



# Can they Speak Louder among Men? Women and Leadership Positions in Southwest United Methodist Church, Gainesville/Florida

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## Abstract

*Male social dominance is well documented toward the history of humankind. The male domination draws women in a position of subordination. However, gradually it changed through a long feminist movement activism. Nerveless, in many religious groups and denominations, female subordination is still the rule for several reasons including the (mis)interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and local understanding of male-ness and female-ness that supports the dominance of the first and the subordination of the latter. This study conducted in a small Methodist congregation in Gainesville Florida examined the roles of women and their perceptions regarding the roles they played. Using a fieldwork of six months mixing participant observation and in-depth interviews, the research concluded that in this congregation, there was a culture encouraging the emergence of women leadership. Women were pastors, lay leaders, directors of departments, and chairs of committees. Most of the mentioned positions helped women leadership to develop in this congregation. Finally, it can be noted that this Methodist church is a religious model for female leadership and a source of inspiration to other religious institutions where women are maintained in subordination position using Holy Scriptures.*

**Keywords:** Women, Men, Leadership Roles, Subordination, Church Methodist, religiousinstitution

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## Introduction

For a long period, human society was defined as patriarchal with male dominance in the public sphere and within the family. In this system, as argued Sultana (2012: 7) 'all the power and authority within the family, the society and the state remained entirely in the hands of men.' In most religious institutions, the male domination was strengthened by the interpretation of Holy Scriptures. In most religions, the divinity was represented with a male figure and these texts in general presented God as a father, not mother. For a long period, the Holy Scriptures (mis)interpretation attributed the leadership role to males not only in the household but also in other social institutions (church, mosque, synagogue, temples, schools...) leaving to females the only position of subordination. Even outside religious institutions, the status of women was subordinate to the one of men (Epstein, 2007).

It is only during the 20th century that a real movement has risen among women. They raised their voices to reclaim an equal society where men and women could benefit from the same rights. The feminist movement sought the emergence of a more egalitarian society. Initially mis-constructed as an anti-men movement and men resisted it. However, feminism was not a movement seeking male subordination, but one fighting against sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression (Hooks, 2015).

In some religions, the change in the representation of the deity from a male figure to a female (Buddhism, voodoo) helped a lot woman in these institutions to feel valorized and to be able to reclaim their emancipation: if God could be a woman, a woman could be a leader as a god herself (Hooks, 2015: 109).

Christianity resisted the feminist movement for many years but recently there have been major shifts. These shifts have been particularly noticeable among the Protestants denominations. The Bible has been reinterpreted to find a place for women (Odell-Scott, 1983). However, until today, not all Christian churches have succeeded the integration and recognition of women's leadership. It may happen that in the same denomination, there are two opposed tendencies at the same time: one recognizing and promoting the leadership of women, another denying to them this privilege in the name of the Holy Scriptures.

As an anthropologist from Africa, I have been a member of a protestant church where the official position regarding the leadership of women is not well defined. The church is almost twenty years old with an average of

1500 church members, and more than the half of them are women. However, there is only one pastor who is a woman, and her main responsibility is to coordinate women's activities in the church. From this background, I had an interested to orient my research in one local church in Gainesville/ Florida. This study aims to understand the roles of women in a small Methodist congregation in Gainesville, Florida: The South West United Methodist Church (SWUMC). Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions

- What are the perceptions of women attending SWUMC regarding their relationship to leadership roles in this religious congregation?
  - Are Women attending SWUMC involved in leadership positions?
- Is SWUMC church a model of female leadership promotion?

### **The Southwest United Methodist Church**

The church building is located at 2400 Southwest Williston road in Gainesville, Florida. The church is more than 50 years old now because it started in January of 1966. It was an idea of a family, which wanted to have in south-west Gainesville, a Methodist congregation. This family (Power family) donated five acres of land as memorial Mr. Powers' mother, Mrs. Carrie Elizabeth Powers. The first church service was held September 18, 1966, at the Idyllwild elementary school with 130 attendances according to the church's website.

The short story above indicates that the church is more than 50 years old now. However, it has kept less than 100 people attending Sunday's services. During all my fieldwork at SWUMC, the Sunday's services consisted on an average of 60 persons. The first thing any visitor can notice is that the majority of church attendees are seniors in their seventies and more.

