Embodying What Can Be: What Star Trek and Women Preachers Have in Common

I grew up in a Star Trek family. I was so devoted to it that, to my eternal shame, I spent the entirety of fifth grade (and a lot of hairspray) trying to make my hair look like Captain Kirk’s. The world of Star Trek captivated me. The adventures, the ships, the aliens! It was only later that I learned about its social impact.

Airing in the 1960s, Star Trek: The Original Series imagined a future where different races, nationalities, genders, and even species served side by side on a peaceful quest of discovery. Characters included Russian and Asian men and an African-American woman, Lieutenant Uhura.

Nichelle Nichols, who played Uhura, was one of the first African-American women to play a TV role other than a servant. After the show’s first season, she chose to leave TV for the stage, but was convinced to stay by none other than Martin Luther King, Jr., who told her “You cannot abdicate your position. You are changing the minds of people across the world, because for the first time, through you, we see ourselves and what can be.” ¹

Whoopi Goldberg credited Nichols with inspiring her own career (and Star Trek fandom). At the age of nine, Goldberg turned on the TV, saw Nichols, and “ran through the house screaming: Come quick, come quick. There’s a black lady on TV and she ain’t no maid.” ²

So great was Nichols’ influence that NASA hired her to recruit women and minorities for its space shuttle program. Among her recruits were Sally Ride, the first woman in space, and Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman in space.

This is why representation matters. What we see on our screens, in our books, and on our stages shapes our dreams. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “we see ourselves and what we can be.” ³

Just as it matters who we see on TV, it matters who stands behind our pulpits on Sundays. If the Bible teaches that women and men are both called to lead and preach (and it does), then our churches must reflect it. It matters that our daughters and sons see women leading in our churches. It’s not enough to talk about our beliefs (though we should talk about them). We need to live them out.

For churches, this means calling women as pastors. It means inviting women to be elders and deacons. It means creating church cultures where sexism isn’t tolerated and girls and women are encouraged to pursue their gifts. It means going the extra mile to serve and support female leaders who face social pressure and opposition that male pastors have never experienced. In a Christian culture that is often hostile toward women in leadership, it means taking risks in obedience to God.

Looking at our world today, you might forget that Star Trek: The Original Series was a bust. The show was cancelled after three years. Yet, fifty years later the franchise it spawned is thriving; Star Trek movies, shows, games, books, and toys are everywhere. Star Trek is now considered one of the most influential franchises in TV history. Why? Because it showed us a world that could be, even if it’s not here yet. It is a world where we see the best of humanity.

For advocates for churches where women and men serve as equals, our work can feel like an uphill climb. We do well to remember that ours, too, is a vision of the best of humanity and the church. We can take heart in the knowledge that this vision is not ours, but God’s.

Women around the world live out this vision every day. They are our heroes and our role models. Their lives and their stories show us who we are and who we can be. They show us what the church can be, even if it has not yet arrived. In this issue of Mutuality, we share a few of their stories.

The four feature articles are the winners of CBE’s 2017 writing contest. Each is the story of a woman who leads and preaches. Pastor or not, these women are what the preachers in our midst look like. There is pain and healing, risk and reward, grief and celebration. May they encourage and inspire you.

In Christ,
Tim Krueger