

Complementarian Ministry in the Local Parish Church

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A new situation has emerged in the Church of England over the last twelve months. We have seen the election of several female bishops but also the appointment of Rod Thomas as the new Bishop of Maidstone, with a remit to act as an advocate for conservative evangelicals, and the introduction of the “Five Guiding Principles” for ordination candidates, which express a firm commitment to enabling those opposed to female priests or bishops to “flourish” within the “life and structures” of the Church of England.¹ In this emerging new climate, therefore, one of the questions we need to be asking is how can we continue to represent and support those who hold a complementarian view of male headship in the church and enable them, to use the buzzword of the moment, to “flourish” in the Anglican church?

More broadly, this will entail a wider vision for the promotion of complementarian patterns of ministry in the Church of England, at both a national

¹ See Lee Gatiss's exposition of the “five guiding principles” (contained in GS Misc 1076), in “Principles of Flourishing?” in *Crossway* 136 (Spring 2015), pages 4-5 also available at http://churchsociety.org/crossway/page/principles_of_flourishing

and a local level. This is not to say that we should become a single-issue society or make complementarianism the defining feature of our membership; there is a spectrum of views on this issue within Church Society. Rather, as Anglican evangelicals who hold to a complementarian position and desire to remain within the Church of England increasingly turn to Church Society for advice, guidance, and support, our hope and desire is that this aspect of our work can take place within the context of a gracious, constructive engagement with those who hold different views, at all levels of the Anglican church.

We can do this in a number of ways: for example, through patronage, matching faithful gospel ministers to parishes, when their complementarian views may have excluded them from other jobs; Church Society can also offer support and advice to clergy who find themselves under the authority of a female bishop and unsure how to respond, and provide leadership for our constituency in response to unfolding developments within the Church of England. We can encourage men and women who hold complementarian views to stand for General Synod and other bodies, so that conservative evangelicals get a full and fair representation at all levels of the Church of England. We can also seek to be modelling a gracious, humble, and winsome engagement with the wider church, at a deanery, diocesan, and national level, in a way that gives glory to God and enables complementarian evangelicals to play a full part in the structures of the Church of England.

We can also raise awareness of other kinds of “women’s ministry”, such as supporting well-trained female Bible teachers on church staff teams, and promoting ways to train and equip laywomen to exercise their teaching gifts in appropriate contexts in the local church (an issue discussed in more detail elsewhere in this volume).² This is particularly important as a way of countering a narrow definition of “women’s ministry” in which ordination and preaching are depicted as the only proper channels for a woman to exercise her gifts, with anything else regarded as somehow inferior. After all, what better way to debunk the myth that conservative evangelicals are opposed to women’s ministry than by actively investing in it? We don’t want to give anyone an excuse to say that Church Society is “against women’s ministry”.

² See the following chapter by Jane Tooher.

Much could be said about all of these issues but, in keeping with the theme of transforming the church, this chapter will examine one area where the rubber really hits the road for complementarian ministers: on the ground in the local church. What will it look like for complementarian patterns of ministry to flourish and glorify Christ in the local parish church? In particular, what might this look like in a scenario that will become increasingly common: that of a complementarian minister who takes up an incumbency in a non-evangelical church? In what follows, I aim to set out some of the problems that have come up in researching this issue and to highlight areas in which we need to be supporting church leaders.³

Overcoming the problem of perception: the view from the pew

One of the biggest issues that a new minister will face is simply one of perception. Repeatedly, clergy report being met with a mixture of shock, surprise and suspicion from congregation members when their complementarian views become known. Occasionally, this manifests itself as outright hostility, but more commonly the response is simply bafflement. Many church members may never have come across a church leader under the age of sixty who takes a complementarian view, and who cannot therefore be dismissed as a crusty old dinosaur.

