

Ruth Haley Barton Transcript - Women and Men in Transforming Community
August 3, 2022 - The 25th Anniversary Celebration of Women in Ordained Ecclesiastical Office
in the CRCNA

It's good to be with you to celebrate 25 years of inclusion of women in the ordained ministry in your denomination.

As we mark this moment together, I celebrate whatever it took to get to that point 25 years ago. Most, if not all, of you are in this room tonight because you have paid a price to see your denomination come to this point and am grateful to be with a group of people who believe as deeply as I do about the equality of men and women in ministry together. I want to affirm each of you, because I know that every individual in this room has been on your own journey regarding the full inclusion and equality of women in ministry. Each one of you has had to discern your path, and you have come to risky places where you said yes to God when God called you.

Men and women alike have had to be brave at different points in time, to speak out and to function in ways that might have been out of the ordinary. I'm aware that I'm in the room with individuals who have all made significant choices and investments in order for your denomination to be here now, and that you have followed God with courage.

I'm also just tickled to be here with Rob Dixon in the same room and I want to tell you a little bit of a story about how I came to write the forward for his book. You may know that I wrote *Equal to the Task* a number of years ago. Was it 1998? And after #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements began, my editor came back to me and said, "Hey, would you be willing to redo *Equal to the Task* to speak to this cultural moment?" And I said, "Okay; I'll try."

And I did try. I really tried to walk into that invitation, and I wrote two or three chapters. But then I just stopped and began to really struggle. I said to her, "You know what? I just don't think I'm going to do this. I don't think I can do this." I told her that, for me, it felt like facing the darkness to go back to writing on that topic, because it was dark then in 1998 and it was even darker at the time that she was asking me to try to redo this book. And since there are many other books I want to write, I told her, "I just don't have it in me right now to face this darkness. And even my team at the Transforming Center, as we would sit in prayer about this, felt a sense of fear and foreboding about taking on this topic again. I just had to be honest about what I was experiencing and she accepted what I said, that I just couldn't do it even though it was an invitation she had felt strongly about. But then I met Rob and in a meeting we had in my office he shared his vision with me and talked about how our work fit together. And then when I discovered the book he was writing and read the manuscript, I realized he had written the book my editor was asking me to write. And I was like, "Hallelujah!" Here was someone else, another voice, who could speak into this space right now.

Perhaps for a man, it doesn't feel quite as dark, but for me as a woman what we are going through felt like darkness that I didn't want to revisit, and I was becoming increasingly convinced that it was not mine to do.

But then into that space came Rob Dixon and his book is the book I would have written if I had said yes to my editor. Isn't that beautiful? So, what a wonderful thing it is to share this evening together.

Elaine asked me to not only talk about flourishing partnerships between men and women, but to talk about my vision for the next 25 years. Well, it's so simple that I'm just going to state it right here at the outset: my vision is that in 25 years, we will not need to have these conversations anymore. That it will be so normal and so assumed that men and women work together in flourishing partnerships, that we will be doing it and we will not be having meetings to talk about it. For me it is that simple. Now, getting there might be a little more complicated, but the vision itself is really not all that complicated. So with that, let's raise our hearts to the Lord before we enter into this time of learning and reflection.

Thank you, Lord, so much for this group of faithful Christ followers who have fought and fought hard and taken faithful journeys in order to be in this place right now celebrating this milestone. We believe that the full inclusion of women in ministry is glorifying and honoring to you, and that it was your full intent when you created man and woman, and they stood before you shoulder to shoulder as you gave them the mandate to have dominion together, to flourish together and to be fruitful together. We believe tonight that we are only coming back to what you intended in creation in the first place. We thank you for a night set aside to celebrate progress and also to discern what could be helpful for us moving forward until YOUR vision and intent come to full fruition and we don't have to gather to talk about these things anymore. May it be so. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

I want to start with a story, the story I share in the Foreword to Rob's book, because it happened fairly recently even though I've been working with this topic for at least thirty years. I founded the Transforming Center 20 years ago, and before that I was in a church that was fully egalitarian, so it's been a long time since I've been in settings where there is not full equality for women. Perhaps you can imagine my surprise when I ended up at a speaking engagement a few years ago where I experienced something I had not experienced in a long time. It was a denominational gathering, and I was there at the invitation of a pastor who was also the head of that denomination. He and his wife had traveled to my office to visit with me and share why they felt I was the right one to bring two messages on strengthening the soul of your leadership at this annual gathering—and visiting with them was a good part of the reason I had agreed to come.

This pastor had read pretty much everything I had written and there was a real sense of kinship among us. I could sense that this would be a really good thing—a good connection with his denomination and also would be very supportive of him and what he was trying to do in his denomination. Everything about it felt blessed.

