

**Women and the Church  
their Attitudes, Needs and Expectations**

by

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# WOMEN & THE CHURCH

## their Attitudes, Needs and Expectations

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### Introduction

Various research projects in Britain in the last few years have looked at aspects of women in church leadership. This is partly because in 1994 the Church of England passed a measure agreeing to the ordination of women. The events leading up to that decision and the changes resulting from it, have been widely studied. However the situation of women churchgoers who are not in leadership positions has been much less documented.

As part of my work at Christian Research, I have undertaken a survey termed "Women and the Church". It sought to discover the attitudes, needs and expectations of ordinary churchgoing women. Why do they go to church - what do they appreciate about it? What brings them in the first place? If they leave, what causes them to go? And other such questions.

The research was almost entirely qualitative. It involved six in-depth personal interviews with women with various nationwide Christian responsibilities, three Focus Groups in different environments with women of various denominations and different ages, and the experience of seven women in leadership of Christian women's organisations. In addition a literature search uncovered supporting evidence and some material was added from the analysis by gender of quantitative surveys of local congregations undertaken by Christian Research.

The overwhelming conclusion is that relationships are the key factor in churchgoing for many women. How those are expressed varies by age and by denomination, but the underlying attitudes, needs and expectations were remarkably similar.

It could be said that for churchgoing women:

their attitude is that church is about relationships

their need is to belong

their expectation is that their faith will grow best in the company of others.

### ATTITUDE

Their faith and their churchgoing revolve around relationships.

### The value of relationships

#### *A sense of family*

The church community can provide a safe place where people are accepted and appreciated for who they are and not only for what they do or who they were. This was particularly important for widows, of which churches often have many as well as some widowers. As one senior citizen widow put it, "The church is a place where widows are honoured and dignified in a way that is rare in society." Grief is a painful and lonely process, but having supportive friends around is one of the most helpful ways of moving through bereavement. The sense of family was also valued by single people, especially those living celibate lives whose lack of a live-in relationship was not understood by work colleagues.

#### *Not letting people down*

There is a strong sense of loyalty among women churchgoers. Having committed themselves to something, however small, they do not want to let people down. So if on a particular day a woman was tempted not to go to church she would very often turn up because of the people she might disappoint by not being there. It could be a major responsibility such as teaching Sunday School, or a small matter such as having said to a friend, "I'll see you on Sunday", but it mattered to fulfill that commitment.

### *Bringing others*

The women in the Focus Groups came from a wide range of churches, each of which was involved in some kind of mission or evangelism in their local community. Asking what kind of evangelism the women were involved in brought the discussion straight back to relationships! While some were involved in church-organised activities, virtually all of them saw evangelism as primarily relational: talking to friends when the subject of faith or church came up, praying for neighbours and friends who had no Christian faith, and simply living out their faith at all times. They were happier talking to people one-to-one or sharing in a small group, rather than getting involved in big evangelistic events.

### *Leaving church*

Several women in the survey had left church for at least a year at some point in their adult lives. Nearly all had returned by the time of the study, but they were asked to identify why they had left. It was most likely to have been because a relationship had broken down. For some that was within the church, perhaps with a church leader or a colleague with whom they had been working, or with someone they had considered to be a friend but who had "let them down". Coming to church involved meeting that person on a regular basis, so it was easier not to come, especially if there had been considerable hurt involved or there was a deep sense of anger. For others the relationship that caused them to leave church was within their own family, perhaps a divorce or a daughter becoming a single mother. The woman perhaps felt ashamed of what had happened, or felt she had not lived up to the standards that her church expected of her. Whatever the reaction, the event made it difficult to face people at church again.

### *Coming back*

Why had the women who had dropped out of church for at least a year returned? For a few it was what is sometimes called "a crisis of faith". For most, however, the main reason was a human relationship of some kind. One was deeply touched by the care and help she received from people in her previous church when her marriage broke up. One returned because her minister phoned her up and persuaded her she was just the person to do a particular job! The reason most often given was that a churchgoing friend had kept in touch, or that a woman had missed her friends at church, the fellowship, and the sense of belonging.

### *Friendship helps faith grow*

How women's faith grows will be considered in detail later in the paper.

### *Worshipping with others*

When asked what they 'get out of coming to church', the women responded with a mixture of practical and spiritual answers. The factors related to worship included several things which are done corporately at church such as singing or receiving the sacraments. Fellowship featured high on the list, as did encouragement both personally and spiritually.

