

How to Find a Church that Empowers Women

By Ruth Martin



This article has developed through specific conversations with Sydney Hughes, Jessica Cheng, and Genevieve Pierre, and through being in community with my fellow female seminarians at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I am grateful for the rich sisterhood I have experienced there.

Finding a new church is often an anxiety-inducing process. People look for a new church for various reasons; the search could be triggered by moving to a new area, leaving a previous church, or even becoming a Christian. The “church search” seasons I’ve found myself in during the last ten years have been related to my moving to new locations. The top

criterion I’ve learned to look for is not shared political ideology, nor the quality of the musicianship of the worship team, but rather whether the church worships the same Jesus I know, love, and follow. All other criteria I might have are secondary to this point. Their beliefs about the Bible and important theological issues (such as Jesus’s incarnation, divinity, and resurrection)

are critical points of evidence in whether we follow and worship the same God. Will the church be a family where I am supported in my discipleship to Jesus? Can I see myself being part of this community and able to support these brothers and sisters in their discipleship journeys?

With this in mind, it is important to determine whether a church will support me as a woman in following Jesus's leading in my life. I've been to

churches where I've taken too long to recognize that the environment there was more of a hinderance than a help to me as a woman with my specific callings. Because of this, I've become sensitive to how churches approach empowering and supporting the women who are a part of their church bodies. With this in mind, how do we then go about finding a church, and what are some benchmarks we can use to identify whether a church will support women in their callings?

Step One: Online Research

A great first step in finding a new church is to research local churches online. The information churches include on their websites, on leadership pages, and in their belief statements can start to give us clues as to how that church approaches women in ministry. Healthy churches enthusiastically affirm women and men who serve the church in their callings, whatever they may be. This will be reflected

by the presence of women in several areas of the church's leadership and administration. You will see women listed as members of the elder board and/or in advisory positions such as directors and leaders. Women will also be included in committees that oversee the pastoral staff, if the structure of the church has this. Here are some things to look for:

Does the church's denomination ordain women?


If the church you're researching is part of a denomination, does that denomination support women in ministry? Some churches deviate from their denominational position on issues like this, but most do not.

Are women listed as part of the church staff?

Looking more broadly, what kinds of jobs do women have at the church? Often, these jobs fall along traditional gendered lines: secretaries are women, grounds crew are men, etc. Pay attention to whether there is balanced diversity among the staff. Do women occupy a range of positions or do the jobs fall within traditional gender roles?

Is there diversity among the church leadership? Does the church include women on the pastoral team, elder board, or equivalent?

Red Flags

 Women are *only* listed in positions of authority over the children's ministry, the women's ministry or the worship team.

If you work with the children or women of your congregation, be encouraged that this is good and honorable work for God's kingdom. If these are the only leadership opportunities for women, however, the church may not permit women to teach or lead adult men. This communicates two beliefs. First, that there are limits to what women can or should do and that there are areas where

women cannot serve. Second, that areas where women serve are secondary or less important than others like teaching or preaching to full congregations.

🚩 Women are listed in leadership, but without the title of “pastor.”

Regardless of what area of the church a woman serves in, the terms used to describe the positions women occupy are important. If a position were held by a man and given the title “pastor,” would a woman in that same job receive the same title or would she be called “director” or “administrator?” Such a church demonstrates a willingness to work with women but has a problem viewing them as pastors.

🚩 There are only women in leadership.

While this is rare, I believe that the same reason male-only church leadership is problematic should also be applied to female-only church leadership. Does not the diverse kingdom of God proclaimed to the world entail the diversity of women and men?

As you explore the church’s website, more subtle concerns might arise. While these may not be as overtly obvious as the previous points, the following yellow flags are worth further examination.

Yellow Flags

🚩 Women are listed as deacons but not elders.

On the one hand, churches that have female deacons believe that women can have some leadership, and the nature of the church may reveal a compassionate and empowering approach towards women. On the other hand, does the ceiling of what roles women are allowed to occupy stop at “deacon”? Again, the church may believe that it’s permissible for women to serve in “lesser” roles (deacon coming from the Greek word diakonos meaning “servant” or “assistant”), but not leadership roles traditionally associated with clear influence or authority.

🚩 All women in leadership serve alongside their husbands.


Churches where the only women in leadership serve alongside their husbands tend to believe that women need to be under the headship of their husbands. Though there is an encouraging sign of women being able to pursue their calling, opportunities for single women are implicitly closed off, while the message that being married as a requirement for ministry is also implied.

