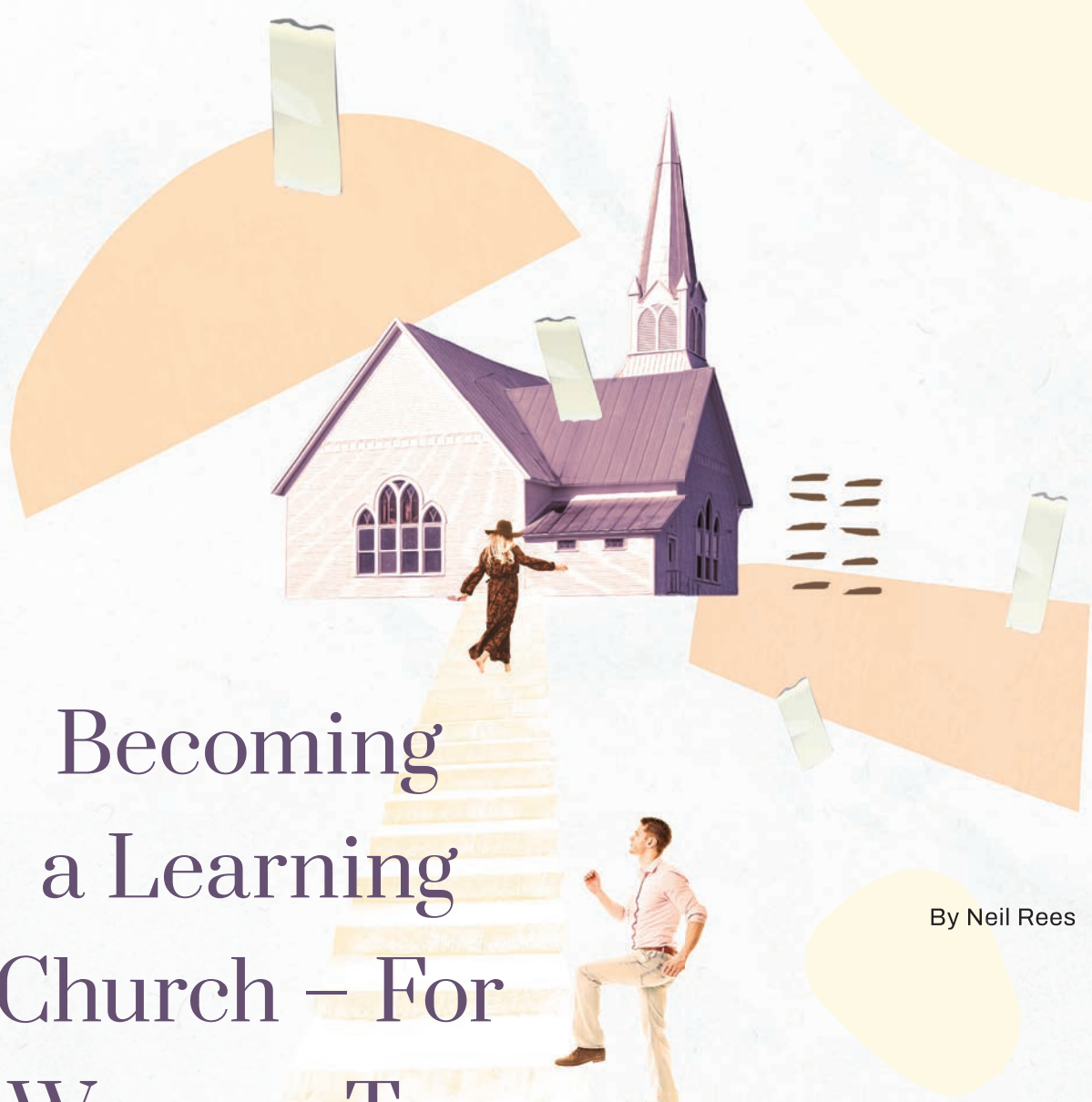




Becoming a Learning Church – For Women, Too

By Neil Rees

Ricardo stopped me by the door of the small shop unit where we held church meetings. “Have you ever been invited to someone’s house for a meal,” he started—and I could tell by his manner that this was not headed anywhere positive—“and they sit you down, put a bowl of tepid water in front of you, give it a couple of quick stirs, then take it away again—and that’s it, the whole meal?” “No, I don’t think I have,” I replied. “Why do you ask?” “Well, that’s how I felt in church today,” he retorted. “I came here to be fed from the word of God, only to hear a babbling brook, empty thoughts, nothing more than a shell of a message, and be sent home starving.”