The day finally came and I arrived for the event. I gave my first message and then following that first presentation, I needed to have a brief meeting with the worship leader to decide how we were going to conclude the meeting at the end of my second talk as well as connect with this denominational leader to make sure we were headed in the right direction and that he was pleased with how things were unfolding.

So the three of us—myself, the head of the denomination, and the worship leader—sat down in a room right off the main hallway to work out the final details for the second session. It was also the room that held all the supplies and equipment for the conference so there was hustle and bustle, people coming and going.

There was an assistant who sat down with us and Dalene, my associate, was right outside the room selling books. The four of us sat down together and I made some decisions with the

worship leader first; when we were finished with his part, he got up to leave and the assistant got up to leave with him. But as they were leaving, you can imagine my surprise when the denominational head blurted out, “You can't both leave!”

It took me a minute to understand what was actually going on and he must have seen the look of incomprehension across my face, because he turned to me and he said, “Oh, no, it's not about you. It's just that I promised my wife I would never be alone with another woman.” So his assistant turned around, sat back down at the end of the table where we were meeting, so she could watch over us (I guess) as we finished our meeting. She was all of 25 years old, watching over us to see if we were going to behave ourselves right there in the middle of this very busy conference room. It was demeaning, it was embarrassing, and it was offensive.

For a moment, I was knocked off my game. I was distracted from what I had come there to do because now, rather than being present to the content and programming choices we were making, a feeling of awkwardness had descended—upon me anyway. Even though I knew in my head that it really didn't have anything to do with me except for the unavoidable fact that I'm female, I was now managing feelings of discomfort and vague feelings of shame about being a woman and a man together doing ministry.

I felt angry and disappointed that he had introduced such an awkward dynamic into our ministry together. And now all sorts of non-ministry thoughts were running through my head. Does he not trust me? Does he not trust himself? Does he not trust his people and what they might think? All these thoughts are going through my head.

And I was also embarrassed for his lovely wife, whom I had never perceived as being so insecure that she would need that kind of commitment from her husband. As we gathered for dinner, I felt less comfortable with her and I felt differently about myself—that somehow, I was being viewed as a threat, as somebody who was not quite safe. And I knew that her husband would never have treated a male colleague in that way.

Now, I had to carry on my ministry with this uncomfortable awareness that being a woman put me in a slightly different category than the men this leader worked with. Now, rather than enjoying bringing my full self to the ministry that I was doing, I just felt yucky. Somehow, I recovered enough to get myself through my second message and I soldiered on, but the incident really took its toll. As I stood to speak and bring my part of the conference to its conclusion, I struggled to focus on ministry while my mind continued to process what had taken place and the shock I felt about being put in a situation like that after so many years in ministry.

And I thought once again—this is not what being brothers and sisters in Christ looks like or feels like. In fact, now all I remember about that ministry opportunity was the awkwardness and discomfort of it all. I keep wanting to be able to say that the church has moved on, that the church has actually been helpful regarding the pain and the questions that we as men and women carry in relation to one another. But what happened on that day reminded me that we are pretty far from being beyond the issue of men and women in ministry together in the church, and in the current cultural milieu. Well-known Christian men still distinguish themselves by the fact that they do not dine alone or meet alone with a woman other than their spouse.

One of the most recent ones being a recent vice president who had quite a bit of pride about the fact that he didn't ever meet alone with a woman. This is a dubious distinction at best. And even more recently, a Mississippi state representative who was running for governor was in hot water

for denying a female journalist the opportunity to ride along with him in his campaign. He cited the Billy Graham rule. And, of course, that prevented her from actually doing her job. Both of these professing Christians tied their stance clearly to their faith—which is rather devastating—because to me, our faith says something quite different. It says that men and women can flourish and partner together in safe ways. While there are helpful principles that can guide women and men to be wise in the way they relate to each other (and I'm going to address some of those ideas) the Billy Graham rule is just woefully inadequate for brothers and sisters in the family of God and the transforming community that Jesus came to inaugurate on the Earth.

When a woman is not given access to the same opportunities men are given access to, that is sexism, plain and simple, and all are impoverished because of it. When women are not invited into full leadership and partnership in all aspects of life and church and work, entire leadership groups and whole communities do not benefit from the fullness of the gifts that God has given to the Church through women. This represents stunning losses for the Kingdom of God and for the human community.

It's interesting that while corporate research indicates that women in leadership positions are perceived to be, if not actually are, more competent as their male colleagues, only 4.9% of Fortune 500 CEOs and 2% of other kinds of CEOs are women. And these numbers are declining globally.

