

Asia's Churches Empower Women—So Should We

This past week, I've been in Singapore, a nation known as "the Antioch of Asia" because of its thriving churches. Some Western ministry leaders come to Singapore to learn the secret of their church growth. Is it cell groups? Is it their administrative savvy? Is it their openness to the Holy Spirit? All those things have helped—but many people ignore the fact that women have played a prominent role in the success of churches here.

A few days ago, I had lunch with Naomi Dowdy, who came to Singapore as a young Assemblies of God missionary in 1975. She began pastoring a small church, but in four decades, it grew to more than 5,000 members. Today, Trinity Christian Center has more than 8,000 members and is led by Dominic Yao, the man Naomi trained to be her successor.

Naomi Dowdy's success is being repeated by younger women in Singapore today. Last weekend, I spent time with Haziël Minoza, a dynamic church planter who leads the Filipino congregation of 5,000-member Cornerstone Church, which is led by Pastor Yang Tuck-Yoong. Haziël has already planted 10 Filipino congregations, and her passion is to train more leaders.

I'm so grateful that Naomi Dowdy and Haziël Minoza were given the opportunity to function in their spiritual gifts. Countless people found Jesus Christ as a result. Yet in the United States, many women still feel still resistance if they volunteer to lead anything other than a women's Bible study. Why is this? During the 20 years I've been a vocal proponent of women in ministry, I've observed seven reasons why conservative evangelicals limit women in the church:

1. **We misunderstand Scripture.** Conservatives who bar women from leadership typically cite 1 Timothy 2:12 or 1 Corinthians 14:34 (NASB) (“women are to keep silent in the churches”), and yet they ignore verses affirming women’s spiritual gifts. Deborah, who served as senior leader of ancient Israel, is ignored, and New Testament women leaders such as Priscilla, Phoebe, Euodia, Syntyche, Junia or the daughters of Philip are dismissed. We also conveniently forget that Peter announced on the day of Pentecost: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17b, MEV). Scripture calls certain women to leadership rather than banning them from it.
2. **We are bound by religious tradition.** Martin Luther was a prophetic voice to the church when he exposed religious corruption and heresy. Yet he was still so bound by his own 16th-century bias against women that he believed God created females only for the purpose of childbirth. Many conservative Christians still hold antiquated ideas about female inferiority. This explains why so many churches didn’t allow women to wear pants or makeup a few decades ago, and why women today are still expected to serve only as cooks or babysitters in some denominations.
3. **We don’t give the Holy Spirit full control.** Paul the apostle wrote: “There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28b). He understood the amazing equality of the Holy Spirit, who gives spiritual gifts to “each one” (1 Cor. 12:11b)—not according to gender, class or race but according to God’s choice. God chooses whom He wills; He does not qualify based on human criteria. This means we must affirm the valid gifts and callings of our sisters. If God calls an Esther to lead, we should not hide the scepter from her.

4. **We are afraid of “feminizing” the church.** Some insecure Christian men complain that there are already too many women making decisions in the church. One author even demanded that flowers be removed from church altars because they are feminine! My response: The same God who created deer antlers and buckskin also made carnations and orchids. Genesis 1:26-28 says God created male and female in His image. Only when we have men and women functioning in their full capacity in the church will we see His image fully manifested. It took both Abraham and Sarah to give birth to Israel; God wants both genders involved in His work.
5. **We associate women leaders with a liberal agenda.** In the United States, many of the women who hold political office do not reflect Christian moral values. For this reason, some people automatically associate women preachers or pastors with a radical feminist agenda. This is unfair. In America’s past, some of the greatest leaders of social change were women who held Christian beliefs—brave women like Harriet Tubman, Phoebe Palmer and Sojourner Truth—but they would have been uncomfortable with today’s liberal agenda. We need an army of women leaders who will speak as prophets on the national stage.
6. **We don’t see enough positive examples of female leadership.** In the early Pentecostal movement, it was not uncommon to see women preachers traveling across our nation planting churches and conducting evangelistic campaigns in roadside tents. Women preachers, including Aimee Semple MacPherson, Carrie Judd Montgomery and Myrtle Beall made a huge spiritual impact on their generation. Today, while there are significant numbers of women pastors and missionaries in Pentecostal groups, the most prominent Christian women featured in mainstream media are Bible teachers who reach women

only.

7. **Some Christians hate women.** It's sad but true. Misogyny is alive and well, and sometimes it is even preached from pulpits. In one prominent evangelical church in El Salvador, the previous pastor often joked about women and trivialized adultery. It's no wonder domestic violence thrives in that country. Until some brave men have the guts to challenge the sexism of the "good ol' boy network," abuse will remain a problem among Christians.

The church in Asia is blessed to have women like Naomi Dowdy and Haziell Minoza on the front lines. On this side of the world, I pray we will affirm and celebrate all women who have been called by God to lead.