Ouch! His words hurt, but not because I was the one who had preached that morning. I hadn’t. Instead, I’d asked a young woman called Magda to speak, and she had genuinely done really well. It’s possible that Ricardo’s uncharitable outlook reflected his own misogynistic theology, not the quality of her message, which would have put many more experienced speakers to shame. I desperately hoped that she hadn’t overheard his harsh words.

This was only the second or third time that Magda had stood at the front of the church, with genuine fear and trembling, to bring God’s word to us. A young

believer with clear leadership and speaking gifts, she needed encouragement, training, and opportunity, not dismissive comments designed to squash her back into the pews. I was deeply saddened that Ricardo's prejudice made him unable to hear what God might want to say through the voice of a woman, much less encourage Magda in her budding ministry.

A Learning Church

In addition to his rejection of women as Bible teachers, Ricardo had also completely missed the point of what it means to be a learning church. We are all disciples—learners—which essentially means one thing: we're not as good at stuff today as we will be tomorrow. The church ought to be a place where people can develop their gifts in safety, confident that others are cheering them on, not looking for the inevitable mistakes or not-as-good-as-it-could-be moments to criticise or disqualify them.

We need to know that we're on the same side, wanting to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds" (Heb. 10:24). Our priority should be "encouraging one another," particularly those keen but inexperienced novices taking early steps in ministry (Heb. 10:25). After all, it takes a whole lot of courage to make yourself vulnerable and take risks when you know full well—objectively at least—that you won't do as good a job as someone else who's been doing it for years.

"A woman should learn. . ."

Learning is not just for the men, though, as even the most patriarchal interpreter of Paul's frequently quoted words would have to admit (see 1 Timothy 2:11)! We want our churches to be places that reflect the universal truth of Galatians 3:28, where *all*, both female and male, can learn, grow, and use their God-given gifts equally. Yet the realities of past prejudice, discriminatory dogma, and male-dominated hierarchies in churches have created anything but a level playing field. Significant barriers need to be addressed for women to be able to learn and grow in ministry with the same freedom as their male colleagues. This requires courageous action on the part of leaders, whether female or male.

Encouragement, Training and Mentoring

Historically, our cultures—both secular and church—have empowered men and relegated women to lower status at every level. Male privilege has become normalised and thus hides in plain sight. Under its influence, boys happily put themselves forward for anything and everything, while girls can be labelled as pushy when attempting to do the same. Centuries of tradition create similar environments in churches in which men happily gravitate towards roles of influence and authority—and are welcomed—whereas women tend to be more reticent. And then,



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even when they do pluck up courage or determine not to be bound by unwritten rules, women often find they have to fight for acceptance.

This unequal starting point needs to be understood. Rather than waiting for women to take the initiative, leaders must carefully consider the potential in those they lead and proactively encourage women in exploring roles of authority or teaching ministries. To build genuine confidence, the understandable insecurities felt by many women should not be ignored but met with the offer of appropriate training and other learning opportunities. A long-term approach that includes mentoring, preferably by women with their own experience in Christian ministry, will bring better results than attempts to simply catapult women into high-profile roles without adequate preparation. It is a process, and every step of progress along the way should be recognised and celebrated.

Quotas, Targets, and Positive Discrimination

Across the world of business, it is widely acknowledged that companies are adversely affected by the low numbers of women represented on corporate boards.¹ So, governments in Europe have taken action, setting targets or quotas to encourage or mandate increased percentages of women at the highest levels of management.² This type of “positive discrimination” is often the only way to redress historic imbalances

and create a different organisational culture. The church is no different, and major change does not “just happen.” To restore balance in women’s participation in leadership and ministry, deliberate goals need to be set, pursued, and fought for.

