

THE BETTER HALF OF THE CHURCH: MAPPING THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ST. JAMES' CHURCH, DELHI

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ABSTRACT

The Almighty God made a woman as an 'ezer' meaning helper and He made her as the last of all creation. A woman is the zenith of creation. Just as piece of musical symphony reaches its crescendo in the end, so did the whole act of creation reached its peak in a woman. She epitomizes the wonderful zenith of all creation. Women are endowed with love, care, grace, beauty and creativity. Her beauty and charm not only lies in her outer appearance but also in her ways of service and assistance. Gender these days, has become a critical category for the analysis of all kinds of data, inclusive of religious studies. Many existing issues in the debates about women and their understandings, experience, status, role and directly or indirectly influenced by religion. The study of women is still undermined in the study of geography and religion, and the comprehensive study of gender as a category with even greater connotations has hardly inaugurated.

Therefore, this paper makes an inquiry to twig and figure out the roles and responsibilities of women in the sacred spaces, focusing on the oldest church in the city of Delhi. The church as a family is interlaced by women and they play a central role in knitting the church as one big family. As the author of this piece, I wish to build the intricate waltz of religion and space with a gendered lens to it and delve into the depths of women's role in sacred spaces.

KEY WORDS: Church, Women, Religion, Social Space and Women Fellowship

PROLOGUE

I take as my starting point to state that the western scholarship has finally begun to recognize the complex coaction between religion, space and social change which comes along with it. Religionists and social scientists have for long known that religion is among the foremost of institutions which conserve and sustains societies around the world. Scholars have of lately, recognized that religion has been equally essential as an agent of societal transformations. Though, religious studies as a discipline remains majorly androcentric in its key concepts, perspectives and approaches, the study women is still marginalized and sidelined. As an author, I believe in the idea that, religion and gender should not be hammered out as a ghetto subject.

The study of religion and gender is a self- reflexive process, which leads to a new, more differentiated consciousness on the part of those undertaking it. It also implies a self- critical examination of one's own beliefs, attitudes and experiences and thus can lead to manifold transformations (King, 1995). Powerful religious institutions are and have been governed and shaped by males alone. The gender hierarchy within institutional churches is restricted to

male priesthood. Thus, there arises a persuasive need develop a critical gender discernment and call for greater balance in the setting up of the religious institutions.

Women studies on the Christian tradition provide grounds for interdisciplinary and comparative research. Women's studies in religion are at forefront of intellectual inquiry by applying human, genderedness as a main interpretive category (King, 1995). Women serve the church as the chosen vessels by the gifts of grace and charisma. Women's studies on Christian tradition can stimulate other fields of research by rectifying religious rationale of a man-centered society. Studying the role of women in the church is both timely and necessary. Therefore, this attempt is made in the direction of delving into the roles of women in the Christian worship spaces. The paper commences with the idea of inception of woman as per the biblical texts, and in the following segments traverses down to the point where women of the present day church execute their roles in the church which bear the fruits of love, togetherness, care and unity and witness. The paper is a humble attempt to trace down the engagements and roles of women in the church family.

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THE FIRST WOMEN : GENESIS OF WOMEN FROM MEN

It is significant to talk about the birth of women in Christianity, as the study is based on the church, which is a Christian sacred space. The Bible mentions that, God created the light, night and day, the seas, the stars, and creatures to live in the seas, creatures to live on the dry land, and then finally the first man *Adam* – all in six days. Adam was created on the sixth day. The Bible clearly states in the book of Genesis, chapter 2, verse 7:

“And the Lord FORMED MAN of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” (Genesis 2:7)

Having seen Adam alone, God created a suitable helper for him, the woman. God caused Adam to fall into deep sleep and created the woman out of his rib. God designed *Eve* to be a helper comparable to Adam. This description can be found in the book of Genesis, chapter 2 verses 21.