Even though 84% of women are viewed as being more competent than their male counterparts, there are very few women at top levels of leadership. In fact, in 360 degree reviews, women were rated as excelling and taking the initiative, acting with resilience, practicing self-development, driving for results, and displaying high integrity and honesty. In fact, they were thought to be more effective in 84% of the leadership competencies most frequently measured.

And according to analysts of thousands of 360 degree reviews, women outscored men in 17 of the 19 capabilities that differentiate excellent leaders from average or poor ones. That's stunning, isn't it? So why am I bringing that up here?

Because I believe God created us for more and better than what we are experiencing currently in the body of Christ. From basic discrimination and lack of inclusion to now a much greater awareness of sexual harassment and assault, we are not living out God's ideal for women and men in fruitful relationships characterized by equality and respect so that our presence in society is actually transforming.

Instead, we as Christians are choosing to rely on an elaborate system of rules and regulations that segregate and limit us for a fragile sense of safety. But you know what? People are going to figure out how to have sex if they want to have sex if that's in them to do. It doesn't really matter what rules you have in place. So, we've got to get beyond rules that merely govern external behavior and come up with something a little bit better. For many religious women (including women in this room) their deepest wounds have been inflicted by a church that has silenced and excluded them from full participation in the life of the church. Florence Nightingale, who was acknowledged before her death as a world authority on the scientific care of the sick, was not the first or the last woman to express these sentiments in relation to the church.

“I would have given her my head and my heart and my hand. She would not have them. She told me to go back and crochet in my mother's drawing room.”

Now, I know we've grown past that to some extent. We're not asking women to go back and crochet in their mother's drawing room, but still key positions within the church—pastor, priest, elder, vestry—those are still often reserved for men only in many denominations. And there are many ways—both obvious and subtle—in which women are still silenced and ill-represented in meetings and leadership settings. They are excluded from full participation in the life of the Church, the body of Christ on the earth now. And that language of the body of Christ on the earth now is important because it reminds us that the person of Jesus is the final word on what takes place in his church. When we look at the life of Christ, we see that Jesus modeled an incredible kind of inclusion, equality and intimate friendship with women that is oftentimes so far from what we see in the church today.

Let me also be quick to add, though, how much I appreciate the men in the room. In fact, I wouldn't have come if there were not men in the room and I asked specifically about that because the issues between men and women can't be solved by women alone. Issues between men and women can only be solved when men and women are in the room together. I don't do all-women events anymore because I don't believe that the real problems of the church are going to be solved in all-women groups—or all-men groups either! I want to be a part of groups where men and women are together trying to solve the big issues that are facing our world today, this being one of them.

Men also are caught and limited by the stereotypes that leave them feeling like misfits rather than valued members of the team. As one man put it, people keep pushing me to be an elder, and that's just not who I am. I am much more comfortable working behind the scenes, but when I don't fit into the role that everyone feels is right for me, I wonder what I'm worth around here. I wonder if people respect me when I don't want to step up into those stereotypical roles that the men usually take.

So, it's important to note that men are hurt by gender stereotypes as well. In addition to the difficulty men have in sharing power with women and allowing full expression of one another's giftedness, I think an even bigger obstacle is our discomfort and fear about the sexual dynamics between men and women. This also severely hampers our ability to work together and to be together meaningfully; what I've observed as I work with pastors and leaders is that even when men have a clear theological belief about the equality of women in the church and in all facets of life, it is still quite uncomfortable to figure out how to really include them.

Recently I heard a pastor of a large church say that he believes in the concept that women can serve as elders and in the highest levels of leadership. But because the group of men who currently serve as elders are his spiritual friends, he doesn't want to mess with that by adding women to the group. You see the subtleties here. You can believe things theologically, but have other kinds of resistance around being close with persons of the other gender. I have also come to believe that even when we try to build a theological point that says there should be exclusion of women from all levels of leadership, it's usually not even about theology. It's about their discomfort with sexuality and intimacy. And that makes it different because you're not really dealing with the real issue. It feels better to say it's theological than to say, "I'm uncomfortable with the sexual dynamic that's present when men and women are together."

So, here's the thing: neither the misuse of power and sexuality nor segregation into male-only and female-only friendships and groups and teams serve God's ultimate purposes for us as God's children. We are, by God's definition, brothers and sisters in the family of God, and we will

not contribute to the flourishing of humankind if we give in to the darker dynamics of fear, created by our unwillingness to bring our fears and our dysfunction into the light. Lately we've had to endure many disturbing revelations about the misuse of power and sexuality and it's really disheartening. But segregation of men and women from one another does not contribute to the wholeness God has for us. It leaves men and women starving for the wholeness that comes when men and women are together as they were always meant to be.

