

3 Key Aspects of Mentoring Across the Gender Gap for the Sake of Mission

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I have a friend who, somewhat unexpectedly, found herself as the senior pastor of a large, growing church. During her first year, having never been a lead pastor before, she knew she needed help navigating the exciting (and sometimes not so exciting) challenges of senior leadership.

She looked around her small denomination and realized there were no women pastoring a church similar to hers in size and scope. So she asked the pastors who had navigated this territory before, seeking mentorship from some of the men inside her denomination. Not having any luck, she started asking men outside of her denomination. It took her twenty asks before one of these men said “yes” and agreed to meet with her. Despite the fact that he came from a different theological tradition and held a different perspective on women in pastoral leadership, he still set up a time to meet for coffee.

She prepared good questions to ask, she drove 45 minutes to his neck of the woods, she showed up with a notebook and a pen, and she showed up hungry to learn. At the end of that one hour conversation, he offered to meet with her

monthly for the next year, and this pastor mentored my friend through a season of explosive growth at her church.

Her ministry effectiveness, and the thousands of people that were reached, hinged on the willingness of a man to mentor a woman.

If the kingdom of God is going to effectively advance, it will require the whole people of God deployed for the sake of the Gospel. And the preparation of the whole people of God has no other choice but to take seriously the role of mentoring across the gender gap, an endeavor that requires us to be humble, hungry, and healthy.

Humble Partnership

Advancing the kingdom requires humble partnership. We must consider the strategic role of mentoring in the preparation of leaders.

Do you remember Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in John 4? Jesus took a huge personal risk mentoring this Samaritan woman. His own disciples looked at him with raised eyebrows.

Just like Jesus, we are called to divest, to give up, to lay down our position and our power to make room for others. We are called to leverage our influence for the good of others and for the good of the church. This requires tremendous courage, confidence, and humility.

Beth has pastored for twenty years, but she still remembers the local diner full of district pastors that her boss dragged her to. She was twenty-three years old and an administrative assistant at the church, but the pastor, Tom, insisted she attend, sit next to him, and contribute. At that long table full of men at least ten years older than her, Beth remembers the raised eyebrows and the awkward handshakes.

In this small way and thousands like them, Tom mentored Beth. And not just Beth, but others too. Because Tom was humble enough to share his clout and slowly reshape a culture.

When you mentor someone, you are sharing your influence, position, power, and clout. This is easier when we receive high fives and backslaps for our investment. It is a sacrifice that requires some measure of humility when it goes against cultural norms. But do not mistake it for charity. Humble mentoring across the gender gap will grow everyone. It will make all of us more effective.

The benefit of a mentor for women in the marketplace is well documented. And while it is easier to push men into mentoring relationships with other men and women into mentoring relationships with other women, studies show that vocational effectiveness is improved when we encourage people toward mentoring relationships where the defining factor is building vocational capacity.

Mentoring across the gender gap is also simple supply and demand. Had my friend limited her search for a mentor to only one gender, she would have significantly limited the pool of potential mentors. And she would have found that this limited pool was already mentored out. Women in positions of significant spiritual authority and leadership in the church have many more requests for mentoring than their male counterparts. Because there are fewer women in these leadership positions, they often find themselves inundated with requests for mentoring.

A good male mentor will spend time with all the people who report to him. He will dole out advice, lead by example, encourage networking, and demonstrate how to handle difficulties when they arise. And women, without close proximity to good leadership, are handicapped.

More than leading by example, however, a good mentor will go a step further and lend legitimacy to a person, help navigate the political nuances of leadership, point out the pitfalls and landmines, offer best practices, serve as a reference, and buffer an individual from subtle and not-so-subtle discrimination.

Studies show that women are often on the edges of networking relationships where so much “learning the ropes” about how to succeed is soaked up and internalized. A mentor can compensate for much of that.

But mentoring, if it is done the right way, will require sacrifice.

A WORD TO THE WOMEN: Don't wait for your mentor to come riding in on a white horse. If you're hungry to build the kingdom, then ask someone. You might have to ask 20 people, but it's worth going after the leader who is already doing the thing God has given you a desire to do.

A WORD TO THE MEN: No one is asking you to be a woman's accountability partner. And it's unlikely that the women around you want to be your confidante. This is about building vocational capacity for ministry effectiveness. Unfortunately, outsourcing that to gender-specific programs will not do it. We need men and women partnered together to bridge the gap.

