

Making the Shift: A Roadmap for Churches Moving to Full Inclusion of Women in Church Leadership

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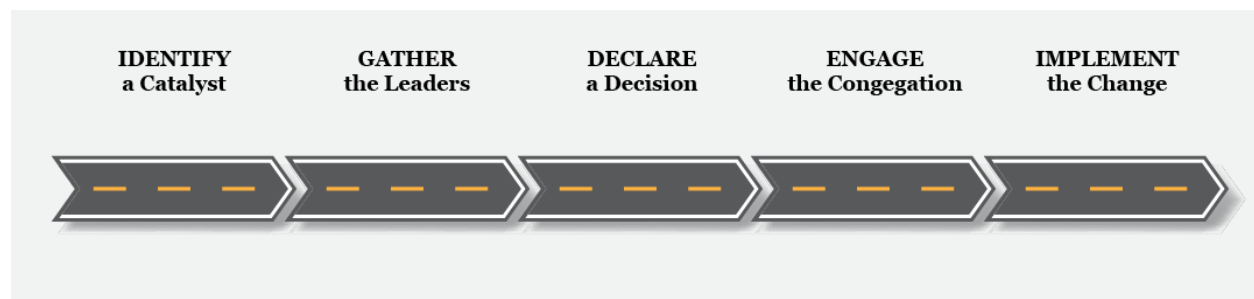
On April 17, 2016, the elder board of Bent Tree Bible Fellowship, a prominent church in the Dallas area, took the stage during their Sunday service to announce that the church was shifting its theological position to permit women to serve as elders. To be specific, they announced:

After careful study, reflection, discussion, and prayer, we have unanimously come to the conclusion that God is calling us to be a community of faith committed to conservative theology and a community where women gifted by the Spirit experience no limits or restrictions on their service. We joyfully agree to invite women to share leadership as elders.

This announcement wasn't made lightly. Instead, it followed a deliberate and extensive process, one that featured, among other components, a full year of contemplation and exploration on the part of the elder team. In the words of one of Bent Tree's elders, "Some decisions we make come at the end of a very long, rigorous journey that we go through and ultimately take great courage and faith to make, and this was certainly one of those."

Plenty of churches have attempted to join Bent Tree in making a similar theological shift, moving from some form of a complementarian theological understanding to an egalitarian one. One challenge for churches in these processes is that there is no existing roadmap for making such a shift.

In this article, we want to propose a roadmap that churches and organizations can use as they consider a theological shift from complementarianism to egalitarianism. Combining Bent Tree's experience with focused interviews with leaders from congregations or organizations who have successfully made the pivot, we are able to articulate 5 steps that communities can make as they seek to shift their theological position and practice regarding women in leadership. These 5 steps are shown in the graphic below:



This article will explain each step in this process, offering examples and ideas along the way. Our hope is that this will serve as a resource for churches and organizations who aspire to make this shift.

Find a Catalyst

The change process begins with a catalyst. For Bent Tree, the process of theological reevaluation began with two different catalysts: one that took place below the surface over time, and the other that arose because of the church's core values. First, Bent Tree's senior pastor, Pete Briscoe, had been nudging the church in an egalitarian direction for his entire tenure, some 25 years. Briscoe's leadership and encouragement created adaptive, long-lasting change over the course of many years. Second, the church's stated value for shared leadership bumped up against the church's espoused theology that women could not serve as elders. The friction between the church's stated value and their espoused theology necessitated a change. These two catalysts converged and sparked Bent Tree's process of theological discernment, which resulted in their dramatic pronouncement in April of 2016.

In change processes, catalysts are crucial. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky wisely note that changing "the way people see and do things is to challenge how they define themselves." In other words, the change process disrupts the way a congregation sees and understands itself, and this process is often painful or uncomfortable. For that reason, many congregations and organizations resist this kind of process until a force—or catalyst—prompts the process to begin. Just like Newton's first law of physics holds that an object in motion will continue on that same path until it is acted upon, many congregations will continue on in one direction until something happens to change the course.

For a church shifting its theology from complementarian to egalitarian, someone—or perhaps something—needs to drive the change process. One church leader reported that their change began when they realized "our values don't align with our practice." For Bent Tree, senior pastor Pete Briscoe encouraged the change throughout his tenure before a catalyst sparked an active move toward a theological shift. In other cases, a leader or key leaders felt strongly enough about becoming egalitarian that the change process became a priority.

In many cases, the catalyst for change is a leader with a strong egalitarian conviction. Other times, the change comes about when a discrepancy is noticed between values and practice. Still other times, the change process begins when a congregation cannot deny the giftedness and calling of someone in their midst. In the case of one congregation, a woman was elected and installed as a deacon, even when the senior pastor was not in favor of women in leadership. Members in the congregation engaged in a change process because the presence of gifted women in their midst clashed with their theology excluding women from church leadership. The catalyst provides the energy for the change process, which is why we need to make sure we care well for catalysts in terms of support and encouragement.