The revelations of the #MeToo #ChurchToo movements are not revealing anything new; they are bringing to light struggles and sins that have always been there. The revelations of #MeToo#Church movements have been apocalyptic in that sense. Now we're having to face what's really there and what's really true among men and women—the misuse and abuse of power, especially as it has to do with sexuality. We are having to face how the misuse and abuse of power works itself out in sexual ways. And it's important for us to name this not just as a social justice issue, but that it is also a spiritual struggle; the struggle for men and women to try and to live and work and minister together is spiritual in nature. It's one result of the terrible tearing that occurred in the community God created in the beginning.

You see, God was not the only one who realized how effective true teamwork between men and women could be. I think the evil one also knew it, and that's why the evil one attacked it immediately. The evil one knew that effective partnership between men and women would be very powerful in accomplishing God's purposes on the Earth, and for that reason, wasted no time in attempting to undermine it. Soon after God gave Adam and Eve, the first mixed gender team, their assignments, Satan approached Eve in an effort to convince her that God had less than honorable motives in instructing her and Adam to eat from one of the trees.

And in fact, the evil one accused God of lying and contradicted God by saying, "You will not die for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good from evil." Eve, who was attracted to the forbidden fruit, tried to argue, but to no avail. And even though Adam, who had heard from God directly about what was right in this situation, was right there with her, he failed to bring anything helpful to offer in this situation. He failed to give constructive input in the moment based on what God had said to Him directly. When Eve offered the fruit to Adam, he took it without any argument or discussion at all!

I don't believe that what happened in the garden was a failure of male leadership or female submission, as some would argue. No, this was a failure to function effectively as the team that God had created. *This* is a spiritual struggle that we are still involved in. When Adam and Eve grew lax in communicating with one another and inviting each other's feedback and being accountable to one another, offering their strengths freely, and being influenced by each other—that's when things started falling apart. That fruitful partnership that God had initiated broke down and grave mistakes were made. Rather than exercising appropriate dominion together, which was their mandate, instead of working together to subdue the creatures that God had given them to oversee, they allowed the evil one to come in and to destroy the partnership that God had created right then and right there.

They acted without conferring together. They acted without working together, and they were the weaker for it. The Fall, as we've come to identify it, is certainly a pivotal event in human history and it caused dire consequences for the human community. And as a result, there was this propensity in men to let their dominion run wild and to impose it in cavalier and illegitimate ways—not only on the earth and other men, but also on the one who was bone of his bone and

flesh of his flesh upon the very helper that God had given him that corresponded to His very self.

But then the peculiarly female sin was to use the preservation of her relationships with men as an excuse not to exercise accountable dominion in the first place and to lay down what it is that God had given to her. The woman's analog to the man's congenital flaw (in light of Genesis 3:16) is the temptation to avoid taking risks that might upset relationships. As Mary Stuart Van Leewen says, it is the temptation to let our creation for relationship and sociability become fallen and distorted. Social enmeshment. When women don't step up and do what God is calling them to do, they too give into a seduction that goes all the way back to the fall. Even though God created us for partnership, it has been compromised in a significant way and the consequences are shame and blame, wrongful domination, avoidance of personal responsibility and those dynamics are now embedded in the relationships between men and women. And that is one of the consequences of the Fall that needs to be redeemed in Christ.

If you read the Old Testament through the lens of male female relationships, what you find there is surprisingly similar to the struggles that we're having today and it's important for us to name that. What we're experiencing right now feels unique. It feels unprecedented. But I don't think it is. It's actually very, very consistent with patterns that were built into the male female relationship as a result of the Fall—starting out right away with Sarah and Abraham when a famine in the land forces them to migrate again to Egypt. The problem, of course, is that they don't have permission to enter. Another problem was that Sarah was very beautiful and Abraham believed the Egyptians were going to kill him in order to get her, so he tells her to lie and to present herself to them as his sister. Applying our modern definition of such things, we would say that Abraham trafficked his wife. In other words, this great patriarch used her to his own ends. He took payment and grew wealthy from her sexual exploitation. He committed fraud by presenting her as his sister a convenient half-truth, and he coerced her into a situation where she had no way out.

This is the very definition of human trafficking and the pain of that dysfunction continued with Hagar, an Egyptian slave girl living at the dangerous intersection of race and gender. She was used and abused by both Sarah and Abraham in their attempts to help God along with his promise to give them a son amid the reality of Sarah's infertility. She was sexually exploited by both Abraham and Sarah for their purposes.

