

# Crafting a Church Without Walls

## Three Pastors Share How Their Churches Embraced Gender Equality, and What They Learned Along the Way

by Lola Scobey

Whether it's a church with about 85 members, one with 850 members, or one with around 8,000 members, three gift-based churches, as described by their pastors, practice a model of church life that is not typical, regardless of size.

These three pastors — Austin Stouffer, Jo Ann Kunz and John Ortberg — have steadily guided their members to use their spiritual gifts in an environment of gender equality. And each states that their gift-based church acquired its egalitarian stance from one fundamental: studying the Scriptures with other Christians.

Austin Stouffer is pastor of Grace Evangelical Free Church in Thunder Bay, Ontario, a small but vibrant church of 75-90 members, with the written mandate: "to reach all walks of life in a class-free, self-help oriented, biblically stimulating environment, while still remaining within our denomination."

Stouffer, the son of a mother who preached, worked 10 years in social work with abused women and broken families before entering seminary. There he encountered what he terms "extreme hierarchical views" on gender. However, earning a master's degree and then a doctorate in divinity gave him a grasp of New Testament Greek and Hebrew that reinforced his innate sense of gender equality.

Six years ago, Stouffer, a marriage and family therapist as well as pastor, was asked by five mostly young, middle-class couples to lead them in starting a new church. "I explained eight 'musts' that I would insist on if I pastored another church," he says. "One of them was absolute gender equality."

The group then asked him to present a mini-workshop on gender and giftedness. "To my surprise," Stouffer says, "they were delighted with my explanations."

Today Stouffer says, "Grace Evangelical has unalterably entrenched the following statement in their own church Constitution: Members of both genders ... may serve in any capacity or hold any office in the church."



**Concrete Plans:** Austin Stouffer says it's easier to affirm biblical equality in a church "from scratch," as did Grace Evangelical Free Church in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

This includes serving on the Pastoral Care Council, which functions basically like an elder board. In addition, Stouffer says that when he goes on holidays, the committee that chooses lay people to take the pulpit "usually chooses women over men two to one, based on ability to preach."

### Bible Study Prompts Church Change

Jo Ann Kunz began attending Hosanna Christian Fellowship in Lititz, Penn., in 1980, only a few months after meeting Christ as an adult. Hosanna is the only church she has ever been a member of — and today she is senior pastor.

As a new member, it soon became obvious Kunz was gifted to teach and had a strong leadership gift. But recognizing these gifts in an environment that only affirmed them in men led to confusion for Kunz. She describes her mixed emotions as "thinking that this really must be something God was doing — but also fearing that something was wrong with it, wrong with me."

She had to know the truth, not just for herself, but

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for every other gifted woman she saw in her church. As a result, she and her male pastor studied the Scriptures together in his office for 4-8 hours a day, 3-4 days a week.

"We began by putting aside everything we had been taught and just approached the Scriptures with as unbiased a mind as we could," she says. "When we really saw what Genesis 1-3 was saying — that woman is the mirror image of man, equal in every way, I put my head down on the desk and wept. What freedom!"

These studies led the male pastor to preach numerous sermons on gender equality. Today Hosanna is the only church in an area Kunz describes as "very conservative and steeped in religious tradition" which has both a female senior pastor and a female associate pastor as well as a policy that "no door is closed because of gender."

### Mega-Church Has Foundation of Equality

John Ortberg came to gigantic, national news-making Willow Creek Church as teaching pastor eight years ago. Holding a master's of divinity and a doctorate in clinical psychology, he was formerly senior pastor of a church in Los Angeles and is a recognized author in the areas of spiritual formation and leadership. Willow Creek is located in South Barrington, Ill., a suburb of Chicago, and often has as many as 17,000 people attend services.

Ortberg credits his church's gift-based ministries to Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian's legacy there. A noted Bible scholar whom Ortberg calls a "founding wisdom figure" of Willow Creek, Bilezikian led the initial leaders through a process of studying what the Bible says about a woman's place in the church and family. This laid a foundation for the church, which now includes women not only as elders and as teaching pastors (i.e. preachers), but in every aspect of church life.

