

Recruiting and training women for vocational ministry

Summary of findings from interviews conducted from August-September 2020

RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others. ~ 2 Timothy 2:2 (NIV)

The apostle Paul's words to Timothy charge him with entrusting the teaching of the word of God to reliable people who will themselves pass it on. How might we do this better among women?

In 2020, I began asking myself several questions as a first-year assistant minister at an established Anglican church with a pedigree of raising men and women for gospel ministry. In the last 10 years, our parish has raised 34 people for training in ministry through ministry apprenticeships at the parish itself.¹ Of the 34 people, 13 are women and, of those 13 women, everyone is active in serving in ministry contexts as lay and vocational Christian workers.

However, the presence of women being trained for gospel ministry is not evident in all ministry contexts. Why is that? How are we falling short of our responsibility to entrust the teaching of the word of God to reliable women who will also be qualified to teach others? What can we do better? What can I – as a male minister – be doing better to promote and raise up women for ministry?

These same questions apply to the presence of men being trained for gospel ministry. Indeed, 2020 was a year when the evangelical context in Sydney spoke to a supposed 'minister drought' particularly focusing on male ministers. But I wanted to focus on women in particular. To do so, I sought to listen and learn from women who have experience in raising other women for ministry training and who have trained women in ministry.

Across August to September 2020, I interviewed 9 women from different ministry contexts² who share the same Evangelical Christian convictions:

- Caroline Andrews – St. James Anglican, Croydon
- Helen Bell – Christian Union (Melbourne University)
- Jo Clark – Hunter Bible Church, Broadmeadow
- Kara Hartley – Archdeacon for women for the Anglican Diocese of Sydney

¹ This does not include members who have undertaken ministry apprenticeships elsewhere like a University campus ministry.

² The ministry contexts listed here were accurate at the time of the conversations taking place.

- Kitty Chan – Evangelical Christian Union (University of Sydney – Cumberland)
- Rachel Noakes – Hope Anglican Church, Leppington
- Stacey Chapman – St. Michael’s Anglican, Wollongong
- Suellen Milham – Orange Evangelical Church, Orange
- Tracey Gowing – Campus Bible Study (University of New South Wales)

The interviews were conducted over a phone call or via Zoom video call and lasted 30-60 minutes. The insights were profound and the breadth of experience varied and unique. I gave myself some months to prayerfully reflect on what I learned and to put into practice some of the wisdom that I gleaned from my sisters. In just the last 7 months, I’ve already been able to implement a number of the suggestions and practices that were put forward to me in these interviews.

What follows is my attempt to summarise some of my findings. I’ll add quotes along the way to give examples of things said that helped me come to this point, and also add some of my thoughts and conclusions at the end of each section. Not all of the contributors may agree with what I write and how I articulate what I learned. Any shortcomings in my understanding are my fault alone.

Special thanks to Candy Grice (one of the ministers at St. Paul’s Anglican who began in February 2021) for conversing with me in-person as I neared the completion of typing up my thoughts. And I’m also particularly thankful to Kitty Chan for being a model of a woman in ministry who I had the privilege of working alongside during my time at Evangelical Christian Union as a ministry apprentice, and for discussing these topics with me over several years. I’m also thankful to Kitty for being the ministry trainer of Vivian, my wife.

Through this process, I was profoundly encouraged to hear of how God has worked in raising women for ministry. And I have been deeply thankful for the work of ministry being done by women, for women, through women. The wisdom and truths articulated stem from our God who is the source of all that is true, good, and beautiful. And I have been personally enriched as a brother to listen and learn. I hope this enriches you as well.

- James Chen, 14 May 2021.
Youth Minister at St. Paul’s Anglican, Carlingford.

A HEALTHY CULTURE OF RECRUITMENT

In addition to constantly preaching the gospel and expounding from Scripture the importance of devoting ourselves to the work of the Lord, what makes a healthy culture of recruitment of women for ministry?