Leadership teams and congregations making the shift toward the full inclusion of women in leadership can care for, nurture, and heed the voice of the catalyst by listening to understand. Listening to understand is an active posture of listening that asks questions for clarification rather than making judgments. Another way to heed and support the voice of the catalyst is by making space for their voice or voices to be heard. A third way to support the catalyst is to

support them with a system of pastoral care. By encouraging these important voices, the spark created by the catalyst can begin to grow. Then it is time to gather the leaders.

Gather the Leaders

Bent Tree harnessed the energy of their twin catalysts and launched into the second step in their process, gathering their leaders. To be specific, Bent Tree's all-male elder team spent an entire year studying the relevant texts and periodically gathering to compare notes. Toward the end of that year, each elder prepared a written assessment of what they thought the Bible's message was regarding women in leadership. When they gathered to share their findings, the group was unanimous; there would be no office of the church off limits to women.

In this second step of the roadmap, the process takes a more formal turn. In response to the catalyst's energy, the leadership of the church intentionally takes up the question of the church's theological position on women in leadership. For the majority of the churches surveyed, this step happened at the very beginning of the church's discernment process.

In several cases, it was the church elder board that took on this part of the process. As noted, the elders of Bent Tree spent an entire year in theological reflection. In another case, a pastor set up a church-wide task force to study the Scriptures on this topic. Reflecting on her experience on such a task force, one leader noted the importance of having a carefully curated roster of participants, a clear vision/purpose for the group, established ground rules for how the group would operate, and effective facilitation.

During their times of discernment and reflection, leadership communities can use a variety of resources in their exploration. Several interviewees referenced books they had read as a leadership community, in some cases teams brought in outside experts to share their interpretations, and everyone interviewed discussed the importance of ample time to explore the Bible on this topic.

One question at this step in the process revolves around whether the larger congregation should be made aware that this leadership group is intentionally studying this topic. The choice to include the congregation could be beneficial, as congregants are able to pray for and support the leadership's process. At the same time, this inclusive choice might create undue pressure, as impatient or opinionated congregants might bring strain to the process.

Further, choosing to keep the process contained to just the leadership team could result in more freedom for the team to have an open and unhurried experience. On the other hand, pursuing this process in secret can result in some awkward dynamics once the leadership team makes its decision. Looking back, several leaders lamented how the secretive nature of the process engendered a loss of trust with the congregation when the decision was ultimately announced.

In trying to determine whether to bring the congregation into the process at this stage of the roadmap, leaders might consider the following questions:

- What is your past history around processes like this? How might that history inform your decision?
- Do you have an espoused value for openness and transparency? If so, that might be an argument for full disclosure.
- Who has a stake in this decision? For example, if a leadership team is discerning a direction, will staff members who are not on this leadership team be left in the dark or included in the process?
- Given the size of the church, would it make sense to go broader quicker?

Whether this second step in the process is public or not, the key feature is establishing a safe space for the church's leadership community to hear from God. At some point, they will be ready to move to the third step in the roadmap, declaring a decision.

Declare a Decision

In Matthew 5, Jesus began the sermon on the mount with the Beatitudes, words of vision that declared a decision of what the kingdom of God would look like. This pivotal moment invited listeners into a new way of being, into a community that would be distinctive from what it had been before. The third step of the roadmap—declare a decision—stands apart from the other process-oriented steps along the way because it is momentary. The declaration is the fruit of prayer, study, research, and discernment, but the moment the decision is declared the congregation is invited to participate in the new vision for the church.

After a year of intensive study, each Bent Tree leader shared their convictions with the rest of the leadership team. The movement of the Holy Spirit was clear when the team arrived at a unanimous decision to include women as elders in the church. With a unified elder team, the next step was to broaden the process to include the congregation.

In the third step on the road map, the leadership needs to declare a decision about including women at all levels of leadership in the church. This is a gut-check kind of moment, where the leadership team says, "Our sense is that the Lord is leading us in an egalitarian direction." Declaring a decision includes counting the cost (which could include people leaving the church), discerning the bandwidth needed to engage with the congregation's questions and concerns, and providing the resources needed to make the change systemic. A decision may be expressed through some sort of statement from the leadership, a researched theological paper, a sermon series about the decision, or some combination of these things.

For Bent Tree, a decision was declared in a few ways: through elder statements, a key sermon by the senior pastor, and most importantly through the theological paper they produced. In this paper, the core values of the church were explored—such as biblical inerrancy and shared leadership—and the case was made for including women as elders in the church

Declaring a decision invites the congregation to continue along on the roadmap. This step has the potential to bring many emotions or concerns to the surface for members of the congregation. In many cases, leadership teams that navigated this shift well in their churches made themselves available to answering questions or addressing concerns that the decision raised for people within the church. Depending on a church's governing structure, church by-laws might need to be changed to align with the decision made by the church leadership.

