to make an autonomous decision. She doesn't listen to God's word but nor does she seem to take time to consult with her husband. Adam on the other hand seems in some way absent (my view is that he is physically present) he abdicates responsibility, he fails to protect and to help his wife. He also fails to obey God's Word, in other words, he also is seeking autonomy. So my view is that in the marriage role, there's also a reminder of how in their own different ways our first parents failed. She grabbed authority and he abdicated. Sadly, men do too often abdicate from their responsibilities in church and family. These verses prod us to take some responsibility. It's not because men are special and great that they are told to take the lead but because we are weak and fail. It's grace. By the way, I also think that this means that how we give roles to people is about much more than gifting.

Now, local churches effectively functioned as enlarged households. We talk about church as a family. I believe that when we look at roles and responsibilities in the church, then it should reflect family life. This means that we should not do anything in church life that undermines the model of family life presented in the Bible. That's why I believe that the role of men and women in the church is intended to reflect that pattern of male headship.

I appreciate that this is not a popular message. This is because the Bible challenges every culture. That's what it means to be transcultural. Paul never wrote to accommodate the culture of his day. Ephesians 5 and Romans 16 are full on challenges to patriarchal hierarchies and to sexism. But these passages will also confront head on, modern day feminism.

But the observation I've made about family life also suggests to me that we've missed something and both complementarians who focus only on guarding male eldership and egalitarians who are passionate about opening up eldership to women miss the same point. If church functions like a family then the role of elder reads across from family life as the equivalent of fathers. We need spiritual fathers within the church. Paul himself acts as a spiritual father to Timothy and we see a fatherly care towards other believers and congregations -see especially his engagement with Corinth. Then we have deacons and we acknowledge the role of women deacons. However, the word deacon refers to a servant or steward in the home. Have you noticed what is missing? Where are the spiritual mums? That's why when I looked at this again, it struck me that the naming of people seemed to point to those who are prominent in the spiritual life of the church but are neither elders nor deacons. Fascinatingly there are also descriptions for the qualifications of women to go

onto the widows' lists in the pastoral epistles. As well as having responsibilities within the life of the church, they are also to meet character requirements. Those requirements seem to mirror those for the elders.

In church life, we have tended to provide for elders and we've included deacons with a practical focus. However there seems to be a gap because there are women who have pastoral responsibilities and spiritual discernment to offer, gifts with which to serve the church and we may be missing the opportunity to involve them early enough in our decision making and discernment. It is here where I think our attention should be.

7. Implications for Church life

First of all, I think we can rule out two extremes. We cannot take the egalitarian approach but nor can we endorse the traditional Brethren approach and a number of traditional approaches which in effect fail to recognise that women are equal in nature. We should recognise that sadly churches have got this badly wrong with painful consequences.

However, we said very early on that even within a complementarian approach there are different practices. So how do we know the right way forward? I find the FIEC position statement on this helpful (the full text of their statement is available at <https://fiec.org.uk/resources/article/womenin-ministry-statement>).

The key paragraphs are:

“Reflecting upon the biblical data, we can see that the primary leaders and teachers of the church are to be suitably qualified men.

Teaching, though, is not to be restricted to pastor/teacher/elders. All Christians are to be involved in teaching and encouraging one another. This includes women who are to teach other women (Titus 2:4) and who may well be involved in teaching in other forums. How exactly this works out in practice may well vary from church to church.”

I think such a statement provides a framework in which to operate, there are boundaries but there is also some freedom depending on local context. Most FIEC churches I'm aware of understand the statement to mean that they will not have women as preachers in their main gathering but in other contexts but it does seem to give some flexibility. I would happily run with working along these lines in our own policies.

I also want to come back at this stage to the question about whether or not the headship issue is covered by having a lead pastor/elder who is male. This is the view of some Anglican churches. The important thing is that this fits in with their understanding of church leadership which is much more hierarchical than ours where we have plural eldership without hierarchy. In the Anglican model, the vicar in effect becomes the true teaching elder in the church. So that option won't work for us. It is also important then that when we look at appointing additional staff to the church that we do not seek to make one or other member of staff the “senior pastor” but recognise a genuinely equal team.

8. In practice a proposal

a. I recommend that we continue with the practice of male elders. However, we should continue and increasingly recognise the diversity of leadership roles and the value they carry. This may mean appointing deacons, it also means having mixed congregational leadership teams and it means cultivating a culture of mutual respect within the church.

b. This will also mean that primary teaching will continue to be from the male elders. However it also should include plenty of room for women to teach both other women and in mixed settings. This will include

- Small Group teaching
- Bringing expertise on specific subject matters at seminars, workshops etc
- Team teaching (i.e. you will see that from time to time on the rota rather than having a speaker and a worship co-ordinator, we have a team responsible for the whole service. On those occasions, I'm personally expecting those named to take responsibility for the whole meeting together, music, readings, prayer and the teaching. How they divide it up is left to them.
- I do agree that there will be contexts in which women might preach from time to time though we should still take care to ensure that this happens in a way that honours what the Bible says about headship.

c. We need another look at leadership teams and how they function. Too often church leadership can feel more like a business structure and less like a family. This also creates the impression of a hierarchy with the pastor as CEO, the elders as the board of directors and the management team with the congregational leaders as middle management. We need to get away from this. I think that we should be defining leaders by their calling not by which meeting they attend. We should also seek to recognise and engage female leaders who are involved in spiritual discernment and pastoral care as opposed to the more practical diaconate end of things.

Conclusion

Our aims should be:

- a. To seek to honour God's Word and be faithful to it
- b. To recognise that there will at times be different views on interpretation and application. In those contexts we should aim to think charitably of each other. We may disagree on the outcome but should trust that each of us is acting from right and loving motives.
- c. To seek to provide an environment where all can be fruitful in service using their gifts to equip and build one another up into unity.