Healthy Partnership

To expand the Kingdom by preparing women for leadership, we need spiritually and emotionally healthy men and women who are committed to holiness.

In this #metoo culture, it is tempting to shrink back from mutual ministry; but we should be leaning into it. After all, where else will the world learn what reconciled relationships look like? This is a cultural moment to be a witness to the world, embodying the God-ordained partnership between men and women that we were meant to have.

It is too easy to either operate from a place of ignorance, in which we are unwilling to acknowledge any sin and weakness that poses a threat to healthy relationships, or to operate from a place of fear, where we build walls of self-protection.

Several years ago, I was at an all-day staff retreat. It was off-site and my ride left halfway through the day, but there were plenty of other folks I could ride back to work with. When the day was over, I stayed behind to talk to a male co-worker about a work-related matter and when we were done, we realized that everyone had left.

I asked him if I could get a ride back to work with him—and he said no. He got in his empty, four door car and drove away, leaving me on my own in an unfamiliar part of town.

Perhaps, in this instance, there was a good reason (unbeknownst to me) for him to ride back to work alone; I understand it's one thing for a man to say that he needs to avoid a specific woman for a specific reason in a specific setting. But it's another thing for a spiritual leader, called to shepherd both men and women, to say he wants to avoid an entire subset of people.

This kind of thinking becomes a problem in the church because it assigns ulterior motives to women whose actual goals are probably quite clear: I want to serve the church. I want to use my gifts. I want to work hard. I want to be a part of the team.

A WORD TO THE WOMEN: There may be a specific season when a man needs to keep his distance from you for a specific reason in a specific setting. As long as no one is avoiding an entire population of people or is roadblocking you from using your gifts, give him grace and keep doing your thing.

WORD TO THE MEN: Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, suggests that, if a man makes a hard and fast rule about things like working lunches with women, then he should make access equal for everyone. So, no one-one-one meetings with women

OR men, do group meetings only, and whatever you choose, treat women and men equally. Does the idea of no one-on-one meetings sound like a real hurdle for ministry effectiveness to you? Right. That's the point.

Hungry Partnership

The motivation for mentoring across the gender gap is a hunger for the in-breaking of the kingdom of God.

What about equality? Sure, that is important. What about women's rights? Yes, of course, we care about that too. What about #metoo and #churchtoo and #believeher movements? No doubt, we need to be brutally honest about this cultural moment and not shy away from the lament and healing that needs to happen.

But more than any of these, our motivation is a hunger to advance the kingdom. And the kingdom is advanced most effectively when the whole people of God are deployed for the sake of the kingdom of God. And in order to deploy the whole people of God, we need to adequately prepare female leaders.

In John 4, despite the Samaritan woman's sketchy past, Jesus mentored her. Or perhaps precisely because of it. When we keep reading, we learn that this woman was uniquely equipped to reach her entire village!

Jesus refuses to eat the food his disciples bring back from the village, instead saying:

I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. (*John 4:32, 34*)

Jesus' spiritual food was to have conversations like this one with the woman around Jacob's well. And if we are going to successfully mentor across the gender gap, we have to be hungry for these kinds of conversations, too.

But unlike a physical hunger that is satisfied after a good meal, Jesus' spiritual hunger was not satisfied by this conversation with the woman at the well. Jesus moves directly from one spiritual feast to the next when he says:

Open your eyes and look at the fields. They are ripe for the harvest! (*John 4:35*)

I imagine Jesus pointing to the fields that would have surrounded the village as he says these words. But also imagine Jesus motioning to a crowd of people coming up over the rise, led by the Samaritan woman as they make their way toward the well. Jesus is hungry for more.

The motivation for mentoring across the gender gap is an insatiable hunger for the harvest. The urgency of the gospel requires all hands on deck—the whole church unleashed.

WORD TO THE WOMEN AND THE MEN: Mentoring across the gender gap takes intentionality. You will have to step out of conventional norms with great wisdom—but ask yourself the question: Who is ripe for the harvest? Who is called to be a laborer in the harvest field? And focus your energy there. Our focus has to be a hunger for the harvest.

For more conversations like this, join us on Nov 10 for Church Together, a She Leads Summit in Pasadena. Regional venues also available across the nation.

