

EMPOWERING PENTECOSTAL WOMEN

Shane Clifton

It is well known that Pentecostalism globally has been framed by the ministry of Spirit-empowered women. In Australia, for example, the movement owes its initial impetus to the spirituality and missionary zeal of Sarah Jane Lancaster and her 'sisters' – evangelists such as Mina Ross Brawner, Minnie Abrams and Winnie Andrews.¹ As Barry Chant observes, “over half the Pentecostal congregations functioning by 1930 were established and led by women.”² In the United States, similarly, the Pentecostal revival traces its symbolic origin to the Spirit baptism of Agnes Ozman and, later, Aimee Semple McPherson became the public face of the emerging movement. In India, likewise, it was Pandita Ramabai's social reform work that formed the basis of the 1905 revivals that were later to intersect with the networks connected to the Azusa St revival.³

Something like these situations – women experiencing Spirit baptism, praying for revival, planting churches, travelling as evangelists, working as missionaries - was mirrored all over the world, and much more could be said (but we have reached, at this point, the limit of my historical knowledge!) The point is that Pentecostal revival, grounded as it is in the non-discriminatory outpouring of the

¹ See Shane Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition: Analysing the Developing Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia*, ed. Andrew Davies, Global Pentecostal & Charismatic Studies (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), chapter 2.

² Barry Chant, “The Spirit of Pentecost: Origins and Development of the Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870-1939” (Macquarie University, 1999), 39.

³ Mark Hutchinson, “The Contribution of Women to Pentecostalism” in Shane Clifton and Jacqueline Grey, *Raising Women Leaders: Perspectives on Liberating Women in Pentecostal and Charismatic Contexts* (Sydney: APS, 2009).

Spirit, has both real and symbolic connection to the empowerment of women – a connection that leads Mark Hutchinson to observe that “if Pentecostalism is to be identified as a form of innovative evangelicalism, that innovation almost always locates itself in advancing the ministries of women.”⁴ We might highlight the corollary; that Pentecostal movements that end up restricting the ministry of women, whether intentionally or otherwise, may well be setting themselves up for stagnation and, eventually decline.

In this light, it is noteworthy that the empowering of women that seemed to accompany the revivalist origins of global Pentecostalism was not sustained over the course of the century. One hundred years later, the place of women in our churches is very different. In 2003 in the Assemblies of God in the U.S.A, for example, only 17.4% of clergy were female, and the percentage of women serving churches as senior pastors was only 3.64%. The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), which only accepted women for ordination in 1984, still has women constituting only 21% of credential holders – and only 2% of senior pastors are female.⁵ The situation in Australia is similar. 26% of credential holders are women, but they hold a disproportionate percentage of lower level credentials and represent only 5.7% of senior pastors – and even these tend to be in smaller churches (I am not familiar with a single female senior pastor of a church with a congregation of 1000). When considered in terms of the leadership of the movement, there are few women on regional and state executives and only one on the National Executive (Donna Crouch, elected in 2009).

Of course, one might complain that this is little more than “damned lies and statistics,” but outside of the fact of sheer numbers, research has shown that women continue to be subject to social, cultural and theological forces that restrict their ministry. Cheryl Catford, for example, in her research into the experience of female pastors in the CRC movement, argues that an ‘ideal-real’ gap exists between the formal rules (and self-understanding) of the Pentecostal movement and its actual practice. That is to say, ideally, Pentecostalism does empower women. Most Pentecostal fellowships make no distinction between women and men in respect to their formal rules of ordination. This legal equality is supported by a historic identity that explicitly recognises the importance of women in ministry.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Cheryl Catford, “Women’s Experiences: Challenges for female leaders in Pentecostal contexts,” in Clifton and Grey, *Raising Women Leaders* .

The history of female empowerment has given rise to theological symbols that provide potent and active support for the idea that women can and should rise to all levels of leadership and influence. Particularly important is the experience and theology of Baptism in the Spirit. As I have argued elsewhere, Spirit baptism is central to Pentecostal identity. In a world of hopelessness and nihilism, it emphasises the possibility of holiness and empowerment, and effects personal transformation, helping to raise up otherwise insignificant, downtrodden and oppressed people (including marginalised women), and enabling them not only to reframe their own lives, but to speak and act prophetically in the church and to society as a whole. The notion of baptism in the Spirit as universally available, and universally empowering for people regardless of gender, race, class and intelligence is a powerful symbol, underlining notions such as the universal priesthood and prophethood of all believers – concepts that insist upon gendered (and racial and economic) equality.⁶