Ortberg himself initiated a series at Willow Creek's mid-week service, typically attended by 6,000 people, called "What Does the Bible Say About Men and Women?" "This is an issue which goes unaddressed at too many churches," he says. "Our senior pastor had been speaking on leadership at a conference and received a note afterwards that said, 'Help, I'm a leader trapped in the body of a woman.' We need very direct teaching on these issues."

### Building Blocks for Change

All three pastors report that simply studying the Scriptures with full openness allows the Holy Spirit to bring about change in church life.

But further discussion reveals a shared experience: Each has grown to see that while right knowledge can drive change, full-orbed wisdom is ultimately required to change a church. They describe a breed of wisdom that includes resolute courage, spiritual maturity, clear focus, careful planning, flexibility, perseverance, compassion and respect.

Stouffer acknowledges that it is easier to affirm gender equality in a church "from scratch," as both he and Willow Creek



**Building Blocks:** John Ortberg recommends working for change in a church with several basic steps, such as doing a careful Bible study and helping members recognize their spiritual gifts.



have done.

But wherever you start, Willow Creek's Ortberg points out, "As time passes, you have to recognize you will have a diverse congregation. And it can be deadly for leaders to assume that the congregation knows what the leaders believe."

Based on Willow Creek's experience, Ortberg recommends several steps:

1. Begin with leaders doing a careful Bible study.
2. Constantly cast vision that the church is organized around giftedness.
3. Do clear, careful, sound, exegetical teaching on this issue.
4. Offer or even require members to attend seminars that identify each person's spiritual gifts.
5. Find gifted people who can be models and let people experience gift-based ministry.

"When people experience a great leadership or teaching gift exercised by a woman, change happens,"

Ortberg says, recalling a man mentored by Nancy Beach, one of their two female teaching pastors. "This man told me, 'I've never done this before. I have unresolved emotions about it. But no one has ever developed me the way she has.'"

Even beyond such concrete steps, Ortberg suggests allowing a lot of time, being persistent, and realizing that change on this issue is a subcategory of how to bring about change in a church in general. "You've got to discern," he says, "how much change can this church take?"

All three pastors agree that change requires strong intentionality and that conflict is inevitable. "Don't just sit there hoping things will change," says Kunz. "And don't think change will come without opposition and conflict. Change by its very nature brings conflict. As Flannery O'Connor said, 'Healing only occurs when the waters are disturbed.'"

But Kunz is hopeful. "Remember," she says, "experts tell us it only takes 2 percent of a group to change the culture of a group. Only 2 percent. You may lose some folks. But you will gain far more."

### **Baby Steps in Stubborn Churches**

How do leaders respond if members are resistant — and how do members respond if church leadership is resistant? Even today, Stouffer's denomination does not share his views on gender equality and still refuses to ordain women.

"Gender equality simply cannot be attained by one nuclear confrontation," Stouffer says, citing how even moderate efforts concerning gender are often interpreted as aggressive by others. "I've had a lot better success with small steps," he adds.

Stouffer highlights extensive New Testament Greek exegesis and word etymology as an effective small step. "No one has ever been offended when I have explained proper word usage," he says. He also uses a balance of men and women in sermon illustrations and coaches the church's nominating committee to always seek the most competent and qualified person for any position, regardless of gender.

Ortberg suggests networking with other churches that have gone through change. "It's key here to not lose hope," he says. "Because when you lose hope, you lose the motivation to act. Networking will help you keep going."

Kunz acknowledges that the pastor of her church did it the hard way. "The only congregational education was from the pulpit," she says. "There were a series of messages with little preparation for

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## **One Pastor's Approach to Gender-Inclusive Language**

**J**o Ann Kunz's commitment to biblical equality is apparent not only in her beliefs, but in her words too.

As senior pastor of Hosanna Christian Fellowship in Lititz, Penn., Kunz takes care in the language she uses, whether in reading Bible translations, using imagery for God, or communicating through preaching.