1. In any ministry context, it starts at the top. If the head of your ministry isn't personally passionate and committed to the task of raising women for ministry, it will not be a healthy culture.³
2. However, it can't be driven by one person. A healthy culture of recruitment of women is seen in a healthy culture of recruitment by men and women of men and women.⁴ In other words, you want men (team members and team leaders) looking out for men and women and you want women (team members and team leaders) looking out for men and women.⁵ Everyone – especially your leaders – need to be on board.⁶
3. This won't happen unless your ministry context has a commitment to training, which is hard because it can be much easier to get people who are already 'competent' to do things. If training isn't in the vision for the big picture of gospel ministry, then it will be hard to justify ministry training from a church resources perspective and difficult to show your women that you're serious about training them when you don't anywhere else.⁷

³ "Some women at College came from contexts where they were literally rolling a stone up a hill in order to make it happen...if the senior minister isn't on board then it'll be really hard to see it happen." – Jo Clark.

⁴ "Champion women in ministry rather than just ministry to women." – Helen Bell.

⁵ "[at the Evangelical Union – University of Sydney] ...we worked pretty hard on having men and women recruiting men and women so the recruiting wasn't just happening along gender lines." – Caroline Andrews.

⁶ "There's a lot of power and weight behind an encouragement from a minister, or a man, in ministry. But it needs to come from as many directions as possible." – Suellen Milham.

⁷ "Yes, trainees bring enormous value to our church but there's a cost in resources and time and money for training. If you're not committed to that as valuable, then people won't want to do it." – Stacey Chapman.

4. You have to be willing to walk alongside women and give them chances to try things so they can see that they can do it. A healthy culture of recruitment of women has set women up with examples of how they have done things, have grown in doing things, and have the potential to be good at ministry itself so that they can see that they could do it.⁸
5. It's important to give your members models of ministry so that they can envision what ministry as a woman looks like – not just ministry to women (which is still important!).⁹ Unless your women can see examples of what ministry as a woman could look like, they won't be able to envision what ministry for them could look like. And unless your men can see examples of what ministry as women looks like, they can be the ones who are causing blockages and discouraging women from serving.¹⁰
6. But seeing examples of women as models of ministry needs to extend to the day-to-day and week-to-week of ministry practice as lay members in word ministry with a robust and thought-out vision of what word ministry looks like.¹¹ If your women don't see it on the ground in non-paid capacities, then it will be harder to convince them that you value it.¹²

⁸ “When you tell a guy that he should consider ministry, he may think ‘yes...of course I should think about ministry!’ When you tell a woman they should consider ministry, they’ll be thinking ‘but I’m not sure that I could’. Unless you’ve walked with them and given them real experience, they won’t believe you when you say ‘you can do it’.” – Tracey Gowing.

⁹ “We have much more obvious male models of ministry – you need to work hard to point out female models of ministry.” – Caroline Andrews.

¹⁰ “Showing women that there are opportunities as women is important. It can be hard for women if they don’t know what it could look like... There are two girls here in my context who had never seen a woman in ministry before coming to this church.” – Rachael Noakes.

¹¹ “It’s hard when you [as a male minister in a ministry context] have a small box of what you think women have and can do and they realise that they aren’t able to tick what’s in that box.” – Helen Bell.

¹² “What makes [healthy recruitment cultures] healthy is seeing men and women serving alongside one another and proclaiming Jesus together...not just giving [women] the tasks of organisation and admin, but working with them to see what it looks like to do word ministry is key.” – Kitty Chan

7. A healthy culture of recruitment will continually cast the net wide in asking people to consider it, and will specifically tap women on the shoulder and walk with them in considering it. Personal conversations, recruitment conferences, preaching and small group applications that challenge women to consider serving God with their lives, and laying the groundwork years in advance are all practices that keep training and recruitment on the agenda.¹³
8. A healthy recruitment culture of women can be undone by poor recruitment of men who don't do a good job of encouraging their girlfriend, or fiancé, or wife to get on board with ministry and end up bitter without the right expectations about ministry.¹⁴ When a woman who is attached to a man in ministry isn't doing well, or isn't on board, then it can greatly discourage recruitment of other women in that ministry context. It's worth noting that this situation also greatly impacts their relationship and their respective ministries. A marriage relationship needs to be seen as a partnership in ministry and not just as something that one member is partaking in.