It is important to understand this reaction from a lay perspective, because this shouldn’t surprise us. We rightly emphasise our fellowship in the gospel with evangelical clergy who hold to the authority of scripture and teach sound doctrine but have come to different conclusions about the roles of men and women in the church, holding an “egalitarian” position as a matter of theological conviction. However, it is probably fair to note that this is not generally the position held by many lay people in parish churches up and down the country. This is not in any way to underrate the intelligence of lay people but simply to recognise the paucity of teaching on this subject. The majority of people in

³ Research data came from responses to a survey sent out by Church Society in early 2015, supplemented by conversations and correspondence with incumbents at a variety of different stages of ministry experience.

a non-evangelical church will have had no clear teaching on male and female roles in the church from any theological perspective. Into this vacuum, the combined influence of changes within the Church of England, liberal theology, one-sided media coverage, and wider cultural and political pressures have created an assumption that egalitarian views are now self-evidently correct.

We also need to recognise the trickle-down effect of feminism and gender theory from academia into the cultural mainstream in the last decade. For example, in September 2014, the intelligent and articulate young actor Emma Watson gave a much-lauded and highly publicised speech to the United Nations about gender equality, in which she confidently stated: “It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, instead of two sets of opposing ideals.”⁴ Complementarian ministers should not be naïve about the speed at which the assumption that gender differences are an “accidental” social and cultural construct, rather than a God-given and essential feature of humanity, has taken hold in British society — including among Christians. Consequently, the prevailing view in most churches is now what might be called “ambient egalitarianism”, that is, a position that has been dictated predominantly by society and culture rather than by theological conviction.

In addition, perhaps particularly among younger church members whose world-view has been heavily influenced by feminist rhetoric and an aggressive secular humanism which insists upon “rights”, the response may be one of deep offence. This cultural context makes it very difficult to be heard rightly, especially by lay women. Complementarianism is all too easily wrongly associated in people’s minds with sexism, misogyny, and abusive or oppressive treatment of women. Consequently, ministers have a lot of work to do in overcoming the negative cultural baggage associated with complementarian views. A preacher may have to spend a lot of time defining and re-iterating what they are *not* saying, as well as what they are saying. In particular, women with past experiences of abuse (and there are likely to be a number of women in this position, even in a small church) will easily mis-hear a man teaching on

⁴ <http://sociology.about.com/od/Current-Events-in-Sociological-Context/fl/Full-Transcript-of-Emma-Watson-s-Speech-on-Gender-Equality-at-the-UN.htm>. Ms Watson also experienced a deeply unpleasant internet backlash against her speech, from which complementarian Christians should, of course, rightly distance themselves.

this subject if care is not taken to portray the loving, Christ-like dimension of male headship. It may be helpful for a male Bible teacher to ask a female colleague, friend, or wife to read through a talk in advance and look out for how things might be mis-heard by female listeners.

In this context, complementarian ministers probably cannot state often enough the equal value, worth, and dignity of women in God’s sight, especially as fellow “heirs... of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7). Ministers may also need to take special care not to give unintentional offence, with casual sexism and lazy gender stereotyping in sermon anecdotes, for example. How many sermon illustrations in a given month typically involve men, especially as “heroes of the faith” from the past? Do examples and applications frequently draw on generic assumptions about traditional gender roles which risk going beyond scripture and may needlessly alienate listeners, such as always referring to a male “businessman” in the “workplace” application or having most “female” applications revolve around married women at home caring for children? (At the same time, do women who have chosen to stay at home and look after their children feel affirmed, valued, and encouraged by the church’s teaching, as this is not something they will receive in many other places?).

Are jokes and humour deployed in our teaching in a way that is not patronising or offensive to women, or reliant on unbiblical gender stereotypes? The familiar quote from Dorothy L. Sayers, noting that Jesus never behaved as if there were anything “funny” about woman’s nature, remains salient in today’s church, even if it has been quoted almost to death by both sides of the complementarian/egalitarian debate.⁵ Some of these suggestions may smack

⁵ D.L. Sayers, *Are Women Human? Astute and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), page 47: “Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as ‘The women, God help us!’ or ‘The ladies, God bless them!’; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no axe to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious... There is no act, no sermon, no parable in the whole Gospel

of tokenism, or even seem to be pandering to feminist sensibilities, but sometimes these small acts of consideration can go a long way towards reassuring the alarmed, nipping unwarranted assumptions in the bud, and preparing the ground for a sympathetic hearing.

