

What women want

Australian women find a voice.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."
Philippians 1:3-6

God has placed us in a partnership with our fellow Christians in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians walking together in our church communities are members of this partnership. The New Testament uses the word partnership in the context of fellowship and sharing the Gospel with others (1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:1-7). God has made men and women different yet complementary to each other (read Genesis 1 and 2). This article discusses the partnership role of everyday women in the PCA.

Partnership is the relationship between people who have mutual cooperation and responsibility to achieve a goal. We are partners in the gospel regardless of gender, age, ethnic background or career. When Christians work together in partnership, the body of Christ functions in the way that God has designed and He is glorified.

Over the past two years a group from the Women's Ministries Presbyterian Church of Queensland held consultations with people throughout the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The main goal was to collect information about the roles of everyday women in the church in 2007 and beyond.

People were consulted from churches in NSW, ACT, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. A discussion paper was written and used as the basis for collecting information. People responded to the paper individually, as a group, or took part in one of the 13 focus groups held around Australia. In total, about 600 people were consulted across Australia. The committee ensured that the participants were a representative sample of the church membership through rigorous research design.

The responses were very encouraging and challenging. Around 90 per cent of the responses were from women who



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poured out their hearts, passions, hurts and desires. While there was a great range of responses, three major themes emerged. Women wanted a voice in the church and wanted to be heard, they wanted to be encouraged and valued by church leadership to develop their gifts and they wanted to use their gifts for God's service.

Many respondents felt that they had no voice in the church at the local or wider church level. Women reported that when they were asked to contribute by the decision makers before decisions were made they felt valued in their church community. Women do not necessarily want to make the decisions – they just want to make contributions.

Some women expressed that the lack of access to the decision-making process has caused hurt, dissatisfaction, loss of enthusiasm, feeling devalued and resulted in a lack of commitment to working within the church. Some churches are already trying new approaches to overcome these issues. Here is an example of a church strategy for involvement:

- The session sets the general direction and goals of the church.
- Committees are then established to address these goals.
- Members of the congregation are invited to belong to a committee of their choice.
- These committees plan ahead (preferably 12 months) and submit a program for the approval of the session, along with a budget to the committee of management.

- Once approved, the committee is free to get on with the job.

In this way the session maintains its ruling role and sets the direction of the church while the committee of management maintains fiscal responsibility. Vital tasks of the church are delegated out to a much wider group of people. These people then have a voice in decision-making and can use their skills, experience and initiative.

Women want to be encouraged to nurture, develop and use their gifts. In some churches women reported that their leaders mobilised them through encouragement and equipping. This is a great example of pastors and teachers preparing God's people for works of service (Eph. 4:12).

Encouragement is translated into action with the support of equipping women with resources. The definition of equipping is "to furnish or prepare for service or action by appropriate provisioning". Women are personally responsible to equip themselves and take up opportunities as God leads them. However, it is the church's role to encourage, recognise and affirm individuals and this will enable women to step out confidently in faith and use their gifts.

Some people mentioned that they desired formal theological training. Some felt that there was no suitable course that was flexible for everyday people with busy lives (that is, those not aspiring to be ministers or elders). Some acknowledged that there might be some courses available, but just didn't know. Existing courses need to be promoted by churches and course delivery needs to be flexible for accessibility.

So why do women fail to volunteer for opportunities available to them (even when they possess the gifts to do so)? Many women find it difficult to escape the sense that their contribution is not seen as valuable within the organisation – thus they fail to volunteer. Some women lack confidence to volunteer for service within the church because they have been discouraged, disappointed or hurt in the past and have come to believe they have little to contribute.

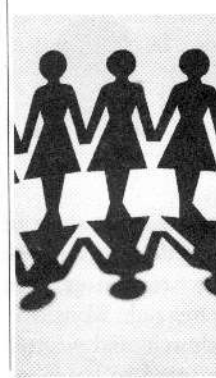
Why don't women equip themselves for service? The PCA has very few formal roles or positions for women within the church (paid or unpaid), and many women mentioned that they see little purpose investing time to develop skills they cannot use in the church. While this may be true, each individual has the responsibility to develop and use her skills regardless of the church she attends.

Women reported that where church leaders valued the gifts of the people in their congregation there was more involvement of people in church activities and sharing Christ with others. The majority of respondents believed that gifts were personally bestowed by God regardless of gender, and people should be placed in roles based on their gifts rather than gender. Generally people reported that the church's ministry agenda did not take into account the gifts of people within their congregations.

When women are not considered for non-ordained roles within the church because of their gender they feel overlooked. Apart from the passages that mention authority positions within the church (see 1 Tim. 3:1-11; Titus 1:5-9), the Bible does not distinguish between male and female as far as gifts are concerned (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16).

The church is a body made up of many parts, each having its own gifts for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7, 12-31). God made men and women different and to be complementary to each other (Gen. 2:18-25). Therefore, the leaders of the church are faced with the challenge of utilising

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these differences as they seek to develop and implement ministries.

Commitment of the church to model partnership for God's glory requires organisational change driven by the leadership of the church. Encouragement, recognition and affirmation are the keys to unlock hidden gifts. A church that teaches people how to equip themselves and encourages them will find people vol-

unteer to take up more positions of service within the church.

In summary, this consultation has informed the church that women feel respected, valued, confident, and enthusiastic about serving the Lord in the church, when they are being:

1. Taught about spiritual gifts and using them for God's service,
2. Affirmed as partners in roles by the leaders in their church,
3. Recognised for their gifts, abilities and strengths,
4. Provided with opportunities and given encouragement to use their gifts,
5. Provided with resources to equip themselves for service to the Lord and
6. Given a voice in decision making in the church.

Many of the issues raised here apply as much to men who are not elders, as they do to women. Men and women of the PCA are partners in Christ's work. As a church we need to equip and encourage one another to share the gospel of Christ with others.

God's call to the church is clear: to identify, encourage and develop the spiritual gifts of the whole body. The church must give ordinary men and women the opportunity to serve in roles in Christ's church as they are able. When Christians work in partnership, the body of Christ functions in the way that God has designed and God is glorified.

Cecelia Orford chaired the Presbyterian Church of Queensland committee investigating women's roles. The other members were the Rev. John Langbridge, Jan Langbridge, Andrea Pryde, Wendy Henry, Cath Thallon, Lorraine Eastwell and Lyn Nicol. We would like to thank all of the co-ordinators of focus groups in each state and area and all those who provided responses.



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