Rebecca and Isaac's marriage and family were also threatened by deception and manipulation. Even though Isaac loved Rebecca dearly, their story is still fraught with dysfunction, devoid of effective communication. They played favorites, they manipulated one another, and they lied to one another. In the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, we see some of the roles reversed. Potiphar's wife was attracted to Joseph and she used her sexuality to try and seduce him. Women do that. And when we do it, it's a sin. It's our sin. Of course, a man's choices are his responsibility, but we as women have responsibility for using our sexuality—something that God has created within us—in responsible and loving ways.

Tamar was preyed upon and raped by Amnon, King David's son and her half brother, despite her pleas for him not to do it. All the men in the story try to convince her to be quiet about it and all for their own reasons. Does that remind you of anything that is going on today? Does that remind you of groups of men telling women to be quiet about what they've experienced in their sexual lives at the hands of men? And it just keeps getting worse. In the Old Testament, Dinah

was raped while visiting friends in a neighboring town. Abigail endured an abusive marriage. Miriam allowed her jealousy regarding Moses's position to get the best of her.

Jephthah abused the power inherent in his role as a father against his own daughter. The daughters of Zelophehad confronted gender-based discrimination when it came time to dispose of their dead father's property. These are the #MeToo stories are Old Testament and they need to be seen and grappled with in the way, rather than minimized, dismissed and ignored. We need to see our story in those stories.

I mention these things to point out that the journey we're on as men and women to find our way back from all of this is a hard one. To find redemption and return to fruitful partnership and the full inclusion that was God's design in the first place is very challenging. And the only answer for our sin and brokenness is to begin with repentance—for those times when we have dominated others, rather than inviting them to share responsibility with us. Those times and we have left to others the responsibilities that were given to us at Creation. Repentance for failing to include each other in all aspects of life and love and kingdom work. This journey must begin with repentance and repentance is a discipline. It is a practice we need to engage in when we see what we have done and the harm and the danger that we have brought to them.

We also need to wrestle with the ways in which cultural influences and stereotypes have shaped us and support us in maintaining these positions that we hold. We need to recognize the economic realities that keep us stuck and keep us unwilling to share power with each other. We need to confront the cultural myth that our sexual urges are so powerful that we cannot control them, which has us convinced that if women and men partner together in workplace projects or church ministries or mentoring relationships, that they will end up in bed together.

Trends in the religious community that send us forever traipsing off to male-only and female-only ministries and conferences don't help us to move in the direction that God intends for us because it further solidifies a belief that it's better for women and men to be kept separate. But there is nothing in Scripture to support this! What Scripture supports is men and women together in all facets of life and work.

Once we can begin to acknowledge the cultural conditioning and patterns that are so destructive, along with the subliminal fears we have about what happens when men and women are together in intimate friendship and collaboration, we're ready to get on a different path. It becomes apparent quite quickly, then, that none of this is going to happen by accident. It's going to take a certain kind of vigilance for women and men to keep moving forward in partnership together and it will take a certain kind of intentionality.

I'll give you those two words: vigilance and intentionality. When I say intentionality, I mean actual practices that will help us to live the values God is inviting us to for the good of all. I am a spiritual formation person, after all, so I'm always going to talk about practices because I believe spiritual practices are concrete activities we can engage in that will open us to God's transforming work. The work that only God can do. There are practices we can engage in as men and women in the church that will open us to God's transforming work so we can move back to the future. Back to what it was that God had in mind in the first place, but that got derailed due to the Fall. Right now we are living in the murkiness of the middle.

So where do we begin? Let's start with the life of Christ—and particularly the famous story of the walk to Emmaus, the road between the now and the not-yet. It is the story where the disciples

have experienced horrendous loss and there's been no redemption yet. They are talking about their experience of the violent death of their friend and teacher and as they are processing their feelings of hopelessness and how confused they are, Jesus joins them and asks what they are talking about together on the road. And there is this little phrase in their response to Jesus that is quite arresting: "Moreover some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said he was alive." *The women of our group astounded us.* I love that phrase.

At the risk of stating the obvious, these verses indicate that it was women and men together who comprised the community gathered around Jesus. That might not seem like a big deal to us today, but I can assure you that in Jewish culture within that time period, it was radical. The way men and women were together in the community gathered around Jesus was unprecedented given the fact that in the Jewish culture, women and men were kept separate. Women and men who were not married or related to each other could not be together. In the synagogue, the women were behind a curtain or a veil so for Jesus to gather a community around himself composed of men and women who were interacting significantly with each other, was a radical departure from what was going on in the culture around him.