Notwithstanding these grounds for female empowerment, the actual reality for Pentecostal women (in Australia and globally) is far from ideal (the ideal-real gap described by Catford). As is well-documented throughout the Christian church, Pentecostals are not alone in this situation.⁷ Yet the failure of the movement to realise gender equality in ministry is disappointing – and its impact upon our women and, therefore, on all of us, is substantial. As a teacher, I have been made all too aware of the extent to which the rhetoric of spirit empowerment is not matched by the practice of church ministry. Not a semester goes by in which I do not receive notes thanking us for teaching a liberating and egalitarian message and, at the same time, testifying to the ongoing experience of sexism. The following extract from an email is typical:

As a female student in your class on redemptive human relationships, I felt for the first time deflected in my calling to ministry. Having returned home to complete my degree via correspondence and pursue other endeavours in ministry I have run into all of the classic arguments and even some downright mean reasons for why I should not be allowed to lead in the church. I am repeatedly encountering men who will tell me that I am out of line with Scripture (some in nice

⁶ See Clifton, *Pentecostal Churches in Transition*, 218.

⁷ The AGA situation firstly mirrors the Assemblies of God in America (see Deborah M. Gill, “The Contemporary State of Women in Ministry in the Assemblies of God,” *Pneuma* 17, no. 1 (1995): 33-36, although the problem is common to almost every denomination.

ways, others in not very nice ways) because of my role in the church. Obviously it is disheartening and frustrating to encounter these attitudes on a regular basis. Even worse, any argument I give in response, no matter how logical, tends to cause people to dig in their heels. I do not know how to handle, with grace, these challenging individuals, who basically inform me that I am not existing as “a woman should.” ... As if ministry isn’t exhausting enough, and I’m really quite battle weary from this on top of the things that really matter.⁸

The prejudices confronting this student are obvious and explicit, but the more insidious barriers preventing gifted females from being raised up into positions of leadership in churches are the common sense presumptions of language, social structures, biblical theology and ecclesial culture that enforce a restricted social space for women, and that go largely unnoticed by most people. These presumptions, which establish supposedly common sense stereotypical attitudes and responses to women whatever their situation in life (age, experience, capacity etc.), create and sustain an atmosphere that make it very difficult for women to lay claim to the responsibilities of senior positions of authority in our movements and churches. So potent is this atmosphere that we are not aware it even exists and, therefore, the unquestionable commonsense ‘truth’ that men will lead and women will follow persists despite the historical, theological and constitutional liberties that are, at least in theory, afforded to women in most PC movements.

Most spirit-empowered people would be horrified to be told that they function in such a way as to sustain a sexist church culture. Indeed, the use of the label itself would be considered by most to be derogatory and unreasonable. The difficulty, however, is that good intentions are not enough. In fact, the presumption that our communities are empowering to women (when compared, for example, to mainline denominations) creates the situation where the sense of self-congratulation undermines the voice of any who might be advocating for change. To facilitate change, it is vital that we face up to the fact that we have a problem, that women in our churches are subject to sustained and overwhelming (even if sometimes invisible) prejudice – a fact that should be concerning to all of us, even those of a more conservative bent.

It is beholden on us, therefore, to listen to the stories of women. One of the exercises we sometimes undertake in classes is to break

⁸ Anonymous source, used with permission.

students into small groups and invite the females present to share instances of prejudice that they have experienced directly. Men are asked to be silent, a deliberate recognition that it is normally the men doing the public speaking (and it is noteworthy how emotionally challenging it is to be asked not to talk but only to listen). What becomes apparent is that it is almost the universal experience of women to be pushed aside and excluded, in one way or another, from the structures of power in church and society and, further, that this experience is one that diminishes their sense of their own worth, capacity and calling. No matter how self-assured (or Spirit-assured) one might be, it is virtually impossible to resist the relentless pressure of gender-based discrimination. As Elizabeth Langton, a recent graduate commented:

Since my salvation, I have had an avid desire to serve God. In my last year of Bible College, I commenced a youth ministry role and came on pastoral staff in my church. Upon embarking into full time ministry, I was heavily confused by the mixed responses I received. While my Senior Pastors were supportive and overtly believed in me, I found many others seemed opposed to my leadership over men and/or held rigid viewpoints of the qualities, gifting, personality and roles that I should surrender to as a leader. Overall, I found that there was a real lack of understanding and support for me as a single woman in ministry. As a result, I became very unsure about my calling and whether I had what it takes to really be an influential woman.