¹³ "As long as someone's got character and convictions, some competence and already doing ministry, I'll tap them all on the shoulder. You don't need to do specific taps all the time – cast the net wide...but you may invite 60 people to [a ministry recruiting conference], have 10 apply that year for a ministry apprenticeship, and end up with 6 doing it, 3 of which are women. Invite lots because you want to create that culture of ministry recruitment." – Jo Clark (note: Jo is working in a Unichurch ministry context. These are often bigger than normal churches. What's significant isn't the invitations to a recruiting conference, but rather the amount of work needed to get one ministry apprentice applicant.), and

"We're always currently thinking about who we should be encouraging and what stage they're at. Asking what is the next step for them...We've been intentional to specifically invite people to things [like a ministry recruiting conference]. Not just 'hey, anyone can come' but personally inviting people and chatting with them about what it is and why we thought they should come...We've also formed groups to help people who have been thinking about ministry to meet and see each other regularly to chat." – Rachel Noakes.

¹⁴ "Male ministers recruiting men need to learn how to help men to also woo their women into full-time ministry with them. Full-time ministry affects the whole job and the whole family and we can fall into huge traps if we only focus on trying to get the men on board with ministry while ignoring their wives...or women who will be their wives." – Tracey Gowing.

9. It's valuable for your church ministry context to have strong female trainers so they can gain confidence that there are people they like and would desire to learn from.¹⁵ This is why we need to see women in paid ministry roles – in discipleship as well and not just as families and children's ministers (though these are still important too).
10. A healthy culture of recruitment will constantly be putting forward the needs for gospel ministers in all aspects and various contexts.¹⁶ This needs to be greater than just what is happening in our patch; it must extend to the global needs and what God is doing in the world.

¹⁵ "When your ministry context has strong female trainers – and a variety of them – then they can feel more confident that this is a place where they'd like to be trained for ministry and that there are people they can learn from." – Caroline Andrews.

¹⁶ "If we have a view that is biblical – men and women contending side-by-side – then we will see there are places for women everywhere in ministry. We need to be aware of, and work out in our local churches how to communicate, the needs for women in ministry in our local churches, the mission field, University ministries, and so on. I could go on and on." – Kara Hartley.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

A healthy culture of recruitment is comprised of a healthy commitment to championing and training men and women working side-by-side in gospel ministry. This culture needs to permeate the DNA of a ministry context from the senior leader(s) and be cast as a vision again and again.

However, it's more than that. Walking alongside women and having a pathway planned to help them gain ministry experience and opportunities to serve are pivotal. Recruiting men can be 'easier' in the sense that for some men there can be an inflated sense of suitability (which needs to be addressed with careful attention paid to character and convictions). But recruiting women needs to come with a more thought-out process and commitment to seeing them grow and serve so that they can see themselves being trained for a lifetime of service.

Interestingly, I have observed that the ministry contexts that have the greatest number of ministry apprentices (male and female) are also the ones who have female leaders in vocational ministry. Could it be that a biblical commitment to seeing men and women contending side-by-side for the gospel results in more men and women desiring to do so vocationally?

PITFALLS TO AVOID

What pitfalls should we be aware of and seek to avoid when recruiting women for ministry?

1. Don't confuse godliness with gifting or vice versa – some women may be faithful, gifted in various ways, and servant-hearted, but that doesn't mean that they are committed to their own personal holiness and putting sin to death.¹⁷ And there are women who are extremely godly and solid in convictions, but have a total lack of ability to handle God's word and work in a team. A lack of competency isn't a deal-breaker, but it is important to be aware of and factor in.¹⁸
2. But don't undervalue competence, specifically in the areas of social skills, management of emotions and mental health (which are distinct things).¹⁹ The ability for a woman to work in a team and their competence in managing different personality styles and working approaches will be pivotal to their ability to last long term in ministry.²⁰
3. Avoid conflating your championing of women in ministry with championing public, upfront roles for women because it's deceptive – much of ministry is unseen and not public or upfront, and we can sell a vision of ministry that causes women to despise unseen roles or motherhood.²¹

¹⁷ "I think we do a poor job of talking to women about sexual purity. You absolutely have to have a conversation about it with women before even thinking about recruiting them to ministry." – Jo Clark, and "Sometimes people who seem very competent and capable and confident on the surface are not the people with the right heart for ministry." – Stacey Chapman.