### *Faith is a relationship with God*

Seeing faith as a relationship with God, rather than a knowledge about Him was common amongst these women. It showed in various ways. For example women were more likely to read the Bible to seek guidance and inspiration, to find comfort in times of illness or loneliness, or to teach their children Christianity. Their responses about how and why they prayed were similar: to pray for friends or family, and often to do it in the company of others. We will see in the next section that part of their sense of belonging is to experience the presence of God, and 'presence' is an awareness of the person of God rather than agreement with beliefs about Him.

The relationship with God was the key relationship at church, and the one which made church significantly different from other social groups such as the Women's Institute. However, relationships were mutually dependent on each other - if the other relationships at church were not working, the relationship with God was more likely to be strained and vice versa.

## NEEDS

To be comfortable in church women need to feel they belong, to find friends there as well as faith.

### **What does belonging mean?**

One of the questions researched was "What does it mean to say you 'belong' in your church?" In spite of coming from very different kinds of churches - various denominations, large or small, rural or urban - the answers were remarkably similar. They were much more to do with relationships and acceptance than with any spiritual or theological reasons. Belonging grows through various stages.

*Being known.* For many women it was important that people knew them by name. It helped with a sense of identity. For a mother it gave a warm feeling to walk into church after the hassle of getting the children ready in time and the dinner in the oven, and to be greeted personally. For someone living alone, Sunday morning may be the first time they had spoken to anyone since coming home from work on Friday evening, and for widowed or divorced people conversations at church may be the only meaningful ones they had face-to-face with anyone all week.

*Being valued.* However, belonging went deeper. It was about being valued as a person, for who you are, not only for what you do. It was an awareness that others in the church were glad that you were there, that you had chosen to come to their church. A warm welcome was much more than a handshake at the door with a polite 'please come again', and lasted much longer than the first visit. It was people showing a personal interest over a period of time, and may involve those already in the church going out of their way to draw newcomers into the life of the church. This level of belonging may be reached quite quickly, for some women even on the first visit, and for others usually within a few weeks.

*Feeling accepted.* This was the next level of belonging, and was a very important stage. It was being accepted, whatever a woman's idiosyncrasies, strengths or weaknesses. Women described it in phrases such as "I feel part of the family", "I feel at home", "I can be myself without being frowned at". It took much longer to reach this level of belonging, sometimes as much as two years. A trust had to be built up before most women were willing to expose their weaknesses, and that took time. It was therefore a more significant factor for women in feeling they belonged. It was reaching the point of feeling 'on the inside' rather than still thinking of oneself as a visitor or newcomer.

*Being involved.* Women wanted to be involved, not just spectators at church. Whether they made coffee, taught Sunday School or joined a church committee, was in one sense irrelevant. A job in the church, whatever it was, gave a sense of identity. This occurred alongside and as part of feeling accepted, and was two-way, because very often taking on a specific job or role in the church brought someone more closely into contact with a few people whom they could then quickly get to know much better. For most of the women in the research this desire to be involved was strong, even if their lives were already very busy. Those who were not involved in some way, however small, felt themselves on the outside, looking in on all that happened but not really part of it.

*God had called her there.* For some women there was a very strong spiritual sense that they were in the right church. Not everyone wanted to use the word 'called', a term that is perhaps more frequently found among evangelicals. However the same conviction about the rightness of worshipping in a particular church was experienced by people from many church traditions. This aspect of belonging was linked for some people to feeling a strong sense of God's presence, particularly in worship but sometimes in other contexts also.

In another survey undertaken by Christian Research a sense of belonging in church was strong only for those who attended at least once a month. Those who went less often than they used to were likely to report that their sense of belonging had weakened.

### **The 'down' side of belonging**

Although there was almost unanimous agreement among the women in the research about their desire to belong, there were some negative answers to the question "What does it mean to you *as a woman* to say you belong?" The difficulties revolved around other people's - mostly men's! - expectations of what role they would be comfortable in. For example, in some churches, especially small ones which are desperate for help, it is hardly possible to even walk through the door before being approached about their need for another Sunday School teacher or being asked to help with any one of the dozens of practical jobs which need to be done in a church!

Other women had found almost the opposite. They had decided on a new church, and felt full of enthusiasm about using their gifts to serve God in that context. And then they ran up against people in the church (possibly the leaders, although not necessarily), who for various reasons were uneasy about women taking on certain roles.