Jesus had significant friendships with women, many of his financial supporters were women, and he interacted with women intimately and substantively about the resurrection. Women were last at the cross and first at the tomb, it was a woman (Mary Magdalene) who was given the first opportunity to proclaim the good news—making her the first evangelist. She was the first one to proclaim the good news of Jesus' resurrection. And not only that. She was the one to take the instructions back to the male disciples about what they were supposed to do next. All of this was completely unprecedented, and there's more that could be said about that. But the main point here is that Jesus' presence on the earth brought about so many needed changes to the human experience and one of those is the needed change he brought to the relationships between men and women. This is one of the most striking aspects about the life of Christ.

Jesus is the truest representation of who God is, the ultimate expression of the heart of God, so whenever we really want to know something about God, we look at the life of Christ. With respect for other Biblical writers like the apostle Paul, what we see in the life of Christ is that he was remarkably unencumbered by the cultural norms of the day, norms that have been shaped more by sin and cultural stereotypes than by God's grace and reflects for us more accurately God's heart on all matters. Even a cursory look at Jesus' life leading into the New Testament church shows that Jesus' presence absolutely and utterly changed relationships between men and women for all time. Jesus is our guide beyond the curse. He's our guide into redemption in this area of our lives that have been so painful. So in conclusion I'd like to mention some practices that we can observe from the life of Christ, practices that will open us to the transformative work of Christ in male-female relationships if we are willing to enter into them.

The first is **the practice of oneness**. I know that sounds more like a concept than a practice, but I believe oneness can be a practice. The changes Jesus' presence brought about in male female relationships is one of the most striking elements of a transforming community. When I say *transforming* community, I'm using that word in a deep and defined way. It means a community in which we are committed to being transformed in Christ's presence and engaging in practices that open us to this reality. And in transforming community, men and women are practicing oneness, especially across lines of gender.

Paul uses the metaphor of the family to describe the relationships between men and women and this is beautiful language for me because I have two brothers. Both of them are pastors, and they are my close ones. When I hear the language of family and brother and sister in Christ I take it really seriously precisely because I know what it feels like to have brothers. I know what it's like to be a sister to brothers, and I love having brothers who are good brothers to me. And I know that most of what I have experienced with men in the church doesn't feel like what I experienced with my brothers, my human brothers. It doesn't feel as comfortable. It doesn't feel as loving, it doesn't feel as intimate. It doesn't feel like we have all the possibilities of how we can be together in this world. But at the same time I continue to resonate deeply with Paul's God-inspired language that identifies us as the family of God and that men and women are brothers and sisters in the family of God.

I have learned from my relationship with my brothers, that there are no men's issues and women's issues that need to be handled in segregated groups. There are just human issues that we care about together because they affect us all --in our family and beyond. Our interest and care for one another extends to all areas of life--spouses, marriages, children, vocation, provision for our families, spiritual growth in discipleship, our attempts at wholeness in our family of origin, and sharing thoughts and opinions on a wide variety of issues facing our world today. We have been intentional through the years to learn how to love and to share as brothers and sister in Christ.

And so I wonder, why does it feel so different in church? We need to think about this. It's hard to imagine that my relationships with my brothers would be healthy without this kind of mutuality, equality and shared responsibility. And it's also hard to imagine what our relationship would be like if there was some sort of artificially-imposed hierarchy. If somehow my brothers had power over me in some way just because I was female. I'm the oldest, so that makes it doubly hard to imagine. It just wouldn't work!

Jesus' prayer for us is that we would be one in Christ so we know oneness is something that Jesus wants for us. And I think he wants it, particularly in these relationships between men and women and this something we can practice. We can practice engaging in the kinds of activities that go along with feeling like we are unified and together—like intentionally including one another. This is a very concrete way that we can open up to the transforming presence of Christ in all of our relationships, and particularly our relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ. We can be more intentional about looking at any meeting or any gathering or the leadership of anything and say, is there an equal representation of both as representation of men and women in this group?

I remember visiting a church recently with my parents and being shocked to observe that every single person on stage was male. The ushers who processed down the aisle were all suits. The only woman permitted on stage was the piano player, which presented a stunning visual that was just *off*. It would have taken so little for somebody to look at that stage and say, you know what, there's no women up here. What can we do about that? Or in the nursery, we don't have any men caring for children in the nursery. We have got to fix that. We got to have some men working with the children. Where are the men teaching Sunday school? Where are the women in the elders meetings? Can we look at any and all of our leadership groups and ask, do we have equal representation of male and female in this group? This is just basic inclusion. Of course it might feel uncomfortable to introduce the other gender into groups that have only been one gender and there is some comradery based on that but we're going to need to get over that if we are going to practice inclusion. Of course, it feels warm and fuzzy for everybody to feel like

they're the same in some significant ways but that won't help us to get where we need to go in this particular issue. We need to actively assess our groups to make sure that there's an equal representation of men and women. And that's really not all that hard once you see it as a spiritual practice that opens you up to the transforming work that God wants to do when men and women are together.