¹⁸ "If people approach with a desire to be trained for ministry but have no experience then I turn them back around and seek to encourage them to serve in their local contexts and get some rungs on the board...I like to see current ministry involvement and a heart for God's people and service." – Caroline Andrews.

¹⁹ "Competence isn't king, but many faithful and hard-working young women should be challenged on aspects of their competence before even thinking of applying...especially social skills. They're key." – Jo Clark.

²⁰ "Some women may have skewed perspectives on what a team may, or should, look like. They may have really strict views of the kind of men they want to work with, and when they end up in ministry and on a team that doesn't match this vision then there can be a sense of helplessness or juvenile-ness. We need to train our women to learn the dynamics of working in teams and in different teams." – Kara Hartley.

²¹ "Most women will get married and have kids – a pitfall is to not show what a privilege that is. Don't just promote public, extensive ministry." – Tracey Gowing.

4. Don't just take whoever comes in an effort to bolster your ministry context's image of being committed to training women.²² And don't just tell women who have completed a ministry apprenticeship that they're suitable for ministry because you want to bolster your reputation for producing women for ministry.²³
5. Don't be too strict or rigid on what it is that you think your women could end up doing in ministry because you don't know what they will be doing.²⁴ However, you do need to be thought-out and well-articulated in how you understand men and women in ministry when you are recruiting. You need clarity.²⁵
6. Don't try and set too strict a pathway or plan for more than 2 years ahead. Check-in periodically because things can change quickly for women and you can end up missing the opportunity to encourage them towards ministry.²⁶

²² "It's always unhelpful to talk in terms of 'do this if you can't find something else to do'. There are times to say 'that's not working out for you – here's what you should be doing with your time'. But don't encourage people into ministry if they don't know what else to do." – Stacey Chapman.

²³ "We can lack a longer-term view in terms of seeing whether women will burn out from ministry. We need to have hard conversations about how they balance ministry and family, rest and managing their mental health. If they haven't grown in how to do it in a ministry apprenticeship then you may be setting them up for failure if you don't tell them. Since there aren't many women in ministry then when it goes poorly it goes really poorly and it can have carry-on effects for the trajectory of women in ministry in the contexts they end up for several generations down the line." – Jo Clark.

²⁴ "You want your women to be entrepreneurial and risk-taking and willing to go out there. Avoid narrowing things down where they don't have to be narrowed down. I always want to avoid people thinking about pre-determined roles and how they can fill them." – Helen Bell, and

"Guys can start [a ministry apprenticeship] with some clear pictures of what is possible. The question for them is if they'll do it. But for women, they can be less clear on their suitability and competency. But they can also have no clear picture of what is possible." – Kara Hartley, and

"For women, they're different to men in having life stages. It looks slightly different. And the roles for women to serve are diverse and not necessarily paid. For women, we need to help them see ministry as valuable and worthwhile – even in giving up their job or changing careers – even if they may not have a paid position or many options to serve after being trained." – Kitty Chan.

²⁵ "It's really important that males in ministry have thought through very well what they see as the role of women in their church if they're seeking to invite them to ministry. I don't mean drawing lots of lines in the sand, but I mean being clear about how they fit in the structure." – Suellen Milham.

²⁶ "Most women only plan 2 years ahead whereas men are ready to talk about their '5-year plans'. There are so many factors that are unknown for women, the biggest being marriage and children." – Tracey Gowing.