## **Methods**

### **Research procedures**

This study aimed to understand the roles of women in the church using a Methodist church as an example as this denomination is one known for its capacity to respond to feminism appeals and movements. Feminism movements since a few decades militated to see the full integration of women in the church as ministers at the same level as their counterpart men. I wanted to elucidate the impact (if any) of these movements on women and how they felt in terms of opportunities to lead or having leadership positions or any responsibility previously considered as 'men related' in the church or faith based congregations. From some literature accessed about the issue, I realized that women were still apprehensive about not being fully integrated into leadership positions as the majority of them played less important roles in their congregations.

I conducted a four months ethnographic fieldwork from September to December 2015 in the SWUMC church from September to December 2015. This ethnography is oriented toward the understanding of women's experience in a religious domain and correspond to what Schrock and others call 'feminist ethnography' (Ghosh, 2016; Schrock, 2013; Stacey, 1988; Lila Abu- Lughod, 1990). During my fieldwork, I used participant observation and got involved in the activities of this local congregation. Getting involved in church activities, in church activities helped me to be quickly accepted as someone women could trust. I attended all Sunday services and most of other activities organized during the weeks.

I conducted 12 in-depth interviews, eight with women and four with men using a semi-structured interview guide. The research participants were interviewed at the church in one of the buildings after church service on Sunday or during the week after setting an appointment with a specific participant.

Before interviewing any participant, I set a meeting with the senior pastor of SWUMC. During this meeting, I explained my research interest and the reason why I wanted to talk to members of in this congregation. From him I got the general background the church, the idea about the ministry of women as set by the Methodist denomination. The pastor gave me the formal permission to conduct my research in this small congregation. He was the first to suggest a woman I should talk to the first because believed this woman had a long experience in the church and could be a good resource for further orientations. Mrs. Pasha (not the real name), my first informant, suggested me the second informant and I ended up conducting a snowball sampling to get all my respondents (Johnson, 2014).

### **Participants**

The women I interviewed were mostly retired, senior women. The majority of them was in their 70s and only one was 53 years old. In general, SWUMC church members are older people (males or females) and the young people are the exception. For my interview, I deliberately chose not to speak to younger women who did not have a long experience in this church because they should not have a lot to say. Mrs. Pasha has been member of this church for more than 40 years and was a good informant to start with. The interviewee she suggested me had an experience of 30 years with this church and she helped me to learn more about women's experiences in the SWUMC.

## **Research techniques**

### **Active participant observation**

During these four months, I conducted an active participant observation (to attend every church service every Sunday, to participate to regular weekly meetings; prayers, teachings, festive events, visits) and to take part to any extraordinary activity organized within the congregation. I was viewed as a member of this congregation. It gave me the insider status useful for me to get access to the data I needed to collect (Agar, 2008). I was not just observing, but also involved in activities, I was even officially integrated as a new member of the congregation during a sole ceremony one month before the end of my fieldwork. To have the whole picture of what was going on; active participant observation approach was the appropriate method I preferred. From it, I was able to see myself how women were involved in what kind of activities. According to Ghodsee (2011), 'the ethnographic participant observation as an approach helps to meet and interact with research subjects'. The more the observation is long the more the research produces new data. When the researcher becomes more active and highly involved in participant's activities, she/he acquires a new status of insider able to collect data of quality (Johnson et al., 2006).

For a good understanding of my research subjects, I committed to attend as many meetings as possible. I became one of the best congregants who was fully committed, who made friends, and who supported all the activities of the church. I attended 16 church services, 10 weekly meetings, 6 festive receptions that included 4 potlucks. I went to one bereavement ceremony of a church member in the unique goal of following women, watching and assisting them in the performance of different tasks.

### **In-depth interviews**

In addition to participant observation, I also conducted in-depth interviews using a semi-structural interview guide. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation (Boyle & Neale, 2006). In-depth interview was intended to supplement the participant observation and allowed me to grasp information I could not get from the ethnographic participant observation. I needed to speak to my respondents and get their perceptions. I talked to 12 persons (4 males and 8 females whose ages varied from 22 to 77). Only two persons were under fifty: one male (37) and one female (22).

Using open-ended questions allowed participants to provide details related to their involvement in this congregation. The relatively small number of my sample was also beneficial allowing me to spend enough time with each respondent.