Development of Role Models

One of the keys to success in most areas of life is found in having suitable role models. With the historic female to male imbalance in church leadership and ministry, it is a sad fact that the majority of girls in the church grow up without healthy role models that encourage them to think of themselves as potential church leaders, speakers, or pastors. If we do things right today and create suitable environments for women to grow in leadership and ministry responsibilities, we can trust that *future* generations of girls will have these role models. That does not solve the issue for us now, though. When a church does not have enough female leaders of its own to nurture and lift up its young women into leadership, it’s time to access outside resources. We invite missionaries to come and motivate people towards mission—in the same way, could we not consider inviting women in ministry to share their experiences and inspire other women to dream big dreams? Why not ensure that a significant majority of visiting speakers are women? The radical changes that we want to see require such bold actions.

Genuinely Female Leaders

In seeking suitable women role models, however, there is another danger to avoid. Women must not have to learn to “behave like men” to qualify for leadership or ministry positions. We believe in the biblical equality of women and men, not their uniformity. The church needs women to be free to bring their full selves to their God-given callings, and this demands a reset of church members’ expectations around leadership. If we think a female leader must essentially be a man in a woman’s body, then we have seriously missed the point. The church will be a much healthier place when women and men are permitted to lead according to their gifts and calling, without being constrained by stereotypes.

Clear Communication

For practical steps like this to be successful, it is essential that the whole church be on board with what is being done and understand what will be required and why. Vague talk about wanting

women to have more opportunities in ministry is insufficient if a church is to correct the long-standing subordination of women to men and its associated misrepresentation of Scripture and God's purposes. The reality of the imbalance of women and men needs to be communicated clearly, and it must be equally clearly labelled as unacceptable. As in other areas of ministry strategy—such as starting a new work in another neighbourhood or putting together a discipleship programme—churches should set out and agree upon their goals and the steps planned to achieve them.

Deborah, a Mother in Israel

One final word. Like Moses before her, for several decades Deborah embodied the roles of prophet, leader, and military commander—not to mention—singer! She did all this as a married woman and refers to herself as a "mother in Israel" (Judg. 5:7). Many women will, at some time in their lives, become mothers. Cultural roles and expectations about motherhood can vary considerably, but if we want women to take their rightful place in church leadership and ministry, being a mother must not be an obstacle. This does not mean simply providing a nursery so that mothers are released from childcare as soon as possible. Though there are occasions where such provision is appropriate, it should not be the only option. Another approach would be to normalise the role and responsibility of fathers in caring for children and supporting their wives in ministry. It may also involve getting used to having babies and small children around, creating spaces and scheduling breaks for breastfeeding, and de-emphasizing the sharp division between family and ministry that many churches traditionally create. Our claims of being "family-friendly" must translate into practical action and ensure that mothers—whatever their role or gifts—can continue to participate in all aspects of church life, even while caring for their children deserves special attention.

In addition, we should recognize that experience acquired through parenthood can be a positive factor that enriches and brings depth to a person's ministry.

In speaking about church leaders, Paul hints at the benefits of parenting experience, stating: "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:5). Compared with their male counterparts, the time that women often dedicate to motherhood may mean that fewer complete a DMin or other forms of formal training or experience, but that must never become an excuse for suggesting they are less suitable for church leadership and ministry. When combined with appropriate pathways for personal development, the unique experience of motherhood is an asset that should be valued as part of the process by which some women are moulded for leadership responsibility.

Women are every bit as capable of leadership in church as men, and equally gifted by God for this. Now it's up to us to lay down practical pathways to make this a reality for them.

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Neil Rees and his wife, Lynn, following ten years in the UK leading their sending church, have just returned to ministry in Spain, where they previously lived for twenty-seven years. This included eight years when Neil was international director of their mission agency, World Horizons.

1. See, for example, Credit Suisse, "Large-cap companies with at least one woman on the board have outperformed their peer group with no women on the-board by 26% over the last six years, according to a report by Credit Suisse Research Institute," Press Release, July 31, 2012, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us-news/en/articles/media-releases/42035-201207.html>, or Claire Braund, "Why Women Are Good for Business," Women on Boards, December 2011, <https://www.womenonboards.net/en-au/reference-items/career-and-leadership/why-are-women-good-for-business>.
2. See "EU action to promote gender balance in decision-making," European Commission, accessed March 31 2023, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/equality-between-women-and-men-decision-making/eu-action-promote-gender-balance-decision-making_en.