These anecdotal stories are backed up by quantifiable research. In her study, Cheryl Catford identified numerous obstacles and challenges faced by female leaders in Pentecostal contexts, and in what follows I reflect upon three of the challenges she identifies:

1. “The Challenge of the Lack of Strong Theological Basis for Women in Leadership”: Notwithstanding the historical and theological factors described above, Pentecostalism remains a movement struggling between what Harvey Cox describes as a “contest between the fundamentalist and the experientialist impulse.”⁹ What this means is that its experience of equality in the Spirit is confronted by conservative Bible reading and theologies that insist on male headship in the home and church. The fact that, in practice, many female women live in such a way as to render the ideology of male headship

⁹ Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1995, 310.

effectively redundant (in practice, most modern women have marriage relationships of mutuality), the presumption that men are the spiritual head of the home carries over into the church. That this concept is both unbiblical (is there a single mention of male spiritual headship in the Bible), illogical (what does it mean to be a “spiritual head”), and sexist (do we really believe men are spirituality superior to women) generally goes without question. The result is that even those women who themselves have developed an egalitarian theology find themselves restricted by the attitudes of others – forced repeatedly to defend their right to pursue their vocation and calling.

2. “The Challenge of the Pentecostal Cultural Norm that Leadership is Male”: There are at least two issues arising from the fact that most leaders in are churches are male. In the first place and at its most basic, the lack of female role models and mentors is self-perpetuating. In the second place and more fundamentally, the very structures that have come to predominate tend to be oriented toward male leadership styles. As Jacqueline Grey suggests, there is a predominately masculine culture within the AoG, one that finds its way into the nature of movement events and public communications and, even more insidiously, into the very structures of church leadership.¹⁰ Indeed, various studies have found support for the position that women and men differ in ministry styles. Edward Lehman suggests men are more likely to use power over their congregations than women, and prefer “rational structure in decision making.”¹¹ According to Lehman, women, by contrast, were more likely to attempt to involve and empower their congregants to manage much of the church’s business and to prefer decision making by open-ended, unstructured, and inclusive discussions and dialogue, using “intuition” as much as

¹⁰ Jacqueline Grey, “Torn Stockings and Enculturation: Women Pastors in the Australian Assemblies of God,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies*, no. 5/6 (January 2002): online at <http://aps.webjournals.org/articles/4-1/2002/2969.htm>, accessed 14 May 2004. Jim Reiher similarly suggests that there exists within the AGA an “unconscious ‘boys club’” which is both structural and cultural. See Jim Reiher, “Do Assemblies of God Churches in Victoria Really Believe in Women's Participation in Church Leadership?,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies*, no. 7 (March 2003): available online at <http://aps.webjournals.org/articles/3-1/2003/4245.htm>, accessed 14 May 2004.

¹¹ Edward C. Lehman, *Gender and Work: The Case of the Clergy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 182-185.

rationality.¹² In this light, it is noteworthy that recent transitions in Pentecostal ecclesiology have led to increased hierarchy, and have tended to emphasise efficiency and effectiveness rather than intersubjectivity and relationality.¹³ This is apparent in the shift away from congregationalism in the local church, and in the increasing influence of the mega-church as the ultimate vehicle of church life and politics. Since women tend to value relationality more than the practical elements of polity and institutional organisation, they tend to be alienated from these emerging structures, or to be assigned subordinated functions within these structures.¹⁴ The consequence of this alienation is circular. Lack of female involvement in the higher levels of church structures leads increasingly to the undermining of intersubjective values, which further excludes women, and reinforces the stereotyping of gender distinctions. The result is not only discrimination against women. The movement itself loses the communal and relational emphasis that might derive from the empowerment of women, and individuals, men and women alike, are prevented from “recovering aspects of our full psychic potential that have been repressed by cultural gender stereotypes.”¹⁵

3. “The Challenge of the Need for Male Patronage”: Given the simple fact that most leaders are men, it is vital that women receive mentoring

¹² Lehman, *Gender and Work*, 184. Studies investing sex discrimination and female involvement in corporate life in Australia give rise to similar conclusions. According to Joan Eveline and Lorraine Hayden, “Women emphasize cohesiveness. They are much less individualistic and spend time fostering an integrative culture and climate. . . . Group activities are more highly valued by women than men.” Joan Eveline and Lorraine Hayden, “Women's Business: Connecting Leadership and Activism,” (Women's Business, Centre for Women and Business, Discussion Paper Series: The University of Western Australia, 2000).