A pastor’s wife carrying the title of co-pastor might not mean that she is ordained or has herself had pastoral training. If a church has women serving in meaningful ways alongside their husbands, this is cause for rejoicing! But qualifications for women’s leadership should not be “married to a pastor.” Does the woman in her own right have the calling, training, and qualifications for leadership, and does the church recognize this? The church may not have complementarian beliefs about headship or marriage, but asking questions about opportunities for single women as well as beliefs about headship and authority is worthwhile.

If a position were held by a man and given the title “pastor,” would a woman in that same job receive the same title, or would she be called “director” or “administrator”?

Research online can only tell so much, and sometimes a church website's pages on doctrine and belief statements are unhelpful. A church can easily write up a statement on something but not live it out or work towards growth in that area. Their statement on women in ministry may reflect a genuine value or vision, but if this is the only piece of evidence you have that a church empowers

women, I recommend scheduling a talk with the pastor or an elder about how the church lives out their vision on a practical level. Core values will show themselves in church practice and culture; outward statements mean little if women are not empowered to serve and follow Jesus in their callings in the day-to-day life of the church.



Their statement on women in ministry may reflect a genuine value or vision, but if this is the only piece of evidence you have that a church empowers women, schedule a talk with the church's leadership to learn how the church lives out their vision on a practical level.

Step Two: Visit

At this point, you've checked out the website and are at the stage where you can visit in person. There is a lot to consider in how a church presents itself, and

greater clarity may come through conversations with the people in the church. What are the things to pay attention to?

How are women present during the gathering?

Do women lead worship or give the sermon? Are female guests ever invited to preach? Do women read Scripture and/or pray publicly? Do they usher or serve communion? Among the women in formal and informal positions, is there a diversity of marital status, age, class, race, and personality?

How is marriage addressed?


Do sermons, studies, or marriage-related events reinforce gender roles or is mutual love and self-sacrifice emphasized? Is marriage considered a default expectation, or is singleness valued?

Are sermon illustrations male-centric?

When women are used in illustrations, are the examples only in relation to the home and family?

How do women and men interact?

Do they interact with people who aren't their spouses? Do women and men equally engage with you in conversation? Do you get the sense that conversing with someone of the opposite sex (married or single) is normal and accepted?



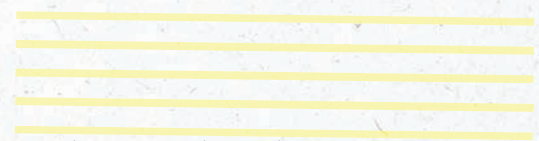
Every church has weak areas, and growing healthy and strong diversity between women and men in the church is an ongoing process.

□ Are ministries *always* segregated into men's groups and women's groups?

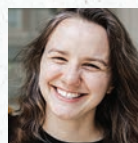
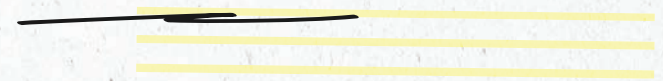
Segregated groups can be beneficial and even necessary at times, but if every ministry is sex-specific, be wary. What sort of conferences or retreats are offered? Are women equally expected at theological or Bible study events, and men at counseling events or activities involving children? During ministry gatherings, do women freely share their thoughts alongside their male peers or does there seem to be a preference and deference to the contributions of men?

When looking for a new church home, we may have a list of "must-haves" for the perfect church. It can be easy to critique and judge how a church falls short. But no church is perfect, and even the best churches I've been part of still have areas where they are learning how to better reflect the multifaceted wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). Every church has weak areas, and growing healthy and strong diversity between women and men in the church is an ongoing process. We cannot fix our

problems and bind up our brokenness on our own; we must be led by the Holy Spirit in our pursuit of Christ. Thus, the primary question we should be asking about a church is not whether it's perfect, but "Do we see Jesus here?" If that body of believers is actively and consistently pursuing Jesus, then I believe, just as Jesus *called* women and treated them as full image-bearers, that church will have signs of life in the area of empowering women.



The primary question we should be asking about a church is not whether it's perfect, but "Do we see Jesus here?"



Ruth Martin is currently studying at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary for a Master of Arts in Theological Studies with concentrations in the Old Testament and the New Testament. She is passionate about empowering women in the church, and she hopes to be an example to young women that they have a place in God's kingdom.