

Positive Complementarity: Men and Women as Fellow Workers.

27th November 2024

Dear St John's church family,

I am writing to explain that I intend to give women teaching opportunities at our in-person prayer meeting. From the outset, I want to say that I have not shifted my theology, but see it as extending our current practice, where we have had women speaking at Theology Breakfasts and the Discipleship Course Weekend Away.

When I arrived at St John's 13 years ago, it was in the process of working through its theology of the roles of men and women in the church. This remains a contemporary debate within the Christian world. For those on both sides of the debate, they recognised that the Bible had something to say on the matter. At the time it obviously caused some strong feelings and while we still have different views in the congregation, I believe that the Lord has taught us to love and bear with one another. Thank you for bearing with me. With the current turmoil in the Church of England, I think it has brought home for many of us that this is a second order issue that does not relate to salvation.

I am complementarian which means that I believe from the Bible that God has made men and women to be equal, but to be different from one another. Both are equally loved by God, but in his wisdom, he has given us some different ways of *complementing* one another. The PCC have voted to be a 'resolution parish.'¹ This means that we have passed a resolution to bring us under the pastoral oversight of a Complementarian Bishop, the Bishop of Ebbsfleet, who was involved in my appointment and recently inducted me. It also gave us the legal right to request a male Vicar.

I understand that the way in which we complement one another relates to two households. Firstly, in the household of the home and secondly in the household of the church, called 'God's household' (1 Timothy 3:15). In the home, I believe that the man is to lovingly and sacrificially lead and in the church that male oversight is also the pattern. If you would like to read of some of the theology behind this, I have recommended resources at the end. In relation to the home or marriage, one of the key texts is Ephesians 5:21-33 and in relation to the church family we have 1 Timothy 2:11-12.

In the New Testament church women were able to pray and prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:34) which leads us to ask what it means in 1 Timothy 2:11-12, that they were to remain silent. My understanding is that the silence is regarding the teaching that an overseer would do. In 1 Timothy 3:1-6 which follows, Paul says that an overseer must be a man. The context of 1 Timothy 2 is also worship, so my understanding is that the type of teaching Paul has in mind is when the church gathers. This leading and teaching is to be done by the appointed elders or overseers of the church. They are the ones who are entrusted with ensuring good doctrine in the church as well as refuting those who

¹ Resolution: 'The PCC requests on grounds of theological conviction, as well as the need to support its clergy and maintain congregational unity, that arrangements be made for it in accordance with the House of Bishop's Declaration on the Ministry of Bishops and Priests.'

oppose it (Titus 1:9). We see in the other key text, 1 Corinthians 14, that Paul includes, 'if the whole church come together' (v23) in his build up argument. He then says 'women should remain silent in the churches' (remember again that he does not imply no speaking at all). To explain what is meant by church, we can see that it is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means literally the gathering. So, as I understand it, it is not saying that women cannot lead anything or teach anything in the building, but rather when everyone is gathered there are certain things they cannot do. In Acts 18:26 we have Priscilla along with her husband Aquila teaching Apollos. Also, we have Colossians 3:6 instructing us to 'teach and admonish one another' whether we are male or female. Given that we are trying to express these things in a setting that Paul could not have anticipated (an Anglican parish in 2024) it follows that people will draw lines in slightly different places. However, my task is to lead you prayerfully and biblically as I understand things, not seeking to honour a system, but to be faithful to God.

In holding the view I have described, I do not believe that men are better than women, always emotionally stronger or better leaders. I do not believe that men should dominate women, and I condemn all forms of misogyny and prejudice against women, which is all too prevalent in our society. Jesus says that leadership is not to 'lord it over' others but to think more of the cross and how Jesus is a servant leader (Matthew 20:25-28). That certainly helps me grasp how God would see it as life giving to call men and women differently in these areas. In recent years a helpful term has been developed which is 'positive complementarity.' Positive complementarity means that we don't spend our time focussing on what women can't do, but talking about what women can do in the church family. As Dr Ros Clarke, Deputy Director of the Church Society and a complementarian herself, has said, 'complementarianism is not about saying no to women.' She also writes: 'True complementarianism celebrates all the gifts women bring and works to find new ways for those gifts to be used.' This is what I want to discuss now.

I want us to celebrate the contribution of women who do so much among us and who God has gifted in many ways; including in many forms of leadership. My hope is that in the coming years we can better equip women for a variety of ministries and use their God given gifts as the Lord intends. My plan for ministry to women over the next three years includes:

- That we conduct a culture review to ensure women's voices are heard, as per the Bishop of Ebbsfleet's recommendation to his parishes.
- Longer term, that we look to appoint a dedicated Women's Worker.
- I also want to explore training opportunities for gifted women to have experience speaking from God's Word outside of our services.

As I finish, I want to say that from theological conviction, I have no plan to make changes to our services being led and preached at by men. My approach was outlined in my application form prior to interview and therefore has been carefully considered by myself and others. Stephen and Glynn have been very good sounding boards as fellow members of the Ministry Team and I'm grateful to others including the Wardens who have provided input.

To re-iterate, I believe that women can teach from the Bible in a range of mixed environments which includes the prayer meeting and continuing to speak at theology breakfasts and lead Bible Studies; a practice that begun under the ministry of Fergus, our previous Vicar. There are also many opportunities for women to encourage and teach the other women, youth and children, which is a high calling that we must provide further opportunities and training for.

Regardless of our personal views, we must love those who see things differently to us. Let's remember to see people, rather than theological positions on a spectrum as we think about one another. We must not lose focus on the main thing which is proclaiming Christ to all.

We are not saved by winning arguments but by our love for Christ which leads to love for our neighbour. If you would also like to speak with me about anything, do not hesitate.

With love in Christ our Lord,

Si Walker (Vicar).

Resources:

A very brief introduction:

[‘The Biblical Case for Complementarianism’ by Dr Sharon James \(online resource last checked 12.10.24\)](#)

Going deeper:

[Women and Ministry \(Redeemer Presbyterian Church\) by Tim and Kathy Keller 1989 \(Last checked 12.10.24\).](#)

[‘Fellow Workers: Women and Men in gospel Ministry. A Discussion Paper by Rev. Alan Purser’ \(2023\) Published by the Bishop of Maidstone. \(Online resource last checked 04.10.24\)](#)

[S08E03: Complementarianism in Practice by Dr Ros Clarke and Rev. Dr. Kirsten Birkett \(online resource last checked 04.10.24\)](#)

Book:

‘Positive Complementarianism’ by Ben Cooper in ‘Confident and Equipped: Facing Today’s Challenges in the Church of England’ (2014) Ed. Lee Gatiss (Church Society).