In a similar vein, complementarian men also need to demonstrate their commitment to the dignified and honourable treatment of women in wider society, to counteract the myth that complementarianism equals abusive patriarchy. In this context, it may be helpful to “call out” the false dichotomy between feminism and other world-views (particularly religious ones) often propagated in the media, which implies that secular feminism is the only way to oppose the unjust treatment of women. According to this false logic, Jane opposes female genital mutilation (for example); feminists oppose FGM; therefore Jane must be a feminist—even if she hasn’t realised it yet. Yet a genuinely complementarian view of men and women will show a right concern over many of the issues about which feminists campaign.

Preaching the gospel to a lost world must always take top priority, but complementarians need to speak up from time to time on contemporary issues of injustice against women, both local and global; domestic abuse, misogynistic online “trolling” of women, the objectification of women in pornography and advertising, immense pressures on even young girls to conform to a narrow and highly sexualised ideal of female beauty, low female literacy rates, female infanticide and sex-selective abortion, to name just a few. Let’s not allow feminism to monopolise outrage over these things, particularly when a biblical world-view on these matters actually offers a lot more consistency and coherence in its response.

Of course, right-sounding words need to be reinforced by the minister’s respectful and appropriate behaviour towards the women in his congregation and on his staff team. Warm, interested engagement with any female deanery colleagues can also go a long way towards dispelling prejudice. Married clergy have the additional opportunity to demonstrate a loving and Christ-like relationship of male headship and female submission in close-up through their

own marriages. Indeed, the impact of a vicar’s wife who holds complementarian views and yet is clearly not an oppressed and downtrodden wife can be a very powerful factor in putting a human face on the culturally alien concept of submission in marriage. Above all, we must not give anyone an easy excuse to say, “The new vicar doesn’t like women.”

In addition, a congregation may contain a number of people who hold a complementarian view but for the wrong reasons, such as uncritical reliance on church tradition, social conservatism, or simply unreconstructed male chauvinism. Others may hold more traditional complementarian views but without really being able to articulate why, and as a result have become what might be called “shy complementarians”, who feel under pressure to keep quiet about their views.⁶ There is a need for clear teaching on these issues in local parish churches for all these groups; this is something that Church Society is keen to help with by providing resources and modelling a positive, confident complementarian perspective.

Introducing complementarian teaching in the local church

However, the big question for many complementarian clergy is how and when to introduce this kind of teaching. This is something that can generate a certain amount of anxiety among new incumbents. Too early, and you risk alienating a congregation who are still getting to know you and losing their trust. Leave it too late, and you risk never teaching clearly on it at all, always waiting for a “right” time that never comes and then moving on, leaving a church no clearer on the issue than they were when you arrived—which may be deeply unhelpful for the next appointment. Responses from more experienced incumbents suggest that there is no “one size fits all” approach to how to do this. Incumbents have taken a variety of approaches, from explicit thematic teaching in Sunday sermons or putting on special seminars, to simply dealing with the subject as and

⁶ A topical reference to the General Election of May 2015, in which the pre-election polls’ failure to predict the eventual Conservative majority was partly blamed on “shy Tories” who were reluctant to share their true voting intentions with pollsters.

that borrows its pungency from female perversity; nobody could possibly guess from the words of Jesus that there was anything ‘funny’ about woman’s nature.”

when it comes up in a regular preaching programme. Others have begun the process with more targeted teaching to PCCs or wardens.⁷

Of course, for most new incumbents, this won't be the top teaching priority or the issue they would choose to focus on first. In a church which is not clear on the gospel, preaching Christ crucified will always be the first priority of a new incumbent. Similarly, there will be little point in expounding a complementarian viewpoint if the congregation are not clear on the authority of scripture. Even in a more broadly "evangelical" church, there may be groundwork to do on the principles of scriptural interpretation, to demonstrate that a complementarian perspective represents a reasonable and faithful interpretation of the Bible rather than an outdated and "fundamentalist" minority view drawn from a few proof-texts.

Indeed, one of the most important things we can do is to communicate clearly that complementarian views come from scripture, rather than simply from misogyny or antiquated church tradition. *The Telegraph* recently reported on how influential groups within the Church of England are calling for official changes to the liturgy to refer to God as female, to reflect a shift away from the supposedly patriarchal language of the traditional liturgy. *The Telegraph* report included an online reader poll which asked: "Should God be referred to as a woman?" and gave the response options as "Don't know", "Yes, there is no reason why not", or "No, the church should stick with tradition."⁸ In other words, classic views on gender in the church are widely portrayed as being based on "tradition" rather than the Bible, a view that quickly seeps into the pews as well.