### **EXPECTATIONS**

A key expectation for women churchgoers was that their faith would grow in company with others who were like-minded.

### **Growing in faith**

In the Focus Groups more than half the women said their faith had grown in the last year. However, saying faith had grown required an understanding of the ways in which that growth had been seen. There were several factors, and as with other aspects of this research, they turned out to be a mixture of spiritual and practical factors, with no particular sequence.

#### *Relationship with God*

Several women described a feeling of knowing God better. Perhaps that was a deeper understanding of who He is, or a deeper recognition of His love for them and acceptance of them. For others it was a greater awareness of His presence, a sense that He was with them all the time and not only when they were worshipping Him in church. One woman said "I can talk to God more, about anything." Another described it as, "I know Him better and understand better His ways in my life." For someone else it was, "I have a greater peace that God is in control." For some it was an awareness that God was there alongside in the good and the bad days. Others had a freedom to chat to Him in prayer about everything that was going on 'as though He were actually there with them'.

#### *Increased responsibilities*

For some women their faith had grown because they had been stretched by taking on a new responsibility in church or Christian service. Sometimes they had offered to take on a new task, while for others the new job was taken on in response to a request, perhaps one to which they initially wanted to say 'No', but then did agree to take on.

Often the new task made a woman more dependent on God. For example, starting to teach Sunday School for the first time could be daunting, but overcoming the apprehension and finding God was there to help was a faith-growing experience. Similarly, carrying on with a difficult task for God rather than giving up, had helped faith grow.

#### *Answered prayer*

Specific answers to prayer had helped women grow in their faith. Those answers might have been for themselves, or for their family or friends, but they were very practical and personal prayers. And being able to thank God for the answer was described as a point of spiritual growth.

#### *Surviving times of crisis*

The nature of the crisis varied enormously: problems with a child, health difficulties, being made

redundant, a personality clash at work or church, the death of a parent or any one of the multitudes of crises which affect everyone at some point in life. The question women found themselves asking either consciously or unconsciously was, "Will such unwelcome events rule my life and drive a wedge between me and God? Or will they send me running to Him for help and support?" Surviving a crisis and coming out of it in one piece was also seen as a point of spiritual growth.

### *Friendship*

Faith also grew for some because of one particular friend, or the friendship and support of a group such as a home group. Having a Christian friend with whom to talk about matters of faith was a significant help for a number of women. Here was someone with whom they could discuss their longings and hopes, doubts and questions. Someone to pray with and be encouraged by. Someone to say, "How are you getting on with that problem you told me about last week?" A friend to phone and say, "Help, please pray. We've got a crisis, I'll tell you about it later." This friendship was two-way. It was just as encouraging to faith to be on the other end of the phone, to be trusted by someone else to be there for them in a time of need. Seeing another cope bolstered faith that in a similar crisis God would be there for her also.

### *Confidence to share faith*

Many women said they found it hard to talk about their faith, and yet underneath would love their friends and neighbours to know God in the way they do. Taking an opportunity to openly acknowledge their faith, perhaps in a very simple way such as inviting someone to church, was one of the factors in helping faith to grow.

### *Teaching*

Relevant teaching on the Christian faith was a clear reason why some women's faith had grown. The source of this varied. Sometimes it was a particularly appropriate sermon or series of sermons. For others there had been the opportunity to go to one of the many Christian conferences or holidays which take place in Britain. Reading a book was the stimulus for some, while for others it was reading the Bible. The common factor was that a deeper knowledge of God or some specific aspect of the Christian life had helped their faith to grow.

### *Attitude*

Some women could not point to specific answers to prayer, new responsibilities, or describe in what way their relationship with God had deepened. Nevertheless they still knew instinctively that their faith had grown. It might be a feeling of enjoying their faith more, feeling more 'alive' during worship, or sensing God's presence more often.

## **Conclusion**

Very few of the women described themselves as feminist, or even thought themselves to have been influenced by feminist thinking. Nevertheless they perceived church structures to be masculine, and felt most churches were run for the benefit of men rather than women. They thought men were more concerned about what churchgoers believe and do rather than who they are, and that therefore women's attitudes, needs and expectations were either not understood or marginalised. They felt strongly that churches would not function nearly as well as they do if women were not building the relationships which turn it from a group of disparate people into a body.

All in all, the outcomes of the research could be summarised that women feel:

While men may build the institution of church,  
women grow the community which holds the institution together.