7. Related to this, you must speak to the question of “will ministry training be a waste of time if I just became a mother?”²⁷
8. You want to be upfront with women about money and employment, and prioritise training them to do their own financial partnership development because it can be hard and it may be necessary depending on where they serve.²⁸
9. Don’t avoid speaking openly and specifically about how dating and marriage will play a big impact on their roles in vocational ministry. It’s not that a woman can’t be in vocational ministry if her husband isn’t, but that it is a complicated matter and the priority must be given to the preservation of the marriage.²⁹
 - If a husband is a Christian but has no thoughts about ministry, or strong convictions about the desire to serve God, then that will be difficult.
 - If a husband is insecure in his identity in Christ because his wife is more godly or competent than he is (especially if he is unsuitable for ministry) then that will be difficult.

²⁷ “Having children is such a valuable mission field. Why wouldn’t you want to be trained in order to minister to your children, to your children’s friends, to your children’s friend’s parents, and to other families?” – Jo Clark.

²⁸ “Money matters and you want to help women work out how to do their own partnership. Interestingly, when women raise their own money for ministry, they don’t tend to have much trouble if they’re trained right, but when they wait for a paid position, they can be waiting for a while.” – Helen Bell.

²⁹ “When it comes to women and marriage in ministry, there are lots of issues but they’re very dependent on individual circumstances. We need to help people see that while the church is God’s household that there is a difference between the church and our own households.” – Stacey Chapman.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

The kinds of people we recruit for ministry training will be seen by members in ministry contexts as examples to follow. As such, who we recruit matters a lot. While we do want to give people a go, we can do damage to our desire to form a culture of ministry recruitment if the people we recruit turn others off from wanting to follow the same trajectory.

This applies to women as well. The presence of women in ministry training is not the end to which we are aiming towards – failure to realise this can result in a desire for quotas to be met and displayed as evidence of ‘how devoted we are to raising up women for ministry’. Instead, we want the right women to be trained so that they may be blessings to God’s church – in whatever context they may find themselves – who will serve in Jesus’ name for a lifetime and train others to train others also.

We also need to avoid adopting a careerist mindset in raising women for ministry that puts forward a rigid, public, positional-power progression plan for women such that they don’t value the importance of the training itself (and see it merely as a stepping stone) or valuing unseen work including loving their families. Careerism in the world is not to be replaced with careerism in the church.

A question that ministry contexts need to ask themselves is: ‘what is a ministry apprenticeship for?’ There are differing ministry apprenticeships with different ministry philosophies. If we see a ministry apprenticeship as only a time of testing for vocational ministry, then the expectations are set up for profound disappointment if the end result is that a woman is advised not to pursue vocational ministry.

Instead, we can – and should – see the value of ministry training (including apprenticeships) as times of transformation, growth in convictions, and competencies in word ministry for a lifetime of service. The value of ministry training isn’t in the job at the end, but in being equipped to know and love God more. This will have manifold advantages when we raise people (men and women) up for reaching the lost, discipling and teaching families, and being a blessing in whatever ministry context one will find themselves.

TRAINING WOMEN

What specific areas do you think should be touched on in training women in ministry?

1. Don't think that training for women needs to be separated from training for men too quickly.³⁰
2. First and foremost, women should be trained in how to handle God's word and teach it faithfully. Plenty of opportunities should be given for women to teach such that they are encouraged to look to the Bible as their first source of guidance and wisdom in all matters of belief and conduct.³¹
3. We want to develop a woman's confidence in doing things upfront and learning how to lead publicly with confidence, but this will look different depending on the person.³²
4. Teach women to think deeply about how to rest well, the emotional toll of ministry, women in ministry, women carrying responsibilities at home, and preparing to think about children. Even if not all of these aspects will be relevant to the women themselves, they will definitely be relevant to the women they minister to.³³

³⁰ "Theological formation is a place that is not different for men and women. Don't silo training too quickly. It's good for men and women to grapple with topics together like men and women in ministry and gender and sexuality." – Kara Hartley, and

"There is much more in common than is different between the men's and women's training. We don't run separate training programs for men and women. Yes, our mentoring may end up going in different directions, but the programs are the same." – Helen Bell.