“And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man HE MADE INTO A WOMAN and He brought her to the man.” (Genesis 2:21)

Eve was formed from the rib of Adam. Therefore, they are of the same flesh and the same bone. From the moment of creation neither man nor woman can be complete without the other. By working together, they form the basic unit of societal structures at large and the family, in general. The story of creation recognizes that men's and women's lives are interlocked and interwoven so beautifully by the Almighty that neither can survive without the other. God used Adam's rib to form Eve to show that they were actually the same created being, two halves of a whole. The female was not created as a separate being, secondary to male. She was formed as part of the initial man, in order to be a suitable helper for the male (Gen. 2:18). Woman therefore was created as a complement to man, as an integral part of man, and as a powerful and influential companion for man. Woman was created to be 'beside' man, not beneath or above him. From the first woman created and till date, the women folk have persevered and supported in the functioning of the society as equal bearers. Therefore, the next segment will focus on the modern day women in the church as a mainstream male dominated institute.

MODERN DAY CHURCH AND THE WOMEN

A significant amount of debate has been in circulation with regards to the women's ministry and participation in the church activities. In discussion of roles for women and men in church today, there has been a transformation in the traditional approach towards the same. Of lately, women have been active participants and initiators of several events and programs. Modern day churches can be seen with women teaching Sunday school children, organize bible studies, vacation bible schools, church revival festivals, host breakfast sales, generate funds, etc. They are engaged in nurturing their own children in the faith, engage in prayer, attend worship and fund church events. These duties are identified as the woman's sphere by the church, and responsibilities which fit into traditional feminine categories- nurturing, caring, listening and performing emotional work (Shaw, 2008).

Most of the societal responsibilities like giving care to the orphans, widows, disabled lie in the hands of the women, who are epitomes of sensitivity and love. The women have been playing a significant part in this league. We shall now track down the role of women in the St. James' Church, the oldest church in the capital of the country. Being old a little less than two hundred years, St. James' Church is a part of the heritage of the city of Delhi, it is worthy to note the eminence and the task and role of women parishioners, who have been associated with the church since three to four generations and have imbibed the upcoming generations with the same zeal.

MEANS, METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research on the role of women in the church of St. James' was carried out in episodes beginning in 2016 till the late 2017. The women group of the church is officially referred to as the women fellowship for Christian service, (WFCS). During this period of research, the women's group actively worked in the church family. The sample size for the study was selected to be six, as the responses started to saturate and repeat. The means of this research endeavor has been of qualitative nature and the methods used for the purpose of research were interviews, participant observations. The materials utilized for the research were interview schedule, recorder. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed over a period of two months.

WOMEN FELLOWSHIP OF THE ST. JAMES CHURCH: SOME OBSERVATIONS

The women's fellowship is organized through groups at various levels of the church. This is inclusive of congregations, zones, regions, states. The women fellowship

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is composed of the women from different walks of life, different professional backgrounds. This diverse composition of the women fellowship comprises of an indispensable human resource endowment. The women fellowship of the church is a hierarchical network of women, consisting of posts of a president, vice-president, secretary and treasurer. Women's fellowship of St. James' Church is doing its ministry for the glory of God, through heterogeneous activities of service. A fair figure of fifteen women members consisting of both retired and working women are involved in the fellowship with fervent prayers and mission zeal. There are few areas, where the women are vigorously involved and this will be seen in the attitude, action interaction of these women.

Spiritual Activities- The women in the women's fellowship are keenly involved in spiritual activities of the church. They conduct and lead the service on every second Sunday of the month in the church. Also in addition to this, Bible studies are also organized. On the third Saturday, members from the committee visit the sick and the elderly people (those who cannot come and attend the Sunday services) and pray for them. The women's fellowship fervently prays for the nation, city of Delhi, churches, sick people and for those who turn up at the church with varied problems and afflictions, advice, counseling and prayers are offered individually. At congregational level, the women lead the service of the least coin, an annual event of thanksgiving and forgiveness.

Outreach Ministries- Villages and slums on the outskirts of Delhi are periodically selected and visited and the message of the gospel is taken to them. The women visit the slums and also teach the under privileged children occasionally. A free scheme to impart tuition to poor needy students during weekdays is being planned by the women fellowship. Every single member of the women's fellowship enjoys contributing their time and efforts to such ministries.

Participation in Special Events- In each and every spiritual event that takes place in the church, the women's fellowship involves itself actively. Palm Sunday procession, Christmas and Easter preparations and World Prayer Days are a few of such events apart from the representation and participation in the Inter- church Women's Rally.