Establishing the authority of scripture is also vital when it comes to one of the other main difficulties highlighted by new incumbents who are complementarian: inheriting a church which has previously had egalitarian patterns of ministry. For example, a church may in the past have had female readers or preachers, or even a female presbyter, or have sent women to ordination selec-

tion conferences (known as BAPs) and on for ordination training, often with the warm support of the church family. Frequently, these women's ministries have been genuinely helpful to the congregation and they have been faithful servants of the church family. Not only can complementarian teaching be seen as a personal attack on well-loved former members of the church family, but it can create a "plausibility problem", because egalitarian ministry has been seen as a positive experience by the congregation in the past.⁹ In this context, it can be perceived as moving the church backwards to try and re-introduce a complementarian view that the church now regards as outdated. Consequently, it is vital to find ways to graciously acknowledge the contribution of these gifted and godly women whilst encouraging the congregation to form their views on male and female roles in the church first and foremost from scripture (even if they end up disagreeing with the incumbent) rather than from experience.

Even more tricky for the new incumbent with complementarian convictions is inheriting a parish in which women are currently exercising preaching and teaching ministries. Different incumbents will vary in the extent to which they are happy in conscience to allow women to preach and teach under their headship, even along a complementarian spectrum. But whatever an individual's position on the issue, we need to help incumbents find gracious and sensitive ways to handle inherited ministry patterns, and to work with and use the talents of gifted women in the congregation in a way that models Christlike headship.

A similar dilemma may present itself when a female member of the congregation expresses an interest in going forward for ordination. How can an incumbent encourage her to consider the issue from a biblical and theological perspective and fully weigh up all her options—which might, for example, include entering the permanent diaconate or training through other channels

⁷ See the Church Society website for a list of recommended books and other resources that incumbents have found useful to give to PCC members and others in their congregation. ⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11641880/Calls-to-overhaul-service-texts-to-refer-to-God-as-first-female-bishops-take-up-posts.html> from *The Telegraph*, 31 May 2015.

⁹ I have borrowed this term from Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem: The Church and Same-sex Attraction* (Nottingham: IVP, 2015), in which he uses the phrase to explain how some Christians are changing their position on homosexuality as a result of a felt disconnect between the church's teaching and their experiences of loving and happy same-sex relationships among their friends, colleagues, and family members. (Please note: this analogy is not meant to imply equivalence between theological arguments for and against women priests and in respect of same-sex relationships.)

to teach the Bible as a paid women's worker on a church staff team—before she is funnelled towards ordination through the Church of England vocations process? This may involve challenging a restrictive definition of “women's ministry”, noted above, in which ordained presbyteral ministry is portrayed as the only “proper” ministry for women with gifts of teaching and leadership. Other forms of women's ministry may be less recognised, valued, and encouraged by the Church of England hierarchy, but this should emphatically not be the case among complementarians!

Situations like these have no easy, one size fits all solutions, involving as they do real people and their individual consciences, histories, and personalities in a real-life local church setting in which all are called to bear with one another in love. Working as a complementarian minister in a local parish church, particularly one without a history of complementarian ministry patterns, presents some very specific challenges which call for great patience, sensitivity, and wisdom.

Yet, at the same time, we must not over-complicate things, so that new incumbents feel paralysed by the additional challenge of establishing complementarian ministry patterns amidst the already-great demands of gospel ministry, particularly in a non-evangelical parish. As one incumbent wisely put it: “I've simply affirmed the good work that the women are doing and got on with leading in a complementarian way.”¹⁰ Much of the time, the complementarian minister will simply be getting on with the weekly graft of parish ministry, with all its peaks and troughs, from which an attractive, winsome, and positive complementarian theology will naturally flow out over time.