³¹ "It's really important to make sure the women trainees are doing word-based ministry and are encouraged to keep on getting their Bibles out with people they meet up with. The easy thing to fall into is just chatting and thinking that that's ministry. It's good to convince people they're meeting up with that getting out the Bible is a good thing to do." – Stacey Chapman, and

"Women need to be trained in teaching the Bible. Much of 'women's ministry' becomes event-based or counsellor-based, but the core of what it means to be a person in ministry is opening the Bible in all your contexts." – Jo Clark.

³² "We don't have women lead church services, but we work at providing opportunities for women to do some things upfront. Not that women always need to be doing things upfront, but we want to help develop their confidence in doing so." – Suellen Milham.

³³ Almost every person I interviewed spoke about this in different ways.

5. It's vital to help train women to learn how to function on a team – especially women who are complementarian.³⁴ This includes how to be persuasive and firm in defending a position, especially since some will feel that when others disagree with them that they should immediately back down.
6. Train them to see what opportunities there are out there for serving, including theological education options and ordination. This also involves training women to be intentional in self-starting ministries.
7. It is essential to train them to raise their own financial partnership.³⁵

³⁴ “Finding long-term ministry work depends more on the people than the job itself. Helping women who are complementarian decide who to work with and how to function in a team is hugely important as they realise, they may never run the whole team...this includes encouraging women to be able to pushback on what others say because it may help her to learn not to be fragile and totally accepting of what others say.” – Helen Bell.

³⁵ This point was raised in the last section.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

There aren't many differences in content when it comes to training women in ministry and training men in ministry, though there may be stronger emphases at various points. This variation in emphasis is not directly linked to different viewpoints on roles for men and women (though, this may be relevant at times). A training program that has the same emphases for all of the ministry trainees regardless of sex may be indirectly ignoring crucial points that would be more prevalent in discussions among women (even though they should be relevant to men as well) e.g. ignoring the importance of thinking about children and thinking about how to pastor people struggling with childlessness.

A thought I had in light of the insight to train women to function on a team is that if you don't have women in your team meetings (senior or otherwise) then it is difficult for ministry apprentices to see it modelled. It may be possible to train women in how to function well in teams and prepare them to tackle disagreement persuasively, but it will only be theoretical if our male and female apprentices aren't exposed to it first-hand. A key aspect that many ministry contexts speak of with their apprenticeship programs is the importance of seeing the lifestyle of ministry in a practical manner – seeing team meetings function and disagreement resolved constructively between male and female members seems to be a crucial facet of healthy team discussions that which would be lacking in some contexts.

Another thought I had was concerning how many of my interviewees noted how important it was to train women to raise their own financial support. What was said – implicitly and explicitly – is that there are currently (in Australia) more jobs that *don't require* personally raising financial support available for men than women. While working on financial partnership is a value for many ministry apprenticeship contexts, some don't place a huge emphasis on it for all their apprentices (for example, paying the apprentices through the church's giving). It seems to me that lacking this key skill will disproportionately impact women more so than men.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS

The key questions that ministry contexts need to ask themselves are:

- What is the **value** of training women for ministry (as lay members, and vocationally)?
- Is equipping women for ministry **necessary** for our faithful partaking in God's mission, or merely **nice**?

How they are answered may not always be written in a document somewhere, or plastered on their website, but it will be seen, felt, and remembered in the training culture that exists (or doesn't) on the ground.

A ministry context may say that they support training women for ministry, but never seek out women to be trained, and serve, in positions and roles. The ministry context may not be attentive to the visibility and celebration of faithful service by women. Or, they may not work hard and deliberately in casting a gospel vision that encompasses the totality of God's people for the purposes of God's kingdom and the proclamation of God's gospel.

All of us can grow in how we raise up all people – men and women – and train them for ministry. We want to see more harvest workers for the harvest. We want to see the lost saved and God's people edified. For it is what we are called to do as we wait for our Lord to return.