



April 2021

A CONGREGATIONAL ANNOUNCEMENT ON

Gender in Church Leadership

Women in Pastoral Leadership Discernment

For many decades, the Highland Church has demonstrated a willingness to study any and every subject pertaining to God. We have tried to submit ourselves to the will of God in dealing with each faithful discussion. Gender roles in the church have been a particular area of focus over the past two decades. Beginning in 1999, the Highland elders and the church went through a multi-year discernment process that resulted in increased roles for women in public worship. In 2019, the Highland elders spent several months in individual and corporate discernment regarding the role of women in preaching and in service as elders. The elders discerned that both men and women should use their gifts to preach in Highland's worship assemblies. It was also discerned that the question of whether spiritually-gifted women should serve as elders needed churchwide study and engagement.

In fall 2019, the elders and the entire congregation reviewed resource materials, attended combined classes, and participated in Bible class discussions about this discernment topic. The elders joined 254 Highland members in listening sessions, and 87 members submitted written comments. A representation of the voices we heard are included in [this video](#). The elders wish to thank all of you who participated in this process, and we want you to know that we have carefully considered each of your comments.

In March 2020, all of our lives were disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the challenges we experienced created the need to pause the process. Once the elders were able to resume meeting again, we spent several more months in prayer, study, and discussion on what we believe to be God's desire for the Highland body. The elders have approved the following motion:

The elders of the Highland Church of Christ are committed to encouraging the use of spiritual gifts by all Highland members. We believe that every member is called to serve God and the church according to his or her spiritual gifts. We hereby affirm that calling women and men to serve as elders at the Highland Church is a responsible interpretation of Scripture. The elders will immediately begin to discern how and when this will be implemented at Highland.

We believe it is important to communicate why we made this decision.

Why Are We Doing This?

As we prayerfully considered the question of women serving as Highland shepherds, three observations repeatedly surfaced and informed our individual and group discernment.

NEW CREATION AND SPIRIT-FILLED SERVICE

First, the Holy Spirit led us to perceive that the biblical teachings that should govern our collective discernments regarding gender roles in the Kingdom should be Galatians 3:28, Acts 2:17-18, Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:13, and 2 Corinthians 5:17. (These texts are included at the end of this document.)

These passages convicted us that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female" (Gal 3:28). In Christ we become a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), each of us baptized by "one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13), who has been poured out upon both men and women (Acts 2:17-18), empowering and equipping the members of the body with diverse gifts of service and ministry, among them gifts of pastoral care and leadership (Rom 12:3-8).

These scriptural teachings regarding the central role of the Holy Spirit in pouring out gifts of pastoral care and leadership upon both men and women, along with examples of female leadership in both the Old and New Testaments, led us to conclude that the gender-specific qualifications for elders referenced in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, along with the prohibition concerning women assuming authority over men in 1 Timothy 2:12, were cultural, situational, and local accommodations to first-century communities and congregations, similar to the biblical texts permitting slavery (e.g., Eph

6:5-9, Titus 2:9-10), requiring women to wear head coverings during worship (1 Cor 11:2-16), and commanding church members to greet each other with a “holy kiss” (Rom 16:16, 1 Cor. 16:20, 2 Cor 13:12, 1 Thess 5:26).

In addition, the inclusion of women in pastoral leadership was determined to be an issue that does not distort the gospel or call into question the salvation of those holding diverse and different interpretations of Scripture on this issue. Consequently, we are convinced that Highland can pursue and maintain “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3) despite disagreements about this change. In doing so we strive to hold to the ideal, “in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”

PASTORAL CARE

Second, we discerned that the primary role of a Highland shepherd is that of a servant who provides pastoral care to the Highland family. In light of that role, despite women in our congregation supporting other women in a variety of ways, we were convicted that long-standing gaps and failures existed in our ability, as an all-male elder body, to provide adequate pastoral care for every member of Highland, especially our female members. This helped convince us of the need for including women elders.

EVANGELISM AND MISSION

Third, the purpose of the Highland church is “to call all people to God.” In light of the expanded involvement of women in leadership positions in our world, it was discerned that Highland’s missionary and evangelistic efforts were increasingly compromised, especially among the younger generations. The inclusion of women elders removes this barrier, gaining a hearing for the gospel, and allows Highland to refocus upon the things of “first importance” (1 Cor 15:3-4): Boldly proclaiming the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We seek to follow the example of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23: “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.”

Finally, we think it important to acknowledge that male leadership has been the predominant pattern throughout church history, and to appoint female elders represents a change from this pattern—a change that will cause some members of our body to grieve. We grieve with them. But we also recognize, as we find in Acts 15:1-31, that the church can be called at times, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to make significant and even unprecedented changes. We believe we have reached such a moment, convinced that the inclusion of female elders is a necessary, helpful, and faithful change that will bless Christ’s body at this time and in this place, enabling us to more effectively pursue our Restoration Vision of joining God in restoring Highland, Abilene, and the world. In the words of James in Acts 15:28, after a long, careful, and prayerful discernment process, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” to make this change.

We pray that our pastoral service and leadership, that includes both men and women, will follow the admonition of 1 Peter 4:10-11:

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Our Prayer and Call for Unity in the Midst of Disagreement

And lastly, we think it important to share with you that this decision made by the elders was not unanimous. There are, and remain, disagreements among us. But we also believe each of us is striving to follow the Scriptures as faithfully as we can.

We share this disagreement with you to offer both hope and a vision of our way forward together as a loving family. Our unity is not based on our ability to agree with each other, but upon our shared faith in Jesus Christ and our deep love of the Highland church. We pray and humbly ask that you follow our example. In a world where disagreements are increasingly creating broken friendships and families, our love and unity points Highland, Abilene and the world toward our hope and salvation, Jesus Christ our Prince of Peace. Let us, as a family, 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 has 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)

Scripture References

GALATIANS 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

ACTS 2:17-18

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

ROMANS 12:3-8

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:13

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!