Social Concern- Trying to pursue the path of Jesus, they wholeheartedly engage themselves in serving the poor, the needy and the oppressed. The women try to comfort these people through the gospel songs and word of God.

Occasionally, the women fellowship '*bhandara*' organizes the community food distribution for the needy and the poor.

Sunday school- A Sunday school is a small group of children, between age groups of 5 to 15 years of age. It is held on Sundays, in chorus with the main church service. Women are actively involved in the Sunday schools, which are organized by the church. They preach about the word of God in form of visual and verbal narratives. Women also part take in teaching new hymns to the children. Mostly the women are from teaching background and are well versed with the student management strategies and hence are able to engage well with the young minds.

Choir Group- Some of the women members can also be seen in the church choir. The church choir is supported by mellow and easy on the ear voices. Besides young women, women from middle-age group are also energetic members. It is through song presentations, the women try to unite the body of the church and bring newness in the order of the church service.

Fund Generation- Women unite as one to generate funds for the church by their own small ways. These initiatives involve hosting of breakfast sale, putting up stalls in the church fetes and fairs, so as to induce financial benefits for the church and for their own ministerial works.

Office Bearers and Pastorate Committee- Though only a minimal number of women are present in the pastorate committee and at the office bearing levels, but their presence and opinions are highly honored and valued by the male members in the pastorate. The women in these authoritative committees contribute and administer by supplying key inputs in matters of concern. Meetings are held after six months to assess the work done and plan future projects.

Traditionally speaking, women have consummated supportive roles in serving the church and gained their greatest sense of joy and accomplishment. In fulfilling their divinely given roles and responsibilities, women are able to realize their full potential because they follow the plan of their Creator and Designer. It is only in obedience, that women believe that they give glory to God, in whatever ministry they are engaged in. Their belief is that, their felicitation not only comes from the materialistic world but also from God, who watches over their ministry. And the latter adulation is more welcomed.

While complying with the set criterion of objectives of uniting the members in prayer, service and witness and

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help them grow deeper in spiritual life, upholding the sanctity of Christian marriage and family life and nurturing the children and training women to participate in the leadership of the church in general and community at large. Besides these, the women reach out to the underprivileged sections of the society.

Women are imbued with some very special qualities of God. They are the image-bearers of His tenderness and compassion. They carry in their hearts the vulnerable, soft and delicate love of God. The sympathetic touch and warmth's of a woman's hand resembles the overflowing concern of God himself. A woman is qualified in this sense, to spread the love, the compassion, care and concern of God in this world in many ways. So it is for their, good work, and for its remarkable results, the church, promotes and felicitates women parishioners for their work and efforts.

First of all, it is rightful on the part of the church to have maintained a women's fellowship committee. The church as a united family promotes and helps active participation of the women parishioners in the church. The church also bestows the women fellowship committee with funds in cash and kind, to carry forward their activities. The church also, supports the women's group in their missions and activities by providing them with utmost moral fulcrum and the necessary material utilities.

On the contrary, St. James' church applauds the works of its women's fellowship by recognizing the ladies on special woman centered theme days, like mother's day, teacher's day or nurses' day specifically and on regular basis.

CONCLUSIVE PORTRAIT

We live in a time when the church is increasingly recognizing the value of teamwork and it is believed among the Christians that ministry (clergy or lay) should be made of

men and women, as it is God's plan to serve him corporately. As men and women are gifted differently and they follow this prescribed nature in discharging their respective duties and responsibilities and roles. The church has condemned the subordination of the women in the social world and denounced discrimination on the basis of gender. Women can now be a part of in the church as Eucharistic assistants, lectors, altar servers, theologians, administrators and on church councils.

The paper looked at the role of women in creating and knitting and maintaining the social space of the parish of St. James church. It was uncovered that the women have associated themselves with an intermixture of activities and ministries all projected to the service of the divine Almighty and society. The women are can be seen rendering their services in Sunday school, choir, prayer meetings, breakfast sale and the rest. They preserve the fabric of the church family as they garner their own families. This paper sets the pace for the forthcoming research on women and their leadership roles at the diocesan level, a level above the parish.

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