
CAN YOU SEE ME NOW? WOMEN, SERVICE, AND THE SMALL CHURCH

A while back, I had an appointment with a new optometrist. She examined my eyes and then she changed my prescription (the one I had for at least ten years) and went on with her day. I wasn't too happy about her change—the old prescription worked just fine.

Last month, my left eye hurt a lot. I went back to her and begged for my old prescription. After a few minutes of consideration, she agreed. Thank goodness.

The doctor wasn't done with me yet, though. She had a couple of questions for me. She started with, "When does your eye hurt you the most?" Well, I am finishing a D.Min. at Abilene Christian University and I'm a second-year professor at Lubbock Christian University. I read and write a lot. Every day. My eyes often rebel and I have to close them for just a little while to make the dull ache go away. "That is when they hurt the most," I told her. "Hmmm," she said, "how old are you?" I answered. She took a deep breath because she knew I would not like what she was about to say. She explained that "at my age"—HELLO, I'M ONLY 41—almost every person needs reading glasses. God made us that way. Science backs it up. I need to accept it, drive to Walgreens, and buy some readers.

One optometrist appointment. One step back to tradition. One move forward toward innovation.

Tradition and innovation. Always in tension. In life. In ministry. In our cities. Sometimes we accept change, and sometimes we don't.

I grew up in a small town and a small church. Small towns don't change—much. Small churches don't change—much. Everyone knows the rhythm of life. They know who will lead singing and teach the kids. The same person may clean the church building for 40 years. Fellowship meals are always on the same day. Services meet on Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, no matter what is going on in the world. Even during the Super Bowl. (Unless the Cowboys are in the Super Bowl—that occasion calls for a different tradition, the church-wide Super Bowl party!)

There are also traditions grounded in Scripture. Singing and making melody in our heart. The Lord's Supper at every worship service, usually after the sermon. Sunday night service allowed for make-up communion. Baptism. Male leadership. Female submission.

There are good reasons to dig in and fight for our traditions, just as there are also good reasons to fight for innovations. Some churches prefer the Lord's Supper before the sermon. Others have struggled with instrumental music. Perhaps small groups meet on Sunday nights. And, what about the women?

Like my optometrist, I'm taking a deep, Holy-Spirit-filled breath. I'm pretty sure some of you will not like what I am about to say.

There are spiritually gifted women in every church who need the space and the opportunity to exercise their gifts as they submit fully to God for the sake of the kingdom.

There, I said it. Exhaling slowly.

I can imagine all the questions that may be running through your mind:

"But, what about God?"

"But, what about Scripture? You know, 1 Cor 14:33-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12?"

"But, what about Great Grandma Sue, who is going to roll over in her grave?"

"But, what if our church looks different with that tradition gone?"

"Even if we embrace a new understanding of Scripture, why should we implement it? It might create division."

I hear you. I really do.

I've served at two congregations in my ministry career. The number of hours that I have spent as a minister in leadership meetings trying to figure out the whole "women's role thing" are too many to count. There is always a tension between tradition and innovation. Paralysis by analysis is a real thing.

It wasn't until I began worshiping with a small West Texas congregation that I experienced the freedom that came with a new understanding of

creating space and opportunity for males and females to exercise their giftedness fully in class and worship. In previous years, this small congregation had studied diligently. After a period of time, they shifted their view from the traditional understanding of Scripture concerning the role of women to a more innovative stance, still within their understanding of Scripture. I can't express to you the depth of gratitude that I felt for God and for the leaders of this congregation when my daughter stood before a precious congregation of all ages and read Scripture. Kingdom was breaking in, and just a bit more of the grace of God was evident through the equality of all people.

I think that small churches are more capable of innovation than large churches. There are fewer moving parts and greater capacity for relationship and deep discussion with most of the members. The decision to lean into a tradition or embrace an innovation rarely brings complete agreement among a church family. But what it does bring is an opportunity to seek God in prayer, to hear each other respectfully, to discuss civilly, and to make a decision together. Equality invites each person into the process of seeking God's preferred future for their congregation. Where there is imagination, there is also the ability to dream big for God's kingdom.

So, here's the thing. God presents us with opportunities. In some of those opportunities, we beg for our old prescriptions, and we hold our old traditions tightly. We avoid pain, sometimes rightly so. But there are also times to get into the car and drive to Walgreens. The research is solid. With the decision made, innovation will happen. This revealed truth is empowering, and sometimes scary. Regardless of what it is, and what decision must be made, one thing is for sure: joining God in kingdom work is the best tradition of them all.



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Shannon loves to help churches imagine ministry that invites children into the presence of God. After fifteen years of church ministry, she took a position as the Assistant Professor of Children's Ministry at LCU in 2016. Shannon speaks at conferences on children's ministry, the vocation and practice of ministry, contemplative practices for children and adults, and topics concerning women in ministry. Shannon directs Refresh: A Day of Nourishment for Women Who Minister and is an associate with Hope Network. Shannon, her husband David, and children River and Reese are actively involved at Tahoka

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