Another practice is **listening to each other** with attention. Listening to one another with love and respect and genuine interest. When men's and women's experiences are different we can choose to have life-enhancing conversations characterized by a real commitment for women to listen to men and men to listen to women about their differing experiences.

Listening was an exercise that I entered into very intentionally when I was writing *Equal to the Task*. There was a point in the writing of that book where I had written five chapters and decided to pull back and read what I had written to see if I even liked it. I went on a one day retreat and took the manuscript with me to just read straight through the five chapters I had. And you know what? I hated it. I recognized that even though I was trying to write in a redeeming way about relationships between men and women I was coming across as angry and strident, which I knew wouldn't be helpful.

It was like putting up a mirror, seeing myself more clearly, and coming to the awareness that a book written in this spirit would not be helpful. I lay down on the bed and said to God, "The deadline's here. They're already publicizing the book and I hate it. I can't put this out there. What am I supposed to do?"

God speaks in these spacious moments of retreat time and God spoke to me very clearly. "I think you need to stop putting your own opinion out there for a while. You need to talk to some of your brothers in Christ and just listen. Don't go in with any agenda. Just listen." So, I set the writing aside and took a number of months to set up conversations with different men in my life to just listen and learn. I told my editor the manuscript would not be delivered on time, and I just listened. I remember one dear United Methodist pastor who said "The women around me are so angry and I just don't know how to respond, how to react to the anger. I don't know how to take it in or what to do." Rather than arguing, I just let myself enter into the hurt and confusion he was expressing. Another man who was one of my college buddies said, "I don't think you understand what men feel in relation to women. I don't think you understand the pull that they feel. I don't think you understand the primal nature of the attraction that men have to women." And I was like, "Yes, you're right. I probably don't know that. Thank you for sharing." And ever since that interview, I have wanted to be very loving towards that reality in men's lives.

And then eventually I have found men to be able to listen to what it's like for women to be discriminated against based on our physical characteristics. For instance, I've been a spiritual director for over 20 years, since before spiritual direction was known or understood in Protestant circles. And yet, I still have men say that they can't be in spiritual direction with a woman. On one level I have some compassion for it, but on another level, this is what I do and you're telling me you cannot receive it because I am female. Because I have done the work of listening I can be compassionate, but I can still name it as discrimination. I can say, "That might be what you are experiencing, but I am still experiencing it as discrimination. And we need to talk about that. We need to be together with that." This is transforming community men and women, creating space to listen to one another.

And when something happens that feels uncomfortable or off or we miss each other in communication, go after it. Name it.

That was really awkward.

I sense maybe I said something wrong, but I don't know what it is.

I saw the tears in your eyes. What are the tears about?

I felt you shut down or back away, cross your arms over your chest. Can you tell me what's going on?

Please help me understand....

Wow! How transformative would it be if we actually practiced listening to one another with attention going both ways? But not just the men listening to the women, but the women also listening to the men.

Finally, let's talk about the spiritual practice of **honoring sexuality in community**. The rules some individuals and communities have put in place to keep men and women "safe" with each other actually function to keep women on the outside. They keep women from being mentored, pastored, and having the same access to power. It is really limiting to a female associate pastor if she can't be mentored by the senior pastor like the other associates. If the senior pastor is male and the female is an associate and she doesn't have the same access to the senior pastor, she is simply not going to get what her male colleagues will get. For there to be real equality in the church and in the workplace, all opportunities must be available to women in terms of mentoring and relationships with senior leadership. With eyes wide open, there are some things we *can* do to honor sexuality in our communities so we can steward the sexual dynamic that is present between men and women when we are together.

First of all, we can commit ourselves to respecting and honoring the power of our sexuality. In a secular culture where sexuality is overplayed and often abused, and a religious culture where sexuality is often repressed and avoided, in transforming community we can create a space where the gift of sexuality is acknowledged and received while also respecting and being wise regarding its challenges and its power. All of us have experienced moments when someone else's infidelity or our own sexual urges bring up fears that are overwhelming and that might even cause us to feel shame.

At the same time, we long for a community that can hold this experience of being human safely—where we can experience the fullness, the goodness, of what God intended for us as men and women in relationship with one another. In transforming community, we learn to experience and even enjoy the good chemistry that is produced when male and female are together. Our creation as gendered beings is a core element of our human existence, after all, so when women and men are together, there is a different kind of sparkiness than when it's just men or just women. I'm naming it. I'm saying it's real.