Employing women well in the local church

Church Society is keen to encourage women to take on as many biblically appropriate roles in the local church as possible. We should long to see women trained and equipped to serve in all sorts of areas of church life, including ministries that involve teaching the Bible in a variety of settings.¹¹ Even well-established conservative evangelical churches need encouragement and

support to employ women well, and there is a growing recognition of the need for more training of lay women in the local church. However, an additional positive side-effect of a more rounded, imaginative, and genuinely complementarian deployment of women in a less securely evangelical church is that entrusting capable, orthodox women with real responsibilities in church life can go a long way towards dispelling any preconceptions that a complementarian vicar is opposed to “women's ministry” per se.

Making use of gifted, godly women in appropriate “up-front”, visible roles in church services can make a powerful statement about the value placed on women and their gifts and ministries by the incumbent. Public recognition of women's contributions as a matter of course in notices, interviews, and prayers can all contribute to a church culture in which it is made obvious that women are actively involved, valued, and affirmed in many different areas of a church's ministry—even “despite” the incumbent's complementarian views!

Often, however, the problem may not be inheriting a church in which women need to be encouraged to take on more roles, but the opposite. In practice, most parish churches would grind to a halt without the active involvement of a small army of highly capable, faithful, prayerful, gifted laywomen. However, many (although not all) of these women will have uncritically absorbed an “ambient egalitarianism” from prevailing church culture and society around them. Again, the challenge here is to teach and train these fantastic women to exercise their gifts according to God's patterns for men and women in the church, particularly in smaller churches which are unlikely to be in a position to employ a full-time women's worker as part of a staff team. This often goes hand-in-hand with an urgent wider need to train both male and female leaders in the church in how to handle the word of God correctly. Because enabling complementarianism to flourish is not just about what the women do, of course, but also what the men do.

Another issue that came up in the research for this chapter was the lack of mature Christian men in the church capable of taking on leadership roles and working in complementarian ways alongside women. In an ideal world, for example, we might wish to see Bible study groups led by a man and a woman together, modelling a complementarian partnership, but the lack of men will-

¹⁰ Survey response from an incumbent with seven years experience in the post.

¹¹ See Jane Toohar's next chapter for a fuller treatment of this vitally important topic.

ing and able to take these roles makes this difficult to put into practice. Many Christian women at the heart of their congregations are single, or they may be married to unbelievers. But parish churches also contain many Christian men who are content to sit in their wife's shadow and let them take on the lion's share of ministry responsibilities, whether through pressures of work, lack of Christian maturity, or long force of habit that has endured into retirement. A genuinely complementarian approach to ministry in the local church will also seek ways to train and encourage Christian men at all life stages to grow in maturity and take on leadership roles within the church.

These are just a few of the issues currently facing complementarian incumbents as they seek to hold out Christ to their parishes and encourage mature discipleship. Serving as a complementarian minister in an ordinary parish church within the Church of England brings with it a very particular set of challenges, for which Church Society is particularly well-placed to offer support and guidance. In addition, we can serve the wider church by promoting confident, attractive, and effective complementarian ministry patterns in the local church and beyond, in a spirit of gracious engagement with others. This is just one way in which we can take a lead in supporting, resourcing, and encouraging conservative Anglican evangelical women and men as they seek to work out in practice what it will look like to flourish in—and transform—the Church of England.

Chapter 5

Overflowing with Ministry Opportunities!

Jane Tooher

Some people believe that a complementarian position on the ministries of men and women, stifles women and stifles the church. But that's not necessarily true. It depends on your working definition of complementarianism, and upon your practice. I define gender complementarity (as per the Values of Moore College, Sydney) as an "affirmation of the fundamental equality and mutual dependence of men and women as image bearers of God, while recognising proper differences in roles and responsibilities in life and Christian ministry." And it's in our practice, more often than in our definitions, that complementarianism can be distorted.

Rightly understood and lived out, a complementarian position helps men and women recognize who they were created and redeemed to be, and it helps the people of God recognize the beauty of interdependence and the variety of gifting that God has given to build his church, as we take his great message of salvation of Jesus Christ to the ends of the world. Far from stifling, when properly understood, complementarianism liberates women as essential to the life and health of Christ's church.

When someone argues that women should be able to do any ministries in the church, their case is often along the lines of justice, rights, and gifting. Because these are all potentially good things, it is easy for those who believe