



April 2021

A CONGREGATIONAL ANNOUNCEMENT ON

Gender in Church Leadership

We are honored by the trust you've placed in us as we have diligently worked to answer the question of whether spiritually-gifted women should serve as elders at Highland.

Each one of the elders standing with me has spent countless hours in prayer, study, and seeking God's will for our church. As your shepherds, one of our great joys is praying for you. Your names have been on our hearts and in our prayers during the challenging months of the pandemic, as you waited for us to conclude our time of discernment.

This announcement brings many emotions, and each of us will respond differently to what we hear. For some, it will be welcome news. For others, it may be confusing or disappointing. We ask that you listen respectfully in consideration of everyone in our church family.

We stand before you in unified humility as we announce our decision that spiritually-gifted women are able to serve as elders at the Highland Church. We believe every member of Highland is called to serve God and the church according to his or her spiritual gifts. We affirm that calling men and women to serve as elders at the Highland Church is a responsible interpretation of Scripture.

Over the years, we've learned we can do the difficult work of living in the questions. This is one of those times. We don't have all the answers, but we are confident this is a place for honesty, unconditional love, and a safe space for your feelings and emotions. The way forward will have challenges, and yet, we know that God's people can do hard things together.

It's important that you understand why we made this decision.

We believe that Scripture makes a positive case for inviting spiritually-gifted women to serve as elders. Through extensive study and the leading of the Holy Spirit, we identified five biblical texts we believe should govern our conversation and understanding of gender roles in God's kingdom. These New Testament passages from Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians convicted us that in Christ, both men and women have been empowered and equipped with diverse gifts of service and ministry, including pastoral care and leadership.

Our study also led us to believe that the gender-specific qualifications for elders found in 1 Timothy and Titus were cultural, situational, and local accommodations to first century communities and congregations.

We know that not everyone will agree with or understand our decision. And yet, we are convinced that Highland can pursue and maintain unity even though we may hold different interpretations of Scripture.

Male leadership has been the predominant pattern throughout church history, and appointing female elders represents a change. Today, we acknowledge the grief and hurt experienced by some in the Highland body who feel called and equipped to pastoral leadership, but have been excluded. We understand that this lengthy process has been hurtful to some of you, causing you to doubt our commitment to the hard work of

discernment. We also heard from those who feel grief and confusion because of their belief that the current structure represents God's heart and desire. As your elders, we care about how you are feeling and commit to listening with care and compassion.

Acts 15 reveals that the Holy Spirit can guide the church to make significant, unprecedented changes. We believe this is such a moment. We are convinced that the inclusion of female elders is a necessary and faithful change that will bless Christ's body at this time and in this place. We believe this will enable us to more effectively pursue our Restoration Vision, joining God in restoring Highland, Abilene, and the world.

Throughout this process we have done our best to remain in a posture of listening to God, the Holy Spirit, and each other. We commit to remaining in this listening position and want to hear from you. Some of you will have questions, ideas, or concerns. Please bring those to us. More than anything we want to talk and pray with you face to face, even during this time of social distancing.

Our decision was not unanimous. Disagreements and differences of opinion remain among the elders, but we believe that each one of us is striving to faithfully follow the teaching of Scripture. During our time of discernment, we had an expectation among the elders to practice "holy manners." This simply means that we were honest and respectful, holding each other in high esteem even though we did not always agree. We talked to each other, rather than about each other. We ask the same of you.

We seek to be authentic and transparent, sharing hope of a way forward together as a loving family. We stand before you unified, not because we always agree with each other, but through our shared faith in Jesus and our love for the Highland Church. We humbly ask that you follow our example.

In a world where disagreements create broken friendships and families, our love and unity points toward our hope and salvation, Jesus Christ, our Prince of Peace.

As a family, let us embrace the encouragement of the Apostle Paul.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you have a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col 3:12-14)

The Highland Elders