## **Results**

### ***Results from participant observation***

I observed both women and men as they performed church activities. I observed also the equipment and materials used and who could use them and when. I realized that men were respectful and careful when communicating verbally and when using body signs. I noticed that women were confident in themselves and somewhat authoritarian because they seemed to control all church activities. Looking on the cover page of church weekly bulletin, I noticed three names mentioned as key people of the congregation. Two of them were women; one was music director and the other as the pianist. The third and the only man was the senior pastor of SWUMC church.

Each day of my fieldwork, I had in mind a simple goal to achieve, answering the question: 'who is doing what?' I was also writing all my observations in my small notebook so that I may reconstruct after I was home the main and meaningful observations I did when in the research field. Ethnographic data according to Ghodsee (2011) consists also in field notes the researcher records on a daily basis to reflect activities in critical detail. My notes were the primary resource used to tell the story related to women's roles in this congregation. They were more important because they were collected objectively without any other intention. During Sunday morning service in the SWUMC sanctuary, six main activities were conducted:

- Chairing the Sunday service: during my sixteen weeks of fieldwork, this activity was led always by a woman.
- Receiving for worship: two women have played this role during the time I was doing this study at SWUMC.
- Lighting the candle at the altar: here two adolescent girls played this role, one apparently adolescent and the other under the age of ten. It appeared that in Methodist church tradition, candles lighting during church service is very meaningful at the beginning of each service as it is for extinguishing them at the end of the service.
- Preaching and blessing the congregation: two persons preached during all my fieldwork, a female and male pastor.
- Directing the music: The music director conducted both the choir and led the assembly in singing hymns from the red hymnal Methodist book during the church service.

- Offerings presentation: offerings moment is a crucial moment at SWUMC, there was a person specially designated to chair this time every Sunday. During my short fieldwork, two different people (one female and one man) played successively this role helped by two ushers who collected the offerings.

The other meetings I attended were dinners, potluck lunches organized during this period. Churchwomen with the support of their fellow men organized all dinners.

I attended a funeral ceremony of one church member in Williston and a male pastor assisted by one of the women of SWUMC led it.

I had no idea or agenda of telling stories about the funeral in my study but as Stacey (1988) noticed, her ethnographic role consigned her to experience the death of one of her informant considered by her as a friend. As it happened to Stacey, this funeral helped me to see women from SWUMC in another lens, the one I was not expecting during my research. At this funeral, women were not there to cry, and express heavily their emotions, they were the family comforters, they provided support, they were making things happen, they were strong to sing, to testify, and communicate with the bereaved family.

### **Results from in-depth interviews.**

Women were asked to answer questions about the roles they played as members of SWUMC. Four men were asked the same questions about their roles, the actual roles of women in the church and the ideal role of women in Christian congregations.

Without consulting one another, their responses converged in a sense that showed women were involved in different activities including the fact that the majority of them were holding leadership positions in this particular Methodist church of Gainesville in Florida. One particular woman mentioned a number of important roles she was assuming and stated:

*“I am the chairwoman of the administrative council. I am nominated for that position and I chair the monthly meetings. I have a vote in decisions that are made. I am a member of the nominations committee. Every year, before the conference, we nominate people from church to sit on the various committees. As chairwoman, I am the altar committee. I make sure that the bread and juice are set up and I assist the pastor on communion Sunday. I have free reign to change flower, I make sure the candies are ready, I change the altar cloths, and I help the acolyte in the morning with candles. I also occasionally help with the collection (of offerings). I sing in the choir.”*

This declaration is very clear how this woman is very proud of herself and different roles she uses to play in the church. Maybe people can think she is just an exception, yes, of course, she is one because it is not easy to find another person playing all these roles including among men from SWUMC. She is an inspirational model among women but was not the only one raised at a high position. I talked to other women who played important roles but were not willing to talk about all of them because they thought it would be missing the humility an attribute they considered as a value. These are other roles of women in this church: Music director, president of women group, chair administrative council, finance chair, encourager to stimulate outreach and facilitator, adult Sunday school teacher, advisory council, lead prayer chair, Sunday school student, choir member, singer.

Only a few of the roles above were not requesting leadership qualities including singing in the choir, being a Sunday school student and these were mentioned by the youngest lady interviewed. In answering the question: What specific leadership role women held in this church, one woman answered in giving specific examples this way:

*“The lay leader is female, the worship leader is female, the Christian education chair is female, I am female”* [chairwomen of the administrative council].