The Bible translation Kunz uses, she says, varies according to the situation. She sometimes uses gender-accurate translations (which use inclusive terms for people when the original author was referring to members of both sexes), but sometimes she doesn't. "I use the translation that best conveys the message," she says.

Her translation choice also depends on the message that she's teaching. If she's teaching topically, she often uses the gender-accurate New Living Translation (NLT) or New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), whereas if she's teaching exegetically, she uses the translation that she believes best captures the original language.

In referring to God, Kunz teaches her church what the Bible says: "that God is spirit, that God does not have gender because God is neither male nor female." This means she can call God "Father" (as Jesus did), while still recognizing the feminine imagery used of God in Scripture.

When it comes to preaching, Kunz notes that gender equality is only part of the gospel. "The message I preach is not gender equality; it's Christ crucified and resurrected," she says. "And while I certainly don't shy away from teaching the whole truth about gender equality, I also don't make it the centerpiece of every sermon I preach."

While Kunz' belief in gender equality influences her approach to language, she doesn't want to become so sensitive about it that she compromises her commitment to teach and preach God's word as accurately as possible. "I don't need to manipulate [the Bible] to include women and equality," she says. "It's there in the original texts."

— Joanne Nystrom Janssen

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the congregation and these messages were quite 'in your face' — confrontational, combative, almost arrogant. The attitude of the messenger caused more resistance than there needed to be."

Ultimately, Ortberg advises leaders to return to the basics. "I try to keep the whole situation rooted in love," he says. "I try to teach rightly. I try to show appropriate pastoral sensitivity to people who disagree. I try to honor their understanding of Scripture, to remember that they are not bad people because they see it differently. I work to achieve community; that's a whole lot more important than proving myself right."

### Discerning God's Direction

But despite the missteps implicit in a learning curve, all of these churches affirm gender equality today. What if change in one's own church seems very far away? How does a church member know whether to stay or to leave?

"If you see small battles bringing small victories, hang in there if you can," Stouffer counsels. "However, if staying requires you to renounce or compromise your fundamental beliefs in any area, you're not doing yourself or the congregation any favors by staying."

"Ultimately it's a discernment question," Orberg notes. "What is your concept of commitment? The Desert Fathers and Mothers said, 'Wherever you find yourself, don't easily leave.' This is how you grow. You've got to have a whole underlying sense of what commitment means to you. So, be very careful before you commit to a church in the first place."

Kunz, who is a spiritual director as well as pastor, also focuses on discernment. "First, you must get alone with God and discern direction directly from him," she says. "God is the only one who knows whether that church, that leader, will ever change. God is the only one who knows whether you will be part of changing that church or not. You've got to hear from God."

### From Paralyzed in Pew to Active in Ministry

How have these churches benefited from allowing every member to practice God-given gifts regardless of gender? "It's huge," says Ortberg. "Otherwise,



**Hard Labor:** Jo Ann Kunz studied the Bible with her pastor for 4-8 hours a day, 3-4 days a week, in order to discover what it said about women in ministry.

we'd be working with one hand tied behind our back. We'd be literally impoverished."

Stouffer says the 30 years he has spent as a marriage and family therapist has led to his passion about biblical equality. "It is my impression that most churches are far more accepting of a divorced or separated husband than a wife in that position," says Stouffer. "At Grace, fully one-third of our adults are divorced, separated or remarried. In our group, they feel accepted and loved the way they are, and nurtured in the Word to become all they can be in Christ."

Kunz observes husbands and wives in her church experience what she calls "deeper and more intimate relationships when they drop all the cookie-cutter roles." Plus, "At Hosanna," she says, "half the gifts of the church are not sitting dormant because the women have been sidelined."

Furthermore, Kunz has seen a remarkable effect even outside her own church. "A few church leaders in the area have come to believe in gender equality — and a few more have come to at least tolerate it," she says, "because they can't question what God is doing in the midst of our church. In the first 18 months I was senior pastor, almost 100 people were saved. That's a God thing!"

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