A theme that arose time and again in our interviews was the importance of transparency as the decision is declared, and the need for explaining what the process will look like from that point on. Because change involves loss (even when the change is good), the congregation may benefit from learning what things will remain the same (e.g. the church's core values, the process of nominating and electing elders and deacons, a commitment to the gospel and the authority of Scripture, etc.).

Engage the Congregation

In the fourth step in the roadmap, the declaration of a decision is followed by a period of engaging the broader congregation. For the Bent Tree community, this largely took the form of an invitation for individual congregants to reach out to elders and pastors in response to the position paper.

According to our research, successful congregational engagement is marked by three features: intentionality, a plurality of opportunities, and a robust pastoral emphasis. First, interviewees articulated the importance of intentionality in this phase of the process. For instance, one leader used the word "campaign" to capture how his community thought about this step. Intentional processes are proactive, carefully constructed, and they are clearly and repeatedly communicated.

Second, our interviews emphasized the importance of a wide range of engagement opportunities. Having a diverse collection of touchpoints can result in a more accessible process where there is something for everyone. Our research generated several examples of what congregational engagement can look like:

- One on one conversations with church leaders who were a part of the discernment process
- Congregational forums, where the community gathers for questions and answers
- Email blasts with resources for further study
- Seminars with outside experts
- Sermon series that follow from the declared decision

Third, the congregational engagement process should be fundamentally pastoral. Successful rollouts effectively shepherd the congregation through the change process. Looking back on his

church's engagement process, one leader noted that "people were brought along," in the sense that they felt seen and heard.

Curating a pastoral process is particularly critical since there may well be backlash. Every leader we interviewed for this project described some form of pushback from individuals or groups within the larger community. One leader remarked that, "even after the process, angry pockets in the church can persist." This high potential for disagreement should motivate a pastoral process. Leaders might not be able to persuade everyone to align with the church's decision, but it is important to honor everyone involved in the community through pastoral dialogue. As one pastor put it, "how we have conversation is just as important as what we decide."

Implement the Change

After engaging in the other four steps of the roadmap, it's time to take a breath, acknowledge the costs incurred, and provide care and support for the leaders who have been part of the change process from the beginning. Then, the process must continue. A theological shift needs to propel cultural and structural shifts as well. In other words, practice should begin to align with theology. For a shift to be successful and long-lasting, the change needs to become integral to the way a congregation "does church."

Implementation involves intentionality with words and titles. Perhaps, a congregation has given female staff members the title "director" when the more appropriate title is "pastor." By making this shift verbally when addressing these staff members and in places like the church website, the church's value of the inclusion of women at all levels of church leadership is made clear. These small changes help the congregation see the vision for where the church is going. As one leader we interviewed commented, there will not be any congregational buy-in if the people can't see "the picture." Another church changed out the pew bibles with New Revised Standard Version bibles so that people were reading the same inclusive translation the pastor was using during worship.

Implementation is difficult because it requires a church to confront systems and practices that may have become largely unconscious. These changes may elicit strong responses in both church leaders and worshipers, which may be difficult to navigate after a change process that may have gone on for some time. Effective implementation will ensure that church leaders are supported through the process, and that support and encouragement will also be given to any women who are first to be called to lead. One church leader shared his commitment for providing a young woman with support by saying, "I don't want her going into any context wondering if she should be here." He went so far as to say, "I'll stake my job on it" as he shared his passion for helping the church hire their first woman to a leadership position. Even when there is congregational buy-in, when a church has its first female leaders, all kinds of "ugly" stuff can come out. Support for these first female leaders is of utmost importance.

The road map for making this shift can span over the course of months, or even years. Even when all five steps have been navigated, church leaders must remain intentional about

implementing the change. Over time, those committed to making this shift may notice places of unintentional bias against women, systems that are set up to exclude women, or small habits that continue to marginalize women. For example, one leader shared the story of decisions being made by men on the team at a local golf course, a practice that effectively cut women out of the decision-making process. Noticing and eliminating that informal decision-making loop created a more inclusive leadership community for their team. Over time, as these habits and patterns come to light, continued steps toward implementing the shift will need to be made.

Conclusion

The first chapter of Genesis lays out God’s vision for the full and equal partnership between women and men. In Genesis 1:27, God tells the first humans, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” This command firmly establishes the principle of shared leadership, of women and men working together to steward God’s creation.

In pursuit of this Genesis 1 vision, the hard work of implementation continues at Bent Tree Bible Fellowship. Five years on from their discernment process, the congregation is currently on its second generation of female elders. Day after day, shared leadership is becoming a reality in their church community.

Indeed, Bent Tree and the other leaders surveyed for this project demonstrate that it is possible to make an egalitarian theological shift. Congregations who aspire to make the shift to the full inclusion of women in church leadership can follow the roadmap outlined above: identifying catalysts, gathering leaders, declaring a decision, engaging the congregation, and implementing the change. May the Gospel advance in greater measure as our faith communities discern fresh ways to partner together as women and men in ministry.

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