By way of example... the Transforming Center used to have our offices at a local convent. It was a community of sisters who were aging together and oftentimes when our male colleagues would come into town, they would stay at the convent. One time I remember walking into the retreat center for meetings and finding one of my male colleagues sitting there at breakfast; all the sisters had gathered around and you could see that they were just enlivened by the presence of a male. It was just so, you know, sparky! It was beautiful and sweet and of course, he was in his element, enjoying being the center of attention. And it was just so sweet and safe and I felt God calling it good. It was a part of what God intended for us.

So, yes, of course! When men and women are together, there will be sparks. But I believe it is possible for the sparks generated by male and female in close proximity to be harnessed towards building a fire that can warm us all versus allowing the sparks to fly out of control and burn down the whole forest. I believe we can tend these sparks wisely, so that they do not start forest fires. We can face our fears and move beyond them, so we are no longer victims of sin and cultural pathologies. We can get therapy around our sexual issues if we need it—especially if you have any sense that you're not safe for other people. We can establish good and healthy connections between our sexuality and our spirituality since they reside so closely together within the human person. The lack of this kind of integration is one of the reasons mistakes happen. I had a wonderful teacher in seminary who taught a wonderful whole class on sexuality; and she did such a great job of helping us to connect sexuality and spirituality and to realize that those two aspects of the person are closely aligned within the human person.

When our spirituality wakes up our sexuality is going to wake up, too, and vice versa. As our sexuality is waking up, we will experience that as a deeply spiritual dynamic. Why is that? Because our sexuality is about our ability to be in union with other human beings, and our spirituality is about our capacity to be in union with God so they're very closely aligned. I've come to believe that any good training for the pastoral vocation has to include a significant segment on sexuality, so that we understand it and know what to do with it.. We can cultivate self-awareness and take responsibility for any transformation needed regarding distortions that exist in our own experiences of sexuality.

We can learn that our sexual longings are part of the goodness of how God created us, and we can learn to live those openly before God. We can learn how to open up to God's care and wisdom regarding what to do with the legitimate urges and longings we have. We can move towards each other in the Christlike expressions of love and friendship and partnership. Dallas Willard once made a very, very bold statement. He said that the antidote to lust is love. He suggested that when lust seems to be the issue, we can choose to move towards the person in love. We can commit to really loving that person and figure out what love really calls me to. If you're not generally healthy in your psychology around sexual, you need to get some therapy first. But once you've done that really good work and you feel an attraction to another person, you don't have to run away and construct hedges and boundaries. You can ask what the most loving thing would be and at the top of that list would be to do no harm. A commitment to never do anything to violate their commitments and their preexisting relationships or the health of their own sexuality. If I love someone, I would never do anything that would be harmful to the other person and their primary commitments. This becomes a part of our Christian discipleship to choose love rather than "acting out" the sexual dynamic in a relationship with that person.

Finally, if we are married we can cultivate marriages that are healthy and satisfying and honest. If we are single, we can explore the question of how to live our sexuality in faithful ways and discover outlets for our sexuality so we can experience a full life of sensuality and the enjoyment of being the gender that we are.

Certainly there is a fine line between respecting the power of sexuality and refusing to live out of our fears. But it is a line that Jesus walked. Let's think for a moment about Mary anointing Jesus' feet with oil, and hair and tears. That was a very sensual moment but what made it safe was the quality of Jesus's presence. Jesus made it safe because he knew who he was and he knew what was in her heart, and he refused to put any other meanings on it except that she was expressing her love and gratitude. He actually imbued it with an even more powerful meaning

when he stated that she was anointing his body for his death. Who Jesus was made the moment what it was.

This willingness to move beyond fear and paranoia to real brotherly and sisterly love in Christ is completely contrary to what we see in the secular hook-up culture, and it's completely contrary to what we see in the repressed religious subculture. It is not either one of those. It's this third beautiful way that Jesus himself modeled. And I think it's a picture of what's possible for us in transforming community.

Celia Hahn calls this sexual paradox. She says, "Sexual paradox is a call for women and men to live faithfully in the tension of two realities. Awareness of our feelings and drives is also a call to behave in responsible ways. Sexual paradox invites us to live where the currents of energy spark back and forth. People discover new sources of vitality when they hold opposites together in tension. And there's a lot of good energy in male female collaboration. Energy is one of the most precious gifts of God and for the people of God."

I believe we can do this. We can be a transforming community in the middle of culture that shows the culture how male-female relationships can be done in a way that is good for all. We really can. And I pray that we will.