¹³ See Shane Clifton, “Pragmatic Ecclesiology: The Apostolic Revolution and the Ecclesiology of the Assemblies of God in Australia,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 9 (2005).

¹⁴ Mega-churches, for example, would deny the charge that women are alienated from their structures. They would argue that women's ministry is integral to their success. Thus, for example, Hillsong's Women's Conference is one of the outstanding features of that particular churches ministry. Yet the prominence of this women's ministry has not translated into female involvement in the upper levels of leadership in the church and fellowship.

¹⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*, 10th anniversary ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 113.

and support from these men. The difficulty is not only the fact that male leaders tend to gravitate more naturally toward the support of younger men (given shared passions for “manly” activities such as football – or for the current batch of Aussie pastors, motorbikes). More significant is the common fear of cross gender relationships that prevails among conservative Christians. Public moral failures of prominent pastors in recent decades have contributed to official and unofficial rules and practices that prevent men and women spending any time together alone. While such practices may be well intentioned, they have the unintended consequence of separating women from male leaders and colleagues, reinforcing the glass ceiling that keeps women out of leadership. Apart from the fact that these restrictions ignore the reality that many of the public failures the church is reacting against involved married men engaging in gay sex (and we have no problems with male pastors developing close friendships with each other), such practices establish a legalistic approach to human relationships and ethics. Just at a time when Pentecostals believe that they have escaped the legalisms of past generations, restrictions against attending the cinema have been replaced with rules preventing open and honest relationships between women and men. And as St. Paul reminds us, legalism leads to death – in this case, the death of female ministry (ironically, by way of practices that are unlikely to even achieve their intention to prevent infidelity).

I have touched on only 3 of the many challenges that might be identified to explain the ‘ideal-real’ gap of female empowerment in Pentecostal churches. What upsets me most is the fact that these issues are not taken seriously. Even pastors who would consider themselves egalitarian in their attitudes toward gender happily invite speakers to their pulpit who reveal explicit and implicit sexist attitudes – reinforcing male headship, telling sexist jokes, using gender exclusive language and illustrations. There is a tendency to ignore these attitudes, or to set them aside and focus on “more important matters.” But is this passivity adequate? Would we respond as passively to ministers who assume the superiority of the “European” over against the “Asian”, or who tell racist jokes, or who use offensive terms such as “nigger”? I hope not. But if not, why doesn’t our blood boil when women are treated as sub-human?

What is needed, then, is a more active and deliberate effort among Pentecostal communities to follow the lead of the Spirit and seek to raise up women leaders. This is a multi-faceted task, one that demands creativity, determination, and the shared effort of Spirit filled men and

women. At the very least it will involve, first, careful biblical and theological analysis that not only retrieves the liberating and egalitarian message of the gospel and Pentecostal history, but that also engages critically with those aspects of our tradition that have sustained and propagated sexism. Second, it will require active and public communication of an egalitarian faith, with the goal of transforming cultures and institutions. This not only involves explicit preaching and teaching but a thoroughgoing modelling of female / male equality, both in speech (in the language we use and don't use) and in action. Organisationally, this should even include pro-active efforts to include women in prominent positions of institutional leadership. Pro-active actions - such as allocating seats on the national, state and regional executives of the movement, as well as on local church elderships - are often resisted on the presumption that they work against 'merit' based election. This presumes, however, that women do not 'merit' election to such positions of authority, and forgets the fact that our current structures make it easier for men than women to rise to positions of power (which makes it likely that men of less 'merit' are currently on our boards).

Finally, Pentecostals need to resist the fundamentalist impulse that too often frames their religious practices and, instead, re-focus their attention on the liberative experience that lies behind the theology of Spirit baptism. This experience is not only capable of transforming individuals, taking them beyond the supposed restrictions of their class, race and gender, but also of redefining community life – overturning restrictive hierarchies and equally empowering all people, including women. It is only in the Spirit that we will overcome stultifying legalisms and truly learn to love and respect each other. Spirit empowered people might even be capable of crossing the boundaries of gender, of establishing open and generous relationships that ensure mutual respect and openness and that facilitate mutual flourishing and the reaching of our full-potential in Jesus Christ.