She just emphasized on the fact that she was not telling stories, but she could give specific examples of women in leadership positions including her. The females and even the males who answered the question did not want to point out to a specific person holding a leadership position in the church. All of them recognized that women were playing roles as leaders of different aspects of the congregation including chair of administration council, choir leader, Sunday school chair, treasurer, chairman of nurturing committee, Sunday school superintendent, children’s home representative, parish nurses, parsonage committee leader, worship committee leader, president of women of the church group. Responsible for outreach and guests host, lay leader, council chair, and finance committee chair.

These answers were converging with what I personally noticed during my participant observation. Nevertheless, it was useful to hear women talking about their own experiences and how they felt about the role they were playing in the church.

I wanted to know what importance women gave to the roles they played in the church and how they could express this by a score of a scale from 1 (less important) to five (very important). The lower score was 3 (two women out of twelve) when others scored up to five. Women felt playing a leadership position in the church at a high level. One added even a comment saying: *“I am a core group of very active members. I feel like a score of 5 is what represents what the importance of what I do here”*.

Even if women showed, they were playing leadership roles and so enthusiastic with these roles, they admitted some weaknesses about their leadership and about their church in general. For the first aspect, they said there were no policy and no mechanism that they were using to prepare those who are supposed to succeed this brilliant generation. When some women were clear in answering the question saying nothing is done to prepare young ladies, others were just vague avoiding giving a precise answer such as *“they are invited to serve on committees”*, or *“we get them involved in the mission”* or finally *“just welcoming their involvement”*.

## Discussion

Grenz & Kajsbo (1995) discussing about the roles of women in the church mentioned about this controversial Danvers statement with the council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (essentially evangelical scholars) which met in Danvers, Massachusetts in December 1987 where they assert that God created men and women *‘equal in personhood and in value, but different in roles’*. Consequently, they uphold male leadership in the church and the home, while encouraging women’s participation. Previously, Barron (1990) stressed on the conclusion of these church leaders, which was *“we are convinced that a denial or neglect of those principles will lead to increasingly destructive consequences in our families, our churches, and the culture at large”*. It is clear to notice that such a position was very dangerous regarding the full integration of women in the church and the need of letting them play any role including leadership positions.

Odell-Scott (1983) supports Barron’s claim asserting that both women and men have to play leadership roles in the church because the scriptures should be interpreted in an egalitarian way. The so-called subordination of women in the church is more an issue of culture than prescription from the Holy Scriptures according to Odell-Scott. Ndeda (2011) has the same concern from his observation in an African independent church in Kenya. From what he saw in a Luo church, he thought it was not admissible that the majority of women attending the church may be required to be subordinate to the minority of men. This was a misinterpretation of gender roles and should be revisited concluded this scholar.

At SWUMC, Ndeda’s observation is not relevant. Women here do not complain because they are involved in everything. They were pastors, lay leaders, directors of department, and chairs of committees where men are members and they are involved in decision-making involving the whole congregation.

At SWUMC, there was a culture encouraging the emergence of women leadership. As Bronitsky (1991) put it, *‘church ethnographies are good for anthropologists to understand church practices and culture’* and as an anthropologist, I realized that women were not only members or men subordinates, but also they held leadership responsibilities. During the 50 years of the congregation, more than 10 pastors appointed were women. Women were also in the advisory committee of the church, members of the church trustees, church council and other important positions. From the history of this small Methodist congregation, women were active and heavily involved in the leadership of this religious group.

## Conclusion

By this study, I wanted to understand the importance of roles played by women in the SWUMC in Gainesville. I used an ethnographic approach to collect my data in this congregation located in the southwest, Gainesville. I mainly used ethnographic participant observation during 16 weeks in church services and other meetings and church events.

My findings indicate that the roles played by women at SWUMC imply leadership positions held by many. Women assumed fundamental and substantial roles within their congregation. They are those who make things happen as affirmed by one of them. This is something I noticed during my observation and when I was discussing with these female church attendants and even their fellow males. These roles included various domains of their church life including the pastoral, committee directors, church trustees and church council chairs, members of administration, finance, liturgy, and others diverse relevant domains.

Nevertheless, the missing of perpetuating this style of feminine leadership in the church is a notable weakness as most of the women involved and holding leadership positions are seniors and will be very soon unable to work for their congregation. It should be good for SWUMC to reflect on this aspect and find mechanisms that allow a good preparation of the succession and the perpetuation of this encouraging model.

Further research orientations should be focused to the growth of SWUMC. Instead of growing, the congregation is decreasing its members. The other interesting question should be why there are almost no young people in this church when it is located next to several student apartments.

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